

Shawnee State University

Digital Commons @ Shawnee State University

Master of Rhetoric and Composition

College of Arts & Sciences

Spring 2024

Identity-Making Processes in the Storytelling and Experiences of Tabletop Roleplaying Game (TRPG) Players

Allen Barnhart

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.shawnee.edu/macr_etd



Part of the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Shawnee State University

Identity-Making Processes in the Storytelling and Experiences of Tabletop Roleplaying
Game (TRPG) Players

Allen Barnhart
Advised by Dr. Marc Scott
Master's Thesis
2024

Abstract

Tabletop roleplaying game (TRPG) play involves complex social interactions and imaginative processes. These recursive elements cause players to evaluate and reevaluate the identities of themselves and the identities of their imagined characters. Previous research has established that TRPG play unwittingly allows players to rehearse social interactions and potential self-identities. Explorations such as these can be desirable to educators trying to give students a critical outlook on identity and perspective. This study presents a novel survey of Discord users from communities with the goal of understanding players' awareness and experience with these identity-making processes. Nineteen experienced TRPG players responded to the survey and their responses were segmented, coded, and analyzed using a constructivist approach. The resulting themes show that players do frequently use TRPG play as an opportunity to explore alternative perspectives and identities. Players reported exploring various moral and social outlooks, as well as genders and sexualities that differ from their own. These explorations happen dynamically, with players initially creating characters with varying degrees of similarity to themselves and reevaluating this similarity as their identity or their character's identity changes over time. TRPGs have potential as tools in the college composition classroom as a way of giving students a critical outlook of identity and the perspectives of themselves and others. Additionally, TRPGs can be a way of approaching these and other topics in a way that feels politically neutral and unobtrusive.

Keywords: Composition, Gender, Identity, LGBT, Pedagogy, Rehearsal, Roleplay, Tabletop, TRPG, Sexuality.

Abstract	1
Introduction	3
Understanding TRPGs.....	6
Goals and Research Question.....	8
Literature Review	10
Social Opportunities for Exploring Identity.....	10
Queer Utopias.....	12
Exploring Identity.....	13
Queer Composition Pedagogy.....	14
In Summary.....	17
Methods	19
Survey Location.....	20
Sample Size.....	21
Developing Survey Questions.....	22
Survey Deployment.....	24
Coding & Analysis.....	25
Findings and Analysis	26
Demographics.....	26
Gender.....	26
Sexuality.....	26
Age, TTRPG Experience, and Mode of Play.....	27
Themes of Player Perspectives.....	28
Identity.....	28
Perspectives.....	31
Gender and Sexuality.....	36
Discussion	39
The Process of Exploring Identity.....	39
Confidence, Appearance, and Charisma.....	41
Pedagogical Implications.....	44
Conclusion	48
References	54
Appendix: Survey Questions	56

Introduction

Like many other people, I have played tabletop roleplaying games (TRPGs) as a creative and social outlet throughout my life. My history of playing such games began with *Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)* around the time I was eight. My mother took on the role of game master (GM) and ran a short game for myself and my younger sibling. While this first experience with TRPGs lasted only for a couple of sessions of play, I still vividly remember sitting at the dinner table imagining my character, discussing their traits and abilities with my mother, and helping my sibling design their character. This first experience with TRPGs led me to play more throughout my childhood. In middle school, I played *D&D* and *Star Wars: Roleplaying Game* in a school club with my friends. In high school, as a post-secondary student, I joined a club at my college to play more *D&D*. As an adult, I ran my own games as a GM, going as far as to write my own settings for the games to take place in. In many ways, these experiences are what gave me the confidence and experience to even attempt to become a writer.

In my late teens (around 2018), I began writing my own rules for tabletop games. I wanted to take my favorite elements of fantasy games and apply them to a game set in a futuristic world. I spent much of my time on Discord servers talking about game design, learning what people liked and disliked, and helping others create content for their games. When the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020 I was fully immersed in my TRPG communities. This meant that I was poised to notice the identities of those communities begin to shift. Online TRPG communities had always, in my experience, been open and welcoming to LGBTQ+ people. But during the “lockdown” period of the pandemic, it felt like there was a shift. Fairly quickly, the communities I had frequented

became dominated by people who were openly queer. Many of my friends, fellow players, and folks I had spoken with for the past couple of years finally decided to come out with their LGBTQ+ identities.

At the time I was too preoccupied with pandemic-related fears to truly consider the implications of these shifting demographics. As time has gone by and I've had more time to consider this trend I have realized that the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic gave many people plenty of time to reconsider their self-identity and presentation. Because most people were, at least for a time, forced or encouraged to self-isolate, they also had plenty of time away from the judgment of those around them. Some people used this time to come to reconsider their self-identity or to decide how to present themselves in an LGBTQ+ context.

But I have mainly seen this trend in TRPG players. This leaves me wondering why TRPG players seem to be more affected by this phenomenon than the general population. Talking informally with some of my friends, I realized that the character-creation element of TRPGs means that players are conditioned to consider and reconsider the traits of a person, creating and evaluating possibilities for an imagined person in an imagined world. I also realized that this same consideration was being applied not only to imaginary characters but to the personal identity of the players themselves.

Many of those around me went through this process. I met transgender players who had used the characters they created to try presenting themselves as their preferred gender, trying out names, and practicing imagined social interactions. Some players created characters with social skills surpassing their own, placing themselves in

the shoes of a confident, suave bard (a magical musician in the context of *D&D*). Most players I met created characters which were, in many ways, representations of themselves with only a few minor alterations. It seemed to me that these explorations were shaping the identities of the players I met.

Around the same time I had these realizations, I began writing my own TRPG system. This made me much more conscious of the many ways that small design decisions—like the process of character creation, the choice of terms used to describe characters, and the variety of options available to players—affect the possibilities that players feel open to exploring in a game. Shortly after I started writing this game, I also began to learn English composition pedagogy. I learned that pedagogical practices have occasionally focused on these same processes. One particular article by Brook Corfman, “On Not Knowing Students’ Genders, Nor Being Able to Predict When or How They Will Change,” discussed the evolving nature of student identities and the possibility that students’ gender identities may change at any point during a course. While it never directly addressed TRPGs, the possibilities of gender exploration discussed in this article echoed the experiences of the transgender players I had known, and the concept of identity-making finally connected several ideas that had been brewing in my mind for the past few years. My experiences as a TRPG player have shown me that there are social forces that lead players to evaluate and reevaluate both their character and themselves based on their own feelings regarding the outcome of roleplay, and on the responses of other players in their group. But how aware are players of these processes, and how active are they in intentionally guiding them? This is the question that I continued to refine during the course of my studies and the

creation of this thesis.

Understanding TRPGs

Before moving on to scholarship surrounding TRPGs, I think it is worth discussing the history and central ideas behind TRPG play. This will serve as a primer for those readers unfamiliar with this genre.

The concept of roleplaying is probably as old as storytelling itself. Where storytelling is the practice of sharing a story that is omnisciently crafted by its creator(s), roleplaying, its base form, is the crafting of a story from the perspective of a character involved in the story's narrative. Creating and playing in these narrative games might begin with the development of a setting—a specific world for the narrative to exist within—or may draw from players' shared cultural understanding of ideas like generic fantasy, space operas, or eldritch horror.

The near-limitless possibilities of freeform roleplay can bring an element of uncertainty. Roleplay in small groups can quickly devolve into arguments when one person imagines an element differently from another. To address this issue, many players use pre-written rulebooks; TRPGs are, in essence, a formalized extension of “make-believe” where rules exist to facilitate the experience of playing the game in a group setting.

In a typical TRPG, one player will take the role of the narrator. This player is commonly known as the “Game Master” (GM), and it is their job to give life to the world of the game by describing situations, environments, and the actions of the non-player characters (NPCs) who inhabit the game's setting. Since TRPGs do not necessarily come with a pre-written story, the GM is also usually responsible for working with the

other characters to create challenges and an overarching narrative to drive gameplay. The game's other players are usually tasked with playing from the perspective of a single character, known as a player character (PC). These players act through their respective PC to engage with the game's world, solve the GM's challenges, and progress the narrative.

TRPGs are also (in most cases) cooperative games where the players are tasked with working together to overcome challenges and progress the narrative. Since players must work together, building rapport between both themselves as a player and their persona as a PC, complex social dynamics and processes of introspection emerge from gameplay. These dynamics, specifically the introspective processes through which players explore, shape, and redefine their own definitions of their personal identity, are the subject of this thesis.

The connection between TRPGs and the field of writing studies may not be immediately apparent. For me, my history playing TRPGs is one of the primary reasons I have become a writing scholar; I was led to this field naturally through play and have therefore had to retroactively come to an understanding of how these topics are connected. My current understanding of this connection is what I now share.

