Making Sense of the Magic:
Legibility, Space, and Play in Tabletop Roleplaying Games

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Dedication

This project is dedicated the queer community of Austin and beyond, with special thanks and appreciation to all those individuals who participated in the study itself. The process of conducting the interviews and hearing the stories of queer individuals across the spectrum of experience was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. I am moved by your vulnerability and willingness to share your moments of joy and sorrow, and I am emboldened to step forward, to make myself visible, and to (re)write the narrative structure of our world so as to make space to be as we are and for who we are becoming.

This project is dedicated to Mason and Terri, my ride or dies, my partners-in-crime, my chosen family. Knowing the pair of you woke something up in me that I did not even know was sleeping. You are my joy, now and forever more.

This project is dedicated to the Queer Coven that, while short-lived, represented everything for which my gay heart yearns: community, tea, plants, tattoos, astrology, tarot cards, and a healthy undercurrent of "fuck the police" and "be gay, do crimes."

This project is dedicated to Pup and Butterpup, Selise, Grenleil, Faebig, Runa, John Constantaang, and Morty. I spent more time with some of you than others, but you are all beloved and live in my heart always.

Lastly, this project is dedicated to Diane Schallert who has helped me find my way time and time again. I would not be here without your unwavering support and encouragement these last five years. From the bottom of my heart and all that I am, thank you.

ABSTRACT

MAKING SENSE OF THE MAGIC:

LEGIBILITY, SPACE, AND PLAY IN TABLETOP ROLEPLAYING GAMES

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As tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) have become increasingly popular among the queer community, and guided by the tenets of pleasure activism (Brown, 2019) that argues that equity entails access to pleasure, my study sought to investigate the connection between play and pleasure and the sense individuals make of themselves and their environments. My research questions included: 1) how do players negotiate legibility (make sense) of their queer identities within the context of their experiences participating in tabletop roleplaying games; and 2) what do the experiences of queer TTRPG players reveal about the relationships between legibility, space, and play? Drawing from social organization theory (Butler, 2004) and ecological definitions (Ramadier & Moser, 1998), I positioned legibility as the extent to which individuals are able to make sense of themselves in relation to their social environments and I use spatial metaphors, such as Third Space and safe houses, to help define the relationship between identity, literacy, and legibility, and to consider the role of play in facilitating these interconnected and constructive processes. My findings demonstrated that legibility was interwoven into the potent and powerful moments of pleasure experienced by participants, which I referred to as *the magic.* Additionally, I established the intimate connection between the concept of

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space and player perceptions of *the magic,* demonstrating that pleasure is in the experience of "crossing-over." Then, drawing on player accounts of these experiences, I identified five forces that constitute *the magic*, components that not only regulate the pleasure possible within the play space, but also maintain the threshold and bounds of the space. I also discussed what players did within the space, or in constructing the space, that can be understood as cultivating these vital ingredients of play and pleasure. In the discussion, I outlined a path and framework for how players experienced personal transformation through play experiences and demonstrated the importance of intentional reflection and integration of play experiences toward the lasting effects of *the magic*.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As the title of this report suggests, I explored the concepts of legibility, space, and play by considering the tabletop roleplaying experiences of (a)gender and (a)sexual minorities (SGM). The adoption of alternate identities is a central aspect of tabletop roleplaying games as participation requires the creation and direction of characters who exist in fictional settings. Players can create characters with varying degrees of similarity to themselves, including personal attributes such as gender and sexuality. Likewise, tabletop roleplaying games are not only imbued with traditional literacy activities such as reading, writing, and storytelling, but may also act as sites where players utilize, resist, and transform literacies related to gender and sexuality. As a label coined by Moje and Luke (2009), *identity-and-literacy studies* is an area of research that asserts that literacy and identity are mediated by each other, and thus tabletop roleplaying games constitute an interesting and rarely researched avenue for exploring this relationship, particularly in the context of (a)gender and (a)sexual minorities.

Legibility is a concept that has been used in many different contexts. Perhaps its most widely known definition and usage is "the quality of being clear enough to read" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary). However, this concept has been extended to various fields, including social organization (Butler, 2004) and even ecology (Ramadier & Moser, 1998). Its usage in this paper positions legibility as existing at the interplay of literacy and identity, referring to the extent to which certain utterances or expressions are understood or recognized as having significance or meaning within any social institution. Drawing from the ecological approach, legibility is also characterized by the extent to which an individual can make sense of their environment and themselves within it. Thus, legibility takes on both social and spatial qualities.

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In addition, legibility is tied to the distribution of power, privilege, and punishment. As such, expanding legibility to include marginalized and oppressed groups is often front and center in any social justice movement. (A)sexual and (a)gender minorities (SGM), who are often made "unreal," "unthinkable," or "illegible" (Butler, 2004) by social institutions, have nonetheless established various spaces where their ways of being not only make sense but are celebrated and welcomed. As tabletop roleplaying games have become increasingly popular among the queer community, my goal with this study was to investigate the ways in which legibility intersected with the experiences of queer individuals in tabletop roleplaying spaces. I used spatial metaphors, such as Third Space and safe houses, to help define the relationship between literacy, identity, and legibility, and to consider the role of play in facilitating these interconnected and constructive processes.

In the remainder of this chapter, I introduce and define my use of terms central to this study, which include *tabletop roleplaying games, (a)sexual and (a)gender minorities (SGMs), literacy, identity, Third Space,* and *play,* and discuss how these concepts relate to my main construct of *legibility* and have been assembled to establish the foundations for this study.

Tabletop Roleplaying Games

Tabletop roleplaying games (TRPGs), usually played by a small group of four to five individuals, entail interaction with a "fictional alternate reality" (Atmore, 2017) through the embodiment of player-created characters. These groups of characters are called *parties*, and their efforts to reach a common goal is referred to as a *campaign*. External sourcebooks generally provide the rules used to determine what is possible in the game world and, through mathematical abstractions (statistics, dice, and probabilities), the success and consequences of character actions. Players are usually guided by a leader player, often referred to as the *Dungeon*

Master (DM), responsible for interpreting the ruleset, structuring the content of the narrative, and facilitating engagement with the world. The DM populates the world with *non-player characters* (NPCs), some of which act as protagonists or antagonists to the players' goals. The choice to engage the storyline is up to the players, influenced by how they imagine their characters would react and their own desires. As Atmore (2017) described, "The characters, the fictional reality, and the story of their exploits are a process of joint construction between the individual players, the gamemaster, and the group as a whole as they interact with the rule set" (para. 2). Tabletop roleplaying games usually occur in person where the narrative of the game is created through verbally relaying actions and intentions of each character to the group. However, as technology has advanced, tabletop roleplaying sessions have become increasingly common on social applications like Discord or Roll20, where players can join each other via webcam and microphone, and roll virtual dice or create virtual game boards that can be manipulated by the DM. The game can also be played through text messaging, with players responding and moving the game forward entirely through text contributions.

Tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) were established in the mid-70s in the form of the first edition of Dungeons & Dragons, sold in its notorious red box, and have recently been popularized in sitcoms like the Big Bang Theory or the popular Netflix series, Stranger Things. However, the genre has had a controversial history. In the 1980's, Patricia Pulling founded Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons (B.A.D.D.), a public advocacy group dedicated to the regulation of TTRPGs, after her son, an avid player, committed suicide. She blamed his suicide on his participation in Dungeons & Dragons, which Pulling described in her 1989 book, The Devil's Web, as "a fantasy role-playing game which uses demonology, witchcraft, voodoo, murder, rape, blasphemy, suicide, assassination, insanity, sex perversion, homosexuality,

prostitution, satanic type rituals, gambling, barbarism, cannibalism, sadism, desecration, demon summoning, necromantics, divination and many other teachings" (p. 179). Despite the game genre's rocky beginnings, and perhaps partly because of them, the population of avid players continues to grow over time in both numbers and diversity.

Tabletop roleplaying games have become particularly popular in the queer community, with queer individuals not only among the most enthusiastic players, but also leaders in game development. A plethora of existing online resources and articles highlight the rising popularity of tabletop roleplaying games among the queer community and a shift toward more inclusive gaming experiences. Riverhouse Games has a whole page dedicated to "Queer Tabletop Resources" that include articles and videos to consider, a list of games with a queer focus, and even links to online gaming communities. In 2014, Vince Gabriel wrote an online article titled "Gay Wizards: Role Playing Games and LGBT Inclusivity" that provided a historical overview of ways in which gender and sexual minorities have been represented in roleplaying games. In 2015, Stenros and Sihvonen wrote a similar article titled, "Out of the Dungeon: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books." The Sorcerer of Tea published an article in the past year titled "LGBT RPGs you need to know about!" In the 2019 article published by The Mary Sue, "How Dungeons and Dragons Became So Wonderfully Gay," Kody Keplinger detailed a shift in the game community from primarily being a "straight, white man's game" to being a "more welcoming place" for not only women and people of color, but the LGBT community, as well.

In 2012, Avery Alder published a tabletop roleplaying game known as "Monsterhearts." As part of a 2017 interview with Owen Duffy of The Guardian, Alder stated that "a lot of queer youth are actively made to feel monstrous by people around them" and that Monsterhearts was

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developed out of a desire "to create something about coming to terms with queerness," putting forth that she had experimented with her own "identity as a queer woman and a trans woman through games." In 2017, Cecilia D'Anastasio interviewed Jeremy Crawford, a Dungeons and Dragons game developer, who shared that a side quest in the module Storm King's Thunder models a family after his own, with two older and married men taking care of their adopted nephew. As part of the interview, Crawford stated that "It's important to many of us personally in the company for the game to acknowledge our existence."

