Failure in Disability Game Studies

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

The praxis and theory of this dissertation observe how tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) can include and represent disability. The goal of this dissertation is to evaluate and establish strategies for TTRPG narratives and mechanics that transform the idea of disability, as an unnecessary disadvantage to be avoided, into an exploration of the challenges faced by the disability communities for the purposes of representation and performance-based advocacy. The main questions I answer are: How can we, the players, game designers, and audience, celebrate failure in TTRPG media without normalizing the pain and hardships experienced by the disability communities? How can we critique romanticized depictions of disability in TTRPG design while avoiding the common framing of disabled characters as inferior? How can TTRPG narratives and game mechanics exhibit methods of game design that acknowledge the diverse experiences of disability while still being critical of disabling politics and social injustice in the real world?

I observe disabling mechanics and representation in TTRPG systems and narratives, while contrasting and comparing them to disabling environments and public opinion. This is done through a retelling of ethnographic work where I hosted a TTRPG design workshop for neurodivergent individuals, and a breakdown of the co-designed TTRPG media artifact created in said workshop highlighting reparative game design practices of care, inclusivity, and community building. I relay the participants' perceptions of, and personal experience with, TTRPG media and the artefact they came together to design. This experience will function as a narrative that structures the academic work, along with several gaming texts depicting disability themes, I bring forward on subject matter broached through the workshops and design decisions for the media artefact.

This is followed up by a theoretical application of disability performance in TTRPGs, specifically with the intention of reframing the common conception of disability, as a failure of the individual, as queer failure. While acknowledging how disability justice initiatives can benefit by being hosted in TTRPG spaces because of the affordances provided by the narrative structure and game mechanics to specific and more general intersectional TTRPG communities

within, I show the range of applications and benefits for disability justice that have not previously been scrutinized.

With the informed perspectives of the workshop participants matched with the performance studies filling other theoretical gaps, my findings convey that TTRPG media affords us the means by which we can reapproach and renegotiate our qualification of failure regarding disability. As we were able to achieve in the workshop, we can embrace our play experience with the understanding that it has innate value as a human experience as opposed to the value of the experience being determined by ableist qualifications of success. With disability informed design practices, reparative play focuses, and performance-based supplemental inclusion of disability voices, we can avoid normalizing the depictions of pain and hardships experienced by the disability community by creating more complexly embodied portrayals. These portrayals will defy stereotypical interpretations through transparent depictions of the reality disabled individuals experience, as opposed to avoiding any unappealing depictions of disability altogether.

My ethnographic work also acknowledges that TTRPG game designers can only provide the tools and resources for the players with the hopes that they take their own methods of critique and activism into the game when they play it. In making room for flexible and open-ended game narratives and mechanics, they in and of themselves acknowledge the diverse experience of disability, as we are not limiting the play in how disabled individuals wish to portray themselves. The limitations of media suggest two things: 1) the players, game designers, and audience, should be immersing themselves in progressive depictions of disabled characters in media and draw from them to improve their media literacy; 2) there is a necessity to continue creating more progressive disability media, in and outside of TTRPGs, to eventually normalize a more complex and realistic take of different varieties of disability so that we are not oversimplifying issues faced by the disability communities and putting greater emphasis on their innate value as human beings.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my beloved fiancée Alexandra Elizabeth Battaglini, soon to be Alexandra Elizabeth Femia, for her devotion and ongoing support. She has been with me for every leg of this dissertation writing journey and inspired the overarching theme with her personal mantra "Nothing is wasted." I found that her philosophy to see failure as more than just a negative outcome was what drove me to see more complexly into my considerations for the societal understandings of disability. She has helped me identify my co-morbid neurodivergences and always offered her love and support, especially on the days I needed it most. This work alongside my maintained sanity would not have been possible without her. I love you my precious jellybean! Thank you for everything and know that I poured my heart and soul into this for you.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Examining Committee Membership ii

Author's Declaration iii

Abstract iv

Acknowledgements vi

Dedication vii

List of Figures xiv

List of Tables xviii

Chapter 1 1

1.1 Thesis, Scope, and Focus 6

1.2 Literature Review 17

1.2.1 Game Studies Foundation 19

1.2.2 Navigating Disability Game Studies 26

1.2.2.1 Disability in Media Studies 27

1.2.2.2 Disability in Game Studies 34

1.2.3 Performance and Game Studies 40

1.2.3.1 Intersectional Definitions 40

1.2.3.2 Supplementing Activist Theatre with Games 42

1.2.3.3 Collaboration of Performance and Disability Studies Concepts 47

1.2.3.4 TTRPGs as Performance 48

1.2.4 Considerations for Disability Performance 49

1.2.4.1 Problematizing Empathy 50

1.2.4.2 Negotiating the Problematic with the Potential in Therapeutic Rhetoric 56
1.2.4.3 Disability Representation 59
1.2.5 Failure in Gaming Media 63
1.2.5.1 Perceptions of Ableist Failure 64
1.2.5.2 Rhetorical Failure 67
Chapter 2 72
2.1 Workshop Ethnography 74
2.1.1 Workshop One 76
2.1.1.1 What words come to mind when you think of neurodivergent representation? ... 77
2.1.1.2 What feelings, experiences, and associations come to mind when you think of disability mechanics in TTRPGs? 78
2.1.1.3 Brainstorm neurodivergent associations, thoughts, and experiences related to: Access; Risk; Survival; Health; Navigation; Community; Rest; Labour; and Pain. 79
2.1.1.4 How are these topics typically approached in TTRPG media such as *D&D* or Pathfinder? What do these game systems do well or poorly in how they present neurodivergence through mechanics or stories? 83
2.1.1.5 Have you ever attempted to play a neurodivergent character before? Do you think you were successful in representing that neurodivergence? Why or why not? 84
2.1.1.6 What could be done better on game developers' ends to make the available stories or mechanics more neurodivergent-inclusive? 86
2.1.1.7 Has your relationship with TTRPG media been influenced by your neurodivergent identity? If so, in what ways? 87

2.1.1.8 What is the purpose of the work we are going to be doing and for whom are we designing? 88
2.1.1.9 How do we want to carry out this collaborative work? 90
2.1.2 Workshop Two 90
2.1.3 Workshop Three 101
2.2 Presenting Teleneuro: A Reparative Neurodivergent TTRPG Design 103
2.2.1 Introduction to *Teleneuro* 103
2.2.2 Safety 108
2.2.3 Core concepts 110
2.2.4 Mechanics 111
2.2.5 Worldbuilding 118
Chapter 3 120
3.1 Player Autonomy in TTRPGs 122
3.1.1 Game Publishers and Politics 122
3.1.1.1 History and Development of *D&D* 124
3.1.1.2 Critique of *D&D* 131
3.1.2 What Makes for an Effective Influencer? 138
3.1.3 Reinventing the Appeal to *D&D* 141
3.1.4 Summary 142
3.2 Object Text Analysis 144
3.2.1 Bringing our Fear of Failure into TTRPG Systems 145
3.2.2 Disability in Game Studies 150
3.2.3 Personal Narratives Depicted in TTRPG Game Mechanics 151

3.2.4 Governing Experience of Success 154
3.2.4.1 Disability Game Mechanics 157
3.2.4.2 Narrative Failure 158
3.2.5 Analysis of Disability Themes in TTRPGs 160
3.2.5.1 Design Intentions 161
3.2.5.2 Contextualizing the Game for Disability Themes 162
3.2.5.3 Inviting the Players to Perform 165
3.2.5.4 Approaching Combat as a Challenge to TTRPG Norms 171
3.2.5.5 Disability Inclusion 173
3.2.5.6 Design Initiatives 175
Chapter 4 177
4.1 Reparative Play in *D&D* 178
4.1.1 Reparative Reading Meets Queer Performativity 180
4.1.2 Reparative Play 182
4.1.3 So, Why *D&D*? 183
4.1.4 Examples of Reparative Play 186
4.1.5 Tools for Play 191
4.1.6 TTRPG Praxis as Research 207
4.2 The GM's Capacity for Representation 210
4.2.1 Theory of Complex Embodiment 211
4.2.2 Portrayal of Diverse Identities as a DM 213
4.2.3 Examples of Informed and Uninformed Disability Portrayal 214
4.2.4 Applications of Inclusion Over Representation 218

4.2.5 Simming as a Method of Inclusion 221
Chapter 5 224
5.1 Discourse of Fan Art in *D&D* 225
5.1.1 My Experience 226
5.1.2 The *D&D* Fan Art Community 229
5.1.3 *D&D* Fan Art as a Genre of Selfie 230
5.2 Uninformed Consent in TTRPGs 237
5.2.1 Methodological and Ethical Considerations 239
5.2.2 Traits of a Bad GM 239
5.2.3 NGM Horror Stories Analysis 242
5.2.4 Expectations of the GM 247
5.2.5 Communication for Informed Consent 252
5.2.6 Selection Process 253
5.2.7 Clarifying Questions 254
5.2.8 Session 0 Trial Run 256
5.2.9 Summary 257
Chapter 6 258
6.1 How can we celebrate failure in TTRPG media without normalizing the pain and hardships experienced by the disability communities? 259
6.2 How can we critique romanticized depictions of disability in TTRPG design while avoiding the common framing of disabled characters as inferior? 260

6.3 How can TTRPG narratives and game mechanics exhibit methods of game design that acknowledge the diverse experiences of disability while still being critical of disabling politics and social injustice in the real world? 261

6.4 Where do we go from here? 262

References 264

Appendix A *Teleneuro* 302

Appendix B Safety Tools 314

List of Figures

Figure 1: Disability 101 Medical Model vs Social Model 7

Figure 2: Literature Review Outline 17

Figure 3: Cover of Avery Alder's a place to fuck each other 23

Figure 4: Wicked Witch of the West from the 1939 film The Wizard of Oz 28

Figure 5: Nessarose Thropp in a Wheelchair from the Wicked Broadway Musical (2003-present) 29

Figure 6: Elphaba Thropp from the 2024 Film Wicked 30

Figure 7: Bran Stark from the Game of Thrones TV Series 31

Figure 8: Tyrion Lannister from the Game of Thrones TV Series 32

Figure 9: Grabber from Dead Space 34

Figure 10: Isaac Clarke from Dead Space 35

Figure 11: Joker from Mass Effect 37

Figure 12: Screenshot from Gluck et al.'s article on Racing in the Dark 45

Figure 13: Second screenshot from Gluck et al.'s article on Racing in the Dark including player 46

Figure 14: Four players gathered around a table playing D&D resulting in a live social environment 48

Figure 15: Disability Umbrella Term 52

Figure 16: Disney's Portrayal of Evil Women 58

Figure 17: Model showing Theory of Complex Embodiment in relation to the social and medical model and performance and game studies 61

Figure 18: DOTA 2 Tournament 65

Figure 19: Oaklash, Oakland's Drag and Queer Performance Festival 68
Figure 20: Inspirisles Illustrations 76
Figure 21: Survival of the Able Cover 77
Figure 22: Kids on Bikes Cover 94
Figure 23: Kids on Bikes Illustrations 95
Figure 24: Kids on Bikes Character Sheet 96
Figure 25: The cover of MonsterHearts, a TTRPG whose themes of embodied change and social anxiety directly influenced the participants' high school setting. 97
Figure 26: MonsterHearts Character Sheet 98
Figure 27: Spoon Theory vs Fork Theory 99
Figure 28: Spoon Theory for Chronic Health 105
Figure 29: Spoon Theory Organization 106
Figure 30: XNO Cards 109
Figure 31: Mei used as Mascot for Protests in Hong Kong 123
Figure 32: D&D First Edition Book Cover depicting a warrior fighting a red dragon 124
Figure 33: D&D Table Setup with miniatures navigating a dungeon on a table surrounded by dice 125
Figure 34: Illustration of Theoretical Differing Variations of the Fighter Class 126
Figure 35: The Blessed of Corellon Fan Art 131
Figure 36: Illustration of Half-orc from D&D 133
Figure 37: Example of Hearthstone Gameplay 136
Figure 38: Hearthstone Tournament 136
Figure 39: Example of Overwatch Gameplay 137

Figure 40: Overwatch Tournament 137
Figure 41: Cast of Critical Role 139
Figure 42: Cast of Dimension 20 140
Figure 43: Illustration of Magically Regrowing a Limb 147
Figure 44: Illustration of a Magical Prosthetic Arm 148
Figure 45: Symbaroum Cover 155
Figure 46: Dark Elves in Warhammer: Fantasy 156
Figure 47: Inspirisles Sign Language Directions 163
Figure 48: Survival of the Able Character Sheet page one 168
Figure 49: Survival of the Able Character Sheet page two 170
Figure 50: Combat in D&D as Shown by two dwarves fighting a troll 172
Figure 51: Illustration of Mollymauk Tealeaf 187
Figure 52: Illustration of Pete Conlan 189
Figure 53: Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim's Dragonborn 194
Figure 54: Sekiro Art Depicting the Protagonist with a Prosthetic Arm Fighting a Giant Ape . 196
Figure 55: Jedi from Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic 197
Figure 56: Disco Elysium Character Archetype Selector 199
Figure 57: Cover of Pizza Game with Kiane looking starry eyed at the sky 201
Figure 58: Joker from Persona 5 dressed in a white mask, black trench coat, grey turtleneck, and red gloves 202
Figure 59: Evil Looking Character in Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim wearing black armour and riding a black horse with red eyes 204
Figure 60: Wizard with Magical looking Tattoo on Arm 205

Figure 61: Illustration of Firbolg in D&D that resembled Vander Annamson 207
Figure 62: Glee's Artie as Depicted in a Wheelchair 216
Figure 63: Glee's Artie as Depicted Performing Able-bodied Choreography 217
Figure 64: Meme Signifying how Autistic-coded Characters are preferred by the autistic community as opposed to explicitly Autistic Characters 219
Figure 65: Blacksmith at Pioneer Village heating up a piece of metal in the fire 221
Figure 66: Astronautical Experiential Learning Attended by Scott Magelssen 222
Figure 67: “1996 to 2013” by Jerome Caillere. 226
Figure 68: Eight D&D characters in a medieval tavern by Zal Cryptid. 227
Figure 69: Häiglé Foolsbait by Joey Hazel 228
Figure 70: Mordok: Mountain Dwarf Barbarian by The Sketch Goblin 231
Figure 71: Assassin Tiefling by Loryenne 232
Figure 72: Salazar Ramondo by Joey Hazel 232
Figure 73: Critical Role’s Dancer by Carmen (porzio_art) 234
Figure 74: Khazimir by Rallix M. 235
Figure 75: Mina Crimini by DnD Disability 235
Figure 76: Matt Mercer and his Voiced Characters 250

List of Tables

Table 1: Disability Themed TTRPG Content Overview 145

Chapter 1

Introduction

I begin this dissertation with a brief outline of its contents. The first chapter provides the thesis, scope, focus, and literature review for the contents of my work. From there we move on to chapter two which conveys the ethnographic approach I took to acquire the more practical experience of neurodivergent TTRPG players in support of the more theoretical work to follow.

I convey this through a retelling of the workshop series I conducted where I relay the participants' perceptions of, and personal experience with, TTRPG media and the artefact they came together to design. This experience will function as a narrative that structures the academic work that I bring forward on the subject matter broached through the workshops. I then observe and analyse the media artefact the participants designed as the result of the workshop. As is best practice when conveying disability studies research, I make my predisposition in society, and my situation in the academic field, transparent (Adams 11; Price 171), at the start of chapter two.

Chapters three through five reflect on the work done by disability, game, media, and performance studies scholars in relation to the topics brought up in the second chapter. I discuss these topics, and related topics, in greater depth to begin framing my research questions and exploring depictions of disability related to public perception and the media that society consumes.

In the second chapter, I outline the results of my neurodivergent game design workshop series done with neurodivergent participants. I conducted this ethnographic research with the considerations for the ways in which disability crips methodology as put forward by Stephanie L. Kerschbaum and Margaret Price in their chapter “Centering Disability in Qualitative Interviewing” and ethics approval from the University of Waterloo. To govern the ethnographic framework, I employed the guiding capacity provided by disability studies scholar Margaret Price in her chapter titled “Disability Studies Methodology” (165).

First, I present my findings regarding the questions I posed to them during the workshop as well as the experience of the workshop itself alongside academic work done on disability and

game design. The responses provided by the participants address their experience with neurodivergence in TTRPGs in terms of both game mechanics and narrative. There is a heavy focus placed on how disability was represented in the games they are familiar with playing and how they considered it to be keeping with an understanding of personal failure or subverting it. I conduct a retelling of these workshops to convey the experience as well as considerations the participants posed for representational strategies of game systems and narratives that developers and players alike can pick up on and utilize.

I then move on to a breakdown of the neurodivergent TTRPG media the participants designed in relation to the following chapters to better inform future gaming media designs with a disability focus, regarding both game mechanics and narratives. Their work will be used to provide insight into neurodivergent representation in TTRPGs designed with an embodied knowledge of the topics it explores. This will also aid in our perception of disability's place in TTRPG game mechanics and narratives as a jumping of point for my theory section.

The third chapter explores the social power in different gaming communities alongside the intersection of disability and game studies, and performance; explaining how TTRPGs are a beneficial media site to host disability justice initiatives. To do this, we will be showcasing the rhetorical power in the TTRPG communities and then analyzing the three object texts that I used in my ethnography, *Chronic Migraine Mechanics For 5e, Inspirisles,* and *Survival Of The Able*. This will further convey the room that TTRPGs as a media form and cultural site have for disability representation and activism, as functions or activities associated with them.

My review of specific case studies reveal the rhetorical power held by the fans, the companies, the larger influencers within the *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) communities, and how they engage with the game for political advocacy, in comparison to online video game companies like Blizzard Entertainment (Blizzard) and their fan base. I provide a brief history of *D&D* and the development of its online communities. By observing the rhetorical power that TTRPGs, and games in general, have on a global political scale, I convey how that power can be invoked by the TTRPG influencers for social justice.

Then, I apply disability media and performance studies critique to my object gaming texts to both to show the benefits and complications they possess as a site to host disability themes. Here

I show how the academic realm of performance studies helps to supplement the scarcity of the work being done in disability game studies by putting forward common performance studies concepts that are applicable to the performance elements found in TTRPG spaces. I supplement these concepts with examples from TTRPGs that are designed with disabled voices in mind to observe how they are treated in varying object texts.

My work here draws heavily on performance studies concepts as well as the conception of failure, as I alluded to in the introduction of this dissertation. Using performance studies theorists and rhetorical concepts of queer, personal, and societal failure regarding disability identity, I convey how TTRPG spaces can assist in pushing back against the associations of failure that society has with the disability communities.

To this end, the sections of this chapter amount to arguing how disability justice initiatives can benefit by being hosted in TTRPG spaces because of the affordances provided by the narrative structure and game mechanics to more general and specific intersectional TTRPG communities within. While this is a theoretical supposition in and of itself, I will be using it to show the range of applications and benefits for disability justice that have not previously been scrutinized.

In the fourth chapter, I scrutinize diverse representation in TTRPG media to show the capacity that TTRPGs have as a site to portray disability identity. Addressing the importance TTRPGs like *D&D* already have to queer gaming communities as a means of self-representation and rhetorical empowerment, I provide my own autoethnographic praxis of the concepts I introduce as well as a first-hand account of the rhetorical value I experienced from my own self-representation through a *D&D* character.

Alongside individual portrayal of characters, the role of the Game Master (GM) will also be observed to see the limitations they have when portraying an identity that is not their own. These sections are crucial for establishing a foothold in TTRPG space for marginalized identity in general before homing in on disability. This is an effective method of bridging the scholarly gap as queer game studies is inclusive of disability game studies, albeit broader in its observance of this particular aspect of marginalized identity. Queer game studies also have very similar ties to other communities and scholarly realms such as the online *D&D* communities and performance

studies, which will further aid us in theorizing how disability representation and activism can be included in TTRPG media.

I go into detail regarding the rhetorical power of TTRPG character identification for members of the queer community in relation to reparative play, observing the stories that we create for ourselves as members of marginalized communities. I showcase the queer communities' sense of empowerment through community building and narrative creation while drawing it back to the capacity TTRPGs have for identity representation. I then present my autoethnographic praxis of this self-presentation with first-hand experience of its rhetorical value. This is crucial for establishing a foothold in TTRPG space for marginalized identity in general before homing in on disability.

Then, I observe Tobin Siebers' theory of complex embodiment and apply it to the Dungeon Master's (DM's) capacity to represent diverse identities within their roleplay. To this end, I will acknowledge the criticism towards depictions of disabled characters alongside the benefits of even problematic portrayals to observe the potential best practices. I draw on performance studies concepts, theatre of the oppressed (Boal 98), queer futurity and performing utopia (Muñoz 28), autobiographical disability performances (Auslander and Sandhal 64), performing cultural memory (Taylor 13, 193), passing (Hadley 364), and simming (Magelssen 3), to explore the potential DMs have for portraying their diverse cast of characters as a distinction between the inclusion of diversity and full-on representation of a particular demographic.

The fifth chapter showcases online media spaces utilized by the TTRPG community while relating them to disability representation and safety considerations, which I apply from previous studies. Through online social media community engagement, as prescribed for best practices by Aimée Morrison (41-48), I show the importance that TTRPGs like *D&D* have to online spaces as a medium for hosting social identities in general and observe fan art done online of the players' characters, created in *D&D* as a form of self-expression. In doing so, I convey the strengths of self-representation that online TTRPG community spaces have as a supplemental media site for artistic interventions, regarding rhetorical self-expression for disabled individuals, in mainstream TTRPG media.

I then transition over to an ethnographic section where I have compiled 303 Reddit stories around the topic of nightmare GMs and conduct a reflexive thematic and descriptive analysis using NVivo software. This will help us observe newcomer approaches to online engagement as well as potential safety and accessibility considerations we need to make when designing and playing TTRPG content with disability themes.

In concluding this dissertation, I reflect on my findings with the scholarly, ethnographic, and TTRPG design work done. In part, I condense the work I did to propose new approaches to multi-disciplinary game design regarding how we can resist the fear of failure in the realm of disability and discuss how we can stop the propagation of such fear in our TTRPG systems. To this end, I will be attempting to answer the initial questions posed with the literary, object text analysis, and ethnographic work, which has been done up to this point, alongside the workshop's creation of TTRPG media. With the work that will be completed at this point in the dissertation, I will have enough ethnographic backing to ensure that my propositions for future research and game design are not coming from solely a scholarly realm. It is the fusion of academia, embodied knowledge, and immersive design experience with members of the neurodivergent communities that will allow me to talk about these findings, without speaking on behalf of every disability experience, and show the exposition that role-players with disabilities have offered up as vital information to their underrepresented communities.

1.1 Thesis, Scope, and Focus

This dissertation observes the theory and praxis of disability representation situated at TTRPG media sites. Roleplaying game (RPG) systems and narratives, TTRPGs included, are valuable media sources that are often applied to popular discourse surrounding identity politics and representation (Bowman and Hugaas par. 1-3; Cazeneuve par. 6; England par. 20-25; Friedner par. 15; Lasley 51; Stone par. 8-10; Vist, "Dungeons and Queers" par. 26). However, the majority of scholarly work being done at these media sites observes queer identity, with disability being hosted as a smaller section within queer game studies (Ruberg and Shaw xvii, xx), often as an afterthought. This dissertation is timely as it applies disability studies and game studies at their various intersections to observe means by which TTRPGs can assist disabled individuals in telling their own story, helping them to represent themselves and combatting harmful generalizations and pejoratives that modern media has associated with disability in the process.

A common and widely spread opinion is that disability equates to many different forms of suffering and helplessness (Mitchell and Snyder 19, 47; McRuer 141-144). This opinion is further exacerbated by early disability research being based on the medical model, a model framing disability as a personal shortcoming that the individual needs to overcome (Ellis 22; Price 164). This medical model continues to be applied to game studies where scholars and game designers are attempting to "fix" or "cure" perceived impairment through the utilization of games (Pliasa and Fachantidis 618), prompting disability game studies scholars to call for a change to this approach (Anderson and Schrier 3; Carr 425-426; Jerreat-Poole par. 3; Ledder 40). Contemporary disability studies theorists oppose the medical model and encourage approaching the discipline through the frame of the social model.

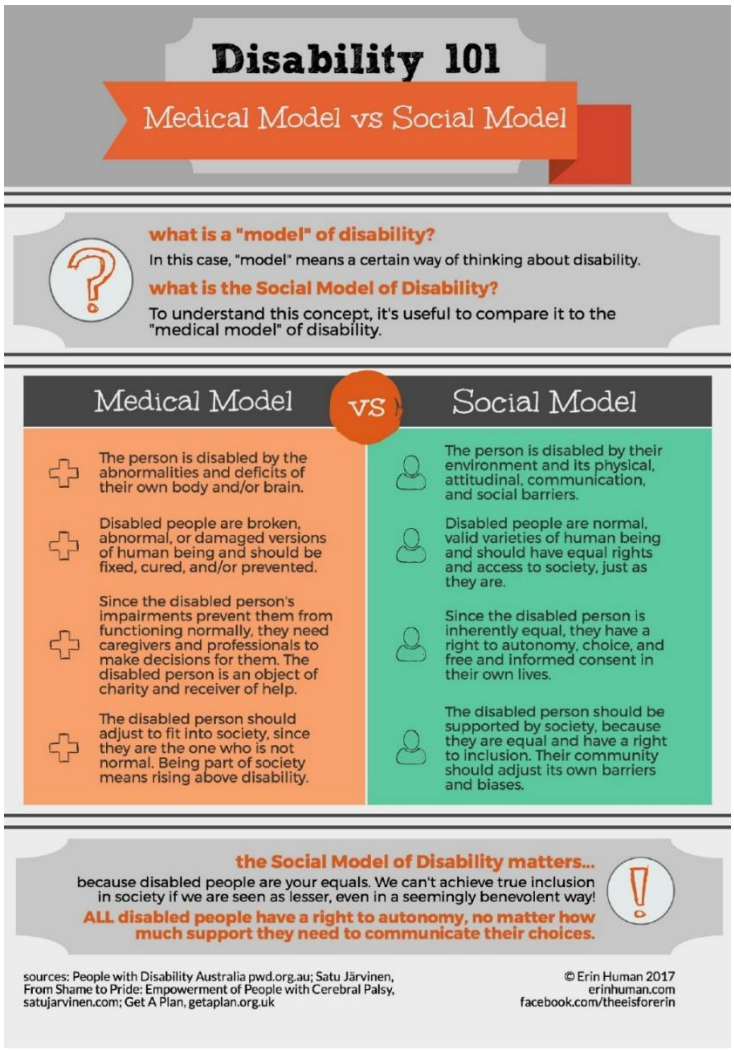


Figure 1: Disability 101 Medical Model vs Social Model

For accessibility purposes, please find the above infographic quoted here by Erin Human as a written transcript,

Disability 101

Medical Model vs Social Model

[image of a question mark]

What is a "model" of disability?

In this case, "model" means a certain way of thinking about disability.

What is the Social Model of Disability?

To understand this concept, it's useful to compare it to the "medical model" of disability.

[table with Medical Model bullet points at left, vs Social Model bullet points at right]

Medical Model:

The person is disabled by the abnormalities and deficits of their own body and/or brain.

Social Model:

The person is disabled by their environment and its physical, attitudinal, communication, and social barriers.

Medical Model:

Disabled people are broken, abnormal, or damaged versions of human being and should be fixed, cured, and/or prevented.

Social Model:

Disabled people are normal, valid varieties of human being and should have equal rights and access to society, just as they are.

Medical Model:

Since the disabled person's impairments prevent them from functioning normally, they need caregivers and professionals to make decisions for them. The disabled person is an object of charity and receiver of help.

Social Model:

Since the disabled person is inherently equal, they have a right to autonomy, choice, and free and informed consent in their own lives.

Medical Model:

The disabled person should adjust to fit into society, since they are the one who is not normal. Being part of society means rising above disability.

Social Model:

The disabled person should be supported by society, because they are equal and have a right to inclusion. Their community should adjust its own barriers and biases.

The Social Model of Disability matters…

because disabled people are your equals. We can't achieve true inclusion in society if we are seen as lesser, even in a seemingly benevolent way!

ALL disabled people have a right to autonomy, no matter how much support they

need to communicate their choices.

[image of exclamation point] (Human)

As we can observe in Figure 1, contrary to the medical model, the social model frames disability as a socialized experience, and recognizes ableism, also known as sanism, through disabling architecture and public opinion (Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick 18; Price 164).

In applying the social model to game studies, these scholars are faced with the fact that disability is not an aspect of culture that we often see adequately represented in our modern media (Dolmage 20; Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick 43). Most contemporary games are designed with an able-bodied and neurotypical main character in mind (Carr, "Ability, Disability and Dead Space;" Ledder 30), with disability inclusion being an afterthought. Attempting to play a character with any manner of disability puts the player at an unnecessary disadvantage for the goal of winning the game, a handicap if you will, and academics looking for realistic disability representation in gaming culture are left with few good examples to draw from.

There are a variety of examples exemplifying disability through the cultural fetishization of archetypes (Anderson and Schrier 11; Jung par. 5), like the blind monk or the one-armed swordsman; showing an individual triumphing over their disability as a barrier to normalcy (Anderson and Schrier 14; Dolmage 236); and portraying disability as an outright horror or tragedy (Carr, "Ability, Disability and Dead Space;" Dolmage 40-41; Jung par. 3). However, positive narratives for disabled character are a lot more difficult to come by, "as a lot of disabled people struggle to find joy in their disability" when they are more likely to have physical, mental, and social barriers in accessing the game world (Jung par. 6).

My dissertation will observe disabling mechanics and disability representation in TTRPG systems and narratives, in comparison to disabling environments and public opinion. This will first be done through a retelling of ethnographic work where I hosted a TTRPG design workshop for disabled individuals alongside an analysis of the design itself, then I will be delving into theory behind my applied experience during this ethnography. I am focusing on TTRPGs, specifically with the intention of reframing the common conception of disability as a failure of the individual.

Games are a crucial media site at the heart of our culture that often depict for us how to quantify success and failure, often as a binary of "win or lose," in traditional board games and sports. In this context, games are not designed for disabled individuals, as will be noted in my ethnography work, they are designed for able-bodied and minded individuals and then adaptations are made as an afterthought to reach their marketable demographic, much like institutional or environmental designs for accessibility (Dolmage *Academic Ableism*, 7, 79, 134). However, TTRPGs, as a media site, afford players the capacity to negotiate and requalify success or failure in terms of how they want to experience the story being played out. This is an affordance that is not often seen in video games due to their fixed design, but the players' capacity to alter their approach and adherence to TTRPG systems provides greater agency than can be found in other RPGs.

The understanding of disability I will be using is the one put forward by disability studies scholar Ellen Adams in Disability Studies and the Classical Body. She considers disability a highly problematic modern umbrella term (12), used to signify a culturally specific phenomenon (6), leaving some definitions "necessarily vague, to cover a wide range of conditions and illnesses," (10). To narrow this definition to a manageable scope, there will be an emphasis on members of the neurodivergent communities in my ethnography, as that is the identity I claim as my own and an aspect of culture that does not often get enough attention in media. For this dissertation, I define neurodivergence as "the differences in people's brains that can affect their day-to-day experiences" (Lebrón-Cruz and Orvell 2995).

As such, many people who identify as neurodivergent may have been diagnosed with, or strongly suspect they may have, certain psychological disorders, such as Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), etc. Also, many people who identify as neurodivergent might have a shared experience of social stigma that they can relate to one another with, as a result of their experience of identified neurodivergent traits (Kachanoff et al. 47-54). However, I define the term neurodivergent as a self-identifying label taken on by people whose brains work differently, and/or are developing or have developed differently, from what has been typically expected of individuals in society (Lebrón-Cruz and Orvell 2995).

In this manner, I am approaching the term from the social model, promoting the self-efficacy associated with the act of (self-)labeling (Kachanoff et al. 47; Hansson Halleröd 10-12), while avoiding imposing disparaging impacts that come with essentializing psychological disorders through the act of medically labeling individuals with disabilities (Bernstein et al. 999; Lebrón-Cruz and Orvell 2996; Zagefka et al. 60). The angle with which I approach this topic fixates on changing our perception of failure regarding disability, as ableism has constructed this idea that failure is the defining feature of life with a disability.

Economically, ableism is used to reinforce capitalist ideology as capitalism fundamentality promotes competition between individuals and organizations while deterring any external help they might find outside the market (Yates 88). As such, I place my observance of disability in the context of ableism in our capitalist society but before I discuss how it has been applied, I define the matrix of disablism and ableism. According to Jay Dolmage, "Disablism says that there could be nothing worse than being disabled, and treats disabled people unfairly as a result of these values" (Dolmage *Academic Ableism*, 6-7). Thereby, disablism creates a sense of discomfort we feel towards the idea of disability. This fear is then capitalized on by ableism, as "…instead of situating disability as bad and focusing on that stigma, [ableism] positively values able-bodiedness. In fact, ableism makes able-bodiedness and able- mindedness compulsory" (Dolmage 7). As such, disablism is a more explicit approach to the negative associations that disability acquires whereas ableism, "…renders disability as abject, invisible, disposable, less than human, while able-bodiedness is represented as at once ideal, normal, and the mean or default" (7). In this manner, ableism stands in opposition to disabled individuals and disability justice as it takes the medical model approach where disability should be cured or eradicated and accessibility barriers that affect us are made out to be the problem of the individual rather than the society.

It does this in part by individualizing problems and reducing complex issues down to the perspective of the individual so that personal viewpoints are held in higher regard than that of the collective (Rockler, "'Be Your Own Windkeeper'" 244; "Entertainment, the Personal, and the Political" 112). As such, all problems experienced by women, people of colour, the queer communities, and the disability communities are made out to be something that the individuals

within those communities need to solve for themselves with no help from the collective. Our ableist society constructs these individualized narratives to maintain its capitalist values of competition, as it frames any disadvantage to economic competition, like disabilities, as a failure that must be overcome lest the disabled individual be viewed as useless (Barnes and Mercer 28).

Many social studies scholars, i.e. Jay Dolmage, Jack Halberstam Jesper Juul, José Esteban Muñoz, and David Payne; have observed the framing of failure for our ableist society. While Juul and Payne observe the importance of failure and our interpretation and reaction to said failure, the remaining scholars observe the importance of, and methods for, our society requalifying what we consider failure to be. Situating myself with their depictions of failure, particularly Halberstam's conception of queer failure, I will be applying it to the cultural anxiety that we see play out in games, more specifically TTRPGs, as a reflection of our society's values to question normative structure.

Here, I see disability studies benefiting at its intersection with game studies through the act of queering our understanding of common sites of failure through means of empowering representation (Taylor 13, 193; Gibbons 31-35); rehearsal for survival (Boal 98. 135); and community involvement for disability TTRPG media space (Fein 318). In this manner, by reframing our perception of failure in TTRPGs through a queer lens, the disability communities will be able to claim vital media sources subverting the commonly held narrative of individual failure associated with disability. Additionally, with the work being done at the intersection of disability media studies (Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick 33), I have a basis in terms of disability representation for media outside of games to compare and contrast it to. I will explore how the object gaming texts I have selected, inclusive of *D&D, Survival of the Able, Inspirisles,* and *Chronic Migraine Mechanics For 5e,* construct our cultural perceptions of the interaction between disability and game mechanic disadvantages to investigate the intersections and tensions amongst the fields of disability studies, game studies, and media studies.

These fields will allow me to begin examining disability roleplay's psychological and social aspects. As such, I will also be applying concepts brought up in performance studies because roleplay occurs through embodied performances. I see relevance for the application of performance studies in four key areas, these being performance as: the enactment of roles

through “restored behaviour;” what exceeds or follows the game’s mechanics; a mechanism for individual and social change; and embodied progression through a designed scenario.

To expand a bit further on some of these ideas, the performance studies intervention will help us to observe the personal labour involved with taking on a role within the TTRPG medium.

Regarding the enactment of roles through “restored behaviour,” as posed by Richard Schechner in his book *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (xi), when a TTRPG player plays out a role, they might take on commonly recognized traits for that role. For example, a rogue in a *D&D* game might be standoffish or get excited at the opportunity to steal things. This is a form of “restored behaviour” the player has learned from watching others, enacting a societal performative which many marginalized individuals are familiar with, passing (Hadley 364). However, individual players will differently interpret what this looks or sounds like. In this sense, we can observe the allowance for culturally specific performance (Taylor 13, 193), extrinsic to game systems, provided to the players in the agency they have in performing their characters’ actions.

Regarding what exceeds or follows the game’s mechanics, mechanics do not necessarily dictate how the character reacts to them. Players are the ones who convey their character’s reaction to specific mechanics in what they look, sound, or feel like in the narrative. For example, a mechanic that induces fatigue can have different players portraying their characters reacting differently to being tired. As such, this allows for autobiographical disability performances (Auslander and Sandahl 64).

Regarding individual and social change, taking certain actions for the purposes of self-actualization or political activism within a TTRPG gives players a sense of what it might be like to do so outside of the game as well. Perhaps it might prompt players to seek out or reenact such conditions in real life. In this sense, we might compare it to the performativity of queer utopia and how Muñoz says it helps us to prepare for the embodiment of a social role outside of the performance (Dolan 460; Muñoz 28), or how Boal positions theatre of the oppressed in preparing its audience for revolution (Boal 42).

Finally, embodied progression through designed scenarios can be employed as a means by which players can learn about different aspects of disability cultures free of assumption. This is a

prominent concept brought forward by Scott Magelssen known as simming (3). The allowance of non-scripted performance, or improv, in TTRPGs, provides differing scenarios that performance scholars can use to analyse how these games allow for different roles and values to be depicted.

So, in turn, performance studies benefit at this intersection as well in being provided new media sites for the field to interrogate. That being said, I do intend for game studies to be the focal point of this dissertation and, as such, I perceive the role of performance studies here mainly to be a support. This support will be for 1) the theory, bridging the gap between game studies and disability studies in some areas; and 2) the methodology and methodological interventions of the performance-related neurodivergent roleplay ethnography and TTRPG design.

Overall, this project is rhetorical in nature as it seeks to understand the potential impact that the act of roleplay can have on the disability communities as a way of creating discourse in a meaningful way for the players. In this manner, I devise that an intervention in disability media representation can be done through the gaming medium of TTRPGs. When I refer to rhetorical power within this dissertation, I mean the ability TTRPGs, and TTRPG players, have to influence, reinforce, and enact political activism while also enabling self-actualization for individuals through the personal enactment and empowerment of their identity. TTRPGs are rhetorical resources that allow for convincing storytelling to enhance the persuasion of the personal and political morals acted out. These impact players or observers of the game through the immersive multimodality of the medium.

The goal of this research is to consider strategies for gaming narratives and mechanics that transform the idea of disability, as an unnecessary disadvantage to be avoided, into an exploration of the challenges faced by the disability communities. The main questions I will seek to answer will be: How can we celebrate failure in TTRPG media without normalizing the pain and hardships experienced by the disability communities? How can we critique romanticized depictions of disability in TTRPG design while avoiding the common framing of disabled characters as inferior? How can TTRPG narratives and game mechanics exhibit methods of game design that acknowledge the diverse experiences of disability while still being critical of disabling politics and social injustice in the real world?

In concluding this dissertation, I reflect on my findings with the ethnographic, TTRPG design, and scholarly work done. It is a cumulative discussion on how we can resist the fear of failure in the realm of disability but also how we can stop the propagation of such fear in our TTRPG systems. My findings conclude that in TTRPG media, we are given the opportunity to reapproach our qualification of failure. We are afforded the means to embrace our play experience with the understanding that it has innate value as a human experience as opposed to the value of the experience being determined by its success. When it comes to us avoiding the normalization of pain and hardships experienced by the disability community, we might show a more complexly embodied portrayal to be transparent of the reality we experience, as opposed to avoiding any unappealing depictions of disability altogether.

While developing the disability media literacy necessary to understand and navigate this topic should be the highest priority, especially for able-bodied and minded individuals. the diversity of disability requires that disabled individuals also develop this skill for disabilities they do not have firsthand experience with. This might be done by affording more room for characters with disability in TTRPGs that will in and of themselves provide certain critique for disabling societal barriers and problematic depictions of disability. Our priority needs to be to immerse ourselves in progressive depictions of disabled characters in media to draw from to improve our media literacy.

What this comes down to is continuing to create more progressive disability media, in and outside of TTRPGs, to eventually normalize a more complex and realistic take of different varieties of disability so that we are not oversimplifying issues faced by the disability communities and putting greater emphasis on their innate value as human beings.

It was made clear early on in the workshop that these disability focused game designs can be flexible in how they are used while providing the players with the proper resources to open up a wider network of possible paths forward for neurodivergent healing and activism. The traits presented in the workshop's TTRPG design exemplify a mix and match approach and provide greater accessibility for neurodivergent individuals to create their own means of self-representation within the TTRPG media with full say in how they do it. To summarize, TTRPG game designers can only provide the tools and resources for the players with the hopes that they

take their own methods of critique and activism into the game when they play it. By making room for game narratives and mechanics like these to be open ended, that in and of itself acknowledges the diverse experience of disability as we are not limiting the play in how they wish to portray themselves.

1.2 Literature Review

As mentioned, there is a large gap within the realm of disability game studies and many of the approaches taken within the field are either disability studies scholars critiquing games or game studies scholars designing accessible games. While the interdisciplinary nature of disability game studies is apparent, the aspects of TTRPGs that I am observing further complicate the study by invoking performance studies, or it may be more appropriate to say that the TTRPG medium is given some foundation within and relief from both disability and game studies by being supported by performance studies concepts. To frame my research questions within the context of this literature review, I am attempting to fill two significant gaps. These being: 1) how we observe disability studies in its intersectionality of game studies, and 2) how TTRPGs might be applied to the creation of cultural discourse for the disability communities.

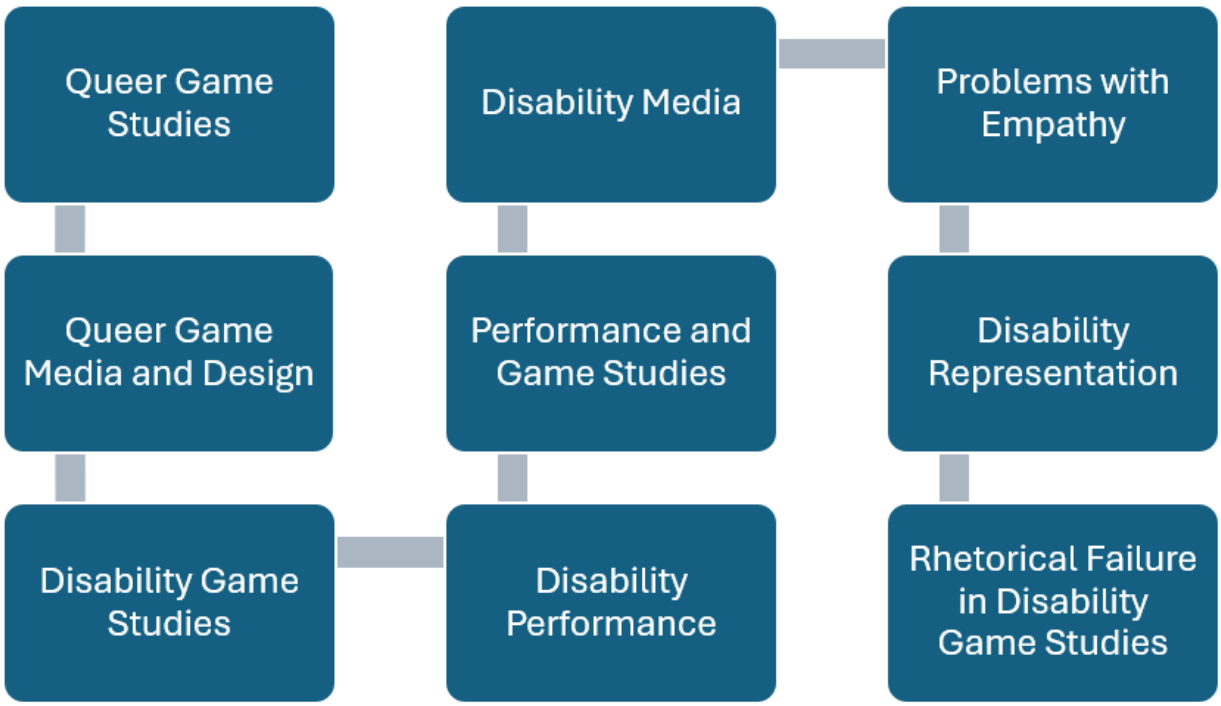


Figure 2: Literature Review Outline

As seen in Figure 2 my literature review moves from queer game studies to queer game and media design to disability games studies to disability performance to performance and game studies to disability media to problems with empathy to disability representation to rhetorical

failure in disability game studies. Due to the complexity of this literature review I have found it most digestible to break the large corpus of intersecting work down into five intersecting subgroups. The first observes the foundation and approach I use for game studies, that being queer game studies, as a stepping off point for observing the portrayal of intersectional identity within games. By drawing from queer game studies and the benefits queer communities have reaped from their own TTRPG representation and political activism I convey the potential benefit we can garner by apply a similar approach to disability game studies. The second subgroup observes foundational work done at the site of disability game studies, sparse though it may be. Here I make apparent the benefits of disability studies have when hosted in new media sites, like TTRPGs. The third subgroup involves a focus on definitions at the three-way intersection of disability, performance, and game studies with a greater emphasis on how performance studies concepts are being used in this dissertation to make up for the knowledge gap at the site of disability game studies in my approach. In this sense, I show how I use performance studies to bridge the gap between game studies examination of gaming experience and actions and performance studies experience with theatrical roleplay and disability media portrayals. I convey the potential benefit to disability activism within roleplay and performance in the capacity that TTRPGs have to host these depictions as a popular media site. The fourth subgroup observes the pedagogical capacity of theorizing and problematizing empathy and its purpose in disability justice, a crucial consideration for the depiction of disability in any media format. Here I scrutinize theoretical applications for narratives and therapeutic rhetoric in media as a tool to support members of disenfranchised communities as an alternative to empathy and the considerations for such portrayals. Finally, I conclude this literature review with an interrogation of ableist ideology and how it has incepted gaming culture. I observe queer failure as a counter for the propagation of ableism in games, more specifically the narrative and characters that are created within TTRPGs.

1.2.1 Game Studies Foundation

I wish to set my work solidly in the field of game studies. Game studies is often approached with a very optimistic lens with an eagerness to explore how games can be employed for a variety of useful purposes (Anderson and Schrier 3, 10; Ledder 33). The social benefits of play have already been reported on at great length.

For instance, Todd Nicholas Fuist's chapter, "The Agentic Imagination: Tabletop Role-Playing Games as a Cultural Tool" from *Immersive Gameplay*, takes a fundamental look at shared gaming spaces. Fuist discusses the importance of socialization through play for the self-exploration of the individual, as well as world exploration and connectivity for the community. He goes on to note how the imaginative roleplay that the individual takes part in with a select few companions in turn connects them to the larger community and sub-communities of players who are also taking part in the game (Fuist 108, 122). Here we can see a basis for how rhetoric and discourse in gaming communities can influence and connect individuals on a scale that is greater than their immediate surroundings.

Likewise, James Paul Gee posits that socializing and simulating players' experience through roleplay in an imagined context helps them to better converse with the real world and the people in it (8). Through the players' shared goals and interactions that take place in RPGs, we are allowed a low-risk means of practicing and reflecting on our navigation of real-world political and social issues (8). By acknowledging the affordances that RPGs hold as an accessible educational and political medium, we can observe how the game space might be used to investigate aspects of our reality regarding the affordances of the real world and the capabilities we have "within the constraints of a given identity" (21).

While these benefits are applicable to the general public and can be used as foundational work for this dissertation, there is a greater need to acknowledge the potential here for game studies to act as a site for toxic optimism (Anderson and Schrier 188). To mitigate this optimistic lens, I find myself drawing from the discipline of queer game studies, often a host to disability rhetoric in game studies (Ruberg and Shaw xvii, xx). Queer game studies approaches game studies with a lot more criticism, striking a good balance between realism and optimism and has made progressive strides in the field. In part, this is because it grounds itself in queer studies as a frame

of criticism. As such, I foreground my literature review by embedding it in this branch of game studies. I begin by observing how others have approached rhetoric within this academic sphere and provide a diverse insight into how TTRPGs can be used to bring about progressive narratives for disparaged communities.

To begin with, we should start with a foundational debate in queer studies, regarding the representation of queer individuals and narratives, that carries over into queer game studies. In this sense, and throughout this dissertation, the term "representation" refers to the cultural politics of depiction. "Queer Critical Rhetoric Bites Back," by Erin Rand, promotes the usage of queer rhetoric to exploring alternative political, cultural, and social possibilities in archived media. She discusses how there is room for queer rhetoric to be progressively used to observe instances of queer narratives within objects of study that might otherwise go undiscovered (Rand 536). The question we should ask then is "In what manner should this rhetoric be applied to past narratives?", and James Joshua Coleman's "Restorying With the Ancestors: Historically Rooted Speculative Composing Practices and Alternative Rhetorics of Queer Futurity" notes a potential flaw in the portrayal of narrative realism.

For many older members of the queer communities, there is a great difficulty in reimagining the reality of the queer ancestors in a rhetorically progressive context. For them, to challenge the trope of unhappy queer endings through therapeutic rhetoric, attached to realist genres, is complicated by the need to imagine happy endings to queer stories that don't seem fake (Coleman 514). However, we might address this site of complication as a source from which new progressive narratives could be created for the queer communities. To this end, Rand sees rhetorical studies in academia as a space that allows for this invention or reinterpretation of previous work for a modern setting through queer rhetorical analysis (Rand 536). Whereas Coleman advocates for the creation of new positively framed stories for queer rhetoric in the pursuit of healing for communities that are marginalized within the field (Coleman 536).

Rand and Coleman make it apparent that the applicability of positively framed narratives holds a potential benefit for all queer discourse, disability included. To draw a parallel and further connect these academic realms, Dolmage acknowledges that there is an area of overlap for disability and deviating sexual differences and gender ambiguity that shows queerness both

reinforcing and playing off disability and vice versa (Dolmage 71). So, here we can situate meaning between queer and disability academic spaces by challenging the flawed approaches society has towards gender, sexuality, and disability, as mutually exclusive concepts (Dolmage 71). As such, I apply the queer game studies scholarship to the realm of disability studies to address the knowledge gap at the disability game studies intersection. With regards to how queer rhetoric has been reviewed by Rand and Coleman, there seems to be potential for TTRPG narratives to be applied for the benefit of marginalized communities as there is potential in these readings to benefit queer communities through reinterpreting past narratives and creating new ones for present-day discourse.

These differing approaches in queer studies can be applied to players from the queer communities and are expanded on in *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Adrienne Shaw and Bonnie Ruberg. This book gives insight into a culmination of authors' takes on the intersections between queer studies and game studies. They survey many alternative frames of gaming that oppose games developed with a lack of queer representation. With its multifaceted approach to gameplay and game studies, it shows how queer studies intersects with game studies through the narrative, mechanics, and implications for queer players, and by extension disabled players. I observe these separate chapters below that have potential applications to this for my research question.

Colleen Macklin's chapter, "Finding the Queerness in Games" in *Queer Game Studies*, explores the concept of viewing games through a queer terministic screen. She notes how failure in games can be pleasurable as it motivates the player to try out new forms of play that the game designer may not have anticipated. This is in line with Halberstam's conception of failure that I observe closer to the end of this review. By observing the failures, in both the structures of the game and the approaches taken by the players, the questioning of these failures and their nature has the potential to lead to progressively framed discourse for disenfranchised players. To this end, disabled players will have the opportunity to explore their own approach to a game so they can alter its intended meaning and playstyle for their personal use.

Conversely, "Dressing Commander Shepard in Pink: Queer Playing in a Heteronormative Game Culture" by Tereza Krobová et al. observes the relationship between queer gamers and the

heteronormative gaming culture that they engage with. By running interviews with queer gamers, the authors conclude that, through the exclusion of queer narratives, the industry excludes the queer demographic of its audience. When the industry includes any romantic and sexual plots in their games they are explicitly or implicitly representing the gender system and social norms (Krobová et al. 2).

As heterosexuality is the default, its practices become invisible and assumed within a narrative that doesn't afford queer play (Krobová et al. 2), showing how gaming media excludes disenfranchised communities. One strategy, acknowledged by Krobová et al., that allows for queer narratives is roleplaying, which the interviewees said they will do when they realize that the game allows for them to roleplay as a queer character. Now, it would not be a one-to-one comparison because Krobová's emphasis is on sexuality rather than disability, and disabled characters have a stronger tie to their disabled bodies, minds, and accessible/disabling environments. However, one of the main considerations of this dissertation is how the portrayal of disability in TTRPGs can be done progressively and beneficially for the disabled communities. As such, we might reason that by allowing for members of the disability communities to construct their own disabled character may hold similar benefits. I go into greater detail on this during my ethnographic work. However, this notion ties in nicely to the use of TTRPG media as a source for progressive narratives.

Regarding TTRPG applications within a queer gaming setting, Avery Alder's chapter, "Queer Storytelling and the Mechanics of Desire" in *The Queer Games Avant-Garde: How LGBTQ Game Makers Are Reimagining the Medium of Video Games,* explores queer game design mechanics that point to a complex relationship between queer players and their characters. Alder believes that mechanics allowing for queer engagement, built into the game, offer narratives with valuable alternatives to mainstream culture regarding the queer experience. She opposes what Macklin and Krobová et al. put forward, as Alder rejects the idea of having to make a game narrative queer from the player's end rather than designing a game with the intention of queer play built into the mechanics (Alder 185).



Figure 3: Cover of Avery Alder's a place to fuck each other

Much like her RPG *a place to fuck each other*, as shown in Figure 3 depicting two queer women, she designs her games with mechanics that can represent queer cultures and their values. In this game two players navigate a queer relationship together while being coordinated by a third player, similar to a GM, to maintain the tone, scope, and complexity of their play experience. It is primarily social, rather than mechanical, and it gives a means by which queer players can conduct themselves in navigating a relationship through roleplay.

As an example of Alder's ideal for game design, Peter Wonica's chapter, "Ending the Cycle" in *Queer Game Studies*, showed how he ran a workshop, similar to the one I conducted for this dissertation, in an attempt to design a board game with mechanics that represented the issues that faced queer women wanting to leave abusive relationships. By using the concepts put forward by critical game design theorists, as well as Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed," his creation contributes to an ongoing discussion surrounding queer discourse and thematic game design. While doing this, he demonstrates how games might be used to both continue the discussion and educate new people while inviting them into the conversation. Further reflection on this shows how games can be used to expand and be incorporated into the existing discourse surrounding issues for the marginalized communities.

Maresa Bertolo et al.'s chapter, "Let's Come Out! On Gender and Sexuality, Encouraging Dialogue, and Acceptance" from *Queerness In Play*, expands the realm of game studies so as not to observe it as an isolated instance from the game designers. Like Alder, they make note of how game designers should be looking past the promotion of mere entertainment when they are criticizing or questioning social issues through their art (Bertolo et al. 203). Instead, the designers should look to create meaningful experiences that the players can engage with, either by themselves or part of a larger social community (Bertolo et al. 211). Alder is adamant in her belief that games are not made queer through queer representation alone but through the structure, they were designed with, having built-in mechanics explicitly making queer narratives (Alder 185). As such, we can see the potential application that game designs with disability mechanics made by and for members of the disability communities might have benefits, beyond representation of identity, for conversations on the social and political issues facing them.

Approaching this topic from a middle ground, Felix Rose Kawitzky, in his article "Magic Circles: Tabletop Role-Playing Games as Queer Utopian Method," investigates the concept of utopian queer play as three separate elements of utopia, queerness, and play, linked to TTRPGs. In line with Alder's view, he goes into detail regarding how these elements are useful tools for training progressive thinking that can move us towards a utopian society. His view differs from Alder however as he believes that access to queer is available within current game systems. Through TTRPG media, players are provided and empowered in a performative space that they can shape toward anti-hegemonic values and use to experiment with creative social approaches to their desired futures (Kawitzky 132).

Hanna Brady's chapter, "Building a Queer Mythology" in *Queer Game Studies*, explores the narrative potential within games to tell stories that are made for members of the queer community. She discusses game rules as the structure surrounding a story but not something that the players need to rely on to create their own narrative surrounding their desired mythologies. In this approach, we see Brady acknowledging Alder and Wonica's perceived structural benefit of game mechanics being used to shape the game but notes that queer representation is ultimately reliant on the player to create the queer narrative (Brady 64). She touches on a point of convergence for all these scholars, that being, for a game to enable beneficial queer narratives,

they need to be reimagined or created anew by members of the queer communities, instead of having a story told to them of the dominant demographic (Brady 63).