TRPGs as a hobby incorporate many of the same recursive elements that guide writing and creative processes such as those described by Nancy Sommers in "Intentions and Revisions." Writers imagine their goals for their work, sometimes creating outlines, before writing and repeatedly evaluating the quality of what they have written. Similarly, TRPG play begins with imagining a story, a scene, or a desired outcome and is refined by the recursive processes of evaluating the effectiveness and

impact of how well these ideas are implemented. While a GM may begin a play session with an outline of their desired events, they will be repeatedly challenged by the decisions and attitudes of players. This forces them to reevaluate and adjust their goals and outlines if they want to preserve their desired outcome by the end of the session, or, if this outcome moves too far out of reach, to redefine the outcome itself. This process teaches players to consistently reevaluate their progress in a narrative, the perceptions of others, and their goals for a given scenario. These concepts connect to several other topics that will be explained in detail in my literature review and discussion.

Goals and Research Question

The goals of this research were guided by my personal and professional interests in TRPGs. Regarding my personal interests, I want to better understand the needs and experiences of TRPG players so I can both better understand the communities I am a part of and so I can write TRPGs that better suit the specific needs of those communities. Professionally, I recognize that TRPGs are a common hobby among my students and want to better understand the implications of TRPG play on student experiences and rhetorical backgrounds. I also realize the potential use of TRPG play or references in the classroom setting as a means of engaging students in recursive exercises in writing, storytelling, and personal reflection. Both of these aspects are areas which I think could be enhanced by a deeper understanding of TRPG player experiences.

These interests and considerations resulted in a short list of goals for the research and presentation of this thesis:

1. To share the experiences of people who have used TRPGs as a part of

shaping their identity.

2. Discuss identity-making processes in TRPG play and analyze their rhetorical implications on player experiences.
3. Contextualize these experiences in the greater conversation surrounding identity-making, queer theory, and queer-focused pedagogy.

Connecting each of these goals, I arrived at a research question that guided the process of conducting, analyzing, and discussing this research project: what impact do identity and identity-making processes through TRPG play have on the experiences and storytelling of TRPG players?

Literature Review

In this brief review, I will explain the most important concepts that have influenced this research, constructing a narrative to describe the greater conversation that this research will contribute to. I will begin with a discussion of why TRPGs are used as a means of exploring one's own identity. Then I will explore the topic of self-identity, discussing the forces that shape an individual's sense of self in a queer context. I will also discuss the concept of the queer utopia as it pertains to the playing of TRPGs. Lastly, I will briefly contextualize the importance of understanding these aspects of TRPGs in the context of writing studies and queer composition pedagogy as a way to give students a critical outlook on social and personal topics, and as a means of incorporating queer composition praxis in the classroom. In my conclusion, I will explain how each of these ideas have shaped my research question.

Social Opportunities for Exploring Identity

TRPGs are largely played in small groups, which means that most identity-making processes have a social element to them. In this section I will examine the literature regarding how players are socialized and brought into TRPG groups and how these groups allow for social rehearsals.

In "Legitimate Peripheral Participation by Novices in a Dungeons and Dragons Community," Michael J. Giordano discusses the cultural and group dynamics observed in a TRPG group playing the fantasy game Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), and writes a description of the processes through which new players are socialized and given the cultural context that they need in order to effectively engage with the game and their

fellow players. Giordano explains that players are willingly brought into gaming groups by friends, and an understanding of the so-called “shared fantasy”—as well as the game’s specific genre—is communicated through cultural references (movies, books, etc.) and secondhand knowledge shared by veteran players. These shared ideas and experiences are described as “subsocial capital” that players need in order to fully engage in the act of playing the game (449). There are additional reasons, beyond these social aspects, that lead players to seek out these games. One of the primary motivations is the opportunity for introspection and the chance to explore one’s own identity in ways that are not possible in the “mundane world.” Giordano summarizes this appeal as the opportunity for players to progress through a series of explorations where they are able “first, to build characters that are like themselves; second, to build characters that are at least partly like themselves; and third, to build characters that act completely opposite to their own identity” (452). It is through these latter two explorations that Judith Butler’s idea of the performance of gender and sexuality manifests in TRPGs (Giordano 453).

This idea is expanded upon in S. Brook Corfman’s “On Not Knowing Students’ Genders.” Summarizing scholarship on the expression of the trans identity, Corfman discusses the nature of gender identity as a changeable construct. They highlight the necessity of highlighting the possibility of changing gender, and eliminating expectations that a person might have about another’s gender identity in order to “[free] up gender change at any moment in one’s life. . .” without the limitation of “. . . what one had previously thought one wanted” (267). Though Corfman addresses these topics as factors in determining classroom pedagogy, other authors discussed in this review

(Alexander; Cross; Kawitzky; Giordano) will draw from the same central ideas to demonstrate the need for spaces through which one's identity (especially sexual orientation and gender identity) can be explored and questioned. TRPGs, much like classroom writing activities, offer such an opportunity.

Queer Utopias

It is very rare for a TRPG to be written with the goal of exploring one's own identity in mind. In "The New Laboratory of Dreams," Katherine Cross discusses the simple fact that ideas such as "Uncover your transgender identity!" [are] scarcely marketed as [features] of online games of any stripe. . ." (74). I would add that this holds true across all genres of games. I cannot think of any genre (e.g. tabletop games, video games, board games, etc.) that would explicitly highlight this feature as a core element of their design (at least not with any frequency). But they are still used, often unwittingly, as a means of identity-making. Centering her argument within the greater contexts of feminism and social activism, Cross explains that fantasy genres (especially science fiction) create a "laboratory of dreams" through which new visions of possible futures can be viewed. Writers and roleplayers become part of creating not only utopic and dystopic visions of what is possible, but of combining the two to create even more possibilities. Cross explains that "These genres allow for a complex and thoughtful sketching out of social dynamics that stubbornly refuse to fall on either side of that dichotomy—in this way, very much like our own world" (72). This process of "sketching out" social dynamics allows for a new kind of activist praxis. Cross writes:

Confronting a grotesque reality, paradoxically, necessitates a robust charge into the realm of fantasy. In order to be what we see, we must first create those

visions and archetypes—fantasy is an ideal place to do this. Imagination is not just a prerequisite of praxis here: it is praxis itself. Dreaming, far from being inimical and opposite of action, is folded back into the urgent doing of political activism and restored to a position of prominence and respect. (72)

Felix Rose Kawitzky writes about similar topics of utopianism in “Magic Circles.” The concept of a magic circle is part of “The queer practice of forming bubbles of suspended, altered reality — pockets of freedom and expression . . . in which the players control the rules and social world of the game” (Kawitzky 132). The magic circle is formed by a (usually unspoken) agreement among players to “imagine possible futures and to branch off from oppressive presents” (130). This perspective leads to a critical outlook on social and cultural dynamics in the mundane world; it is impossible to escape the larger contexts and meanings of societal and political topics (133). Through the magic circle and the act of improvisational roleplay, players have an opportunity to consider realities that could be, rather than simply considering the reality we find ourselves in. This offers an opportunity to implicitly and explicitly critique the world that is (135).

Exploring Identity

Having established both the opportunity and the social mechanisms that lead to the kind of introspective reflections on self-identity that are the topic of this thesis, attention can finally be given to such explorations themselves.

Susan Haarman, in “Dungeons and Dragons and Dewey,” connects John Dewey’s idea of dramatic rehearsal to TRPG gameplay. With players imagining and cooperatively exploring a shared and responsive world, there are many opportunities for

players to experience “both the individual and social consequences of the actions they take” (58). Through this improvisational, social, and socially aware type of gameplay, players are able to imagine not only what would happen in a fictional situation but also to experience dynamic relationships with other characters and weigh the consequences of their choices against the impact that their actions will have on the other players as both real people and as PCs (58-60). Through this social dynamic players are also forced to consider the roles that they play both in their daily life and as a PC in the world of the game. This makes players more aware of the impacts of their roles and choices in a variety of contexts that extend outside of the game to the players’ daily lives (60-1).

Giordano’s concept of performance is similar to Haarman’s description of dramatic rehearsal. Through their respective PCs, players are able to perform a “fantasy self and put their real self on the sidelines” while playing the game (452). During these performances, players can directly witness the effects that various elements of their presentation—their actions, words, and fantasy self—have on their fellow players. This allows for direct experimentation with possible self-identities. Since players can construct their PCs, choosing, among other things, the character’s gender, sexuality, and race (this loaded term is usually synonymous with species), there are also ample opportunities for players to embrace the possibility of flexible identities and perform a character other than themselves.

Queer Composition Pedagogy

The field of rhetoric and composition has a history dominated and directed by straight, cisgendered men. This limited perspective has only been questioned in recent decades by feminist and queer studies scholars. Queer pedagogy is an outgrowth of the

feminist movement. In *The History and Theory of Rhetoric*, James A. Herrick summarizes feminist rhetoric as addressing the exclusion of women from the “rhetorical mainstream.” This exclusion “has resulted in the loss of women’s meanings and [. . .] the loss of women themselves as members of the social world.” In other words, the dominance of men and the limited discourse allowed women has resulted in the loss of the unique perspectives of women, quieted their voice in society, and hindered their influence on the culture (238-9). Sonja Foss summarizes the two foundational arguments of feminist rhetoric: “(1) women’s experiences are different from men’s; and (2) women’s voices are not heard in language” (qtd. in Herrick 238).