Many online bloggers have echoed many of Alder and Crawford's sentiments regarding the game's influence in their lives. Lemus-Mogrovejo (2019) wrote "The Fantasy of Being Human: Queer Joy and TTRPGS," a reflective piece that positioned tabletop roleplaying games as "facilitating joy and community, particularly for disabled queers (of color)." As part of this piece, the author gathered perspectives from other players, who pointed to the importance of various game elements including the collaborative storytelling format, the creation of an inclusive game space, the opportunity to empathize and embody another person's experiences, and the ability to learn through player characters. According to the author, "Knowing that, if only for a little while, we can pretend to be something grander or more fantastic than ourselves can be a blessing in a world that doesn't offer disabled queer and trans folks (of color) many luxuries." Although the game affords an outlet for escapism, it also represents a space where players can imagine new realities and bring a little make believe into the everyday.

Tabletop roleplaying games have also begun to receive recognition in academic fields, with researchers arguing that tabletop roleplaying games possess a transformative capacity for both identity and learning. A few of the components of tabletop roleplaying games that have been a central focus of this research field include collaborative storytelling, play and

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improvisation, community building, and the ludological nature of game mechanics. Bowman (2010) pointed to roleplaying games as storytelling communities where individuals can explore possible selves through the characters they create and maneuver. Woods (2017) and Coe (2017) drew parallels between game spaces and learning spaces, exploring how game features promote engagement and motivation. Although negotiation of identity has been a common theme in research pertaining to roleplaying games, I was able to find only one publication, a master's thesis, which specifically considered gender identity in relation to tabletop roleplaying games. In this thesis, O'Neal (2011) explored how players performed, constructed, and negotiated gender through in-game language use. Bowman (2010) considered gender differences between players and characters, and Just (2018) explored "gendered resistance," though each within the context of live-action roleplaying games. Thus, there is ample room to consider the rise of tabletop roleplaying games among the queer community and how these gaming experiences may intersect with gender and sexual identities.

Gender and Sexuality

In the previous section, I established a need for research that explores the concepts of identity and literacy in relation to participation in tabletop roleplaying games, and highlighted the rarity of research concerning specifically the experiences of sexual and gender minorities. In this section, I first define my usage of the terms *(a)sexual and (a)gender minorities* (SGM) and then discuss how this term relates to other descriptors of this population.

Gender and sexuality are concepts with controversial definitions that may complicate categories used to describe people based on these characteristics. However, for the sake of this project, the following definitions are used. The term *sexual minority* refers to individuals whose sexual orientation or expression resists or falls outside of hegemonic heteronormativity that

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privileges heterosexual individuals in committed relationships who have monogamous, potentially reproductive sex (McNeill, 2013). Although *gay, lesbian, and bisexual* are among the most common terms used to describe minority sexualities, they do not represent the full breadth of existing identity labels, nor are they approached in the same way by all who use them. Other terms used by sexual minorities include *pansexual*, *asexual*, and *polyamorous* (Gordon & Meyer, 2007). The term *sexual minority* may feel exclusive to asexual individuals who may not experience sexual attraction and/or desire to engage in sex activities. Therefore, as modeled by Miller (2015), I use *(a)sexual minorities* moving forward.

The term *gender minority* refers to individuals whose gender identity resists or falls outside of binary constructs of gender (National Institutes of Health, 2020) or whose current gender identity does not align with the gender assigned at birth (American Psychological Association [APA], 2015). Gender minority individuals may identify as *transgender*, *non-binary*, *gender nonconforming*, *genderqueer*, *agender* (APA, 2015), or other terms that reflect that standard labels may not capture the individual's relationship with gender. This is in contrast to *cisgender* individuals whose gender identity does match their gender assigned at birth. It is important to note the distinction between gender and sex. *Sex* is often used to categorize individuals based on physical characteristics, particularly genitalia, and *gender* is usually assigned at birth based on sex characteristics. For example, an infant assigned *female* at birth (AFAB) is also assigned a gender of "girl." If this child is comfortable with this gender identity, they are considered cisgender. However, if the same infant later identifies as a different gender or does not feel any connection to gender at all, they are considered to fall under the transgender and agender umbrella. Because *agender* denotes a lack of connection to gender or feeling of

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gender, the term *gender minority* can sometimes feel exclusive when talking about these populations. As with sexuality, the term *(a)gender minorities* is used hereafter.

Furthermore, sexuality and gender are often linked. For example, sexuality is often defined through the ascribed genders of individuals and conceptions of gender more broadly. For example, the term *heterosexuality* is often defined as sexual attraction between individuals of the *opposite* sex <u>or</u> gender, which assumes two distinct genders. Additionally, normative gender expression may be realized through seeking relationships with individuals of certain genders. For example, a woman who does not seek relationships with men may be seen as less of a woman. Alternatively, a man who adopts traditionally feminine behaviors or traits may be assumed to be attracted to individuals other than women. Although some researchers claim that the experiences of (a)sexual and (a)gender minorities (SGM) are unique and diverse and caution must be maintained when considering them together as a group, commonalities of experience do exist, particularly in their "difference from, and oppression by the dominant culture" (Gross, 1993, p. 117). In fact, Meyer (2003) asserted that oppression and marginalization experienced by individuals across the SGM spectrum are predicated on many of the same processes. Furthermore, queer visionary and theorist, Kate Bornstein (1994), has conceptualized sexual minoritism as a subset of gender minoritism, proposing that heteronormativity is an instrument in maintaining the gender-based class system and thus the oppression experienced by sexual minorities is tied to the threat their gender-inappropriate attractions pose to the established order.

The term *queer* is often used as an umbrella term to describe non-normative gender and sexuality. However, *queer* can also be understood as a philosophical orientation toward gender and sexuality used to resist limiting narratives around these constructs, with many rejecting the concepts entirely (Castro, Dhawan, & Engel, 2016). Due to the inherent ambiguity and

inclusivity within the term and its associations with stretching and expanding oft taken for granted concepts, I favor the use of *queer*, though also use *(a)sexual* and *(a)gender minorities*, SGM, reflecting their historically and contextually shared experiences, to refer to these populations throughout this paper, except in situations where gender and sexuality are referred to separately.

Literacy and Identity

Earlier developmental models of identity, such as Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and Marcia's identity statuses, position the individual as existing on a path to achieving a stable, coherent, and unified sense of self or identity. In stark contrast, Norton (2014), taking a poststructuralist perspective, characterized identity as "multiple, changing, and a site of struggle" (p. 60), and Moje and Luke (2009) defined identity as "socially situated, mediated, and produced, as well as fluid and dynamic" (p. 432). These current conceptions of identity understand the self as defined through its interaction with the surrounding environment, with different selves or identities emerging and becoming more salient as the contexts in which individuals are situated shift and change.

A common conception of literacy defines it as the mastery of written communication, typically drawing to mind reading and writing activities. However, the Multiliteracies perspective, coined by the New London Group in 1996, has dramatically expanded the scope of literacy to include multiple, nearly limitless modes of representation (called *texts*) used in the process of meaning-making (i.e., visual, musical, gestural, behavioral, etc.). Although literacy studies researchers often use the metaphors of reading, writing, and authoring to explain the processes by which individuals construct meaning of texts from one moment to the next, literacy

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is not specifically related to language use. Rather, in their view, literacy is the framework from which we make sense through participation in and interaction with social worlds.

Although literacy and identity may traditionally be viewed as two separate constructs, postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches have positioned literacy and identity as intimately and inextricably entwined. Indeed, in 2009, Moje and Luke coined the term *literacy-and-identity studies* (p. 416) to refer to this field of research, claiming that literacy and identity mediate and are mediated through the other. The authors went on to examine five metaphors for conceptualizing identity and their implications for literacy research. Moje and Luke examined how these metaphors approach identity in subtly different, though sometimes overlapping, ways that make possible new understandings of how literacy and identity come to be. However, each metaphor affords a perspective that is limited, and these limitations must be considered and defined in any literacy-and-identity-studies research that seeks to contribute meaningfully to the field. The frameworks that I will use to discuss identity and literacy also use various metaphors to help us *see* and interact with identity and literacy meaningfully; these include consideration of Discourse, figured worlds, and rhizomatic assemblages (Gee, 1989; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Leander & Boldt, 2013).

The term *discourse* has been used to describe language as it is used in particular contexts, and Gee (1989) defined it as "connected stretches of language that make sense" (p.6). However, Gee used the term *Discourses* (distinguished by the capitalized "D") to refer to "ways of being in the world" and combinations of "saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing" (pp. 6-7) that are acquired through socialization. Gee likened Discourse to an "identity kit" with instructions on how to exist in ways that others will recognize and value, positing that participation in Discourse leads to an illusion of a consistent or "well-integrated" self (p. 7). In actuality, people

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participate in multiple, changing, and conflicting Discourses that are held in tension with one another and can be brought in and out of focus depending on the circumstance.

Gee (1989) defined literacy as fluent control over Discourses, or ways of being recognizable to social institutions. Discourses outline the appropriate and ideal form or shape of any given element within discursive bounds and how that element relates to other elements, much like knowing the meaning of words and how they can be strung together to make meaningful sentences. To be literate means an individual not only can comprehend the meaning of various texts, but can manipulate texts in ways that are meaningful. Gee suggested that in order to inhabit a Discourse, or become literate, one must participate in its social practices (e.g., language, dress, values, beliefs), which may initially require "scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse" (p. 7).

Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) defined *identity* as "imaginings of the self in worlds of action, as social products" that are "lived in and through activity" (p. 5), always "unfinished and in process" (p. vii). Like Gee's Discourses, Holland et al. viewed individuals as inhabiting multiple "worlds of action," to which they referred as *figured worlds*, and that depending on which figured worlds are being traversed, different identities become more or less salient. Holland and colleagues, like Gee, did not ascribe to unified notions of identity, but characterized persons as "composites of many, often contradictory, self-understandings and identities [...] few of which are completely durable" (p.8). They went on to suggest that the various loci of identities are "spread over the material and social environment" (p. 8), indicating that identity is constructed through social interaction and participation within figured worlds.

Drawing on activity theory (proposed by Leont'ev, 1978) and practice theory (proposed by Bourdieu, 1977), Holland and colleagues (1998) asserted that individuals are "always in the

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flow of doing something, the something being a historical, collectively defined, socially produced activity—and it is within this meaningful intent toward their surroundings that they respond to whatever they encounter in the environment" (p. 39). The behaviors, feelings, and sensations experienced in response to the environment are "shaped to the social situation" (p. 40). Thus, how people make meaning or engage in meaningful activity is tied to how they perceive themselves, the environment, and the interaction between the two.

Although Leander and Boldt (2012) agreed with these authors that people are in fact actively engaged with their environment, they argued that it is not always directed by rational control or design on the part of the individual. In their observation and interpretation of the literacy practices of a 9-year-old manga enthusiast, they noted that "script-like, purposeful, or rule-governed practices" (p. 29) were always in negotiation with those that were "spontaneous and improvisational" (p. 29). This idea is mirrored in their concept of identity as a rhizomatic assemblage. Using a metaphor established by Deleuze and Guattari (1987) of the root system of a bulb plant, the authors defined a *rhizome* as "in a state of constant, unpredictable emergence" (p. 25) and "produced through an emergent moment-by-moment unfolding" (p. 25). An *assemblage* is defined as all of the elements constituting any particular context. Thus, identity can be conceived as the connections and meanings created as the "always-emerging body interacts with the always-emerging environment" (p. 30).

In terms of the rhizomatic framework, Leander and Boldt (2012) described literacy as "living its life in the ongoing present through forming relations and connections" (p. 26) between elements within any given assemblage, elements that include, among others, bodily sensations, desire, prior knowledge, material artifacts, and texts. Literacy is lived through activity that positions the body in a particular space at a particular time with a particular layering of

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experience, sensation, and anticipation. Rather than produced through rational control and design, this view of literacy allows for a more organic understanding of meaning-making as often unintentional, indeterminate, and unpredictable. Literacy is the framework by which we recognize potential through connection and interpretation of the assemblage elements, which necessarily involves the self situated in context.

Although these three theories (Discourse, figured worlds, and rhizomatic assemblage) frame and draw into focus different aspects of identity and literacy, together they can be used to shed light on how these two constructs have been connected in the literature. Identities can be understood as constructions produced through literate practice, or the process of interpreting the relationship between the self and the Discourses, figured worlds, and assemblages in which the self is situated at any given moment. Our exposure to various social worlds contributes to our available literacies and shapes what we find meaningful in any given context. It is through literacy that identities are made legible, and it is through identities, which define our position in social arenas, that we are able to engage and interact with the worlds in which we inhabit. Thus, as Moje and Luke (2009) asserted, identity and literacy mediate and are mediated through the other.

Third Space and Legibility

As a final perspective that brings literacy and identity together with legibility and the experiences of gender and sexual minorities participating in tabletop roleplaying games, I turn to the concept of space. In his collection of essays, *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha (2004) proposed the concept of *Third Space*. Bhabha's theory posited that "the cutting edge of translation and negotiation" occurs in the "inbetween" space which he characterized as "contradictory and ambivalent" (pp. 54-55). When we communicate with others, we have little

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control over how our utterances, the products of our strategic attempts at engaging meaningfully in social worlds, will be taken up by others and interpreted. We do not directly deposit meaning into the minds of others, but rather, our utterances pass into Third Space where others use their available tools and resources to make sense of whatever is there and fold it into their own knowledge structures. When the individuals involved in any given interaction have similar experiences using similar tools (e.g., language), the effort required to make sense is reduced, sometimes to such a degree that the process is taken for granted entirely. The recognizability and legibility of utterances depend largely on individual fluency within social worlds, or as has been established, literacy. However, literacy can only be developed through social interaction, and thus requires a "willingness to descend into that alien territory" (Bhabha, p. 56).

Pratt (1991) referred to these alien territories as *contact zones*, describing them as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other" (p. 34). The "moves" people make in any given interaction usually follow a "set of rules or norms," or what in Gee's terms would be "ways of being" or Discourses. It is in the contact zone where we are confronted with rules and moves for which we are unaccustomed or that may be perceived as threatening the legitimacy of those to which we adhere, and this experience can produce strong emotional reactions, particularly "in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (p. 34). Pratt suggested that in contact zones, "ideas and identities" are "on the line" (p. 39), as it is through participation in contact zones that individuals experience "seeing the world described with him or her in it" (p. 39), an idea central to my conceptualization of *legibility*. Pratt suggested that "along with rage, incomprehension, and pain," negotiation of difference within the contact zone can bring about "exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new

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wisdom" (p. 39). According to Pratt, there is always some amount of risk involved in entering contact zones, but it is in this zone that transformation, growth, and learning occur.

Although Pratt suggested that the contact zone, or Third Space, is the site for learning and growth, the contact zone is not neutral territory devoid of the power structures that privilege some ways of being and thinking while suppressing or punishing others. Navigating these spaces can be unsafe and emotionally burdensome for individuals who do not conform to dominant Discourses, and thus Pratt suggested the importance of *safe houses*, described as "places for healing and mutual recognition" where inhabitants can "construct shared understandings, knowledges, claims on the world that they can then bring into the contact zone" (p. 40). These "social and intellectual spaces" are defined by "horizontal, homogenous, sovereign communities with high degrees of trust, shared understandings, [and] temporary protection from legacies of oppression" (p. 40). These safe houses can be understood as Discourses that are identity-affirming, supportive, or comforting to their inhabitants, and where they experience higher degrees of legibility. However, Discourses are only safe for those who can conform to the ways of being that are valued, privileged, and comprehended by the associated social institutions.

Queer Theory as Critical Discourse

According to Miller (2015), societal norms "maintain status quo beliefs and make identities legible and readable" (p. 38), but they can also create "uneven social realities" (p. 40). Social justice and equity require that individuals be allowed to be "self-expressive without redress of social, institutional, or political violence" (p. 40). However, the lines of power that contribute to marginalization and oppression can be difficult to see and are often taken for granted. Stepping into the Third Space necessitates engaging with discomfort and ambiguity, and doing so is essential for obtaining a more well-rounded perspective from which social

institutions and systems of power can be critically examined and from which we can engage in critical self-reflection regarding our position in such systems.

Gee (1989) referred to this conscious awareness of discursive structures as *metaknowledge* and suggested that metaknowledge is made accessible through interaction with difference. Using multilinguality as a metaphor, Gee claimed that it is in the comparison of languages that their structures, often taken for granted and unconscious, become visible and are able to be used intentionally. Thus, "metaknowledge is liberation and power because it leads to the ability to manipulate, to analyze, to resist while advancing" (p. 13). Metaknowledge enables critique of oppressive power structures foundational to dominant Discourses by situating individuals in Third Space. However, in line with the metaphor of multilinguality, some groups of people, particularly those that belong to non-dominant communities, are more motivated to learn multiple languages due to social structures that bind access to resources and power to fluency in the dominant language. Individuals for whom the dominant language is their first language may not be sufficiently motivated to learn another language and may even resent being asked to do so. From this perspective, queer theory, feminist theory, critical race theory, critical indigenous theory, and crip theory have been formed and shaped through the dissonant interaction and tension created between non-dominant and dominant Discourses. Stepping toward social justice and equity requires stepping into the Third Space where we can begin unsettling dominant Discourses, such as heteronormativity, patriarchy, white supremacy, and colonialism, and envisioning new ways to be in the world.

Queer theory attempts to expand social legibility by disrupting categorization and definition of deviant and normative behaviors and identities that perpetuate myths of stability, arguing that boundaries used to construct identities are always permeable and in flux (Mayo,

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2007), a view similar to the rhizomatic framework proposed by Leander and Boldt (2012). The term *queer*, though often used superficially as an umbrella term to refer to (a)gender and (a)sexual minorities, is perhaps better represented as a process. Miller (2015) defined *queer* as a "suspension of rigid gendered and sexual orientation categories" that "embraces the freedom to move beyond, between, or even away from, yet even to later return to, myriad identity categories" (p. 38). Queer does not merely belong to (a)gender and (a)sexual minorities, but rather to "any experience that transcends" (Miller, 2015, p. 38) normative and dominant ways of "saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing" (Gee, 1989, p. 6). To queer is to cross over into and through, to re-center at the boundaries, to walk forward without a clear path, to deconstruct and rebuild, to unsettle and to be unsettled.

