

Cecil H.

San Marcos, California

A Beginner's Guide to The Kiramal Space

Procreate for iPad, found frames, fake florals

My installation is a glimpse into one aspect of a fictional world called Aflor that I am developing for the tabletop game Dungeons & Dragons. The installation provides the information one would need to run one organization within the setting of the world, and in addition has art and character sheets for a sample adventuring party.

My research focused on identity and expression within the game, and I chose to express my findings through the characters I created and the story told within the text portions of the project. As I developed the project and the world behind it, I gained a clearer understanding of the universe I want to portray and create with my future work. The choice of materials stemmed from my own personal favourite way to create art - drawing on my tablet, and then a choice to incorporate more natural, realistic textures in the mismatched frames as a way to contrast my more stylized art and ground the piece in reality.

The installation was created with love, stemming from my passion for my hobbies and my creations. It's an expression of what I want to do and the worlds I want to build.

Dungeons, Dragons, & Discovery:
Marginalized Stories and Self-Expression in
Dungeons & Dragons



Cecil H.

The Oxbow School

OS46

Writer's Note: Dungeons & Dragons is a popular game played by a growing and diversifying community. This paper explores how it can be used by these players as a tool for self-expression and how the game can reflect their identities. Dungeons and Dragons is a powerful form of group storytelling and self-expression, and its particular format is especially conducive to queer and neurodivergent stories.

I. Middle School, MERP, and Marginalized Identity

Three of the most important aspects of my identity are as follows: A. I am very, very queer. B. I'm autistic and proud of it and C. I am a *massive* nerd. Notably, these three things are all very intertwined, and that is something I actually very much like about myself. Now, when I was in middle school, these three things understandably caused me some difficulty. Setting aside the assortment of mental health issues I was struggling with at the heart of it, I was a very lonely kid, searching for the connection I craved but struggled to maintain. Then, I walked a little game called MERP.

MERP, or Middle Earth Role Playing, came from my dad's desk drawer of his own middle school hobbies, where it had long sat neglected among several other old rulebooks and notebooks full of characters and hand-drawn maps. My immediate fascination led quickly to an attempt at a recurring game with two friends, Lexi and Caesar. We switched to Dungeons & Dragons when I got the core rulebooks for the most recent edition of the game and started playing weekly, feasting on whatever snacks we could and absolutely butchering the rules, but having a great time regardless. That connection came at a crucial time in my life. I grew closer to my friends, had a recurring social and creativity outlet, and most importantly, discovered a new passion that has

carried me since. For a young, questioning, exploring barely-a-teen, this was more than I could have hoped for. I propose that this is not an exclusive experience.

Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) is a tabletop role playing game (TTRPG). The game involves a number of players, which varies per group, and a dungeon master (DM) who runs the game. Using a collection of rulebooks, the players and DM tell a collective story, sometimes stemming from the DMs imagination and at other times using pre-made adventures . Players have a character sheet, with stats and numerical values to determine skills, and listed abilities and backstory information. When determining outcomes of actions and events, D&D uses a set of seven polyhedral dice in different shapes. These dice are ubiquitous throughout the game, and the most commonly used die is the iconic d20, or a 20-sided die.

Dungeons & Dragons is an incredibly popular game, but the actual amount of scientific research that has been done on the topic is less than comprehensive. In particular, the current state of peer-reviewed research on Dungeons & Dragons is generally lacking. There are papers and books to be found, but many are outdated and the span of information is hardly complete. It was especially difficult to find papers on my specific topic - self expression and queer identities in D&D. Despite the lack of research, D&D is a relevant and accessible resource and it deserves merit for what it can do. Dungeons and Dragons is a powerful form of group storytelling and self-expression, and its particular format is especially conducive to queer and neurodivergent stories.

II. Previous Exploration and Possibilities

As mentioned, research for this project was difficult. Papers on the subject of D&D tend to focus on the therapeutic and educational benefits of the game - a perfectly important topic to study, and one I've researched and presented on before myself, but not what I was looking for. After several

days worth of hunting, I stumbled across several peer-reviewed articles regarding feminism and queerness within role-playing games. This was a relief, as up to that point, I had only found someone's college blog and was quickly losing hope.

The first of these three papers was Antero Garcia's "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games." This article prompts discussions of representation and portrayal of varying identities within the scope of D&D, and provides a much needed awareness of the aspects of the game, especially within older editions that limit and stereotype and purport problematic representations of race and gender.