There are a couple divisive takes within queer game studies scholarship on how best to create queer discourse through gameplay. As on the one hand, we can be critical of how members of the queer community are portrayed in, or excluded from, modern games and look into the creation of new systems to address these issues. On the other hand, we can look at how meaning can be derived from the games in their current form. Coming at this from a narrative focus, Alder only builds games for members of the queer community while Wonica designs games for further conversation that is digestible to most demographics. They both agree that the rules and mechanics need to structure a game with the intention of creating queer narratives, while Macklin, Krobová et al., and Kawitzky, believe that members of the queer community can interpret gameplay as, and make it, queer through their engagement with the medium. So, a combination of the two approaches might be the best way to seek out benefit for disability gaming communities. Here we can begin to see potential approaches that my research can take, looking at benefits from both the game design and the way that members of the queer communities have been able to claim their own representation through their play. In these instances, there is a strong foundation of scholarship pointing to a potential benefit an individual can acquire from TTRPG play, but there is also another gap regarding how the larger communities might benefit from the individual members' creation of personal narratives.

From this section of the review, we can note that there is a surplus of scholarship regarding how the individual members of queer communities might benefit from enacting their own performances through gameplay. In contrast, the disability communities have a lack of research done within the realm of game studies, but scholars Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw suggest a potential benefit that can be garnered from using queer game studies scholarship as a vanguard to the disability game studies intersection (xx). The intention of this next section of the literature review considers how disability studies will receive benefits equitable to the other disciplines at this intersection, be prioritized, and why it is necessary.

1.2.2 Navigating Disability Game Studies

Observing the limited area of disability studies and game studies crossover, "Disability and Video Games Journalism: A Discourse Analysis of Accessibility and Gaming Culture," by Sky LaRell Anderson and Karen (Kat) Schrier, reveals how "Most scholarly work on games and disability primarily focuses on games as medical interventions" (3) showing us a significant gap that my research is attempting to fill. They also note the potential for narratives within games to be better contextualized to hold forms of representation for the disability communities that help to mitigate biases in the gaming community (Anderson and Schrier 4). Pointing out current flaws in the themes of discourses surrounding disability in gaming media, self-congratulations, fetishization, awareness as advocacy, and problem-solving, the article show how the field of game studies could be investigating disability more effectively from a rhetorical approach (Anderson and Schrier 14). However, it is often the case that work being done for disability representation is inequitably used to supplement other work being done at the sight of marginalized identity (Dolmage 48). As such, this section intends to realize the historically underappreciated discipline of disability studies in terms of how it can benefit from its intersection with game studies.

Disability studies can benefit from its intersection with game studies in two crucial ways: 1) it begins to satisfy the call for greater awareness of disability in Classics and the Humanities where it has been historically underrepresented (Adams 1); 2) game studies provides disability studies with access to the academic media site it needs to critique and deconstruct the more harmful approaches that are being applied in gaming media while informing game developers of more constructive game design practices (Gibbons 31).

To demonstrate these benefits, I discuss the prevalence of the medical model in media to substantiate the need for greater awareness of disability studies in academia. Drawing on work done by Ellen Adams and Katie Ellis, I observe examples of the multimodality of disability studies. This will demonstrate how its application to other interdisciplinary intersections affords disability scholarship access to greater representational media while expanding its awareness through Classics and the Humanities. I then observe Diane Carr's, Cecilia Rodéhn's, Adan Jerreat-Poole's, and Sarah Gibbons' work to show how disability game studies scholars are

employing this interdisciplinary approach to criticize and deconstruct pejorative practices for gaming media featuring disability. Despite the source for Carr's work being a decade old, it is still used heavily as a crucial model for approaching game studies from a disability studies position. I conclude with how my research at the disability game studies intersection could prove beneficial for bringing societal perceptions of disability into question. Throughout my work, I substantiate my claims regarding how disability is viewed through society and media by drawing on scholars in Linda P. Ware's edited collection, *Critical Readings in Interdisciplinary Disability Studies: (Dis)Assemblages*.

1.2.2.1 Disability in Media Studies

Disability scholarship has long been in contention with pejorative depictions of disability culture brought about by early academia's employment of the medical model. The medical model portrays disability as an undesirable shortcoming or loss and seeks to cure or eradicate disability to make everyone able-bodied and able-minded. This in turn leads to a fear felt towards the idea of disability as it is something that is perceived as an innate shortcoming or failure (Stolz 133; Jarman and Thompson-Ebanks 148; Shallish 175; Ware 190-191). Due to this association with failure, the cultural anxieties facing the disability communities are further provoked by ableist assumptions (Goodley 50). The ableist ideology prevalent in our culture heavily promotes competition, individualism, and reduced assistance from outside resources, which allows ableist views to be more commonplace in questioning a disabled individual's ability to perform in comparison to individuals with able-bodies and minds. The perseverance of the medical model then necessitates scholarly interventions through all types of media to combat these pejorative ideas.

The same media that propagates ableist ideology then has the power to make society challenge its understanding of the stereotypes in how it tends to pity, or infer inferiority in, the people that are presented as such (Donnelly par. 15). Colleen Elaine Donnelly's "Re-visioning Negative Archetypes of Disability and Deformity in Fantasy: Wicked, Maleficent, and Game of Thrones" discusses how our societal conceptions of evil are portrayed in fantasy and use disability and deformity as a basis, presenting them as instances of terror (Donnelly par. 1), as shown in Figure 4 and Figure 5.



Figure 4: Wicked Witch of the West from the 1939 film The Wizard of Oz

In the above image, we are shown the Wicked Witch of the West, aka Elphaba Thropp, as she is most commonly depicted with a broomstick and green skin, and in the cannon of both the movies and books her green skin is made out to be a deformity, specifically one to show us that she is in fact wicked. This is not simply thematic as green skin was seen as a physical manifestation of her wickedness within the context of the world as well.



Figure 5: Nessarose Thropp in a Wheelchair from the Wicked Broadway Musical (2003-present)

In the above image, Nessarose Thropp is shown to be using a wheelchair, and it is meant to be the symbol of a lonely, painful, and undesirable livelihood that eventually turns her to become evil or, in the context of the world, wicked.

However, in modern retellings of fantasy villains, we are seeing villainous characters redefined through their backstories to rationalize their behaviour for the audience. In Figure 6, 7, and 8 we can see how Donnelly draws on examples from Wicked, Maleficent, and Game of Thrones, to show how their recontextualization of evil character archetypes forces the audience to confront the judgments and behaviours in which spectators and society engage the disability communities.



Figure 6: Elphaba Thropp from the 2024 Film Wicked

In the above image, conversely to Figure 4, Elphaba Thropp, aka the Wicked Witch of the West, is depicted as more compassionate, relaxing in a meadow with Glinda resting her head on Elphaba's shoulder. In this depiction, Elphaba is written in a much more sympathetic view in the Broadway musical and movie adaptation *Wicked*.



Figure 7: Bran Stark from the Game of Thrones TV Series

In the above image, Bran Stark is depicted sitting in a wheelchair similar to Nessarose Thropp, however, we are treated to a much different positioning of the character. While it does start off as a tragic outcome, having been pushed out a castle window, Bran Stark learns to live with his disability and, unlike Nessarose Thropp, he is not socially isolated or driven to committing acts of evil because of it. Here we can see a stark contrast between the framing of a person using a wheelchair in historical media versus modern day depictions.



Figure 8: Tyrion Lannister from the Game of Thrones TV Series

In the above image, Tyrion Lannister presents as someone of noble esteem. While his dwarfism is a factor that has people in the world write him off or make fun of him, the context of both the books and tv series conveys his heroic and noble qualities that are often lacked by other members of his household.

So, through the creation of narratives that, don't reaffirm but, question and denounce problematic presentations of disability in fantasy archetypes, we see room for games to provide a social benefit for members of disability communities. Donnelly's reimagining implies that resituating disability within a context that forces us to re-examine our approach to these communities would be a progressive step.

Adams, in her book *Disability Studies and the Classical Body*, agrees with the need for disability studies to have a wider engagement with Classics and the Humanities, as an active conversation between the past and present media artifacts and social discourses can aid in combatting ableism found in scholarly work (Adams 1). As the humanities discipline that

governs the academic work being done on games, game studies makes for a crucial reference point that disability studies can use to approach the gaming media site (Anderson and Schrier 3; Gibbons 35). More specifically, games have the capacity to act as a media sight, commonly associated with competition, to allow disability studies a means of exploring the embodiment and qualification of the disability experience outside of ableist ideology. The value of creating new conversations around these aspects of culture will allow disability studies a broader range of approaches that do not need to be tied to a single discipline (Ware xiv).

Other intersections of disability and media have been crucial in cultivating communities of understanding around disability culture and its representation, as discussed in Katie Ellis's *Disability and Digital Television Cultures* (3), and some disability narratives in modern television assist in demystifying much of the stigma around ableist cultural preconceptions (68). Additionally, work within the television medium has enabled greater levels of accessibility for people with visual and hearing disabilities while making certain designs, like subtitles, commonplace. From an industry perspective, Gulka et al. note how, film and television industry can help to bring about change in three ways: 1) Agents who see past their actors disability provide them with greater opportunities for roles that don't highlight their disability; 2) Strategies, employed to ensure that the actors needs are met, aid them in experiencing fewer barriers; 3) Exposure to disabled actors in media can shift the perceptions held by industry professionals, benefitting the actors with further opportunities in their career and setting a precedent for more authentic representation (145). From these observations, we can conclude that when scholarship approaches disability from the social model, which presents the communities as disabled by their environment as opposed to an innate predisposition, it is beneficial for counteracting harmful assumptions based on the medical model.

Within the realm of classical studies, Adams notes how there is an emphasis placed on perpetuating the assumption of normality for the purposes of navigating outliers of the 'other' (6). In fact, the concept of the 'other' has been heavily influential in Classics but is often only explored through interdisciplinary means. This gives disability studies the leverage it requires to expand itself further into other disciplines. Similar to Classics, the same could be said for game studies. Game studies is a relatively new discipline that has baseline studies for game design and

narrative. However, game studies scholars often need to employ interdisciplinary approaches to observe academic gaps that intersect with scholarly areas like disability studies. Given the affordances provided in the interdisciplinary approaches associated with game studies, disability scholars have been able to branch out into the psychological and social aspects of gameplay to spread further awareness of the necessity of the disability studies field throughout the Humanities. The knowledge gaps within the discipline leave room for growth at the disability game studies intersection where the relatively new media of gaming technology, and its affordances, are being explored to cultivate progressive disability media creation. This brings me to the second benefit of the disability game studies intersection.

1.2.2.2 Disability in Game Studies

In modern gaming media, the narrative design of many popular video games played for their entertainment value does not help to portray disability favourably to the media-consuming public. In her analysis of the sci-fi horror video game *Dead Space*, Carr posits how able-bodiedness is depicted as desirable and necessary for survival while disabled bodies are presented as a contaminant, a threat, and something to be avoided at all costs ("Ability, Disability and Dead Space" par. 1-18).



Figure 9: Grabber from Dead Space

The above image shows a Grabber from the Dead Space video game series with its neck elongated by a tentacle-like muscle and its mouth opened like pincers. The Grabber is a necromorph, an undead human, and it attacks by launching its head towards the play and grabbing them to then pull them in and stab them with its spine. Through this body horror imagery, Carr is saying that the necromorphs' depiction is abjectifying disabled bodies in favour of able-bodied survival.



Figure 10: Isaac Clarke from Dead Space

Conversely, the abled body of the protagonist, Isaac Clarke, is shown jumping backward in his tech-suit and firing a laser at another humanoid monster with sharp bones protruding from its skin. In this framing, Isaac Clarke's abled body is positioned as more desirable for the purposes of navigation and survival within the game world and by extension the real world.

With narratives of this nature, we can see how disability communities continue to be associated with societal perceptions put forward by the medical model (Connor 211). As observed, Carr endorses the approach of applying disability theory to the practice of play, as a frame of criticism ("Bodies That Count" 423). This allows the disability game studies intersection to "problematize clinical perspectives within game studies, and to help make visible the extent to which [ableist ideologies] … depend on the abjectification of disability" (425). The criticism brought forward by Carr speaks to the benefits disability scholarship receives from the

intersection, as it is afforded the media space to deconstruct pejorative depictions of the human body that might otherwise go unnoticed in a standard narrative game studies approach.

In line with Carr's critique for disability in games, Rodéhn introduces us to a mad reading, a textual analysis that, "shifts the perspective from diagnosing characters and examining how diagnosis appears within the game to exploring how and where madness appears in games" (par. 3). Addressing how discourse is used to normalize ableist/sanist ideologies within the gaming media, we can see how they are conflated with other oppressive ideologies (par. 3). As Carr applies disability theory within a fragmented interpretation of gaming experience ("Methodology, Representation, and Games" 710), so too does a mad reading of a game take place during the play experience (par. 24). To this end, there is room to apply the same positionality and critical lens during the live roleplay of a disabled character.

However, there is also an abundance of popular disability narratives in our modern media, centered on the medical model, demonstrating people overcoming their impairment to attain the same level of performance as able-bodied and minded individuals in a disabling environment (Wooden 108). Therefore, the disability game studies intersection needs to employ more than just a critical lens to bring about substantive change.

Jerreat-Poole employs a myriad of "cripping strategies" like "crip negotiation," alongside disability studies concepts like "crip futurity" and "supercrip" to decenter the able-bodied and minded character and interpret games and derive their own meaning from them. This approach focuses less on unveiling the problematic and more on navigating the gaming media from a perspective that opposes an ableist reading while, "…uncovering productive moments of tension and discomfort that disrupt the smooth story of hyper-able bodies performing extraordinary feats…" (par. 3).

To begin with, Jerreat-Poole uses crip negotiation to access alternative readings from the popular military sci-fi RPG trilogy *Mass Effect*. From one such reading they observe a physical disabled character by the name of Joker, as depicted in Figure 11, who, while disability has not been made the sole aspect of his personality, has been heavily impacted by a less than accepting society's criticism of his body (par. 17).



Figure 11: Joker from Mass Effect

In the above image, it appears that Joker, in a sitting position, has thinner looking legs as he has a disease in that world that causes his bones to be more brittle. As such he needs to use braces and crutches to support his own weight.

An initial response to this character might be one of pity or an acknowledgement that the game takes place in a world where disability is still seen as an inferiority however the "crip negotiation" that is being employed here observes a more nuanced take where despite his body being slower than other characters the game does not position him as inferior with regard to his value as a character. His mechanically designed shortcomings bring in real-world experiences, like the want to not use crutches all the time or the defensiveness he initially meets the player character (PC) with when he thinks he is being evaluated. So, even though he is being marginalized within the world of the game and the game's mechanics reflect that his movements are less time-efficient than that of other characters, there is a degree of realism being portrayed to

show how disabled bodies are devalued and critiqued within our society for not being able to conform to ableist standards.

"Crip futurity" is often foregrounded in sci-fi media as a means of imagining the relationship of bodies and technologies. In the future, will disabled bodies be disregarded in favour of ableist ideology? Will inefficient or inconvenient body parts be replaced by technology altogether? As such, depending on how we approach disability narratives, crip futurity can be used to imagine better futures for disabled individuals or warn of the current path society is heading down with how we value disabled bodies.

Jerreat-Poole notes how *Mass Effect*'s gameplay reveals a futuristic world of technological augmentation that makes up for perceived bodily failings as well as medical model criticism on disabled bodies. Regarding the "supercrip" and hyper-able bodies, we get into considerations of transhumanism and that of the cyborg. The conception of the "supercrip" is a trope that embodies the medical model by having the disabled individual overcome their disability through effort and determination. Something interesting emerges when we consider this "supercrip" trope alongside advancements in technology where it begs us to question if the technology the "supercrip" is using to overcome their disability makes them perform better than an able-bodied individual. This implicates a higher standard for performance in society that cannot be attained with the technological augmentation, meaning able-bodies are now devalued alongside disabled-bodies and anyone who has not undergone transhuman augmentation is now opposed by the ableist ideology, much as disabled individuals are now.

To this end, Jerreat-Poole exemplifies the use of "crip negotiation" in gaming media texts where we are not simply problematizing the depiction of disability but drawing further meaning from it with regards to our own reading of the narrative. Another example of scholarly intervention, addressing games that take a medical model-inspired approach, can be observed presenting alternative design intentions to benefit the disability communities.

One of the latest additions to the medical model-inspired game design scene has been serious games that teach children with autism the "correct" social skills to employ when talking to other people (Pliasa and Fachantidis 618). This is problematic because it shows that the creators and employers of such games seek to eradicate the neurodivergence in children and re-educate said

children into abiding by socially accepted norms (Anderson and Schrier 3; Bolt 72). Game designs like this do not acknowledge the diverse means of socialization that neurodivergent people have to offer, as their way of being is considered inferior by the medical model, which favours neurotypical practices.

To contest this, Gibbons discusses the benefits of creating an alternative game "space for a nuanced exploration of the expressive power of autobiographical games" (30), in the context of representing autism in a humanizing way rather than as an object in need of rehabilitation. In this instance, the game space would not be employed for the purposes of fixing or eradicating the disability but for accommodating and normalizing disability practices and values, some otherwise feared topics. Even though these practices are not as prevalent as some more mainstream game studies methodologies, Gibbons informs us that "…critical efforts to make disability a part of gaming can also echo the existing work that scholars, players and developers have begun with respect to fostering greater inclusion and representation of diversity" (30). So, more prevalent work from the social model is required at the disability game studies intersection, to combat problematic intentions found in game design and allow us to explore productive alternative approaches.

While Gibbons' conception of an accepting game space helps to create awareness for disability culture and issues, she notes that the intersection of disability game studies is a key academic space for deciding if awareness is enough or if other modes of game design need to be present for progressive game design (35). The result of this might enable disability game studies scholars to effectively emulate or deconstruct disabling architecture and ableist viewpoints while enabling a more constructive approach to disability issues (30). With a critical lens turned towards how the medical model is being employed in game spaces and the development of socially constructive games for the disability communities, disability game studies allow for accessible approaches to gaming media avoiding ableist navigations of the field (Connor 211).

As I have demonstrated, the medical model remains a prevalent foundation for how many media developers approach their work. While I discussed the general benefits of interdisciplinary approaches for disability studies alongside the specific benefits found in disability game studies, greater scholarship needs to be involved to address the significant gaps found at the intersection.

In the next section of this literature review, I explore how performance studies and game studies come together to supplement the lacking disability game studies scholarship.

1.2.3 Performance and Game Studies

This approach I am taking, supplementing the methodology and methodological interventions of this dissertation study via performance ethnography and theories that support it, is not unheard of in these intersecting realms of game studies. Work of this nature is often known to merge game studies concepts with concepts reported on in applicable media or cultural studies (Carr, "Methodology, Representation, and Games" 709). In fact, it is frequently reported that when writing about representation in games, the gaming media itself needs to be applied to the realm of media studies that it has drawn inspiration from at its conception through similar elements it shares (709). As such, showing how game simulations can inform performance readings and vice versa is instrumental in my approach to the disability representational roleplay experience of TTRPGs I wish to examine.

This section simply seeks to show the capacity that performance studies methodology has to be employed in gaming media, for criticism and representational practices, in service of marginalized communities. To do this, I draw on Clara Fernandez-Vara, in conversation with performance studies theorist Augusto Boal, and Sarah Hoover et al. to demonstrate informative work done at the performance and game studies intersection. Situating gaming media alongside theatre would be a good way to exemplify this intersection because gaming media, like theatre, is not confined by certain physical, social, or political limitations of reality (Fernández-Vara 3). Therefore, it too can be used as a site to host activist performances.

1.2.3.1 Intersectional Definitions

Before I continue this section, I define and distinguish some key concepts, namely performance, simulation/simming, and roleplay. Performance, as a term, is applied broadly. It can range anywhere between performances of the artistic or aesthetic variety, such as music concerts, theatre, individual performance art pieces, sports, social games, religious rituals, political rallies, sign language, etc. The main focus I will be using performance for will be acts that focus on

disability identity that hinge on someone doing something rather than just existing, i.e. sign language and the deaf community's usage of sign language.

Simulation, or simming in performance studies, has been used excessively in the context of game studies and performance studies while being scrutinized by disability studies. In the realm of game studies, simulation is akin to recreating an aspect of reality or an imagined reality for the purposes of experiencing it through roleplay. In many contexts, this simulation is used in serious games to help train the role-player, educate them, or to help them empathize with a character of a different background, under the belief that playing a character can allow us to empathize with their experience. Simming on the performance studies end is meant to have a focus on fostering the embodied experience of a performed character, real or imagined, or recreating an interpretation of said character for the audience, i.e. performing the role of a blacksmith at a museum piece. To this extent, both fields apply simulation to recreate a piece of environmental or embodied reality for the performer or observer in an attempt to influence them, i.e. promoting activism. Scholars studying the representation of intersectional identity, partially aligning themselves with Boal, scrutinize the practice of identity simulation to experience empathy for activism because they believe it fosters passivity in the performers and the audience (Boal 84; Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick 78; Ruberg 59).

Finally, roleplay is a term used in both performance studies and game studies together at their intersection. Roleplay is not simply the act of performing the role of a scripted character, nor is it the act of playing a random game. At this intersection, roleplay is the performance of a character in the context of game. The play element allows for improvisation of the character that invokes imagination and creativity in the role-player, while the role element provides structure to the role-player through their understanding of the character, i.e. their goals, dreams, fears, relationships, etc. Here, at this intersectional term, I bring disability studies into the conversation concerning disability identity in roleplay with scrutinized structure for representation and self-empowerment.

1.2.3.2 Supplementing Activist Theatre with Games

Fernández-Vara observes theatrical performances as the basis for her framework to study video games as performative media. Regarding video games, the role of the player is made out to be fundamentally similar to the combined role of the performer and audience member in theatre (Fernández-Vara 6), as opposed to Modern Western tradition where the performance is considered separate from the audience (4). As I alluded to, a primary concern for activist theatre that Boal observes is that spectators are linked to the heroes, or main characters, in the sense that they can feel empathy for them despite them being fictitious (Boal 51). This passive observance of the character is what Boal scrutinizes as the cause for a passive reaction to the call for activism (84). Fernández-Vara goes on to note how Boal promotes interactive engagement with the audience and how video games can provide similar considerations as theatre of the oppressed (4). The main objective of Theatre of the Oppressed is to change the spectators of the performance from passive beings of the theatre to active subjects of dramatic action to make meaningful experiences (Boal 97; 109).

In this sense, gaming media and performance theatre differ as a media site because, in theatre, the positioning of the individual as an audience member reduces their role to that of a passive observer, stripping them of their autonomy, and in doing so brings about a passive and toxic optimism for them in whatever political or social message is being portrayed (Boal 84), as opposed to the self-actualization that role-players can attain by performing their personalized characters (Bertolo et al. 203; Fuist 116-118; Kawitzky 132). From this, we can gather that the immersion of gaming media automatically accomplishes the main objective of Theatre of the Oppressed. So, with this intention in mind, an immersive option for Theatre of the Oppressed would be for it to be situated in gaming media, allowing for the player to take on the dual role of both observer and active participant.

Being an active participant in gaming media, role-players are, for the most part, incapable of being passive in the roles they take part in. Of course, Boal was approaching this concern from a much different context (42) and was not considering TTRPGs in his work. If he had been, he might think of them as an alternative approach to traditional European theatre, as TTRPG players

are substantially more active within the context of the game than observers are in the theatre (Fernandez-Vara 3).

Boal's concern was not simply that people move and act to engage with their chosen media, but that they do so for the sake of revolution, as he was writing from a revolutionary mindset (42). And, while not all RPGs have the players physically moving their bodies, they are expected to bring creative solutions and their own pre-disposed mindsets to the gaming environment (Davis par. 4). In this manner, so too can their own sense of justice and activism play out in the game to inspire real-world motivation for change. It would then benefit our understanding of this intersection to observe how this conception of the active participant can be emulated in video games and analog RPGs as separate modes of gaming simulations.

As for the framework Fernández-Vara is constructing, the capacity that video game media has to simulate environments is used to inform a performance studies approach to game studies. With rules being employed to regulate performance activities in a similar manner for both theatre and video games and performance space being a consideration for allowances within the theatre stage and game environment (3), Fernández-Vara maps out how performance studies can extend its reach to the game studies discipline for a more diversified media experience. An affordance of video games hosting performance is that the rules governing the game space cannot be broken due to the code's static nature. Additionally, at this intersection of performance and game studies, there is an abundance of regulated space for performance research to be employed in an interdisciplinary fashion to the gaming media as a platform, although, this game space abundance is not limited to the virtual world of technology (Hoover et al. 223).

Hoover et al. focus more broadly on analog RPGs from the perspective of live roleplay as performance. They posit analog RPGs as having the potential for realism that exemplifies liveness and presence, "experiential and aesthetic specifics of theater" (222), as no two experiences of RPGs are the same despite them potentially having similar source material and setup. In part, this is due to the players' capacity to improvise their words and actions and break the notion of authorship boundaries expected from traditional narrative media (220).

Boal sees improvisation as crucial for the theatre of the oppressed as scripted imitation does not depict people as they are but as the script says they should be, limiting the actors in their

ability to depict real people (10). And while video games do have limitations with their capacity for improvisation, as much of the necessary code for the medium works as a script, analog RPGs are limited in their flexibility only by what the players will allow. Therefore, the affordances shown through both video games and analog RPGs inform different methodologies of performance. Hoover et al. conclude that RPGs and theatre share similar roots as performance media through the meaning-making they afford their respective subjects and here we can observe simulation in gaming opening diverse avenues for performance practices being employed to make meaningful contributions to marginalized communities (Hoover et al. 223).

Fernández-Vara observes video games as performative media with five major overlapping qualities, "a special ordering of time, a special value attached to objects, non-productivity in terms of goods, rules, and performance spaces" (1-2). At this intersection, I see where disability justice concepts can overlap with these qualities as well. Some might be more obvious to spot like special value being attached to objects for symbolism or rules and performance spaces to regulate and ground the disability justice work. We might also observe non-productivity in terms of goods being used as an anti-capitalist stance in relation to how productivity is at the forefront of ableist ideology and stands in direct opposition to disability. However, for the sake of brevity, I focus on the special ordering of time with a brief consideration for performance space.

The constraints of theatrical performances, like specific times and dates or travel, make it so that not everybody can attend an in-person event like Theatre of the Oppressed. While there are many contemporary theatre performances that involve virtual and/or asynchronous elements, however these often detract from the liveness and presence, two important performance studies concepts I define after the next paragraph. In this case, the affordances that a video game or an analog RPG would provide a would-be spectator, like having the experience in the comfort of their own home, is beneficial to reach wider audiences without sacrificing liveness or presence. And, while a set time does need to be booked for the game to be played, if it is run privately, rather than publicly at a convention, like GenCon, it is an agreed-upon time that is most convenient for everyone as opposed to fixed times. To this end, I also define and reflect on the capacity that TTRPGs have to be employed with considerations for crip time as a means of access to performance space.

If we were to use a hypothetical example of gamifying Theatre of the Oppressed for the blind community, this game might take the form of a virtual reality simulation where the headset acts as a blindfold and the player is forced to navigate an environment without their vision, instead needing to rely on sensors in the remote and sound to play the game. This is not dissimilar to *Racing in the Dark*, a VR game developed by Gluck et al. to use the Oculus Quest's built-in haptic, tracking, auditory, and voice systems, to provide players with a non-visual car racing experience (1114), as shown in Figure 12 and 13.



Figure 1 a,b. Images from Racing in the Dark. 1a. The behind the scenes set up of player and opponent racers getting ready to begin the race. 1b. The player's view.

Figure 12: Screenshot from Gluck et al.'s article on Racing in the Dark

The above images were taken as a screenshot from Gluck et al.'s article on the subject and conveys to us the behind the scenes set up that can be observed but also the point of view of the player, that being complete darkness or nothing visual. They state for the caption of the images, "Figure 1 a,b. Images from Racing in the Dark. 1a. The behind the scenes set up of player and opponent racers getting ready to begin the race. 1b. The player's view" (Gluck et al. 1115).

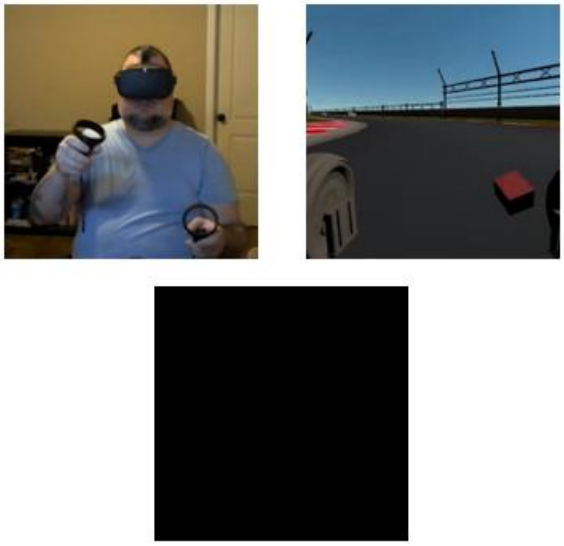


Figure 2 a,b.c. Using hand gestures to make a left turn in Racing in the Dark. 2a. A player makes a left turn by raising the right Oculus Touch Controller above the left. 2b. Behind the scenes view of the turn being made in the game. 2c. The player's view.

Figure 13: Second screenshot from Gluck et al.'s article on Racing in the Dark including player

The above image was also taken as a screenshot from Gluck et al.'s article and it shows us the distinction of a real experience of the game where the onlookers can observe the player racing in real time using the VR equipment but again to the player there is nothing visual they can observe from the racing experience. They state for the caption of the images, "Figure 2 a,b.c. Using hand gestures to make a left turn in Racing in the Dark. 2a. A player makes a left turn by raising the right Oculus Touch Controller above the left. 2b. Behind the scenes view of the turn being made in the game. 2c. The player's view" (Gluck et al. 1116).

Alternatively, the game design could take the form of a TTRPG where the players are educated about societal constraints on the blind community and must come up with alternative means of overcoming these disabling barriers, a concept I scrutinize later in my object text analysis for *Survival of the Able*. By giving players the dual role of the spectator and actor through the affordances discussed by Fernández-Vara (6), a gaming simulation has the potential to simulate the objectives of Theatre of the Oppressed providing the observer with the additional role of the subject, in an immersive manner. To this end, the game design intention of spreading awareness and encouraging activism can be more prominently embraced by the players through their immersive performative experience.

1.2.3.3 Collaboration of Performance and Disability Studies Concepts

In performance studies, two concepts come up that are richly contested. As I alluded, these are liveness, the distinction of theatre from film in which the media being presented is a production with performers and objects immersing the observer and being in the same moment as them (Reason 235), and presence, the realness and existence of "The body, voice, and self of the performer engag[ing] the text…and draw[ing] the audience into a newly created world" situating the observer in the space they consciously share (Coonfield and Rose 204). With the vital aspects of theatre, like liveness and presence being available through improvisational practices, no two players will have the same experience. Now we must observe the affordances of crip time as an affordance for disability communities to access sites of performance within TTRPG media.

Normative time is supposed to be the temporal expectations that our society adheres to (Sitter et al. 34). Despite these expectations varying based on the location or time of year, it is typically considered to be fixed and provides little to no leniency for accessibility. Normative time is generally the socially accepted way that we account for time throughout our day-to-day lives. For example, our 9-5 workday schedule, the deadlines we have for our final essays, and how long it takes for a pizza to be delivered to our house. While these all seem to be the norm and expected for our society, we are shown by crip time how normative time excludes and restricts disabled bodies and minds through arbitrary means.

Crip time, as a concept, is used for disabled individuals to identify the way they experience time uniquely from everyone else. It shows us the unnecessary complications that are part of disabled experiences when they are not provided proper access to the world around them (Sitter et al. 34-35). Crip time looks at the additional time they need for both accessibility accommodations as well as how long it would take people with disabilities to complete a given task (Kuppers 29-31). In the context of conducting disability initiatives, "With consideration to crip time, there is an opportunity to consider how the format can be delivered over a more manageable timeline that may involve shorter sessions over longer periods of time that can guide the balancing of funding commitments, resources, and project timelines" (Sitter et al. 54). This is exemplified later when I present the ethnographic neurodivergent TTRPG design workshop I conducted as well as the media artifact that emerged from it.

1.2.3.4 TTRPGs as Performance

While I have made note that there are theatrical productions that include digital and accessible means, they often lose the feeling of presence and liveness that makes them so appealing. Whereas the local and group-mediated nature of analog games, more specifically, for the context of this dissertation, TTRPGs, makes use of crip time to ensure the liveness and presence are there, as shown in the following image.

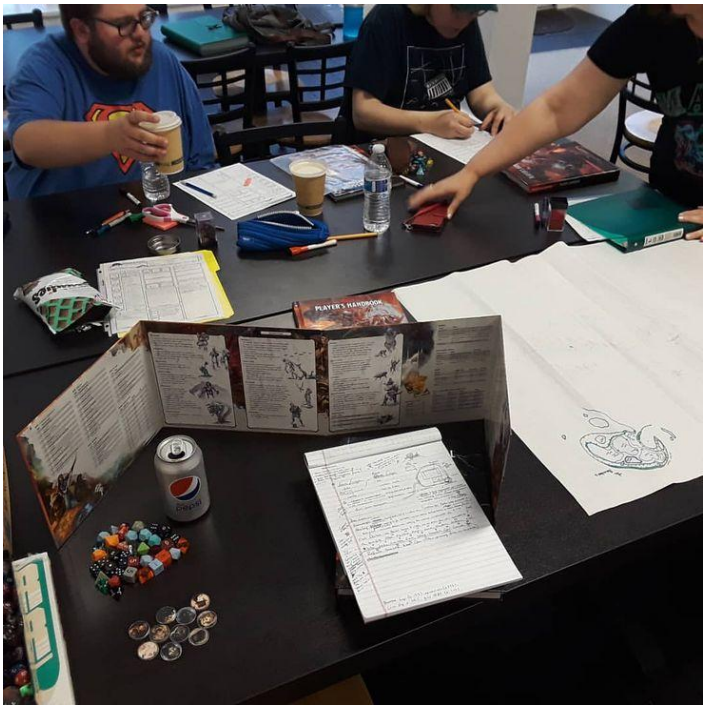


Figure 14: Four players gathered around a table playing D&D resulting in a live social environment

To ensure these qualities, traditional European theatrical performances require a theatre venue, occur between certain hours, and can only be attended for a limited time, spanning how long the producers intend for the events to run. In contrast, TTRPGs subvert these requirements by being available at flexible pre-determined times and locations, that best accommodate smaller groups of performers and spectators, as many times and as often as they so desire and can attend.

Regarding the performers, TTRPGs allow for narrative flexibility that accommodates the spectators' needs for autonomy in their performance art, as they do not need to be hired, rehearse, and memorize aspects of the performance other than what they would like to put

forward as their embodied experience. Whereas game designers like Alder observe TTRPGs to be “transparent, replicable, and hackable” (188). There is no expert knowledge required to become a designer for TTRPGs because the players are the ones in complete control of the story (188). They are responsible for the themes, character designs, and the narrative that can be designed for themselves without needing to meet the expectations of mainstream media (188). This manner of engagement would be otherwise inaccessible to spectators as passive observers in other interactive engagements with performance, where to be part of the performance is a constrained normative time commitment in and of itself.

While this intersection has been realized in academia, there are still scholarly gaps that can be expanded on in terms of performance methodology that can be hosted in gaming media. One such gap being considerations on how best to employ performance methodology within gaming media in service of marginalized communities, as I go on to examine.

1.2.4 Considerations for Disability Performance

So far, this literature review has conveyed that there are potential unexplored benefits to situating disability performance in TTRPGs. As Hadley notes, disability studies scholarship that questions political austerity using disability media, art, and culture

> ...offer new and more nuanced approaches to protesting the issues, including approaches that – whilst they do return to focus on pain, impairment, and problems – push spectators to go beyond the identification with individual stories that characterised solidarity-based activist movements and towards the calls to collaborative action that characterises collectivity-based activist movements. (358)

However, given these perceived benefits, I have yet to address the issues that disability and performance scholars have brought up scrutinizing empathy, despite it being an aspect of gaming media that is heavily promoted (Ruberg “Empathy and Its Alternatives” 58). So, in this section of the review, I provide a more nuanced take on the consideration that should be raised for empathy in conversation with the alternative intentions of representation and activism. To preface, I do not mean to rule out the possibility for empathy to be productive for other game designs or media, just that it will not be beneficial to explore empathy for the purposes of this

dissertation. As such, I reflect on it here to provide a comprehensive understanding of how it is observed in disability, performance, and game studies as well as why it should be avoided.

1.2.4.1 Problematizing Empathy

To define empathy, it is the ability we have to understand and share the feelings of another person. It is largely debated on how well we can do this to begin with as it is often questioned if we can truly understand what it is like to be something other than ourselves or if we are just imagining the experience as we believe it to be (Nagel 438). A lot of the advertising in gaming media approaches this with a level of toxic optimism where it is discussed how the immersive game experience is so real that we can empathize fully with the main character (Ruberg 59-60). In performance we can connect this concept with simulationism, and we come to another divisive means of portraying characters who don't share our identity (Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick 60; Hadley 352).

The use of disability simulation to promote empathy is an intense topic under scrutiny by many disability studies scholars. Attempts to simulate or empathize with the disabled experience have often been shown to be counterproductive for progressive movements, especially if it does not include people with disabilities. Ellen Adams says it best when she remarks,

> Empathy is the ultimate imagined reality and can work to positive and negative ends. The positive is obvious: a reaching out, understanding, and kindness. 'False empathy', however, comprises the hollow acknowledgement and appropriation of a condition or situation, in order to evade dealing with the implications. (211-212)

Hence a well-noted requirement for disability work is encapsulated in the saying "Nothing about us without us." This particular phrase has been used since at least the 1600s by advocates for political and social change across the world and has historically been applied to emphasize the necessity of including disenfranchised groups in the decision-making process of policies and programs concerning them. The phrase was popularized in the U.S. by James Charlton, in the 1990s, who heard of it from its usage in the South African disability rights movement (Penn State Center Philadelphia par. 1)

The phrase's application to disability activism is primarily due to able-bodied and minded individuals placing Toxic Optimism, most often encouraging sentiments to reduce or avoid uncomfortable or painful emotions which ends up building pressure on disabled individuals to be unrealistically positive without considering the context, on an event or craft that satisfies a need they have to be proactive without bringing about much fundamental change for members of disability communities (Hadley 352).

Boal provides us with some additional reasoning as to why empathy has been counterproductive, even if used by the community in accurate depictions of their lived experiences. Approaching from a time of revolution, for the purposes of rousing the audience to meaningful action, he describes empathy as making the observers of Theatre of the Oppressed complacent and more likely to empathize with regressive ideologies (Boal 34-41). For example, they can empathize with millionaires and subscribe to the idea of trickle-down economics if the millionaires' position is made out to be a sympathetic one (34-41). This is in large part because observers are never actively involved in the performance, taking on their passive role. They sit back, feel sympathy, and get a sense of self-actualization from that alone without needing to do anything greater.

As such, she is in accordance with the points brought up earlier, stating that False Empathy is a growing concern for marginalized gamers and game designers (Ruberg "Empathy and Its Alternatives" 58). Yet, empathy continues to be a major selling point in the video game industry, making it so that studies done in the field of game studies promote it in all its facets. To this end, disability studies is a necessity for this dissertation to offset the Toxic Optimism instilled in game studies.

In a disability performance, this would result in an unrealistic interpretation of the embodied experience of disability brought about by the imagination of individuals rather than an understanding of the culture through lived experiences of embodiment or enmindment "a term that captures the process-based character of culturally shaped cognitive and mental life" (Kuppers 3). To this end, complacency is promoted for able-bodied and minded people through the feeling of satisfaction and empathy they attain with minimal action. However, when we adhere to the saying "Nothing about us without us," the reality of disability is such that even one

person with a disability cannot accurately understand another person's embodied experience with another disability to the point where there is no one agreed-upon definition within disability studies to be united by (Adams 10).



Figure 15: Disability Umbrella Term

The above figure states, “The Umbrella of ‘Disabilities:’ A broad term that encompasses a very diverse group of people.” This is positioned overtop an umbrella with the word “Disability” written on in with the word “Visual, Developmental, Hearing, Emotional, Mental, Learning, Cognitive, Physical, and Autism” beneath it. Further down the image states,

> Not all disabilities are visible. This graphic is a basic guide intended to help increase understanding. All disabilities and abilities are on a spectrum and people who have been given general labels such as these are individuals and should be given the opportunity to express their individual talents, and abilities, without limitation of stereotyped biases. (disXABILITY | Disability Awareness)

As has been depicted in this figure, Adams herself considers disability a highly problematic modern umbrella term (12), used to signify a culturally specific phenomenon (6), leaving some definitions "necessarily vague, to cover a wide range of conditions and illnesses," (10). The complexity with which society disables different members of the disability communities and the variety of experiences that each disabled person has across cultures, ethnicities, sexualities, gender, and other demographics makes defining disability an inherently complicated task. The boundaries are further blurred, as Jay Dolmage notes, in that, "Disability is often used rhetorically as a flexible form of stigma to be freely applied to any unknown, threatening, or devalued group" (4). In this manner, the semblance we have of understanding disability mainly serves to reinforce a false depiction of normalcy in relation to the Other (Hall 491). As such, there is a strong case to be made for empathy for disability to be an impossibility.

However, these scholars are not considering the idea of empathy positioned within a game for disability performance where players are already in an active role and immersed experience. So, it could be argued that these perspectives are not enough to discount empathy as a potentially beneficial aspect of disability performance in gaming media specifically. To provide more perspective in relation to game studies, Bonnie Ruberg discusses the controversial topic of empathy games, games designed for immersion allowing the player to empathize with either the main topics of the game or the main character's experiences. This genre of game is something that game designers with marginalized identities argue against the use of but one that white male players speak in favour of (Ruberg 58). The point of contention lies in that people playing games from a perspective of privilege enjoy these types of games because it opens up new experiences for them that they would not otherwise be exposed to or explore. However, Ruberg explains that the use of such empathy minimizes and generalizes the lived experience of marginalized individuals (60). Behind gaming media's rhetoric of empathy is the wrongful assumption that it has empathy games have been designed to educate more privileged, normative players (60). Ruberg gives an example of how "…describing queer game as empathy games implies that the purpose of such work is to educate straight, cisgender players—to invite them to 'understand and share' the feelings of queer people" (60). Wherein reality the intended audiences for many queer indie games are members of the queer community (60). In this manner, the gaming media

rhetoric behind the empathy games insist or presume that games belong, "to players who represent dominant positionalities within games cultures and society at large" (60).

Adding further perspective to this rhetoric of empathy, performance theorist Ryan Claycomb sees empathy as an economy being used to commodify the human experience and reinforce the ableist ideologies with passivity for activism (61). He notes how, "Just as empathy is symptomatic as a response to human commodification, empathy has itself become commodified as a tool for further market reach into the human psyche" (59). In this manner, he believes it works best to placate people when they empathize with a narrative or character that they themselves already share political and social values with (55-56). As such, any conversation activists can have across these rigid lines of differences that are drawn between abled bodies/minds and disabled bodies/minds is made more difficult due to the preconceived social and political understandings society enters with. Despite this, many still believe empathy is as crucial for social justice and human rights despite the "market-oriented vision of empathy which judges it as just another skill to be developed by the self-enterprising" (55-56).

Like Adams, Claycomb notes that despite our willingness to take on the role of empathetic listeners, and how it may enable social change, it is common for privileged members of society to take in feelings of sympathy and sadness as a remedy in and of itself to the ableist politics without looking for greater activism (Claycomb 53-56). However, social theorists have argued how this "empathy economy can be deployed in a range of ideological directions, perhaps toward encouraging mutual obligation to Others, perhaps toward mobilizing fear against "terrorists," and perhaps toward erasing the public offense of sexist abusers" (Claycomb 57). So, suffice to say the employment of empathy for activism is scrupulous and its positioned neutrality can often bring about passive or propagandized motivations.

The commodification and publicization of these experiences are often referred to as narrative empathy but leave the impression of sympathy (Kuppers 30). As an alternative, Krista Ratcliffe suggests we invoke rhetorical listening instead of narrative empathy because the concept enables room for nuance and critique in place of False Empathy (Ratcliffe 220). Noting how Ratcliffe centralizes rhetorical listening for white individuals in service of racialized communities, she transparently acknowledges that white people need to do a better job in listening to people of

colour to understand their issues before assuming they already understand. This sentiment is paralleled for neurotypicals who think they can understand neurodivergent experiences without experiencing them first-hand. In opposition to narrative empathy, rhetorical listening approaches others in a way where we are looking to change our rhetorical selves and acknowledge the personal and political influences that are ingrained in us and society's views of the Other. By moving past the surface-level interactions and deepening our understanding of the rhetorical representation of ourselves in conversation with those who will share their stories we can move towards a comprehension beyond baseline sympathy. This would work in opposition to pro-active measures without the inclusion of disability input which fosters myths of certain conditions leading to pejorative understandings of disability.

Historically, mental disabilities like ASD have been rhetorically constructed, primarily through second-hand observation, as a lack of emotion and affect (Dolmage 144; Yergeau 85). Baron Cohen for example is notorious for depicting autistic people as less emotional and more systematic in their thought process because of studies that were fueled by biases on how autism was thought to affect people and their way of experiencing the world (Yergeau 88). To this end, any notion of empathy of simulation towards disability experiences would only serve to replicate the harmful falsities that we so often associate with disabled individuals.

Disability theorists Melanie Yergeau and Paul Heilker oppose Baron Cohen's assessment by noting how empathy presupposes an attunement to a completely different person and their emotional state or experience (Yergeau and Heilker 491), a feat that we can't confidently say anyone is capable of. When it comes to playing disabled characters in a TTRPG setting, we need to draw concepts from game studies and performance studies to help theorize and explain certain phenomena however, for all intents and purposes, the only experience I will be drawing from will be that of people who are speaking on behalf of their own embodied experience with their disability. That too will be divisive however as there is still a level of reduction when we view heavy political and social topics through the lens of the individual, much how Dana Cloud conceives of therapeutic rhetoric.

1.2.4.2 Negotiating the Problematic with the Potential in Therapeutic Rhetoric

To define therapeutic rhetoric, it is a concept where the positioning and phrasing in media are used to focus the attention of the audience on personal issues rather than addressing social and political problems. In her article, "Shock Therapy: Oprah Winfrey, Celebrity Philanthropy, and Disaster 'Relief' in Haiti" Cloud analyses 2010 coverage of the Haiti earthquake done on the Oprah Winfrey Show. She states how the Oprah Winfrey Show tried to use a therapeutic discourse that limited the mass experience of the earthquake to the individual. In this manner, Oprah Winfrey used celebrity guest experiences as shock absorbers for the audience instead of addressing greater issues at play, like the lack of assistance offered to Haiti in the aftermath (49). This rhetoric is therapeutic in nature as it allows the audience to empathize with the experiences of the event itself rather than considerations with what needs to be done or what could have been done earlier on to mitigate the damage (43). After having the traumatic experience of the earthquake filtered for them, the audience can then move on with their lives and not consider it anymore. Cloud notes how this is a common rhetorical strategy of private capitalism, as it limits experiences and tragedies down to the individual without addressing root problems. This then reinforces the ideology of every tragedy being the personal responsibility of the individuals involved as opposed to societal responsibility. Cloud refers to this as a Theatre of Pity, which is applicable to disability simulation in theatre and other media sources, where the audience may empathize with the disenfranchised but ultimately feel good about themselves to just understand the problem without inspiring them to take any further action in addressing it (46).

That being said, the academic sphere of therapeutic rhetoric is divisive as David Payne sees therapeutic rhetoric more as a neutral "…therapeutic approach to rhetorical analysis [that] seeks to identify a psychology of interaction between a text and audience and explain[s] why and how an audience member may actively appropriate meanings from the text for therapeutic purposes" ("The Wizard of Oz" 28). Meaning it does not necessarily need to work in the manner portrayed to us by Cloud. So, while some scholars look at the negative implications of current therapeutic rhetoric as a means of socially conditioning the audience, based on its application, others observe the social benefit that therapeutic rhetoric can bring disenfranchised communities. Payne and

Naomi R. Rockler both take opposing sides in this point of contention and provide a good depth of how therapeutic rhetoric has previously been used and how it can be used moving forward.

In Coping with Failure: The Therapeutic Uses of Rhetoric, Payne explores the rhetorical implications of failure and how it is perceived. He discusses how an individual's shortcomings are what hold their interest, so we create and seek out discourse that might provide relief by offering alternative understandings to our situation, i.e. therapeutic rhetoric (Payne, *Coping with Failure* 148). Creating or resolving experiences of failure is a form of therapeutic rhetoric and this reading shows us how it is a beneficial tool for helping achieve sustained relief through narrative discourse. In this sense, seeking out and acknowledging societal failure has rhetorical implications in creating said discourse and as such has the potential to be used for addressing potential applications of disability portrayal in multimedia narratives. That is not to say that societal failure should be framed as the norm, as Rockler's "'Be Your Own Windkeeper': Friends, Feminism, and Rhetorical Strategies of Depoliticization" observes the negative applications of therapeutic rhetoric in the TV series Friends. She discusses how it is used to depoliticize women's issues by representing instances of female empowerment exclusively as individual transformation, oversimplifying the resolution of women's systemic economic problems, and portraying political issues as worthy of mockery (Rockler, "'Be Your Own Windkeeper'" 244). So, like Cloud, Rockler makes therapeutic rhetoric out to be a form of social conditioning, as opposed to being a sense of relief for the disenfranchised. Here we can see a concrete example of how therapeutic rhetoric can be employed to reinforce hegemonies instead of creating discourse that opposes them.

In "The Wizard of Oz: Therapeutic rhetoric in a contemporary media ritual," Payne acknowledges Cloud and Rockler's view of therapeutic rhetoric in his analysis of how folklore, as a narrative, holds many rhetorical symbols promoting discourse for the people of a culture.



Figure 16: Disney's Portrayal of Evil Women

He brings up examples of its negative applications, like Disney's portrayal of evil women, as shown in the above figure with the Evil Queen, Maleficent, Ursula, and Mother Gothel, creating a modern stereotype through a fictitious narrative (Payne, "The Wizard of Oz" 27). In this manner, he sees the potential for the therapeutic rhetoric of a text formulating problems alongside solutions to the audience through stories. Payne notes how this is often used for the reinforcement of societal ideals and, in "Entertainment, the Personal, and the Political: Therapeutic Rhetoric and Popular Culture Controversies," Rockler reflects on the genre of therapeutic rhetoric and discourse that surrounds U.S. audiences specifically. She notes that their disposition to understanding and discussing social problems is situated in the terministic screen of individualism (Rockler, "Entertainment, the Personal, and the Political" 112). The U.S. audience is then inclined to accept these solutions as rational on a psychological level because they see the actions being taken through the composed narrative leading to a satisfactory conclusion (Payne, "The Wizard of Oz" 28). By reducing every political experience down to the level of the individual the systemic issues are hidden, and we see a way of framing therapeutic rhetoric that helps to maintain the hegemonic structure at play. This is prominent in the context

of U.S. audiences because the sociocultural disposition, that heavily favours the individual, propagates this individualism (Rockler, “Entertainment, the Personal, and the Political” 99).

From what we have observed so far, we can see the potential for how empathy and therapeutic rhetoric can be problematically applied to shape discourse and socially condition members of society. However, in terms of framing my questions, I still view therapeutic rhetoric as a method of developing discourse through personal disability narratives for representation that might provide a potential benefit to the disability communities through the rhetorical reinforcement of disability values through media. To that end, my question, implying the social benefit to the disability communities, prompts my literature review to observe specific considerations in the scholarship surrounding them.

1.2.4.3 Disability Representation

How we can best go about this representative practice is still going to be a complicated matter. Hadley considers every instance of a person with disabilities entering a performance space to be an intervention of societal assumptions about disability (182). However, she is also rightfully concerned with non-disabled artists appropriating disability art and culture to create self-determined positive symbolism that seeks to present disability in a more digestible fashion to the audience without showing “the realities of (pain and impairment that are part of) being disabled” (152).

While on the one hand, activists want to create these narrative depictions and game mechanics to provide a rhetorical representation of members of the disability communities and political issues that affect disability communities. On the other hand, the idea of depicting life with certain types of disability as pain and impairment feels unsavory, despite being realistic. Simply creating disabled characters or attempting to simulate disability is considered a problematic methodology amongst critical disability scholars (Maggelsen 141-149). Maggelsen discusses how disability simulations fail to provide the actors with the embodied knowledge that comes with disability identity (148-149). It comes back to the idea of empathy where it is one thing to imagine having, playing, or performing a character with a disability but it is another to have said disability.

While Maggelsen goes on to note the benefit of supplementing the simulation with more of a learning structure to better inform the public of disability disposition (188), Tobin Anthony Siebers makes it apparent that people, "…experience their body relative to their usual embodiment, and they become so preoccupied with sensations of bodily inadequacy that they cannot perceive the extent to which their 'disability' results from social rather than physical causes" (28). Therefore, purpose and audience need to be considered in how the medium of TTRPGs is framing disability. That being, to what ends and for whom?

Even if a game does position players as actors, there is still room for them to be subjected to empathy towards a regressive argument, making them passive in the real-world instead of activists. If all we do is take an able-bodied and able-minded individual and put them in a position where they need to play out a lived experience of what it's like to have a disability of any kind it will most often result in sentiments of loss, anxiety, pity, frustration, and them concluding that it would be awful to be disabled (Siebers 28). So, to ensure the project will not presuppose an imagined empathetic understanding of neurodivergent people, the first step requires that it be designed for and by the members of said communities.

The trouble we run into here is that every disability experience is unique making it an impossible task to create a one-size-fits-all option. Perhaps instead of designing broader narratives and game mechanics for the disability communities, game designers with disabilities start by designing more specific narratives and game mechanics of their individual experience. Especially since creating a depiction of disability with embodied/enminded knowledge, requires greater insight from designers with said knowledge. To this end, there is room at the junction of performance, disability, and game studies to promote understanding and social change without creating a prescription for perfection or trying to fix the problem.

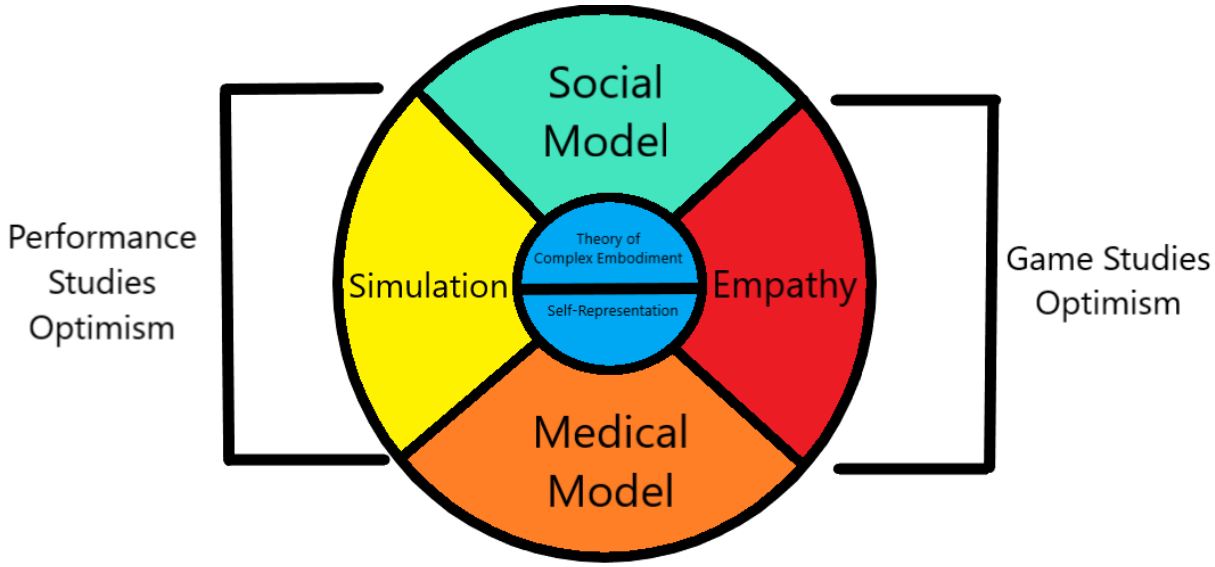


Figure 17: Model showing Theory of Complex Embodiment in relation to the social and medical model and performance and game studies

Siebers discusses the Theory of Complex Embodiment and its inclusion of both the medical and social models (22-33). As I have illustrated in the above image, the social model and the medical model come together to bring truly convey complex embodiment. While at the sides we can see how a concerning optimism in performance studies tends towards a simulated experience where similarly game studies toxic optimism moves towards empathy. To allow for each quadrant to perform its intended function I convey that self-representation must be employed so as to offset any problematic depictions or assumptions.