Legibility and Institutional Learning Spaces

Miller (2015) argued that "humans are entitled to unsettle knowledge, which can generate new possibilities of legibility" (p. 38) and that "happiness and success is dependent on social legibility" (p. 39). As stated by Fraser (2016), "in the third space nobody belongs and therefore...categories are no longer exclusionary" (p. 48), thus expansive legibility is supported by learning environments that encourage Third Space engagement. Miller's professional attention has focused on queering education spaces, and as part of this work, Miller created a Queer Literacy Framework that "as a tool for legitimization affirms all forms of (a)gender and (a)sexuality expression" and can be used to "rework social and classroom norms where bodies with differential realities in classrooms are legitimated and made legible to self and other" (p. 37). The framework, guided by a set of ten principles and associated "commitments of educators who queer literacy" (p.42), encourages and guides classroom and school collectives to hold space for and engage in critical examination of how social institutions construct normalcy and

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deviance and how these constructions contribute to inequity and violence. This work not only

increases the internal safety experienced by (a)gender and (a)sexual minority students who have

been deemed deviant, but all students who are all arguably harmed by systems that privilege and

punish bodies based on their adherence to arbitrary norms and standards for behavior made

legitimate by social authorities.

Whereas Miller (2015) focused on gender and sexuality, Gutiérrez (2008) focused on the

learning experiences of migrant youth in the U.S. education system, arguing that the experiences

and identities of migrant youth are often made illegible in school environments by "traditional

mismatch theories of home and school discontinuity […] that reinscribe deficit portraits of home

that compel educators to 'fix' communities and their members so that they match normative

views and practices without regard to students' existing repertoires of practice" (p. 151).

Gutiérrez proposed that a more productive framework would begin "by tracing students'

movement" (p. 151), highlighting that whereas "school-based literacies generally emphasize

ahistorical and vertical forms of learning and are oriented toward weak literacies[...], learning in

the Third Space attends to both vertical and horizontal forms of learning" (p. 149). Third Space

exists at the point where the "teacher and student script — the formal and informal, the official

and unofficial spaces of the learning environment — intersect, creating the potential for authentic

interaction and a shift in the social organization of learning and what counts as knowledge" (p.

152). Third Space learning reorients notions of expertise to include not only skills and content

traditionally acquired through formal (vertical) learning experiences as represented by the

teacher-student relationship, but also the (horizontal) knowledge constructed through

participation in practices associated with other areas of their lives. Gutiérrez stated that "people

live their lives and learn across multiple settings, and this holds true not only across the span of

their lives but also across and within the institutions and communities they inhabit" (p. 150).

Thus, learning spaces must consider the "significant overlap across these boundaries" and how individuals "travel through different and even contradictory contexts and activities" (p. 150), with the purpose of creating pathways that make it possible to blend and merge the activities, practices, and experiences indicative of the various contexts in which learners live and exist.

Gutiérrez (2008) likened Third Space to a "particular kind of zone of proximal development" and argued that Third Space facilitates learning, conceptualized as the movement and reorganization of knowledge and practice, as well as the "transformation of the individual, the individual's relation to the social environment, and the environment itself" (p.152). This transformation can be supported through intentional structuring of "activities significant to individuals' subsequent development, specifically play and the imaginary situation, learning, and affiliation" (p. 152). Gutiérrez argued that inclusive learning spaces are characterized by shared practice and collaborative action, and that "this matrix of language and embodied practices helps create a social situation of development that facilitates a collective social imagination and the coordination of individual activity in the struggle for intersubjectivity" (p. 154). This collectively constituted Third Space affirms the identities and lived experiences of its inhabitants, while also challenging individuals to consider different perspectives or grapple with concepts beyond their current understanding, "[extending] students' repertoires of practice in ways that enable them to become designers of their own social futures" (p. 156) and "reconceive who they are and what they might be able to accomplish" (p. 148). Ultimately, collective Third Space "[orients] students toward possibility" (p. 157).

Play as Third Space Engagement

A final construct relevant to my project was that of *play*, a term used to refer to as much an attitude and state of mind as a "complex variety of activities" (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2012, p. 2). This construct has garnered much attention from early childhood researchers and thinkers and is widely considered as vital to the cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development of children (Piaget, 1951; Vygotsky, 1978; Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2012). In contrast, for adults, play is often seen as trivial engagement in activities with the purpose of enjoyment rather than for any serious necessity. Taking a contrasting view, Gutiérrez (2008) positioned play as central to the learning process. Bateson (2015) argued that play and playfulness lead to creativity and flexibility of thought integral to wellbeing, innovation, and even scientific advancement by helping us to "escape false end-points" (p. R14) and "discover possibilities" (p. R14). As a site where "space and time merge, blur and transform" (Brabazon, 2016, p. 2), play generates new perspectives and tools important for addressing the challenges of our social worlds and reconfiguring our position within them. Play encourages and facilitates "breaking away from established patterns and combining actions or thoughts in new ways" (Bateson, 2015, p. R14). Brabazon (2016) argued that "play is an act of mediation and translation" (p. 2), thus positioning play as a form of literacy engagement. Through play, we can reorient how we see ourselves in relation to our social environment, opening up consideration for "different and defiant ways of learning and living" (Brabazon, 2016, p. 2).

However, the extent to which individuals feel comfortable engaging in playful activity or expression depends on their relationship to the social environment. Whereas the term *play* is often used in reference to "playing sports" or "playing the piano," Bateson (2015) argued that these activities may lack *playfulness,* the element of true importance when considering the benefits of play. Paaseonen (2019) defined playfulness as "a mode of sensory openness, curiosity

and drive towards improvisation" (p. 537). According to Bateson, playfulness occurs in non-competitive social settings, or "protected states," where individuals are allowed to "think laterally and explore wild ideas, without being punished" (p. R13). This view echoes Gutiérrez' definition of collective Third Space and Miller's assertion that the experience of internal safety "galvanizes individuals to take risks and to be their authentic selves" (p. 40).

I further argue that play and playfulness are central to the queer process, and situate the queer community as collective experts at engaging in playful reconsiderations of what is possible, as evidenced by such efforts to dismantle and move beyond false narratives presenting dichotomous gender as natural or obvious. Mujer (2019) solidified this connection by stating that the possibility to do queer work, to construct realities that challenge normative culture and opens up space for alternate ways of being, exists within our ability to play in and with narrative. Thus, queer spaces may be fruitful sites for investigating the relationship between legibility and play.

Rationale and Research Questions

Although the inspiration to explore the topics foundational to this study stemmed from my own personal experiences with tabletop roleplaying games and identification with (a)gender and (a)sexual minority groups, I saw the importance of this research as extending beyond any personal interest. I hoped not only to shed light on the relationship between space, play, and legibility, a concept which I have positioned at the intersection of identity and literacy, but also to provide some insight into how social spaces, such as classrooms or workspaces, can be restructured in ways that are more socially just and inclusive.

Participation in tabletop roleplaying games by queer individuals provides an interesting context in which to explore the concepts of legibility, space, and play. Not only are tabletop roleplaying games teeming with more traditional forms of literacy like reading, writing, and

storytelling, but the game space also includes the creation of whole other worlds with their own dynamic social institutions and power structures that invite certain ways of being and discourage others. The game space provides an ideal context for exploring how identities shift and change through interaction with social environments, how identities may influence game play, and how players may make sense of themselves and their identities. Furthermore, the kind of play that sparks joy and creativity requires that participants feel safe in their social environments. The rise in popularity of tabletop roleplaying games among the queer community suggests that this population enjoys participation in these games, which also indicates that this population feels safe in this gaming environment and has negotiated some degree of social legibility within this space. Therefore, I expected tabletop roleplaying games to be sites where players would recognize the potential for the negotiation and expansion of legibility in a safe environment as they resisted dominant discourses that would render them illegible.

Queer individuals occupy spaces outside the bounds of, in opposition to, or in tension with dominant narratives of how to exist in the world, thus making identity work around gender and sexuality more salient and visible. Queer individuals also represent an ideal population of focus due to issues with legibility in social institutions, such as schools, that contribute to experiences of marginalization and oppression. Furthermore, research on the queer population is sparse, and what exists is often focused on highlighting discrimination and prejudice, their negative impact on (a)gender and (a)sexual minorities, and interventions that often seek to buffer against minority stress rather than dismantle the oppressive systems at the heart of the problem. In this study, I attempted to steer clear from notions suggesting that this population is in need of saving or from tendencies to center discussion on the challenges and traumas experienced by those with non-dominant gender and sexual identities. Instead, this project sought to center and

prioritize voices and perspectives of queer individuals through investigation into spaces where this population experiences social legibility and through inquiry into how this population constructs and negotiates these spaces. Centering the perspectives, knowledge, and wisdom of marginalized and oppressed groups seemed a crucial first step for any effort toward social justice.

In an interview with Emma Bracy from Repeller (2019), adrienne maree brown, stated that "Oppression makes us believe that pleasure is not something that we all have equal access to. One of the ways that we start doing the work of reclaiming our full selves — our whole liberated, free selves — is by reclaiming our access to pleasure." In regards to queer folks, particularly trans individuals, our identities are often defined by others in terms of our dysphoria, the roots of the word meaning "hard to bear," as if our identities are a great tragedy in and of themselves. Instead, I argue that the tragedy lies in inequitable power structures that attempt to deny queer individuals the pleasure, the euphoria, inherent in being ourselves without undue struggle or risk of violence. Tabletop roleplaying games bring pleasure and joy to the folks who play them and thus warrant the effort and attention required to investigate, legitimate, and celebrate their use among populations who have historically been denied these experiences. Working toward social justice should focus on maximizing pleasure and joy, rather than solely minimizing harm. Thus, this study was guided by the following questions:

- What do the experiences of queer TTRPG players reveal about the relationships between legibility, play, and space?
- How do players negotiate legibility of queer identities within the context of their experiences participating in tabletop roleplaying games?