Second was Rachel M. Just's excellent research, presented in "The Power in Dice and Foam Swords: Gendered Resistance in Dungeons and Dragons and LiveAction Roleplay." The conclusions Just comes to within her research mirror the ones I came to within my own. She focuses on the experience of women, whereas I focus on mainly queer stories, but the experiences we researched largely mirror one another. Her paper is also an accessible summary of the problems and possibilities within D&D and LARP (Live Action Roleplay, a version of storytelling in which players physically act out their characters.)

Finally, I came across Katherine Angel Cross's paper, "The New Laboratory of Dreams: Role-playing Games as Resistance." Cross discusses the table top game system *Eclipse Phase*, and its concept of transhumanism in its sci-fi setting. Cross's paper addresses the use of RPGs as expression of racial and queer identities, and was significant in accompanying my own research. These three papers corroborate and elaborate on important aspects of my topic, but I chose to conduct my own research to truly find the data I was looking for and could not find. I was looking

for accounts and experiences from queer and neurodivergent people of all ages in order to answer my big question: How can D&D be used as a tool of self-expression and reflection of identity?

III. Surveys and Social Media

My research was conducted through use of a Google Form for the actual gathering of data and anecdotes and was spread and promoted through use of the services Tumblr and Discord. Tumblr is a social media blogging site known for its use by fan and counterculture populations. The post on Tumblr was posted on my personal blog where I talk and share my own art and opinions, generally about shows and media that I enjoy. Thus, the blog has a following of people with similar interests as myself, lending its use as a place to promote a survey regarding D&D. Since I very often post about both D&D shows and characters of my own, I knew much of my audience would be possibly interested. The other way of finding participants was through the messaging and community space, Discord. I posted the link to my Tumblr post within two servers, one for a separate horror podcast unrelated to my research that I have friends and acquaintances within, many of whom play D&D, and one server for the popular D&D web show, *Critical Role*, where a group of voice actors play the game live on streaming services.

I cut the survey off at 60 responses in order to begin processing the received information. All of the questions were optional in order to allow respondents to remain within their comfort level and only answer that which they felt they had a meaningful response for. The questions were split up into sections, the first being general - a yes or no option for “Have you played D&D before” and a subsequent “if yes, how long have you played” and “if no, what is your primary way or source of consuming related content?” Following was:

1: a section addressed to those who have “Dungeon Mastered” or DMed before, as well as those who have designed an adventure or world for playing D&D,

2: a section for those who have played the game as a character, and finally

3: a section for everyone, as long as they’ve engaged in D&D content before. There were no questions for demographics as I was more interested in experiences and wanted those who didn’t know me to still feel comfortable and safe doing the survey, but based on the length of time people have reported playing D&D and my own personal knowledge of who answered the survey, the research covered a range of ages from teenagers circa my own age, 16, and up to middle-aged adults.

There were similar questions in each of the sections pertaining to both DMs and players, both regarding their favourite part of the game. The question posed to the DMs was “What is your favourite part of worldbuilding?” and the question posed to the players was “What is your favourite part of playing the game?” Both of these questions provided similar results, with the DMs commonly discussing creating lore around their worlds, such as fleshing out religions, cultures, and magic systems. Another common topic was working with their players and especially creating connections between player characters and the world around them, created by the DM. One respondent described DMing a custom homebrewed (homebrewed meaning a world created by the group who plays in it, not published by the makers of D&D) as being “like creating a playground with toys made exclusively for the people who show up and watching them explore!”

IV. Responses and Real Stories

The players’ responses overwhelmingly discussed ideas of roleplaying and collaborative storytelling. Twenty-five out of the fifty-five people who responded to the question included or

mentioned roleplaying in their answer, and 8 answers mentioned collaborative storytelling. One respondent explained that “Storytelling! Collective storytelling!! Isn't it beautiful that a bunch of people can come together with independently made characters and accidentally weave stunning parallels??” and another answered with “Playing pretend with my friends! I love storytelling and there's something really appreciate about being able to (as a full adult) take an afternoon and just play with people I care about.”