While the medical model is problematic in that it reinforces ableist depictions of disability and seeks to cure all disability it still holds merit for acknowledging the innate lived experiences of people who seek medical interventions to cope with factors of disability derived from the body, such as chronic pain (25). The social model, while pushing back against the common narrative of seeking cures for disability and preferring to accommodate socially and environmentally, fails to observe disability at the level of the individual and how they would still experience the world with all the accommodations they require (25). The Theory of Complex Embodiment seeks to portray and understand the realities Hadley wishes to put forward through both models while putting their oppressive reasonings or oversights aside respectively (25). As such, a promising

means of approaching neurodivergent representation in TTRPG systems would allow for this nuanced approach using complex embodiment.

Petra Kuppers promotes the usage of ambiguity, in the form of "unexpected encounters, fleeting moments, puzzles and unanswerable questions… as a method to destabilize audience expectations" (Kuppers 88). In doing so, she places value on the diverse embodied experiences of disability and empowers disability artists to explore experiential understandings of what they see and how they are seen in at the site of contemporary performance (88). This ambiguity is necessary to conceive of disability as a complex cultural concept that unites, complicates, and develops social communities as a lifelong journey (3). This approach helps to inform my ethnographic work by making allowances for mechanical considerations that might fall outside of a hard-set system. This way we can introduce the nuance of the designs put forward and they are free to, "… make their own contribution to maintaining focus both on large-scale social, political, and economic issues and on specific examples of these issues in activism moving forward" (Hadley 358).

As such, in accordance with these disability studies scholars and queer game designers (Alder 188), the means of TTRPG representation that I see as the most progressive and effective would be means by which neurodivergent players are designing their own content for themselves and their communities to play out and explore these narratives and navigations of the world. As we observe in my ethnographic work in chapter two, the way the neurodivergent communities navigate our disability, our accommodation needs, and the sociopolitical phenomena surrounding us starts with self-representation.

1.2.5 Failure in Gaming Media

As I mentioned earlier, a common and widely spread opinion is that disability is synonymous with failure in many different forms of suffering and helplessness (Mitchell and Snyder 19, 47; McRuer 141). More specifically, there is a present aversion felt by gaming cultures towards this suffering and helplessness ascribed (Carr, "Ability, Disability and Dead Space" par. 13-26). On top of this, modern media does not adequately represent the disability community in a realistic or supportive way (Dolmage 20; Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick 43). More specifically, gaming media exemplifies our capitalist societies' obsessions with things like productivity, efficiency, success, able-bodied/minded idealization, and achievement (Carr, "Ability, Disability and Dead Space" par. 17-20). In short, this aversion to disability in games stems from a direct correlation between disability and failure, a correlation that ableist ideology has rhetorically constructed, and constantly reinforces, making disability out to be synonymous with failure.

In this section, I remark on how most contemporary games are designed with an able-bodied and neurotypical main character in mind (Ledder 30) which makes playing a character with a disability disadvantageous for achieving success in the game. As such, academics do not have many positive examples of disabled TTRPG characters to draw from since there is not much appeal to playing a disabled character outside of fetishization or identity tourism; due to the physical, mental, and social barriers they would have in navigating the game world (Jung par. 3-6). I posit that it is ableist culture's obsession with success, winning, and productivity that fosters the fear of disability both in and outside of gaming culture.

This portion of my literature review observes ableist perceptions of failure and how they foster a fear of disability, making it undesirable and complicated to incorporate disability into pre-existing TTRPG systems, like *D&D*. As I touched on them briefly in the overview, I provide a greater rundown of the social studies scholars and their work in rhetoricizing failure as a tool for personal and social change. Placing these scholars in conversation with one another to discuss the conception of the queer art of failure, I show how refocusing our observations of in-game loss as a productive affordance of game systems can be dissociated from ableist failure (Juul 60).

1.2.5.1 Perceptions of Ableist Failure

When we consider what constitutes failure in an ableist society, it is most often associated with a negative consequence. Failure to execute a task correctly will result in punishment or loss of reward. Failure to speak clearly will result in other people making mistakes and, potentially, the speaker being blamed for it. Failure to look ideal for the context will result in social exile or debasement. In this manner, ableism stands in opposition to disabled individuals and disability justice as it takes the medical model approach where accessibility barriers that affect us are made out to be the problem of the individual rather than the society (Jarman and Thompson-Ebanks 147).

Ableist framings in media do this in part by individualizing problems and reducing complex issues down to the perspective of the individual so that personal viewpoints are held in higher regard than that of the collective (Rockler, "'Be Your Own Windkeeper'" 244; "Entertainment, the Personal, and the Political" 112). This is similar to how many socially-imposed problems, experienced by women, people of colour, and the queer communities (Magnet and Watson 262), are made out to be something that the individuals within those communities need to solve for themselves with no help from the collective society. So, while disability is impacted by ableist ideology, in a similar capacity that many other marginalized identities are impacted by their corresponding bigoted ideologies, it stands out further as the very symbol of negative consequence or failure due to disabledness being at the core of the identity.

Disability identity is framed as an impairment and further exemplified as a symbol of failure through "…sociopolitical, personal, legal, [and] economic…" disadvantages (Adams 11). However, the very notion of disability is an artificial and often socially constructed conception (10). It stands to reason that the physical and mental impairments experienced by members of the disability communities are in-fact real, but the way that society reacts to us, treats us, denies us, and rhetorically disenfranchises us through media is made out to be reasonable and rational (Yates 84). This in turn makes disability out to be something to avoid at all costs so as to remain able-bodied and minded enough to cope with the obligations made necessary to survive our ableist society.

The notion that ableism stands in direct opposition to disability identity is nothing new, as it has been the call of disability justice for years now to come together and take an anti-capitalist stance (Berne et al., 227). Patricia Berne et al. remark in "Ten Principles of Disability Justice" that due to our bodies and minds resisting conformity to the capitalist standards of production, those of us with disability identities are anti-capitalist by our very nature (227). The notion that human worth is not dependent on our ability to be productive and efficient is by its very nature anti-capitalist (227). They see the standards of labour defined by ableist ideologies of able-bodied supremacy as something to be critiqued (227).

Though capitalist mindsets are heavily promoted in many venues of modern media, we see them exemplified in sports and gaming culture. In many competitive sports and e-sports cash prizes and salaries of millions of dollars are available for those who are abled enough to win. In all these contests, ranging from *DOTA 2* to professional basketball, there is a singular goal that qualifies winning and anything other than achieving that goal means failure for the team or individual player. In the following image, we can observe how the DOTA 2 tournament is set up much like a basketball tournament, with a stadium and a 360-degree auditorium, and conveys a similar level of seriousness in the event.



Figure 18: DOTA 2 Tournament

This goal can be something straightforward, like getting more points than the other team, or it can be something more complicated, like destroying the opposing team's guardian. In either case, there is static qualifiers for victory and any mistake, shortcoming, or handicap, if you will, is met with criticism.

In this manner, disability, of any kind, is seen as unfavorable if it conflicts with the goals of winning the game, just as it is seen as unfavourable in an ableist society when it comes to performing a given role. Even within the current state of game studies, an overwhelming move within the genre of serious game studies, alongside the tech industry as a whole (Sum et al. 50–55), has gone towards rehabilitation, in the sense of improving on or "correcting" undesirable symptoms of disabled individuals (Wästerfors and Hansson 1143). To be clear, I am not saying that all serious games work towards an ableist agenda. I am saying they primarily facilitate learning, skill practice, or problem-solving which can have beneficial impacts on the lives of the players but can often be used to reinforce the medical model of disability in the sense that they are marketed to be able to assist the player in overcoming their own disability (Anderson and Schrier 11).

In contrast to the limitations of traditional games; like chess, baseball, golf, etc.; TTRPG systems provide us with a unique site where there is no static goal for winning the game. While there is a big bad evil monster to kill in many cases, a dungeon to explore and successfully navigate, and nobles to rescue, no one is limiting the players so that they can't go off on their own and try something different. In this TTRPG game space, the fear of failure that deters us from experiencing the traditional games I mentioned above with disabled identities present and active participants has less purchase, unless the game's designers and the players at the table were to bring in their own preconceived notions of success and failure. Therein lies the problem.

1.2.5.2 Rhetorical Failure

While I have already touched on the harmful depictions and potential responses to them, i.e. disability critique, cripping strategies, etc., I now posit the notion of failure in how it is observed rhetorically by media, performance, queer, and disability studies scholars alike.

In line with more traditional takes on the concept of failure, David Payne puts failure forward as a tool of the rhetoric of the self-used for the individual to defend, repair, or change their identity (*Coping with Failure* xi). This can be read as an ableist-inspired take on the conception of failure for a project of self-change and self-improvement (*Coping with Failure* 13). In a sense, this viewpoint is common enough. We are compensated through the information we learn from our failures, and we also use them as inspiration to improve (*Coping with Failure* 4; 152). Regarding identity, the loss we experience is made out to have social value in terms of how we present ourselves, as it teaches us what to do and what not to do as a form of boundary navigation (*Coping with Failure* 45). To take this perspective to its natural conclusion however is to say we must use failure to assimilate ourselves into society, a prospect of the medical model worthy of rebuke. That being the case, the other scholars I put forward gravitate to the defending of identity that Payne briefly alludes to.

Jesper Juul observes failure as a paradox and a necessity for games. While he does agree in part with Payne's mention of improvement through failure, as in improving skills necessary to win the game (60), he also remarks that, without the risk of failure, games lose their appeal (7). In part, we are willing to subject ourselves to the risk of losing a game we play because we can perceive the risk as fair (7). As Juul puts it, "(good) games are designed such that they give us a fair chance, whereas the regular world makes no such promises" (7). However, narratively speaking within the context of a game, Juul's posits how a concept he calls fictional failure, a failure that is unavoidable for the intended narrative, does not have to be fair in this regard (27, 91-114, 118). If the game script is such that failure is written into it, the narrative failure we experience is appreciated in a comparable respect that it would be to a film or novel. So, there is the failure we have control over and the failure we subscribe to accepting through the story of the game. Each of these sites of failure hold value to us in how we can observe queer failure for members of the disability communities.

Jack Halberstam's conception of queer failure has been applied by many other scholars like José Esteban Muñoz, Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer, and Jay Dolmage in their respective fields. Queer failure is a productive means by which we can critique capitalism and heteronormativity (Halberstam 3; 10; 11; 74; 101), by dismantling our preconceived notions of success and failure dictated by our society (2-3). In the following image, we can observe the participants of Oaklash, Oakland's Drag and Queer Performance Festival, and they convey queer failure by means of intentionally deviating from the societal norm that men don't dress as women by purposefully dressing in hyper-feminized outfits.



Figure 19: Oaklash, Oakland's Drag and Queer Performance Festival

Halberstam observes how, "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2-3). For disabled individuals, observing how society fails us versus how we fail society, or how we fail to be accepted or how we fail to accommodate ourselves versus how we are shunned and how our needs are ignored is essential to defending ourselves from the ableist ideology we are subjected to (Allan 14).

In accordance with Halberstam, Dolmage points to the societal failure, that is enabling the disability, as the instance that needs to be addressed and reimagined to allow for members of the disability communities to be equitable access received by able-bodied and minded individuals. Just as inaccessibility can promote discrimination in the physical space, pejorative media can promote discrimination in the rhetorical space (Dolmage 20).

We learn from our ableist society that these societal failings are reasonable and to be expected. Ultimately, what this fear of failure comes down to is a fear of not being capable of performing a role correctly. With queer failure, we observe how not fitting in with the societal norms as part of our identity and actions is a failure to conform to heteronormative and capitalist standards. Similarly, disability, being viewed as failure, also combines the ableist failure of useful performance with this queer failure of identity conformity.

In this manner, we are putting the onus of failure on the society we live in when it comes to marginalized identity. Pushing back against the medical model, we move closer to the social model with our stance on failure revealing, not the inadequacies of the individual but rather, the inadequacies of the society's disparaging and uncompromising approach towards the individual's identity. To many with marginalized identities being met with failure is so commonplace that it has become a way of life for them (Dolmage 243; Halberstam 23). In this sense, it is not the individuals who are failing but the society that is inadequate in making their lives accessible. To correct this, we can use narratives to promote this concept of societal failure for marginalized identities by imagining alternatives (Halberstam 52; 119-120). To clarify what I mean by this, Halberstam posits,

> The dream of an alternative way of being is often confused with utopian thinking and then dismissed as naïve, simplistic, or a blatant misunderstanding of the nature of power in modernity. And yet the possibility of other forms of being, other forms of knowing, a world with different sites for justice and injustice, a mode of being where the emphasis falls less on money and work and competition and more on cooperation, trade, and sharing animates all kinds of knowledge projects and should not be dismissed as irrelevant or naïve. (52)

To this end, we can use the focus brought forward by Halberstam with regard to considering alternative ways of being through society while using Juul's gaming media site as a means of hosting queer failure narratives and player navigations for the purposes of combatting failure as an individual shortcoming.

From a queer game studies position, Ruberg suggests that by rejecting the idea that players only play games to "win" we can recognize non-heteronormative pleasures that they take part in both in and outside of the game, while challenging, "…widely accepted notions of desire, purpose, and agency in video games" (Ruberg *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, 136). While this seems simplistic in theory, there are certain considerations that need to be made when we craft these narratives for the disability communities. Dolmage warns us of problematic rhetoric that we touched on earlier where rhetorical disability narratives need to ensure they are not being used as pity or that they do not portray the disabled characters triumphing over their disability, lest we allow them to maintain "their role in managing the fears of the (supposedly) able-bodied" (121). Ideally, we would have a purpose in mind such that these queer failure narratives are designed by and for the disability communities they seek to represent and done so in numerous ways to reach the broad range of experiences that would otherwise be reduced to a single story. As the adage goes: "Nothing about us without us." To know the story of how one disabled individual has been failed by society is to know just that, how one disabled individual has been failed by society. There is no one-story solution, but a chaotic intersection of individual experiences harmonized in the name of disability justice.

Throughout this literature review, I provided an understanding for how TTRPGs, while having the potential to be used as a benefit to a community or demographic, is not an inherently progressive tool if we fail to use it without a situated understanding of both the communities and context at play. Additionally, we can observe through both gameplay and other media, many scholars are in favour of creating anti-hegemonic discourse through narratives to benefit members of disparaged communities. Finally, we observed potential methods to go about creating progressive narratives through gameplay by using concepts brought up in performance studies, disability studies, and game studies. Given the scholarly work that has been reviewed, I see an equitable benefit to disability studies at this intersection. I apply this literature to the

scholarship I take part in throughout my dissertation as a foundation with which I govern my analysis and practice observing TTRPG phenomena.

Chapter 2

Neurodivergent TTRPG Design Workshop

I now showcase the results and findings from my neurodivergent game design workshop series done with neurodivergent participants. The purpose of this project was to investigate the nuances of neurodivergent representation in TTRPG media. As I mentioned, I conducted this ethnographic research with the considerations for the ways in which disability crips methodology as put forward by Stephanie L. Kerschbaum and Margaret Price in their chapter "Centering Disability in Qualitative Interviewing," as I too observed how "…centering disability from the beginning of a research project, and committing to collective access, reveal[ed] specific ways that disability change[d] the assumptions and outcomes that ordinarily characterize—or are assumed to characterize—research situations" (18). To this end, I afforded greater autonomy to the workshop participants in how they wished to conduct themselves to meet the goals of the workshop. As will be observed, I was not expecting certain outcomes in how they chose to apply themselves to the work they did.

Additionally, I received ethics approval from the University of Waterloo. Specifically, this study was reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Board (REB #45770). Any questions for the Board can be directed to the Office of Research Ethics, toll-free at 1-833-643-2379 (Canada and USA), 1-519-888-4440, or reb@uwaterloo.ca. For all other questions contact Giuseppe at gwfemia@uwaterloo.ca.

For the context of my predisposition, I am a white cisgendered asexual man with ADHD, ASD, and OCD. While the ASD is not confirmed, as I would lose certain rights as a citizen of Canada, and the OCD does not require an official diagnosis to receive medication, I identify as such anyway as a self-diagnosis. Officially, I was diagnosed with ADHD at the age of 26 and have been taking medication for it for the past two years as of the writing of this dissertation. While I do not share every neurodiverse identity of the participants, I found myself reasonably positioned to facilitate the workshop and the following discussions.

To maintain participant anonymity in accordance with the ethics protocol, specific demographic data is not detailed here. However, the cohort of eight participants was recruited to

ensure a diversity of intersectional identities, and collectively represented multiple genders, racial and ethnic backgrounds, nationalities, and disabilities.

I begin this chapter by presenting my findings regarding the questions I posed to them during the workshop as well as the experience of the workshop itself alongside academic work done on disability and game design. The responses provided by the participants address their experience with neurodivergence in TTRPGs in terms of both game mechanics and narrative. There is a heavy focus placed on how disability was represented in games familiar to the participants and how they considered it to be keeping with an understanding of personal failure or subverting it. Through my retelling of these workshops, I convey the TTRPG play experience as well as considerations the participants posed for representational strategies of game systems and narratives that developers and players alike can pick up on and utilize.

I then move on to a breakdown of the neurodivergent TTRPG media the participants designed in conversation with the following chapters to better inform future gaming media designs with a disability focus, regarding both game mechanics and narratives. Their work is used to provide insight into neurodivergent representation in TTRPGs designed with an embodied knowledge of the topics it explores. This will also aid in our perception of disability's place in TTRPG game mechanics and narratives. That being said, it is my hope that the TTRPG media designed by the participants, based on knowledge-sharing and personal experience, will contribute to a better understanding of TTRPG media's treatment of neurodivergent characters, communities, and activism. So, we will find that their work also gestures towards more ethical and accessible futures and practices.

2.1 Workshop Ethnography

To begin with, this first section is a synopsis of my findings regarding the questions I posed to them during the workshop as well as the experience of the workshop from my perspective. This is accompanied by and will help to guide and structure the academic work done on disability and game design. The participants provided first-hand accounts addressing their experience with neurodivergent game mechanics and narratives in TTRPGs. Due to the nature of the study, there is a heavy focus placed on how disability was represented in games familiar to the participants and how they considered it to be keeping with an understanding of personal failure or subverting it.

Through my retelling of these workshops, I convey the TTRPG play experience as well as considerations the participants posed for representational strategies of game systems and narratives that developers and players alike can pick up on and utilize. I also take time to bring scholarly voices into conversation with one another and provide my takeaway, being the combination of those voices. In this section, I cover the first three workshops in the series and then move on to address the fourth and final workshop alongside the TTRPG design in the following section.

My ethnographic work started in July of 2024. I began recruiting participants for the upcoming September to take part in a neurodivergent game design workshop with me. I put out a request on social media, both though my own networks and through public and community accounts, saying that anyone who identified as a neurodivergent game designer, scholar, or activist was welcome to take part in a workshop series for Neurodivergent TTRPG Design. To participate, the participants needed to self-identify as neurodivergent and be interested in game design. Most of the participants were strangers to me with only one being someone who I knew personally. Participation in these sessions was voluntary and involved four virtual workshops where participants discussed issues associated with neurodivergent representation in TTRPGs and designed their own narrative and game mechanics inclusive of consideration for neurodivergent experiences. These workshops were a maximum of two hours long and took place over the course of September 2024 to October 2024.

The purpose of this study was to create a collection of neurodivergent knowledge with attention to TTRPGs. I found this method best for the inclusion of neurodivergent voices in answering the research questions for this dissertation. These sessions focused on observing how neurodivergence can be represented in the narrative and game mechanics of a TTRPG and exploring the impact of assumed neurotypical characters on neurodivergent communities.

When applying this study to my dissertation work that will be conveyed in the following chapters, I realize neurodivergence is a limited scope of disability. However, given that it is an underrepresented aspect of media even by disability standards, and the fact that I self-identify as neurodivergent, I felt this study was a beneficial approach to addressing my research questions free of neurotypical appropriation. Whereas a similar study regarding physical disabilities would not have the backing of embodied knowledge on my part with how the workshops would be conducted.

The workshop sessions were not audio or video recorded. I took notes on our group discussions for later analysis while documenting my thoughts and experiences participating and facilitating the workshops to better understand neurodivergent community engagement with TTRPG media. The workshops were conducted over the online platform Zoom. This was mainly because Zoom has implemented technical, administrative, and physical safeguards to protect the information provided via the services from loss, misuse, and unauthorized access, disclosure, alteration, or destruction.

If the participants did not wish to be identified in the study results, their participation was kept confidential. Their real names do not appear in this dissertation, however, with their permission, credit is attributed to them alongside a pseudonym in place of their real name. There were eight participants in total.

2.1.1 Workshop One

For the first workshop, I chose to make it an introduction and brainstorming session as an icebreaker for the participants and to get their predominant understanding and thoughts on the subject matter. I also sent them the object TTRPG and TTRPG game supplement texts, *Chronic Migraine Mechanics For 5e, Inspirisles*, and *Survival of the Able*, as examples.

I provide images from the latter two below to help depict the settings. *Inspirisles* imagery conveys fun adventures with companions whether it be out on an adventure or enjoying the practice of magic at a table. Conversely, *Survival of the Able*'s imagery depicts a group of four disabled individuals sitting by a fire in the middle of a dark forest, looking fearful.



Figure 20: Inspirisles Illustrations

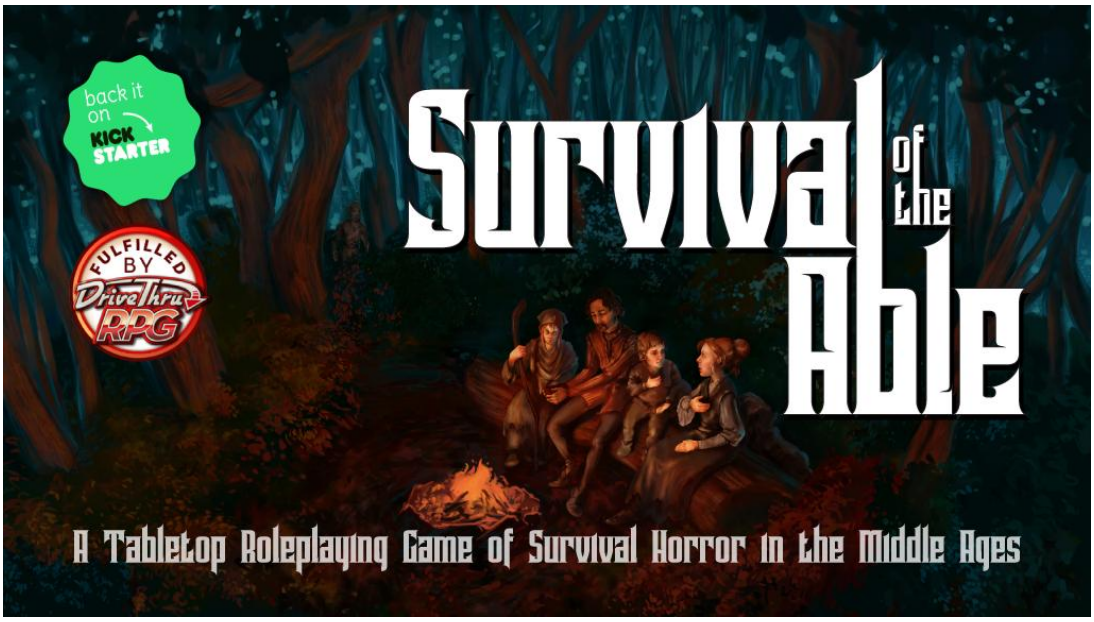


Figure 21: Survival of the Able Cover

Participants introduced themselves to the extent they wished. They were then offered a series of questions/prompts and invited to reflect on their embodied experiences for TTRPG representation. I go through these questions now as well as the notes I took regarding their responses.

2.1.1.1 What words come to mind when you think of neurodivergent representation?

Each response, while diverse and personal, seemed to be understood to some capacity by the other participants. The words that came to mind and accepted as truth through similar embodied knowledge within the group were: Infantilization, Quirky/weird/out of the average/positive traits, Asexual/sexually or romantically inexperienced, West-centric/U.S.-ish/ Cis-straight white boys/men, White-skinned characters/first-world problems, Needs to fit the mold, Demonized, Sanitized, Invisible, Acceptable kind of neurodivergent, Requires more variation and sensitivities, Overcompensate "normalcy" of the other demographic, Coded as neurodivergent but not confirmed.

While these were all insightful the final response I noted, regarding coding, is something I brought up in earlier chapters regarding autistically-coded, yet unconfirmed characters. Reading

a character as neurodivergently-coded is a crucial means that many neurodivergent people employ to identify and impose their representation. Mullis remarks that,

> The only chance that this may change one day is if "autistic" becomes a label no longer so far removed from personhood that creators would be just as comfortable claiming the actual label as they are its scheme of characteristics, while still writing a well-rounded full-fledged character. Characters will no longer be "autistic-coded", they will simply be autistic. However, simply getting to be autistic is a luxury many autistic people in the real world can't yet claim, so it may be a while yet for our fiction to catch up. Unless fiction starts to help lead the way. (155)

That being the case, it raised an interesting concern that is discussed later on in my analysis of the artefact regarding how the participants wished to employ neurodivergent terminology in the identity portrayal of the TTRPG characters.

2.1.1.2 What feelings, experiences, and associations come to mind when you think of disability mechanics in TTRPGs?

A summary of the main points that were made included: the TTRPG play experience had an inaccessible format for neurodivergent players; many TTRPGs had mechanics to introduce disability just to have disabled individuals play them; disability mechanics in TTRPGs often feel disingenuous and can be difficult to play in a fun way; many TTRPGs approached the mechanics with trepidation and the resulting mechanics seem like they were created for the sake of their own existence rather than anything purposeful; TTRPG mechanics tend to feel more genuine when made by other disabled people for the sake of engagement because the question often arises "How do we position this mechanic in a way it will be valued without it being avoided due to difficulty?;" TTRPGs are designed in a manner that necessitates punishment as a consequence of failure so unpleasant neurodivergent stereotypes are reinforced; prosthetics in TTRPGs are forced to be magical to function as an able-body and they feel like cop-outs that don't allow real-world disability themes to affect the story; and the other option to this mechanical avoidance or punishing depiction is the superhero effect where the disabled character is super abled through their disability.

2.1.1.3 Brainstorm neurodivergent associations, thoughts, and experiences related to: Access; Risk; Survival; Health; Navigation; Community; Rest; Labour; and Pain.

Thoughts on community reflected how neurodivergent friends tend to group together and gravitate to one another through shared interests and mannerisms. Intersecting thoughts of risk and community reflected on unaccepting groups of people and the stigma that is enforced by them, loneliness and desire for connection, and how differences are valued between their innate being and as useful for the productive aims of society.

Thoughts on Risk involved a dichotomy of having the privilege of approaching risk as a means of thrill-seeking, as is common for people with ADHD, and the fear that arises from a single point of failure and the constant strain of the individual to upkeep their appearance and performance. While I did touch on this last theme earlier in the dissertation, here we see how failure is viewed by members of the neurodivergent communities. Combining the dichotomy to approach failure in TTRPGs we can turn to Sarah Hoover et al. who conceives of roleplay as a performance ritual composed of rules for performative play (223). In this theatricalized ritual, this manner of play is not necessarily qualified by success and failure. While some theorists like Jesper Juul consider failure, in the fictional game sense, useful for making success more meaningful by revealing the depth of emotion, inadequacy, and want (60), the ritual of performance that provides no sense of objective failure in its player can be made to be more accommodating and equitable regarding disability performance. Nick Watson and Simo Vehmas acknowledge that disability is already inundated by conceptions or experiences of fear, disgust, and pity (89). As such, disability performance may benefit greatly without the presence of queer failure, as I noted earlier positions heteronormative critique in the perceived shortcomings of the character, as a driving force behind the ritual being performed. In the ritualized manner of play put forward by Hoover et al. (213-215), there can be alternative methods explored by means of making success in disability performance meaningful without the need to rely on the role-players' prior exposure to shortcomings. In this sense, risk can be a thrill-seeking yet therapeutic navigation within a TTRPG media site for disability performance.

While it is more evident how risk in TTRPGs can facilitate the thrill-seeking aspect that may come with neurodivergence, we should do well to observe how it could be self-actualizing and

therapeutic for others. As mentioned previously, David Payne sees failure as a tool for learning rather than a driving force (60). He discusses that in failing we question and recreate our identities by communicating our assessments of ourselves in the aftermath (60). In this sense, we can acknowledge the social value of loss in reassessment in the form of therapeutic persuasion. Oftentimes, the sense of failure we perceive is brought about by psychological problems and solutions conditioned into us by media rituals (Rockler, "'Be Your Own Windkeeper'" 244). So, when it comes to failure our questions cannot always be posed internally to the self but also externally to society as a whole in its prescriptions for success and failure. Stephane Daniau looks at identity exploration in RPGs and notes that conditions for success must be realized and expanded to fully explore aspects of the self and not perceive a lack of success as a personal failure (428). The context of play in RPGs becomes vital as these are the considerations created to measure and queer our idea of failure, not as a binary but as a qualifier of a negative yet meaningful and educational experience. Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick aim to requalify impairment as not a fact of about disabled people by renegotiating, disability media in a manner not dissimilar to the requalification Daniau makes note of (Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick 3-10). In this manner, disability is not defaulted to failure but normalized in mainstream culture. As such, Payne's notion of failure can be applied to society in the same manner as queer failure as opposed to the failure of the individual to question political and social values resulting in viewing disability through the ableist lens of failure. When asking why we failed, considerations can be made for external factors to the self to understand what needs to be done in a world like ours to make it equitable.

Intersecting thoughts of risk and survival reflected the intersectionality of identity that came with disability alongside race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and social status. The creation of our identities is observed by Homi Bhabha as being relative to the other as a means of symbolism within our culture (63-63). Coinciding with Bree Hadley's notion of bodily differences as a basis for challenging public notions of able-bodies (182), this indicates that disabled bodies and minds don't exist merely through an innate disability but rather by how they are able to access the world in relation to how societies host disabling barriers innate to their design. In this sense, the disabled culture is positioned in its accessibility in relation to the otherness provided by environmental impairments. It is between this accessible means of passing that is afforded by

certain environments and the questioning of the remaining differences between normative identity and disabled identity that disability culture is produced by ableism.

Throughout the workshop, the participants were also reminded that while many of them were able to openly divulge their diagnoses to their peers and family, many neurodivergent individuals are not afforded the same privilege, lest they jeopardize their jobs and citizenships. So, to this end, the questioning of accessibility is not limited to disabled bodies and minds but can be expanded to question the sociopolitical constraints of all intersections of marginalized identity, allowing it to be used for the sake of furthering other identity research. It was this notion that inspired the participants to include masking as a crucial game mechanic for social interactions in their final TTRPG design.[1] In this manner, disability research is a great unifier across all disciplines and cultures, making the question of accessibility a vital consideration in all walks of life. Therefore, I posit that disability inclusion, in an overt sense, is a crucial consideration for media production for the interpretation and depiction of trans-cultural values and analyses of imaginary narratives and symbolism (White 1, 54).

The participants' final thoughts on survival came down to a list each of them was personally made responsible for creating for themselves for use in their day-to-day life regarding the dos and don’ts they needed to follow for the sake of their survival. Intersecting thoughts of labour and pain were observed as the inevitable self-destruction they abated but unwillingly navigated towards concerning the expectations of labour they are forced to maintain to the deterioration of their mental health and their capacity to mask and hide from the world, eventually leading to burnout. Concerning rest and health as concepts being largely ignored by the able-bodied and minded, we are expected to emulate their example and ignore our needs as well. Pain is meant to be a fact of life, normalized and dealt with by the individual to leave society unburdened by their needs. Intersecting thoughts of labour and rest brought up ideas for game mechanics regarding worsening symptoms coinciding with burnout and rest mechanics requiring longer time

[1] This concept of masking, as a form of exhausting and necessary labor, became a cornerstone of our design, directly informing the core mechanics of Spoons, Forks, and the Masking roll modifier in Teleneuro (see Section 2.2.4).

committed to it for the sake of undoing neurodivergent burnout. Thoughts on navigation came down to the requirements of more money and time, to maintain ourselves and give greater consideration to the tools at our disposal.

Access was observed to be conditional in a capitalist society, in that those providing access in the workplace expected productivity in exchange for it to be worth their time. This makes it more of a matter of time versus tools at our disposal when it comes to measuring the accessibility of a given environment.

The final thought the participants had on these matters was that when neurodivergent individuals are in an environment where their needs are being met, they are often considered or, in the case of popular media, depicted as quirky. Famous examples of these types of characters that were brought forward included: Eric Effiong from *Sex Education*; Raven Baxter from *That's So Raven*; Sokka from *Avatar: The Last Airbender*; and Morris L. "Mo" Tibbs from *Smart Guy*.[2] Whereas when neurodivergent individuals are in an environment where their needs are not being met, their mental health degrades to the point where symptoms are more noticeable and as a result, they are demonized and vilified by media and society alike. Famous examples of these types of characters that were brought forward included: Michael from *The Proud Family*; Jinx from *Arcane*; and Ice King from *Adventure Time*.

[2] Drawing from neurodivergent characters in popular media later solidified the participants initiative to use Disney TV shows as a template for how the GM might structure the campaign. (see Section 2.1.2).

2.1.1.4 How are these topics typically approached in TTRPG media such as *D&D* or Pathfinder? What do these game systems do well or poorly in how they present neurodivergence through mechanics or stories?

With regard to the positive affordances provided within TTRPG media, the participants noted that most of the following examples were not done intentionally but neurodivergent individuals have been able to impose their own meaning onto these aspects of the game for the sake of their own progressive readings. The first instance they discussed was a handwaving of the long rest mechanic in *D&D* where the players are able to take a nebulous amount of time to recuperate from any injury they might have received. In this capacity, the game unintentionally employs crip time, as I discussed in my literature review, making the benefits of rest equitable for each character. In this manner, it applies to two of the three ways of understanding crip time being "…the extra time needed to perform a task due to barriers of ableist time, such as extra time needed to use augmented communication devices or to move in an inaccessible space;" and "…flexible, individualized temporalities are more conducive to individuals thriving than one fixed, 'normal' temporality" (Sitter et al. 34). They also note how crip time can be considered time travel that affects non-disabled individuals as it necessitates break from the world to recuperate from illness or injury, much like the idea of the long rest.

Outside the realm of *D&D*, the participants noted how games like *Call of Cthulhu* allow for permanency in mental disability with no quick fixes. They reasoned this as a positive affordance in three ways, being that it humanizes the concerns we have when playing our character without pathologizing the illness, the game mechanics allow the mental disability to get better or worse based on whether the individual is cared for or is exposed to further danger, and when the mental illness is purposefully named for the character it holds power in how we address it. It was mentioned how a lack of neurodivergent terminology deprives us of the vocabulary tools we might use to be in our power with our understanding and navigation of our own disabilities.

In contrast to this last point, *Dream Askew* shows a symptom of neurodivergence, depicting it as a weakness, but making the description of it loose enough that it cannot be explicitly linked back to a specific form of neurodivergence. In this regard, it allows for a more nuanced

approach. Similarly, in games like *Lancer*, the mechanics are loose enough to afford a greater degree of freedom in how the narrative is navigated which allows for neurodivergence. However, the success of these depictions relies heavily on the talent of the DM and players.

On the negative end, there are still many issues that can be drawn from these games. For instance, anything can be healed within the span of a long rest, once again detracting from disability playing any long-term role in the narrative. Additionally, it was noted that mental injuries and emotional turmoil are not dealt with well, usually mechanically oversimplified with a couple of notes devoid of any basis for real-life experience.

Much like in my ethnography, it was remarked on how mainstream TTRPGs have able-bodies and minds as the default with any illnesses able to be cured with relative ease or remaining present as a permanent detriment, becoming a liability, punishing the player for not adhering to the prescribed default. In this regard, the reward and punishment mechanics reinforce stories of stereotypes and tropes within the players. It was noted that this is also largely due to how the high stakes of disability in the games polarizes the stereotypes, either having them be played off as being superhuman or making them subject to a moral failing on the part of the character.

2.1.1.5 Have you ever attempted to play a neurodivergent character before? Do you think you were successful in representing that neurodivergence? Why or why not?

This question was crucial for ascertaining the capacity that TTRPGs had in affording players the capacity to play out their neurodivergence. It was generally agreed upon by the group that when we attempt to play any character in *D&D*, the character becomes Neurodivergent, as in ADHD, DID, Autistic, etc., naturally without the initial intention of doing so. Over the course of my experience with TTRPGs I have always found that neurodivergent players cannot help but to play their characters as neurodivergent and I have struggled with this as well. The participants noted that how we are wired to act is inevitably how our character will be wired to act, acquiring neurodivergent traits from us as we become more comfortable in our depiction of them. Many of the characters that I initially created I wound up playing as though they had ADHD, like me. The participants also noted that the depiction of characters outside of their neurodivergent identity had never felt genuine, and it has always been most genuine on accident. This led us to believe

that when it comes to neurodivergent players attempting to depict neurotypical players, the most we can hope for is to create instances of neurotypicality in otherwise neurodivergent characters. In the same realm of false representation, the most neurotypical individuals can hope for is to create instances of neurodivergence in otherwise neurotypical characters.

Ultimately, it was concluded that when we enter a new space it is better to play yourself as a character rather than trying to be something we aren't. This might be in part because playing a character as neurodivergent doesn't have as many in-game repercussions as it would by being myself in the real world. Even then, the capacity to represent ourselves was understood by the participants to be limited. For example, game mechanics are sloppy when trying to emulate mental disorders like DID and providing nuance makes the game mechanics nebulous resulting in a shallow representation of the embodied experience we wish to depict.

One participant mentioned that success for neurodivergent identity representation in TTRPGs could be measured by how many diverse forms of neurodivergence they can account for. However, that too be reliant on the GM who can only usually provide a hollow portrayal due to their lack of experience with each demographic.

The participants then reflected on the limitations of the TTRPG medium itself noting how despite our wants, the character we play is not real. It's a doll and cannot encapsulate the enormity of embodied experience to the point of faithfulness. As such it can never feel true to us who are complex enough to embody the experience of neurodivergence. To attempt to do so can even come off as disrespectful when differing from the embodied experience of another neurodivergent individual.

What the characters can do is hint at the untranslatable experience of disability without a necessarily faithful representation which might serve the narrative better for those of the disability community to impose our own reading on.

2.1.1.6 What could be done better on game developers' ends to make the available stories or mechanics more neurodivergent-inclusive?

Complicated mechanics that quantify the struggle of someone with a disability make it difficult to reflect on because they are either condensed and overcomplicated or handwaved and forgone. In any regard, Neurodivergent inclusive storytelling and mechanics should not be the goal for developers looking to supplement their TTRPGs. If it is then it would feel like the disability representation is being shoehorned in after the fact.

The main thing that should be done by design studios is to create more opportunities for Neurodivergent game developers to make their own forms of representation and storytelling in new TTRPG media. If that is not an option, the developer could always read and talk to more neurodivergent people to make representations less harmful by default. If they were to engage with the community instead of the media, they would become innately aware of some harmful portrayals they could mediate. The solid middle ground to these two options is consultation for and with neurodivergent individuals. With the use of focus groups, not just a single person, they can acquire great insight into disability representation so long as they value the members of the group and what they have to say.

With all that being said, there is not a one-size-fits-all option as it might look different to fix different games. The main point the participants agreed on was the importance of providing options, allowances, and freedom to players to make it their own forms of representation. However, this should not be done in a way that makes the players do all the work. Just provide them with a strong enough foundation for them to build upon.

2.1.1.7 Has your relationship with TTRPG media been influenced by your neurodivergent identity? If so, in what ways?

The TTRPG communities allow neurodivergence to thrive in narratives where we are accepted and allowed to play who you truly are. The immersion we experience during TTRPG play helps us to translate our lived experiences through narration. James Paul Gee posits that games are a medium through which we can create new discourse analyses using the in-game avatars and affordances to provide a sense of satisfaction with reality (8). Discourse analysis, as put by Norman Fairclough, allows us to investigate social changes (23-25). In this sense, Gee must consider the act of playing as a social or psychological engagement with discourse. With the affordances of the avatar allowing for the construction of the self and reality of the game, the player engages with the discourse put forward by the designer. Carlo Fabricatore takes this a step further in his conception of motivation, as he puts forward that in the conception of game narrative mechanics, narrative design becomes a powerful rhetorical tool for meaning-making (90-92). In this sense, with the affordances of TTRPG systems, the players are enabled to fill in their own discourse analysis for constructing themselves and their environment which other media does not allow for so easily. With the introduction of community-made content, like the work that was done throughout this workshop, player-made narratives and game mechanics affords the player control over how and what kind of discourse they engage in.

If we consider neurodivergence a culture that is not brought together genetically, medically, or because of living proximity then TTRPGs are a media site that acts as a social tool to help connect neurodivergent people with others. To some degree, TTRPG communities aid in building neurodivergent community relations and culture, much like we are seen doing here in this workshop.

2.1.1.8 What is the purpose of the work we are going to be doing and for whom are we designing?

In terms of purpose, the participants saw this workshop as an exercise in critical intervention where like-minded people could come together and participate in another way of questioning society, through the act of designing. One participant mentioned, “Throughout this project, I hope to produce a joint product that we can be proud of and develop lasting relationships with fellow game designers.” It was also a means for the participants to gain insight or concepts for their own neurodivergent projects to help embolden their own critical interventions.

This was something we did for the participants to mechanize their experience as a means of communicating their personal truths to those who might not understand. Marginalized identities in general bring to light how power is dispersed throughout society. Within the context of disability, however, the association of powerlessness does not come just from social or political biases, although those do play a role, rather disabled bodies and minds are themselves perpetuated symbols through our cultural discourse (Hadley 182). The same may be said for people of colour or non-male presenting marginalized groups but with the lens of the medical model, associations of disability and powerlessness might seem more straightforward than other issues facing those of marginalized communities.

Simon Ledder discusses how medical power is gamified in RPGs to reinforce the medical model of disability (40). These games and other media depictions of a similar nature are abundant throughout society and often go unnoticed and taken for granted. On the more explicit side of disability depiction, Diane Carr posits how able-bodiedness becomes a reliant theme to navigate game worlds while disabled bodies are depicted as undesirable in their limitations or otherwise vilified, often as monsters (Carr, “Ability, Disability and Dead Space”). She finds that the best way to create discourse around these issues is by applying theories to gaming media by analyzing them through play. By using these media sites for explicit narrative, thematic, and performance analysis, Robert Young notes how the discourse created can be used to transmit, produce, reinforce, undermine, expose, weaken, or thwart normative power (51). In this sense, imaginary themes and narratives can bring attention to and deconstruct immemorial beliefs (Young 60). To this end, the workshop was seen as something that could aid in influencing

society, to make our critical interventions, by telling our story through TTRPG media, accessible to neurotypical people.

It was heavily acknowledged that the work itself was not the goal, the work was a process that other people were going to see which would ideally open up a wider network of possible paths forward for neurodivergent activism. In this manner, we compared the game design process to that of academia in which they could both be considered an iterative artform, as we make new rules to our engagement with neurodivergent portrayal in TTRPGs with each rendition of the game.

Finally, it was mentioned that the experience of the workshop had the potential to be transformative in illuminating our coming to terms with how we relate to ourselves and our fellow neurodivergent people. In this sense, we were reckoning with our own self-realization, and we were going to be exploring ourselves in the designs we made.

José Esteban Muñoz discusses how the performance of utopian queerness is essential to our understanding of queerness as a collective (19, 49, 97-113). As queerness has become something of an umbrella term for many marginalized identities, it encompasses diverse approaches, conceptions, and navigations of the world. This was in line with the participants agreeing to be inclusive of people who suffer from colonial violence as part of the target audience. In terms of performing queerness, we embrace a world of otherness that is not subject to the straight world's demands for adherence and passing. With the creation of a game depicting these values through play, Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum note conscientious game design can allow for assumptions and personal social values to be explored and portrayed in the player's performance (7, 15-31). As we covered previously, Clara Fernandez-Vara sees video games as a productive performative medium with roleplay being a form of interactive drama (Fernández-Vara 6), which make gaming media sites ideal for the setting of queer futurity. Now, what might this look like for utopian accessibility for disabled people? Instead of the medical model seeking to cure or eradicate disability innate to the individual all aspects of life would be made accessible to the individual through the accessibility needs their environment would afford them. This means we would not see a one-size-fits-all method of navigating, or being able to navigate, our reality but rather a world where everyone is given the patience, understanding, and technology to discover

the means by which they wish to approach and experience the physical and social world around them. In this queer understanding of accessibility, we can develop methods by which performance brings new insight to our navigation of disability politics.

2.1.1.9 How do we want to carry out this collaborative work?

We agreed to create a google folder for organization with docs for chats, colour code our contributions, and lean into the strength of our neurodivergence by working on the aspect of the game we gravitated towards in our own time.

2.1.2 Workshop Two

The second workshop foregrounded neurodivergent storycrafting. This involved a brief discussion on how we wanted to see neurodivergent characters written. It was followed by time spent for participants to create a TTRPG narrative as a continuation of the conversations we started during the first workshop. In this context, narrative refers to the overall lore within the game world and the individual characters' storylines. Prior to the workshop, I provided the participants with Kara Stone's "Reparative Game Creation" to assist them with their design approach. The quote that reflects her work of considerations for repair, care, and share states,

> Repair
>
> - Games are no more healing than any other art form.
> - Games will never cure anyone. Cure is not the goal. Make work that changes the media landscape, adding to a culture oriented toward making life more livable for those with psychosocial disabilities.
> - Do not only represent psychosocial disability but design for it.
> - No score, no winning, no losing, no good paths, no bad paths, no one right way to play, no punishment, no reward.
> - Be emotionally challenging, not mechanically challenging.
> - Describing some feelings as "good" and some feelings as "bad" are judgments. They might ease classification but are not inherent or true.
> - Feelings are a political resource.
> - Everything is an experiment and an exploration.

Care

- Recognize not only the labor of the time spent working but also the preparation and recovery.
- Do not expect to work like a machine (consistent, always productive, not emotionally affected by mood, physical experience, environment, food, weather, past experiences, brain fog, pain, injustice, neurochemicals, microbiome, our partner's mood, noise, etc.). We are not machines. Capitalism has set up unrealistic and unattainable work expectations. These expectations actively damage and drain us. Resist wanting and trying to live up to them.
- Know our cycles of work. Know that some are in our control, and some are out of our control.
- Rest without guilt.
- Art does not need suffering to be made.
- Affect cannot be quantified. Foster emotional self-reflection rather than aiming to funnel the players into a specific emotion.
- Do not overwork, and do not ask players to overplay.
- Be cautious—and grateful—of how much time is asked of players.
- Remind ourselves and players that there is life beyond the screen.
- Make space for self-reflection in the game: emotional choices, diary entries, mood trackers, pauses, time-outs, direct questions, and surveys.

Share

- Be vulnerable. Be radically open during the creation stage. Edit after it is already created if necessary.
- Ask others for help. There is beauty in interdependence.
- The process of making is about coming to understanding, not demonstrating understanding.
- A good game is not determined by a game one wants to play all the time. Meaningful experiences last beyond the playtime.

- Perfection does not exist. Nothing is ever perfect, only an expression of that moment in time's preferences, desires, expectations, conditions, and experiences.
- Feelings are powerful and should not be avoided, but consider how some may affect potential players. Will it make the game inaccessible to certain groups?
- Consider the audience as someone in the disabled communities, experiencing psychosocial disability and many forms of debilitation, not an audience we must explain our experiences to. (Stone 16-17)

From this, we see how the alternative approach to considerations for design Stone provides takes on a more reparative format, rather than representative. To some degree, this is in line with Ellen Adams who views narrative and literary therapy for members of the disability community as a necessary rhetorical resource to combat the misrepresentation of disability (46, 80). Regarding the manner in which disability is framed today, it is observed as a presence of impairment that focuses on the consequences rather than the causing factors. While the physical, mental, and social differences are present, Adams depicts disability as artificially constructed and reproduced (10). While there are innate elements to all that we observe, as noted by John Durham Peters, it is the meaning we ascribe to our environment that produces our media (10-16, 36). He observes media as ordering devices for society in how we are conditioned to draw associations together (5). It is in this regard, Adams proposes narrative performance-centred therapy to help reorder our social experience with disability, both for members of the community but also outside observers of disability (46, 80). As such, we discussed at length how a rhetorical intervention along these lines could be achieved.

In the second workshop, while I initially thought we would be working separately, everyone was eager to collaborate on a joint project.

Their first concern was the means by which they represented each neurodivergence. They questioned whether they should be explicit about the neurodivergence of the characters and the technology, medical or digital, associated with them or just make a framework of symptoms.

Miguel Sicart discusses play as a part of our moral being. In this manner, roleplay can afford us crucial insight in how we experience and navigate the world with the use of roleplay characters to assist us as a lens (6). Erving Goffman sees this shift in (mis)presentation of the self

as an activity of influence holding vital rhetorical power for the individual as they present themselves in everyday life (58). Sicart identifies the benefit of this practice of play as providing freedom from moral conventions in the real world that would otherwise constrict or restrain one's presentation of identity (6). In terms of disability identity exploration, Martin Heidegger addresses questions regarding our relationship to technology as humans. In this TTRPG design, it could have been possible to frame the media site so that it provided members of the disability community an observation of their own identity in relation to technology free from the moral conventions of the real world (Heidegger 182; Sicart 6). With this practice of play questions of morality in the queer and newly approached sense can be answered regarding disability's role in the age of technological advancement.

However, while the framework would be easier to work with and for neurotypical people to digest, it would not be great for the representation they desired. Adrienne E. Raw mentions how,

> Contemporary scholars, activists, and members of disability communities have therefore interpreted labelling as a process of stereotyping, discrimination, and erasure. This minimizes the individuality and identity of those with disabilities by lumping large and diverse groups together — for example, assuming that all individuals with a particular physical, mental, or intellectual disability experience the world in the same way or have the same needs. Labelling and classification similarly force people into often narrowly defined boxes by collapsing the differences inherent in individuals and their disabilities into singular definitions that do not represent the individuals' realities or needs. Disabled individuals thus often face characterizations of themselves or their disabilities that are not defined by their lived experiences. (189)

In line with this, Dolmage agrees that generalized disability narratives "mark and construct disability as surplus, improper, lesser, or otherwise other…condition[ing] our understanding of disability (and thus of all identity and all bodies)" (31). Whereas when the fans of the media apply their own readings of the neurodivergence it might better work to construct a framework for communication between the players and developers (Raw 185).

So, while the participants acknowledged that a more explicit and focused approach to neurodivergence would provide greater representation, it would ultimately run the risk of making

subjective stories seem universal (Raw 190). It was decided that the depictions of neurodivergence would focus more on the symptoms of neurodivergent individuals while allowing players and observers of the game to impose their own interpretations of what the characters' identities were. In this manner, we were in accordance with Raw in how it was ultimately the neurodivergent players and fans of the TTRPG media we created who would bring neurodivergent identity to the discourse of the game (213-214).

To simplify the foundation for the game mechanics and narrative structure, I opted to use the TTRPG *Kids on Bikes*. It was noted by the participants that this TTRPG setting was malleable enough for the players to go against the conventions of the original media and play the game how they wanted without having a detrimental impact to the story. I provide images from the *Kids on Bikes* source material below depicting children in a variety of scenarios exploring the mysteries of their hometown or just hanging out with their friends.



Figure 22: Kids on Bikes Cover



Figure 23: Kids on Bikes Illustrations

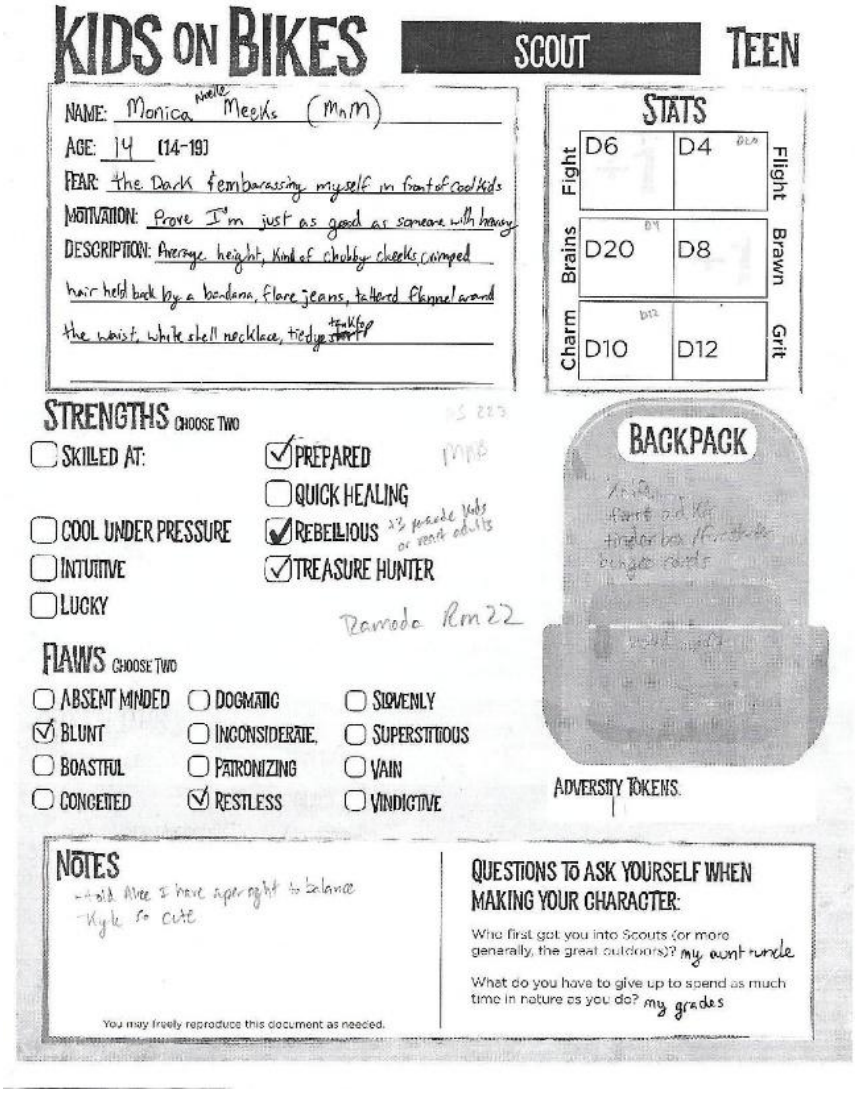


Figure 24: Kids on Bikes Character Sheet

The character sheet, shown in the above figure, conveys a much more simplified approach to TTRPG play than that of *D&D* as it is only one page long, whereas other TTRPGs usually have a two to four pages long character sheet. It also focuses less on the mechanics of the character and more on the social aspects of the character, including flaws, strengths, age, fears, motivations, description, with ample room for notes.

The participants began the narrative design process by defining what the antagonist would be. They wanted an antagonist against which neurodivergence could be used, so they had the idea of setting the narrative in a high school. They found that it was a cultural site that exemplified the

struggle that a neurodivergent individual went through as it was a common antagonistic experience for many of them as neurodivergent teenagers. In part, this decision was inspired by *The Breakfast Club* and *MonsterHearts*, as the former is thematically about the difficulties navigating social worlds in Highschool where the latter is transparent that, “This isn’t really a game about monsters. It’s a game about the confusion that arises when your body and your social world start changing without your permission” (Alder 42). As such, the cover of the game, depicted in the following image, shows three teens looking angry or insecure under a blood moon.



Figure 25: The cover of MonsterHearts, a TTRPG whose themes of embodied change and social anxiety directly influenced the participants' high school setting.

The character sheet for *MonsterHearts*, as shown below is set up to be more of a social experience as the physical combat mechanics take up less than a third of the single page that is the character sheet and rewards for navigating the story are much more prominent and concrete to incentivize engagement with the narrative.