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the previous chapter, I endeavored to define legibility through the combination and consideration of the broader concepts of identity, literacy, Third space, and play. I also illustrated how the concept of legibility pertains to the equitable inclusion of individuals who do not conform to dominant, valued, and legitimized ways of being. Furthermore, I proposed that tabletop roleplaying games represent sites where players may negotiate gender and sexual identities, and I presented a rationale for seeking to determine how legibility relates to the experiences of gender and sexual minority players within the context of the tabletop roleplaying games. In this chapter, I situate tabletop roleplaying games within the existing literature on play, I then consider popular perspectives on identity and how these perspectives might relate to tabletop roleplaying games, before reviewing the existing research on tabletop roleplaying games.

Play

In this section, I first address the definitions of play and then consider the prominent schools of thought regarding the function of play.

Definitions of Play

The concept of play has been discussed in many different ways and by many different voices in many different contexts. Although attempts have been made to construct definitions for the universal phenomenon, *play* remains difficult to pin down. However, in examining the various checklists that have been developed to help explain the boundaries of play, the literature has identified some common features (Table 1). Vygotsky (1978) suggested that play involves experiencing pleasure, creating an imaginary situation, and adhering to a set of rules (which

includes taking on specific roles). Garvey (1990) added that play has no extrinsic goal and is "spontaneous, voluntary, and elicits active engagement from players" (p. 6). Among other features already listed, Brown (2010) listed freedom from time and diminished consciousness of self (which the author linked to the concept of "flow" proposed by Csikszentmihalyi), and improvisational potential. Gray (2013) stressed that play is a process-oriented activity requiring an "active, alert, but non-stressed frame of mind" (p. 140). In the introduction of their book, *Play, Performance, and Identity: How Institutions Structure Ludic Spaces,* Omasta and Chappell (2015) argued that play is grounded in specific sites, both real and imagined. Cornell (2018), drawing on Winnicott (1971) and Berne (1964), noted the "precariousness" of play, positioning play between the "predictability of games" and the "unpredictability and risks of intimacy" (p. 24). To engage in play is to make oneself vulnerable, while at the same time maintaining the protection invoked by adherence to well-understood rules and conventions of the inhabited social worlds. With these proposed characteristics in mind, I have established my own criteria for play:

- Grounded in specific sites (both imaginary AND physical/concrete realities)
- Structured/guided by a specific set of negotiated rules
- Spontaneous, improvisational
- Adopting or performing prescribed roles, with diminished consciousness of self
- Pleasurable, intrinsically motivated/motivating
- Willingness to be vulnerable or take risks, openness to experience

Table 1

Definitions of Play

Author/Year	Criteria of Play
Vygotsky (1978)	• Imaginary situation • Pleasure • Ruleset/adoption of roles
Winnicott (1971)	• Intense interest • Exciting and precarious • Interplay between subjective and objective realities
Garvey (1990)	• Pleasurable, enjoyable • No extrinsic goal • Spontaneous • Voluntary • Active engagement
Brown (2010)	• Purposeless/done for its own sake • Voluntary • Inherent attraction • Freedom from time • Diminished consciousness of self • Improvisational potential • Continuation desire
Gray (2013)	• Self-chose and self-directed • Means are valued more than ends • Structure or rules that "emanate from the minds of players" • Imaginative, nonliteral, removed from "real" life • Involves active, alert, but non-stressed frame of mind
Omasta & Chappell (2015)	• Grounded in particular sites • Governed by pre-established rules or protocols • Encourage players to perform prescribed roles • Voluntary, for its own sake • Pleasurable experience

These criteria help distinguish play from the activities in which play may occur, such as games. Although games can facilitate play, they are not sufficient in and of themselves to

qualify. For example, chess is a game that is grounded in specific sites (the game board and the environment in which it is situated), bound by specific rules and the adoption of prescribed roles (the bishop, for example, is limited to specific moves). For many chess players, the challenge of responding to the unexpected is part of what makes the game pleasurable. If an individual is unwilling to take risks or experiences great anxiety at the thought of "losing" the game, the experience of pleasure may not be achievable in this setting and the potential of play will be thwarted. It is also important to note that play can exist outside the realm of games. For example, participation in BDSM (bondage, discipline/domination, submission/sadism and masochism) arguably fulfills all of the criteria listed above, yet to most would not be considered a "game" (not to exclude the possibility of games being incorporated into BDSM-related play).

Schools of Thought on the Purposes and Functions of Play

Just as the field of play has struggled to agree on definitions of play, there is also debate as to the purpose and function of play. Omasta and Chappell (2015) outlined four major schools of thought regarding the boundaries between play and real life and how these boundaries frame perceptions regarding the function, purpose, and impact of play. The authors did not attempt to laud one school of thought over the others, and although their separation gives the illusion of definitive boundaries, it is clear that these schools overlap and cannot be fully distinguished from each other. Thus, each school of thought may be true and untrue depending on the angle from which play is viewed.

Discrete and Separate Realms

The first school of thought suggests that play and real life are "discrete/separate concepts/realms/experiences" (p. 4). Omasta and Chappell drew heavily on early research into play by Huizinga (1938) and Caillois (1961), who positioned play as being confined to a virtual

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space removed from the everyday, with Huizinga asserting that there is no "profit" to be gained through play (p. 13). Although it may be true that pretend actions have pretend consequences, illustrated by Omasta and Chappell's example of the "girl/dragon" on a rampage through an imaginary village, other research has suggested that the boundaries separating the real and imaginary are more fluid. Indeed, in my own experiences working with children, I have witnessed collisions between imaginary creatures tearing through "villages" constructed out of the very real time, effort, and resources of other children, and have had to deal with the aftermath.

Transition, Learning, and Experimentation

The next school of thought asserts that play is rehearsal and imitation of "real" life and functionally prepares individuals for new roles or growing responsibility. Omasta and Chappell (2015) stated that "learning is the testing of imagined ideas in real-life contexts." The play space provides a safe(r) place in which to experiment and try out other ways of being or engaging with the world before bringing them into the "real world." This view primarily views the play space as an arena for skill development, with Omasta and Chappell presenting Vygotsky's theory of proximal development as representative of this school of thought, with children using the play space to practice next level behaviors. Play is positioned by Vygotsky (1978) at the intersection between leveraging symbols to imagine possibility and engaging with external rule sets that encourage the adoption of certain roles and behaviors. Through play, children are able to separate mental abstractions from concrete objects, and are thus able to alter their associated meaning (e.g., a stick becomes a sword, a small child a parent), a process Butler (1993) referred to as *resignifying practice* (p. 177). In adopting different roles, children also adopt new rule sets for their behavior. Both of these processes Vygotsky associated with play require and contribute

to developed literacies regarding the social worlds children inhabit and their place within them. Although Vygotsky primarily considered these concepts within the scope of children, these concepts easily extend to individuals of any age.

Transformation, Transgression, and Resistance

Whereas the second school of thought can be likened to transition, Omasta and Chappell (2015) presented the third school as representing transformation of reality, stating that what occurs in the play space impacts reality through altering structures within our social environments. Although I would argue that learning is also transformative, the subtle differences associated with the second and third school of thought center around whether the transformation is understood to be internal or external to the individual. Omasta and Chappell presented this difference by referencing Piaget's (1936) theories regarding accommodation versus assimilation. Assimilation typically refers to the process of molding new information or experiences to fit within developed schemas, whereas accommodation refers to the process of changing our schemas (including our self-related schemas) to adapt to new information, experiences, or environments. Learning consists of interleaving assimilation and accommodation, and this process can be understood as occurring internally. However, the concept of assimilation can also be extended to altering, resisting, challenging, or even rejecting aspects of the environment to "suit ourselves and our imaginations" (Omasta & Chappell, 2015, p. 6).

Transgressive play that brings the taboo or childish into "real" life illuminates aspects of our lives and social institutions that are often taken for granted or hidden, and can undercut the authority of hegemonic institutions. For example, in their citation of (hyper) femininity, drag performers make clear the theatricality and fluidity of gender itself, opening up space for conceptions of gender that move past strict binary structures. Another example of playful

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resistance includes a 1979 protest where Swedish employees used the tactic of "calling in gay" to illustrate the ridiculousness of the classification of homosexuality as a mental illness.

Fluid Boundaries and Dissolved Distinctions

The last school of thought dissolves the boundary between the "real" and the "imaginary," asserting that "there is no distinction between play and life" (Omasta & Chappell, 2015, p. 4), or between the self and the roles or characters individuals play, which Omasta and Chappell argued "amalgamate to create a unified persona" (p. 8). This school of thought proposes that we are always engaged in a process of reorganization and construction. In their discussion, Omasta and Chappell (2015) drew on Turner's (1959) concept of liminality to consider play where the imaginary and real converge and occur simultaneously within a space that is both and neither. Thus, although a live-action roleplayer who adopts the role of a skilled swordsman may not actually wield their weapon in support of a holy mission in a fantasy land, the individual may actually develop proficiency with martial weapons or strategy, and in doing so, gain social capital within the intersecting social realms of the play space.