Theories of queer rhetorics make many of the same assertions about the experiences of queer persons, arguing that queer experiences are unique and that queer voices have gone unheard. The goal of much of this scholarship is, therefore, to share the experiences and voices of queer people. Additionally, seeking to address the issues and inequalities that lead to marginalization, many writing scholars also attempt to influence composition pedagogy to better engage with queer persons.

Instructors who take a queer-forward approach to writing pedagogy often take critical approaches to the topics discussed in class (Cross; Corfman; Kawitzky). They ask students to question their assumptions, preconceptions, and personal views. While every student brings a unique perspective to the classroom (a unique view of themselves, a unique voice, and a unique take on life), it is important to understand that cultural forces shape these perspectives, and the dominant voice in the Western rhetorical tradition has been that of the straight, white, cisgendered man. This dominance can stifle students who do not share these traits, preventing them from

feeling free or welcome to speak and share their experiences. In “Education as Translation,” Alison Cook-Sather laments the fact that writing instruction has a silencing effect on student voices (96) and suggests pedagogical approaches that challenge students to reconsider “the stories they have told themselves and others about themselves” (100). Before educators can implement a queer-focused pedagogy, a space for dialogue must first be opened in the classroom and presumptions about the meanings and implications of queer topics must be challenged.

A discussion of a critical approach to queer topics can be found in “Transgender Rhetorics” in which Johnathan Alexander describes “possibilities of/for gender” (53). While this discussion is intended as a way to approach trans theory, the same sentiment applies to many other queer topics. Alexander writes:

In many ways, trans theorists, activists, and writers are equally invested in engendering in others a “critical awareness” about gender and in opening up a “sense of agency, a sense of possibility” about what gender means—and *could* mean—as a construct that is simultaneously deeply personal and profoundly political. (53)

This questioning, asking what is possible, calls upon students to question the “essentialist nature of identities” and the forces that influence this perception (Alexander 52). Students should not only ask what influence the queer identity has on writers’ work, but also what influences have led to the conception of those queer identities, and how those pressures take shape in the student’s own life. This critical dialogue also leads students to consider exploring their own identity in a sort of “interrogation” (51).

In “Gaming, Student Literacies, and the Composition Classroom,” Alexander

discusses the use of video games as a way to encourage literacy and critical reading. Though the focus of this article is on video games rather than TRPGs, I hold that much of Alexander's argument still applies to discussions of TRPGs. I would add that not only can TRPGs be used to enhance discussions of literacy and critical thinking, but the improvisational and open nature of these games also brings in added elements of creative process and social awareness. This concept is discussed in the article "We're Just Playing" by Michael Cook et al. This article provides an example of the use of TRPGs in the high school English classroom as a way to engage students in a literacy experience. Clearly, TRPGs can be used as a classroom tool that aligns with many common pedagogical goals. With more study, they may be adapted for the college composition classroom as well.

In Summary

The nature of TRPGs as a social activity that encourages explorations of perspectives were self-identity and the creation of queer utopias means these games often play a role in the development of queer identities. Though games are rarely made with these goals in mind, they still create an excellent opportunity for self-discovery and for rehearsing possible presentations of one's self. These processes are well established (see Giordano), but there is still work to be done in establishing what effects these processes have on the shared narrative that players create and in determining how TRPGs can be designed to enhance and further encourage these processes.

My research question—what impact do identity and identity-making processes through TRPG play have on the experiences and storytelling of TRPG players—was guided by the topics discussed in this literature review. The initial question was sparked

by my observation that many players who I have played with have appeared to use TRPG play as a means of exploring their own identities. This question was supported by scholarship highlighting the social opportunities for identity-making through TRPG play (Cross; Haarman) and strengthened by the concept of the magic-circle and the possibilities afforded by queer utopias (Cross; Kawitzky). My goals of understanding the experience of players and the possibilities for queer pedagogies were spurred on by scholarship in those areas, and a lack of similar studies to the one reported in this thesis.

In conclusion, TRPG play is a hobby that has seen rapid growth especially in the years surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. This growth means that many of my students are themselves TRPG players by the time they enter my classroom. These games clearly have an impact on the perspectives of my students regarding their identities. The aim of this research is therefore to better understand the extent of these influences and the ways these identity-making processes manifest in gameplay. Such understanding may be useful not only in creating and refining queer composition pedagogies but also in understanding the identities and perspectives of students themselves.

Methods

I chose a survey as the method for gathering data to answer the question: what impact do identity and identity-making processes through TRPG play have on the experiences and storytelling of TRPG players? In this section, I will explain why I decided to conduct a survey, how I designed the survey, and how I analyzed the results.

The best way to learn about the experiences of TRPG players is to ask them to share their experiences. Given the limited number of articles discussing this topic in the current literature, I had to create my own research protocol and study design with the goal of establishing the frequency of these experiences in order to understand how common identity-making processes are in TRPG play. An analysis of intensity may also give an indication of the level of awareness players have regarding these same processes.

While interviews may be the easiest way to closely examine individuals' perspectives, the nature of this research question presented unique concerns which made me decide not to conduct interviews or an in-person survey. The most important of these concerns is the willingness of participants to offer their experiences and answer the survey itself. Because this research is, in many ways, a study of queer culture, it is important to think about the perspectives of queer persons taking this survey. Many queer individuals may feel reticent to share their experiences at the expense of their anonymity—they may decline to participate or might be influenced by perceived expectations of conformity to social norms. To alleviate these concerns, I decided to create an online survey. The development, deployment, and analysis of this survey instrument is discussed in the remainder of this section.

Survey Location

One of the earliest considerations in this research project was the location of the study itself. While I have access to a campus of students that includes many TRPG players, the nature of this research question, and the likely reticence of suitable participants to engage in an in-person study, I chose to conduct my survey online.

Several websites and media applications were considered when choosing a suitable location to deploy the survey. Twitter (now X), Reddit, and Discord were the three most heavily considered. These websites each have communities of TRPG players, but are not equally suited for this form of research. Twitter, undergoing a demographic shift as ownership of the website changed hands, was deemed unsuitable because it does not have discreet communities to share a survey link within. While Reddit does have several TRPG communities, the number of members on this site meant a high likelihood of vandalism and made the site unsuitable.

Ultimately, Discord was chosen as the location because: (a) the site's small community "servers" act as forums which offer a greater degree of specificity when choosing where to deploy a survey; (b) the small size of Discord communities makes vandalism a lesser concern; and (c) a lower volume of messages (a result of the smaller size of a Discord server when compared to a Reddit or Twitter feed) means that the survey is more visible to potential participants.

Three suitable Discord servers were identified based on three criteria: 1) researcher access; 2) server environment; and 3) server size.

To determine access, I joined servers and briefly interacted with members. This step allowed me to determine whether the server was a suitable environment for

deploying the survey. A server was deemed suitable if it had a focus on TRPG discussion, featured a community rule explicitly prohibiting discrimination against LGBTQ+ persons or declaring itself a welcoming space for LGBTQ+ people, and had steady use by its members.

Three servers were chosen:

1. A community of approximately 1,000 people, focused on discussing TRPG rules and designing fan content,
2. A community of approximately 200 people, formed around an “actual play” podcast of recorded TRPG gameplay,
3. A community of approximately 1,400 people, built by a TRPG publisher to share and discuss TRPG content.

These servers represent a diverse group of TRPG players, covering a wide variety of games.

Sample Size

Approximately 25 responses were desired. Sample size is relatively small, especially when compared to the full population of all three servers, but this number was deliberately chosen for a few reasons. First, while there are over 2,500 persons across the three servers surveyed, this number is not representative of the total active participants of each community. This count includes people who have never participated in the servers’ forums and people who have stopped checking the server or application. An exact count of members who actively participate in each server is unknown. For this reason, it was assumed that the number of potential respondents is much smaller than the number of community members.

A small sample size was also chosen as a way of maintaining the feasibility of the research. This is my first human subjects research project, so a small number of participants meant that I could learn research theory and practice without becoming overwhelmed by a high volume of responses.

Finally, because this research represents a foray into an area of study with few prior examples, the quality and character of responses were unknown. A larger study would require a more detailed understanding of these aspects. It was decided that a small study would allow for the collection of initial data that might guide future studies on this topic.

Developing Survey Questions

While this study is informed by literature in the field, few existing studies have addressed similar questions to this research. With no suitable instruments to use, I relied on my own experiences with TRPG groups as a guide for the kinds of questions to ask. The goal of these questions is to collect the experiences of casual TRPG players regarding their storytelling and identity-making. These responses can later be examined for rhetorical and pedagogical importance. A survey instrument was designed following processes described in two books: *Educational Research* by Creswell and Gutterman; and *Becoming a Writing Researcher* by Blakeslee and Fleischer.

Four lines of questioning were identified:

1. Demographic questions.
2. Questions for players.
3. Questions for game masters.
4. Questions about LGBTQ+ experiences.