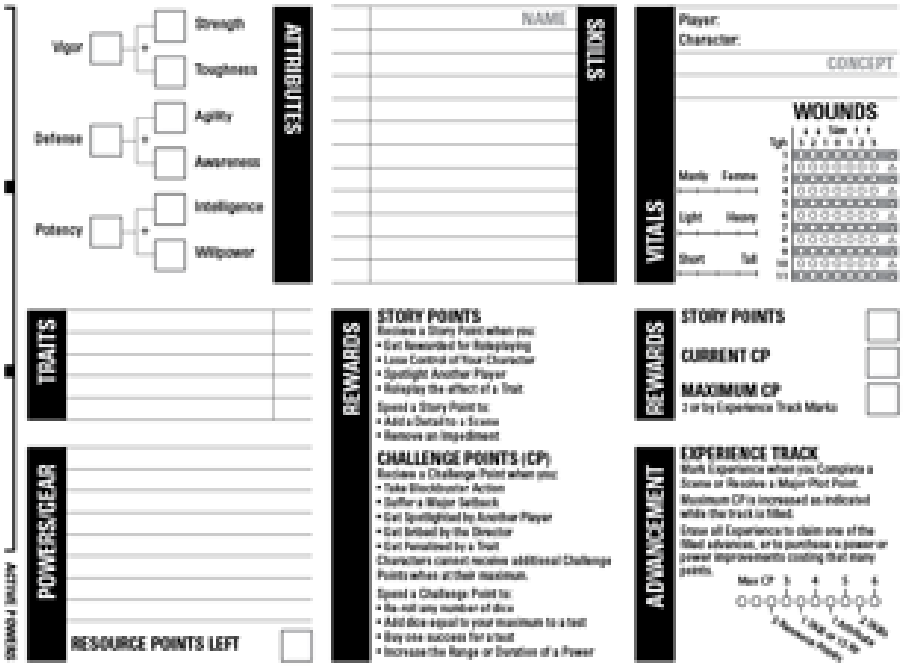


Figure 26: MonsterHearts Character Sheet

The group acknowledged that a depiction of a homogenized American high school would be the best setting to enable diversity. However, they did want to ensure that the setting was not flavoured with the weather for when school begins and ends in the U.S. to make the nationality nebulous.

Another narrative design choice was that they wanted a moral to be a critique of traditional forms of teaching that are not accessible enough for the neurodivergent characters. They thought that this could be done while having the non-player character (NPC) teachers acknowledge that they needed to learn new ways of approaching their subject matter to be a good teacher for the players' characters.

With those design choices being the foundation of the TTRPG design the participants decided that the narrative could be set in such a way that anyone who ran the game could decide on the tone. While there were considerations on making it a horror genre in a way that related the neurodivergent experience to common modern stressors, i.e. social interactions, bad grades, etc., they concluded that an open mood allowed for by the core features of the game would let players

create lighter or more horrific tones depending on their desired play experience. They wanted a genre agnostic approach for the range of allowances the game offered the players. However, they left room so that extreme features, like the discursive use of technology, might be supplemental or optional to include for more intense play experiences.

Due to the fact that narrative and mechanics are so closely knit together, there was some bleed over in workshop two regarding certain mechanics that the participants wished to flavour narratively. As was brought up in the first workshop, masking was a neurodivergent phenomenon they wanted to make into a core mechanic for the meaningfulness it held to each of them. The participants wanted to explore it in a sense where stressors acted on the PCs, and they were forced to be productive.

Spoon theory and Fork theory were disability terms that were floated as a meaningful way to quantify energy levels and pain experienced from said stressors.

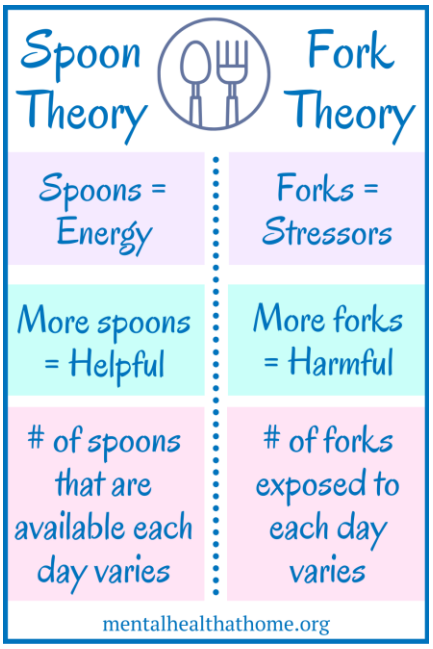


Figure 27: Spoon Theory vs Fork Theory

As shown above, the left side of the image states, “Spoon Theory, Spoons = Energy, More spoons = Helpful, # of spoons that are available each day varies.” The right side of the image states in contrast, “Fork Theory, Forks = Stressors, More forks = Harmful, # of forks exposed to each day varies.”

The basis for this thematization was because these two disability centric theories are often already a quantitative means by which members of the disability community can describe their state of being to others while keeping track of their own wellbeing. As such, it was decided that applying this real-world means of communication in the game would be less harmful than creating new mechanics surrounding neurodivergent stressors. In this manner, the use of these theories could be applied as a means of communicating mechanically to other players as it is communicated socially through the character. Furthermore, it may also be taken up as a manner of practicing the commonly used disability-coded lexicon, similar to how Boal considers theatre of the oppressed to be preparing its audience for revolution (42).

The story goals were made out to be both intrinsic to the individual character and collective to the group. Examples of intrinsic goals would be provided, or players could make their own for their character, allowing for a more diverse range of personal storytelling and motivation. Goals that varied from character to character with could be social, academic, or personal in nature. These goals could be short-term, as in completed in one or two sessions of the game, or long-term, as in completed over the course of the campaign. Short-term goals might then be rewarded upon completion in a way that benefitted their long-term goal progression. Collective goals, or group goals, would be the story goals that were come up with by the players as a means of having their characters band and work together.

The participants decided that they wanted an episodic structure for the TTRPG narrative, similar to that of Disney Original TV series (i.e. Hannah Montana, The Suite Life of Zack and Cody, That's So Raven). They thought these kinds of narratives hit closer to home whereas something similar to an anime high school setting would make for over-the-top story beats and romances with worse pacing and less grounding of the narrative in reality. In turn, this Disney Original TV series episodic structure would provide the GM greater control of the pacing for the overarching narrative. Additionally, depending on the episode type, this structure could help set the tone for the play session (i.e. field trip, beach day, detention, camping) and could also provide the opportunity for character focused episodes to let them develop narratively. The participants thought that the idea of a randomized table designed for determining possible events regarding the episode type might be beneficial for variety and focus.

The participants decided to break off and work on their separate portions of the project for the next workshop. They found the randomized tables they were working on fun as it gave a sense of structure for options without needing to be developed on too much. Over the coming weeks they wanted to brainstorm random tables for long- and short-term goals, and episode types while they considered narrative uses for mechanics and merging different narrative mechanics from other TTRPG systems. They also wanted to create a story bible based on rough ideas for NPCs that the GM could draw from. It was noted that much of the investment they experienced came from hyperfocus and they had a deep desire to continue working on this after the workshop ended and over the coming days.

2.1.3 Workshop Three

The third workshop focused on game mechanics tailored to aid or represent neurodivergent experiences. This was comprised of a discussion on how we want neurodivergent characters to be treated by game mechanics followed by time spent for the participants to create a TTRPG mechanics as a continuation of the conversations we started during the first workshop. In this context, game mechanics refers to the rules that govern the game for both the individual characters as well as the environmental and external elements they interact with.

In the third workshop, they did a recap of the last session and introduced the separate parts they worked on. They intentionally left room to include resources of lived experience that they could use as a source in the introduction for GMs. As of right now, these resources have not been officially decided on.

To simplify the mechanical depiction of the neurodivergent experience they came up with four mechanical values, masking, spoons, forks, and bonds. Masking regards how much a neurodivergent character can mimic those around them. When the character loses their stronger masks, symptoms start to become more noticeable. Spoons, like in spoon theory, depict the energy of the individual. Spoons allow the mask to exist through energy expenditure. Spoons buy masks of varying ability. Forks, like in fork theory, depict harm to mental health, they enable symptoms and make it harder to wear our stronger masks. Finally, bonds were made out to be a value associated with our relationship with an NPC determining how easy it is to hide symptoms from them and how easy it is to don a certain mask for them. As such, the main costs surround

masks and forks with bonds and spoons being counted towards the character's capacity to purchase masks.

Regarding symptoms, there was a greater concern for being considerate for people with DID. One symptom that they created mechanically, dissociation, allowed the GM to take control of the character to emulate the symptom. The participants acknowledged this would require a great degree of trust between the player and GM. For the final workshop, the participants responsible for the depiction of the symptoms was going to be working to further intertwine mechanics with the symptoms.

Finally, while the participants wanted to depict the reality of neurodivergent experiences, they found it would only be appropriate for them to provide examples within the narrative of bigotry towards neurodivergent identities as opposed to other marginalized groups, as that would be their lived experiences. As such, the third workshop was concluded and the participants set to work in bringing together their narrative and mechanical designs.

The fourth workshop was supposed to be focused on debriefing the participants and getting their overall thoughts and experiences of the study. However, in this final meeting the participants were more focussed on discussing their design and acquiring a much greater discussion on the framing. As such, I present the fourth workshop considerations and findings alongside the TTRPG media the participants designed in conversation with the following chapters. For now, I end this section by noting that the final workshop was concluded with the participants agreeing to submit their completed work by November 7th, 2024. While the workshop was anonymous with regards to the participation, some of the participants keenly swapped emails in hopes that they could do further work on their design involving playtesting to render and refine the TTRPG media.

2.2 Presenting Teleneuro: A Reparative Neurodivergent TTRPG Design

I now move on to a breakdown of the neurodivergent TTRPG media the participants designed in conversation with the following chapters of this dissertation to better inform future gaming media designs with a disability focus, regarding both game mechanics and narratives. Their work is used to provide insight into neurodivergent representation in TTRPGs designed with an embodied knowledge of the topics it explores. This will also aid in our perception of disability's place in TTRPG game mechanics and narratives. That being said, it is my hope that the TTRPG media designed by the participants, based on knowledge-sharing and personal experience, will contribute to a better understanding of popular media's treatment of neurodivergent characters, communities, and activism. So, we will find that their work also gestures towards more ethical and accessible futures and practices. They decided to have *Teleneuro* be the name of the TTRPG design, so I will be referring to the game design as such.

2.2.1 Introduction to *Teleneuro*

The module for *Teleneuro* begins with a statement of intentions for how the designers expect this game to be approached. It states that,

> This will be a game that will serve as a means for players with neurodivergence to better represent themselves through TTRPG, rhetorically, accurately, and progressively. In doing so it is hoped that side effects include understanding of the experiences of neurodiversity, both within neurodiverse spaces and without. (See Appendix A)

The approach they took as a game design intention for *Teleneuro* focused more heavily and primarily on reparative play, as I discuss in section 4.1. Here they are making a crucial artistic intervention, similar to the ones I provide examples of in section 5.1, by affording members of the neurodivergent communities a new rhetorical tool that can be used to provide self-representation in TTRPG media spaces. The primary goal here is the creation of performative space for the neurodivergent community, with external understanding being a welcome but secondary outcome. While they also hope to provide everyone, internal or external to neurodiversity, with a greater understanding of neurodivergent experiences, they see that as more of a potential side effect of the initial intention and don't provide any greater insight into how

they see this coming about. While they don't explicitly state that they would like only neurodivergent players to play neurodivergent characters, they also don't explicitly deter it. However, one of the purposes behind their designs for the workshop was to create a process that other people were going to see which would ideally open a wider network of possible paths forward for neurodivergent activism. In this manner, through the networking of the play and more diverse depictions of neurodivergent characters, they hope that players and viewers of the game can acquire something more progressive in their view of neurodivergence, a topic I explore in section 4.2.

The module goes on to say that the designers based the game on the core mechanics of *Kids on Bikes* by Jonathan Gilmour and Doug Levandowski and took inspiration from the *MonsterHearts* games by Avery Alder and the *Belonging Outside Belonging* game systems by Avery Alder and Benjamin Rosenbaum. Avery Alder is well known for her RPGs for queer play and in a similar vein the designers found some of the representative concepts and settings more grounding than the fantastical elements of other TTRPGs.

It also states how they decided to employ Spoon Theory and Fork Theory for the purposes of depicting the themes of energy and disability (Jenrose par. 3-8; Miserandino 1-2). Spoon Theory being a disability-coded approach to measuring how much energy the individual has remaining in units of spoons as well as how much energy they know certain tasks will take from them (Miserandino 1-2). For instance, if I have a total of six spoons remaining for the day and I know that doing the dishes will take four spoons to complete, and taking out the trash will take three spoons then I know that if I don't want to end up burnt out I can only complete one of those tasks safely for my wellbeing. This is depicted in the following images where certain tasks might take less energy or more energy and we can learn how to budget our energy for different tasks.

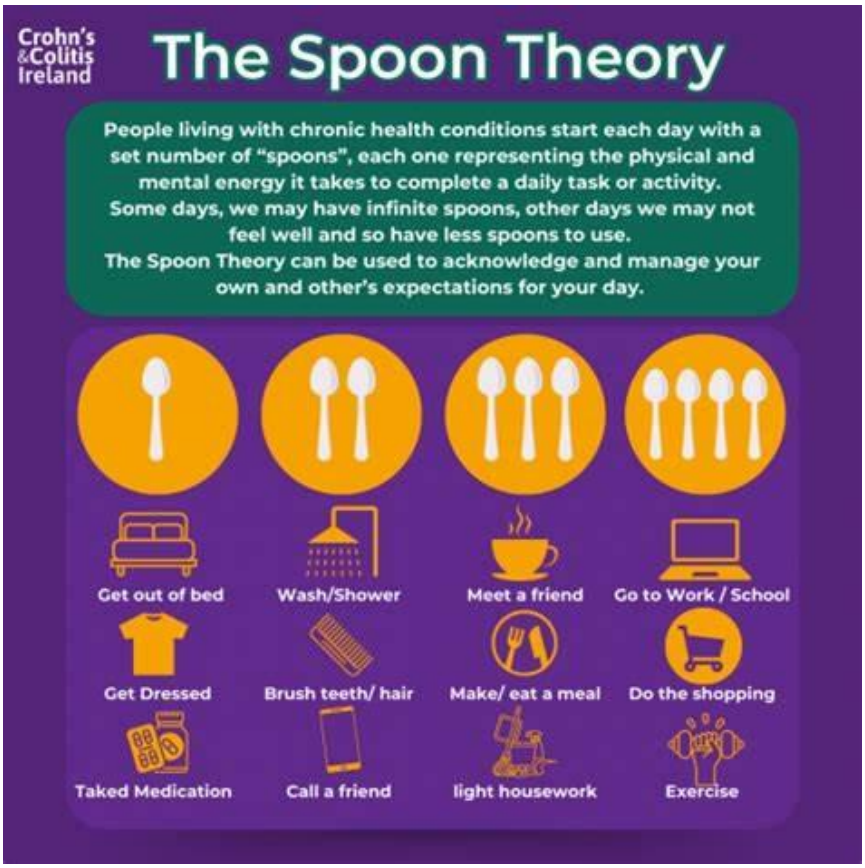


Figure 28: Spoon Theory for Chronic Health

Figure 28 states,

> The Spoon Theory: People living with chronic health conditions start each day with a set number of 'spoons', each one representing the physical and mental energy it takes to complete a daily task or activity. Some days, we may have infinite spoons, other days we may not feel well and so have less spoons to use. The Spoon Theory can be used to acknowledge and manage your own and other's expectations for your day.

It then goes on to convey that the tasks of getting out of bed, getting dressed, and taking medication might cost one spoon, the tasks of washing/showering, brushing teeth/hair or calling a friend might cost two spoons, the tasks meeting a friend, making and eating a meal, and light housework might cost three spoons, and the tasks of going to school/work, going shopping, and doing exercise might cost four spoons. The following image depicts a means by which people can learn to budget their spoons.

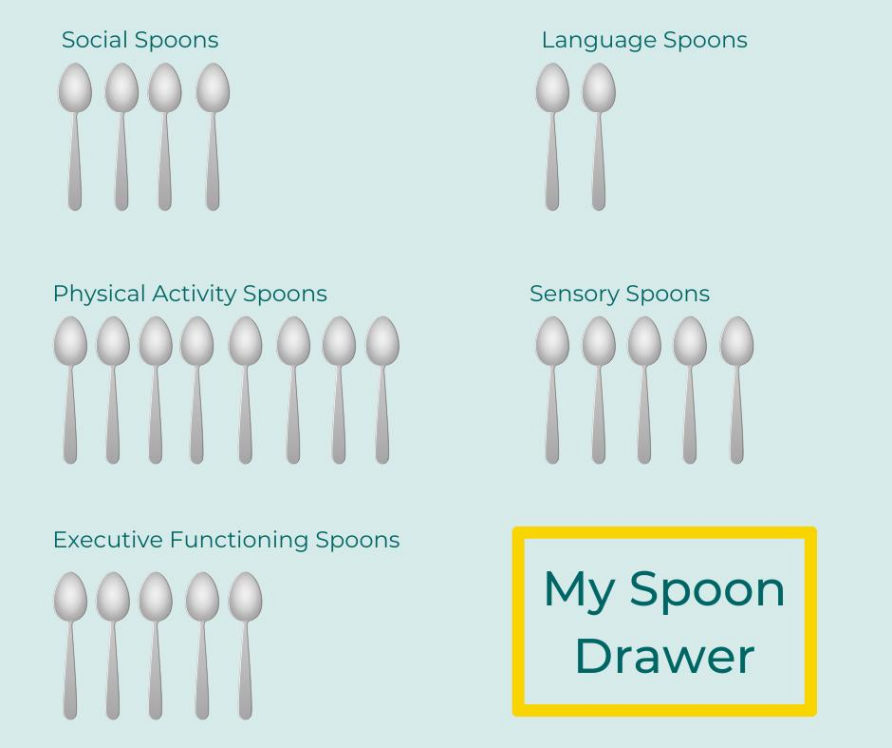


Figure 29: Spoon Theory Organization

In this image, we are introduced to the idea that we can think about our spoons like a spoon drawer. The image title says, "My Spoon Drawer" and it shows that the owner has four spoons under a heading called "Social Spoons," two spoons under a heading called "Language Spoons," eight spoons under a heading called "Physical Activity Spoons," five spoons under a heading called "Sensory Spoons," and five spoons under a heading called "Executive Functioning Spoons." In this manner, the owner is budgeting for each activity they have to take part in over the course of the day.

Fork Theory, on the other hand, was created in relation to Spoon Theory being derived from the saying "Stick a fork in me, I'm done." In this sense, it means "that one has a Fork Limit, that is, you can probably cope okay with one fork stuck in you, maybe two or three, but at some point you will lose your shit if one more fork happens" (Jenrose par. 6). Jenrose goes on to explain how,

> A fork could range from being hungry or having to pee to getting a new bill or a new diagnosis of illness. There are lots of different sizes of forks, and volume vs. quantity

> means that the fork limit is not absolute. I might be able to deal with 20 tiny little escargot fork annoyances, such as a hangnail or slightly suboptimal pants, but not even one 'you poked my trigger on purpose because you think it's fun to see me melt down' pitchfork. (par. 7)

Alongside resources to further explain the connection between these theories and the in-game mechanics, the module heavily encourages GMs to research lived experiences of neurodiverse individuals when it comes to trying to depict both the NPCs and explain instances of how certain symptoms will affect the individual characters in the context of the game. This way, the harmful depictions that might come from the GM will be reduced significantly, so as not to perpetuate problematic depictions or themes of neurodivergence. The explanation of symptoms further on in *Teleneuro* help to offset many assumptions however, given that the performance of the GM is a crucial aspect of this TTRPG design, I examine their role further in section 4.2.

On the players' end the module discusses how it can be used as skill development for neurodivergent individuals. This is not to be confused with the idea of curing the neurodiversity or helping individuals overcome their neurodivergence, but rather through the use of the in-game mechanics for social navigation, the players are allowed to practice self-care in a consequence-free environment. As this is not something they are afforded the time or the space to do. In this manner, it is the participants hope that neurodivergent individuals learn and utilize specific tools within the game to assist them in navigating an ableist environment. The tone with which they do this could be like approaching self-case on easy or hard mode, as the genre-agnostic setting of a high school "allows players to explore more lighthearted episodes (e.g. having a battle of the bands) as well as most difficult episodes (e.g. putting on a memorial for lost friends)."

Right away, just from the introduction to the module, it is evident that there are significant requirements of trust on the GMs part to be had when playing the game. Lest it turn into a problematic scenario like I discuss in section 5.2. This brings us to considerations the module provides for safety.

2.2.2 Safety

The primary area this module focuses on in terms of safety is communication, mainly that each game session should end with a debrief to provide an opportunity and space for the players to reflect on and discuss their experiences. The module notes how this should be done in three parts: 1) as a character debrief, 2) as a player debrief, and 3) as a story debrief. The character debrief is straightforward as it has the players time to reflect on characters' next goals and how they might be feeling at the time of the next episode. The player debrief is a bit more personal in that it has the players reflect mindfully on their experiences on the session which typically involve things like triggers, sensitive subject matter, and challenges that they might have been experiencing. The story debrief involves the larger picture of the campaign. The module instructs there to be a reflection of the themes of the story, how they are currently resonating with the players as well as if there needs to be any modifications to the game moving forward or any retcons made to instances where the player was feeling uncomfortable. The module encourages an open dialogue between the GM and the players in between sessions to further discuss any concerns or thoughts about the content of the game.

Additionally, while not part of the official TTRPG design, the designers included a *Player Safety Guide* (See Appendix B) to facilitate a safe and fun experience. For the sake of brevity, I just summarize what they included here. The safety guide included the usage of game ratings to help maintain the tone of the experience. It included the safety tool designed by Ron Edwards called Lines and Veils to place limits on certain topics to portray how comfortable the players are with them appearing in game. As per the safety guide,

> Lines are the hard lines you are definitely NOT comfortable with being included in the game AT ALL. They're the red lights. Veils are soft limits you'd be okay with including indirectly, or if it happens behind a veil offscreen. They're like yellow lights. Veils are something you talk about with the GM…We encourage each player and the GM to write a list of topics and ideas they'd place behind a hard line, and things they'd be comfortable with only behind a veil. Every player should return their lists to the GM, who will collate all topics into one sheet of everyone's hard lines and veils, not associating any particular

topic with any one individual, which can be used for reference by everyone. (See Appendix B)

This is a similar consideration to my discussion in section 5.2 on more accurate measures taking place to help synchronize the GM and players' understanding for informed consent. They also included X, N, and O cards created by John Stavropoulos, Mysty Vander, Adam Cleaver, and Kira Magrann as a non-verbal and accessible means to help navigate discomfort in the game where, "When an X Card is tapped, the topic is immediately dropped and not discussed further. When an N Card is tapped, we are nearing X Card material. Discuss or tread lightly. When an O Card is tapped, green light - we're comfortable with the current topic" (See Appendix B) as depicted in the following image.



Figure 30: XNO Cards

2.2.3 Core concepts

The module is transparent in its focus on neurodivergent concepts for the scope of play. The core concepts of *Teleneuro* involve ideas like managing differences, seeking how to achieve individual goals personal to the neurodivergent characters, and seeking how to achieve group goals as a new high school student with neurodiversity. Whereas the main themes that are intended to be explored are, "friendship, neurodiversity in a neurotypical world, overcoming hardship, community, communication, risk, survival, rest, vulnerability, and learning about yourself and others." While these might be the themes the module presents story wise, these are all central themes of life that neurodivergent individuals need to navigate on a daily basis and as such set this TTRPG media up well as a site for the rhetorical play neurodivergent players might be seeking out as a means of self-representation.

Providing guidance for pacing and story lines, the module explains that,

> The game is intended to be played over a season which includes several different episodes. Episode zero allows characters to get to know themselves and the setting. Some more advanced mechanics are added from episodes 1 onwards. A season may last anywhere from six to eight episodes. Each episode can be played over an evening and are a continuation of the previous episode. Each episode is centered around an important event to the high school students. (See Appendix A)

During our fourth workshop the participants discussed how the pacing was set up like this with the intention of emulating a Disney channel show, a media that many neurodivergent individuals are familiar with.

2.2.4 Mechanics

Using *Kids on Bikes* as the foundation for this module, the main mechanics were crafted around the action called "Doing something risky." The participants commented how this worked very well for grades and general performance in a high school class. The module notes that,

> Whenever you want to **do something risky**, **roll 2d6**, plus any modifiers you might have. **2-6 is failure.** Player describes what goes wrong and the GM describes how things get even worse. **7-9 is partial success**, a.k.a. complicated success. You barely get what you want, AND the GM throws something else in there you weren't expecting. If you don't want the complication, you can choose to fail instead. **10-12 is success.** You get what you want. **13+ is a critical success!** GM offers you +1d6 on your next roll or some other benefit. (See Appendix A)

The inclusion of the other main mechanics for this module allowed for them to have influence over how this base mechanic worked.

In terms of their use of spoons and forks as mechanics, they used them to track and measure energy for the PCs as well as the mental damage or the wounds taken from the burdens they carried over the course of the game, respectively. As a baseline for the energy and mental damage they began each day with, the characters were respectively given five spoons and zero forks. The participants acknowledged that this was not very realistic to real life because certain individuals might have greater or fewer spoons to start their day with and not all forks are the same size, as noted in the quote above. Among other considerations, sleep, diet, exercise, and social versus physical pain tolerance play large roles in how we as neurodivergent individuals navigate life. However, the participants found it necessary to negotiate this for the sake of facilitating equitable navigation of the game without overcomplicating the ruleset. It was commented how this too is in line with a Disney show as the beginning of each episode shows the characters refreshed with a brand-new concept for the episode.

Strenuous situations would have a coinciding spoon or fork cost depending on the context. The module helps to guide the coming up with the spoon or fork cost in each situation so as not to replicate harmful assumptions. When the character reaches zero spoons or five forks, the player

will need to reduce every roll they make by one until the character can recover (See Appendix A). For the purposes of what exceeds or follows the game's mechanics we rely heavily on the players' autobiographical disability performance to convey their character's reaction to losing spoons or acquiring forks in what they look, sound, or feel like in the narrative (Auslander and Sandahl 64).

The module provides a mean of recovering spoons and removing forks in the form of self-care. The act of taking time and space to oneself to recuperate after a stressful day has cumulated in the creation of an in-game space called the hideout. The hideout is a shared space where everyone has their own section to recover, much like how Disney Channel shows have a group hangout spot for the characters to unwind at. The hideout can be something just for the characters and can be anything they choose (treehouse, pizza place, back porch). This also means that there can be multiple hideouts where the PCs can decompress from the day's events.

While the hideout is a space that can be used to recover, recovery is not always possible for neurodivergent individuals if their mind is still having them focus on the stressful thoughts they deal with. As such, recovery in the hideout is an uncertain mechanic that can only be attempted twice per session. To depict the energy requirement that comes with the executive function needed to take recovery time to ourselves, there is a cost of one spoon needed and in the event of there being no spoons left the character must take one fork to attempt to recover. The player then flips a coin and the GM calls heads or tails to see if the character is successful in taking time for self-care. If they are successful, they can either gain two spoons or remove two forks. If they are not successful, the GM will describe their attempt and why in this instance they were unable to recover due to things happening in their personal narrative (See Appendix A).

Masking was the main mechanic that the participants were determined to implement in this module and as such they found it appropriate to intertwine them with the spoons and forks to more accurately show the neurodivergent experience with masking. While entirely optional, masking allows for the player to get an add two to any roll made by their character as a baseline. To mask, the character must spend the appropriate number of spoons, between two and five depending on the context. As such, if the character is in a safe space with friends, the cost to mask is lower. Whereas is they are working or presenting or meeting with the principal the

character might feel greater stress and the cost to mask will be higher. Ultimately, it will be up to the GM to decide the cost based on the context of the situation the players are expected to socially navigate. On top of this, the module shows the realities of the negative impacts on the character when they are attempting to mask with too few spoons or too many forks. As noted in the module, "At 3 forks, masks provide only +1 instead of +2. 4 and above, you also take -1 to every roll until you recover. At 2 spoons, masks only provide +1 instead of +2. 1 and 0 spoons add -1 to every roll until you recover" (See Appendix A).

Let's say for example, Jason, the hypothetical character from *Teleneuro* is called to the principal's office. The principal wants to discuss Jason's poor academic standing. To maintain his composure during this emotional discussion, Jason needs to succeed a 2d6 dice test, meaning he rolls two six-sided-dice and adds their results together. If he rolls a seven or higher, he will be able to keep his cool. He has five spoons, so he is able to use two spoons to mask. However, Jason didn't sleep well last night, and he had to take a pop quiz this morning, he is starting this social encounter off with three forks. This means masking is only able to grant him a plus one bonus to his dice test instead of the normal plus two bonus. He will have to make a roll of 2d6 and add one to the result to determine the outcome of this scene.

To show the social side of neurodivergence the module simplifies the relationship between PCs and NPCs with a number ranking attributed to each relationship called a Bond. These can be any kinds of bonds from paternal to rivals to best friends and levels of a higher number means a closer and stronger relationship with the NPC.

The higher the bond level, the larger a bonus that is available to the character when they are performing certain actions with them. However, each time this bonus is used the bond level is reduced showing the need for maintenance of their relationship with the NPC. This specifically allows players to decide if they want to use the bond bonus and illustrates a more nuanced role that the NPCs have outside of being there to assist the players. In a similar manner, it helps to show the value inherent to the NPC rather than the utility the NPC can provide us, which in turn helps us to bring a stronger critique to the ableist view of disability, as I discussed in my literature review. When the bond level hits zero the bond with the NPC is lost. Bonds can be increased by bringing the NPC to a unique place that is special to the two of you or to the

hideout, allowing an NPC to become closer to the PC in a more personal and comfortable space by spending a spoon for the chance to build the bond (See Appendix A).

Additional specific mechanics were made for the traits of neurodivergence that play off the above noted mechanics. These are traits that help to create the mind of the neurodivergent character. According to the participants, observing the mind of the neurodivergent character was the primary means of building the character, as that is where neurodivergence starts before society reacts to them, which is in line with the theory of complex embodiment I discuss in section 4.2. The module then notes how the characters' mental traits are accepted, ignored, or rejected socially. The player can then further their understanding of the traits of their neurodivergence by thinking about how they might roleplay their character in relation to how their mind exhibits these traits.

The initial conception of these traits was categorized as boons and drawbacks. The traits were all based on aspects of life with neurodivergence with boons being the beneficial aspects of neurodivergence and drawbacks being the negative aspects. Creating this binary of good or bad traits did not sit right with us and while it was suggested to use the term "annoyance" rather than "drawback" to reference bad traits, with regard to the reality of neurodivergence, this still ended up giving the mechanic a thematically negative positioning. As such, the categories were adjusted to be socially accepted, ignored, and rejected traits because the mental traits we perceive to be negative cannot be boiled down to a symptom, and they are not our shortcomings. These traits are determined to be good, bad, or remain unseen by society and we are conditioned to take on these beliefs as well. The socially ignored traits are particularly nuanced as they critique a productivist society, highlighting the instances of neurodivergent experience that are rendered invisible as they are deemed neither useful nor disruptive. While there are the three distinct categories for gameplay purposes and understanding, their societal perception is not the same from person to person. Most of these traits depend on how the individual presents themselves and identifies (i.e. their gender, race, sexuality, class, etc.) For example, in U.S. work culture, the prominence of the "angry Black woman" stereotype incentivizes Black women to be conflict avoidant in order to be socially accepted, despite the neurodivergent trait "Conflict Avoidant" being categorized under socially rejected in the game. This is because what might be observed as

"assertiveness" in a white woman will most likely be interpreted as "aggression" in a Black woman and negatively impact performance evaluations and assessments of leadership capability (Motro et al. 148). This is an area for further exploration and development.

While each of these traits can be observed being embodied by certain neurodivergent individuals, the participants decided against being explicit with any archetypes of diagnoses, like ADHD, DID, or Autism, so as to keep the game separate from the medical model of disability. This approach enables the player to choose for themselves whether or not they wish to have their character be diagnosed and, in this manner, it lets them play out a more personal story showing the wanted or unwanted realities of undiagnosed neurodivergence. On the one hand, this deters players from pathologizing their interpretation of the traits while encouraging the players to create their character with their personal mind in mind in a way that evades restricting them to a single category.

Initially, it was suggested to allow players to select four traits, two socially accepted and two socially rejected, which allowed them to craft their character in a way that kept the game balanced. While this worked for the desired balance of a TTRPG, it was limiting in how neurodivergence affects individuals in reality. Few neurodivergent individuals would be limited to having two or even three of each type of trait, so forcing the characters to adjust their neurodivergent experience for the purpose of not being too rewarding or too punishing from the mechanic's side of things doesn't corelate with how real life neurodivergence exists. As such, it was later decided to allow the player to select as many of the socially accepted and rejected traits they desired, so long as they were equal number between the two, as well as any socially ignored traits they find appropriate. This allows for the complex embodiment of the characters the participants desired, as I discuss in section 4.2. In forgoing simplicity and balance, *Teleneuro* opens up a more diverse understanding for how the players approach neurodivergence through their emulation of complex embodiment within their characters.

Now for the sake of brevity I will not be going into great detail regarding every single trait, as they can be observed in Appendix A. Each of these traits are something that at least one of the workshop participants has embodied experience with and is provided as such. All of the depictions outside of the mechanics and their initial descriptions are up for the GM and the

player to decide on and impose their own research, understanding, and embodied experience. Now, I list each of the traits in their category and will remark on certain ones that were discussed at length.

With regard to socially accepted traits the module has: Problem Solver; Creativity; Hyperempathy; Intelligence; Trust; and Routine. It is not difficult to see how each of these traits are praised by society in that they are productive and can contribute to capitalism. Initially, two of the original traits, which were named community and loneliness, were found to be outside the realm of neurodivergence. It was discussed that what the names implied had more to do with social and environmental predispositions as opposed to having anything to do with the character being neurodivergent. They were appropriately renamed trust and distrust respectively as that helped to flavour them more in line with mental traits the participants were going for.

With regard to socially ignored traits the module has: Persistence; Pattern Recognition; Special Interests; Hyperfocus; Connection to Nature; Overstimulation; Trauma; Dissociation; Delusions; and Stimming. From their mechanical effects we can observe that the socially ignore traits are not based on a neutral or minimal in-game impact as might be the case with other TTRPG designs. Rather they are taken entirely from how our real-life society ignores such traits and as such are not limited by mechanical game balance, but by the sense realism that was attempted to be emulated within the game. In this regard, these traits do not necessarily get in the way of productivity, nor do they benefit it, so they go largely ignored or unseen. Regarding Dissociation as a trait, the module regards it as such:

> Your mind fractures during stressful situations. EITHER you lose time, and GM can decide to make a roll for you once an episode; OR make a second character. During stressful situations, GM can call for you to *switch,* and you'll play that character instead, inhabiting the same body. Your first character cannot take action, and can lose memory of the time they're out (decide with GM). GM can call for switches to happen up to 3 times per episode. (See Appendix A)

This description of dissociation, instead of divvying the types of dissociation up into their own pathologized categories, allows for a greater spectrum of the trait to take precedent, making room for both more common experiences of dissociation and the disorder that is clinically diagnosed

as DID. During the fourth workshop, with certain participants having experienced the diverse ranges of dissociation, it was commented how this description, as well as the descriptions for Delusions and Hallucinations, was a productive portrayal of the ranges of symptoms of schizophrenia instead of an all-or-nothing approach where schizophrenia is boiled down to one digestible understanding. Mechanics such as these underscore why safety tools like Lines and Veils and the XNO Card are not merely optional additions but are integral to the ethical play of *Teleneuro*.

Regarding socially rejected traits the module has: Conflict Avoidant; Executive Dysfunction; Anxiety; Hallucinations; Distrust; and Mania. Much to the opposite of socially accepted traits, it is easy to see how each of these traits are demonized by society in that they are at odds with the capitalism in failing to allow for an optimally productive individual. These are the traits that are most criticized by the medical model and are often sought to be eradicated or cured so as to not otherwise be disruptive.

The discussion surrounding social rejected traits required a bit more nuance when it came to how they were being mechanically depicted. Concerns were brought up about their interconnectedness, one being how mania often also triggers hallucinations or delusions, and this interplay was included in the final revision where the module notes that the "GM assigns a delusion and special interest during [the] duration [of the manic episode]" (See Appendix A). Another concern of interconnectedness came from how Hallucinations compounded with anxiety and stress overall which was ratified in the final revision with the addition that the "duration is dependent on the number of forks you currently have" (See Appendix A).

The module goes so far as to include some general archetypes as examples for how a neurodivergent individual might experience reality. It notes,

> Example archetypes:
>
> Accepted (a) Rejected (r) Ignored (i)
>
> - Routine (a), Anxiety (r) Pattern Recognition (i), Special Interests (i)
> - Trust (a), Executive Dysfunction (r), Dissociation (i)
> - Hyperempathy (a), Hallucinations (r), Connection to Nature (i) Delusions (i)

- Creativity (a), Mania (r) Hyperfocus (i), Stimming (i)
- Problem Solver (a), Trauma (i), Persistence (i), Distrust (r)
- Intelligence (a), Conflict avoidant (r), Trauma (i), Overstimulation (i)

(See Appendix A)

In these examples, one could read certain traits as making up the mind of a person with Autism, ADHD, or DID. So, there is room to impose our own lens for readings of neurodivergence within this game system. The important piece of this innate non-specificity is that using an explicit identity formation based on medical diagnoses is optional, so as to not do harm to individuals whose neurodivergent medical diagnoses would take away certain rights or privileges, they have under the guise that they are assumed to be able-minded. This plausible deniability of self-representation makes for another layer of safety that the players would have as a lived reality they employ to avoid stigmatic associations.

2.2.5 Worldbuilding

Worldbuilding is done in tandem with the other players. However, to begin with each player contemplates and answers personal questions posed about their character. These questions seek to address how the characters themselves approach and play off of themes surrounding neurodivergence, such as community, medication, special interests, and social isolation, as well as passions, routines, and life events that would characterize them outside of their neurodivergence as well. This brings to light the troubles experienced by the characters either by an external influence or as a result of their neurodivergence. The players are also prompted to have two cliques or clubs they are a part of, one which is fulfilling and the other which is draining for them to take part in. On top of this, the players are asked to create NPCs and establish their relationship and bond level to them. These play into how the players craft their character's long and short-term goals which will be the driving force behind their navigation of high school.

In a similar fashion to the game *MonsterHearts*, the players take turns in asking each other questions to build up their understanding of their characters' relationships to other PCs. The group is also given the opportunity to collectively come up with and vote on two rumours that

are currently circulating the around the game world. Together the players decide on where their hideout and hang out spots will be as well as one major event that will be taking place during the school year. All of this then plays into how the players craft their characters' group goals for each session which will establish their group cohesion in how they navigate the world.

A rudimentary guide for session pacing is then provided to the GM. This includes considerations for the pilot episode and story beats for the GM to consider and pitch to the players so that they can decide on the game they want to experience together. It is the hope of the workshop participants that this will allow the players to appropriately synchronize their expectations and take part in a rhetorically valuable, accessible, and safe play experience.

This process, the blending of crip methodology, workshop ethnography, and design-as-research, exemplifies neurodivergent inclusive and informed design approaches to collaborative game development. As such, it affords disability game studies with an effective best practice for positioning disability as the critical lens rather than the subject of study and provides a best practice of safe and flexible design parameters, as shown through the plausible deniability of self-representation available to the players.

Chapter 3

Agency for Disability in TTRPGs

This chapter explores the social power in different gaming communities alongside the intersection of disability and game studies, and performance; explaining how TTRPGs are a beneficial media site to host disability justice initiatives. To do this, we will be showcasing the rhetorical power in the TTRPG communities and then analyzing the three object texts that I used in my ethnography, *Chronic Migraine Mechanics For 5e, Inspirisles,* and *Survival of the Able,* to further convey the room that disability has for representation and activism in TTRPGs.

My review of specific case studies reveal the rhetorical power held by the fans, the companies, the larger influencers within the *D&D* communities, and how they engage with the game for political advocacy, in comparison to online video game companies like Blizzard and their fan base. I provide a brief history of *D&D* and the development of its online communities. By observing the rhetorical power that TTRPGs, and games in general, have on a global political scale, I convey how that power can be invoked by the TTRPG influencers for social justice.

Then, analyzing my object gaming texts, I apply them to both disability media and performance studies to show the benefits and complications they possess as a site to host disability themes. Here I show how the academic realm of performance studies helps to supplement the scarcity of the work being done in disability game studies by putting forward common performance studies concepts that are applicable to the performance elements found in TTRPG spaces. I supplement these concepts with examples from TTRPGs that are designed with disabled voices in mind to observe how they are treated in varying object texts.

My work here draws heavily on performance studies concepts as well as the conception of failure, as I alluded to in the introduction of this dissertation. Using performance studies theorists and rhetorical concepts of queer, personal, and societal failure regarding disability identity, I convey how TTRPG spaces can assist in pushing back against the associations of failure that society has with the disability communities.

To this end, the sections of this chapter amount to arguing how disability justice initiatives can benefit by being hosted in TTRPG spaces because of the affordances provided to more general and specific intersectional TTRPG communities within. While this is a theoretical supposition in and of itself, I will be using it to show the range of applications and benefits for disability justice that have not previously been scrutinized.

3.1 Player Autonomy in TTRPGs

To situate the context of this section in the rhetorical tradition, I will be drawing from rhetorical studies and game studies. I will first be looking at the events surrounding the 2019 Hong Kong protests and how two specific games, *Hearthstone* and *Overwatch*, have influenced this national dispute. I will then introduce the game of *D&D* as I will be comparing the publishers of these games regarding how they each develop their own rhetorical power. We will then be observing the development of ethos for influential players who have gained authority within specific political ideologies. I observe how ethos is developed by these parties from the fanbase that has been built up around the game. This is relevant to a modern setting because games have been becoming heavily politicized with creators and players alike using them to advocate political agendas. The point I seek to prove is the fact that the majority of the ethos within the *D&D* fan community that advocates for diverse representation does not belong to the company that publishes the game, like it would in online video games. It belongs to the influential players who speak for, and have developed the ethos to speak for, the game's audience.

3.1.1 Game Publishers and Politics

In 2019, Blizzard, based in Santa Monica, California, made international headlines over a very controversial stance they took regarding international politics. A famous gamer, Ng "Blitzchung" Wai Chung best known for playing the game *Hearthstone*, was kicked out of Blizzard's tournament for voicing support for the protestors in Hong Kong (Carpenter par. 1). Blizzard claimed that Blitzchung's statement was in violation of a tournament rule that forbade players from doing anything that brought them "into public disrepute, offend[ed] a portion or group of the public, or otherwise damage[d] Blizzard's image" (Carpenter par. 5). This statement has since been removed from the official *Hearthstone* e-sports news site (Carpenter par. 5). He was banned from Blizzard's tournaments for a period of one year which was later reduced and Blizzard attempted to make amends by giving Blitzchung the tournament's prize money (Clark par. 15). Blizzard was attempting to stay out of foreign affairs however, this just seemed to draw them into the dispute (Kent par. 4). After this gamer was kicked out, many in the online gaming community concluded that Blizzard was in favour of Hong Kong's current government (Kent

par. 6). They then rallied against both the company and the country, through a series of memes (Martinello). They went so far as to make the Chinese character Mei, from another game published by Blizzard called *Overwatch*, one of the mascots used by the protesters in Hong Kong (Carvalho par. 1), as shown in the following image with Mei wearing a mask that says "Fight for Freedom. Stand with Hong Kong" with Blizzard's logo crossed out and a backdrop showing images of the protests.



Figure 31: Mei used as Mascot for Protests in Hong Kong

Blizzard did not seem to be expecting this backlash, and their reparations seem to only be from the result of fan and protester reactions (Brack). However, this situation, in line with many commentaries of power in social media and other entertainment properties, begs the question of who has more power in the entertainment industry, observing the players and the creators.

It will be beneficial for us to begin our discussion of the rhetorical power within the *D&D* community by delving into the origin, and then the discourse, of the game. This will show the current issues that continue to occur within *D&D* as well as improvements that have contributed to its success over the years. Now, I provide a brief historical context of *D&D* before moving into the discourse surrounding it, as it is important to show how the game started off and look at it in comparison to how it has been redesigned for the modern day. I then go on to show some

problematic features within the game and discuss these instances alongside areas where more "queer-friendly" elements might be included.

3.1.1.1 History and Development of *D&D*

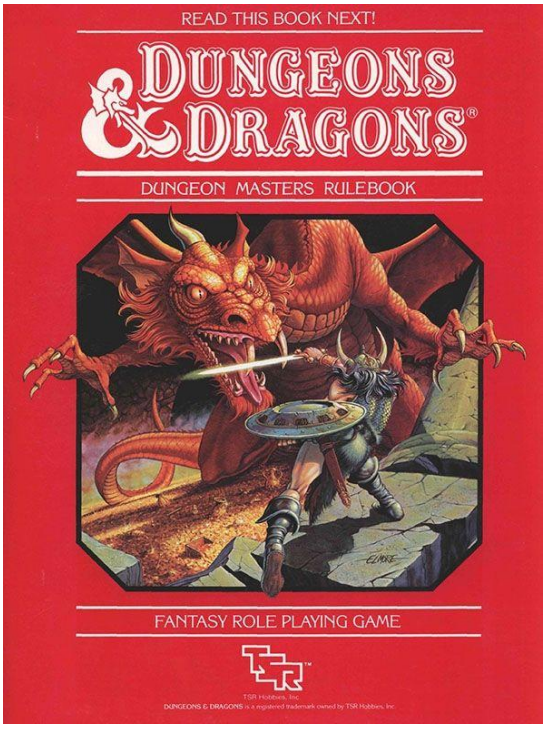


Figure 32: D&D First Edition Book Cover depicting a warrior fighting a red dragon

D&D is an RPG currently published by Wizards of the Coast. Gary Gygax co-created the first edition of *D&D* in 1974, and it was designed from a combination of wargaming features and popular medieval fantasy tropes (Bellow par. 4). The goal was to allow the player to embody an individual character's actions as opposed to commanding an entire army, as wargames do. Inspiration for the initial idea of the adventuring party comes from stories like *The Lord of the Rings* where a group of characters come together to accomplish a task or take part in a quest (Gygax, "Creator of Dungeons & Dragons" par. 4).



Figure 33: D&D Table Setup with miniatures navigating a dungeon on a table surrounded by dice

Part of *D&D*'s appeal stems from the diversity of characters that can be created by the players (Codega par. 4). In the earlier editions, however, the rules around character creation were a lot more limiting than they are today. The classes that a character could choose from were entirely dependent on their race. For example, if a player chose to make a dwarf character, the dwarf would have a "racial stock," limiting it to certain classes, and the DM, who acts as the referee of the game, would have had to make an allowance, forgoing the rules, for the player to choose anything other than a fighter, a thief, or an assassin (Gygax, "Advanced Dungeons & Dragons" 13). Additionally, each race had different limits on how high a number they could put in the abilities they started off with.

Compared to older editions of *D&D*, the fifth edition has a lot more diversity in terms of character customization. In the first few editions, the extent to which your character could be used mechanically was very limited. Rogues, elves, dwarves, halflings, magic-users, fighters, and clerics were all separate classes that one could play and if you were not a specific race your default would be a human. As such, these classes boiled down into stereotypes within the *D&D* community. Fighters were good at fighting, rogues were good at sneaking, clerics were good at healing, and magic-users were good at magic. While this style of game may appeal to those interested in the fantasy genre, it did not draw a particularly large fanbase nationally (King par.

17-18). This could have also been the result of limited means of communication back then as well.

This shortcoming, of limited character creation options, was addressed in later editions, allowing for any race options to be paired with any class options and giving every race the same ability score capacity. As such, the players were given more agency to design the characters they wanted to embody. They could now make dwarves who were wizards, and elves who were barbarians without needing the DM's approval. The latest version of *D&D*, fifth edition, puts more emphasis on making the different play styles accessible to each player (D'Anastasio par. 1). With the inclusion of subclasses and backgrounds, the game provides the players at the table with more diverse options to consider in character creation, as opposed to the first edition which only gave the options of class and race. Subclasses have greatly contributed to the play styles and the aesthetic of each class, as they are a more specific aspect of a character's class. For instance, instead of just being a fighter, with the same abilities as any other fighter, the player has the choice to be a fighter who is specifically a samurai, or a cavalier, or a champion, each one distinct from the others in terms of mechanics and aesthetic. I have included an illustration below to help convey the diversity of different fighters in *D&D* flavoured mechanically and narratively as vastly distinct. This illustration depicts a pirate, a robot, a gunslinger, and a knight.



Figure 34: Illustration of Theoretical Differing Variations of the Fighter Class

The inclusion of backgrounds in the latest edition has also contributed to this allowance for greater diversity. The backgrounds that the players can choose from establishes the character as a person with a role in the in-game society. The background afforded to the character in fifth edition is additional aesthetic, used to set up an identity for the character outside of their base mechanics and situate them within the world. Backgrounds are occupations, or lifestyles, that the character has within the world and informs the player on how they might interact and engage with the world around them. These backgrounds can range from Entertainer, to Soldier, to Hermit and each one provides the character unique skills and items that a person with that background would have. Accompanying each background is a list of possible character traits that can be chosen to orient the character within the world. These traits answer questions such as: What is this character's personality like? What are their political views? Who do they consider friends? Who do they consider enemies? What is their greatest flaw as a person? What is something they admire in others? This guideline for suggested ways of creating the character based on background is important for some suggested reparative play elements that I explore in section 4.1. The background of a character makes it so that the players can see them as more than just their game mechanics but as people with their own hopes and dreams. This aspect, more than the other components of the character, helps the player in navigating the world as they understand who their characters are and what role their characters play within the world.

So, comparatively, the fifth edition allows for a more nuanced flavour and backstory to come across in character design. If one so chose, in this edition, they could make a rogue swashbuckler gnome who has a background of a pirate. This then allows for the player to embody their character the way they wish to and create a more entertaining experience for everyone through the affordances of the game.

The gameplay of *D&D* comes with no explicit instruction regarding how it should be played and compared to other games, like Snakes and Ladders, where the goal is to get to the top before your opponents, there is no set goal that every player aims for. Throughout the game, players can choose exactly how they want to play it and, as I mentioned earlier, they are guided and refereed by another player known as the DM. So, while other games are typically a challenge, or contest,

regarding physical or mental abilities, TTRPGs like *D&D* are more akin to creating an ongoing narrative about a character's life through improvised roleplay.

There are two main components to the characters of *D&D* which have been consistent throughout its existence: the race and the class. Mechanically, race can be chosen to give benefits to the character's innate abilities. Race can also contribute to the cultural background that the character might come from but there is a mechanical incentive to choose a race for the bonuses they can provide to the gameplay. Race consists of many different mythological beings, like elves and dwarves, that come with a variety of cultural aspects which have been ingrained in the idea of the race through worldbuilding done by the designers. This has created multiple bioessentialist stereotypes for the different mythological races over the years.

The class, on the other hand, is the most influential component of the gameplay that the character can afford the player. This is because it will determine what allowances the game will provide the player in their actions as their character navigates and interacts with the world. This could be in the form of casting spells, making conversation, or going into a combat encounter. For example, the fighter, typically having high strength and constitution, is trained in all weaponry and can wield any weapon to start off, which will determine how they fight and what aesthetic they will give their fighting style. In contrast, the wizard typically has higher intelligence. Higher intelligence will allow them to prepare a greater number of spells and increase the chances of their spells succeeding. Unfortunately, they do not get proficiency with many weapons and have fewer hit points than every other class. With every act the character performs in this world, the class provides said character with different abilities which could make some interactions easier, harder, or zanier than others. In this manner, we can understand that while the race is more informative of the cultural aesthetic the character has in the fantasy setting, the class will influence nearly every experience that a player has within the game through the affordances given to them.

To begin the game, the players are given the context of the situation that their characters are in. This information is given to them by the DM. The DM acts as the rule keeper and builds the game with locations and characters in mind ahead of time. Alternatively, they can use a prebuilt module, made by the game designers, that already has all the information of the world in place

for them. The players will then navigate the situation that they have been given by their DM while roleplaying their characters. Maybe they need to escort a king to peace talks and fend off the dangers of the forest on their way. Perhaps bandits have taken hold of a nearby village and the characters need to go and liberate it. Along the way, a story is formed, and the players all take part in their own adventure.

The roleplay aspect of the game has been steadfast throughout the different editions that have been released for *D&D* and within the past two decades the game has been further evolved to allow for more inclusive takes on how one wishes to play the game. Through the roleplay setting that the players take part in, the game requires them to think about the world from the perspectives of their characters. The role that the players embody is developed around the identity that they give their character. As they take part in the play, they will come across situations where they will need to ask how their character would react to something. These choices they make in the story, alongside the identity of their character, will become the role they play. It impacts what they are capable of, how others will treat them, and how they will view the world. If the player wishes to play the role of a wealthy elven aristocrat, the social rules of the world would work differently for them than if they were to play a dwarven barbarian. It is this understanding of the world that allows the player to figure out ahead of time who they want to portray and how they want to approach their fictional setting.

As such, there is now more flexibility in character design given to the players than what they might find in the first edition. When the players take part in the improvised experience of the game, they are given the autonomy to act and present themselves however they please. This is, of course, only allowed with the consent of the DM, who decides what is and is not allowed. Through this freedom, the roleplaying aspect of *D&D* has impacted modern culture significantly. Since diversity in identity has come into the mainstream, the changes made within the game have been looked at favourably. As such, we see more progressive changes being made in the fifth edition of *D&D* as opposed to the previous editions (D'Anastasio par. 4). That is not to say that *D&D* is the ideal game for the queer community, in terms of better representation, as many in the community still have issues with it, as I will address shortly. However, the game has become

increasingly popular within the queer community because, “The worlds that queer gamers play in are inherently queer, inherently different, and inherently optimistic” (Codega par. 4).

This optimistic gameplay is made much easier with homebrew, including “the adaptation, modification, and creation of mechanics and settings for these games that fall outside the official source materials” (Hibbard par. 3). Through the modification of *D&D*, the game becomes more unique to players at the table and gives them the freedom to add to or replace the official game rules with ones that may work better for their own group. Lee Hibbard, a Rhetoric and Composition PhD student, reflects on his experience as DM with his own group saying,

> In my own game, which serves here as a case study, the modification of 5th Edition *D&D*’s mechanics and setting allowed me, as a queer individual running a game for three other queer individuals, to explore the ways in which queer theory, expression, and identity discovery inform the game and world I have designed. The practices I engaged with in order to ‘queer’ my *D&D* game provide an insightful lens into a new way of engaging with participatory storytelling games, one that allows for alternative play styles, a pushback against stereotypical (and frequently racist/sexist) fantasy worldbuilding, and queer identity expression. (Hibbard par. 3)

In this sense, it is the players who are making *D&D* more “queer-friendly” as opposed to the designers. Even so, the official changes made to the game which we noted earlier do have some merit, putting it in a good position to be used for the purposes of reparative play, which again I go over in greater detail in section 4.1. Next, I explore the discourse that both scholars and community members have engaged with regarding creative design choices made by the game’s designers through two instances of heavy criticism they have received.

3.1.1.2 Critique of *D&D*

After the initial release of fifth edition *D&D*, Wizards of the Coast began publishing updates for their game that expanded on the lore of the world as well as the game mechanics available to the player. One of the major decisions the company made was to publish source material that could be used to represent members of the gender fluid and trans community through the players' characters. This was done with the inclusion of lore called "The Blessed of Corellon" allowing for an elf character, who has the blessing, to make a physical transition of their biological sex from male to female, or female to male, at will (Hoffer, "Introduce Sexfluidity in Elves" par. 4). I have included an image of an elf illustrated as one of "The Blessed of Corellon" below.

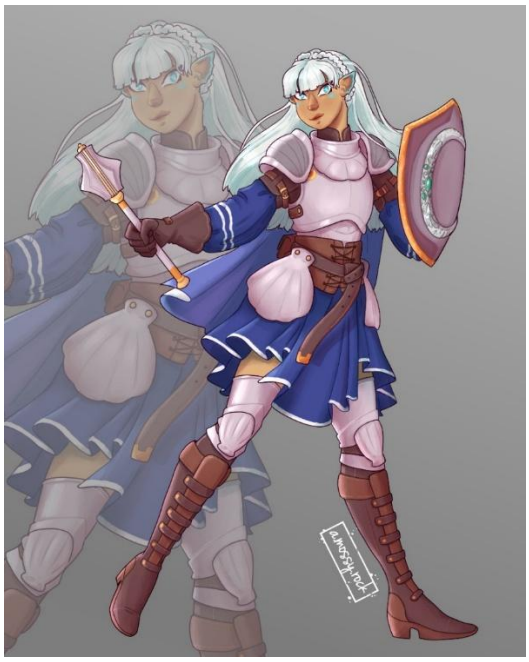


Figure 35: The Blessed of Corellon Fan Art

The designers situate this feature in the manner of a holy blessing from a god, giving it a positive connotation. Unfortunately, they also included a note for the lore where one subrace of elves known as dark elves or drow perceives this feature as a curse, forcing those born with it in their society to flee (Mearls and Crawford 44). This addition of lore gives the implication that the elves born with this trait in such a society are persecuted for it, which brings real world traumas into the fantasy setting. The inclusion of such lore in the source material would not make for a

positive setting for a member of the trans community, especially if the player is trying to portray themselves in a more accepting world.