Leander and Bolt (2012) observed the literacy practices of a ten-year old manga (Japanese-style comics) enthusiast and described the child's movement between reading and engaging in imaginary play related to the chosen manga, which included acting out scenes and the use of costumes and props/toys. The authors centered the "sensations and movements of the body in the moment-by-moment unfolding or emergence of activity," arguing that literacy exists in the present moment through "forming relations and connections across signs, objects, and bodies in often unexpected ways" (p. 22). In highlighting the fluid boundaries between the various activities in which the child (and later with a friend) engaged, the authors dissolved the distinction between literacy practice and play. The authors also considered the boundaries of the

self, asserting that "the limit of the body is not at the boundary of the skin. Rather, the body is always an assemblage, "the-body-and-" (p. 29). The authors asserted that the assemblage is always in a state of flux and that it is through "constant, responsive interaction" (p. 29), or activity, that "the-body-and-" *emerges* or *unfolds*. Thus, through the embodied practice of play, and the inextricable relationship between the body and environment, Leander and Bolt's manga enthusiast can be understood as "becoming-manga" (p. 29).

In summary, these schools of thought outline the various ways the field has conceived of the function and impact of play, which includes: simple diversion, fulfillment of needs, learning and growth, resistance and transformation, and becoming. Outlining these schools of thought is necessary in guiding the examination of accounts of individual tabletop roleplaying experiences, and their consideration draws on concepts central to my project, namely Third space, literacy, and identity. By indexing Leander and Boldt (2012), I present play as a form of literacy practice, thus linking play to the broader field of literacy-and-identity studies.

Storytelling and Identity

Storytelling is another central component of game play that may also contribute to player experiences of legibility. Stories can nourish and sustain, devastate and overwhelm. They can be potent catalysts for change that not only contribute to how we view the world around us, but ourselves within it. Sara Aird (2016), in a piece titled "Storytelling and Identity: Writing Yourself into Existence," described writing as "a sifting of the soul, an attempt to reveal the true person underneath" (What Does it Mean section, para. 2). She explained how the narrative process helped her to make sense of her trauma and to "write myself into the person I was always meant to be" (para. 2). Aird positioned herself as both the narrator and main character of her own story, noting how accepting these roles helped her to "regain control of the story" (Character

Development section, para. 3). Two key aspects of storytelling are narrative and dialogue, concepts I consider in relation to identity. However, the concept of space is central to play and my definition of legibility, thus it is also important to consider how space relates to identity. To frame this discussion, I draw on the work of Moje and Luke (2009).

Moje and Luke (2009) outlined the field of research they termed "literacy-and-identity" studies, a field that is intimately about the relationship between these two concepts, as well as how various approaches to identity impact understandings of literacy, and vice versa. In their discussion, the authors detailed five identity metaphors: identity as 1) difference, 2) sense of self, 3) mind or consciousness, 4) narrative, and 5) position. These metaphors are useful for providing context for how I organized my study and my approach to analysis.

Identity-as-Difference

The first metaphor, identity-as-difference, represents a comparative approach to identity in which individuals come to understand themselves through recognition of what they are not. This approach to identity is always defined by group membership, and encompasses various social identities such as racial, gender, age, class, etc. Moje and Luke (2009) illustrated how this perspective on identity impacts approaches to literacy, by drawing on Heath (1983) who concluded that schools marginalize certain groups of students through the devaluation of non-dominant literacy practices. In literacy studies, this stance on identity aims to disrupt skills-based views of literacy practice as on a continuum from "proper" to "improper," and instead allows for the recognition of differences without judgement.

Identity-as-Self

Central to Moje and Luke's (2009) examination of the identity-as-self metaphor is Erikson's model of the self developing along a linear path with full maturity and realization

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occurring at the end of the continuum. Although Erikson agreed that the self was developed through social interaction, his theory viewed the self as moving toward a unified and stable state in predictable stages that could be mapped and identified. In contrast, Mead (1934, as cited in Moje and Luke, 2009) proposed that the self reflexively develops as individuals come to understand themselves in relation to and in unpredictable interaction with a "generalized other." Moje and Luke also asserted that Bourdieu's (1980/1990) concept of habitus assumes that the self is acquired through embodied practice that is "largely unconscious, nonagentic, and nonstrategic." Moje and Luke noted the similarity between this view and the previous *identity-as-difference* metaphor, but they highlighted that the difference resides in the emphasis on the social exchange between self and the environment, or self and not self, in the identity-as-self perspective. This view of identity impacts views of literacy in that it opens up space to understand literacy beyond memorization and conscious adherence to rules. It opens up space for unpredictability and also suggests that the self is formed through literacy practices.

Identity-as-Mind

Moje and Luke (2009) described a third metaphor, identity-as-mind, pointing to the connection of this metaphor to the work of Karl Marx, who suggested that reality and consciousness are dialectically shaped through the activity of individuals. The authors then linked this Marxist perspective to Vygotsky's theories regarding tool use that suggest that "the internal plan of consciousness comes into existence through the emergence of control over external sign forms," with consciousness, tool use, and activity feeding back into one another "in a kind of unlimited semiosis" (p. 425). One of the major differences between this metaphor and the two discussed previously is the extension of the being beyond the body. Consciousness can be projected and hybridized through the use of tools and internal mental abstractions. According

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to Moje and Luke, Anzaldua viewed literacy practice as opening up space for individuals to "work through tensions and conflicts in a bifurcated (or multiply situated) consciousness," likening literacy to a "medium for self-discovery and self-formation" (p. 426).

Identity-as-Narrative

The concept of narrative identity describes literacy practices as not only reflecting the self, but producing it, with theorists arguing that "identities are not only represented but also constructed in and through the stories people tell about themselves and their experiences" (Moje & Luke, 2009, p. 427). Moje and Luke noted that some theorists go so far as to assert that identities *are* the stories. Within this framework, any sense of a coherent identity is produced through our ability to tie together our actions over time into a meaningful narrative. Sfard and Prusak (2005), as presented by Moje and Luke, argued that "activity is only meaningful in its representation in narrative" (p. 428).

As further noted by Moje and Luke (2009), Wortham (2004), influenced by Bakhtin, suggested that identity is also enacted through interaction or dialogue with the audience. The telling and construction of stories is an interactional activity during which participants draw from "what will be understood, and what the participants predict will be said" (p. 428). Narratives are a way to represent the self in ways meaningful to others and narrators often draw on the use of archetypes, metaphors, and other narrative structures that may be familiar to the audience. The self is thus narratively produced through the "self-in-interaction-with-others," and can be further understood as Georgakopoulou's (2006a, as cited by Moje and Luke, 2009) "narratives-in-interaction" (p. 428).

Viewing identity within the framework of narrative allows consideration for how "people recognize others or respond to the recognitions of others via the telling of their stories" (p. 429).

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Stories can move us — move us to tears, move us to laughter, move us across the country — but their power derives from what resonates within us when they are told, what enlivens in us during that interaction, and that movement becomes part of our own narrative process. A changed perspective can radically alter the coherence of a narrative and lead to new understandings of the self within its environment.

Identity-as-Position

In their fifth metaphor, Moje and Luke (2009) stated that "subjectivities and identities are produced in and through not only activity and movement in and across spaces but also in the ways people are cast in or called to particular positions in interaction, time, and spaces and how they take up or resist those positions" (p. 428). Moje and Luke suggested that the identity-as-position metaphor unites the other four metaphors, blending together narrative and discourse, centering activity and interaction, and situating these concepts within considerations of space and spatial relationships. Latour's (1993) "laminations" is one of the more common metaphors used to conceptualize identity within the position framework, providing a structure upon which to explain how identities thicken over time as new layers and positions are added. This metaphor fits nicely with concepts such as Bourdieu's (1980/1990) *habitus* or Holland and Lave's (2001) *histories in person.* However, the usefulness of this metaphor diminishes when trying to account for how individuals can hold and enact multiple and often contradictory identities, and the experience of shifting between or crossing boundaries. The movement becomes lost.

Moje and Luke (2009) suggested that a multiple-sided object may be more appropriate than the standard image of lamination as horizontally stacked layers. An apt example may be a d20, a 20-sided dice commonly used in tabletop roleplaying games, with additional layers contributing to various faces that may be more distinct or elaborate than others. Additionally, this

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metaphor makes it easier to see how identities that appear distinct on the sur(face) are actually part of a unified whole. To provide extra depth to this metaphor, like the d20 dice, aspects of the self or certain identities may be visible depending on the throw and the perspective of the viewer, with resulting perspectives dependent on the face presenting at any given moment. Furthermore, the significance of the roll is dependent on the context of the game. As positioning metaphors of identity draw together the four other metaphors considered by Moje and Luke, they also draw together my three main constructs — literacy, identity, and space, and provide a framework from which legibility can be considered.

Tabletop Roleplaying Games

In this section, I first consider how the environment, context, and underlying structure of play influences players' experiences before reviewing the literature linking roleplay and legibility.

Structure, Environment, and Context for Player Experiences

There are essentially three types of roleplaying games: tabletop, live-action (LARP), and computer-based. Although roleplaying games all essentially involve adopting an in-game persona within a fictional reality, Omasta and Chappell (2015) argued that the differing environments and contexts for gameplay have different implications for player experiences. The following section highlights some of the differences between the three types of roleplay and how these differences may affect gameplay. The differences listed in the following section are compiled from both my own personal experience with these mediums and from the ways these mediums have been described in the literature.