Demographic questions will be used to better understand the type of people who are responding to this survey in terms of age, gender, sexuality, types of TRPG played, and mode of play (online or in person). Because TRPGs are generally played asymmetrically, there are two roles for players: “player” and “game master.” Because players and game masters experience the game differently, it was decided that the survey should include two primary branches—one branch for players, and one branch for game masters. Additionally, since a player in one game might be a game master in another, it was decided that these branches would be nonexclusive, and allow participants to answer questions that are relevant to their mode of play. Finally, to address questions specific to the experiences of those who identify as LGBTQ+, an additional branch was added to the end of the survey to ask questions about how TRPG play has affected the experience of “coming out.”

These four lines of questioning each address individual aspects of the research question: the first set of questions addresses the identities of players themselves, giving necessary context for understanding later responses; the second question set answers questions regarding the experiences of players who “play” the game but who are not in charge of managing sessions as a GM, giving insight into individual experiences during play; the third set of questions addresses those who do manage gaming sessions, capturing the perspective of those who most carefully observe the relationships and reactions of those in a gaming group; and finally, the fourth question set attempts to capture greater insight into the perspectives of queer players regarding the impact of TRPG play on their experience of being queer.

Short answer questions were designed to allow participants to choose the level

of depth and detail they provide. These questions will be the most important data for answering the research question. Each set of questions was intended to capture the experience of TRPG play from a particular perspective (particularly from the perspectives of players versus that of GMs). My goal for designing the survey this way was to allow participants to authentically answer questions about their experiences with TRPGs. As such, I designed the survey instrument to focus on the experience of casual TRPG play rather than the use of TRPGs in the classroom. Following my analysis, I will discuss the rhetorical and pedagogical implications of my findings, using these results to propose future areas of study and potential for use in the composition classroom.

The full survey can be found in the appendix.

Survey Deployment

I contacted administrators on the three servers I chose in mid-November 2023. These gatekeepers had reasonable questions about the survey I was conducting. They wanted to make sure that their community would not be asked identifying questions or exposed to unnecessary risk, and wanted to ensure that it was clear that I would use their responses in this thesis. After answering their concerns, I revised my message calling for participants to address their concerns. The survey was posted on all three servers and made available for a two week period in late November 2023. Responses were received between the 14th and 25th of November.

After deploying the survey, a gatekeeper made me aware of an error that duplicated a survey question, preventing the first 11 participants from answering a question. Fortunately, the answers to the duplicated questions matched completely. The duplicate responses were discarded and this error was corrected for the remaining

participants. A similar error in the survey's branching prevented these same 11 participants from answering follow-up questions about the impact of their players' personal identities on the stories of their games. Both errors were corrected on the second day of the survey's deployment.

Coding & Analysis

Creswell and Guetterman's *Educational Research* was referenced during the coding and analysis phase of this research. Initial segmenting and coding was conducted following the process outlined on pages 244 and 245 which instructs researchers to initially segment their data into many smaller pieces which can then be coded in steps. I followed the concept of "lean coding" to reduce the number of codes created before reducing the number of codes to a handful of themes (244-5). I also referenced their explanation of grounded theory designs, focusing on a constructivist design involving active coding and an analysis with the goal of understanding participants' meanings and experiences (441).

Following data collection, numerical data beyond demographics was determined to be unhelpful for answering the research question when compared to the responses given to short-answer questions. For this reason, most numerical data is omitted. As the analysis was conducted, I determined that the research question itself was overly broad. In narrowing the scope of the question, a step necessary to highlight the importance of my findings, survey questions in the sections regarding GM and LGBTQ+ experiences were excluded from the analysis and discussion. It is also worth noting that the experiences of GMs shared a high degree of similarity with those shared by players.

Findings and Analysis

Quotes taken from responses to the survey's short-answer questions are presented with minimal changes. Many of the responses feature various spelling, grammatical, and mechanical errors which have not been corrected. I believe that these responses can still be understood without correcting these errors and have chosen to preserve them rather than correct them and potentially change the meaning of a response.

Demographics

Nineteen responses were received from users in the three Discord servers chosen for this survey. The first seven questions on the survey help answer questions about the demographics of the participants. All nineteen participants reported having played TRPGs.

Gender

Nine participants were male, nine were genderqueer, and one was female. The surprisingly high proportion of genderqueer individuals includes seven who identified as nonbinary, one who identified as transgender and nonbinary, three respondents who identified as gender-fluid, and two who identified as "demimasculine" or as a "demi-boy."

Sexuality

The majority of respondents (9) were heterosexual. Of the remaining participants, five indicated bisexuality, two were homosexual, two were asexual, and one response of "Attracted to women" was deemed unclear. One asexual participant also identified

themselves as “panromantic,” and one heterosexual participant also identified as “demisexual.”

Age, TTRPG Experience, and Mode of Play

Thirteen participants were over 25. Eight participants were 31-40, five were 26-30, and four were 21-25. There was only a single respondent for both the 18-20 and the 41+ age groups.

All participants began playing TRPGs more than a year ago. Six reported playing for the first time over a decade ago, seven began playing 6-10 years ago, five began 3-5 years ago, and only one reported starting 1-2 years ago. This relatively long experience with TRPGs makes sense given the overall age of the players in this survey.

It also makes sense that the players reported having used many different modes of playing TRPGs. All had played online, and all had used a virtual tabletop application VTT. Most also reported using an application to share their voice (14), or playing in-person with their group (17). The least popular modes of play were with text (11) and while sharing video (8).

D&D was reported as the single most popular TRPG played, with fourteen participants reporting it as the game they have played most often. Two participants reported primarily playing *Pathfinder*, and one participant mainly played *Blades in the Dark*, and one mostly played *Fabula Ultima*. A final participant responded with: “I don’t have system loyalty” which most means that they frequently change games or that they are not willing to indicate a primary game.

Themes of Player Perspectives

Several themes emerged when participants were asked questions about their characters' identities and their impact on the story of the games they have been part of. These themes—identity, perspectives, and gender and sexuality—were repeated in many responses to the survey's short answer questions. Themes in this section are presented in the rough order in which they were first coded. This means that this section is structured in roughly the same order as the survey's questions.

Identity

One of the earliest emerging themes I called "identity." I coded a segment as identity if it (a) mentioned the participant's self as the source of a trait, (b) explored the concept of a character's identity shifting over time, or (c) discussed playing multiple characters with varying traits.

When participants were asked, "How would you describe the identities and characteristics of the characters you make?" this theme appeared in 35% of the 40 coded segments. By way of example, one respondent highlights the identities of their characters, writing:

Their personalities vary widely, sometimes drawing from myself and other times drawing on a story. Inevitably, some of myself creeps in while role playing. Most of the characters I have created have been cis female; as an AMAB person, this trend is what helped me realize I was gender-fluid.

This is one of the clearest examples of this theme. The respondent shows that they understand the sources of the traits that go into their characters and even have

reflected their characters' traits and compared them with their own identity. This comparison even led to a realization about the participant's own gender identity. This understanding is significant because it shows that the player has made conscious decisions about the traits they give to their characters and has reflected on those choices. This participant has even reflected to the point where they have changed their own gender identity—realizing that they are gender-fluid.

Another response to the same question demonstrates similar insights about the origins of a character's traits, but these are directed at the character rather than at the player:

[My characters are] Often some flavour of queer, even if I don't realize it when making them (There was a period where I kept making 'eggs' who I'd realize were trans and/or non-binary while playing them before they did, for example)

This response shows that some players create characters who may begin a narrative expressing one identity, only to evolve into a different expression as the game progresses. The term “egg” is informally used in LGBTQ+ communities to refer to people who display signs of being transgender without being “out” to themselves. The so-called “egg” will crack once the person realizes for themselves that they are transgender. In this way, the metaphor implies a permanence of the transgender identity; it suggests that a person or character can be transgender even if they themselves have not yet come to that realization. This also indicates that while a character may be created with one gender or trait in mind, players reimagine their characters in a way that is reminiscent of typical identity-making processes.

Responses that address identity also show a self-awareness that demonstrates

that players often intentionally create characters who echo the player's self. One response highlights various ways that a person's own traits might appear in a character:

Typically i choose a part of myself that is a good or bad things that I live my life around and have yhe character exemplify that. For example i have a tendency to care more about others than i do myself so Im playing a character who spends all his time uplifting others and not focusing on himself. Or im very competative, so a few characters so far have to be the best at their thing be it dueling, fighting in general, or song.

This participant's caring demeanor, competitive nature, and presumed interests have become defining traits of their characters. Many other responses similarly focus on positive traits which a person intentionally shares with their characters.