With the addition of "The Blessed of Corellon," the explicit representative option for play may still have an appeal to those who are seeking more gender fluid and trans community inclusion (Hoffer, "Introduce Sexfluidity in Elves" par. 5). Even though this inclusion is a representative victory of sorts, against a society that is not always favorable to the diversity that goes against heteronormativity, the game designers could do more to accurately represent the intended audience in a meaningful way. A more meaningful game mechanic might take the form of allowing the players to interact with real world gender-confirmation surgery, without the associated scrutiny one may experience in reality (Hanna par. 8-9). The designers could implement this within the source material for the game to allow the players to engage with the transition. In terms of homebrew, fan-made supplements to the game, we can already see aspects of reality like these being implemented, and I bring this up again in section 4.1 when I go into examples of reparative play in *D&D*. Regardless, this is one instance where we can see a need for *D&D* to be adjusted so that it does not perpetuate real-world trauma in a fantasy setting.

Being the first RPG of its kind, the first edition of *D&D* set the foundation for the RPGs that followed and as such we can still see the influences it has had over them. For example, mechanics including bioessentialism have remained a predominant theme in fantasy, more largely attributed to Tolkien's typology of the races in his own world but thoroughly embraced by the rules of *D&D* (Hodes par. 6; Sturtevant par. 1). Currently, we are beginning to see changes made to the game in order to move away from problematic mechanics associated with race.

Wizards of the Coast has been making it increasingly easy to tailor characters for the individual, especially in their fifth edition. Wizards of the Coast does this in part by finding problematic mechanics and changing them to accommodate a more diverse audience. One thing that was heavily criticized in previous editions was the negative framing of the orc race (Hodes par. 6) which is made evident through the occurrence of the half-orc. In the third and a half edition of *D&D*, the half-orc, being the conception of a human and an orc parent, is framed as a "barbaric race" due to the ancestral ties they have to the full orcs. This is further evident with the

quote from the source material stating, “Half-orcs inherit a tendency toward chaos from their orc parents, but, like their human parents, they favor good and evil in equal proportions. Half-orcs raised among orcs and willing to live out their lives with them are usually the evil ones” (Tweet 19).



Figure 36: Illustration of Half-orc from D&D

Ilan Mitchell-Smith remarks that “In the case of the half-Orc, the description of this racial choice in the Player’s Handbook (2003) leaves no question as to the monstrosity and dangerous savagery of the full Orcs,” (Mitchell-Smith 221). Even in the latest edition of the game, the source material remarks on how the orcs have “barbaric customs” and are uncivilized compared to humans and other races (Mearls and Crawford 40). Obviously, this is an overlooked issue in the game as framing a race as “uncivilized” or “savage” uses problematic colonialist terminology that people tend to get away with in fantasy settings (Torner par. 21). Additionally, races being inherently evil have problematic implications for the real world as well. Therefore, this is another aspect of the game that might be adjusted so that it is not propagating racism.

In the fifth edition of *D&D*, the orc was released as a playable race with a negative intelligence ability modifier, a mechanical incentive to not play the orc race and an implication that orcs were mentally inferior to other races. After a few years from its release and much criticism towards

the game, the game designers made a new optional ruling. Typically, when Wizards of the Coast updates or revises the current rules, or source material, of fifth edition, they put notes up on their website that explain the changes, or they release the changes through expansions in future source books. In this case the new ruling was released as part of a new source book. This ruling made it so that the negative racial ability score modifiers did not have to be used. They also removed the orc's "Menacing" racial trait and replaced it with the "Primal Intuition" racial trait, which grants the player more options with the skills they can choose from instead of just a mechanical bonus to the intimidation skill, which the "Menacing" trait grants. Coverage on the event stated,

> The updated rules reflect previous comments by the *Dungeons & Dragons* team that promised better representation and a movement towards giving the player characters individualism as opposed to forcing them to fit within cultural stereotypes within the game's lore. While players can still choose to use the cultural generalities of D&D's various campaign settings when creating a character, the updated rules allows for greater expression and also gives DMs more freedom to create their own worlds where the standard D&D cultural stereotypes aren't present. (Hoffer, "Dungeons & Dragons Officially Removes" par. 2)

This change of wording and greater accessibility makes it so that the orc is associated with fewer negative connotations even though the idea of "Primal Intuition" still plays into the idea of a racial motif for orcs. To elaborate a bit further, the problem here is not so much that they are associated with racial traits to begin with but more so that these traits have been primitivized by the terms used to describe them, i.e. "Primal." It is this same discourse that has historically served colonial, eugenicist, and otherwise racist projects (De Bont 236; Huang 453; Moreton-Robinson 157-158; Sysling 394-396).

With the player's reception in mind, we see the game designers at Wizards of the Coast attempting to make their game more accessible and less problematic for the fanbase. Admittedly though, the new rule change, as shown here, is entirely optional and does not necessarily need to be implemented at every table the game takes place. So, we should note that there are still numerous changes that Wizards of the Coast might make to the game of *D&D* in their future releases of source books to be more inclusive.

Despite this Wizard of the Coast's initial success with the game could in part be attributed to its explicit stance on the freedom of gender identity sexual orientation provided by the game. In the fifth edition of Player's Handbook the game designers explicitly state,

> You can play a male or female character without gaining any special benefits or hindrances. Think about how your character does or does not conform to the broader culture's expectations of sex, gender, and sexual behavior. For example, a male drow cleric defies the traditional gender divisions of drow society, which could be a reason for your character to leave that society and come to the surface… You don't need to be confined to binary notions of sex and gender. The elf god Corellon Larethian is often seen as androgynous or hermaphroditic, for example, and some elves in the multiverse are made in Corellon's image. You could also play a female character who presents herself as a man, a man who feels trapped in a female body, or a bearded female dwarf who hates being mistaken for a male. Likewise, your character's sexual orientation is for you to decide. (Mearls and Crawford 121)

As we saw, on top of this, the source material that they release attempts to keep the audience in mind and aims to match their political views through diverse storytelling (McGrane et al.). In this sense, we can see that the publisher has developed a pseudo-ethos that is held entirely by their most influential players but is borrowed by the company for marketing purposes, which I will now be using as a basis to contrast Wizards of the Coast from Blizzard in how they handle their content.

From its initial release in 1974, *D&D* has had a consistently growing fan-base of 3 million players worldwide, but did not start acquiring the popularity it currently has until it received a significant boost in popularity from the release of the fifth edition in 2014, the interest brought about by the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, reaching over 50 million players worldwide by 2024 (King par. 15). The game of *D&D* is entirely in book form, meaning that once it is sold to the public, it cannot be taken away.

This contrasts with Blizzard's *Hearthstone* and *Overwatch*, which are games meant to be played with multiple people entirely online as shown below where the spaces where the tournaments happen can vary from large internet cafes to large tournament stadiums.



Figure 37: Example of Hearthstone Gameplay



Figure 38: Hearthstone Tournament



Figure 39: Example of Overwatch Gameplay



Figure 40: Overwatch Tournament

In this manner, Blizzard has a degree of power to decide who is allowed to access their content. With *D&D*, however, once it is in the hands of the public, Wizards of the Coast has no control over what it is used for. As noted earlier on, Blizzard has the ability to directly combat their community over political matters, but Wizards of the Coast does not. The publisher is attached to their fan community and can only create the content that will be used in the game.

They have no authority governing how they use it. If the company were to go against the community, it would lose as it holds no power over their fan base.

This we have seen multiple times, as when Wizards of the Coast was publicly rebuked for the inclusion of the Hadozee race option in one of their book releases, *Spelljammer*, by many big names within the community (Jackson par. 6). The Hadozee are a simian-like race that had a lore similar to that of the transatlantic slave trade (Chancey par. 6). The scrutiny was met with edits to the book so that they no longer included the similarities, but the community has since lost a lot of respect for the company (Hall par. 7).

Instances like these show how the entities that hold the power of persuasion within the fanbase can leverage the community against Wizards of the Coast so that they make changes to the game based on their fans' scrutiny. These entities are the more influential players in the *D&D* fanbase that I refer to as influencers. Such names like Aabria Iyengar, Matthew Mercer, and Brennan Lee Mulligan are what would constitute as *D&D* influencers and, through them and their actions, the community comes into formation.

3.1.2 What Makes for an Effective Influencer?

The influencers have used the open-ended story potential, a staple in *D&D* and other TTRPGs, to advocate for diversity and freedom of identity ("Defeat Your Demons…"). By using the source material to build their platform, the influencers have developed their ethos within communities that are empowered by their identities like the disability and queer communities. The source material is, however, an adaptive process in the sense that it is constantly being built on for the sake of the audience (Keplinger par 6). In this manner, it shapes and is shaped by the fan community, and it all starts off with influencers finding ways to advocate for diversity in identity. In this sense, the advocacy for open-ended and flexible storytelling provides access to the greater TTRPG community disability-focused TTRPG content.

Looking at the virtues of the community, we can include a contextualization of virtue theory. In modern rhetoric, the development of feminist virtue theory has been advocated for. This being the situating of one's character regarding moral issues and the acknowledgement of the inseparability of the ethical and the political (Duffy et al. 322). This contextualization of the

game as both a moral influence and a political influence is heavily utilized by the influencers and is made so that they can have a common understanding and viewpoint with the *D&D* fan base.

Most of the time, these influencers are actors or voice actors that have built up their talent and charisma over a long career. However, it is not enough to be a compelling actor for the purposes of being an influencer within the *D&D* community. As Merideth Love notes, "While actors might have the freedom to express various characters, orators have a limited repertoire" (Love 228-229). Quintilian believes that effective ethos is developed from embodying the "good man", and in today's culture what constitutes a "good man" is based solely on the community. Within the queer communities the "good man" would promote and advocate gender diversity. This is what *D&D* influencers like Aabria Iyengar, Matthew Mercer, and Brennan Lee Mulligan embody and utilize well. By acknowledging the parts of the game that alienate specific people, the entirety of the community learns how to avoid it and make for a more diverse group mentality ("Building Your Own Campaign Setting…").



Figure 41: Cast of Critical Role



Figure 42: Cast of Dimension 20

Whenever someone like Brennan Lee Mulligan talks about accepting people and building a community, he is utilizing a type of persuasion that situates himself as the voice of reason to queer and disabled audiences that will observe him as a fair-minded individual. “Fair-minded” is a concept that Aristotle observes as a quality that makes the speaker worthy of credence. This bears no persuasive power in itself but allows the audience to observe the speaker as an authority on the matter which they discuss (Kennedy 38-39). Reports on Mulligan’s Dropout TV show, Dimension 20, talk about how, “Whether broaching topics of gender, sexuality, disabilities or mental health, Dimension 20 manages to handle these topics with respect, while representing these traits throughout many of the pivotal NPCs and characters” (M par. 4). Respectful discussions like these then allow influencers to be perceived as fair-minded people within the eyes of the community and they are then given the ethos to speak on behalf of the community that forms around the game (Edwards par 1-10).

The fandom of *D&D* itself resides mostly online, and it is this allowance of technology that is mainly responsible for its existence. The platforms provided by the internet on which the *D&D* communities reside are a space where the intersectionality between TTRPG gaming communities and the disability and queer communities can come together over a shared interest. I discuss this

at greater length in section 5.1 however, there are many sub-communities within the larger *D&D* community that is noted in Zappen's take on the "local communities of belief" (Zappen et al. 401) but the overarching idea is the shared contribution to the promotion of *D&D* for the purposes of advocating for diversity in identity. Through this medium, the influencers can engage with their audience at any time and, due to the permanence of videos online, are given the allowance to maintain their ethos between conversations without needing to rebuild it.

3.1.3 Reinventing the Appeal to *D&D*

Many factors went into *D&D* becoming the best-selling TTRPG, with over 18 million players in North America (Huber par. 10), including the diversity of character customization in this edition, the political stances of the influencers who played the game, and the new media outlets that were available at the time. The most important of these being the influencers that have developed their ethos through the game in a way that makes them more influential than Wizards of the Coast as a whole. The trend of this rise in influencer power can be seen starting in 2015 with the creation of Critical Role, the first *D&D* podcast to feature the star power of prominent voice actors. For the years to come after, many new *D&D* podcasts were created, and online fan communities were fostered to build the prominent and like-minded *D&D* fanbase it is today (Whitten par. 1-8). With this accumulation of social power around the influencers, the community behind *D&D* has effectively rebranded the game for the purposes of promoting identity politics and Wizards of the Coast has made attempts to comply to its new audience, albeit with several oversights along the way. The fan base then accumulates through a combination of the influencers drawing them in and making it seem appealing and the source material that is aimed at their demographic. With the inclusion of different means of representation, this style of play became very appealing to those whose identities empower them (Hernandez par. 3-5; Silverman par. 14-16). This empowerment is a victory of sorts against a society that is not always favorable to the diversity that goes against heteronormativity.

Over the past two decades, an abundance of video games and movies have been released with the main character being the straight white protagonist making people who do not identify with him feel alienated ("Queer Theory: You Should Play Dungeons & Dragons"). So, for them to have an outlet to create their own stories with their own characters that can be used as an

extension of their identity, is a victory for people who are heavily invested in queer identity and diversity. Aristotle notes in *On Rhetoric*, that the character of the young "love victory…for youth longs for superiority and victory is a kind of superiority" (Kennedy 149-150). With this sense of superiority, the concept of freedom of expression in *D&D* is the appeal that the majority of the younger audience is drawn in by. This is one of the ways that young people can combat an older generation that has essentially been in control for their whole lives.

Since the modern generation has begun to look upon diversity in identity more favorably, the changes made within the game have been readily embraced by them. While previous editions of *D&D* were less developed and fit the stereotype that it has become known by, the game was still tailored for the previous generations, whereas we see more meaning placed in the fifth edition (D'Anastasio par. 4). In this way, the game of *D&D* as it has been revised appeals strongly to the queer communities as people who hold a lot of value in their own identity, as I discuss further in section 4.1.

3.1.4 Summary

To summarize, the community grows due to the appeal of freedom of identity that the game has to offer. The influencers advocate for and perpetuate this freedom in both how they create stories for queer and disabled characters and provide a game space where queer and disabled individuals can craft their own stories through self-identification with the character (Zeoli par. 8-13). In this regard, they empower the queer and disability fanbase of *D&D* while giving Wizards of the Coast the knowledge of what the players are looking for in their source material. The company has limited political power in this situation as it now adheres to the wants of the fanbase to maintain economic prosperity. In this sense Wizards of the Coast has much more perceived power than Blizzard, but it does not have to act as the gatekeeper for its material as the influencers already act as such for them. In this way the influencers have claimed their authority over identity politics within the game of *D&D* and the community is run and mitigated by the people, not the company.

Now that we have observed how the rhetorical power has been developed in the TTRPG community by the players, I move on to my object text analysis of disability themed TTRPGs. This will provide us with concrete examples to draw from regarding best practices for designing

for disability justice as well as affordances provided by TTRPG media for the players agency in crafting their desired disability story.

3.2 Object Text Analysis

Disability scholarship has long been in contention with pejorative depictions of disability culture brought about by early academia's employment of the medical model. The medical model portrays disability undesirably, as a shortcoming or tragedy, seeking to cure or eradicate disability, making everyone able-bodied and minded (Ellis 22; Price 164). This ableist propagation leads to people fearing disability, perceiving it as an innate shortcoming (Ware 190-191). The medical model's perseverance necessitates academic multimedia interventions to combat these pejorative ideas.

Intersections of disability and media have been crucial in cultivating communities of understanding around disability culture and its representation (Ellis 3), and progressive disability narratives in modern television demystify the stigma around ableist preconceptions (68). By creating new conversations around cultural media, we afford disability studies an abundance of interdisciplinary approaches (Ware xiv).

As a younger discipline, game studies provides disability studies with an abundance of approaches to gaming media (Anderson and Schrier 181; Gibbons 35). This includes work on game design and narrative but also interdisciplinary research observing academic gaps that intersect with areas like queer and performance studies. In this manner, the disability game studies intersection affords scholars the means to critique and deconstruct harmful approaches being applied in gaming media while informing game developers of more constructive game design practices (Gibbons 31).

In this chapter, I analyse the three object texts that I used in my ethnography, *Chronic Migraine Mechanics For 5e, Inspirisles,* and *Survival of the Able*, to further convey the room that disability has for representation and activism in TTRPGs. I chose these as examples because they are diverse enough to cover a wide range design intentions, mechanics, positionalities, and play styles. I observe *Chronic Migraine Mechanics For 5e*, separately from the other two object texts in my comparison as it is more directly linked to *D&D* and functions less as its own game and more like an inclusion for *D&D*.

To start, my overview of multidisciplinary disability studies conveys how disability is often demonized or avoided in games as an unnecessary disadvantage followed the disability game studies scholars I discuss in my literature review. In contrast, the allowances provided from *Chronic Migraine Mechanics For 5e,* convey a personal experience as a means of storytelling, while *Inspirisles* and *Survival of the Able* hold diverse considerations and approaches for the intentions set for their design.

Object Text	Author Positionality	Core Mechanic	Disability Representational Approach	Rhetorical Goal	Risks/Limitations
Chronic Migraine Mechanics	Embodied knowledge with disability themes in question.	Migraines being depicted through story as a *D&D* 5e feat of the character with both positives and drawbacks.	Flexible affordances for diverse migraine experiences.	Representational practice for those with chronic migraines.	May impede character in the combat-oriented game system of *D&D*.
Inspirisles	Engaged community practice with disability themes in question.	Sign language used to cast spells with specific elements.	Allowances for open storytelling approaches without imposing representation.	Indirect Deaf community engagement through learning of sign language.	While inclusive, does not do anything directly to provide representation in TTRPG narratives.
Survival of the Able	Embodied knowledge with one, blindness, of a variety of disability themes in question.	A varying spectrum of sensory and mobility impairments as navigation mechanics of characters	Direct attempt to simulate varying degrees of disability by both abled and disabled players.	Understanding of necessity for modern day technology and disability policies.	Set up makes for a pre-disposition towards narratives of pity, replicating view of disability as personal shortcomings.

Table 1: Disability Themed TTRPG Content Overview

3.2.1 Bringing our Fear of Failure into TTRPG Systems

The origins of game studies are such that the foundations of the discipline support the views of able-bodied neurotypical cisgender heterosexual white males, leaving "marginalized scholars frequently feel[ing] unwelcome and uncomfortable in the field" (Phillips 12). The initial lack of diversity within the field has allowed the field to navigate to concepts of productivity in line with ableist ideals as opposed to greater cultural and political science orientations that can be observed. Queer game studies has been the umbrella sub-field, incorporating greater diversity in how we approach the field of game studies for progressive narrative and game mechanic purposes.

That being said, while still underrepresented in most areas, it continues to be more common to find the inclusion of other diverse identities in TTRPGs than it is to see examples of disability in games. In part, this is due to the fact that marginalized identities that don't intersect with disability don't requiring mechanical considerations when it comes to their inclusion. A character who is a queer woman of colour can be mechanically designed to swing a sword the same way as any other character, so long as they are considered able-bodied and minded. When it comes to considering a character with a disability, the game designers and the players trying to tell stories of disability are left with the complication of portraying disability accurately while being respectful.

A character with one arm or a character who is in a wheelchair is not going to be able to fight or navigate the game world the same way as an able-bodied character. In a similar sense, as was brought up during my ethnographic TTRPG design workshop, a character with autism or ADHD would not be thinking the same way as the players would or the way the players would pretend to. As mentioned in section 2.1, it is often the case that players struggle to portray any form of the lived reality of people with these identities, especially if they do not share their identities.

While there are problematic means of fetishizing disability, like tropes of the one-armed swordsman or the blind monk, they can't represent the reality of many who embody these identities. This is especially so when they are not being negatively impacted by the disability in the same manner a real-life person would be if the players choose to forgo the mechanical and narrative drawbacks. In these cases, we replicate Jerreat-Poole's conception of the "supercrip" (par. 6-8). On the other hand, if their disability is foregrounded as a tragedy then the identity is looked at as an unfavorable existence. Then we come back to the sentiment of failure. If the goal of the game is for the character to do something where the disability or the ways that the environment disables the character get in the way then we might again experience the fear of failure by playing characters with disabilities (Carr "Ability, Disability and Dead Space" par. 3-8).

Many TTRPGs, like *D&D*, have gone so far as to incorporate magic or technology in ways that circumvent disability entirely (Joyal 6). While there are monsters and special weapons that are specifically designed to leave permanent damage to the body of the character, i.e. blinding

them, deafening them, or removing limbs; there are many means of healing and prosthetic replacements that undercut any long-term disability that might impede the character's ability to adventure.

For healing, if the party has access to healing spells, they will most likely be able to cast the spell called "lesser restoration." "Lesser restoration" is a low-level spell that "can end either one disease or one condition afflicting [a creature]. The condition can be blinded, deafened, paralyzed, or poisoned" (Mearls and Crawford 255). So, at level 3, a relatively low level for a *D&D* character, we have a high-grade medical model cure for a large population of disability community members in our world. At a higher level, there is the spell "regenerate" which makes it so that, "[A creature's] severed body members (fingers, legs, tails, and so on), if any, are restored after 2 minutes. If you have the severed part and hold it to the stump, the spell instantaneously causes the limb to knit to the stump" (Mearls and Crawford 271).



Figure 43: Illustration of Magically Regrowing a Limb

These abilities allow for any physical disability to be effectively "cured," letting the characters reclaim a natural and able-body, without much of exertion on the part of the player's character.

However, not every adventuring party is going to have access to these spells with ease, so *D&D* included some cost-effective options for characters to adventure with able-bodies.

As an example of this, in the fifth edition *D&D* supplement *Eberron: Rising from the Last War*, they introduced the magical/technological item called “Prosthetic Limb.”



Figure 44: Illustration of a Magical Prosthetic Arm

Under the description of the item it says, “This item replaces a lost limb a hand, an arm, a foot, a leg, or a similar body part. While the prosthetic is attached, it functions identically to the part it replaces. You can detach or reattach it as an action, and it can't be removed against your will. It detaches if you die” (Crawford et al. 278). The fact that it functions identically to the body part it is replacing ignores the need for more intricate mechanics that might better convey the embodied experience of someone with a prosthetic limb in the real world. This makes it so that if the PCs do not have the abilities to heal or regrow limbs, this is a more cost-effective means of being able to regain an able-body. Jay Dolmage puts the transhumanistic nature of this concept best by saying,

> The idea of a relationship with the world mediated by technology might be acceptable, but the idea of the incorporation of technology as part of this process is less easily accepted. We resist the idea that we may allow technologies to trespass beyond the boundaries of our bodies; we will not admit that we all extend ourselves through our relationships with others and our use of tools. We will not admit that our knowing of the world is fragmented because our knowing of our bodies and therefore ourselves is fragmented—or, rather, relies on constant augmentation." (Dolmage 110)

In this sense, we must ask "Why are disabled individuals/characters expected to take on this kind of technological augmentation for themselves when abled individuals don't need to?" Especially when a robot arm can be stronger and more efficient than a natural human arm.

To that end, not only is disability identity unnecessary in TTRPGs, but it is also actively discouraged by the disadvantages the game system will impose on you if you dare try playing the game with anything other than an able-bodied character. A deaf or blind character is given disadvantages to perceiving their environment and their enemies, a one-armed character is restricted to the use of a single one-handed weapon or shield at a time, and a character with a disease that needs to be cured by magic has a range of disadvantages and pain that afflicts them until they are. As noted in my ethnography, to play a disability in the game of *D&D*, and to some extent, all TTRPGs, is to either have them cured or have their restrictive mechanics ignored lest we be punished by the rules of the game as they are written.

When it comes to mental disabilities, the games usually make it out to be horror or a joke. The rules of *D&D* only have mental disabilities as a type of madness shown through the players' capacity to roleplay it. If a character goes through a horrific event, like looking at a wall of flesh; a creature designed to inflict insanity, they will gain a madness which is randomly decided by rolling dice, and the madness they get can range from kleptomania to varying degrees of schizophrenia. These too can be magically cured or wear off after a couple of weeks in the game. However, the madnesses are usually meant to be an annoyance to the rest of the group as it will impede the party's progress or get the players in trouble with the local town or the law. In all my years of playing TTRPGs, this has only ever been played off as a joke or a downright tragedy. It being a joke makes it less annoying to the other players and more entertaining but it being a

tragedy reinforces stereotypical depictions for the group (Jung "Using TTRPGs to change the narratives around Autism," par. 3). All of this is further reflected in the disability game studies academic intersection.

3.2.2 Disability in Game Studies

"…the majority of the work on gaming and disability comes in the form of research on games' utility as medical or therapeutic interventions" (Anderson and Schrier 191). Meaning, little work has been done in game studies regarding disability representation or awareness and scholarship approaching disability game studies critically, Carr, Jerreat-Poole, and Gibbons, can be considered outliers. A concern for disability game studies scholars is that narrative designs for many popular video games do not help portray disability favourably (Carr, "Ability, Disability and Dead Space" par. 3). While "cripping strategies" can be employed to derive progressive readings from these narratives (Jerreat-Poole par. 3), greater and more purposeful inclusion of disability is ideal (Gibbons 30). As such, I observe these scholars to better inform my observations for the object texts.

Concerning the video game *Dead Space*, Carr posits how able-bodies are depicted as desirable and necessary for survival while disabled bodies are presented as a contaminant, a threat, and something to be avoided at all costs ("Ability, Disability and Dead Space" par. 29). Through these narratives, disability communities are associated with ableist perceptions put forward by the medical model (Connor 211). Applying disability theory to the practice of play, as a frame of criticism ("Bodies That Count" 423), the disability game studies intersection can "problematize clinical perspectives within game studies, and to help make visible the extent to which [ableist ideologies] … depend on the abjectification of disability" ("Bodies That Count" 425).

Regarding this criticism, Jerreat-Poole employs strategies, like "crip negotiation," to decenter the focus gaming media has on able-bodied characters, deriving alternative readings from them. "Crip negotiation" focuses on navigating the gaming media from a perspective opposing ableist readings while "…uncovering productive moments of tension and discomfort that disrupt the smooth story of hyper-able bodies performing extraordinary feats…" (par. 3).

Concerning the videogame *Mass Effect*, Jerreat-Poole uses crip negotiation to access an alternative reading of a physically disabled character by the name of Joker. While disability has not been made the sole aspect of his personality, Joker has been heavily impacted by an ableist society's criticism of his body (par. 17). Pity or observing the creators as positioning disability as inferior, might be an initial response to this character. However, with "crip negotiation," Jerreat-Poole affords nuance where, despite his body being slower than other characters, the game does not position Joker as inferior regarding his character value. His mechanically positioned shortcomings bring in real-world experiences, like the want to not use crutches all the time or the defensiveness he initially meets the PC with when he thinks he is being evaluated. So, even though he is being marginalized within the world of the game and the game's mechanics show his movements being comparatively slower, there is a degree of realism being portrayed with how disabled bodies are devalued and critiqued within our society by ableist standards.

Moving to design intentions, Gibbons proposes we address the abundance of problematic depictions of disability by creating games with the intention to benefit the disability communities. Concerning disability representation, these alternatives would ideally hold "a nuanced exploration of the expressive power of autobiographical games" (30), to humanize disabled individuals rather than positioning them as needing rehabilitation. Ideally, the game space would accommodate and normalize disability practices and values, opposing ableist ideologies, and allow for self-exploration. Though, there are instances where indie creators have taken that task upon themselves to tell their own story.

3.2.3 Personal Narratives Depicted in TTRPG Game Mechanics

While no greater steps have been taken by Wizards of the Coast, as of late, to incorporate more nuanced mechanics for mental disability, as observed in my ethnography, some fans of the game have gone so far as to create their own homebrew mechanics, based on their personal experience, which they invite players to use. Cat Elm created *D&D 5e* homebrew mechanics for chronic migraines based on their experience and while it does impose disadvantages, it provided further roleplay notes to assist players trying to convey the reality of a migraine (Elm 2-9).

For instance, upon creation of the character, they encourage the player to decide on the: regularity of migraine attacks; migraine triggers; migraine auras, as in the symptoms leading up

to migraines like fatigue; length of migraine auras and migraine attacks; severity of migraine attack; and the medication that can be taken to alleviate symptoms (Elm 2). Additionally, they provide mechanic deficits for the symptoms with mood swings, tiredness, and difficulty speaking giving the character disadvantage on charisma-based checks; sensory sensitivity, and disrupted vision giving the character disadvantage on perception and investigation checks; stiffness and joint pain, tingling or numbness giving the character disadvantage on dexterity-based checks; and constipation or diarrhea, and nausea giving the character disadvantage on constitution checks and saving throws (Elm 4).

In addition to the more bitter realities of someone living with chronic migraines, they have also gone so far as to leave room for grace mechanically, showing how the embodied knowledge of having chronic migraines provides certain feats,

"Your migraines cause pain and disruption in your life, but you have also gained some skills from your experiences.

- Your Constitution score is increased by +1

You also gain one feat from those described below. If you already have proficiency in one of the skills described, you may double your proficiency bonus for that skill:

Fortified Mind

Through your migraines you have grown somewhat used to pain and discomfort. You gain proficiency in Constitution saving throws and resistance to psychic damage.

Self-Advocate

You're well versed in advocating for yourself and your medical needs. You gain +1 to your Charisma score and expertise in Persuasion and Intimidation.

Self-Medication

You have learned which herbs help your migraines and how to use them. You gain proficiency in Nature and may double your proficiency bonus when making a check to identify plants. You also gain proficiency with the Herbalism Kit. You may use the kit to create a herbal draught (see

Medicines), given 1 day in creation time, and provided you are able to forage for or buy the common herbs needed." (Elm 5)

Of course, these mechanics are based on the author's own experiences so they will not cover every experience individuals have with chronic migraines, and they are transparent with this fact (Elm 2). However, this is a first step towards the personalization of a TTRPG character for disability representation without the need to see the disability as a complete detriment to the experience of play. So, to further introduce disability mechanics into the world of TTRPGs we must re-establish the sense of failure that deters them to begin with.

In terms of character game mechanics, disability does not need to be represented solely with negative attributes. Just like in Elm's example of chronic migraines, there is embodied knowledge that comes with how individuals navigate their reality. In Elm's example, she has provided positive bonuses to the characters through learned self-advocacy and mental fortitude. Instead of focusing on what are positive or negative traits of our disabilities, we can look at the embodied knowledge that comes with them and present them as a product of personal experience rather than a static state of being. To this end, ADHD comes with both memory issues and expertise in specific subjects, autism comes with sensory overload and pattern recognition, deaf culture comes with a varying level of disconnection from the sense of sound and an entirely different means of non-verbal communication inaccessible to those who don't learn the language.

Bringing it a step further we might look at able-bodies and minds similarly. A character perceived as able-bodied might come with greater ease navigating a world that is designed for them and greater difficulty in understanding their own body's needs or navigating the medical system. A character perceived as able-minded might come with mental faculties that can accommodate them in stressful situations but might not be imaginative regarding hypothetical scenarios or lateral thinking. Despite these practices not being as prevalent as some more mainstream game studies methodologies, Gibbons notes how "…critical efforts to make disability a part of gaming can also echo the existing work scholars, players and developers have begun with respect to fostering greater inclusion and representation of diversity" (30), as was exemplified in my earlier review of *Teleneuro*.

To this end, the embodied knowledge of abled and disabled individuals alike is held transparently for the players to investigate through the narrative that plays out in the game. To be clear, I am not suggesting we put positive spins on disabilities but rather that if we are to represent disability it should be the case that we investigate the reality of them in their entirety alongside what the assumed able-bodied and minded norm is and question what context makes us see them as more or less favourable. This will help us question why we see one embodiment as a failure while another is a success, or at least not a failure.

3.2.4 Governing Experience of Success

I now attend to two aspects of the TTRPG play that will be crucial for representing disability in TTRPGs. These being the narrative and the mechanics of the game. It is wherein these aspects reflect and promote failure that TTRPGs hold a unique sense of agency and pre-determination.

In terms of narrative, TTRPGs have their own pre-ordained narrative structure. In many cases, the narrative is being written through play, but when it comes to the foundation on which the world; the campaign, or the backgrounds of the characters are set; there is already an extensive story being told that can be researched and has been written, either by the GM or the author of the setting. In *D&D*'s case, the setting is called the Forgotten Realms and has been written in great detail by Ed Greenwood. As such, the pre-set aspects of the game can be observed in a similar capacity to that of a novel or film and have a great deal of context to provide the characters within the game that is being played.

On the other hand, interactive mechanics are being employed by the players and allowing them to experience the narrative. This is not unsubstantiated as, especially in TTRPGs, the mechanics have a large impact of the player's experience and in-game choices. Two games with the same beat-for-beat narrative will feel drastically different depending on the divergence of the way they are played. Any TTRPG system could in theory host the story of any other TTRPG system but depending on how different the magic systems are, how easy it is to deal damage, or even how complex the persuasion mechanics are there is going to be a distinct experience that is provided to one player over another.

To this end, it is often the case that game developers take both the narrative and the mechanics into account when they are considering the experience that the game should provide the player with. Dark fantasy TTRPGs like *Symbaroum* or *Warhammer Fantasy* are designed to make the player's struggle for their victories and never feel truly powerful.

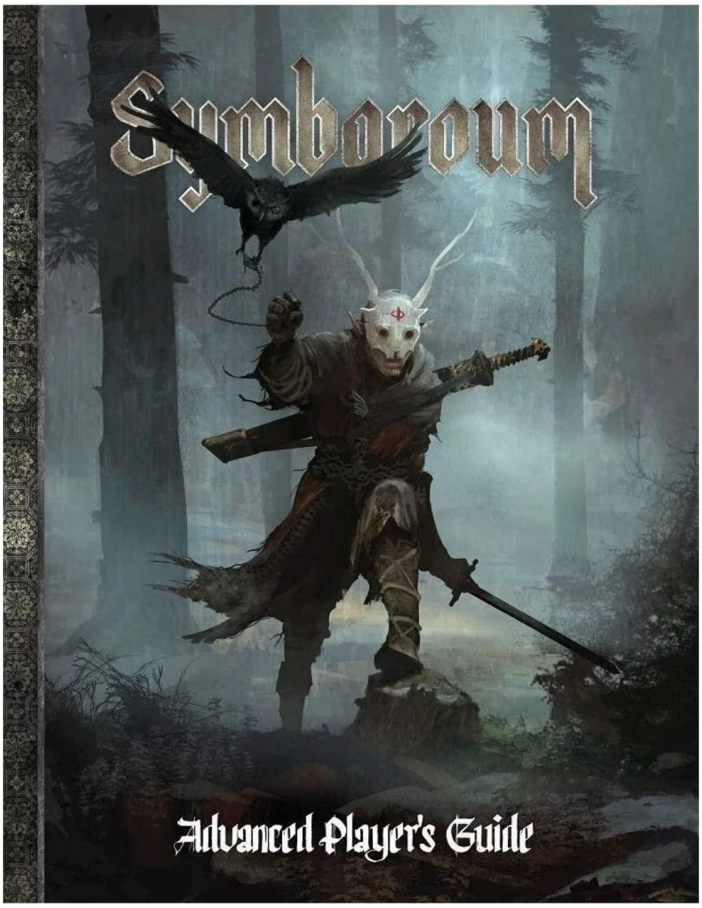


Figure 45: Symbaroum Cover



Figure 46: Dark Elves in Warhammer: Fantasy

The above images show the grimdark nature of their game and help to establish early on that these games take place in a dark world where your characters are never truly safe. *Symbaroum*'s cover depicts a lone figure with a white mast with antlers running through a dark forest and the *Warhammer: Fantasy* image depicts dark elves in black armor with one holding the severed head of a high elf.

The systems themselves make it easy for the players to lose. For example, *Symbaroum* does not give their PCs more than a maximum of 18 health with dragons that do 30+ damage in one of their four attacks. Whereas high fantasy TTRPGs like *D&D* make it harder to die and provide the PCs with a variety of abilities to make them feel more in control of their destiny. In *D&D*, average people have 10 health but PCs often surpass that by level two of twenty.

In his book, Juul reasons that the gratification we take in our in-game accomplishments stems from our appreciation of the innate fairness built into a "good" game's design (7). While success is never a guarantee in reality, there is always a chance for success in typical gaming media as it is expected to be part of the design. And while failure is undesirable, it is not observed as an unjust outcome because an in-game failure never results in a permanent failure for that game. Unlike reality, there are always opportunities to try again with the same, if not improved,

chances for success (60). Games that simulate reality and guarantee a chance for success are then a key media site for marginalized individuals to take part in their own self-actualization through performance and educate players on social and political issues they face (Wonica 45-47). Although, there are artistic opportunities in the design of a game that might requalify the success and failure conditions, as in queer failure.

So, to craft our illustrations of queer failure in the realm of disability advocacy and representation in games, the societal failure and the reality of disability portrayed needs to be something that comes about with both narratives and mechanics in mind.

3.2.4.1 Disability Game Mechanics

In terms of character game mechanics, disability does not need to be represented solely with negative attributes. There is embodied knowledge that comes with how individuals navigate their reality. In Elm's example, she has provided positive bonuses to the characters through learned self-advocacy and mental fortitude. Instead of focusing on what are positive or negative traits of our disabilities, we can look at the embodied knowledge that comes with them and present them as a product of personal experience rather than a static state of being. To this end, ADHD comes with both memory issues and expertise in specific subjects, autism comes with sensory overload and pattern recognition, deaf culture comes with a varying level of disconnection from the sense of sound and an entirely different means of non-verbal communication inaccessible to those who don't learn the language.

Bringing it a step further we might look at able-bodies and minds similarly. A character perceived as able-bodied might come with greater ease navigating a world that is designed for them and greater difficulty in understanding their own body's needs or navigating the medical system. A character perceived as able-minded might come with mental faculties that can accommodate them in stressful situations but might not be imaginative regarding hypothetical scenarios or lateral thinking.

To this end, the embodied knowledge of abled and disabled individuals alike is held transparently for the players to investigate through the narrative that plays out in the game. To be clear, I am not suggesting we put positive spins on disabilities but rather that if we are to

represent disability it should be the case that we investigate the reality of them in their entirety alongside what the assumed able-bodied and minded norm is and question what context makes us see them as more or less favourable. This will help us question why we see one embodiment as a failure while another is a success, or at least not a failure.

3.2.4.2 Narrative Failure

The narrative can then be used to compliment the character's game mechanics in apply queer failure. To begin with, questions regarding lore can provide the context of reasoning that went into environmental and societal designs for the narrative. These might be: Why are the buildings in certain areas of the city not wheelchair accessible and not have elevators? What are the magical or technological limits of facilitating disability? What is the historical precedent for support animals? Why does it cost so much to pay for pain relieving or quality of life-improving medication? What does this medication actually do? How is it supplied? How neurodivergence observed in this world? Are certain disabilities neglected? What forms of disability justice are there in this world? How do different cultures react/engage with certain disabilities?

Here we can draw from Juul's conception of fictional failure to deliberately observe instances of our real-world societal failure within the TTRPG world. To this end, the players might investigate the strengths and shortcomings of how their character's disability is accommodated in a fictional world while comparing it to our own. If we observe disability being accommodated better in the fictional world then that speaks to society's failure to accommodate in the real world and might give inspiration for change in the future. However, that is not the queer failure we mean to make rhetorical space for. Rather, there is particular interest in observing examples of character or narrative failure brought about by a lack of accommodation for disabilities that mirrors real life.

In these instances, we can see queer failure in terms of disabled individuals not being properly supported to meet the ableist standards our society is ingraining in us. This might look like the villain sneaking past the hero because they are near-sighted, and glasses were not covered by their health insurance plan. Or perhaps the castle was not wheelchair accessible, so characters were late to a meeting with the king because they took more time to carry their paraplegic party member up the stairs. These stories are without magic or mechanical enhancements and reflect

the reality of disability politics while positioning the society and environment as the entities creating these shortcomings as opposed to making it out to be a problem for the individual to solve on their own.

There is a plethora of angles that we can approach these stories from and, because I can't give an exhaustive list of every individual disability need, disability justice advocates can begin this gaming intervention by putting themselves in these narratives, disabled or other. TTRPG media allows participants to engage with its content similarly to how other performative media does, either by passively spectating or actively performing themselves. However, where many instances of performative media, like traditional theatre, need to occur at a set location within a pre-determined timeslot, TTRPGs can be accessed virtually anywhere for as much time as the participants require. TTRPGs can also accommodate as many interruptions as needed and can provide the participants with opportunities for learning and critical reflection (Daniau 426-427). In this manner, the TTRPG medium is more accessible to players with disabilities compared to other similarly beneficial performances (435).

In the following subsection, I apply performance studies scholarship to my other object texts, *Inspirisles* and *Survival of the Able*, and convey how they are designed with opportunities for learning and critical reflection concerning disability communities and their social issues respectively. As a discipline often seeking to foster greater inclusion and representation of diversity, performance studies will fill the research gap in disability game studies to further consolidate how TTRPG media affordances can provide players with the agency to enact their own narratives geared towards disability justice.

3.2.5 Analysis of Disability Themes in TTRPGs

I now give a rundown of *Inspirisles* and *Survival of the Able*, and examine them separately from each other alongside performance studies theorists that provide further rhetorical context to the performance they take part in. Stéphane Daniau and Sarah Lynne Bowman discuss the diverse means by which RPGs can be designed and for what purposes they can be employed. As such, I will be drawing on them briefly to explain the intended applications of certain design choices in RPG media. Here I also convey the capacity that performance studies methodologies have to be employed in gaming media, for criticism and representational practices, in service of marginalized communities.

To summarize, *Inspirisles* is an open-ended TTRPG design, set in an original fantasy world, where the mechanics are the dominant deviation from traditional TTRPGs. In this game, the players are assigned an element chosen from water, fire, earth, or air, and they overcome obstacles, throughout their adventure, by magically and creatively controlling their element using American Sign Language (ASL) or British Sign Language (BSL).

Comparatively, *Survival of the Able* provides more focus on disability themes through the setting itself attempting to simulate the reality of disabled characters trying to survive the simultaneous occurrences of the bubonic plague and zombie apocalypse in medieval Europe. PCs are varying degrees of deaf, blind, or physically impaired which is reflected through game mechanics with certain actions or perceptions being more difficult or impossible.

Concerning the scholarly conversation, *Inspirisles* emulates Gibbons' suggested practices of navigating and building community. Additionally, *Inspirisles*, being an education RPG (Edu-RPG) as defined by Daniau, also demonstrates Jill Dolan's utopian performative with an inclusive involvement of Deaf culture, understood by Jackie Leach Scully.

Survival of the Able demonstrates creative affordances and attempting to emulate realism by employing simulation similar to Scott Magelssen's simming, which I apply to Bree Hadley's considerations for disability performance. However, it brings forward shortcomings in its design worthy of Carr's critique regarding undesirable depictions of disabled bodies, making room for crip negotiation.

My analysis focuses on specific components of each TTRPG and contrast them with one another. I observe these games concerning 1) design intentions, 2) contextualization of disability for intended play experiences, 3) how they invite player to engage with disability topics, 4) combat mechanics challenging TTRPG design norms, and 5) their inclusion of disabled voices.

3.2.5.1 Design Intentions

As I alluded to, *Inspirisles* is intended to promote Deaf awareness and inclusive storytelling opportunities for the deaf community (Waldman par. 2). It achieves this by incorporating ASL and BSL into the game mechanics governing how magic is used as well as providing background information about the Deaf community. This emulates Gibbons' conception of accepting game spaces, creating awareness for disability culture and social issues (35), as the players are actively encouraged to learn ASL and/or BSL to cast spells and advance to stronger spells, through character progression.

The physical actions taken, like facial expressions, gestures, sign language, and other forms of communication built into the game, are not intended to simulate deafness. This is relevant as Gibbons observes the simulation of disability as problematic, increasing stigma around said disability (29). Rather, the game promotes players' engagement with the language used in Deaf culture, like instructors employing the learning of cultural practices when teaching students a new language. In turn, game designers approaching their media with open-ended educational intentions like this help to deconstruct disabling architecture and ableist viewpoints while enabling a more constructive approach to disability issues (Gibbons 30).

In contrast, *Survival of the Able* inspires reflection by directly drawing attention to accessibility barriers to challenge ableist assumptions. With realism and difficulties imposed on the players in *Survival of the Able*, the game functions similarly to the immersive performance studies format known as simming. Simming, as embodied progression through designed scenarios, uses practices from performance and theatre to design spaces where narratives are played out to give an understanding of a specific contextualized experience to the actors and audience (Magelssen 3). Likewise, *Survival of the Able* sets up a context in the theatre of the mind to play out a narrative for the lived experience of disabled individuals in the 1300s. According to Magelssen, this instance would be a "simming of witness," where the design goal

is to bring attention to the individuals who suffered a past or present injustice or trauma through a compelling use of the narrative (14).

However, the most immediate intention for *Survival of the Able* is to induce discomfort, often the primary aspect of certain art pieces. Magelssen makes note of how discomfort or anxiety felt by the actors can be used productively to create conflict and controversy (43-44). Social and political insight evoked in the players would be an understanding of how civil rights laws and technologies have developed, since the 1300s, by subjecting them to the struggles of a world devoid of them. Ideally, just as other games foster retrospection (Bertolo et al. 290), considerations for how we can better accommodate accessibility needs and demonstrate necessity for accessibility affordances to continue being developed is imposed on the players for further real-world activism.

3.2.5.2 Contextualizing the Game for Disability Themes

Sign language is at the core of *Inspirisles*, as it is the key mechanic used to facilitate the magic system of the game. As such, the rulebook provides a guide to learning sign language alongside additional information regarding how members of the Deaf community identify themselves and communicate. This supplementary and contextual information helps to educate the players on, and expose them to, Deaf culture. Such information includes but is not limited to: distinguishing the identity of being Deaf from the medical diagnoses of deafness; discussing how Deaf identity can range from hard of hearing (HOH) to a dual sensory loss of someone who is Deafblind; tips on how to sign with the dominant hand; and best practices for fingerspelling accompanied by illustrations. As shown in the image below, the source material of the game illustrates the actions of speaking specific words, like “name, hello/goodbye, and how are you? (well?).”



Figure 47: Inspirisles Sign Language Directions

Due to how it employs the use of sign language, Daniau would characterize this TTRPG as an Edu-RPG because of how it: 1) positions itself for non-Deaf individuals to learn the basic sign language mechanics while engaging with the deaf culture; and 2) "bring[s] in predefined educational goals…and invite[s] players to learn and develop themselves through playing" (425). To exemplify how *Inspirisles* aligns with the idea of a Deaf awareness-focused Edu-RPG, Maryanne Cullinan and Laura Wood implemented the game in a class of middle school students. Not only did the students report an increased aptitude for sign language and a greater sense of connection to the affinity groups they formed while learning this method of communication, but the researchers also noted that the "...students walked away with a better appreciation of not only ASL and the Deaf community, but also for the value of learning any second language" (277).

In this sense, the ASL they engaged with allowed the students to approach the game as though they were learning another language. So, while the students did not engage with the Deaf community directly, they received a participatory introduction to the culture in terms of the intersectional identities within it as well as the predominant means of communication. This is not a solution to the need for Deaf awareness in and of itself. However, as the players now have a rudimentary means of communication with Deaf culture, it could very well be an invitation to these students for future engagement with the Deaf community producing greater dialogue and

awareness in the future. Speculatively, if this were applied more purposefully, it could aid in eventually bringing about societal change in favour of the Deaf community.

In contrast, *Survival of the Able* contextualizes itself for disability themes through the depiction of struggle and hardships for disability identity. The game is situated "in Western Europe circa 1347 A.D. because [the game designers] wanted to put [players] into a world where people with disabilities (PWDs) have few protections. There are no civil rights laws to ensure equal rights and fair treatment for PWDs, and most people perceived PWDs to be weak, if not helpless" (Wood 10). The era of the game also has no modern-day technology, to provide relief to the characters, for a sense of historical realism. While there are mechanical difficulties associated with the actions taken by deaf, blind, or physically impaired characters, shown as a spectrum of ability and disability (Meehan par. 5), they also have anxiety triggers related to their disability adding to their stress, making roleplay a vital aspect of the game. As such, disability performance is an area of consideration for discussing this game's design.

Regarding the enactment of roles, through "restored behaviour," Hadley considers every instance of a person with disabilities entering a performance space to be an intervention of societal assumptions about disability (182). However, she is also rightfully concerned with non-disabled artists appropriating disability art and culture for the purposes of creating self-determined positive symbolism which presents disability more digestibly to audiences, neglecting "the realities of (pain and impairment that are part of) being disabled" (Hadley 152). In line with these realities of impairment, Wood's design illustrates how disability is a spectrum by making it so the "Player characters do not have specific physical attributes, instead, they have scales on each of the five senses" (Meehan par. 5), ranging from degrees of abled to disabled. To some degree, *Teleneuro* does this as well, however the intention is for the players to design their own disability from real life as opposed to having neurotypical players play out a mental disability. So, regarding positioning for disability depictions, I consider how both games invite the players to create and portray their in-game characters.

3.2.5.3 Inviting the Players to Perform

Playing off this contextualization, *Inspirisles* is very open-ended in how it invites the player to take on the role of their character. The main guidelines are, "Pick a **Name** & **Pronouns**; Pick a **Friend** & **Home**; Pick a **Patron** & **Element**; [and] Pick a **Hobby**" (Oxenham 42). With very few guidelines on how to depict their character, the players are free to do whatever they feel most comfortable with. As disability representation is not the main focus of this TTRPG, the guidelines are free to be as loose as they desire, provided everyone is respectful.

The social context set for the players allows for a type of utopian experience which challenges our preconceived notions of utopia. Dolan discusses utopia, not as a construction of reality, but as a cultural production evoking feelings and sensibilities of idealism through performance, what she calls the "utopian performative" (460). In this manner, we can see it prompting individual and social change (Muñoz 28). Relating it back to game studies, it has been noted how the enactment of particular values and behaviours can be experienced by players through their characters, when they are given the freedom to explore how they fail or succeed in the actions they take (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 31), an opportunity not often afforded to disabled individuals. Miguel Sicart discusses play as a part of our moral being. In this manner, roleplay can afford us crucial insight in how we experience and navigate the world with the use of roleplay characters to assist us as a lens (9; 24). He identifies the benefit of this practice of play as providing freedom from moral conventions in the real world that would otherwise constrict or restrain one's presentation of identity (5; 30). *Inspirisles* affords utopian performativity as its design makes sign language out to be a central aspect of the game just as it is a central aspect of Deaf culture. Within this game system's design, sign language, a practice often taken for granted (Scully 147), is how the player employs the game's magic mechanics, giving it a sense of importance in the game world. This reflects reality for the Deaf community as sign language plays a central role in their communication, echoing an identical sense of importance within Deaf culture. By emphasizing the necessity of sign language, the game depicts a setting more ideal than our own reality for members of the Deaf community to inhabit alongside players who are willing to learn sign language for the purposes of play. In a game setting where all the players know, or are learning, sign language, the barriers to accessing communication are significantly

reduced and tolerance and inclusion of deaf or HOH individuals is encouraged (Cullinan and Wood 268), invoking a more accepting reality where they are free to communicate in the manner they are most comfortable with. This allows for navigating the game to be made more hospitable and less stressful for members of the Deaf community.

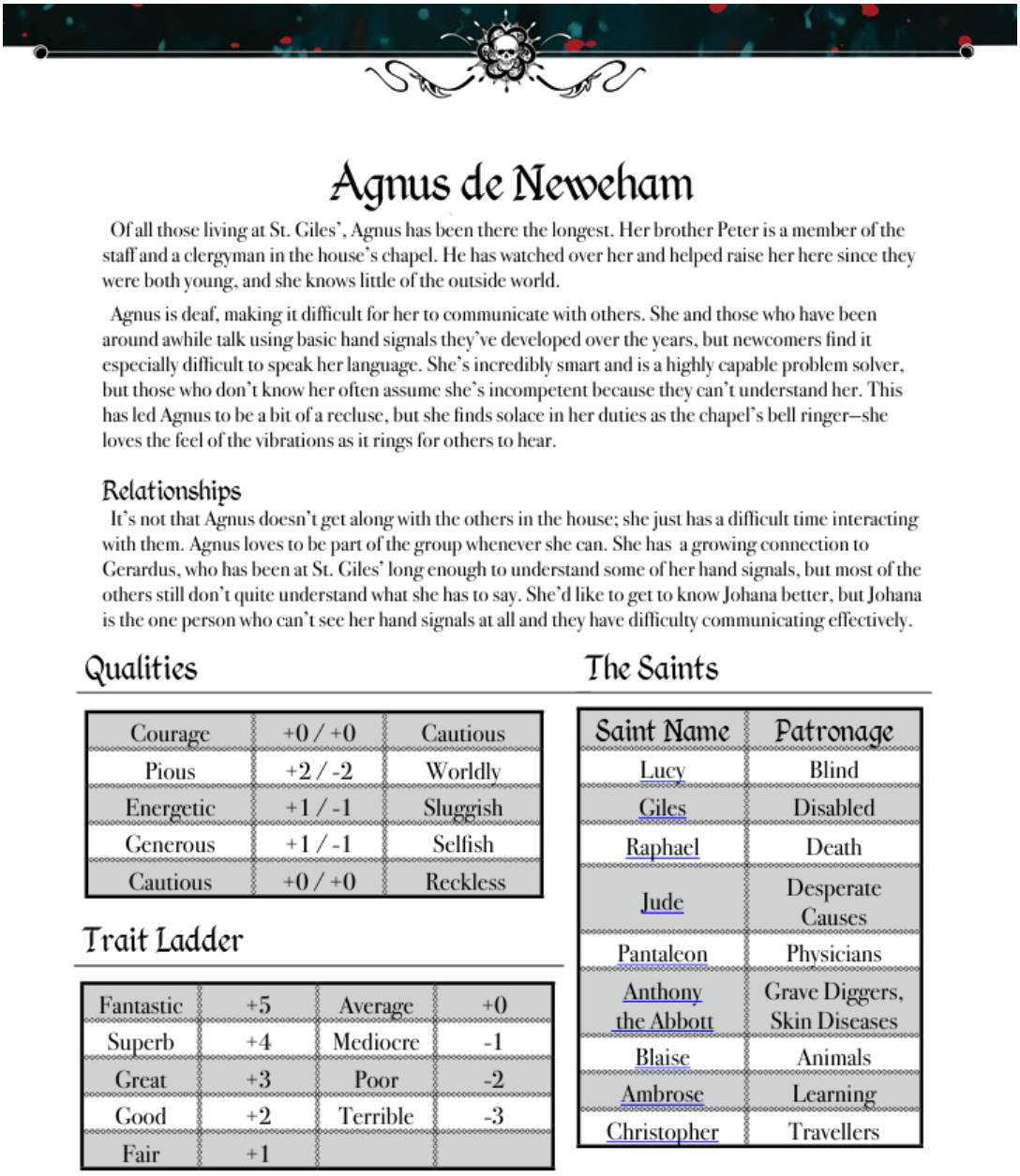
In opposition to utopian performativity, *Survival of the Able* invites the player to consider their character in a more nuanced manner alongside their struggles and hardships, saying,

> Every character is comprised of a set of quantifiable Traits, but they're so much more than just a collection of numbers. Your character had a life before they arrived at St. Giles' Almshouse, and they've built a new life for themselves since they arrived.
>
> For the first step of the character design process, consider your character's overall concept and how their history made them who they are today. Are they…
>
> - A cranky old sailor, brought back from the edge of death only to become mildly insane?
> - A merchant's son who lost his sight during an attack by brigands?
> - The daughter of a poor farmer who couldn't afford to raise a child with a disability?
>
> Think of the above examples. What kind of Senses would you have if you lost your vision during an attack by brigands? What Skills would you have as a merchant's son? What Qualities would you have, both as the son of a merchant and someone who has been through the ordeals you have experienced? What would help you find reassurance in the world, and what would cause you undue stress?
>
> Your character concept has no tangible in-game effect, but thinking about it will help you choose your Traits going forward. The most important thing to keep in mind is that you're at St. Giles' Almshouse for a reason: you have a disability of some kind. Don't use that fact to limit your choices, but rather to offer you some constrained creativity with which to build your new persona. (Wood 39)

To this end, Wood is directly inviting the players to explore and create well-rounded characters while considering their disability as a key component of their life without making it the only aspect of their identity. While the disabled characters are a focus for *Survival of the*

Able, further guidelines are provided to avoid narratives of pity and two-dimensional disabled characters. Wood prompts players to think of characters beyond just their disability however, able-bodied and minded players would still be limited in how they see disability playing a role in the life of a disabled character.