Customization and Representation

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Roleplaying games differ in the extent to which players can customize the narrative and personalize their characters. Computer-based roleplaying games are arguably the least customizable as the games are sold as complete packages. Character customization is limited to preset options, and although game developers may build in opportunities for players to make various choices that lead to different outcomes in the game, the options remain predetermined. A common criticism of many video games is a lack of diversity among characters, and the prevalence of storylines that center the experiences of white heterosexual men, with Bonnie Ruberg (2019) asserting that the industry "has proved to be openly hostile to those perceived as different" (p. 1). However, in a discussion regarding the queerness of video games, Ruberg argued that to focus solely on the intentions of the game developers erases the ways in which players make space for themselves and resist power structures that seek to exclude them. Queer individuals are notorious for creating their own *headcanons,* which The Afictionado (2019), a popular queer media blog, referred to as "just internet fan lingo for a queer reading of a text." In this way, players are able to "read" themselves into and transform the interpretations of narratives in ways that are inclusive and affirming. Players further queer games by intentionally playing them "the wrong way," subverting and rejecting the "stated goals of the game" (Ruberg, 2019, p. 24).

Sites of Play

The sites of play also affect the player experience and can limit what is possible. Computer-based games require specific technology to play, often including headsets, keyboards, and internet connection, among others. Although the advent of phones has made gaming easier and more accessible, gaming still centers on engagement with virtual worlds through various screens. In contrast, the physical space is much more prominent in live-action roleplaying games,

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and thus these types of games are often constrained by the resources of the participants (rather than the game developers) to prepare for and adapt to multiple eventualities. Live-action roleplaying games also rely more on props to represent the virtual world. Because fictional realms are mapped onto the physical world, Bowman (2015) suggested that LARPing often requires a suspension of disbelief, with players accepting less than realistic physical representations of fictional or imaginary environments and actions (e.g., using bean bags as fire balls, dorm floors as taverns, etc.).

The necessary preparation can both make gameplay more realistic or believable, but it can also make it difficult to stray from the established narrative or limit the flexibility of characters. Whereas in video games, characters may switch easily between weapons or costumes, LARPers are physically bound by what they are able to carry with them, the time it takes to swap, and the resources required to acquire the props in the first place. Furthermore, because the site of play is bound to the physical realm, there are physical consequences for certain actions or behaviors that may necessitate additional rules regarding aspects of game play such as weapon handling or physical interaction with players.

By contrast, because tabletop roleplaying games are primarily narrative-based games, the game can be played basically anywhere with very little needed to get the game actually up and running. Although physical dice are a central feature of the game normally, this element of chance could easily be replaced by a coin flip, or any method devised by players. Furthermore, although tabletop roleplaying games are often guided by sourcebooks with established rules of play, these rules are almost always presented as suggestions, and players are actively encouraged to adapt the rules to suit their needs and play preferences. Thus, the story is limited only by the ability and willingness of the players to improvise and adapt to imaginary scenarios.

Character and Player

Roleplaying games can also be differentiated in the distance they invite between self and character and the extent to which they engage the bodies of players in the activity. For example, computer games are highly visual, with fictional worlds and characters displayed through screens. Advances in visual technologies allow for highly realistic depictions. Other technologies such as haptic feedback (vibrations) in controllers or surround sound can contribute to more immersive computer-based gaming experiences. Like movies and television shows, the musical scores are also important for manipulating the emotional responses of players.

A popular feature in computer-based roleplaying games allows players to shift the perspective of the camera to either first or second person views, changing the distance between player and character. In first-person mode, players often only see the hands or weapons of their character positioned in a way to suggest that these are the player's own, that the player "is" the character. In second-person, the entire body of the character is often in view, suggesting that instead of being the character, the player is controlling the character. Additionally, the disembodied nature of computer-based games allows for players to mask their own identities when engaging with other players online, unless features like webcams or microphones are used. This potentially allows players to adopt personas that are not as readily questioned by other players. In instances where no other identifiable information is presented, players are limited to engaging with other players based on their actions within the game space.

Tabletop roleplaying games are arguably the least visual in their depictions of the imaginary world. Visual aids are often limited to art included within source books, maps of the game space provided by the DM, or some kind of token representing the position of various characters. Players will also frequently draw characters within their campaign, and occasionally

invest in designing mini figures of their characters (often to use instead of tokens). Although not expected, players may also choose to dress up as or carry props representing their characters. Tabletop roleplaying games typically involve verbal narration of the characters' actions within the fictional world, with players most often lending their voices to carry out dialogue between characters. Although the actions of characters are often clearly distinguishable from the actions of players, dialogue is often blurred, with players shifting back and forth between talking to, about, and for characters. The amorphous boundaries between player and character may affect the legibility of scenarios or experiences within the game.

This becomes particularly salient as players embody characters that may not have the same physical characteristics, and requires that the imagination be stretched to encompass these discrepancies. Although some of this challenge can be mitigated through costuming or other features of acting, it can be difficult to separate the player from the character. The physical embodiment of characters within LARPing sessions can blur the lines between selves and make it difficult to distinguish characters from players, real life from imaginary, an experience Bowman (2015) referred to as "bleed." Two LARPers interviewed by Bowman (2015), Matthew and Walter, recounted an experience during which their characters engaged in a romantic relationship viewed as central to the story arc of Matthew's character. For Walter, self-identified as bigender and androgynous, the most difficult aspect of playing Ishtari was physically "passing" as female, a term used here to describe when the perceptions of an individual's gender by others may not match the individual's sex assigned at birth. Walter's efforts to pass included purchasing feminine clothes (specifically a corset and heels) and a wig, as well as applying makeup. Although Matthew initially found it difficult to engage with Walter's character, Ishtari, as a woman because of Walter's perceived maleness, he noted he was eventually able to move

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past "immature and confusing thoughts" and engage with Ishtari as the woman she was meant to be. In this scenario, the physical embodiment of Ishtari by Walter, and Matthew's perceptions of Walter as the "obvious opposite" of a woman, affected the legibility of Ishtari's gender.

Social Interaction

Social interaction within roleplaying games may occur at multiple levels, with players interacting with players, players interacting with characters, and characters interacting with characters. However, these interactions vary in the degree to which they occur in the physical space. Computer-based roleplaying games can be completely solitary, with players only interacting with the environment or in-game characters. Thus, social interaction can at first appear one-sided or non-existent in these contexts. However, even in situations where players are limited to certain actions within the game, their understanding of the narrative is a social process in and of itself. Likewise, the game developers' choices regarding the structure and narrative of the game are also indicative of these social processes. The responsiveness of the game developer is significantly lower in computer-based games, though the increasing popularity of online feedback is expanding this capability, with developers now able to make changes after a game has been released. Live-action roleplay, though less so than computer-based games, also sees sizable separation between players and the game master and reduced ability by players to negotiate how the story will progress due to factors already discussed (required preparation and limited resources). One of the main areas of difference that sets TTRPGs apart is the nearly non-existent distance between the game master and players, with the game master essentially considered a player themselves (albeit with more responsibility and control) and the narrative and the environment within the game space negotiated in the moment by all participants.

Many video games do include multiplayer settings that allow more than one player to participate at the same time, and computer games with online capabilities allow player-characters to interact with other player-characters. Players may be able to speak with one another through the use of gaming headsets or through text chat features. These advances in game play allow greater social coordination among players. As social interaction increases among participants, players must also adapt to the social rules associated not only with the game space, but the fictional reality, and grasp the consequences associated with certain actions.

In solitary videogames, if a player fails to complete a task, the task can often be restarted as if the initial failure never occurred. However, as more people are involved, actions become increasingly more impactful. For example, in multiplayer modes, the ability of players to progress within the game becomes dependent on the success of other players in completing necessary tasks. In contrast, redos are highly discouraged in LARPing and TTRPGs, and game masters may not allow them. There are a plethora of articles and forum discussions detailing good player etiquette when engaging in roleplaying games, whether online or in-person. Examples include muting one's microphone when not in use, taking it easy on "noobs" (new players), and being gracious during wins and defeats. As roleplaying veers more toward storytelling as in live-action and tabletop roleplay, other forms of etiquette become more common such as focusing on the story rather than the win, sharing the spotlight, and coming to the table with an open mind. The social guidelines can be understood as functioning to maintain the play space, as not conforming could lead to conflict that may jeopardize enjoyment of the game and transition the activity outside the bounds of play.

In this section, I have attempted to provide readers with a well-rounded perspective of what roleplaying entails and with more context for how tabletop roleplaying games can be

understood in relation to my main constructs. In the next section, I review the roleplay literature, specifically those focused on topics related to legibility.

Research into Roleplay

In this section, I review three main areas of literature regarding the link between roleplaying games and legibility: 1) identity formation, 2) identity and institutional learning, and 3) resistance and reinforcement of power.

Identity Formation

The potential for games, particularly roleplaying games, to facilitate identity work is well documented in existing research. As part of an in-depth ethnography into roleplaying games, Bowman (2010) outlined three main functions of roleplaying games: community-building, problem solving, and identity alteration. Bowman argued that experiences associated with enacting various characters alter player understandings of the world and themselves. Bowman referred to this process as *integration,* where players bring aspects of the game world into their everyday lives. Bowman also provided an outline of nine different character archetypes based on how players presented themselves in relation to their character. Bowman argued that these player-character archetypes served different purposes for players. For example, use of the *Doppelganger Self* seemed to make learning the game easier for beginner players, as it requires less effort to determine what a character will or will not do. Players enacting the *Repressed Self* relished opportunities to surface aspects of themselves they felt had to be controlled or subdued in their daily lives, often drawing on childish, mischievous, or naive traits and behaviors.