The examples so far show that the theme of identity is not solely expressed as a reflection of a participant's self. Many examples of this theme show that respondents use the freedom of roleplay to explore other possible identities. This form of expression is apparent when respondents discuss creating characters that differ from the participant's own self-expression or that actively explore the possibility of experiencing different identities. Explorations may involve gender, sex, sexual orientation, life experiences, and other aspects of a character's identity. One response discusses several such explorations:

Fluid i would say. I have played as men, women, non-binary, genderfluid, trans. All with different sexual orientations as well. Sometimes the characters sexuality and gender identity changes through the game to. I do play a lot of darker themed characters, even my rly happy and kind characters have pretty dramstic

and traumatic backstories. I also like playing with stereotypes, taking them and breaking them. So I make a tiefling cleric who's got a heart of gold. Or a broody aasimar necromancer who's the furthest thing from what we consider to be divine. I do tend to play more chaotic good and neutral aligned characters though.

This response not only shows that players experiment with identities and the many possible opportunities that roleplay allows for, but it also shows that players consider whether characters fit into the preconceived notions that other players may have regarding specific aspects of a character. An example from within this response is the use of an Aasimar, a fantasy race of people with divine origins, as a necromancer who uses unholy magics to raise the dead. Similarly, references to character "alignments" like "chaotic good" and "neutral" borrow terms used in *D&D* to describe the moral compass of a character (*Player's Handbook* [2003]; *Player's Handbook* [2014]).

Perspectives

While the theme of identity was the most frequent theme in the survey's first short response question, the most common theme throughout the remaining questions is one I called "perspectives." I coded a segment as perspectives if it discussed a character or player's outlook on life, personal values, or other abstract virtues. The perspectives shared by the study's participants will help us better understand how player experiences are shaped, which is a key component of the project's research question.

Respondents discussing the characters they make often brought up morality, justice, and other outlooks. One nonbinary participant in the 31–40 age range wrote that their characters are: "Typically male, usually the product of two different cultures,

generally virtuous, usually struggling with their values.” The brevity of this response is typical of responses that show this theme. Instead of giving a clear example of ideas like virtue or morality, respondents expect others to draw from a shared cultural understanding of these ideas. In another response, a 31–40-year-old male describes his characters as: “More happy-go-lucky with strong senses of justice for the downtrodden, often pansexual or asexual rather than hetero.” This response addresses both the personality of his characters and the characters’ social outlooks or perspectives surrounding the concept of justice.

It appears that many of these perspectives originate from the players themselves. When participants were asked “Which of your own traits do you intentionally give to your characters?” this theme emerged in 21 of 33 coded segments.

Many participants cite their own morals or other values as guiding the characters that they create. One respondent says that their own morality is given to their characters: “Generally, my approximate moral compass, I tend to play good type characters.” Another respondent shows their dedication to their family and social group, writing that their characters are: “Protective of their found family, happy to break the rules if the rules are hurting people, fights injustice and advocates.”

Players not only imbue their characters with their own perspectives but also often create characters with idealized outlooks and personalities that they themselves might desire. When participants were asked “Which of your characters’ traits do you wish you had?” perspectives were identified in 25 of the 37 coded segments. Only a few responses expressed the theme of perspectives in any depth. One such response by a nonbinary person aged 31–40 reads: “I wish I was as smart/observant as my

characters. My characters are often dragons, which I wish I was.” Looking further, 17 of these responses addressed general perspectives like those discussed above. Most of the responses to this question were very short. Several responses were only a single word, like “Charisma,” or simply listed a few characteristics like “bravery and adventurousness.”

It is worth pointing out that the popularity of *D&D* among participants may be affecting the descriptions given in responses such as these. The term “Charisma,” for example, has a specific meaning in TRPGs like *D&D*. In the rules for the current version of *D&D*, Charisma is one of “Six abilities [that] provide a quick description of every creature’s physical and mental characteristics” (*Player’s Handbook* [2014] 173). Specifically, “Charisma measures your ability to interact effectively with others. It includes such factors as confidence and eloquence” (*Player’s Handbook* [2014] 178). This definition of the term is commonly accepted in TRPG communities and is the most likely intended meaning behind the use of the term in responses to this survey. In other words, when participants indicate that they desire to have more charisma, they are most likely expressing a desire to be able to influence others and to better fit into a variety of social contexts. Interestingly, previous editions of *D&D* included physical appearance as an aspect of a character’s Charisma. In the 2003 edition of the *Player’s Handbook*, Charisma is described as measuring “[...] a character’s force of personality, persuasiveness, personal magnetism, ability to lead, and physical attractiveness” (*Player’s Handbook* [2003] 9). Using this older definition, which is still understood and often used by players in the present, one might argue that responses that mention desiring a character’s appearance might fall under this same theme—perspectives.

While I do not share this same interpretation, I think that it is worth mentioning that 5 of the 6 responses that address appearance in this question also mention some form of courage.

One response that lends credence to the idea that appearance may be a factor that affects courage and charisma comes from a nonbinary, genderfluid person in the 26–30 age range who writes: “I wish I was skinnier and more feminine and in general I had more androgyny as well as the confidence i believe it would give me.” To a nonbinary or transgender person whose appearance may be a barrier in certain social contexts, it makes sense for confidence to be inherently linked with appearance.

Confidence, courage, and bravery (which I will simply refer to as “confidence”) appeared in 8 coded segments in this question. One response by a male in the 31–40 age range explains that they want the “Confidence to go into a situation without fear of it going badly, because as an imagined character failure doesn't have potentially life long consequences.” While the lack of life-long consequences that a TRPG character may have is not something that can translate into the real world, this general sentiment appears to be shared by many other respondents who simply want “more self confidence” or “confidence and self assuredness.”

When participants were asked “When your characters express aspects of your personal identity, which aspects have affected the game's story?” all 8 responses included aspects that fit into the theme of perspectives. In the following question which asked “How was the story affected by these aspects of your identity?” perspectives emerged up in 5 of the 8 responses. One response by a nonbinary, transgender person in the 31–40 age bracket addresses feelings of alienation: “My tendency to feel alien in

the world due to my autism, and my characters' naivety, sometimes affect the story. I'm not sure of specific examples." While this response shows a clear example of a person's own perspectives affecting their gameplay experience, this participant was unsure of what specific impacts their perspective has had on their games' narratives.

A few other responses addressed personal ideals like conviction and the commitment to justice. One such response by a 31–40-year-old male discusses how his ideals have affected his play: "Self-Sacrifice, outside the box thinking, unwillingness to back down when defending others. I usually play the party Tank." He goes on to expand upon this meaning when explaining how this commitment has affected his stories: This response also explains the concept of a "tank," which is a term to describe a character whose role in a group is primarily to draw attacks away from other characters—an act that is reminiscent of the use of armored vehicles to support infantry on the battlefield. This player's commitment to self-sacrifice and the wellbeing of others shaped his experience of the game, allowing him to vividly express values of self-sacrifice which can rarely be experienced in the real world.

Another pair of responses to the same questions by a male aged 31-40 describes a similar conviction, this time directed towards activism. He writes that the most impact on the story from his own traits comes from his "Conviction in the power of community and aiding and empowering people." These convictions had a deep impact on the story of the game he was playing. He writes:

My character's strong personal beliefs and drive led to a major story arc about the rightful exercise of community power (vs terrorism). His love for people, dignity, and wellness led him to save many victims in opposition to his mentor in

an act of terrorism.

Interpreting this response, I believe that he is saying that his character, who was previously aligned with his “mentor,” was faced with an ethical dilemma that forced him to choose between his values of community and his allegiance to his mentor. The player’s commitment to community and the empowerment of others, which were echoed in his character, led him to abandon his mentor and take up a more (apparently) righteous cause.

Other responses demonstrated similar commitments to political and community values. One response suggests that a player’s own ideals “usually they will affect my characters romantic situations as well as my political beliefs (ie, antifascist and anti authoritarian).” In the player’s group at large, this means that “[They] almost always avoid playing on the side of heirarchies and tradition.” It is worth noting that these commitments are not always viewed in a positive light. One participant wrote that their character’s commitment to “Try to do the right thing” resulted in “Getting us [the party] all killed.” Together, the activist and social values demonstrated in these responses imply that players feel free to explore activism and social perceptions in TRPG play. The artifice of the game may make these explorations feel safer and more approachable. As seen in previous examples, this willingness also extends to players' self-perceptions and can allow players to interpret and reinterpret the identities and perspectives of themselves and their characters both individually and in the social context of gameplay.

Gender and Sexuality

While identity and perspectives were the most common themes among players, other emergent themes offer further insights. One such theme is repeated references to

gender and sexuality. I coded a segment under this theme if it mentioned gender or sexuality. The frequency of responses under this theme may be a result of the servers chosen as the research site and the high proportion of gender non-conforming participants. Many participants were clear that they had created characters that had various gender and sexual identities. Because these responses fit better under the theme of identity, they were coded as such and discussed in that section instead.

Many participants chose to specify the genders of the characters they made in ways that implied a sense of permanence or consistency in their characters (as opposed to the shifting sexualities and genders discussed under the theme of identity). However, some specified that they've made characters of various genders and sexualities. One participant wrote: "My characters tend to be androgynous and bisexual, usually very flirty and forward romantically. They all tend to be very pretty." This response is typical of the level of detail of these responses which present these character traits in a passive manner. This passive outlook may imply that some players view their characters' gender and sexuality as constants. Perhaps such characters share the player's own gender and sexuality. No question was devised to establish this connection.