In these instances, we can observe how Carr's critique is applicable to this game, as Wood is positioning disabled character's as being less capable of surviving through the game's mechanics. Here, the players might conclude that disability is something to pity and avoid at all costs (Adams 211-212). If players decided to use *Survival of the Able* to try experiencing disabled life through their imagination, then they might just reinforce common stereotypes associated with disability in popular media (Gibbons 29). To compensate for this, the TTRPG inspires diversity and originality in its character creation affordances which may help to avoid stereotyping.



Agnus de Newcham

Of all those living at St. Giles', Agnus has been there the longest. Her brother Peter is a member of the staff and a clergyman in the house's chapel. He has watched over her and helped raise her here since they were both young, and she knows little of the outside world.

Agnus is deaf, making it difficult for her to communicate with others. She and those who have been around awhile talk using basic hand signals they've developed over the years, but newcomers find it especially difficult to speak her language. She's incredibly smart and is a highly capable problem solver, but those who don't know her often assume she's incompetent because they can't understand her. This has led Agnus to be a bit of a recluse, but she finds solace in her duties as the chapel's bell ringer—she loves the feel of the vibrations as it rings for others to hear.

Relationships

It's not that Agnus doesn't get along with the others in the house; she just has a difficult time interacting with them. Agnus loves to be part of the group whenever she can. She has a growing connection to Gerardus, who has been at St. Giles' long enough to understand some of her hand signals, but most of the others still don't quite understand what she has to say. She'd like to get to know Johana better, but Johana is the one person who can't see her hand signals at all and they have difficulty communicating effectively.

Qualities

Courage	+0 / +0	Cautious
Pious	+2 / -2	Worldly
Energetic	+1 / -1	Sluggish
Generous	+1 / -1	Selfish
Cautious	+0 / +0	Reckless

Trait Ladder

Fantastic	+5	Average	+0
Superb	+4	Mediocre	-1
Great	+3	Poor	-2
Good	+2	Terrible	-3
Fair	+1		

The Saints

Saint Name	Patronage
Lucy	Blind
Giles	Disabled
Raphael	Death
Jude	Desperate Causes
Pantaleon	Physicians
Anthony the Abbott	Grave Diggers, Skin Diseases
Blaise	Animals
Ambrose	Learning
Christopher	Travellers

Figure 48: Survival of the Able Character Sheet page one

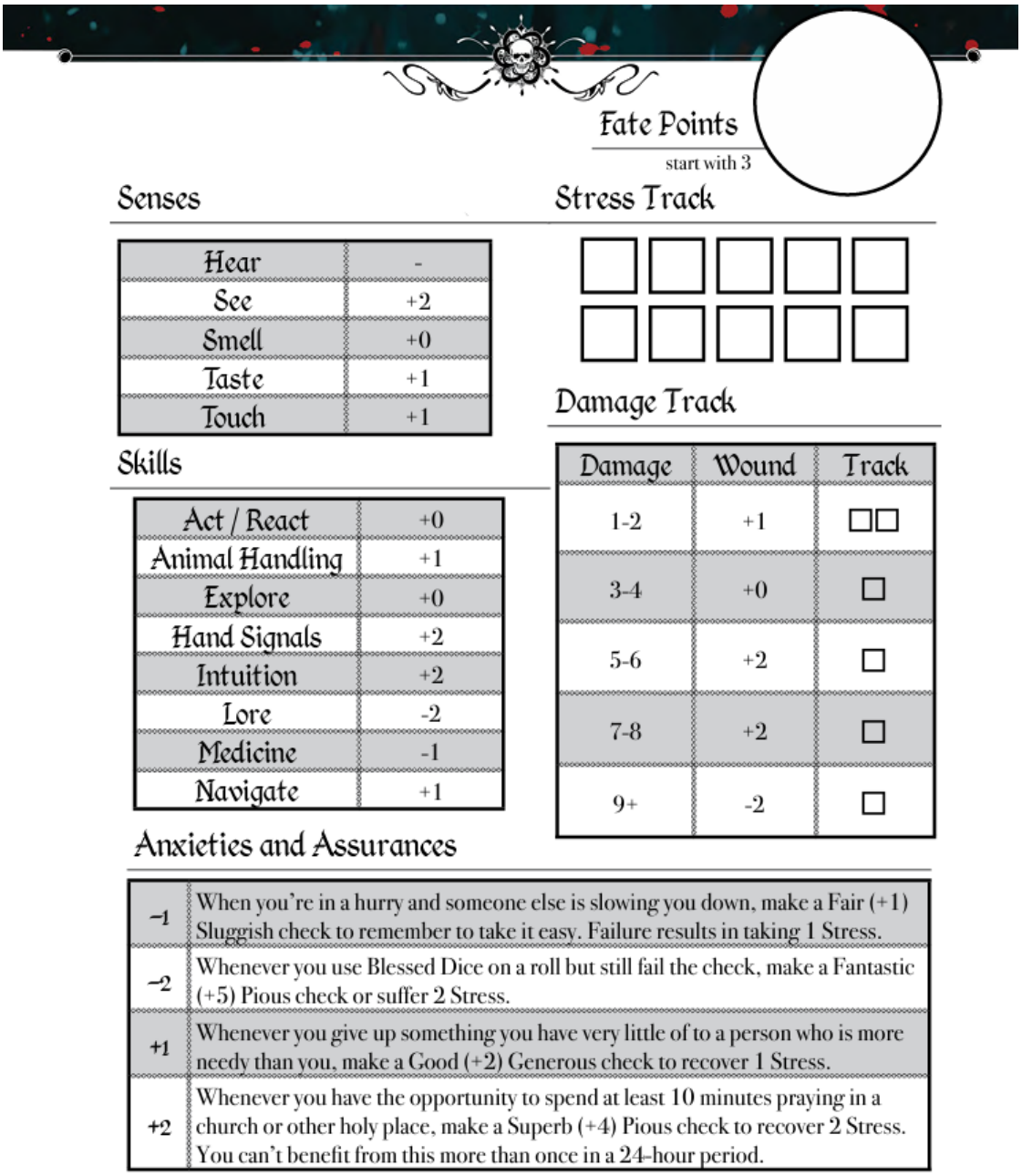
The above figure states that,

> Of all those living at St. Giles', Agnus has been there the longest. Her brother Peter is a member of the staff and a clergyman in the house's chapel. He has watched over her and helped raise her here since they were both young, and she knows little of the outside world.

Agnus is deaf, making it difficult for her to communicate with others. She and those who have been around awhile talk using basic hand signals they've developed over the years, but newcomers find it especially difficult to speak her language. She's incredibly smart and is a highly capable problem solver, Agnus is deaf, making it difficult for her to communicate with others. She and those who have been around awhile talk using basic hand signals they've developed over the years, but newcomers find it especially difficult to speak her language. She's incredibly smart and is a highly capable problem solver, but those who don't know her often assume she's incompetent because they can't understand her. This has led Agnus to be a bit of a recluse, but she finds solace in her duties as the chapel's bell ringer—she loves the feel of the vibrations as it rings but those who don't know her often assume she's incompetent because they can't understand her. This has led Agnus to be a bit of a recluse, but she finds solace in her duties as the chapel's bell ringer—she loves the feel of the vibrations as it rings for others to hear. for others to hear.

Relationships

It's not that Agnus doesn't get along with the others in the house; she just has a difficult time interacting It's not that Agnus doesn't get along with the others in the house; she just has a difficult time interacting with them. Agnus loves to be part of the group whenever she can. She has a with them. Agnus loves to be part of the group whenever she can. She has a growing connection to Gerardus, who has been at St. Giles' long enough to understand some of her hand signals, but most of the others still don't quite understand what she has to say. She'd like to get to know Johana better, but Johana growing connection to Gerardus, who has been at St. Giles' long enough to understand some of her hand signals, but most of the others still don't quite understand what she has to say. She'd like to get to know Johana better, but Johana is the one person who can't see her hand signals at all and they have difficulty communicating effectively. is the one person who can't see her hand signals at all and they have difficulty communicating effectively. (Adams 44)



Fate Points

start with 3

Senses

Hear	-
See	+2
Smell	+0
Taste	+1
Touch	+1

Stress Track

☐☐☐☐☐
☐☐☐☐☐

Damage Track

Damage	Wound	Track
1-2	+1	☐☐
3-4	+0	☐
5-6	+2	☐
7-8	+2	☐
9+	-2	☐

Skills

Act / React	+0
Animal Handling	+1
Explore	+0
Hand Signals	+2
Intuition	+2
Lore	-2
Medicine	-1
Navigate	+1

Anxieties and Assurances

–1	When you're in a hurry and someone else is slowing you down, make a Fair (+1) Sluggish check to remember to take it easy. Failure results in taking 1 Stress.
–2	Whenever you use Blessed Dice on a roll but still fail the check, make a Fantastic (+5) Pious check or suffer 2 Stress.
+1	Whenever you give up something you have very little of to a person who is more needy than you, make a Good (+2) Generous check to recover 1 Stress.
+2	Whenever you have the opportunity to spend at least 10 minutes praying in a church or other holy place, make a Superb (+4) Pious check to recover 2 Stress. You can't benefit from this more than once in a 24-hour period.

Figure 49: Survival of the Able Character Sheet page two

As shown in Figure 48 and 49, *Survival of the Able* puts forward a variety of prompts; like character senses, qualities, anxieties, assurances, skills, and relationships; for the player to design an interesting and engaging multidimensional character worthy of player investment (Wood 39-40). For instance, the Anxieties and Assurances require a good deal of thought and conviction as they have mechanical implications like,

-1 When you're in a hurry and someone else is slowing you down, make a Fair (+1) Sluggish check to remember to take it easy. Failure results in taking 1 Stress.

-2 Whenever you use Blessed Dice on a roll but still fail the check, make a Fantastic (+5) Pious check or suffer 2 Stress.

+1 Whenever you give up something you have very little of to a person who is needy than you, make a Good (+2) Generous check to recover 1 Stress.

+2 Whenever you have the opportunity to spend at least 10 minutes praying in a church or other holy place, make a Superb (+4) Pious check to recover 2 Stress. You can't benefit from this more than once in a 24-hour period. (Adams 45)

3.2.5.4 Approaching Combat as a Challenge to TTRPG Norms

As we can observe from their design, my object texts set themselves up well for their intended play experience. They also avoid falling into the same habit as many other TTRPGs. Sarah Lynn Bowman and Menachem Cohen agree how in traditional *D&D* the terminology used, like referring to a long-term game as a campaign, or the mechanics of killing monsters to gain experience to level up as the main method of advancement, positions it as a war game (Bowman 108; Cohen 69). Mind you, that is what *D&D* was initially intended to be, but this aspect of the game's design fundamentally focuses the player's attention on combat mechanics with less regard for the roleplay performance.



Figure 50: Combat in D&D as Shown by two dwarves fighting a troll

In reality, many TTRPGs retain this same positioning without fully realizing how it impacts the player's approach to the game. However, we can see how the game systems of my object texts are designed to deter a combat focus while focusing the players' attention on their intended play experiences.

Inspirisles simplifies the combat mechanics for its learning focus. This is reflected in how it sets up the characters. The game notes, "Many roleplaying games give you a sense of character through statistics and numbers. We've left the math for our dice rolls and opted for a storytelling approach" (Oxenham 42). Meaning, while they are present, the combat mechanics boil down to three six-sided dice rolls with any additional considerations coming from character progression and creative roleplaying choices made using sign language. Creative uses of sign language can happen at any point in the game and are not limited to combat. This creativity is rewarded with the acquisition of belief, a unit used to track character progression throughout the game. As such, this design firmly positions the players' navigation of the game within the sign language magic system they have learned during their play, leaving combat as an option governed by said magic system and not the sole focus.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, *Survival of the Able* deters a combat focus because of the limited capacity the characters have for their survival. In the game, "Zombies carry the plague wherever they go and spread it rapidly. Whenever they bite someone, cough blood on them, or scratch them with their rotting fingernails they give their victim the terrible bacteria that causes the Black Death" (63). While combat with zombies might not be difficult to win, the chances for infection make any form of combat unappealing and condition players to avoid it at all costs. If the challenge of the game is to simulate difficulties disabled individuals would face, it is reasonable for the designer to keep players' focus on issues of inaccessible navigation. When the game encourages an avoidant approach to combat encounters like this, the players are kept mindful of their embodied experience through their roleplay. This in turn allows them to feel the injustice of the situation through the constraints of unlikely survivability in an inaccessible environment, something many disabled individuals experienced firsthand during the Covid-19 pandemic. In both object texts, the importance of roleplay is emphasized by the systems to encourage the players to produce their own meaning within the game, separate from combat, challenging traditional TTRPGs in how they position their system regarding their design intentions.

3.2.5.5 Disability Inclusion

Inspirisles exemplifies collaboration with Deaf culture through the creative decisions made between Richard Oxenham, the game designer, and Rajnie Kaur and Moonlight Joy, the Deaf culture and language consultants. In terms of representation, *Inspirisles* is thorough with the information it provides regarding the diversity of identity within the Deaf community and the importance ascribed to how some of its members might choose to identify themselves in relation to it. For example, it is common for many members of the Deaf community to not consider themselves disabled but consider the Deaf culture to be a minority culture (Scully 145-146). As such, while *Inspirisles* explicitly deals with disability themes and allows for depictions of disability identity, at no point in the rule book does it administer the classification of disability to the Deaf community. This illustrates the consultation for this game as inclusive of the diverse identities of the Deaf community (Scully 153), allowing its members to approach the game as a friendly space regardless of how they choose to identify themselves.

In *Survival of the Able*, the realities of being disabled are definitively a highlight of the game as they are what the game designer, Jacob Wood, is attempting to emulate. While Wood is a blind creator, there is little evidence to suggest other disabled creators provided input into the game design to come up with mechanics for the disabilities Wood did not have embodied knowledge of. Which is concerning because Wood's priority with *Survival of the Able* was to develop,

> …a game about empathy. You'll play as someone with a disability tasked with surviving a zombie plague, but the real villains of the game are injustice, inaccessibility, and ableism. You won't have modern protections like the Americans with Disabilities Act to offer you protection against discrimination, and you won't have modern technology to make your life easier. You will have your wits, your guts, and your determination.
>
> Our hope is that by putting yourself in your character's shoes, you'll start to feel angered and incensed at the way they are treated. You'll see the injustices that still impact people with disabilities to this day. You'll also feel a great sense of accomplishment when you overcome the odds and survive grueling challenges despite the setbacks you face. Finally, you'll recognize how to translate this experience to the real world. (Embry par. 2-3)

Empathy, being a main aspect of *Survival of the Able*'s design, would make it easy for players to take away piteous or overcoming narratives from the experience. *Survival of the Able* intends for you to be more likely to fail and, in that depiction of unfairness, Wood is incentivizing the players to be more mindful of the injustices felt in reality. However, empathy has been widely regarded, by disability media, performative activism, and RPG studies scholars alike, as an inaccurate, problematic, and oversimplified view of how we feel viewing or playing another character that inspires passivity instead of activism (Adams 211-212; Boal 34-41; Ruberg 60).

However, I don't see *Survival of the Able* as inherently problematic but any merit it has is largely dependent on how the players approach the game. If they choose to employ it discursively then they might seek to bring about societal change as we observed *Inspirisles* being capable of in the case study provided (Cullinan and Wood 277). Simultaneously, this game design affords the player with room to employ crip negotiation where problems arise from

inaccessible environments the players find themselves in and not the characters themselves, as demonstrated by Jerreat-Poole (par. 3; par. 17).

Rather than fostering empathy, I see this game making a more crucial intervention in disability representation by cultivating a game space for better-designed characters with disabilities (Meehan par. 5-6). Hadley considers any depiction of disability as having a potentially positive impact giving both the performer and the audience a call to consider their own position as part of an ethical process (31). Though, she stipulates it be made apparent non-disabled performers do not represent the disability community (31). In this sense, the game helps to combat disability erasure in modern media, which was a major concern brought up by Wood in the creation of this game to begin with (Wood, "[Q&A] Jacob Wood (Accessible Games)" par. 1), while allowing the players to take a humanizing approach to considering disabled individuals as multidimensional.

3.2.5.6 Design Initiatives

As I have demonstrated, the medical model remains a prevalent foundation for how many gaming media developers approach their work. I discussed the general benefits of interdisciplinary approaches for disability studies alongside the specific benefits found in disability game studies. While there are still academic gaps to be expanded on at this intersection, scholarship must continue to observe how the work being done, both in academia and gaming media, might have a beneficial or detrimental impact on the underrepresented disability communities.

To this end, more ethnographic work within the realm of disability game studies is warranted, ensuring we are getting input from the communities we are trying to help. After showing how these games are designed to achieve their affordances for progressive disability themes, I would like to bring two recommendations forward that leans into the strengths of both games.

The first observes *Inspirisles* positioning itself to teach a new language, making it fundamental to the playing of the game. By acquiring input from consultants from the Deaf community, Oxenham created an Edu-RPG teaching players about sign language and Deaf culture while

engaging with an immersive storytelling practice. As such, at their foundation, games require input from the communities they are meant to benefit.

The second recommendation I make observes *Survival of the Able*'s choice to make the players reflect on disabled individuals and society. While the game is intended to afford the player to break away from preconceptions of disability in their character creation it also explicitly calls them to reconsider how society regards accessibility needs. However, while generative discomfort might have potential uses, the mechanical simulation of disability should only be done for and by those who share that disability identity. Centring disabled voices in design should take priority over simulated an embodied experience. As such, to assist players in navigating the topic of disability, games could use a set up designed to destabilize preconceptions of social issues.

The findings of this chapter inform how we should be approaching disability game design pedagogy with a focus on prioritizing an intersection of embodied knowledge, community engagement, and collaboration with disabled designers and players. Disability justice research benefits from a similar ethnographic approach and the implications of this as best practices will do better to inform the intention behind the design as an approach to disability activism.

Chapter 4

Identity, and Representation

Where Chapter 3 traced textual affordances, here I foreground identity and embodiment as enacted through player praxis and GM practice. Throughout this chapter, I scrutinize diverse representations in TTRPG media to show the capacity that TTRPGs have as a site to portray disability identity. I begin by addressing the importance TTRPGs, like *D&D*, already have to queer gaming communities as a means of self-representation and rhetorical empowerment. I believe this to be the most effective means of bridging the gap as queer game studies is inclusive of disability game studies, albeit broader in its observance of this particular aspect of marginalized identity. Queer game studies also has very similar ties to other communities and scholarly realms, such as the online *D&D* communities and performance studies, which will further aid us in theorizing how disability justice could be included in TTRPG media. I provide my own autoethnographic praxis of the concepts I introduce as well as a first-hand account of the rhetorical value I experienced from my own self-representation through a *D&D* character.

I go into detail regarding the rhetorical power of TTRPG character identification for members of the queer community in relation to reparative play, observing the stories that we create for ourselves as members of marginalized communities. I showcase the queer communities' sense of empowerment through community building and narrative creation while drawing it back to the capacity TTRPGs have for identity representation. I then present my autoethnographic praxis of this self-presentation with first-hand experience of its rhetorical value. This is crucial for establishing a foothold in TTRPG space for marginalized identity in general before homing in on disability.

In the next section, I observe the theory of complex embodiment concerning the DM's capacity to represent diverse identities within their roleplay. To this end, I will acknowledge the criticism towards depictions of disabled characters alongside the benefits of even problematic portrayals to observe the potential best practices. I draw on performance studies concepts to explore the potential DMs have for portraying their diverse cast of characters as a distinction between the inclusion of diversity and full-on representation of a particular demographic.

4.1 Reparative Play in *D&D*

As queer identities, and by extension disability identities, continue to be marginalized in contemporary culture, the spaces for progressive discourse in most media are limited. Through queer performativity, members of the queer community have the chance to accurately represent ourselves and overwrite the more harmful stereotypes that are associated with us (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, 1). Like film, literature, music, and performance (Jones 1-5; Sedgwick 137; Tau 23-25), roleplay provides an opportunity for queer performativity allowing us to create our own progressive discourse (Lasley, ""An Examination of Gaming Environments in Dungeons and Dragons Groups" 62). Roleplay can commonly be found in drag or theatre but more recently it has been popularized through RPGs. *D&D*, being the most popular RPG to date, is considered a common pastime for people all over the world. However, as we have established, it is much more than just a game. *D&D* helps people in ways that many of us don't realize.

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

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

community with the difficulty we may experience in accepting our own identity (Stone par. 8-10), while also helping to develop us further as people (Bowman and Hugaas par. 1-3; Lasley, "Fantasy In Real Life" 51). In this framing of the effect the story has on its audience, we can consider this akin to Payne's depiction of therapeutic rhetoric rather than empathy (Payne, "The Wizard of Oz" 28), as it is a creation of rhetoric that reinforces and helps to promote queer values. While it may have some emotional appeal, that is not the focus. The focus is the rhetorical appeal of the narrative.

To explain how this works, I look at the creation of queer rhetoric through roleplay to find the reparative value that *D&D* can potentially provide the queer communities. My work focuses on the concept of reparative play, an adaptation of reparative reading which was first proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in 1995 (Sedgwick 135-137). Reparative reading explores alternatives to both heteronormative and ableist ideals through the act of reading. Instead of getting caught up in the problematic implications of a text, the alternatives are foregrounded (Sedgwick 137). Reparative play then expands reparative reading into the realm of play, where one explores the possibility for a sustainable livelihood for queer and disabled community members through play (Vist, "Dungeons and Queers" par. 3, 9, 11, 27). I conclude with an observation of safety tools, designed for TTRPGs, that enable reparative play. This will be posited alongside an autoethnographic reflection of my own roleplay experience as a means of demonstrating reparative play in practice. My work is founded on Sedgwick's Touching Feeling, Kara Stone's "Time and Reparative Game Design," and Sarah Lynne Bowman's *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*. These scholars observe roleplay as a method of queer performativity and identity exploration. My analysis will add further potential for application of the concepts brought up by these scholars by drawing from ethnographic and autoethnographic examples. In this section, I propose that through the embodiment of a *D&D* character, set in a more accepting world, the players can enact reparative play to give an accurate and positive representation of themselves while promoting alternatives to heteronormative culture.

While reparative play is my core theoretical framework for this section, I have sought to place this concept within performance studies to supplement the gap between queer performance and disability performance. My framework pays particular attention to performance study scholars

like Judith Butler, and later Jill Dolan, as a means of situating *D&D* in existing work for the exploration of queer and, by extension, disability identity. Butler identifies that "the binary of sex, gender, and the body—can be shown as productions that create the effect of the natural, the original, and the inevitable" (xxix), demonstrating a persistent and underlying naivety of identity construction. That being said, "It would be wrong to think that the discussion of 'identity' ought to proceed prior to a discussion of gender identity for the simple reason that 'persons' only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (Butler 22). I situate this understanding of gender identity as a starting point to address the issues that affect members of queer and disability communities through the potential of reparative play. This will be set in the context that the TTRPGs afford the players with a type of utopian experience to challenge our preconceived notions of utopia.

4.1.1 Reparative Reading Meets Queer Performativity

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

Queer performativity uses performance in a way that allows people to question the restrictions of traditional gender roles and heteronormative expectations, as previously depicted in Figure 19.

We can then see a useful application for reparative reading when it is applied to queer performativity, the former being used as an interpretation for the latter. As such, Kara Stone notes a link between the reparative and the performative:

> reparative art is a method to work through difficult feelings but is also a method to stay in them as long as they need to be felt...Reparative art is not a way to move on from or be cured of mental illness, psycho-social disability, or the states in need of healing, but actually a mode of staying in them. Sometimes that means moving around in them, sometimes being stuck in them. (Stone, "Ritual of the Moon" par. 11)

In this manner, queer performativity allows people to "move around" in the discourse they create, with a reparative reading of the context being used to interpret a hopeful image of the future. This performativity acts as a counternarrative, to heteronormative and ableist culture, that develops sustainable motives, or practices, for the queer and disabled communities (Tytler 248; Vist). This reparative reading frame can be present elsewhere, like podcasts or drag shows. However, in this section, I observe this reframing potential with TTRPGs being the primary media site. Seeing how queer performativity can be used as the performative of a reparative practice, we can direct our focus to the culmination of these two practices: reparative play (Vist, "Dungeons and Queers" par. 10-14).

Elise Vist builds on reparative reading, and expands it to the realm of play, explaining how reparative play is "about finding and making spaces within game systems where you don't have to squint as hard to feel healed and affirmed" ("Dungeons and Queers" par. 12). Using a positive outlook for the creation of a queer space within a game is the essence of reparative play. In this sense, reparative play would be situated as an available act within a game that helps to create progressive queer discourse from the medium. Now, that is not to say that reparative play cannot be enacted in a game not designed as such, because the act of reparative reading, like reparative play, is based on finding the good even in the bad. Although, with regards to reparative play, the act can be facilitated by the rules whereas authors do not typically give rules for reading and therefore the reparative reading is not as often facilitated in the same manner. I make this distinction because it is important to note that reparative play is not limited to, but facilitated by,

the game rules and design in a manner that reparative reading, lacking game rules and design, cannot be.

As I discussed previously, Dolan discusses utopia, not as a construction of reality, but as a cultural production evoking feelings and sensibilities of idealism through performance, what she calls the "utopian performative" (460). In this manner, just as I discussed with regard to *Inspirisles*, the enactment of particular values and behaviours can be experienced by players through their characters, when they are given the freedom to explore how they fail or succeed in the actions they take (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 31), an opportunity afforded through reparative play but one that is not often given to marginalized individuals (Alder 185, 188).

4.1.2 Reparative Play

Reparative play might then be achieved for the disability communities in TTRPGs like *Teleneuro* in how it facilitates interpretation in the form of roleplay. According to Vist, reparative play, being enabled through game design, is a means of creation that emphasizes healing and sustainability instead of looking for aspects of a game to feel depressed over ("Dungeons and Queers" par. 12). By providing the affordances for reparative play, the game designers can give players the opportunity to focus on healing while constructing a more positive narrative for queer and disability communities as well as themselves.

So, to summarize, reparative play, like reparative reading, is an idealistic interpretation of the story that transpires. Unlike reparative reading, which lacks a performative aspect, reparative play is enacted by queer performativity through the embodiment of a character so that the player is healing by enacting their own stories through the agency and affordances provided by the game. This embodied performance allows for a more emotional and meaningful experience for the player that is distinct from the act of reading. By formulating psychological problems and solutions for both the characters and their players, and showing how they fail or succeed in the actions they take, the enactment of particular values and behaviours can be experienced (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 31; Payne 28).

This creation of discourse can help people with marginalized identities reimagine the world in a positive light and change how they view their positionality in and alongside the world's

problems (Muñoz 28). Elektra Diakolambrianou notes that "reality is not objective but socially constructed, and thus having narratives is our way of maintaining and organizing our personal reality and making sense of our experiences" (Diakolambrianou par. 47). Engaging with the rhetoric of these types of narratives might let the players resolve tensions they experience in the world (Lasley, "Fantasy In Real Life" 58; Payne 29). These liberating actions taken by role-players allow for the freeing cathartic experience known as emancipatory bleed. When said players steer themselves into situations where they can fight oppression, Jonaya Kemper notes how emancipatory bleed becomes a liberating feeling they can acquire through play (Kemper, "Wyrding the Self" par. 1-6).

This liberatory steering then is an available act the players can use to seek out and enact freeing experiences in game (Kemper, "The Battle of Primrose Park" par. 15-31). Simultaneously, reparative play constructs progressive narratives with the experiential reading it affords players through the performance. Therefore, I situate emancipatory bleed as a potential benefit alongside reparative play and liberatory steering as an available action to enact these benefits during play. Where reparative play is conducive to a rhetorical experience that formulates progressive stories through play (Stone, "Ritual of the Moon" par. 5-11), the emancipatory bleed felt in these experiences can be greatly beneficial to the player's sense of empowerment (Kemper, "Wyrding the Self" par. 1-6).

4.1.3 So, Why *D&D*?

A common criticism of *D&D* is that it does not produce significant content positively framing queer discourse in support of the queer community (Ruberg and Shaw xi; Shaw 28). Because games provide an important media environment for building community (Chee et al. 171), it is critical that game designers account for a wide range of player identities and communities. To move towards progressive change in games, *D&D* would likely benefit from being redesigned to include the affordances of adequate marginalized representation and acceptance to make room for these new spaces of discourse (Shaw 28). One way to produce greater representation in *D&D* is to have the game designers include affordances for the creation of progressive discourse. This might be done effectively by implementing elements in the game that facilitate reparative play, as shown by Avery Alder's *MonsterHearts*.

MonsterHearts is a good example of a TTRPG that affords the intricacies of queer characters in the character design, that also has the potential to enable reparative play. *MonsterHearts* is a game where the players take on the role of different kinds of monsters, like witches, werewolves, and ghouls, and navigate social and romantic relationships in high school. In the game, the character is missing something essential to who their player is, humanity. Humanity can be defined many ways but in this context a lack of humanity means that, despite looking human most of the time, the characters are not human. The main point of the game is for the characters to feel alienated in a human world where it is easy to feel like they don't belong because of their differences. *MonsterHearts* is also a game designed with the express purpose of embodying queer characters. As noted in the guidelines of the game,

> This isn't really a game about monsters. It's a game about the confusion that arises when your body and your social world start changing without your permission...Your story will be more interesting and real if it includes queer content. It's another dimension of isolation and anxiety to explore through your characters. It's another way to keep the story feral, by breaking down our own expectations concerning "normal" (i.e. heterosexual) relationships and desires. It's also another way to introduce messy, unrequited love interests into the picture…When someone decides to roll to turn you on, you don't get to block that move by insisting that you're straight (or any other convenient excuse that you've got up your sleeves.) The dice decide whether this sexy person's sexy behavior gains them a String on you. What you are in complete control of, however, is your reaction to what they do. (Alder 42)

Here we see explicit instruction on how to embody a queer character that does not put all the responsibility on the players. Understanding this, *MonsterHearts* is not the perfect game for reparative play. Some players may find this reparative while others find it alienating, and these perspectives are both acceptable. Just as "The Blessed of Corellon" has the potential to bring in real-world trauma, this alienation might also reinforce the real-world trauma felt by a player who is part of the queer community. Nathan Hook, a game studies scholar and live action roleplay designer, may be inclined to believe that the reparative play found in *MonsterHearts* would represent "situational immersion" for the situation present (Hook 58). Since everything about

this game is centred on the taboo of the situation, the participants can prepare and willingly consent to the experience.

According to Michelle Nephew, *D&D* is the ideal setting to navigate cultural taboos because the game allows players to easily enact a form of wish fulfillment since they are always viewed as the "good guys" (Nephew 126). Additionally, it is worth noting that "gender and film scholar Doty insists on studying mainstream texts and argues that these are more likely and more productive sources for queer readings precisely because they reach wider audiences" (Ouellette 36). As we can observe in modern media, *D&D* is a staple in the TTRPG community, reaches wide audiences, and is an ideal example through which I can explore the concept of reparative play for creating progressive queer experiences in an TTRPG format. On top of that, opportunities for reparative play arise in TTRPGs played by the queer community because, as mentioned previously, "The worlds that queer gamers play in are inherently queer, inherently different, and inherently optimistic" (Codega par. 21; England par. 21). Even in games where the source material is problematic, there is still potential to create progressive queer discourse through reparative play when they are played by members of the queer community.

There are already many TTRPGs that might allow for reparative play; however, *D&D* is by far the most popular to date (Teller of Tales par. 1). *D&D* itself takes inspiration from many aspects of popular culture and sets up a mathematical system for the players to play out their own story, regardless of the setting. Its inclusion in media, like *Stranger Things* and *The Big Bang Theory*, has greatly contributed to its growing popularity (Gomez par. 1). However, for some people it is much more than just an RPG with dice ("Defeat Your Demons…"). *D&D* holds the potential to both positively impact players individually and also have even greater progressive impacts on a society ("Defeat Your Demons…"). Similar to mainstream texts, mainstream games might offer productive sources for reparative readings, in this case, however, the act of reading would be substituted by the act of performance through play. This phenomenon of queergaming, as coined by Edmond Y. Chang (18), is why I focus on the more popular game *D&D* as opposed to lesser-known indie games made by queer designers. Even in games where the source material can initially be problematic, there is still potential to create progressive queer discourse through reparative play when played by members of the queer community (Sedgwick 146).

While previous versions of the game have been restrictive with their character creation affordances, like class requirements and race options, newer editions make diverse character options more accessible. *D&D* fifth edition's free-flowing rules, and heavy reliance on world-building, contribute two key elements towards the act of reparative play: 1) it affords individuals room to craft their own stories within a greater arching narrative, and 2) it encourages the use of personalized characters—often avatars of the players—as a way for them to exist in a safe space. As such, the positionality and purpose with which a player approaches the game will heavily influence the reparative play they experience from it (Moriarity par. 1-12). The improvised experience of the game allows players to act and present themselves as they please while exploring queer themes (Sihvonen and Stenrose 115-120). Through this freedom, the roleplaying aspect of *D&D* can be used as a productive and entertaining tool to facilitate reparative play.

4.1.4 Examples of Reparative Play

The idea of RPGs being empowering and holding a space for reparations and healing is by no means a new concept. In an experiment they ran, Matthew Orr, Sara King, and Melissa McGonnell observed that the "TRPGs are appealing for social and personal reasons, including…the allowance of identity exploration, and the design of the rules…as the lived experiences of participating TRPG players contain themes that reflect…social or psychological improvement…" (80). Long time fans of the game are open to talk about the social and psychological benefits that *D&D* has offered them over the years as well. In a video interview, Satine Phoenix, a famous member of the *D&D* community, talks about how she was able to use *D&D* to help her overcome the childhood trauma that she experienced by letting us know "It's about…creating new memories and doing it so often that it overtakes all the bad memories" ("Defeat Your Demons…"). What Phoenix is alluding to here is more about reframing associations the players may have with their past traumas or negative experiences so that the aversions they have to the people, places, or things related to them are mitigated. She mentions that a lot of who she is today stems from the heroes she embodied and, in a context like reparative play, creating a new narrative in our life might potentially have substantial improvements on the way we perceive our reality.

D&D, being a game that has space for freedom of identity to be embraced through character creation, holds the potential to enact reparative play in a manner that allows for the portrayal and navigation of queer identity through the roleplay experience it provides. As such, it would benefit us to get a better understanding of reparative play with some examples of what it could look like in terms of *D&D*.

The social benefits I discussed above have been reported on previously, even if the players did not realize that they were already taking part in a form of reparative play (Cohen 53-58). A specific example of the performativity that we see reparative play taking place in can be found with Taliesin Jaffe's portrayal of his character, Mollymauk, on the *D&D* podcast *Critical Role*. Mollymauk Tealeaf is a bisexual genderfluid character who has no memories of a past and specializes in taking care of people that are not used to being taken care of.



Figure 51: Illustration of Mollymauk Tealeaf

Jaffe designed the character with no memories so that he could play someone who did not owe anything to the world and did not need to be tied down by their origin, as many of us find

ourselves. Jaffe talks about his character, saying, “He dresses the way I wish I would dress all the time… He’s a character that is certainly following a path that I thought about for my life…disappearing into the oblivion of base pleasure that is drink, and drugs, and sex, and working one gig after another…” (“Taliesin Jaffe on Mollymauk and Critical Role”). In this manner, we can see the player designing a character that allows him to act out a life he imagined for himself but ended up not having. This example shows how a mainstream actual play podcast normalises queer-coded reparative play, extending beyond player benefit to audience discourse.

Similar to how the narrator in *In Search of Lost Time* can be shown benefitting from not having conformed to the heteronormative societal expectations of raising a family, Mollymauk can be shown benefitting from this lifestyle he chooses for himself, defying heteronormative expectations and creating a new positive narrative. Through this occurrence of reparative play, Mollymauk’s narrative can help to create positively framed queer discourse that shows an alternative to a heteronormative norm. The frame of reparative reading, or reparative play, might then be facilitated by setting characters, like Molllymauk, in a more accepting world and in turn begin a healing process for the player involving the reframing of queer values in a positive light.

Another good example of reparative play we can see being used in *D&D* comes from Ally Beardsley’s portrayal of their character, Pete Conlan, on the *D&D* podcast *Dimension 20*.



Figure 52: Illustration of Pete Conlan

Pete Conlan is a trans man. Working as a drug dealer, he lives alone in New York. He cares about those around him and does not always seriously consider the choices he makes. He also struggles to take responsibility for his actions. Beardsley has used this character to explore the darker themes of drug addiction, a topic related to disability representation I reflect on in the next section, as well as the life of a person who has undergone gender-affirmation surgery, before undergoing their own. The show incorporates elements of a real-life transition for Pete by having him be on testosterone. As noted previously, elements like these are part of the meaningful interactions that accurately depicts aspects of a transgender identity in play. In an interview, Beardsley talked about how,

> …the hero character is extremely, obviously trans. Like we're talking about top surgery, we're talking about medically transitioning. I can imagine if I had just been like a viewer, I would have started foaming at the mouth. Like, 'We are opening on the main character as a trans guy in New York. Are you kidding me?' Then we absolutely did not talk about his transness ever again. He's just a guy. You don't have to keep coming back to him being like, here he is getting hate-crimed. Here he is taking his hormones. He's still trans.

> I feel like we just put in that saucy opener as, 'There's no question that this person is trans.' We're telling you that right away, so we don't have to keep telling you this or showing off that we have a trans character. Then we just go back to being like, 'OK, he's this guy.' (Hanna par. 8-9)

In contrast to the wish-fulfillment of identity that was enabled for Jaffe by Mollymauk, Pete is more situated as proper representation for the trans community. As such, reparative play is enabled through the new and varied experiences that he allows for both the player and the audience. On top of the realistic elements of transition, Beardsley has also been able to portray the recovery of a drug addict with homebrew game mechanics that they created for Pete (Hanna par. 2). These mechanics allow for there to be a degree of frustration and anxiety felt towards the very real idea of drug dependency through the character and as such frame the prospect of recovery, that would not otherwise be mechanically represented, more accurately. This type of navigation for the story helps to normalize the idea of trans characters and addiction recovery while enabling reparative play to take place during the podcast, developing discourse the audience can progressively engage with in the process, similar to like-minded practices observed for disability representation (Ellcessor et al. 2).

On other personal notes, Joan Moriarity, in her article "How my role-playing game character showed me I could be a woman," discusses at length how TTRPGs were crucial to her journey of self-discovery (Moriarity par. 13) and, in a similar vein, game designer Josephine Baird describes the alibi that *D&D* gave her to take part in her own gender performativity in high school (Baird 100), These TTRPG narratives help to normalize queerness and enable reparative play while emancipatory bleed empowers the players (Kemper, "Wyrding the Self" par. 1-6). To this end, we might observe similar means of rhetorical support and empowerment with the ethnographic designs I observed in chapter two.

4.1.5 Tools for Play

While playing *D&D* has the potential to allow for a shared space where the players can act more freely and comfortably than they would otherwise (Cazeneuve 4), this is not a guarantee. If we wish to employ reparative play effectively, there are scholars and game designers developing tools to facilitate this play. These tools allow us to assist players in accepting their queer identity and allow them to portray themselves as they see fit. My use of these tools demonstrates how autoethnographic practice reveals the interdependence of individual agency and community norms in reparative queer/disability play.

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

Kemper explains how members of marginalized communities steer for survival, where they navigate the game in a manner that does not bring up any disparaging or insensitive subject matter (Kemper et al. par. 8-11). This "steering," in *D&D*'s case, would be excluding racist content, like the Hadozee race option (Hall par. 4), which has been banned from my table as it would be triggering and act as a barrier to reparative play. The way that this is often achieved is a practice known as "Session 0" where the group gathers before the play begins to discuss their boundaries and expectations, what they are okay with experiencing and what they hope to achieve in the play. While no one knows exactly when and by who "Session 0" was invented, its presence on the internet can be traced back to 2003, with discussions of a "pre-session" taking place in communities that played Aaron Allston's *Strike Force* going back to 1988 (Alexander par. 10). It was later popularized by Matthew Mercer in 2016 with GMing tips he gave as a way to make sure everyone was on the same page with the story they were playing out together and engaging ("Getting Players to Roleplay"). "Session 0" has become so common practice now that, as of 2021, it was included as part of the official guidelines in the *D&D* module Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft as a precaution for running a horror game safely (Schneider 186).

While events that violate the players' boundaries may never occur to begin with, this practice ensures everyone that the players will collectively be steering away from any potential triggers, as the group is obligated to maintain these rules. "Session 0" also assists in working towards the design goal and ensuring the sustainability of the endeavour. Here, the players might create characters that work well together and are willing to assist each other in meeting their socio-emotional needs, which can aid in their reparative play as everyone is looking for an experience and willing to help each other attain it.

If these rules are broken, the DM, the player with the most authority, can stop the game. However, if it comes to it, the players can enact their own agency and quit a game that they do not wish to be a part of anymore. One safety tool for these moments would be the X, N, and O cards employed in *Teleneuro* as it approaches this navigation of the game with greater nuance to accommodate the players more methodically (See Appendix B). These cards are placed on the table so that a player can touch them at any time to alert everyone of their discomfort (Cook 6). The DM's intervention would be some initial warning, however if a player needs to intervene that would be more serious, as they do not trust the DM to stop the play. In this case, the setup needs to be re-examined, and the game will potentially need to end.

With regard to character creation, Bowman takes a typological approach to the characters that a player might design, classifying them based on how the character is derived from aspects of the player. I find this useful as it helps me organize the approaches that players, who want to employ reparative play, might take to the game, as well as the portrayal of their character. While there are trillions of possible variations in the characters that could be created, I want to make note of the nine types that Bowman looks at relative to the player, which I believe would be ideal for reparative play. To summarize, these are the Doppelganger Self, the Devoid Self, the Augmented Self, the Fragmented Self, the Repressed Self, the Idealized Self, the Oppositional Self, the Experimental Self, and the Taboo Self (Bowman 155-56). These character types are not mutual exclusive of each other and there are large areas for potential overlap between two or more of them while embodying a single character. I go through each one in detail to show their potential contributions to a reparative play experience as well as potential causes for concern when engaging with them.

One issue that comes with addressing these archetypes for *D&D* is that the scholars are not all focused on the same games. So, it might be necessary for future research to expand upon this academic conversation. For this section of the chapter, I use comparisons to the closest examples and scholarship that I can find to analyse the archetypes. Note that for some of these archetypes there are not examples readily available in other games, so I explain them, situating them in broad terms of roleplay.

Now, the Doppelganger Self is a character which is made so that it acts and thinks like its player, as though the player had been put in the situation that the character finds itself in. This character archetype provides the player with more self-awareness of their own perspective than would typically be the case if the player were trying to figure out how a different character would act. This is a very common character to make for beginners, as they would have an easier time navigating the world when they are not preoccupied with the dissonance that comes between a player's wants and a character's wants. While it is often disapproved by more experienced characters who feel like it's not actually roleplaying if you are playing yourself, Bowman notes that "The similarity between the primary self and the persona can also work to enhance self-esteem, offering an 'ordinary' person the opportunity to do extraordinary things and make a difference in crisis situations" (Bowman 166). In my experience, neurodivergent players often attempt to play other archetypes but seem to keep being drawn back to the Doppelganger Self, which was confirmed by the workshop participants in Chapter 2.

We can see this archetype often being embodied in RPGs where the player is given a character that is just a blank slate with no previous identity associated with them. Now, I preface that it is possible for the player to take on another archetype within such games but given the lack of character they start off with, it would facilitate the Doppelganger Self by letting the player play as themselves in the character's situation.



Figure 53: Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim's Dragonborn

One such example of this would be *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* where the character has no memories of themselves or the world prior to the game. In this instance of play, the character wakes up as a prisoner and is never given any idea as to their past or origin. This way, the character begins as a blank slate which the players can imprint on and embody as the Doppelganger Self. They are given the affordance to navigate the world learning how to fight and use magic and generally have free reign within the confines of the game. In this manner, there are very few indicators of how they are meant to play the game giving the player complete autonomy over the character's actions. Again, this isn't to say that the game cannot be used to embody other character archetypes, which I touch on later, but just that this game affords the player the option of embodying the Doppelganger Self.

The experience that players can have with this archetype can vary greatly, as some players may find themselves confronted by their own moral conscience each step of the way and be very restricted in their play. I personally found the Doppelganger Self most useful when enacting reparative play by telling my own story as I note later in the autoethnographic portion of this section. On the other end of the spectrum, there might be a player that would rationalize themselves being a bit more active with the power they have in this persona. For *D&D*, being given the power to heal an entire village of people or throw a ball of fire into a room can affect different people differently. As such, we can see players building self-esteem through the actions that they take in this manner as well as gaining insight into there own wants and desires by questioning these actions.

The Devoid Self is similar in make to the Doppelganger Self. It is fundamentally the player but lacking a quality that is essential to who they are. This could take the form of a physical disability that the character has, like being blind, or a shortcoming, like having no compassion. This character design makes it so that the player's perception of reality, and the way they navigate the world, changes in response to their new vessel. With the help of the DM having them access their space in a different way, the player can begin to appreciate some of the things that they take for granted, like their eyesight. This can then be used as reparative practice allowing for the players to develop discourse and understanding for those who cannot access the world in the same way that they can.

Examples of this kind of character in popular RPGs are extremely rare, as having a self-insert character with a disability that is portrayed well with in-game mechanics is not a common occurrence (Rouner par. 1-5). That being said, there are still cases when instances of disability have been implemented but often times it does not give an accurate or beneficial experience to the player.



Figure 54: Sekiro Art Depicting the Protagonist with a Prosthetic Arm Fighting a Giant Ape

Some examples of these instances would be in games like *Sekiro* and *Star Fox*, where the disability is covered up with prosthetics to have them act and operate functionally similar to those without the disability. By having the characters function like this, it is clear that the disabilities are only being used as an aesthetic rather than being taken into account mechanically (Rouner par. 1-5).

From here, we can see that while there is potential for good, there is also potential for the players to use this Devoid Self as a way of romanticizing disability. The blind monk or the one-armed swordsman are popular tropes that could potentially have negative impacts of the perception of the disabled community. Dolmage notes that there is "…mythical overlap of disability, 'deviant' sexual difference, and gender ambiguity…[and]…Queerness both reinforces and plays off disability, and vice versa" (71). The novelty of these disability tropes only serves to reinforce these myths if they are not played out respectfully. Those involved in the play should take steps to mitigate such romanticizing and play the character in a respectful manner so as not to reinforce the disparaging myth surrounding disability.

The Augmented Self is also like the Doppelganger Self in that it is the player but with additional features. This could take the form of a superpower or a higher status in society and will heavily influence their perception of reality, particularly when it comes to making decisions. Bowman notes that, "…some players report [relying] on their supernatural powers or other mechanics in the game world to compensate for abilities that they feel their primary self lacks" (Bowman 167). Here, I explore what this archetype offers to individuals who might feel that they are missing something in real life and whether engaging with an augmented self in *D&D* can serve reparative ends. By engaging with a fantasy setting through this character, the player can feel self-actualized with the acts they perform. This is useful in terms of building confidence for the player and allowing them to access the world in ways that they could not have otherwise. The Augmented Self would then perform the opposite role of the Devoid Self while still providing additional benefits through reparative play.



Figure 55: Jedi from Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic

This kind of play can be made possible in RPGs like in *Star Wars* games, where the character is once again a blank slate but with the addition of force powers. With the inclusion of these game mechanic, the players are facilitated in navigating the world and accessing it in ways they

would not otherwise be able to. They can jump higher, move faster, and shoot lightning in ways that only a jedi can and by embodying this blank slate the player is still able to make decisions based on their new way of accessing the world. The player can embody the character with the experience of these supernatural powers allowing them to feel like they are in more control than they otherwise would be.

A possible issue that can arise from this is that the player may be more inclined to live out a power fantasy instead of following through with the reparative play they set out for. In *D&D*, this may consist of the characters becoming murder hobos. "Murder hobo" is a term in the RPG community used to describe a character who opts for the violent option when interacting with everything they encounter, instead of looking for strategies or using social skills to solve their problems. Instead of talking to a guard and negotiating their way past a gate, they may just kill him and move on with the game. These kinds of players can be challenging for other players, including the DM, to cooperate with as they often create conflict and turmoil in their actions. The DM should be able to accommodate certain aspects of the Augmented Self, however murder hobos can get in the way of the reparative play that we are looking for in this archetype. If the DM can see signs of this happening, they should confront the player about it immediately so as not to ruin the healing and sustainable practices that the other players wish to enact. The reparative game design I create will require the DM to intervene in this manner, but it will also have advice on how to best go about it.

The Fragmented Self is developed from a smaller part of the player's personality. In this way, the fragment that the player draws from in creating their character becomes the focal point of the character and it is built up from there. This part of the player could be an emotional state, an interest they have in a field of study, a manipulative aspect they might possess, or even an intense sexuality. Bowman notes that, "The freedom of the play space allows the individual to experience a small piece of themselves, expand it, magnify it, and ultimately, examine how it functions when carried to certain conclusions" (Bowman 167). The Fragmented Self as a reparative practice is then a method in which the player can explore and gain insights into certain aspects of their identity as well as their self-representation. This archetype can be optimized for

reparative play if the DM then interacts with the player's character in a way that allows the player to fully explore the aspect of themselves that they chose.



Figure 56: Disco Elysium Character Archetype Selector

A good example of the Fragmented Self can be found in *Disco Elysium* as shown above. *Disco Elysium* is a game in which the character has a pre-existing narrative, and we are embodying him at the point in his life where he is a detective and an alcoholic. The part of the game that gives this character the potential to be a Fragmented Self is at the beginning where the game allows the player to choose how they want to portray the character. As shown in Figure 56, they are given the choice between choosing from three distinct premade builds or creating their own build. If they do not create their own build then the options that have are Thinker, Sensitive, or Physical, each coming with their own skills and abilities in accordance with what one may associate with the name of the build. However, this visualization allows the player to choose one of potentially three fragments of themselves to explore and expand on in the sense that people are not a perfect fit for any one of these three. Obviously, this game can allow for other types of play but given how it segments itself right at the beginning, it provides a good opportunity for the player to embody a Fragmented Self character.

The Fragmented Self does not bring up any issues that are specific to its archetype, however it is worth noting that the DM will need to accommodate for the player attempting to explore an aspect of themselves in this manner. Mainly, the DM needs to ensure that there is opportunity for the player to enact play with the fragment they chose and that the story they are making doesn't belittle the player for taking on the fragment. An example of this mishandling might look like the player wanting to embody a character with a more loving and compassionate mindset. If the world made by the DM is harsh and the character is constantly being told that they are childish or stupid for feeling that compassion, then the reparative play experience is ruined. As such, it is a responsibility of the DM, and the other members of the group, to accommodate these players in helping them explore these fragments of themselves.

The Repressed Self is like the Fragmented Self but specifically for a part of the personality that the player actively represses, the inner child. Now, other scholars of psychology may discuss the Repressed Self as the inner desires, or inner self, that is scrutinized by society, but Bowman is very explicit that her concept is regarding a childlike persona acted out by the player. The role-players that take the opportunity to create a more simplistic character might find themselves creating a Repressed Self. These characters do not always have strict morals and will navigate the world in a naïve but happy-go-lucky way that allows them to be more carefree. This way the players don't need to worry about being taken seriously and can do things strictly for the humor and enjoyment of the game. Bowman acknowledges that these characters are vulnerable within the roleplay experience, but "their youthful zeal often inspires new levels of compassion and self-reflection in other characters" (Bowman 171). This archetype has more influence on those around it than the player who is playing it but, in this manner, it can still be useful to see situations from a point of view that is not overthinking the scenario. The reparative aspect of this character allows for a grounding indulgence for those at the table that can help them see solutions or insights to problems that they may not be considering.



Figure 57: Cover of Pizza Game with Kiane looking starry eyed at the sky

An example of the Repressed Self would be the main character of a visual novel called *Pizza Game*. Throughout the game, the player follows the character, Kiane, and the story has the player making choices for her at key moments. Kiane goes through the game performing a variety of tasks, ranging from taking driving classes to hunting ghosts, which the player will help her with. The contrast that one might experience between Kiane and themselves as people could be beneficial for reparative play, as it allows them to empathize with her perspective, which is oftentimes surface level and straightforward. One of the main aspects of *Pizza Game* is the humour that the game shows through the character interactions and Kiane's inner monologues. What makes her a Repressed Self is that she has a naïve and happy-go-lucky way of interacting with and navigating the world.

A possible issue that can arise from this kind of play stems from the lack of seriousness that the player exudes through their actions. While deferring to a child-like mindset for this archetype is key to its reparative capabilities, it is easy to lose the sense of purpose that comes with the reparative play others may want at the table. A player who is interested in more serious roleplay looking at deep-seated political issues might not want to have a child accompanying the group and pointing out what might be obvious. That being said, it is important to understand what kind of archetypes the other players at the table will be using for their reparative play and conferring

with them. This way the group, as a whole, can allow for the reparative play benefit without impeding on one another's experience.

The Idealized Self is a character designed to possess qualities that the player wants to have. This role helps them overcome deficiencies that they may perceive themselves to have and, as a result, the player is able to gain confidence through enacting the best version of themselves that they can think of. Like the Augmented Self, these characters can possess qualities that the players want, however it is taken to a further extreme where instead of the character just being the player with one ability, the character is perceived with envy by the player for not being able to have what they do. This could take the form of strong moral values such as a spiritual idealism, or a strong physique that the players do not possess. In terms of reparative play, the Idealized Self performs a similar role as the Augmented Self with the development of the player's confidence, although in a more idealistic mental frame.

Given that everyone has their own version of an Idealized Self, it is hard to find an example that would suit every player in every scenario. Not many games have the capacity to allow for the broad idea of the Idealized Self outside of RPGs that give you absolute freedom in how you want to design your character. While this is achievable in *D&D*, in consultation with the group, the closest comparison that I could find to the Idealized Self in a game with pre-built characters and set mechanics would be in *Persona 5*.



Figure 58: Joker from Persona 5 dressed in a white mask, black trench coat, grey turtleneck, and red gloves

In *Persona 5*, the main character is called Joker, a teenage boy who has just recently transferred high schools and awakens special powers in himself. While the wish fulfillment found in the power fantasy of the game could make Joker a contender for the Idealized Self, the social mechanics in the game make for a more convincing argument. With the player embodying Joker, he can skillfully and effectively navigate each of the social relationships that are developed over the course of the game with the other characters. This mechanic is something worth being enviable of as it affords the player an ability that they would not otherwise have in real life to find self-actualization through their social status. Whereas, having force powers might be something the Augmented Self allows for, the ability to navigate a social setting with a lot more ease than what the player may have in real life is what makes this character ideal. With enough effort, Joker can get pretty much any character he can converse with to like him which is not always possible in the real world. Now, the reparative play that stems from this particular archetype, as represented by Joker, only works for players that find this social capability a part of their ideal selves, making it an accurate example of the Idealized Self for those who do.

A possible issue that can arise from this is that two or more players may design a character with the exact same abilities. If this happens it may diminish the experience through lack of diversity in mechanics in which your own can be contrasted. If every player chooses to play the Idealized Self and they all want to be human paladins that accentuate their own ideal bodies and character, then this archetype will not reap the reparative play they might be looking for. Again, a good way to overcome this is to confer with the players in the group ahead of time to ensure that everyone is doing something that will not inhibit the experience of the other players. This will also be addressed at length in the reparative game design.

The Oppositional Self is a character designed to be the exact opposite of the player. While the player might be shy and timid, the character could be loud and arrogant. Additionally, the character might take on qualities that the player would never want to adopt, like a craving for murder and theft. Bowman notes, “sometimes exploration of an Oppositional Self aids players in better understanding both themselves and people with whom they would not normally relate” (Bowman 174). For the purposes of reparative play, the Oppositional Self works as a vessel to assist in the exploration of the mentalities of other people. If a heterosexual person were to take

on the persona of a queer character, they would then be given the task of navigating the world with that new mentality. Like disabilities being used for the Devoid Self, this too should have steps taken to mitigate romanticizing, or oversexualizing, the character. If these are not mitigated, then the character will most often become a stereotype which will continue to do more harm than good by incorrectly representing a disparaged demographic. Provided that this is navigated in a respectful manner, this form of play has the potential to put emphasis on normalizing queer practices.