As extrapolated from the data, one can conclude that a very strong draw to D&D players of today are the group interactions and collaborative aspects of the game. D&D is a way for people of all ages to unwind, have fun, bond with people close to them, and tell a story that means worlds to the people who play it. Just, mentioned earlier, came to the same conclusion within her research, stating that “When I asked the participants what attracted them to D&D or LARP, the most common answer was collective storytelling” (Just 19). She goes on to discuss how two aspects of this draw are the comradery and the creativity. I agree with this conclusion, as many of the answers I received mirror this. A common thread among the DMs’ answers was the creativity they were allowed in creating their worlds. One DM wrote “The imagination part of it- tapping in on what you really can do, pushing cliches out of the way to do something new and refreshing. I absolutely love it.”

The questions addressed to everyone included “What do you find to be the most engaging part of D&D?” which prompted more of the previously stated responses. Roleplay, collaborative storytelling, spending time with friends, and creativity were all themes that once again came up heavily. One respondent phrased the draw as “There's something incredibly satisfying about sitting with a bunch of friends and asking, "What is this world that these characters are living in? And how does it shift because we exist in it??"

Another respondent noted that:

I think the power aspect of D&D is a definite draw for a lot of people, myself included to an extent. The ability to take so many things that are impossible (or at least Very Difficult) in the real world, and making them possible, even if it is just make-believe, feels really engaging. In terms of at the table, I think the capacity for every player to bring in their own sort of plot twist/big reveal is part of the fun, it keeps you on your toes and sometimes, despite knowing what the big reveal would be, it can even take the DM by surprise.

D&D is a way for people to express themselves and tell stories they wouldn't be able to otherwise, as seen above. Dungeons & Dragons is a very powerful and meaningful tool for collaborative storytelling and expression, and for many players, this is the draw to the game - the comradery and the creativity.

The next series of questions pertained to the identity aspect of my thesis. The DMs were asked "How is your identity reflected in your storytelling?" and the players were asked "How do you express yourself through playing a character?" The most prevailing theme throughout these answers was one of queerness. 27 out of the 39 answers for the DM's section mentioned or were about queerness in their storytelling. Other reoccurring themes were neurodivergence, political commentary, race, and religion, though the answers regarding queerness were in the vast majority. I theorize this is likely due to the spaces and topics I frequent and thus the audience I have accumulated.

One respondent described their identity's influence as:

I'm queer, and a celtic pagan, so it happens in a lot of different ways. My queerness is reflected in how I structure my NPCs, most often they are also queer in someway, because it's hard to separate my own world view from my queerness, even in a fantasy

setting. It's also interesting to figure out where queer people sit within a fantasy society, and 'live' in a world where homophobia and transphobia are at the very least much less common than the real world. My world building (while a collaborative effort with my older sister) also leans on celtic mythology and how celtic cultures could have looked if they weren't Christianised.

This is one of the most fleshed out answers, but the concepts it discusses are mirrored across many of the others. Another answer in response to the DM's question said that their identity was reflected in "so many ways! the inclusion of characters across gender, sexuality, race (in our sense and the fantasy sense), the not subtle but indirect political commentary from the way the worlds political systems are set up, the culture of each of the parts of the world, to name a few." Many of the respondents use their stories as a way to provide representation, make commentary, and create a comfortable space for their players to express themselves.

The results were slightly different from the players' side, with the concept of incorporating parts of oneself into one's character prevailing with 24/54 answers. Immediately following, however, were answers regarding queerness with 17/54 answers. Other recurring themes were discussions of neurodivergence, mental health, and trauma. As one respondent put it, "I always add bits of myself into my characters. A lot of the feelings I'm dealing with and struggles I've faced become part of their backstory and character." Another respondent explained how "My characters are always in some way defined by me, defined by how I play. I Have many PCs who have directly borrowed my own trauma, almost every PC I've ever written was neurodivergent. They may have my sense of humor, because I spend time bantering with my friends in character - or they have my curiosity, because I constantly try and look for secrets and clues my dm has hidden. For me an PC is a way to bring out parts of myself i love to indulge in, and find escapism

through them.” Many, many D&D players use their characters as a way to process their own lives and histories and then turn that into something creative. D&D becomes a healthy and enjoyable outlet to express themselves.

The final (and arguably most important) question, in this case directed to everyone, was a call for meaningful stories relating to identity and self-expression in D&D. This prompted another batch of answers with the same themes as before - queer stories, mental health and trauma, and stories about religion - alongside answers I believe demonstrate just how wonderful D&D can be. Several answers discussed how D&D helped them recognise their own gender identities; "I made one of my characters nonbinary, and it helped me realize my own gender identity through them.” Other answers describe how D&D is a way to experiment and try out different ways of presentation: “My characters are mostly outside of the gender binary, and it helps a lot to try on different identities in short form, compared to make a more permanent decision in the real world” or “i realised i was trans through d&d !”