When players responded to the question asking which of their traits they gave to their characters, responses that fell within this theme simply clarified that the participant often creates characters that share their gender and sexuality. Due to their simplicity, these short responses are omitted from this discussion.

Gender and sexuality also appeared when players were asked which of their character traits they wished they had. In the responses to this question, many

participants who discuss a character's appearance also discuss the character's gender or gendered appearance. I previously linked appearance with a sense of charisma and confidence, but now I will provide an alternative interpretation.

Because of the large proportion of gender-nonconforming participants in this survey, it is likely that gender dysphoria is a factor in many participants' lives. The apparent focus of appearance in a gendered context may represent a desire for the traits of a different gender—and the sense of relief that a dysphoric person may then feel. This link and potential explanation may be the most apparent in a response from a gender-fluid participant in the 26-30 age range. Responding to a question asking about which traits have affected the stories of the games they have played, the participant writes:

Well, besides the magic and cool physicsI appearances along with the benefits they get from their liniage (otherwise known as race) ? Probably the strength and ability to actually change things in the world around me. To fight things, see the world with found family and uncover cool secrets. Also...i would love to be able to change my appearance at will, would make the whole ",gender fluid" thing a lot easier to manage. [...]

The participant clearly desires their character's appearance and ability to shapeshift. They also highlight the importance of these traits for a person who is gender fluid—experiencing a shifting gender identity that consistently fluctuates.

Discussion

Now that I have established and analyzed several themes present in the responses I collected from my participants, the goal of this section is to contextualize these responses in the greater conversations found in published literature. I will also further discuss the findings of this research while describing their importance to the field of composition pedagogy.

The Process of Exploring Identity

The themes of identity and perspectives that emerged from the responses in this study show how TRPGs offer a socially acceptable outlet for the experimentation with and exploration of players' current sense of self and of possible selves.

The responses I collected demonstrate the same process discussed by Giordano in which players first make characters similar to themselves, then make characters that are somewhat similar to themselves, before finally making characters that are opposite to themselves (452). It seems clear from the variety of responses and the experience of the players who responded to this survey—the vast majority of whom began playing TRPGs more than two years ago—that this process is not a linear one. While it seems likely that players follow this trend when initially learning to play TRPGs, certain responses discussed in the section on identity imply that some players begin by creating characters which are dissimilar to their everyday presentation of their self. The experiences of nonbinary and genderfluid participants in particular demonstrate that gender identities in particular often differ from a player's own. These differences may be intentional in some cases, but appear unintentional in others. While intentional

exploration of the possibilities of a changeable self are interesting, I find unintentional explorations much more engaging. Participants realizing over time that they or their character are transgender or genderfluid, as was seen in a pair of responses, shows that players are open to dynamic, shifting senses of self.

Rhetorically and narratively speaking, TRPG characters are often dynamic, changing over the course of a story. Players reappraise their characters' identities, feeling free to change, refine, or redefine their character's identity as they develop. This reappraisal of characters' identities implies that the explorations Giordano discusses are ongoing, occurring across multiple sessions of play, rather than simply ending at the point a character is created. I would suggest that rather than creating a character that statically falls into one category described by Giordano (being very similar to the player's self, different in some ways to the player's self, or very dissimilar to the player's self), players create characters which can begin in any of these categories and dynamically shift the character between them as the story progresses.

Such shifts may happen for at least three reasons. (1) a player may create a character in one category but find it easier or preferable to play the character in a way more or less similar to themselves. Imagine a player who, upon creating a villainous character, learns experientially that they do not have the heart to roleplay evil acts; such a player would likely either change their character to better suit their playstyle, create a new character, or stop playing. While not found in the responses collected in this survey, my experiences with TRPG play have shown me that this shift is far from uncommon. (2) a player's perception of their character's identity shifts as they reevaluate their character over time. This shift is evident in the example of the player who created "egg"

characters who they slowly decided were transgender over the course of a narrative. (3) a player's perception of their own self may shift to become more like that of their character. This final shift is evident in the example of the player who realized that they were genderfluid after creating several characters with a variety of gender identities. Anyone who acknowledges a newfound trans identity may experience this shift.

While gender identities are one of the clearest ways to see a player or character's identity shifting over time, other aspects of identity, such as those discussed under the theme of perspectives, may also experience these same shifts. Responses that address advocacy and socially-oriented ideals suggest that these perspectives may also fall into similar categories of closeness to a player's own ideals and may thereby experience similar shifts over time.

Confidence, Appearance, and Charisma

Another interesting aspect that emerged from this study is the use of TRPG terms and concepts to describe aspects of participants' identities. It should come as no surprise to find that TRPG players use terms from popular games, but the ways these terms are used have some interesting implications. Responses often connected ideas such as charisma, appearance, confidence, and bravery with the mechanical concept of Charisma popularized by *D&D*. The term Charisma in *D&D* is connected with influence, communication, confidence, and many other social and interpersonal skills. It appears that the importance of Charisma in TRPGs like *D&D*, where it serves as one of the six core ability scores for all characters, may have an influence on the values of TRPG players. The social nature of TRPG play means that players are intimately aware of the importance of cooperation, social connection, and good communication. This

understanding combined with the common desire for better social skills may mean that players have an understanding of the limits of their social abilities and seek to improve their social ability over time.

Similarly, many participants discussed appearance in ways that suggest a desire to better adapt to a variety of social situations. In my findings I highlighted two possible explanations for the frequent mention of appearance in findings. The first explanation connects appearance to Charisma, as the term is used in past editions of *D&D*. In versions released before 2014, physical appearance and attractiveness are usually tied to a character's Charisma score (as seen in *Player's Handbook* [2003]). This connection may lead players to desire a particular appearance as a way of gaining social influence. Likewise, the ability to shapeshift or alter one's appearance—as is possible in many TRPGs through the use of certain spells and abilities—may manifest for similar reasons. The second explanation for the frequency of appearance in responses connects to the high proportion of genderqueer, nonbinary, and gender-fluid participants in this study. It is likely that some of these participants experience gender dysphoria due to their appearance. The ability to choose one's appearance may be a relief to those experiencing this dysphoria. Even participants without dysphoria may desire control over their appearance as a way of better signaling their gender identity. Since this level of control is difficult in the real world, TRPGs are an outlet for expressing these desires. A third, new possibility is also worth mentioning: players may simply think that exploring these different identities are interesting or narratively compelling. I propose this final explanation as a counterpoint to the other, more complicated explanations I provided. In reality a combination of these factors may be responsible for the importance of

appearance among players. It may also be true that a player may create a character for one of the above reasons only to reevaluate their choice at a later point. This is akin to the shifting degree of similarity between a player's self and the identity of their characters, demonstrated when participants reported discovering that they were creating "egg" characters or coming to new realizations about their own gender identity.

The use of shared terms and concepts echoes Giordano's idea of "subsocial capital" and the socialization or initiation of new players into established TRPG groups (449). It is clear that TRPGs offer explorations into aspects of identity and appearance which are not possible in the real world; look no further than the accounts participants who desire to shapeshift or to become fantastical creatures. TRPG play offers experiences that could not be had elsewhere. Another example of shared terms and subsocial capital comes from references to morality and character alignments (the latter of which being another concept from *D&D*). Characters created in many TRPGs, especially in *D&D*, often have some sort of mechanical representation of their moral compass; a character may be "good" or "evil" and these terms have significance in the rules of the game. Because players are exposed to these terms, they are more likely to consider their own morality, ethics, and perspectives.

Beyond highlighting the processes behind the socialization of new players discussed by Giordano, these examples also demonstrate other concepts discussed by academics in the field of writing studies and composition pedagogy. All of these explorations are made possible by the formation of the "magic circle" as described by Kawitzky; by suspending the realities of the real world and allowing for the assertion of new, fantastical realities, the magic circle makes players comfortable with exploring new

possibilities (132). Both the idea of the magic circle and of the “laboratory of dreams” described by Cross are on clear display as participants in the study discuss activism and social justice. Several participants made it clear that their outlooks on topics such as the importance of community, the search for justice, and a desire to help others have had a profound impact on their experience of playing TRPGs and on the stories they have taken part in. Whether they have done so intentionally or otherwise, players have reported putting their activist and social ideals into practice during play.

Pedagogical Implications

While the specific findings of this survey say little about the exact use and implementation of TRPGs into the classroom setting, I have identified several reasons why TRPGs may be beneficial in the classroom. I present the following sections as desirable outcomes for the use of TRPGs in teaching writing. From this perspective, TRPGs may help students create a critical and evolving sense of self; create a framework for exploring morality; and lead to a more critical outlook on topics of activism, advocacy, and the possibility of changing narratives in the real world. It is worth briefly mentioning that this study did not aim to create or evaluate classroom activities involving TRPGs. Instead, this section discusses potential benefits that the use of TRPGs in the classroom may provide students. It is my hope that outlining these prospects will aid future researchers and educators in the quest to study the use of TRPGs in the classroom.