Figure 59: Evil Looking Character in Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim wearing black armour and riding a black horse with red eyes

As I mentioned previously, games like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* can also be used to embody other archetypes, like the Oppositional Self, as it allows for the necessary amount of freedom to encompass both the player playing as themselves, the Doppelganger Self, and the player playing as their polar opposite, the Oppositional Self. If they would usually attempt to deal with conflicts through non-violent means by talking it out, they are given the freedom to choose a more violent method that they might otherwise avoid in real life. The point being that the game allows for the player to explore a mindset that they would be unfamiliar with and in turn provides them with a greater insight into themselves and others through their reparative play.

The Experimental Self has a more diverse range than the other character types. Bowman notes that it "arises when a player attempts to create a character as an 'experiment.' These personas may exist as bizarre concepts, highlight interesting themes in the game, or may present difficult role-playing challenges" (Bowman 175). The Experimental Self is developed with the capacity to push the aesthetic boundaries of the RPG, and it can be encapsulated by the critical play concept which Mary Flanagan refers to as re-dressing, reskinning, or re-writing (Flanagan 32-34). She refers to these being used as a "simple subversion of a stereotypical norm" (221) where the player can create "miniature rebellions within [the] confines" (57) of the game. While all the functions of the character may be the same in a mechanical sense, the emphasis is placed on the theming for the purposes of trying to change how the game itself can be perceived. A wizard in *D&D* for example, someone who has spent years studying the arcane arts, is set to have a spell book. Many assume that this is meant to be a tome they carry with them.

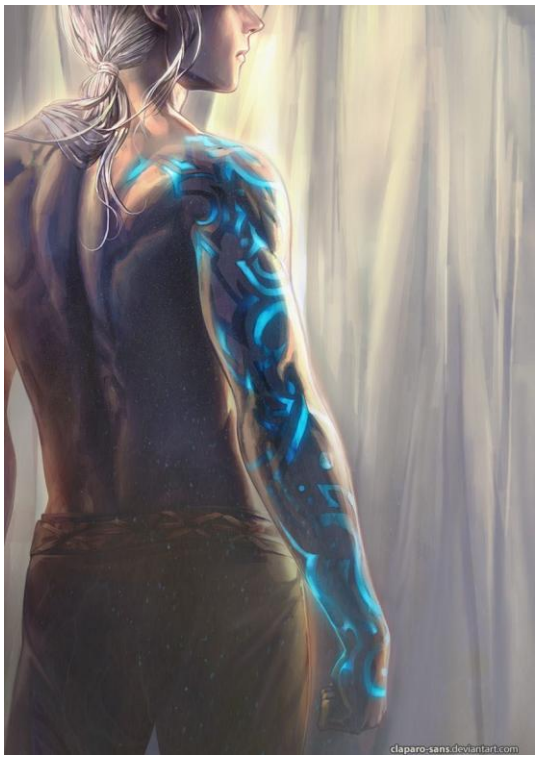


Figure 60: Wizard with Magical looking Tattoo on Arm

A fun alternative to this would be that the wizard tattoos their spells across their body, as depicted in the above image. Mechanically, this functions the same but conceptually it is

perceived much differently from your typical wizard. This reskinning allows for the preconceived notions of character archetypes to be overwritten by more creative ideas. For the purposes of reparative play, the players are then freer to think about the world how they would like to and not how it is stereotypically represented in the source material.

There are no examples of games that exemplify the Experimental Self, like the other archetypes, as the main point of the Experimental Self is to create a character within the confines of the game that can deviate from its norm. However, as we observed earlier with Ally Beardsley's portrayal of her character, Pete Conlan, there is room for depiction of trans characters within the confines of RPGs through the Experimental Self. As we saw with Beardsley's example, there were no new mechanics that needed to be built up around the inception of a trans character and the theme for the character was able to be maintained in the context of a *D&D* game. *D&D*, only having one mechanic representing trans characters that is restricted to the race of elves, makes for a hospitable site to implement the Experimental Self in this fashion. With the potential to progressively reskin the source material, the Experimental Self can allow for the conception of a variety of different characters from the trans community who can make for meaningful and interesting roleplay opportunities during reparative play.

Finally, the Taboo Self pushes the moral capacity of the game. Bowman explains it by saying how these

> …characters allow players to explore taboo subjects through the safe space of the role-playing game, an environment which remains, for the most part, consequence-free. Common taboos explored with these personas include: incest, cannibalism, murder, rape, [and] abuse... While non-gamers may view the exploration of these topics shocking, the Taboo Self can often be used to create a space for in-character and out-of-character discussion about normally off-limits topics. Indeed, the Taboo Self often works to reaffirm the moral stance of the players, rather than to subvert it. (Bowman 176)

Taking part in these themes during the roleplay and acting out uncomfortable situations akin to these can be considered taboo play. Some of these themes of taboo play, like incest and rape, might be a bit too extreme within the context of reparative play. The Taboo Self is a risky archetype to play, as the entire group might not be comfortable with having to navigate these

themes in their RPG. That being said, the Oppositional Self would offer a milder alternative to the more grotesque themes Bowman suggests here. Other aspects brought up, like abuse and murder, have the potential to be more effectively explored through the Taboo Self. However, to be implemented properly, the players all need to be on the same page with what they would be attempting to gain from this kind of reparative play experience. Ultimately, this archetype is not necessary as many of its benefits can be gained through the other selves that Bowman puts forward in her typology without as much risk to the players.

Having given a comprehensive review of the archetypes associated with RPG characters, I move on to discuss my own character design.

4.1.6 TTRPG Praxis as Research

In terms of my own autoethnographic approach, I found the Doppelganger Self insightful for when I decided to play an asexual Firbolg named Vander Annamson.



Figure 61: Illustration of Firbolg in D&D that resembled Vander Annamson

Vander was the son of the giant god and was tasked with uniting the giant kingdoms. He was forced to marry one heir from each kingdom and through this I was able to create a new narrative for myself with Vander. I treated each relationship I was in as queer platonic instead of succumbing to the in-game expectations for my character to become romantically entangled.

Even though I was not romantically or sexually attracted to my partners, I was still able to be good friends with them and that was more in line with and with respect for my boundaries as a member of those relationships. Through this character I created my own narrative where asexuality was approached as a positive alternative to the heteronormative ideal. Since there were no imposing predispositions around things like gender and sexuality, I was able to exemplify *D&D*'s systemic affordances for non-normative relationality in the freedom I had to craft and position my character for a reparative play experience.

This benefited me greatly because I was able to create a piece of media, in my own canon at least, where an asexual character, like me, had a fulfilling existence without a sexual or romantic partner (Kemper, "Wyrding the Self" par. 1-6). This is in line with LARP designers Laura Wood and Quinn D where they note how the separation of sexual and romantic attraction in how these aspects are experienced by the character is useful for designing a character for the desired play that the player wishes to take part in (Wood and D par. 1-30). Considering aspects of my identity this way aided in creating a character who was more attuned to the way I felt about the world. In cooperation with my fellow players, I was able to "steer" away from any social pressure to pursue romance and felt supported in my exploration of asexual identity. Having this type of self-representation gave me the narrative empowerment I needed to begin openly identifying as ace (Kemper, "Wyrding the Self" par. 1-6), and with that came a greater degree of fulfillment in my social relationships.

Over the course of this section, I have looked at the use of *D&D* as a tool for facilitating reparative play. Setting up the concept of reparative play from Sedgwick's reparative reading, I showed how the alternative frame of play could better accommodate the performativity necessary to help normalize and develop progressive discourse around queer identity. Through the application of the tools presented, I illustrated how one might approach reparative play in RPGs in my autoethnography. This praxis demonstrates how autoethnographic methods illuminate the micro-politics of identity work in collaborative narrative games.

I have found that *D&D*, along with other TTRPGs, has great untapped potential for progressive change through reparative play and it will all start with players coming together to imagine a brave new world. In the next section, I observe limitations for this type of

representation from the position of the DM while linking the representational practices more firmly to characters with disabilities. I scrutinize this limitation in conversation with the theory of complex embodiment to provide a disability studies lens through which to judge representation, inclusion, and misappropriation.

4.2 The GM's Capacity for Representation

The GMs, or DMs role in TTRPGs is one of both behind-the-scenes world-building and maintaining a constant simulation of the players' social and physical environment. Everything the DM does and says is a prompt for the players to react to and everything that the players do and say needs to be responded to in kind. With so many moving parts, the role of a DM is exhausting and requires nothing less than a carefully considered approach. In line with this, the DM also needs to consider real-world politics so as not to tread into problematic territory. As such, an ethical dilemma arises when it comes to playing NPCs that the DM does not share an identity with.

I'm not referring to the DM being a human and the NPC being an orc, but more concerning is whether or not the NPC orc is being portrayed in a way that replicates a gendered, sexual, or racial stereotype from our real world by a DM who is none the wiser to the harm they might be causing.

It might stand to reason that the DM should only play the characters as a part of themselves and acquire them solely from the game's play material without adding any real-world political implications to it. However, a DM limiting themselves to the game's prescribed play material makes for strict adherence and conformity to the same ideology that created the play material, whereas going "against the traditional character creation 'tips' given in the books can provide a more engaging narrative experience because the focus shifts away from [things like] raw statistical strength" (Gaudreau 44-45). Deviation from the game's prescribed play material brings a diverse means of storytelling into the equation where, because people are more willing to include things like disability politics and themes in their TTRPG game space, the possibility of greater and more diverse narratives arises. In terms of progressive representation, Emily Morris conducted a survey where queer young adults with TTRPG experience were asked questions regarding queer identity and RPGs. The respondents remarked how, "it isn't enough to simply design for queer players, but to '[make] sure that there is a range of other identities and diversity within the TTRPG' (such as but not limited to race, disability, mental health, neurodiversity, weight etc.), and how those aspects form an 'intersectional queer experience.'" (Morris 53, 71). We see here that there is a call for greater inclusion of disabled characters. However, to what

degree can we foster this inclusion at our own table? The danger that comes with the replication of a single story is such that it creates a static image of a group of people in the mind of the audience. However, the affordances of greater diversity allow for new narratives which in turn is beneficial to the social reception of marginalized communities (Friedner par. 15).

This section addresses the limitations of how the DM can respectfully portray characters with a disability so as to diversify the story telling capacity of the game without doing a disservice to the communities they are depicting. I begin by explaining the theory of complex embodiment and showing how it can be applied to character portrayals in TTRPGs. I then observe examples of disability that have been depicted in popular media and that was well-received by fans and members of the disability community alike. I then propose a theoretical means of inclusion for the DM rather than representation to avoid the pitfalls that come with depicting marginalized characters without sharing their identity. I conclude this section by showing how Scott Magelssen's performance studies concept known as simming can be employed to bolster the inclusion of disability voices through the game's play material.

4.2.1 Theory of Complex Embodiment

The theory I will be using as the foundation for scrutinizing representation for disability identity in TTRPGs is known as the theory of complex embodiment. Tobin Siebers, the scholar behind the theory, sought to develop a model for identity politics that took the embodied knowledge that is innate to a person's physical and mental being and put it into conversation with their environmental barriers and affordances. He developed the theory of complex embodiment so it can be used as a disability model that, "raises awareness of the effects of disabling environments on people's lived experience of the body, but it emphasizes as well that some factors affecting disability, such as chronic pain, secondary health effects, and aging, derive from the body" (Siebers 284).

He acknowledges that embodiment is a point of contention in disability studies saying that while, "The medical model has a biological orientation, focusing almost exclusively on disability as embodiment. The social model opposes the medical model by defining disability relative to the social and built environment, arguing that disabling environments produce disability in bodies and require interventions at the level of social justice" (Siebers 284). So, complex

embodiment takes the lived reality of both the medical and social models of disability to further our understanding of disability experience and get closer to an accurate representation of disability issues. To this end, he means to avoid simplifying issues down to a level of dismissal but further complicate our understanding of disability to push forward arguments around social construction, identity, and the body that have otherwise been neglected or isolated in our approach to disability studies (Siebers 287).

With regard to my scholarship, complex embodiment is crucial for observing how the representation of the body and the body itself are mutually transformative. The manner the body is represented socially; be it movies, magazines, games, etc.; in turn affects the body's experience (Young 23-25). Reciprocally, the body has the capacity to influence how is it represented socially as we as humans can change the way media depicts our bodies from an activist approach.

That being said, it stands to reason that the practices for representing characters in TTRPGs might benefit from being founded on the principles of complex embodiment. I believe the game designers for *Teleneuro* exemplified this approach to allow for greater interpretation when it came to character creation. I remarked previously on how they focused on neurodivergent symptoms which deters players from pathologizing their interpretation of the traits while encouraging the players to create their character with their personal mind in mind in a way that evades restricting them to a single category. However, while individual players, who are representing themselves through their characters, would have the majority of the embodied and social knowledge associated with their own disability, the DM would most likely not. This is due to the fact that the plethora of bodies and minds they would need to portray when playing NPCs would have such a variety that they would not have the experience with every disability that they could hope to include in their game, that is if they were trying to be inclusive of a range of disability representation. However, if the DM only ever portrayed NPCs who had the same gender and sexuality as them that could be seen as problematic, as a refusal to include other identities in their game (Baker 35).

As a DM, my aim for playing an NPC is not primarily for the sake of diverse representation but rather for the sake of making interesting characters. If it would be more interesting to have a

character of a specific station, like a blacksmith or captain of the guard, be a woman rather than a man then that is the route I would gravitate to. I also tend to make certain aspects of the character, like sexuality or religious beliefs, not immediately apparent, much like it is in real life. However, I would not recommend other DMs replicate these approaches for the portrayal of disability identity because it might promote the fetishization of disabled characters or make disability issues invisible, respectively. That being said, refusal to include disabled identities in the game is also not the route we should be taking if we wish to make room for greater representation. So, the question remains, what is the DM's capacity for disability representation in a TTRPG?

4.2.2 Portrayal of Diverse Identities as a DM

As we already covered, the first way to tell if the DM can productively and effectively portray disabled identities with an NPC would be to know if they have the embodied knowledge that came with said identity. I am not here, however, to argue that a blind DM should be allowed to portray a blind NPC. Others have already discussed how "When players see themselves reflected in the characters they portray, it fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment… [and how] It allows individuals from marginalized communities to find a voice in the narrative and feel valued within the gaming community" (Inn at the End: A TTRPG Haven par. 3). Rather, I will be focusing on everything external to their own embodied knowledge because the incorporation of, "diverse backgrounds, genders, sexual orientations, and abilities into the game, TTRPGs become a more welcoming space for all players, helping to break down barriers and challenge stereotypes" (Inn at the End: A TTRPG Haven par. 3). As such, this scrutiny is warranted to help break social barriers to disability inclusivity in TTRPGs.

Disability studies scholars Gulka et al. state that, "Authentic representation includes hiring actors with disabilities to play characters with disabilities, increasing the amount of background and principal characters with disabilities, focusing less on the disability when characters have a disability, and putting actors with disabilities in roles that are not disability specific" (141). That being said, there are many instances in popular media where; by doing research on characters with a disability, able-bodied and minded actors feel confident in their ability to represent them. This is not to the extent of empathy but to portray disability inclusively and respectfully. Now, I

move on to observe the legitimacy of this idea in how disabled characters portrayed by able-bodied and minded actors benefit, and have been received by, members of the disability community.

4.2.3 Examples of Informed and Uninformed Disability Portrayal

The first instance I observe was notably done on the D&D podcast Dimension 20 by Ally Beardsley and their DM, Brennan Lee Mulligan. When creating their character Pete Conlan, a drug dealer with a hardcore substance addiction, Mulligan and Beardsley worked with sensitivity consultants to design the mechanics and narrative around the character Pete Conlan. During this consultation work, Beardsley was given direction on how to portray a character dealing with addiction recovery, as there has been no evidence to suggest that Beardsley has embodied knowledge of this experience. In this case, the character was well received, and the cast members of the show did their due diligence in ensuring a respectful portrayal of this disability. Beardsley reports said mechanics and how they implemented them in their roleplay of the character:

> I really wanted to address addiction and recovery more specifically in some sort of way in the game, and I knew that in this season -- I don't want to give away too many spoilers -- Sweet-Boy Pete works in a bookstore and is trying to figure out what's next. Brennan met some sensitivity consultants because we wanted to do this right. We didn't want to do, "Roll a d20 to see if you relapse." We didn't want to gamify addiction or someone's addiction to chaos, or chaotic behavior.
>
> So we came up with this really cool thing with these sensitivity consultants, but pretty much we use dice, and because Pete was in a bad place, he started with just a d4. As he worked with his sponsor and continued to attend Narcotics Anonymous meetings, he would bump up to a d6, a d8, all the way up to a D20. That dice came into play, because I sent Brennan a list of triggers that I think would have affected Pete, or would have made Pete want to self-obliterate into drug world. So throughout the season, sometimes Brennan would remember and ask me for it, and sometimes I would just know, "Oh, Pete -- no one can hang out with him tonight. I gotta roll this dice to see what's up with him.' (Hanna)

While this example supports the way an actor might make their portrayal of disability seem more authentic it should not overshadow the intention behind what the portrayal is trying to do. Answering the questions, what is this performance meant to convey to the audience, who is the intended audience, and why is it necessary that an able-bodied actor needs to be the one to portray the disability, with the assistance of a sensitivity consultant is important to keep the performance in check. As such, with the use of sensitivity consultants Mulligan and Beardsley were able to create a well-rounded progressive character with a disability and play them out accordingly, something that other media has failed to do.

That is not to say that this portrayal was free from any criticism. Addiction survivors, at the time, noted that the mechanics for the portrayal of addiction left no room for grace, that it only had punishments from the relapse, making it unrealistic in how it portrayed rehabilitation for addictions. According to this critique, when an addict relapses, it doesn't always make it more difficult to continue fighting their addiction, sometimes the experience of relapsing can be used to bolster their resolve. However, that experience is not universal for all addicts and the portrayal might not have benefitted from its inclusion. I now move on to another well-received, yet controversial, depiction of disability by an able-bodied actor.

Elizabeth Ellcessor, Mack Hagood, and Bill Kirkpatrick bring up the example of the wheelchair-using character from the TV show *Glee,* Artie.



Figure 62: Glee's Artie as Depicted in a Wheelchair

They remark on the complicated feelings they have for him as well as the positive reception he received (Ellcessor et al. 2). While the writers for *Glee* were advancing the politics of visibility, in their choice to include a character with this disability, the show undermined its own efforts by choosing to conveniently cast an able-bodied actor for the role (2). And even with this attempt at disability inclusivity, they maintained an ableist perspective by having the character long for an abled body, as shown by the able-bodied actor dancing in dream sequences and implying at times he could never be truly happy if he remained disabled (9), as depicted below.



Figure 63: Glee's Artie as Depicted Performing Able-bodied Choreography

Despite this, his visibility makes it possible for the audience to adopt the view that the show is cultivating a validation for Artie's importance and humanity and by extension all people with disabilities (14).

Within the politics of visibility, we can see that Pete Conlan and Artie both play similar roles in terms of their inclusivity and how audiences respond to them. The key differences are thus: 1) Pete was designed with sensitivity consultants in mind whereas there was no such inclusive effort made for Artie; 2) Pete's story is one of healing and depicts a realistic, albeit critiqued, sense of progress and failure when dealing with his addiction whereas Artie's story shows him unhappy with his current disabled state and coming to reluctantly accept it; 3) Pete is never portrayed as being healed from his addiction whereas there are many scenes throughout *Glee* that show how happy Artie would be without his disability in imagined sequences where he can walk and dance. Despite all this, both portrayals of disability seemed to be positively received by their audiences.

While one could argue that Pete is a more effective and beneficial portrayal of someone living with a disability, the character of Artie brought disability inclusivity to the media and garnered his own positive reception through his mere existence. So, we can see that the audience's positive response to these characters comes less from whether they have a progressive disability portrayal and more that they are allowed to be main characters in popular franchises. This would

suggest a demand for the inclusion of characters with disabilities in pop culture that has gone unmet for so long that the marginalized communities are just looking to be included or seen above all else (Ellcessor et al. 14).

4.2.4 Applications of Inclusion Over Representation

An interesting concept in media is the understanding of the benefits of inclusion without representation. In this capacity, characters of diverse backgrounds are being included in the story to allow individuals of those backgrounds to feel included. However, they do this without going into much detail regarding their identity as part of their characterization. The benefits of this portrayal are that the marginalized communities get to see themselves as part of the story and the writers and actors are free to portray them without sharing the identity. The drawback of this is that their identity doesn't come into play other than perhaps an acknowledgment and as such is not important to the overall plot of the story. However, inclusion might be of value to us in terms of the DM's capacity for disability portrayal in two important ways, especially considering even amongst marginalized identities disability often doesn't even get inclusive efforts (Jagoo par. 20).

The first is that,

> Contemporary scholars, activists, and members of disability communities have therefore interpreted labelling as a process of stereotyping, discrimination, and erasure. This minimizes the individuality and identity of those with disabilities by lumping large and diverse groups together — for example, assuming that all individuals with a particular physical, mental, or intellectual disability experience the world in the same way or have the same needs. Labelling and classification similarly force people into often narrowly defined boxes by collapsing the differences inherent in individuals and their disabilities into singular definitions that do not represent the individuals' realities or needs. Disabled individuals thus often face characterizations of themselves or their disabilities that are not defined by their lived experiences. (Raw 189)

In this sense, general stories of disability that are better known would mainly assist in reinforcing ableist stereotypes and depictions of disability (189-190). Inclusion would not be this

explicit in its depiction of disabled characters and allow greater room for interpretation. However, the mere presence of disabled characters is the safe, non-committal, response to a demand for greater representation which might keep us from causing more harm, but not necessarily doing anything worthwhile. Meaning if the disability does not have its presence made known in any capacity, then the depiction runs the risk of being invisible altogether.

To explain the second point of value that inclusion might have for the DM's capacity for depicting disability brings us to consideration of disability-coded characters.



Figure 64: Meme Signifying how Autistic-coded Characters are preferred by the autistic community as opposed to explicitly Autistic Characters

The above image conveys how autistic characters designed for representation like Sheldon from *The Big Bang Theory* don't relate to the autistic viewer like characters like Lilo from *Lilo and Stitch* or Tina from *Bob's Burgers*.

Christa Mullis discusses the politics and reception of autistic-coded characters at length saying how,

> For autistic fans, an 'autistic-coded' character is not merely a character they would like to be autistic, or that they see a few sprinklings of autistic traits in, but one who is so

> obviously autistic, they must actually be autistic. At the very least, these characters were based on the idea of autism as marked by certain 'unusual' ways of thinking and being. It's therefore not a far reach for autistic fans to read as 'autistic-coded' characters who are declared "autistic" in the pilots of their series, retracted by their creators or not. It certainly isn't for a character like Abed Nadir who came out of the mind of an undiagnosed autistic person. (150)

In this sense, observing key symptoms of a disability would be enough to focus the audience members' reading of the character to allow for the interpretation of a character as being disability-coded. As such, a potential route for the DM to take would be to portray disabled NPCs by describing them through actions they take, that would predict presenting symptoms, as opposed to explicitly labeling them as disabled and trying to simulate their mannerisms through an active performance.

While the DM does still need to play the character, they do not need to act like or speak on behalf of the disabled identity they do not share. Instead, we have the inclusion of disabled characters to allow the DM to accommodate the need for greater diversity at their table. Playing out the disability of the character would be less embodied and mostly verbal. The descriptions given of the character could imply a non-abled body or mind without being explicit about it.

The second point of value comes from a benefit of the TTRPG medium which allows for something more proactive for disability portrayal through scripted interactions. In typical *D&D* fashion, many source books for the game provide the DM with lines that an NPC might say to the players upon meeting them or providing them with information for their quest. For example, in the *D&D* adventure supplement, *Strixhaven: A Curriculum of Chaos*, the following script is provided for the DM to narrate:

> The characters notice that the front of Bow's End Tavern is oddly deserted, but then they see a familiar face. The student says: 'Hey, friends! Tulk's drained the retention pool behind the tavern for cleaning tomorrow. For a few hours, we've got a perfectly smooth, empty pool. You know what that means—mage's skate park, baby! Come on, let's see who'll pull the wildest moves and win the prize purse!'" (Hamon 114)

If lines like these were included for characters with disabilities to portray their actions, mannerisms, perspectives, needs, or pejoration, then the DM could relay them without speaking on behalf of the identity. Of course, these lines would have to be written with sensitivity consultants and members of the disability community in question, but Magelssen has already done a lot of the groundwork regarding the implementation of a script when it comes to a performance studies concept known as simming.

4.2.5 Simming as a Method of Inclusion

In his book, *Simming,* Magelssen discusses the applications of simulated performance, simming. Most commonly it is employed for educational purposes. For example, an actor playing the role of a blacksmith at Pioneer Village would act and talk like someone from that era, as shown below.



Figure 65: Blacksmith at Pioneer Village heating up a piece of metal in the fire

In a similar capacity, museums might employ actors to act and talk like the people who lived at the time of the exhibit. A lot of this would have to be improvised, as I touched on in my object text analysis, however, there is a lot of it that is scripted for the sake of keeping consistency with the information the museum wants them to deliver and how they want them to deliver it. In this capacity, the audience is being educated in a more immersive format with reliable information.

Simming uses practices from performance and theatre to design spaces where narratives are played out to give an understanding of a specific experience and contextualization to the actors and audience (3), as shown in the educational simulation at the Challenger Learning Center below.



Figure 66: Astronautical Experiential Learning Attended by Scott Magelssen

Likewise, *Survival of the Able* sets up a context in the theatre of the mind to play out a narrative for the lived experience of disabled individuals in the 1300s. According to Magelssen, this instance would be a "simming of witness," where the design goal is to bring attention to the individuals who suffered a past or present injustice or trauma through the rhetorical use of the narrative (14).

While there is something to be said about historical accuracy and interpretation, the intentions behind the design of this TTRPG are mainly to induce discomfort, as that is often the primary aspect of certain art pieces. Magelssen makes note of how discomfort or anxiety felt by the actors can be used productively to create conflict and controversy (43-44). The social and political insight that is evoked from the players then is an understanding of how civil rights laws and technologies have developed, since the 1300s, by subjecting them to the struggles of a world devoid of them. The intention is to then impose on the players the question of how to better

accommodate accessibility needs and demonstrate the necessity for accessibility affordances to continue being developed.

So, when it come to using the concepts of simming as NPC dialogue, we might be able to assist the actor, the DM, in their inclusion of disabled characters by providing them with a pre-set script in their game. This script might convey concerns that a member of the disability community would have within the game world as well as how they might want to be described by the DM. To this end, there might be a system developed for scripting and implementing inclusive elements in an RPG for DMs to follow. Here we can provide the inclusion of disability voices built into the game without the DM needing to share every single disability identity with the characters.

In summary, the only means by which the portrayal of complex embodiment can be fully attained is by the portrayal being done by, and to represent, a disabled individual. And, while we can leave the majority of that for the players who represent themselves in their characters, the DM cannot possess the intersectional identity required to appropriately represent every disabled identity. As such, a potential solution to this lack of representation would be inclusion born from the design of the game done by and for sensitivity consultants and members of the disability community. In this capacity, we can acknowledge how narrative elements within the game's design can aid in disability portrayal and be inclusive of critical stances of disability politics.

In the next chapter, I convey the importance that online spaces, as a media site, have for hosting social identities from TTRPGs through artistic interventions and some concerns for members of the disability community in said online spaces.

Chapter 5

Access and Connection Through Online Communities

Up to this point, we have been able to see the potential that TTRPGs have as a media site for disability representation using performance studies concepts and disability rhetoric. However, the online communities have yet to be touched on so to give greater insight into the TTRPG community's online engagement I will be dedicating this chapter to observing fan art as a means of online fan self-representation and then concerns brought up by the communities with regard to uninformed consent.

I begin by displaying the importance that online spaces, as a media site, have for hosting social identities from TTRPGs like *D&D*. To do this, I observe fan art done online of the players' characters created in *D&D* as a form of self-expression. This is so I can convey the strengths of self-representation that TTRPGs could have if they afforded greater means of disability representation but ultimately need to be supplemented with online discursive interventions, making the online public sphere invaluable to the disability communities' engagement with the TTRPG scene.

I then transition over to an ethnographic section where I have compiled 303 Reddit stories around the topic of "Nightmare GMs." This will help us observe newcomers' approaches to online engagement as well as potential safety and accessibility considerations we need to make when designing content with disability themes.

5.1 Discourse of Fan Art in *D&D*

With the release of the 5th edition, *D&D* has made their character creation mechanics a lot more diverse. This way, the game allows for a very personalized identity, and as such it has appealed strongly to those who place a high value on their own identity. Naturally, TTRPGs are only limited to the imagination, making the possibilities nearly endless. Conversely, this makes it so that the image of the character is usually an isolated experience, restricted to the players' thoughts. So, when players bring their character out into the real world, it shows a representation of themselves that others would not have been able to experience otherwise. I observe the concept of self-representation and identity within the customization of player-made *D&D* characters and how they are presented online as fan art. My goal for this section is to show how online communities use the *D&D* character fan art as a way to promote artistic growth and express identity.

I observe this discourse broadly in terms of identification without a specific focus on disability identity as the intention behind this chapter is to develop an understanding for the role of this specific online community discourse intervention. Joanna Rankin observes that, "Recognizing online discussion as a public sphere and the voice of readers as force in the shaping of public opinion around disability, the online discussion put forth by readers serves as a valuable source of information" (75). *D&D* fan art, as a visual form of online discussion, functions as one such "valuable source of information" that allows disabled players to insert their identities into a public sphere that often lacks such representation.

I begin by analyzing the best practices to use when navigating and engaging with the fan art communities attained through my own experience. Then I depict the use of online TTRPG fan art in how individuals represent themselves through fan art as a genre of self-portrait, or selfie. To this end, I show how the depiction of personalized characters speaks to the strengths that TTRPG fan art community interventions have for self-representation as I find self-portrait to be the most directly linked practice to representing the self when it comes to marginalized identity that are often excluded from popular games.

5.1.1 My Experience

My autoethnographic engagement with the D&D fan art community reveals that the process of commissioning art is governed by a distinct etiquette that ensures mutual respect and facilitates the successful translation of an imagined self into a tangible artifact. I commissioned an artist that I was previously familiar with, Zal Cryptid, to draw some of my *D&D* characters. I was hoping to learn what the experience of engaging with the world of fan art was like, both as an identification I had with the end result of my commissioned piece as a self-portrait as well as through the commissioning process. I knew that I already identify with a lot of the characters I played as in *D&D,* but I wondered how I would feel about them being parts of me in their artistic depictions. The project itself took inspiration from a piece of art depicting all the different versions of Lara Croft throughout the *Tomb Raider* series over the years sitting in a diner (see Figure 1).



Figure 67: "1996 to 2013" by Jerome Caillere.

Much like in the above image, depicting all the different historical game models of Lara Croft sitting in a café, I wanted my experience with *D&D* to be historicized with the depiction of eight select characters, that I have created over the years I played *D&D*, sitting in a tavern (see above Figure).



Figure 68: Eight D&D characters in a medieval tavern by Zal Cryptid.

The end result of this piece filled me with nostalgia. In each character in this image, I could see a part of myself, both in how I chose to play them and how I felt when I was thinking and feeling as them. Seeing a rendering of the images in my mind suddenly made the stories seem more real and present in the moment. Even now, it feels like they all have their own separate stories, lives, and worlds to go back to and be a part of but in this moment, they were all taking a break until they were needed again. To me, this image is something I identify strongly with as they are brought to life here just as I once did in my playing of *D&D*.

Throughout the interactions that I had with the artist, I made sure to follow the guidelines given by Kelly Knox in her article *Commission An Artist to Take Your D&D Character to the Next Level*. Among these she included "Think about what you want your character to look like…Find reference images to help your character come to life…Find an artist with open commissions…Read the artist's terms before you contact them, especially image ownership…Don't haggle the price…Be prepared to pay correctly up front…[and] Be patient!" (par. 5-17). In terms of social practice, the first two rules reveal how it is beneficial for the outcome of our character's design if we, the commissioner, have a clear image of what the end result should be as well as sources to supplement their description where words fail. The next four clearly illustrate polite etiquette when engaging the artist so as not to put them in an awkward position where they have to decline work they might need, and to ensure that there are

no major disagreements or undue stress for the artists involved. These rules add up to the minimum of respect needed to keep the fan art practice alive and thriving.

With this in mind, our interaction started with me ensuring that they were available for commissions and that they would let me use the work for any scholarly work I did. I then described the project to them, and they gave me an estimate of how much it would cost to do something of this scale. They typically measured their work by the number of characters and the completion of a background, the final cost being $75. I told them that I would prefer it to be done by mid-November of 2019 and they agreed to that despite having taken on other commissions. To communicate we used Messenger, and I was able to describe each character as I saw them in detail. Occasionally I used reference material like the Lara Croft picture (see Figure 68) or a different artist's depiction of one of the characters I had done previously (see Figure 70).



Figure 69: Häiglé Foolsbait by Joey Hazel

This particular piece was done as concept art for a comic I was writing and wasn't done through the same avenue as a commission would be. Though I do still see this as a self-portrait

of who I was when I played this particular character and found it apt to direct Zal Cryptid's artistic expression while using it as a reference point for the character's features.

This was an effective method because we were not restricted to words for describing the characters. I gave them $40 upfront and $35 before they started the final inking of the picture. In the end, the project was completed on time, and I was satisfied with the results. I was able to attain the expression of my identity that I wanted, and Zal Cryptid was given an appropriate incentive to continue developing their skills as an artist, through a monetary transaction. With this desire for self-expression from the commissioners and the validation for the artists, the fan art community remains self-sustaining.

5.1.2 The *D&D* Fan Art Community

To maintain itself, the fan art community as a whole has an extensive base that requires care and understanding from everyone involved. Those who partake in the making of fan art need to understand the limits they have regarding copyright (Bailey par. 1-10), and those who commission the artist to draw their content need to understand the limits of said artists (Fehr par. 1-15). Specific fan art communities, like the ones for *D&D*, are often centered around specific stories across multiple media. The common interest shared by the members is what makes the community, and stronger fan art communities are typically those that are encouraged by the creators of the story. For example, there was a lot of criticism regarding the diversity in body type of the character in the new *She-Ra* television series. The creator was able to circumvent this by encouraging the fan art community around it and empowering them through their own imagination (Robinson par. 14). The artists share their content to show their own individual experiences with the story that the art is based on. Whether it be someone's interpretation of what they would be like as a *My Little Pony* character or a reinvention of the design for Darth Vader, it is the unique spin that the artist can put on their work that makes it self-representing (Dickerson par. 5).

Those who lack artistic talent to make this form of self-representation can commission an artist to draw for them, from their descriptions. This practice is especially popular within the *D&D* community where players commission artists to bring their original characters to life (Knox par. 1-3). This engagement develops these communities and empowers the artists. Additionally, it is a

common exercise within fan art communities to help each other improve in their art style. One point that Gareth Schott and Andrew Burn bring up is that

> Terms such as ‘communities of practice’ (Wenger) and ‘textual poachers’ (Jenkins) have been used to describe firstly the practices that serve as a source of coherence for a community, based on the dimensions of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire, and the objects through which social groups create meaning, which others have (often incorrectly) characterized as trivial or worthless. (Schott and Burn 260)

This meaning that the community has consistent discourse that can be taken part in over this want to help one another improve. This holds its own value and the community members can each decide if they want to engage with each other regarding criticism or feedback.

5.1.3 *D&D* Fan Art as a Genre of Selfie

Through this consensual engagement of fan art, we can observe the parameters of the genre. Fan art of *D&D* characters is commonly hosted across all media platforms, but artists usually concentrate their collection on sites such as DeviantArt, Instagram, or websites they designed to host their work. In each case, this fan art begins with a player who is willing to pay to have their *D&D* characters’, and by extension their own, imagined likeness depicted with an art commission. Behind the scenes, a long back and forth has gone on where the artist and commissioner have discussed their expectations for the piece, the price has been set and verified, descriptions of the character and other images to accompany them have been sent back and forth for clarity, the drafts have been appraised and confirmed, and, having received payment for the final piece, the watermark placed on the final draft by the artist has been removed before sending to the commissioner. While there might be some tension for self-representation with the back and forth of the descriptions provided to the artist and the creative mediation the artist takes, the final product is usually an unexpected accuracy for the fans, like looking in a mirror for the first time after having your appearance only ever described to you and imagined. The artist is able to solidify their fluid vision into something tangible that gives permanence to this interpretation of their identity.

Like many other forms of selfie, Instagram allows for hashtags to accompany pictures. This way they are grouped with other artifacts of the same genre. The fan art that is created usually comes with a character introduction (see the below Figure) and hashtags of popular media trends within the community.



Figure 70: Mordok: Mountain Dwarf Barbarian by The Sketch Goblin

Common among these hashtags are #dungeonsanddragons and #dndcharacter for *D&D* fan art (see the below Figure).

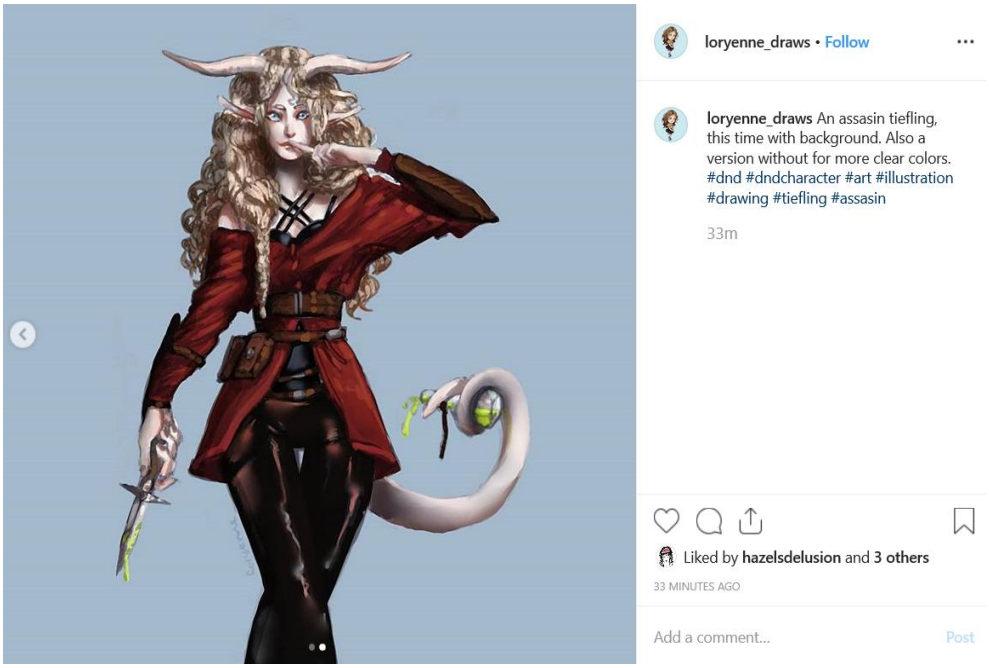


Figure 71: Assassin Tiefling by Loryenne

For advertising purposes, the artists will often include #commissionsopen on a recent work of art they did to let people know that they are currently willing to accept commissions (see the below Figure).

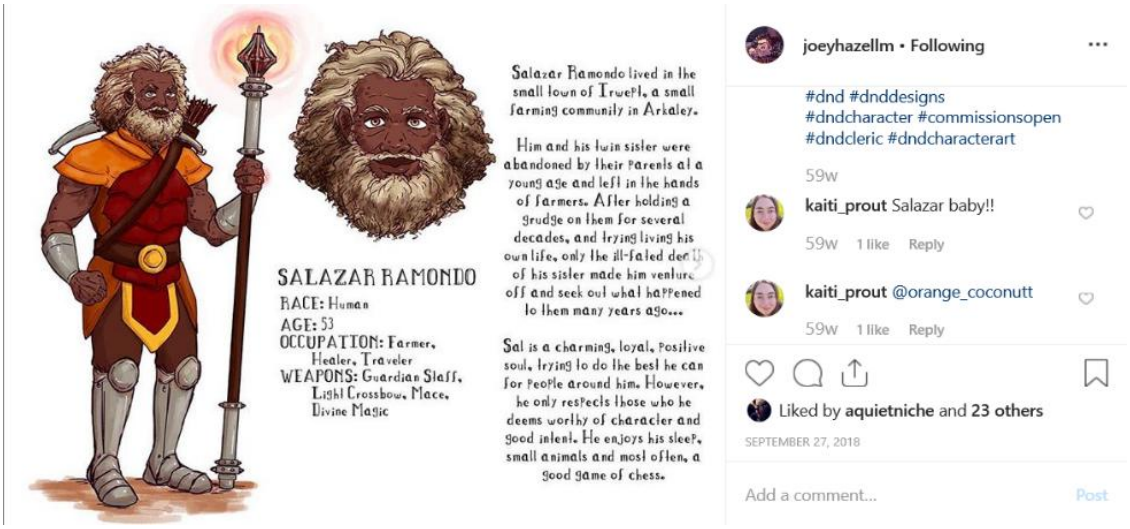


Figure 72: Salazar Ramondo by Joey Hazel

If we use these parameters to categorize *D&D* fan art as its own genre, we can situate it in the context of self-portraits, or selfies. Art allows for a more diverse expression of one's self, not confining us to our body type or look. The rhetorical value this has within a community promotes imaginative growth and unites the members of the community through a reminder of their shared interests. Through these means, members of the disability communities have the potential to supplement their own identity in the TTRPGs they play through their online engagement with this artistic medium. While the overlapping genres of game studies and discourse of identity play heavily within this form of self-expression, *D&D* fan art can be perpetuated as its own subgenre. Through the interdisciplinary ties, we can see the community using their experiences within the TTRPG to advocate for diversity in identity due to the diversity of the art that is present. This in turn allows for the normalization of fan art done as self-expression and creates a demand within the market for commissions.

Looking into the applications of commissioned fan art as a piece of identification, I observed the work that has already been done on online avatars. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note that "The possibility of configuring oneself as an avatar with nonhuman features and capacities…offer new dimensions to the performance of the self" (Smith and Watson 78). It should be noted that they are speaking about avatars in video games as opposed to avatars through fan art. However, for the purpose of identification, the concepts they talk about are still translatable to *D&D* fan art as forms of self-representation.

This concept of the self that we portray can be empowered through the subgenre of which it is presented. The diversity of the options at our disposal makes for a greater potential of self-representation. The book *Gaming Representation* examines the game *World of Warcraft* and an avatar within said game that is being used to represent a female player. It brings up the fact that because "there are no externally enforced constraints on her body… [the player] is free to reconfigure her troll's gender, attraction, and bodily expression via the game's menus and in-world shops" (Malkowski and Russworm 220). With no rules of gender constraints being enforced, the player is free to decorate the body of their in-game avatar how they see fit.

It is evident that online representation through avatars, just like through fan art, is malleable and the allowances for customizability and empowerment it provides make it very appealing as a

genre of self-portrait, contributing to a greater community. Beth Coleman in *Hello Avatar* discusses the virtual communities saying

> As networked subjects we desire more, not less, contact. And, we like to have multiple channels through which we send our message. We feel the global power of these connections. The real effects in the world such as political mobilization or friendship bonds, reinforce the power of identity located in the networks we create. (Coleman 50)

Similar to the connections made by the fan art community members over *D&D*, Coleman talks about how the power of identity is accentuated within online communities. *D&D* being the common interest the community members can use to engage with one another while exploring their individuality and artistic expression.

While online fan engagement with the artistic work being done is prevalent in terms of identity depiction, it still has shortcomings to consider. For one, explicit disabilities with physical features are a lot easier to depict (see the below Figures).



Figure 73: Critical Role's Dancer by Carmen (porzio_art)



Figure 74: Khazimir by Rallix M

Whereas neurodivergence is not as accessible through visuals and is primarily open to interpretation (see the below Figure).

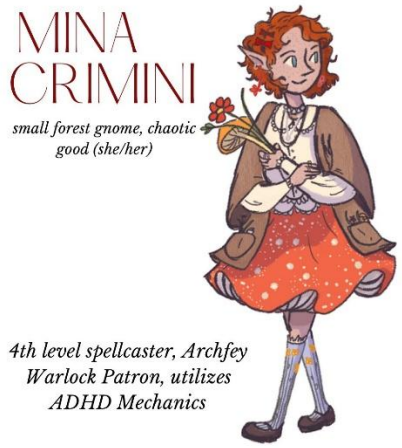


Figure 75: Mina Crimini by DnD Disability

Additionally, the same issues with fetishization or depictions of tragedy that are present in most media could be made prevalent if the work is not being done with respect to the disability communities. This artistic intervention, however, is still something useful for supplementing the lack of disability identity shown in modern-day TTRPGs. As such, it is a great example to draw from concerning fan community interventions of the source material.

Through my engagement with the *D&D* fan art commission, I can say with certainty that the allowances are entirely up to the members of the community regarding acceptable artwork. They make it possible to explore many depictions of our identity through artwork in ways that they would not otherwise have access to and, if everyone is respectful, it can be a fun and self-actualizing process.

I observed the fan art in the *D&D* communities because the self-representation that is the description of a character can be brought to life through these commissions. Sharing ourselves with others is a very delicate and complicated process, a process that is simplified through the interactions we have with fan artists. In this, fan art supplements the TTRPG experience by bringing the characters we identify so strongly with to life in ways that grant us a sharper understanding than game mechanics and collective imagination can afford us. To this end, we can observe how the identification we have with our TTRPG characters is rhetorical in nature for our self-image, whether we can depict their likeness ourselves or not, as well as how this online engagement allows for crucial artistic interventions in areas lacking from the core rulebooks. While these artistic interventions demonstrate the power of online communities to supplement and enrich the TTRPG experience, the very accessibility that enables this empowerment also exposes players—particularly those from underrepresented groups—to significant social risks when expectations are not aligned. As such, in the next section, I go into detail regarding the vulnerability this online community engagement comes with as well as the power we provide different players at the table through our consent to take part in the game.

5.2 Uninformed Consent in TTRPGs

Dominant discourse within TTRPG communities often provides a lot of stories, advice, and criticism surrounding the role of the GMs to help them run their games at home ("PAX Unplugged 2017…;" "PAX 2013…"). Despite this abundance of GM-focused media content, and the numerous papers written on the role and best practices of the GM (Axner; Bisogno; Connell; Bowman "Social Conflict in Role-playing Communities…;" Dashiell; Edwards; Fine; Lasley; Yamamoto; St. Jacques and Tobin; White et al. "At the Head of the Table…"), horror stories of players dealing with Nightmare GMs (NGMs) are prevalent within the TTRPG community. These stories range from GMs forcing their players into scenarios to fit their desired narrative to GMs violating the boundaries that were previously set by the players. Acknowledging the uniqueness of each story, it is evident the GMs and the players often differ in terms of their set expectations (White et al., "At the Head of the Table…" 53), thereby making it difficult for the group to provide informed consent for the game.

We observed, in previous sections, how social media platforms allow members of disability communities to connect and engage with TTRPG communities' media and discourse, mainly due to the accessibility it affords them. Therefore, it stands to reason that members of the disability communities are particularly vulnerable to these nightmare GM scenarios, as the majority of these stories took place, or began, online. As such, concerns about coercion and uninformed consent regarding TTRPG media for individuals with a disability should be put forward and acknowledged explicitly alongside the safety tools and precautions necessary to mitigate them.

Now, establishing expectations before play is not a new concept in the TTRPG community but it is often limited to broad considerations of personal triggers and boundaries with inconsistent usage of safety tools, like the X card or a session 0 checklist (Reynolds and Germain 3-4). Whereas *Teleneuro* approaches this navigation of the game with greater nuance employing X, N, and O cards to accommodate the players more methodically (See Appendix B). So, when observing how the safety and agency of the players are balanced by their GM, alongside group objectives for play or larger narrative structures, it becomes evident from the persistence of NGM stories, how we communicate our expectations amongst each other has not been given enough attention. Concerning as it may be, the consent we provide to our fellow players to take

part in an improvised performance with them is often uninformed because the expectation for the anticipated play varies drastically from person to person.

While my focus for this dissertation is to bridge the gap between disability and game studies regarding TTRPGs, additional considerations need to be made for the capacity of individuals with disabilities to provide informed consent in their roleplaying experience. To this end, I posit the consent we provide to our fellow players when taking part in TTRPGs can only be considered informed when the GM and the players adequately harmonize and understand their separate expectations for the game. As will be illustrated in the stories I present, all too often we fall into the assumption everyone is on the same page and this assumption opens TTRPG players up to NGM scenarios. As such, greater consideration needs to be given to how we harmonize the group's collective expectations.

In this section, I show the present necessity for the TTRPG community to acquire greater understanding of how to set expectations in advance. To do this, I perform a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, "Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis;" "One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis?") as part of a discourse analysis on 303 Reddit stories regarding NGM power abuse and their (mis)management of TTRPG players. I first observe Foucauldian discursive formations within the subreddit communities I gathered these stories from to show an understanding of what sharing NGM stories provides.

I then apply interactional sociolinguistics to help distinguish the boundaries between a malicious NGM and a well-intentioned NGM. Using the work done in interactional sociolinguistics, I exemplify instances where expectations of the players were thwarted by the GM's rigid adherence to their understanding of the role. This will provide my claims with substance when considering GM versus player expectations. Afterwards, I expand on these perspectives and present the multiple issues that arise inhibiting the GM and the players from understanding each others' expectations for the game. Drawing on William J. White et al., and Steven Dashiell, I make it transparent how the role of the GM is perceived by the GM and players alike. Then, I conclude with an overview of pre-game considerations for garnering an understanding of the group's expectations. This will include a theoretical onboarding process and trial run for GMs.

5.2.1 Methodological and Ethical Considerations

Please be advised, I take a neutral standpoint centering responsibility for understanding the group's collective expectations and synergy evenly on everyone involved in the game. To differentiate the GM role from other players, I will refer to the GM as the GM and everyone who is considered a player, not in the GM role, as the players. When I refer to everyone at the table, I will call them the group.

Additionally, I understand ethical considerations must be made in how scholars allow for the information they gather online, like account names, quotes, and story links, to be made public in their academic work. In these cases, there is usually cause for concern that the information provided might come back to harm the original posters. However, considering the common practices online Reddit communities have in anonymizing the information they give, like changing the names of key characters, telling it as something that happened to a friend of theirs, or purposefully using throwaway accounts to post anonymously, I don't deem it necessary to avoid citing and quoting the sources as they are publicly available.

Finally, I acknowledge I cannot be certain all of these stories involve the players using safety tools as only a few commented on doing so.

5.2.2 Traits of a Bad GM

When fans of TTRPGs think of what a GM should be, we imagine them in a more active role (Bisogno 75). This is a set expectation everyone in the TTRPG scene has for the role of the GM (75), to be more involved in the game than a computer would be. Eccentric personalities, like Matthew Mercer or Brenna Lee Mulligan, often come to mind when we consider the ideal GM. Imagining a passive GM suggests an individual who is apathetic and provides no greater detail or imagination than what the game module provides them. GMs do not just statically run the world and react to everything the players do. They are tasked with keeping the pacing of the adventure, setting and maintaining the tone of the game, teaching new players the rules, providing consequences to the players' decisions, socially including all players, delivering the story beats and narrative outcomes, creating a comfortable environment, doing voices for the NPCs, and painting vivid ideas of the setting for the players (Bisogno 74). These expectations cannot be

done passively, requiring much time and effort from the GM. As such, the GM's role is expected to be an active one.

GMs, like the players, also understand they are expected to be in an active role (White et al., "At the Head of the Table" 54). How they approach this call to action varies based on a range of predispositions such as demographics, experiences, personal tastes, synergy with the players, and political affiliations. Such aspects of their lives impact their creative agenda for the game and play heavily into what actions they think are acceptable in their role. Unfortunately, it is not unusual for there to be a lot of assumptions on the GMs part that might lead to them acting as an NGM. I am intentionally using the community's term "Nightmare GM" because the chapter analyzes the discursive formation of that very concept within the community itself, rather than imposing a more clinical, external label.

Drawing from Michel Foucault's conception of discursive formations, rules and practices governing a specific group's production of knowledge (34-43), I observed their creation of, and occurrences within, the subreddits. The Redditors who posted on these sites were using them for the freedom of expression they would be granted on Reddit. More specifically, they were using these subreddits as a media site to voice the injustice they experienced from the power their NGMs abused. In doing so, they collectively created a communal judgment of qualifiers for what makes an NGM.

Within the subreddits, it is commonly accepted that an NGM is a GM who turns the play of whatever respective TTRPG, they are running into a stressful or emotionally painful ordeal for the players, which the players have not consented to nor desired. After reading and analyzing the Reddit stories, on the topic of NGMs, I compiled a list of common actions and themes, I touch on a bit later in this section, surrounding NGM activity from discursive formations qualifying them as such.

Initially, I separated these stories into four categories of the creative agenda (Bowman 12). These are narrativism, simulationism, gamism, and immersionism. The intention was for these categories to help isolate different realms of the creative agenda where we find the NGM at odds with the players. NGMs in the realm of narrativism are at odds with the players over narrative disputes. With gamism, they are having rule disputes. With simulationism, they are employing

contentious worldbuilding and having disputes over consistency. While with immerisionism, they are having social disputes that place tension on immersion (Bowman, "Social Conflict in Role-Playing Communities…" 12-15).

Regarding conflict in narrativism, NGMs tend to spotlight their ideas for the story they are creating, such as favouring non-player over their players' characters, and actively seeking to kill off PCs. For conflict in gamism, NGMs adhere to the rules so strictly it stunts player agency and creativity and break the rules at their leisure to disadvantage the players. For conflict in simulationism, NGMs often recreate sexist, racist, ableist, or religious propaganda in their campaigns, often under the guise of maintaining their ideas of realism. Finally, for conflict in immersionism, horror stories include instances of NGMs becoming heavily intoxicated at the table; flirting with or making sexual advances on players they have real-world feelings of attraction for; punishing players they dislike for bigoted or personal reasons; bullying or belittling players; and triggering the players with themes in-game.

While most of these are inexcusable, it is often assumed all these acts are done out of malicious intent on the NGMs part. However, based on my review of the Reddit stories, I put forward the notion that not all NGMs adhere to this toxic image. For instance, a potential causality in many NGM stories was a recurring pattern linking NGM activities to miscommunications within the group.

For the purposes and scope of this analysis, I found it most appropriate to highlight my findings regarding narrativism. I observed that group expectations for their story are often the most contentious for NGMs who do not mean harm to the players. As such, we can observe here examples of NGMs who made mistakes so we can learn how to best mediate them for the future.

5.2.3 NGM Horror Stories Analysis

To begin the review process, I scoured through hundreds of NGM stories on Reddit and copied each one to a Word document that laid out their issues with the NGM in an extensive enough manner to be a proper story. The subreddits these stories were sourced from include: r/AmItheAsshole, r/DungeonsAndDragons, r/DnD, r/rpg, r/rpghorrorstories, r/dndhorrorstories, and r/CritCrab. The stories I included for this analysis involved any stories where the NGM turns the play experience into a stressful or emotionally painful ordeal for the players, in a manner the players have not consented to nor desired. Understanding this was a broad criterion for inclusion I also excluded stories based on other criteria.

I excluded stories based on three lacking areas I deemed vital for me to get comprehensive information out of an experience with an NGM. I first excluded stories with a word count less than 100, so I could ensure enough context would be given to get a proper understanding of the Redditor's experience with the NGM.

I then excluded stories where the Redditor indicated they disliked the GM for reasons unrelated to the game. Some Redditors indicated they subscribed to problematic ideology, either through referencing the NGM in a bigoted manner or using problematic terminology in their description of people. For example, one story was titled "What could there be more worst than a Simp DM?" (BunnySar) indicating problematic ideology as the term "simp" is used by the incel community to insult men who are nice to women and treat them respectfully. In these instances, I felt the need to contest their claim, as the issues they had with the NGM seemed more to come from the problematic ethos the Redditor presented themselves with rather than any actual fault on the part of the GM.

Finally, I excluded stories lacking relevance to the NGM stories they claimed to be. In these stories, it seemed more like the player was upset with the outcome of the game rather than the GMing style. An example of this would be the posts "AITA for buying our Dungeon Master new minis for Dungeons and Dragons?" (dungeonsandminis) and "AITA For Inadvertently Driving Off My Dungeon Master?" (TheGreatMightyFool) where the Redditors were inquiring if they were in the right or the wrong about a conflict with their DM. It seemed unanimous in the comments the Redditors were being toxic, immature, and not communicating their expectations

to the DM. There were about fifteen such Reddit posts and they were dismissed by the subreddit community, where it was pointed out the GM was not an NGM, the player was the problem. After the stories were compiled, I uploaded them to NVivo14 to begin the coding process.