One respondent described the impact of their story in one of their players lives by answering with how:

In a long campaign I ran years ago, my friend played a Gnome Artificer named Arthur Bramblestone. Arthur's player has a degenerative eye condition and is prone to migraines and through the campaign, Arthur suffered an injury which broke his back. Through collaborative efforts, me and Arthur's player designed a system of tools that allowed Arthur to regain mobility and a series of magical items which lessened his pain. Years later, I still get told that the tools we designed helped Arthur's player come to terms with the fact that he was going blind and he still cries over the fact that I was so ready to help make the tools available for someone in-game to be able to live life fully.

Dungeons and Dragons is a game that can so easily make a remarkable impact on its players lives, purely through what it is. The ability to tell nuanced stories with and for people around you is a medium truly made for making lasting impacts.

Several answers mention their experience with mental health, neurodivergence, and trauma. A few answers discuss religious trauma specifically - “d&d really helped me come to terms with my religious trauma and as a dm, explore/create a world where i am the one in control of gods instead of the aspect of one controlling me (and i am yet to be a player, but i have a whole set of clerics i'd love to play who are all products of my self-reflection and coping mechanisms)” or “my character talia has been helping me deal with my religious trauma lol.” D&D’s specific way of dealing with divinity, both from the perspectives of players and those of DMs, is one that allows for significantly more exploration and healing than the real world. Having a set of gods that can be controlled, can be as kind as one desires, and religions that are what players of the game design them to be is a massive opportunity for exploration and thus healing.

A particularly poignant answer describes how:

Going through the assortment of characters I have, dealing with grief- like one character lost his father and holds that ugly feeling of grief in him, along with everything else that's happened to him, while presenting himself as a sort of scrappy, roll with the punches type. But he grieves- and I feel like I grieve along with him when the time comes. When the time comes and he gets vengeance for his father, I've been hyping myself up for the better half of a year, because I know that he's going to say things I wish I had said, and being able to experience through that through a dorky little role-playing game is amazing.

D&D is a second chance, an opportunity to live and learn and grow both from real life experiences and in-game ones.

A happy few answers mentioned love and D&D - “i realized i was in love with my best friend after our characters fell in love during a game. theyre now the love of my life lol” - “I met my current partner through dnd and we kind of fell in love over the course of it, and having our characters fall in love in so many games and spin off stories we then wrote, etc.” Several other answers described the relationship with their friends through D&D, explaining how:

I have been very blessed to have a consistent group for 3 years now 🙏” and “In this group, by virtue of all meeting online - we all picked our 'main' oc [original character] to go by. We all use our ocs names in our day to day conversation. EX: we all call one friend ‘Seek,’ despite knowing her name, because her ocs name is fireseeker. I call my IRL friend i met in middle school ‘doc’ instead of her real name.

These answers and many others are simple expressions of love: for their friends, their partners, and the game. D&D brings people together in so many ways and that is one of its most valuable aspects.

V. Conclusion

Dungeons and Dragons is a wonderful way for its players to express themselves and tell stories as a group, and it clearly is markedly conducive to queer stories and experiences. There may be little to no current literature on this specific topic, but what there is demonstrates a meaningful connection between the game, its players and their identities, and the stories they tell. My research alongside others’ pulls together a story of joy, expression, experimentation, and freedom. D&D is not perfect, and the community I pulled from is not representative of every single D&D player. From the source itself to the many players and spaces who are less accepting, there is much work to be done, but the way the game permits and encourages joy in one’s identity and community is

not something to be ignored. D&D, at its heart, is a storytelling game, and those who love the game need to tell the stories that mean the most to us. D&D is a huge part of my life and passions, and I look to a future where so many people like me can experience the love I feel for the game and its community. If we speak up, work to make changes, and keep creating as we do, together we can build a story that speaks to us all.

Works Cited

- Cross, Katherine Angel. "The New Laboratory of Dreams: Role-Playing Games as Resistance." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 40, no. 3/4, 2012, pp. 70–88, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23333474>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2022.
- Garcia, Antero. "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games." 7 Apr. 2017, Accessed 22 Apr. 2022.
- Just, Rachel M. "The Power in Dice and Foam Swords: Gendered Resistance in Dungeons and Dragons and Live-Action Roleplay." 2018, Accessed 22 Apr. 2022.