Critical outlooks are one of the most difficult things to teach—and it can be even more difficult to teach students to view themselves critically. This is especially true given the silencing effect of some forms of writing instruction on student voices (Cook-Sather

96). As educators work to change this educational paradigm and to encourage critical thinking, various scholars, such as Alexander, Cook, and Cook-Sather, have discussed ways to shift student perceptions and expand their thinking. The findings of this study demonstrate that TRPG players learn to explore a variety of identities, view the world from new perspectives, and consider possibilities that may otherwise be out of reach. These qualities show that TRPGs have a great deal of potential as a way to foster critical thinking in college students.

Participants in this study also demonstrated an awareness of their own perspectives regarding morality, ethics, and the perceptions of themselves and others. This kind of understanding of ethos is another area which is difficult to teach. The benefit of TRPG play is that players learn by doing rather than through study. As a cooperative medium, TRPGs offer direct and immediate feedback regarding how players' actions, beliefs, and outlooks are perceived by others. This element of dramatic rehearsal is discussed by Haarman and Giordano, who each suggest that players develop a stronger sense of social awareness through these rehearsals. The benefits of this understanding are many, but I would draw particular attention to students' awareness of their audience. I suggest that rehearsals through TRPG play foster a greater understanding of how others interpret what one says and does. This understanding can translate to the composition classroom by giving students a greater ability to predict the needs and expectations of their readers; in essence, this gives students the ability to create a profile of their hypothetical readers in much the same way that they might create a PC or NPC character. In practical terms, this understanding will allow students to better construct arguments and decide what

background details are relevant and important to readers.

One final area of potential I will discuss is the ability of TRPGs as a means of approaching social topics that have been politicized. Many socially aware educators, especially those who incorporate elements of queer-focused pedagogical praxis, seek to expand students' perspectives when it comes to activism and social perceptions of topics like class, race, gender, and sexuality. However, students are resistant to open discussions of these topics, which are often regarded as political and matters of opinion. In "Rhetoric on the Edge of Cunning," Karen Kopelson discusses the "encumbrance" that the expectation of neutrality places on students, writing that many students "[resent] and often actively [rebel] against what they may experience as the 'imposition' of race, class, gender, sexuality or (more generally) cultural issues on to their 'neutral' course of study" (116-7). Scholars writing about these issues have suggested various approaches to this problem. For example, Alexander suggests that these preconceptions offer an opportunity to examine how the nature of language and "restrictive concepts" like masculinity, femininity, and gendered expectations "[limit] our potential sense of self" ("Transgender Rhetorics" 53-5). Kopelson, on the other hand, suggests that instructors should "rehabilitate" neutrality into an intentional "performance of neutrality" with the goal of fulfilling students' expectation of neutrality while slowly incorporating increasingly progressive pedagogical goals as the course continues (122-3; 132; 135).

TRPGs offer opportunities to explore these topics in a manner that can feel both neutral and safe. I attribute this openness to the magic circle described by Kawitzky. By suspending reality and creating an imaginary world, players feel more comfortable setting aside their own preconceptions of and expectations for the real world. The

activist praxis described by Cross enters in during these acts of play, allowing players to imagine new possibilities of what could be. The responses of several participants in this study demonstrate that players do take this opportunity to explore not only concepts such as race, gender, and sexuality, but also as a way to explore and alter social norms while putting activist ideals into practice. These activist ideals and the general practice of introspection evident in TRPG play demonstrates both Cross's concept of TRPG play as activist praxis, and the potential of TRPGs to challenge players to question and consider "the stories they have told themselves and others about themselves", the latter of which being a suggestion of Cook-Sather's as a goal for queer composition praxis (100). With further development and research, TRPGs may serve as a tool to aid in these endeavors in the classroom.

Conclusion

I began this research with the seemingly simple goal of forming a better understanding of identity-making processes which I had observed during casual play. When I began this research in earnest, I developed the question: what impact do identity and identity-making processes through TRPG play have on the experiences and storytelling of TRPG players? In concluding this thesis, I will again summarize my primary findings before discussing the overall limitations of this study and suggesting directions for future research.

While not directly shown in the responses to my survey, there is a general sentiment among participants that shows that TRPG players are eager for outlets to share their experiences and to contribute to research in this field. Soon after deploying my survey, I received an email from a respondent who wished to share his thoughts on the research topic. I think that his words offer insight to the feelings that many TRPG players have and is a demonstration of players' eagerness to share their experiences:

I just completed your survey about TTRPGs and identity, and after reading the confirmation page, I wanted to send you a quick note.

I am a cis het man, but in TTRPGs, I have played two women and two non-binary player characters, and many LGBTQ+ NPCs, and I do think this exploration has been beneficial to exploring and overcoming some of the anxiety and trauma I've experienced from toxic masculinity in my own gender identity. I can't draw any straight lines (ha) but I have certainly become more confident in stretching my expression as a straight man outside of my old anxieties in the last 5 years since I started playing TTRPGs and explored these characters. I have

never doubted my identity as a cis het man, but I have become more confident in charting my own definition of that identity.

I wanted to share this with you because even though it is not directly within the scope of your study, I think it is closely adjacent and this anecdote may be of interest in your line of research.

I'm glad you're researching the topic you are, and I wish you the best of luck!

This respondent, who I will call B, discusses many of the most important reasons for conducting this research and for studying TRPG play. While B is a "cis het man" (a heterosexual, cisgender male), his experiences with "TTRPGs" (an alternate abbreviation for TRPGs, commonly found outside of academic disciplines) have allowed him to experiment with different perspectives. While B was not convinced that his anecdote was directly relevant to answering my research question, the experiences nonetheless highlight many of the most important findings of this research.

TRPG play has given B opportunities for exploration and self reflection which would be difficult to find in mundane life. He explains that his experiences roleplaying as female and nonbinary PCs, and various LGBTQ+ NPCs have given him a chance to process his own feelings of trauma and anxiety. B was right in suggesting that these aspects of his experience were beyond the scope of my research. While I had acknowledged the possibility of traumatic events factoring into player experiences as I was developing the initial goals for my research, I quickly decided that their inclusion would divert attention from other aspects of my research and make it more difficult to draw conclusions from my data. Other aspects of B's anecdote fall precisely within the

scope of this study: B became more confident in his own masculinity and with “stretching” his understanding of what is allowable for a masculine person; while his “cishet” identity never came into question, he did critically examine the meaning of his own identity and consider alternatives; and through these explorations he became more confident. B’s anecdote and the responses of all the survey’s participants show that TRPGs are used to practice and explore identity in ways that are consistent with published literature (Cross; Giordano; Kawitzky).

The findings of this study show that players often construct characters that enable them to experience perspectives and identities which are not always the same as those they have in their mundane lives. Interestingly, this study found that players create characters which may be in one step of the process of exploring identities, as described by Giordano, but that may shift to a different point in this process—PCs can become more or less like the player’s self over the course of play due to a variety of reasons such as reflection on a character’s identity, reevaluation of one’s own identity, or the desire to engage differently with a character or narrative (playing the character more or less like the player’s self).

I also found that players’ descriptions of their own identities and of their characters’ identities borrowed terms and concepts used in TRPG play. This means that as players are brought into gaming groups and mentored by experienced players (as described by Giordano), they also learn language for describing the identities and outlooks of people and characters. The prevalence of these terms means that TRPG players are likely more able to explain concepts in identity, morality, ethics, and social outlooks more easily than nonplayers.

These findings are not without limitations. The high proportion of genderqueer (nonbinary and genderfluid) participants responding to the survey may have influenced the themes found through my analysis. Shifting gender identities and the exploration of various LGBTQ+ perspectives may be the result of players' past experiences rather than the influence of TRPGs. It may also be that people with experience exploring their own identities, perhaps as a result of being genderqueer or LGBTQ+, were more likely to complete a survey which may have appeared to comport with their introspective habits. While the surveyed population is far from representative of the general population, I find that the experiences of participants like B, who have explored and challenged their identities solely through TRPG play, show that TRPGs certainly have an influence on these processes.

The design of the survey instrument presented additional limitations which became clear through the course of analysis. The multiple-choice questions presented in the survey were answered with near unanimity by participants. The only exception to this trend came from the section on demographics. These questions were designed to probe participants and to challenge my own preexisting notions, allowing me to generate new insights on the topic and better understand my participants. Because the answers to these questions were near unanimous and almost entirely in agreement with my preconceptions, I decided to omit them from the analysis of my findings in favor of solely focusing on the experiences of players shared in short-answer form. Additionally, questions directed towards GMs rather than players reinforced ideas which were shared in greater detail on the section directed at players. GMs also answered with much less detail, likely because this section was found relatively late in the survey and participants

faced survey fatigue. For these reasons, questions directed towards GMs were also omitted from analysis.