I applied a mixture of deductive and inductive coding. Being familiar with the language used in these NGM stories, I had some pre-set terms and categories in mind, these being the controlling GMs, unclearly communicated boundaries, and vindictive NGMs. I used these ideas to deductively code a starting point for organizing the stories as I saw their pre-defined categories. I then immersed myself in them and realized several considerations I had yet to make could be used to further organize my categories in subcategories. These being: the concepts of railroading, Mary Sues, and joining games as a stranger. I used these to further inductively code the stories into the areas of the creative agenda I thought they fit best.

For example, I thematically coded NGM stories into the area of narrativism based on if the story involved the players having issues with the way the NGM was handling the narrative while using terms like railroad and Mary Sue to identify such stories. I coded stories as gamism based on if there was contention with the GM changing the game in unfair ways or breaking the rules. I coded stories as simulationism if the NGM was inconsistent in the information they gave the players about the world or had instances of contentious worldbuilding, like sexism and racism. While I coded stories as immerisionism when in-game elements were negatively influenced by out-of-game social dynamics. Afterwards, I organized my codes to see the connection between the different themes. Though, as I mentioned for the scope of this analysis, it is most appropriate to highlight my findings regarding narrativism.

A Word Frequency Query acquired the keywords used in these stories that indicated certain themes. The keywords used are often regarded as terms for literary criticism, or at least derived from terms for literary criticism, but are used by the subreddit communities in the context of a TTRPG story to implicate the NGM's power in influencing the story unfavorably both in and outside of the game mechanics. As such, I found it best to use them in creating themes for different instances of NGM activity. For instance, *DMPC*, *DMNPC*, *Mary Sue*, *Gary Stu*, and *self-insert* are all words that can be searched to observe when a NGM has created a character in the campaign who is taking the spotlight away from the players. Approaching these stories from

the position of interactional sociolinguistics, a subfield of anthropological linguistics concerned with language's role in constructing and sustaining cultural practices (Günthner 53–76), we can see how these terms are all derived from the literary analysis term of "Mary Sue" as a character, resembling the author or favoured by the author, inserted into the story. It was this present use of terms derived from and for literary analysis within the subreddits that prompted me to use my narrativism category as a basis for this analysis.

Other search terms I used deductively included, *online*, *internet*, *stranger*, and *found*, as they can be searched for to examine parts of the stories indicating the player and the NGM did not know each other ahead of time. This approach exemplifies common themes within NGM Reddit stories and gives a good indication of how often these occurrences are a contributing factor to an NGM story.

Based on my review of the Reddit stories, there are a few exceptions to the commonly assumed image of a toxic NGM. While there does appear to be countless stories of NGMs being petty towards the players, violating their boundaries, and going out of their way to emotionally harm them, a considerable number of NGM stories boil down to a difference of creative agenda and an NGM who is statically adhering to their expectations for how they run the game despite concerns brought up by their players. Here, I do not intend to excuse such behaviour, rather I show disparities between these instances where an NGM story could have been avoided by communicating expectations from all parties involved more thoroughly.

Now, I draw on the information I synthesized regarding the type of NGM interactions that occur based on diverging expectations for the players. I address different aspects of the creative agenda and instances where the NGM acts in a manner showing a contrast between their creative agenda and that of the players, making it a nightmare scenario. I first observe instances of poorly communicated expectations. I then examine concerns on both the NGMs and the player's part for fear the players might be ruining the game. I conclude this data analysis by considering different themes of a controlling NGM that did not overlap with malicious intention.

Over the course of my analysis, I found 76 NGM stories explicitly indicated the expectations of the GM and players had not been properly communicated and varied greatly. A typical example of broad communication of expectations: "After a few weeks of prep-time for the DM

to write the first session and general storyline, we finally met up for a session 0. We rolled our stats, introduced our characters and got the general gist of the lands we be playing in." (Rubber_ducky25). While differing expectations are almost always a staple theme for an NGM story, as the players should not be expecting it to be a nightmare scenario, the fact the stories indicate points of contention surrounding poor communication of expectations reflects a greater need for the GM and players to synchronize their expectations for the play they are giving consent to.

There were two categories of voiced concern I investigated regarding the NGM stories. The first was concern on the NGMs part their players would be ruining the game. The second was the concern on the players part that they themselves would be ruining the game. In 19 of the stories, it was explicitly mentioned the NGM vocalized concern their players were ruining the game while in 24 stories it was mentioned the players themselves were concerned they might be ruining the game by bringing up issues with the NGM, whether they chose to do so or not. A couple of examples of the players feeling the social pressure deterring them from voicing concerns: "I just kept trucking along because I cared about the DM and did not want to hurt his feelings" (b3llamor3lla); "About 30 minutes later I felt kind of bad. Not for the DM but for the other players who I probably ruined their game" (ryanxwonbin); "I wasn't enjoying it, but nobody else at the table brought up any issues with it, and I didn't want to be the one ruining other people's fun, so I just shut my mouth and went along with it" (MarionberrySouth6010).

It should be noted that, in most NGM stories, the game becomes a nightmare scenario quickly and damages the relationship between the NGM and the players well before the narrator has a chance to consider bringing the issue up to the NGM. So, from this limited perspective, we can observe the hesitation in the player based on the implicit social expectations of the table.

Furthermore, it will be helpful to give a tally of the remaining themes. There were 132 stories where the players indicated the NGM was controlling, either through unfair limitations, DMPCs, or railroading; a practice that forces the players to go down a certain storyline as chosen by the GM. The following numbers don't add up to the 132 stories due to partial intersection of the observed themes. Within the 132 stories, there were an overlapping 73 instances of the NGM imposing an unfair limitation, 82 instances of the NGM using DMPCs, and 68 instances of

railroading. 21 instances included both DMPCs and railroading. While 74 of these instances included notes of conduct that indicated malicious or problematic intent on the NGMs part, the other 58 instances indicated the controlling behaviour was not planned to intentionally upset the players.

There are some instances where amends were made from non-malicious mistakes on the NGMs part: "… unlike a majority of posts on here we are still all friends, nobody's feelings got hurt, and we all can talk to each other..." (Minigiant2709); and "We apologized and owned up to the different things we did wrong. He invited me back into the campaign with open arms and we are doing our best to make amends" ("Toxic DM or is it me?"). Additionally, there was explicit mention of unintentional instance of NGM being controlling "…the DM felt that we really needed a healer, so he gave the party 'a literal heal-bot' (his words, not mine). This turned out to be a warforged cleric character, who became a bit of a DMNPC for a while there. Though it wasn't the DMs intention, it was clear that is what she turned into." (_Thespian_).

This evidence suggests, despite no harmful intentions, the NGM scenarios came about from group members expectations being in contention with one another, partially due to a lack of communication. I go on to provide greater detail on the types of expectations players and GMs alike have for the role of the GM. I continue drawing from my NGM story analysis to indicate where greater consideration needs to be taken regarding the collective expectations of the group.

5.2.4 Expectations of the GM

In these NGM stories, there are instances where expectations were not communicated well. Due to this oversight, the players did not have the best idea of what they were consenting to. In one instance, a group of players came together for the purpose of the NGM playing out a fantasy novel he was writing (ThrowawayfanficDM). This was not made apparent until several sessions in and by then the players felt cheated and railroaded through a story of the NGMs creation. This example is a larger consideration of narrativism and somewhat existential to the campaign. This manner of miscommunication can also happen on a micro level and be considered to overlap with contention in simulationism.

Here I posit a hypothetical for this manner of micro miscommunication. If a GM were to proactively ask a player what they would like to avoid during play and the player simply says depictions of gore, neither the GM nor the player have a good idea of what they are consenting to, as each topic is a spectrum (Reynolds and Germain 3-4). The GM might be a big fan of horror movies, and the player is sickened by the thought of blood. So, what constitutes gore for the other person is extremely different from what they both imagine it to be. Later in the game, a description of a villain attacking the player's character might involve the GM saying how their arrow pierces through the character's arm and blood trickles down their sleeve. The player then feels ill and betrayed by the GM as they had voiced their expectations. However, the GM didn't think their description included gore, given their predisposition, and may believe the player is upset they took damage. This begins causing tension within the group.

Misunderstandings like this are common occurrences in NGM stories, as shown by 76 occurrences of poorly communicated expectations. Miscommunication of what to expect, regarding setting, theme, commitment, and performance, result in a lack of unified understanding of what each player wants from the game and is detrimental to the longevity and enjoyment of play. In one instance, "All Aboard the Dragon Age Railroad," after the NGM had made several attempts to challenge the morality of the Redditor's character, the player decided to begin roleplay their character immorally. This,

> …at first pleased the DM, but ***did not*** please them when I started having my character stop resisting the demon all together and make a powerful blood pact with it. The DM

> expected my "good guy" PC to continue fruitlessly resisting temptation and not agree to a deal which would make my character extremely broken and OP by allowing them to use Blood Magic (essentially mind control). ("All Aboard the Dragon Age Railroad")

It was only communicated afterwards that the NGM had certain expectations in mind for the player's character progression, though it should have been made explicit on the NGM's part so the player could consent to play their character this way.

Much like the earlier gore hypothetical, issues that arise from this might be avoided by including some upfront examples about what the GM and players consider to be their expectations for roleplay. This would help them understand each others' expectations explicitly before any harm occurs. However, when the GM and player are unfamiliar with one another, they might not think to have a deeper conversation and just state some basic boundaries. So, even if safety tools are used, if they are used without explicit intention, greater conversation, or consideration, then boundaries become vague and assumed. The lack of understanding for each others' expectations made it difficult for the Redditors to provide informed consent and the group did not make the effort to acquire a better understanding than what they assumed to be universal.

Misunderstandings are not limited to boundaries surrounding themes but includes each of the above-mentioned items involve the GM being an active contributor: pacing the adventure; setting and maintaining the tone; teaching new players the rules; providing consequences to the players decisions; socially including all players; delivering the story beats and narrative outcomes; creating a comfortable environment; doing voices for the NPCs; and painting a vivid idea of the setting for the players. New TTRPG players are not going to know how many aspects of running the game goes into being a GM or how the GM's role works in general. For example, one Reddit story involves the player being upset with the DM for intentionally putting them in combat with monsters that were a much more difficult challenge for them than they could reasonably survive (Senior-Meat-5671). It also did not help they were in a flooding room. The Redditor makes note of how there was "No way to escape, no way to talk ourselves out of it, I lost 2 rounds trying to open a door that wouldn't, and we got TPKed like that. I was frustrated because she'd DMed before, and played dnd for years, so she was supposed to know how CR worked and how

dungeons worked…" (Senior-Meat-5671). We can see that there is also a deviation in our collective expectations for the game resulting from a lack of fluency in the games' mechanics, not solely on the part of the players but also on the part of the GM.

In many other NGM stories, the players do not initially know the NGM, as they have either not played with them as GM before or the game is what brought them into similar social circles. There are two examples of this that would be good to introduce and substantiate this concern. The first story involves a couple who join a D&D campaign where "Everyone brought on was a stranger to DM and to on another…" ("DM brings on-again-off-again lover…"). They decided to join because they wanted to take part in a *D&D* campaign to overcome their social isolation during Covid. Everyone in the group takes the proper safety precautions as they note "We go through content warnings and such before we start the game. We discuss how to navigate toeing boundaries, crossing boundaries, etc. Everyone's pretty cool with most things." Things seem to be going well until the NGM invites their friend to play with the group, which everyone was initially okay with. From there the sessions grow increasingly less fun as the NGM heavily favours their friend, allowing them to get away with bullying the other players in character, and prioritizes their roleplay opportunities over the rest of the group. This story ends with the NGM's friend quitting the game and villainizing the Redditor to the group.

The second story involves a stranger recruiting people, including the Redditor, from their discord server to play in a game they were the DM for (tom04cz). The Redditor starts off the story by saying they were "a completely fresh player at the time, looking blindly for a game, DM reached out for me and i jum[p]ed at the chance." Amongst other in-game issues between the players that stood out, the DM included,

> …a questgiver NPC who basical[l]y enslaved us and sent us on a wild goose chase…, saddled us sith a half shark, half man NPC which had the personality of a toddler and a penchant for injuring the party and ruining any chance of subtlety…, then enslaved us harder with shock collars, blamed the party constantly for circumstances evidently not under their control and also turned out to be invincible… (tom04cz)

This story ends with the DM expressing he didn't have time for the group because he was the DM in another group he was playing with and cancelled the campaign shortly after. This specific

example helps to illustrate the inability new players have to provide informed consent for their roleplay experiences as the Redditor also mentioned the "DM was also very lenient in letting us players make the most wack of characters. In hindsight i realise that was not good for someone as new as me, but at the time i relished it" (tom04cz). In a similar manner, new players might approach the game just like a video game they have played except, while TTRPGs can be quickly committed to, they are not as easy to turn off. So, when they have already committed to the game, by convening with the group; making their character; coordinating schedules for weekly games; and starting the sessions, they often find themselves locked in a social contract they can't escape, lest they upset the rest of the group.

In the previous examples, we can observe how the NGMs are stunting the creative approaches characters are taking to the game through roleplay or narrative choices by either favouring certain players' experiences over others' or imposing their personal characters on the party. In part this could be a result of the expectations placed on the GM by the GM. It is common for GMs to hold themselves to the impossible standards they have seen online. Again, Matt Mercer and Brennan Lee Mulligan exemplify their GMing styles and GMs are comparing themselves to the point where the "Mercer effect" has been coined as a term describing a GM who strives too hard to replicate Matt Mercer's GMing and voice acting prowess.



Figure 76: Matt Mercer and his Voiced Characters

We might relate this to amateur writers comparing themselves to Stephen King. In "Controlling DM writes Fan-fiction about my D&D Character and Copies my Campaign." the

Redditor notes how, when their NGM Jack was transitioning from a writer to a DM, "…the main problem [he] seemed to keep bumping into was that he wanted to have full control over his story. Whenever we did something that didn't align with his perfect world, he would throw a small fit over it and stop his sessions early so he could think of how to fix his plot" (ThrowawayfanficDM). This shows that the failure to meet the expectations the GM sets for themselves often compels them to double down on their intention to run their perfect game.

In turn, we also get NGMs who are holding themselves to an impossible standard and ruining the game for the players because they are rigidly adhering to the rules, or their playstyle, or the story they want to tell so their genius will be recognized. White et al. ("At the Head of the Table…"), note,

> The balancing of all of these expectations and interactions seems to be the way to achieve the sense of wonder that arguably 'all games should aim for, and too few achieve'…The GM, in striving to offer hard but fair challenges to the players when playing as adversary, must resist the temptation to be provoked into 'unrestrained hostility'… that will quickly lead to the characters' destruction or otherwise hinder campaign development. Simultaneously, in pursuing a cooperative style of play, the GM must avoid demanding the excess of conformity that will rob the game of suspense, action, and excitement. Additionally, a GM seeking to flesh out the campaign world may 'attempt to enforce their predetermined concepts of plot and character development on players' and in doing so at the last extreme be unmasked as a 'failed novelist'… (53)

Another way of categorizing this that I observe would be GMs attempting to railroad their players, which is a common occurrence as far as general GM stories go but can also easily fall into the NGM category.

So, when the group has these expectations for how a GM is supposed to run the game (Dashiell 6), they can vary widely making informed consent impossible for everyone to provide unless their understanding of their own and each other's expectations synchronize. Oftentimes, GMs can feel judged or as though they have failed themselves or the players by not being capable of meeting the group's expectations. Maybe the players could not distinguish the GMs character voices. Or maybe the players were expecting there to be faster paced combat and the

GM is moving too slowly. These can be things the GM is putting earnest effort into but the amount of talent they have for performance, or their executive dysfunctions can be putting a hard limitation on what they can provide the game.

These concerns are not the GMs fault, but they are still factors affecting the play experience for the group. In these cases, if the players require a certain level of competence with performance, pacing, etc., they might try to handle considerations for GMs similarly to considerations for a position being hired for.

5.2.5 Communication for Informed Consent

As bleak as that idea may sound, it is all too often the case, as some of the examples I showed exemplified, that players jump at the chance to play a TTRPG simply because GMs are in short supply, and they don't want to run the game themselves ("DM brings on-again-off-again lover…"; tom04cz). While the full context of the social relations was not always provided, 133 of the NGM stories explicitly mentioned their NGM was either a stranger or casual acquaintance who they provided the position of GM to.

In many of these NGM scenarios, the Redditors expressed how they were desperate to play a game and later regretted playing with people they did not know ("DM brings on-again-off-again lover…"; tom04cz). If we equate this to hiring someone in a workplace like lifeguards, paramedics, or teachers then anyone who expressed interest in the job, as unqualified as they might be, would be granted the power and authority to perform it. This immediate commitment on the players part often easily leads to an NGM scenario. As such, when TTRPG players consider who to pick as their GM, it is best to handle it as a candidacy rather than an immediate commitment on both sides, especially when members of marginalized communities like disabled individuals are involved. I provide several suggestions: a selection process, where potential GMs are given explicit expectations in advance; clarifying questions, with scenario-based considerations observing a more involved conversation on expectations with examples; and a session 0 trial run.

5.2.6 Selection Process

The first consideration is to have any initial expectations for the GM to be made explicit. As I mentioned previously, 76 of the NGM stories I examined gave some broad considerations for what the setting, theme, commitment, and performance expectations would be like, but only seven discussed considerations of safety for the players and only three talked about the use of safety tools. While players are becoming more familiar with the considerations for triggers that need to be made during session 0, as it has become a popular practice of late (Reynolds and Germain), new players and players who are self-proclaimed as "desperate" to be part of a game often overlook the nuance of the assumed expectations of the group. As such, the GM selection process needs to have expectations foregrounded.

A personalized list of wants and things to avoid should be made by each of the players and brought up in detail to the potential GM, similar to the Line and Veils discussed in the Player Safety Guide for *Teleneuro* (See Appendix B). This should also be the time when the GM puts forward their expectations to the players to ensure they also have a good understanding of what they are signing on to. However, this becomes challenging with players who are less familiar with the game. If a player is new to the TTRPG scene they might not have any experience with the bleed effect, which is a staple and often desired experience within the community (Bowman 20). The bleed effect is when the players' real life emotional states, opinions, and relationships begin to influence their characters' in-game actions and vice versa (16). As such, they don't yet know what they don't consent to.

New players, and players who don't take the authenticity of their experience into account, risk giving their in-game boundaries and real life triggers a lack of consideration (16-21). After all, the assumption is if it is "just a game" then people should all know the implied nuances of each trigger. Juhana Pettersson makes a point in noting that once we understand what we, "can and can't do, want and don't want to do, it becomes easier to have good [roleplay] experiences and to co-create them with others…For the purposes of developing [this] understanding, [roleplay] experience needs to be paired with reflection and analysis" (par. 3, 16). Unfortunately, new players will not have developed this understanding of themselves due to their inexperience with

roleplay while even experienced players will not have developed this understanding about themselves if they have not reflected on or analysed their roleplay experience.

Therefore, the expectations put forward by new players need to be drawn from their real-life experience with triggers, made explicit, agreed upon, and adhered to (Kemper et al. par. 4-10), so as to accommodate any potential lack of self-understanding. The expectations of the role of GM, in particular, need to be put upfront to ensure everyone, including the GM, is on board. A longer conversation about the nuances of our triggers and accommodation needs would potentially benefit to this selection process. To do this, time for further clarifying questions needs to be accommodated.

5.2.7 Clarifying Questions

When we don't know what we don't consent to, due to our lack of self-understanding, a generic Session 0 checklist will be confusing or overwhelming. It's pertinent to include more explicit considerations and questions concerning broad and specific aspects of the game. *Teleneuro* does this by employing a Game Rating to help set up the expected comfort level of each player (See Appendix B). Just because everyone has the same idea of what they want out of the game and what their boundaries are does not mean the GM is a good fit for the group.

As Pettersson explains, "I have severe dietary restrictions caused by illness. I know them very well but that knowledge only helps me if the organizers of the larp are willing to accommodate my issues. If not, no amount of self-knowledge will help me play that larp" (par. 4). Asking for proof of the GM's ability to accommodate accessibility requirement should be the norm. Players should be getting field notes of their previous experience GMing. This might look like the GMs providing examples of how they could accommodate certain needs or providing stories from their previous experience as a GM to ad merit to their accommodation claims. Another way of sussing these considerations out can take the form of asking the GMs hypotheticals from our mechanical and social expectations to gauge their synergy with the players.

We might see in this line of questioning inquiries on how the GM would react to players doing certain actions. For instance, in the game of *D&D* there is a spell called Revivify which can be used to bring a dead character back to life. There is another spell called Counterspell where a

mage can see another person trying to cast a spell as negate the effects of it. A simple enough question to ask would be: “If a player, as their character, casts Revivify on their dead comrade, would you have a NPC cast Counterspell on them to have the comrade stay dead?” While this spell interaction is a mechanical part of the game, it is typically considered taboo for the GM to enact. Part of this is due to the vulnerable situation the players find themselves in where they would need to use a spell to revive a dead ally. The other part of this is because magic users in the game only get one spell per turn so by using Counterspell on a spell they cast their turn ends abruptly. So, in the first scenario, the GM is actively choosing to make a dead character stay dead. While in the second scenario, an overuse of Counterspell calls the point of the players’ spell preparations and their safety into question during later encounters. While this act is considered taboo, there are those GMs who would still do it as it gives the game a sense of realism. For example, in the Reddit story “The DM literally countered half the party,” as the name suggests the NGM “spammed counter spells and made half the party useless in a boss fight” (KefkaSircus). This was not a fun game for the players involved. Some GMs might argue that if they don’t have scenarios like this then they might feel like they are taking it easy on the players or not portraying evil characters in their game authentically. Getting the GMs answer to this question and then clarifying their reasoning will help you to decide if this is the kind of scenario you want to experience as a player, or if this is the kind of scenario the GM wants to allow.

Another question that might be asked is: “Would you allow NPCs to steal items from the players’ character?” This action might be seen as annoying and provokes paranoia on the players’ part towards the GM. Whether this is something the group wants to make room for or ban entirely should be a consensus decision. An example of this proving to allow for an NGM scenario, “DM Ruins Campaign With His Disgusting Mary Sue DMPC Out of Spite,” wherein the Redditor notes how the DMPC, played by the NGM, was causing trouble by stealing “whatever magic item, land, weapons,… etc. that he wanted” (Dr_Frog_MD). Due to the NGM protecting this character from every problem he would have encountered, the DMPC faced no consequences in-game for his actions. So, we can reason how asking simple questions like this ahead of time can aid in seeing if the GM is right for us or if they are not a good fit for the group.

From this story, we can also observe how the GM is not immune to the bleed effect, as shown by the need to ensure his favourite character always gets his way. So, it stands to reason, the way GMs say they will conduct themselves might differ from how they react to things the players do in-game when they are under pressure. My final suggestion for synchronizing expectations of the GM role is a trial run of the game where everyone can get experience playing together.

5.2.8 Session 0 Trial Run

One theme each of the NGM stories, which provided such context outside of one-shots, had in common was the commitment the players made to take part in a long-term campaign, intending to span months, at the first opportunity they had. This might be in-part because GMs are in short supply and most people who are trying to put a game together require commitment, as commitment of time and energy is the only way a long-term game can happen. However, there was only one example I came across where the players had their GM run a one-shot for them to see if they were a good fit. Despite it still turning into an NGM scenario, the idea has merit.

Having the GM run a one-shot to test their capacity to perform the role of the GM and adhere to the set expectations of the group, should be another norm. This would give the players a chance to get comfortable with the GM and the way they conduct their game and the GM to become familiar with the players and how they act in character. At the end of the trial run, if anyone is unsatisfied with the game, if there are any red flags, or the group members don't feel like they can commit their time to a long session, then anyone is free to leave without a social contract binding them to continue a long-term campaign. To do otherwise may lead to experiences where, even if the GM is not an NGM, it might still feel like the players have committed to something too soon and now they are forced to participate as per their social contract, much like as we saw in MarionberrySouth6010's Reddit story.

5.2.9 Summary

Throughout this section, I have shown the necessity for establishing expectations more explicitly on both the players and the GMs part. Drawing from the Reddit stories about NGMs, I showed that lack of clear communication remains as a problem we need to address for the future of TTRPGs, and the nuances of different kinds of NGMs. While I also went into detail with the nuances to be considered in our expectations for the role of the GM, everything leads to considerations for normalizing a more detailed GM selection process. This was all to show how we, the individuals with a disability who are part of the online TTRPG community, might avoid NGM scenarios while putting the group members in their own power regarding stringent and confining social expectations.

Future work can look at bringing our understandings together more efficiently. The examples for the GM selection process I provided are rudimentary and require greater consideration for specific questions to ask, and early warning signs to look for during play, for the safety of the players. However, these ethical considerations may not be limited to the TTRPG community.

In many aspects of society, be it work, hobbies, social gatherings, we find ourselves locked in social contracts with power distributed between ourselves without always questioning why it is being done that way or considering who we are providing our consent to while engaging with them. Other avenues the academic community might expand on these initial inquiries might ask questions like: What expectations do we take for granted everyday, in relatively similar contexts like online gaming or digital interactions, that we just assume to be common sense? How might we design tools for online or in-person social planning that avoids nightmare scenarios with someone like the organizer? What might the Mercer effect look like in other contexts? Where might we find solutions to other areas of uninformed consent? Given how game spaces so often reflect reality, I propose we use game studies as a foothold for understanding the idea of consent in other social relations. As such, I move on the to ethnographic work to see what further consideration can be built into the game system by neurodivergent game designers.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

In concluding this dissertation, I reflect on my findings with the scholarly, ethnographic, and TTRPG design work done. It is a cumulative discussion on how we can resist the fear of failure in the realm of disability but also how we can stop the propagation of such fear in our TTRPG systems. To this end, I attempt to answer the initial questions posed with the literary, object text analysis, and ethnographic work, which has been done up to this point, alongside the workshop's creation of TTRPG media. With the work that has been completed at this point in the dissertation, I have enough ethnographic backing to ensure that my propositions for future research and game design are not coming from solely a scholarly realm. It is the fusion of academia, embodied knowledge, and immersive design experience with members of the neurodivergent communities that will allow me to talk about these findings, without speaking on behalf of every disability experience, and show the exposition that role-players with disabilities have offered up as vital information to their underrepresented communities.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this project, my research questions consist of: How can we celebrate failure in TTRPG media without normalizing the pain and hardships experienced by the disability communities? How can we critique romanticized depictions of disability in TTRPG design while avoiding the common framing of disabled characters as inferior? How can TTRPG narratives and game mechanics exhibit methods of game design that acknowledge the diverse experiences of disability while still being critical of disabling politics and social injustice in the real world? I attempt to answer these now with the knowledge that my answers are more accurate to neurodivergent concerns and imperfect even then in their coverage of all forms of neurodivergence. Nevertheless, I will provide my imperfect answers in relation to the findings of this dissertation, knowing there is still much work to be done to address this research gap.

6.1 How can we celebrate failure in TTRPG media without normalizing the pain and hardships experienced by the disability communities?

We must first start by observing how we qualify failure in our TTRPG narratives. The idea of success and failure at its foundation stems from a binary imposed on many more traditional games, such as chess or basketball. The media site afforded to us by TTRPGs elicits a completely different approach than that of a more orderly analog game system or a hard coded video game experience. Queering this idea of failure becomes much more attainable in a roleplay setting and much more so in an analog roleplay setting as we established previously. As such, in TTRPG media, we are given the opportunity to reapproach our qualification of failure. Going back to the design experience of the workshop, the participants engaged in an iterative process that inherently involves trial, error, and failure. They did not set out to create a perfect game but I game that did something better than what had come before. In this way, there work becomes a stepping stone for future game designers that can appraise the ways in which we are celebrating failure as crucial for both players and creators. With TTRPGs designed like this and informed by our own embodied experience, we are afforded the means to embrace our play experience with the understanding that it has innate value as a human experience as opposed to the value of the experience being determined by its success. In this manner, by queering the failure for disability TTRPG experiences, we embolden ourselves to celebrate the rhetorical power we find within the experience of our self-representation.

To that end, and when it comes to us avoiding the normalization of pain and hardships experienced by the disability community, we might show a more complexly embodied portrayal to be transparent of the reality we experience, as opposed to avoiding any unappealing depictions of disability altogether. Understanding that there are medical interventions necessary for the livelihood and wellbeing of certain disabled individuals in society, the social model shows just how much more destructive factors external to our bodies are. Much like any other marginalized identities, the vast majority of the pain and hardships experienced by disabled individuals comes from two main sources. The first is the disabling societal barriers that make many aspects of our physical and social environments inaccessible. The second being the problematic portrayal of our identity that becomes the staple of what people tend to associate with our communities. With

Tobin Siebers theory of complex embodiment, a full transparent and complicated depiction, showing the medical and social realities of our experience, is warranted to provide greater rhetorical and societal benefit to the disability communities when it comes to our representation in media.

6.2 How can we critique romanticized depictions of disability in TTRPG design while avoiding the common framing of disabled characters as inferior?

Developing the disability media literacy necessary to understand and navigate this topic should be the highest priority, especially for able-bodied and minded individuals. Though, while members of the disability communities have certain embodied experience for their particular position, the diversity of disability requires that they too develop this media literacy for disabilities they do not have firsthand experience with. To do this, we need to provide more room for characters with disability in TTRPGs that will in and of themselves provide certain critique for disabling societal barriers and problematic depictions of disability. The main concern I had for myself going into this topic was that I did not have a diverse enough understanding for progressive depictions of disability in media to speak critically on the matter. In the midst of my research for this topic I was greatly immersed in portrayals of disability that had rhetorical meaning to many members within the communities and became much more capable of navigating this topic as I interacted with the other workshop participants. Unless we have progressive understandings of disabled characters in media to draw from, criticism is much more difficult to navigate. So, our priority needs to be an immersed media literacy that provides us with the tools and examples to draw from in our critique.

Regarding how we avoid the framing of disabled characters as inferior, this most often comes about in how the character is positioned in the media. Of course, the disabled character is going to be depicted as inferior if they themselves ascribe to the capitalist serving medical model where they are seeking a way to cure themselves or triumph over their disability (Ellcessor et al. 9; Rockler, "'Be Your Own Windkeeper'" 244; "Entertainment, the Personal, and the Political" 112). Of course, the disabled character is going to be depicted as inferior if the media in question frames itself around a win or lose scenario where the disability in question is holding the

character back from success (Adams 11). And of course, if the problematic portrayals of disabled characters continue to be normalized, we are going to continue to see them replicated again and again over time, as they are seen as reasonable and rational (Yates 84). So, what this comes down to is continuing to create more progressive disability media, in and outside of TTRPGs, to eventually normalize a more complex and realistic take of different varieties of disability so that we are not oversimplifying issues faced by the disability communities and putting greater emphasis on their innate value as human beings. The most effective path toward this necessary media literacy is through the creation of more TTRPGs that employ the very design principles of flexibility and user-driven narrative explored throughout this project.

6.3 How can TTRPG narratives and game mechanics exhibit methods of game design that acknowledge the diverse experiences of disability while still being critical of disabling politics and social injustice in the real world?

It was made clear early on in the workshop that what the participants advocated for in terms of activism and critique within the game of *Teleneuro* at tables other than our own was to design the game in such a way that it allowed for other neurodivergent individuals to play the game how they wanted to without an explicit agenda being made to hold a static purpose with which to play the game. As was discussed in section 3.1, *like with Wizards of the Coast* and *D&D*, the game designers for a TTRPG have no control over what it will be used for. As such, there is no way for the workshop participants to ensure that *Teleneuro* will be played for a specific reparative healing journey for individuals who desire the self-representation the game might provide them, nor can they ensure that the game will be played with a specific activist mindset hellbent on pointing out how our modern society fails neurodiversity.

However, what these game designs can do is be flexible in how they are used while providing the players with the proper resources to open up a wider network of possible paths forward for neurodivergent healing and activism. The traits presented in the workshop's TTRPG design exemplify a mix and match approach and provide greater accessibility for neurodivergent individuals to create their own means of self-representation within the TTRPG media with full say in how they do it. Additionally, the suggested narratives brought forward in *Teleneuro*

provides options of disability narratives that make room for neurodivergent individuals to play out a specific suggestion their own way or allows them to implement their own desired stories of their neurodivergent experience in a high school setting.

To summarize, TTRPG game designers can only provide the tools and resources for the players with the hopes that they take their own methods of critique and activism into the game when they play it. Regarding the scope of this question, the key words to focus on for our imperfect answer is “diverse experiences.” By making room for game narratives and mechanics to be open ended, they will innately acknowledge the diverse experience of disability, making it so we do not limit the player in how they wish to portray themselves. As such, if other game systems made room for, or were designed with room for, disability themed narratives and mechanics, made by disabled individuals for disabled individuals, for them to freely employ towards their own ends in a way that best accommodates their desired play experience, we can trust that they will bring their own embodied experience, self-representation, and activism to the table.

6.4 Where do we go from here?

The scholarly composition you just read is the cumulation of six years’ worth of academic and pop cultural research, networking, presentations, class assignments, late night obsessions and a good deal of neurodivergent burnout. Throughout all of this time, I have seen the field of disability games studies go from a couple odd articles on the matter that stepped out from under the umbrella of queer game studies to several fleshed-out books on the subject matter. So, there is progress being made at this intersection, albeit slowly.

I set out with this topic to explore how we can create better TTRPG media in a way that better serves disabled individuals as well as the disability communities as a whole and I am satisfied with the answers I have come to, for now. The world of disability media in general is messy and the answers I provided here are imperfect, related mainly to TTRPG media, and will only serve to act as placeholders until disability gets the proper representation it requires in media. Whereupon they should be re-evaluated, adjusted, and replaced to fit the needs of the disability communities more concisely and with relevance to the time.

In the workshops, the participants reminded me that academia, much like game design, is an iterative process. As academics, what we conclude in our findings should not be held as a permanent truth, nor as the sole truth on the matter. By our colleagues, the processes should be investigated, the ethnography should be revisited, and it should be questioned whether or not our answers have any relevance to the time or context they are being applied to. It is my hope that in a decade's time, I myself no longer see the relevance of the answers I provided.

While I outlined the limits of, and problems with, empathy in the literature review of this dissertation, it is worth highlighting an alternative form of relationality that can be seen as a desirable outcome of gameplay. In this case, I pose solidarity as a means by which members of the disability communities can relate to one another in their otherwise untranslatable lived experience. Speculatively, certain game mechanics like the spoon and forks from *Teleneuro* as a means of communicating our energy and mental health may help to create common moments of understanding and solidarity of the diverse disability communities' lived experience. In solidarity with one another, we move forward with an understanding that we require and benefit greatly through mutual support and movement towards our common interests. That being said, greater consideration for this topic should be the site of future work in disability game studies as a whole however, it is a fair bit outside the relevance of this dissertation.

So, for now, the only thing to be done is more. We need more activism, more conversation, and more critique by, for, and with the members of the disability communities. I am particularly interested in doing more ethnographic work with neurodivergent individuals to expand their input into the disability game studies intersection. It is in this manner that we will see the failure of disability game studies amended and distanced from the medical model.

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Appendix A

Teleneuro

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Introduction

This will be a game that will serve as a means for players with neurodivergence to better represent themselves through TTRPG, rhetorically, accurately, and progressively. In doing so it is hoped that side effects include understanding of the experiences of neurodiversity, both within neurodiverse spaces and without. It is based on the core mechanics of Kids on Bikes by Jonathan Gilmour and Doug Levandowski, with additional inspiration taken from the Belonging Outside Belonging game systems by Avery Alder and Benjamin Rosenbaum and the *Monsterhearts* games by Avery Alder. It also takes from Spoon Theory and Fork Theory, two theories on energy and disability.

GMs are encouraged to research experiences on the lived experiences of neurodiverse individuals.

This game can also serve as a space for skill development for neurodiverse individuals.

This game is set in a high school environment. It is intended to be genre-agnostic and allows players to explore more lighthearted episodes (e.g. having a battle of the bands) as well as most difficult episodes (e.g. putting on a memorial for lost friends).

Safety

All game sessions should conclude with a debrief to make sure to allow space for players do discuss their experience:

- Character debrief (what their next goals are, how they are feeling going into the next episode... etc.)
- Player debrief on their experience (any sensitivities or challenges throughout).
- Story debrief. (how the themes of the story resonated with players and whether they want to make any modifications in future episodes or go back on any changes that may have made them uncomfortable).
    - GMs should encourage players to reach back out to them in between sessions if they want to discuss any content further.

We have included a Player Safety Guide [See Appendix B] to help assist your table in having a safe comfortable experience.

Core concepts

The core concept of the game is around managing differences and seeking to achieve individual and group goals as a new high school student.

The game is intended to be played over a season which includes several different episodes. Episode zero allows characters to get to know themselves and the setting. Some more advanced mechanics are added from episodes 1 onwards. A season may last anywhere from six to eight episodes. Each episode can be played over an evening and are a continuation of the previous episode. Each episode is centered around an important event to the high school students.

The main themes of this game are friendship, neurodiversity in a neurotypical world, overcoming hardship, community, communication, risk, survival, rest, vulnerability, and learning about yourself and others.

Doing Something Risky

Whenever you want to **do something risky**, **roll 2d6**, plus any modifiers you might have.

2-6 is failure. Player describes what goes wrong and the GM describes how things get even worse.

7-9 is partial success, a.k.a. complicated success. You barely get what you want, AND the GM throws something else in there you weren't expecting. If you don't want the complication, you can choose to fail instead.

10-12 is success. You get what you want.

13+ is a critical success! GM offers you +1d6 on your next roll or some other benefit.

Spoons and forks

Spoons are a measure of energy the PC has, and forks are a measure of mental damage or wounds taken - of burdens carried on the PC's shoulders. GM is given a guide on how to assign appropriate spoon or fork cost (1-4 DC) in each situation (ex: if a symptom is acting up or you're trying to mask in a stressful environment). If a character finds themself in a draining situation, then the character is prompted to take the appropriate spoon or fork cost.

The Spoon and Fork bars each go up to 5. You start with 5 spoons and 0 forks. At 0 spoons or 5 forks, you begin to take -1 to every roll until you recover.

Recovering spoons or removing forks (Hideout)

- Going to your hideout can allow you to recover spoons and remove forks.
- Spending one spoon in the hideout will allow you to recover. You can only visit the hideout twice per episode.
- In the hideout, you flip a coin and the GM calls which one wins. If you win, you can recover +2 spoons or -2 forks (OR bring an NPC with +2 or above bonds into the hideout with you for the chance to gain +1 bond with them). You can do this up to two times.
- At 0 spoons, take a fork in order to recover spoons at the hideout instead of 1 spoon.

- The GM should provide narrative intrigue and consequences when you fail.

Masking

Masking is optional and allows you to get a +2 on your roll. The number of spoons (between 2-5) spent is contextual (with friends, giving a presentation, at work, etc.) and is decided by the GM.

At 3 forks, masks provide only +1 instead of +2.

4 and above, you also take -1 to every roll until you recover.

At 2 spoons, masks only provide +1 instead of +2.

1 and 0 spoons add -1 to every roll until you recover.

The Mind of the Character

Each player chooses 4 traits that encapsulate some important elements of their neurodiverse experience. Each trait is either socially: accepted, ignored, or rejected, and players are encouraged to roleplay ways their character might respond to their mind behaving in these ways.

Bonds

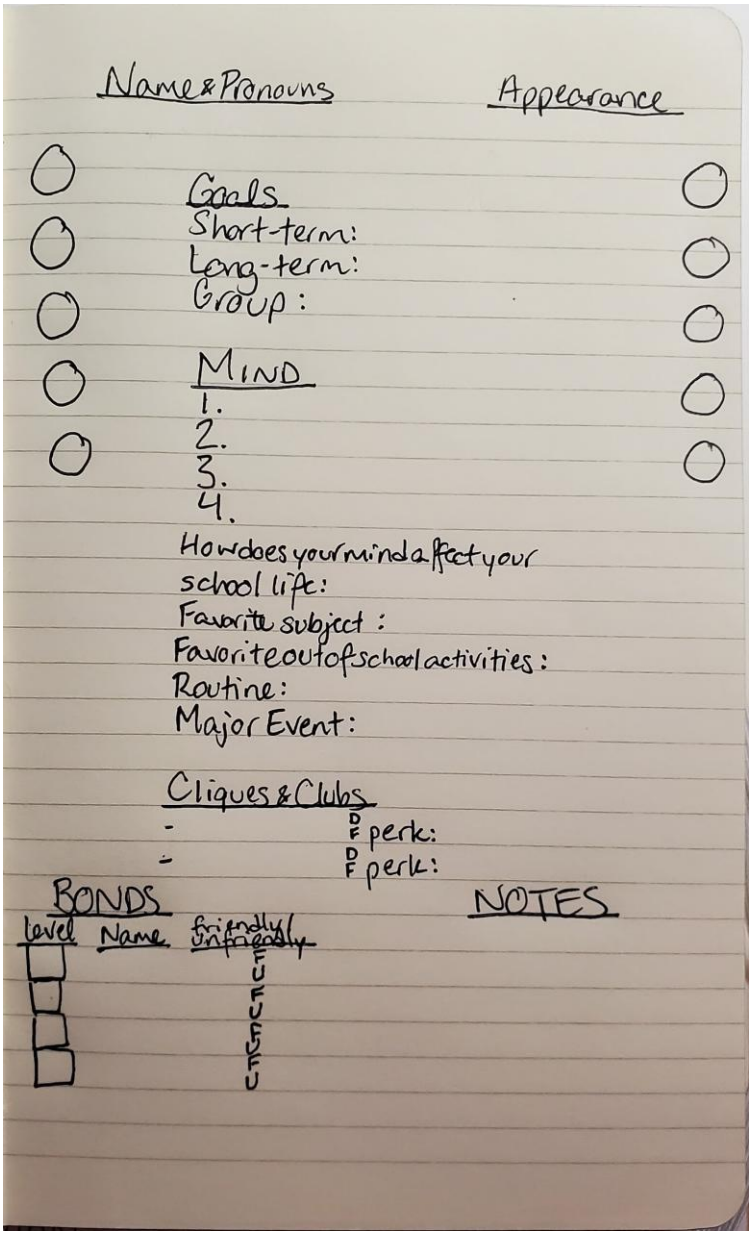
Bonds are relationships between characters (PCs or NPCs) that can give certain advantages or disadvantages. Examples of types of bonds include: familial, besties, coworkers, rivals, teacher, mentor, partner, etc.

Each bond gives a bonus of half the bond level rounded up whenever receiving or giving help to the bond. Every time you use this bonus, your bond level goes down by one.

If your bond level goes down to zero, you lose that bond and can use that slot to create another bond with an existing PC or NPC at the top of the next episode. When you and a PC have a bond with each other, if either player character’s bonds go down to zero, the bond is lost for both of them.

Bonds can be restored by bringing your bonded character to a special place for both of you (decide where this is for each bond when you create it), as opposed to the hideout Spending a spoon (or taking a fork if the player is at 0 spoons) can allow you to flip a coin for the chance to recover +1 bond. You can do this up to two times in one visit.

Character sheet



(example character sheet)

Character creation

(This is done in episode zero)

Summary

Step 1: Create the Mind of the Character (choosing traits)

Step 2: Answer remaining character prompts

Step 3: Decide a name, pronouns, and appearance

The Mind of the Character

Choose an equal number of socially accepted and rejected traits, and choose as many socially ignored traits as you'd like. These traits will affect your experience in play.

Socially Accepted:

1. Problem Solver: Your perspective makes the problem seem not so bad. Spend a spoon to give +2 help instead of +1.
2. Creativity: Your innovative mind brings fresh ideas to every table. Create something useful to a goal once an episode, and it can give you +1 toward a roll related to that goal.
3. Hyperempathy: Your ability to relate to anyone and anything helps you survive in a neurotypical world - but it can definitely be a burden as well. Take a fork to give +2 help instead of +1.
4. Intelligence: You thrive in logical and academic situations. Teacher NPCs can give you +2 help with a roll once an episode.
5. Trust: Cannot select the Distrust trait. You have a support system you can rely on. Bump up 2 of your bonds to another level.
6. Routine: You need to complete your routine activity to comfortably function. +1 to next roll if you engage in your routine activity that day, or -2 if you're unable to.

Socially Ignored:

1. Persistence: You can handle anything life throws at you. You gain one extra fork slot below zero permanently.
2. Pattern Recognition: Your ability to notice patterns in the world is monumentally helpful in your expectations. +1 to any roll about perception.
3. Special Interests: You have an interest you are ALL about. Pick 1 special interest in episode zero (get weird and niche with it!) and take +2 to any roll related to your special interest, -1 to any roll not related (This is the only trait that can be selected more than once)
4. Hyperfocus: While time-consuming, your ability to focus on a specific thing can be a huge boon. Pick a new hyperfixation at the top of each episode and take +1 to any roll involving your hyperfixation. The GM determines the amount of time that passes while doing so

5. Connection to Nature: Your hideout is teeming with nature. You can visit the hideout 3 times instead of 2.
6. Overstimulation: You are a highly sensitive individual, and certain stimuli can be debilitating. When doing something risky in high intensity environments, the GM can call for you to roll twice and take the worse roll.
7. Trauma: You have a difficult history. Think about what your trauma might be. Each episode starts with +1 Fork. Also, you gain an additional personal goal: Heal. Once each episode, you can actively spend time working on healing (skip a group scene for therapy, for example) from your trauma in order to gain +1 spoon. [Specify active engagement vs begrudging?]
8. Dissociation: Your mind fractures during stressful situations. EITHER You lose time, and GM can decide to make a roll for you once an episode; OR make a second character. During stressful situations, GM can call for you to *switch*, and you'll play that character instead, inhabiting the same body. Your first character cannot take action, and can lose memory of the time they're out (decide with GM). GM can call for switches to happen up to 3 times per episode.
9. Delusions: You believe things that aren't true. The GM can give you something new to believe. You will need to roleplay it. You cannot assist another player when it relates to your delusion.
10. Stimming: Stimming can help you regulate your emotions, but it's often visible. Choose 1 form of stimming (ex: hand flapping, listening to music, chewing gum, watching lava lamps, lighting a candle, etc.) your character prefers. When you are able to stim in this way, you can gain +1 spoon. GM can incorporate a narrative downside if you stim visibly.

<u>Socially Rejected:</u>

1. Conflict Avoidant: Arguments take a toll on you. -1 spoon OR +1 fork (your decision) when you're in interpersonal conflict.
2. Executive Dysfunction: You struggle starting and completing tasks. Pick one of your personal goals, you cannot complete it until the GM determines it is possible.
3. Anxiety: Your mind is in an emotional turmoil 24/7. GM can cause you to use up your downtime once an episode to take a compulsory action instead. (e.g. Hide in a bathroom, have a panic attack, etc.)
4. Hallucinations: You see things that aren't there, and they are distracting/disturbing. -1 to any roll when a hallucination is present. The GM determines the type/severity of hallucination, and its duration is dependent on the number of forks you currently have. At the end of the experience add a fork
5. Distrust: Cannot select the Trust trait. You're in need of support, but spend a lot of time alone. Take two of your bonds down a level but gain an additional level 1 bond.
6. Mania: Manic episodes come at random times and lengths determined by the GM. GM assigns a delusion and special interest during its duration. You are compelled to take on more than you're easily able to do.

Example archetypes:

Accepted (a) Rejected (r) Ignored (i)

- Routine (a), Anxiety (r) Pattern Recognition (i), Special Interests (i)
- Trust (a), Executive Dysfunction (r) ,Dissociation (i)
- Hyperempathy (a), Hallucinations (r), Connection to Nature (i) Delusions (i)
- Creativity (a), Mania (r) Hyperfocus (i), Stimming (i)
- Problem Solver (a), Trauma (i), Persistence (i), Distrust (r)
- Intelligence (a), Conflict avoidant (r) , Trauma (i), Overstimulation (i)

Worldbuilding

Choose two ways your mind affects your school life and answer a question about it:

1. I'm doing poorly in my classes.
    a. How does that make you feel?
2. I'm a teacher's pet.
    a. Name the teacher.
3. No one talks to me.
    a. Do you still try to reach out?
4. Teachers don't trust me.
    a. How can you use this to your advantage?
5. I only have 1-2 very close friends.
    a. What secrets do you share?
6. I'm naturally talented in everything I do.
    a. Choose how this impacts your life.
7. I study one specific skill very hard and I'm good at it.
    a. Select your chosen skill.
8. I'm a leader in my area of interest.
    a. Select area of interest.
9. I can't focus on anything.
    a. What is distracting you? (For example things like love, finances, family, sports… etc.)
10. I can't handle school without my medication.
    a. What happens when you don't take them?

Choose a favorite school subject.

Pick 2 things you like to do out of school and describe how committed you are to them.

Describe a routine activity that you do every day. Ex: I eat cereal every morning at 7am, I sit with the birds after I get off the school bus every day, I have a snack after I do my homework every day, etc.

Create a major event you are either looking forward to OR dreading.

Ex: prom, spirit week, homecoming game, talent show, town parade, family reunion, birthday party, etc.

Questions

Choose one question to ask the player to your left:

1. What is one thing you love about me that I am not aware of?
2. When did I help you out of a difficult situation?
3. What is one thing I have done that has hurt you?
4. What did we do together as young kids?
5. How do you know my family?
6. Why did we break up?
7. How did I help you get a job?
8. What secret did you entrust me with?
9. What is our secret place?

Creating NPC Relationships

You can create non-player characters (NPCs) to liven up the story. You will be able to develop bonds with them throughout the season's episodes.

Create one adult NPC in your life and describe how your relationship is difficult. Ex: advocates for what they believe you need, won't give you needed support, problem drinker, works too much, homophobic, etc. Make sure the whole table is comfortable with your decision.

Create an NPC around your age and describe how they impact your life. Ex: cool kid, newshound, jock, etc.

Finishing Touches

Come up with 2 rumours that are going around in the world - the table votes on a top 3 that stay in game

Give your character one short term goal and one long term goal. These goals will be informed by the episode you play. For examples of goals for Episode zero see p. 13.

Give your character a name, a set of pronouns, and an appearance.

Example appearances: eyes that stare, long hair with coiley curls, scene kid, wears a hoodie and shorts, teeth with braces, uses crutches, taller than everyone else, heavy use of eye makeup, lots of acne, wears skate shoes but doesn't skate, wears button up pastels, hearing aids, greasy hair, etc.

Worldbuilding

(This is done in episode one):

Cliques and Clubs

Choose 2 cliques or clubs to participate in, make one Fulfilling (gain +1 bond with a relevant character every time you visit the club) **and one Depleting** (lose -1 bond with a relevant character every time you visit the club)**.**

Cliques and Clubs:

A Sports Team (football, soccer, golf, etc.)

A Creative Club (band, theater, art, etc.)

A Nerd Club (math club, debate team, etc.)

A Culture Club (foreign language, cooking, GSA, etc.)
A Political Club (student council, model UN, etc.)

A Hobby Club (anime, chess, robotics, etc.)

Outsiders (the leftovers, the kids without a clique, not necessarily friends with each other but sit together at lunch)

Create your own!

Give 1 narrative perk for membership in each group. Ex: Access to specialized equipment, a teacher with a specialty, funding from the school's club program, uniforms you can use for disguise, etc.

Bonds

Relationships between players that will give contextual bonuses or disadvantages. Some examples of ways you can choose a bond: *familial, rivals, friends, lovers, mentor/student, etc.*

Choose 3 NPCs to have a bond with. Two should be related in some way to your two Cliques. Pick one to give +1 bonds, one to give +3, and one to give +5. Decide for each if they're friendly or unfriendly bonds. (This distinction can change once per episode.)

Each bond gives a bonus of half the bond level rounded up whenever receiving or giving help to the bond. Every time you use this bonus, your bond level goes down by one.

If your bond level goes down to zero, you lose the bond, and can use that slot to create another bond with another existing NPC.

Where do y'all hang out? Together, describe the place you all get together at the most. Your hideout, club room, mom's basement, etc. **Give it 3 boons and 2 drawbacks.**

Example boons: sensory safe space, soundproof, landline phone, an extra bike to use, hard to find.

Example drawbacks: an adult is always present, hard to access, no internet or phone signal, overstimulating, falling apart.

Each create your individual safe space in the hideout. You can replenish spoons, remove forks, or increase bonds here.

Together, create one major event that will take place during the school year.

Define a group goal with the other players at the top of each episode.

Game goals

Individual Short-Term Goals:

These goals are intended to be accomplished within one or two episodes. When you have accomplished your short-term goal, you can choose a new one at the start of the next episode. These are created by the player and are specific to the episode they are about to play.

Individual Long-Term Goals:

These goals are intended to be accomplished over multiple episodes. Here are some examples.

1. Have a heart to heart with another character that seriously changes your relationship with them
2. Participate in an event where you can express who you truly are
3. Succeed at something you never thought possible
4. Help an adult understand something about yourself
5. Have another character owe you something

Group Goals:

These goals are the main story arcs and are linked to the episode you are playing. Note that individual goals can sometimes clash with group goals and the characters will need to resolve this (e.g. a character may be hyperfixated on winning a sports match but the group needs them to help and meet them after school).

Pilot Episode (Episode zero)

First week of school - Trying to fit in

Bonds are not used in this introductory scenario
Group goals are not used in this introductory scenario

Story beats

*Players should decide the tone of this episode and can choose from the story beats listed as comedy (c) drama (d)

Each character will see these events from their own neurodiverse lens (e.g. a fire drill may be triggering for someone who is oversensitive)

First fire drill (c) (d)

First homework to be completed (d)

Club day (c) (d)

Food fight (c)

Showcase your activity to the school (d)

Choose the NPCs that will be present in this episode (from the list of previously created NPCs)

Define your character backstory (What were their favorite topics in middle school? which struggles did they experience?)

Episode zero example short-term goals

1. Help another player accomplish their short-term goal (This will give you +1 bond with that player)
2. Talk to crush
3. Ace a test
4. Find a part-time job
5. Confront a bully
6. Make a new friend
7. Find two hang out places
8. Make a good impression on a teacher (NPC)
9. Introduce another PC to one of your interests
10. Speak up about something that bothers you
    Or define your own

Ideas for future episodes in the season

Once you have completed episode zero you are free to decide what your next episodes of the season will be.

Here are some examples

- There is a group of doppelgangers that are abducting students
- The school is reeling following their sports team bus crashing killing several players
- Battle of the bands
- Student council elections
- Prom

Appendix B

Safety Tools

This sheet is designed to help assist a table's GM and players to find safe ways to play a game together. You're welcome to use any and all of these techniques to ensure your group is comfortable in play. We also recommend reading the TTRPG Safety Toolkit created by Kienna Shaw and Lauren Bryant-Monk. (bit.ly/ttrpgsafetytoolkit)

Game Rating

Imagine if your game was a movie. What movie rating would you be most comfortable playing in?

G: General audiences. Okay for everyone.

PG: Parental guidance. Might have some difficult or inappropriate topics.

PG-13: Encouraged for people 13 and older. Will have some difficult or inappropriate topics.

R: Restricted Audiences. Recommended for adults only, may have some explicit content.

NC-17: Must be at least 17 to watch. Includes explicit content.

Lines and Veils

Lines and Veils, a safety tool designed by Ron Edwards, are limits you can place on certain topics to describe how comfortable you are with them appearing in game. Lines are the hard lines you are definitely NOT comfortable with being included in the game AT ALL. They're the red lights. Veils are soft limits you'd be okay with including indirectly, or if it happens behind a veil offscreen. They're like yellow lights. Veils are something you talk about with the GM re:how you're comfortable and uncomfortable with it appearing in game.

We encourage each player and the GM to write a list of topics and ideas they'd place behind a hard line, and things they'd be comfortable with only behind a veil. Every player should return their lists to the GM, who will collate all topics into one sheet of everyone's hard lines and veils, not associating any particular topic with any one individual, which can be used for reference by everyone.

Here are some topics to consider when writing your lists:

Sex and romance, real-world social and cultural issues, elements of horror, phobias, types of physical and mental harm.

X, N, and O Cards

Created by John Stavropoulos, Mysty Vander, Adam Cleaver, and Kira Magrann, this safety tool is used in-game as opposed to pre-game like Lines and Veils. At the table, there will be 3 cards (You can use index cards, sticky notes, or even just torn up pieces of paper) in the center of the table, reachable by all players, at all times of play. Any player or the GM can at any point tap one of these cards to express their comfort with the current topic.

When an X Card is tapped, the topic is immediately dropped and not discussed further.

When an N Card is tapped, we are nearing X Card material. Discuss or tread lightly.

When an O Card is tapped, green light - we're comfortable with the current topic.

At any point, any player or the GM can ask the table "Card?" to prompt the table to tap which card represents their comfort with the current topic before continuing in game.