I set out with the goal of answering a broad question, attempting to see which areas interested my respondents the most so I could focus on those topics in this thesis. In many ways, I succeeded in this task; I found that players were very willing to share their experiences creating characters, evaluating identities, and exploring the unique possibilities afforded by TRPG play. While I accomplished my goals for this research project, I was unable to answer all of the initial questions that led me to this point. Namely, I have not satisfactorily established the effect of players' identity-making and explorations on their storytelling. I attribute this to the overly broad nature of my initial question and my survey instrument. Both my participants and myself were driven to discuss identity in much greater detail than storytelling.

Looking forward, there are a few potential areas of study which deserve mention. Finding that players use terms and concepts borrowed from descriptions and mechanics in TRPGs suggests that players may have a unique way of referring to and understanding identities, ethics, morality, and perspectives. Future researchers may study this area to better understand the ability of TRPG players to discuss, categorize, and understand these topics. They may also wish to compare TRPG players with non-players to establish a degree of difference between these two populations. The realization that players repeatedly reevaluate the similarity of themselves to their characters also opens up new lines of inquiry. Future research may focus on the shifting nature of players' characters as they become more or less like the player's self and may try to identify key moments that lead to these new reevaluations and to epiphanies

about the player's self or their characters. Finally, the potential of TRPGs as a classroom tool may also be explored. Having identified a few desirable student outcomes that are made possible by TRPG play, it is my hope that future scholarship may work backwards from these outcomes to develop TRPGs as a classroom tool. Such a tool should present a means of teaching students to think critically, evaluate their own identity, and to interrogate social paradigms while maintaining a sense of political neutrality.

References

- Alexander, Jonathan. "Gaming, Student Literacies, and the Composition Classroom: Some Possibilities for Transformation." *College Composition and Communications*, vol. 61, no. 1, 2009, pp. 35-63.
- . "Transgender Rhetorics: (Re)Composing Narratives of the Gendered Body." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 57, no. 1, Sep. 2005, pp. 45-82.
- Blakeslee, Ann, and Cathy Fleischer. *Becoming a Writing Researcher*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2019.
- Campbell, Harrison, and Andrea Madsen. "Nothing Like a Good Fiasco! Exploring the Potential of Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TRPGs) As Literacy Experiences." *Canadian Journal for New Scholars in Education*, vol. 12, no. 2, Dec. 2021, pp. 98-105.
- Cook, Mike P. et al. "We're Just Playing: The Influence of a Modified Tabletop Role-Playing game on ELA Students' In-Class Reading." *Simulation & Gaming*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2016, pp. 199-218. DOI: 10.1177/1046878116684570
- Cook-Sather, Alison. "Education as Translation." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 55, no. 1, Sep. 2003, pp. 91-114.
- Corfman, Brook S. "On Not Knowing Students' Genders, Nor Being Able to Predict When or How They Will Change," *College Composition and Communications*, vol. 73, no. 2, 2021, pp. 261-286.
- Cresswell, John, and Timothy Guetterman. *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. Pearson Education, 2019.

Cross, Katherine Angel. "The New Laboratory of Dreams: Role-playing Games as Resistance." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, volume 40, numbers 3 & 4, 2012, pp. 70-88. DOI: 11.1353/wsqr.2013.0026

Giordano, Michael J. "Legitimate Peripheral Participation by Novices in a Dungeons and Dragons Community." *Simulation & Gaming*, vol. 53, no. 5, 2022, pp. 446-469. OhioLINK Electronic Journal Center, doi:10.1177/10468781221119829.

Haarman, Susan. "Dungeons & Dragons & Dewey: The Potential for Dramatic Rehearsal and Civic Outcomes in Tabletop Role-Playing Games." *Philosophical Studies in Education*, vol. 53, Jan. 2022, pp. 56–70.

Herrick, James A. "Contemporary Rhetoric III: Texts, Power, Alternatives." *The History and Theory of Rhetoric: An Introduction*, 5th ed., Pearson, 2013, pp. 229-252.

Kawitzky, Felix Rose. "Magic Circles: Tabletop Role-Playing Games as Queer Utopian Method." *Performance Research*, vol. 25, no. 8, Dec. 2020, pp. 129–136.

Kopelson, Karen. "Rhetoric on the Edge of Cunning; Or The Performance of Neutrality (Re)Considered as a Composition Pedagogy for Student Resistance." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 55, no. 1, Sep. 2003, pp. 115-146.

Player's Handbook. Wizards of the Coast, 2003.

Player's Handbook. Wizards of the Coast, 2014.

Sommers, Nancy. "Intentions and Revisions." *The Journal of Basic Writing*, vol. 3, no 3, 1981. DOI: 10.37514/JPW-J.1981.3.3.05

Appendix: Survey Questions

Have you played a tabletop roleplaying game?

Yes

No (ends survey)

What is your age?

18-20

21-25

26-30

31-40

41+

What best describes your gender identity? (select all that apply.)

Male

Female

Transgender

Nonbinary

Gender-fluid

Other (please specify)

What best describes your sexual identity? (select all that apply)

Heterosexual (primarily attracted to the opposite gender)

Homosexual (primarily attracted to the same gender)

Bisexual (attracted to multiple genders)

Asexual (infrequently or never experience sexual attraction)

Other (please specify)

When did you first play a tabletop roleplaying game?

Less than a year ago

1-2 years ago

3-5 years ago

6-10 years ago

Over a decade ago

Other (please specify)

How have you played tabletop roleplaying games? (select all that apply)

In-person

Online

Using a virtual tabletop application (such as Roll20, Owlbear Rodeo, or Foundry)

Using an application (such as Discord, Skype, or TeamSpeak) to share voice-only

Using an application (such as Discord, Skype, or FaceTime) to share voice and video

Using text (writing descriptions and narrations rather than speaking)

Other (please specify)

Which popular tabletop roleplaying game titles have you played?

Apocalypse World

Blades in the Dark

Call of Cthulhu

Cyberpunk

Dungeons and Dragons

FATE

Generic Universal Roleplaying Game System (GURPS)

Lancer

Pathfinder

Starfinder

Warhammer

Other (please specify)

Which tabletop roleplaying game have you played most often?

Apocalypse World

Blades in the Dark

Call of Cthulhu

Cyberpunk

Dungeons and Dragons

FATE

Generic Universal Roleplaying Game System (GURPS)

Lancer

Pathfinder

Starfinder

Warhammer

Other (please specify)

How would you describe the identities and characteristics of the characters you make?

(You might think of a specific character for this response.)

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

“I base my characters entirely on specific aspects of myself.”

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Which of your own traits do you intentionally give to your characters?

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

“Certain aspects of my characters’ identities are based on traits I wish I had.”

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree (skip next question)

Which of your characters' traits do you wish you had?

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

"I roleplay as a character in order to try being someone else."

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

"In real-world situations, I often think about how my characters would react."

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

"As a player, my characters express aspects of my identity which I am not comfortable expressing in other settings."

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Not applicable

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

“As a player, I intentionally create characters with identity traits that differ from my own”

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Not applicable

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

“I believe that the people I play with usually base their characters on themselves.”

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

“As a player, the personal identity of my characters strongly affects the game’s story.”

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree (skip next three questions)

Not applicable

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

“Aspects of my characters’ personal identity have the most impact on the game’s story when they are based on my own identity.

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree (skip next two questions)

Not applicable (skip next two questions)

When your characters express aspects of your personal identity, which aspects have affected the game’s story?

How was the story affected by these aspects of your identity?

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

“As a Gamemaster, I like to lead players through predetermined stories.”

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Not applicable (I'm not a gamemaster skips next 5 questions)

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

“As a Gamemaster, the characters my players make have the greatest impact on the story of the game.”

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Skip

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

“As a Gamemaster, rather than creating a story, I let the players' characters determine the narrative.”

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

“As a Gamemaster, the types of characters my players make have the greatest impact on the story of the game.”

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree (skips next question)

How have the identities of your players' characters affected the stories you've told in your games?

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

“As a Gamemaster, the identities of my players themselves have the greatest impact on the story of the game.”

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree (skips next question)

How have the identities of your players themselves affected the stories you've told in your games?

(end of GM branch)

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

“My experience with tabletop roleplaying games has made it easier for me to talk about my own personal identity.”

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

“For people who identify with the LGBTQ+ community, tabletop roleplaying games are a safe space.”

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

“For people who identify with the LGBTQ+ community, playing tabletop roleplaying games makes it easier for them to ‘come out’ to their family.”

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

Have you played tabletop roleplaying games with one or more people who self-identify as LGBTQ+?

Do you identify as LGBTQ+?

Yes

No (end of survey)

Have the people you’ve played with been aware of your LGBTQ+ identity?

Yes

No

Have you come out to your family and/or friends as LGBTQ+?

Yes

No (end of survey)

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

“My experiences with tabletop roleplaying games made it much easier to come out to my friends and/or family as LGBTQ+.”

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree

How did your experiences with tabletop roleplaying games affect you when choosing to come out to your friends and/or family as LGBTQ+?

Choose the option below that best reflects your response to the following statement:

“I would not have come out to my family and/or friends if I had not had experiences with tabletop roleplaying games.”

Strongly agree

Agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Disagree

Strongly disagree