Nielsen (2015) argued that players develop new literacies through their character's in-game interactions "that not only allow them to explore their own identities but also interact with the offline world" (p. 51). Roleplay does not limit projection of the self into future roles, but

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rather it can be understood as opening up space to pursue possible identities, which may fluctuate or vary in the extent to which they are represented through character development during roleplay. Tabletop roleplaying games allow individuals to experiment with various identities in ways that provide space to consider the possibility of assuming these roles in the future, as well as the expansion, resistance, or subversion of various identities.

Institutional learning

It has been established that attending to identity is crucial for engaging learners. Gee (2007) argued that learning spaces could be strengthened by taking a cue from video games, specifically roleplaying games, which he positioned as adept at building bridges between the real-world identities of players and the virtual identities available through game play. Gee's (2007) tripartite identity theory suggested the establishment of three different, yet connected, types of identity during engagement with RPG video games: virtual (character on screen), real (physical player), and projective (the interaction between the real and virtual identities — or "the project in the making"). Gee argued that the power or magic of roleplaying games occurs in the space and interaction between the real and virtual selves, where something more than either player or character is created and players come to understand they have the "*capacity,* at some level, to take on the virtual identity as a real world identity" (p. 66).

Woods (2017) argued that tabletop roleplaying games possess features that make them ideally suited for use as pedagogical tools within classrooms: 1) promoting engagement and enthusiasm, 2) encouraging roleplay and agency, and 3) facilitating participatory learning contexts. Drawing a parallel between game spaces and learning spaces, Coe (2017) explored what motivates individuals to continue participating in tabletop roleplaying games after initial participation. Using grounded theory, Coe determined five motivations underlying participant

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engagement with tabletop roleplaying games: imaginative creativity, exploring and knowing self, belonging and interacting, relief and safety, and learning. These five categories were considered to constitute the broader motivation of "becoming," defined by Coe as "developing their identity or their state of existence to a more idealized state" (p. 2857).

Resistance and Reinforcement of Power

Research has also shown that players can use the game space either to resist or reimagine systems or reinforce them. Cross (2012) argued that roleplaying games can be understood as sites of "defiant becoming" and resistance where players consider "new gendered possibilities and arrangements of power" (p. 73). Drawing on the work of sociologist Raewyn Connell (1987, 2000), Cross characterized gender as in a "perpetual dialectical interaction," stating that roleplaying games are in a prime position to facilitate and encourage this process of negotiation. Roleplaying games have also been shown to represent sites of resistance against normative expectations of both gender and race (Just, 2018; Long, 2016). Nielsen suggested that the ability of players to take on roles beyond their own experience can lead to "potentially fruitful criticism of stereotypes" and to consider deeply different ways of being in the world. However, Nielsen argued that these benefits are only achievable through inclusive gaming environments where players are given the opportunity to "play who they are" (p. 47). Fein (2015) engaged in an ethnographic study of a summer camp for autistic youth that facilitated live-action roleplaying. Fein concluded that live-action roleplay facilitated identity transformation and healing through "co-creation of innovative cultural spaces" (p. 299).

Shay (2013) argued that tabletop roleplaying games create sites where individuals can engage in "edgework without the edge" (p. 17). Players press at the boundaries and flirt with destruction, gaining an appreciation for the limits associated not only with the ability of their

characters, but also of themselves. Although character deaths can be intensely negative experiences, the physical consequences are largely contained in the virtual game space. However, based on interviews with roleplayers, Shay proposed an association between risk-taking, perceived safety, and visibility, noting that participants felt safer to explore outside of the public eye and with people who shared similar gaming preferences. Additionally, gaming communities are not immune from reinforcing normative standards for how to be in the world, or shaming players who are perceived as taking things too far beyond the limits of what is considered normal behavior.

Playful Storytelling and Storied Play

In this chapter, I examined two central components of tabletop roleplaying games, play and storytelling, and positioned play within the realm of literacy-and-identity studies, exploring this relationship through the examination of the five metaphors for identity proposed by Moje and Luke (2009). Identity-as-narrative and identity-as-position are most relevant to the topics and themes discussed within this project. Narrative is a tool used to make sense of the world and ourselves within it. Stories provide a specific perspective and can be used to frame our experiences in certain ways. They can also move us, altering our relationships with others and our environment. When storytelling is combined with play, such as through the playful storytelling or storied play of tabletop roleplaying games, new stories and new ways of being become possible. Through play and storytelling, individuals may be able to re-center their own experiences and re-negotiate their various positions in the world. This may be particularly empowering for populations that have historically been denied power, pushed out to the margins, and systematically erased from the story through (narrative) genocide.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

In this chapter, I begin with a reflexive statement regarding influential research paradigms and my positionality, as it is integral to how I have approached the topics addressed in this literature and applied them to my research strategy. This reflection includes a consideration of both my guiding research paradigm and my own personal connection to this research. This is followed by details of the study itself and the reasoning and intentions behind the choices I made in design and implementation.

Issues of Research Paradigm

The following section includes an overview of two conceptual frameworks that are foundational to how I have brought together concepts, and they provide insight into how I think about knowledge and the research process itself

Ecology and Metaphoric Harmony

My approach to the research process and understanding of knowledge is greatly influenced by the work of Fleckenstein et al. (2008). Fleckenstein et al. suggested that metaphor is foundational to the research process, stating that metaphor shapes how researchers orient themselves to topics of study, how they choose research methods, and how they make and package the knowledge produced through this process. These authors argued that metaphors not only describe reality, but shape how individuals experience it and ultimately produce it. Thus in research, metaphors and the phenomenon of interest must be in alignment, else the metaphors produce knowledge that is "limited, reductive, and subject to misleading clarity" (p. 389). Because the phenomena of study are never simple constructs with clear boundaries, the metaphors a researcher invokes must be complex enough to account for their inherent messiness.

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Fleckenstein et al. argued that "we need ways of knowing the indistinct and the slippery without trying to grasp and hold them tight" (p. 389), and they proposed an ecological metaphor that allows researchers to engage in meaning-making while also accepting the impossibility of ever knowing anything in its entirety.

As part of this discussion, Fleckenstein et al. (2008) presented the idea of "metaphoric harmony," meaning the evaluation of research and theory by how well it fits into the established "key" and whether it "rings true" to those that encounter or are exposed to it. Some metaphors simply do not resonate with an individual's understanding of the world or fit within the structures they may operate. This does not preclude the possibility of the usefulness of such a metaphor, but rather defines the boundaries and limits of existing perspectives. Metaphors are lenses, drawing into focus certain aspects of a subject, while obscuring or blurring others. Metaphors are insufficient in isolation to encompass the complexity of reality, but when held together can offer a rich and intricate perspective. However, the rhetorical strength of research relies on its ability to weave together metaphors that resonate with each other, the subject of the research, and the receiving audience (Fleckenstein et al., 2008).

The ecological metaphor proposed by Fleckenstein et al. (2008) is comprised of three components: interdependence, feedback, and diversity. *Interdependence* refers to the "living web" (p. 296) of relationships central to any given research topic, with the involved elements within the group mutually constituted dialogically through their interactions with one another. This concept lends itself to explanations of how issues of power, how identities of privilege and oppression are written into being, can be extended to how researchers and the entire phenomena of study come into being through their interactions. *Feedback* refers to the mutability and permeability of the boundaries researchers draw to limit the scope of their "research ecosystem"

(p. 396). The fidelity of these boundaries is dependent on the feedback researchers receive as they work with the theoretical constructs they have delineated. Lastly, *diversity* refers to the need of any research project to include a multitude of perspectives, methodologies, and sites of immersion. This concept of immersion addresses "the flawed belief that the researcher can be separated from the phenomenon of study" (p. 395), and instead argues that the research context is actively influenced by the researcher, and thus the researcher should be considered within the ecology of the research study.

Fleckenstein et al. (2008) argued that research itself is an ecology with a structure of fabricated boundaries and forced perspectives and that this "ecological orientation to research fuses the knower, the known, and the context of knowing" (p. 395). Research contexts and learning environments are constituted and limited by the perspectives already held, and the held perspectives are limited by the context in which individuals are situated. Ultimately, the research context requires, as Law (2004) argued, that the researcher become comfortable "living with and knowing confusion" (Fleckenstein et al., p. 402), and accept that knowledge is situated in a paradox of expansiveness and limitation. The concept of ecological harmony and orienting research around metaphor is foundational to this research project, not only in that the project relies heavily on metaphor to explore various conceptualizations of the central constructs of legibility but also because the ecological metaphor used by Fleckenstein et al. resonates so deeply with other metaphors, both spatial and literary, evoked elsewhere in the project.

Aesthetic Play and Narrative Inquiry

As a second and complementary perspective, Kim (2019) presented the notion of approaching research design as *aesthetic play*, a concept derived from Latta (2013). The *aesthetic,* according to Latta, is "vaguely associated with the beautiful and sublime" (p. xiii), and

typically applied to art. However, Latta noted that consideration for the art object often ignores the "aesthetic experience of creating as intimately connected to its creation" (p. xiii). Latta then connected this concept with play, which she defined as a "process, taking place 'in-between' self and other(s), drawing attention to the aesthetics of human understanding" (p. xiii). Although Latta used this concept to argue for play's vital role in curricular practices, Kim (2019) argued for playful, yet serious research design. Kim suggested researchers engage in aesthetic play, which she likened to flirting, in three ways: 1) playful, yet serious engagement with research ideas and negotiation "bringing nearness that reveals reciprocity, connectedness, and coherence," 2) embodiment of "intellectual curiosity, flexibility, open-mindedness, and attunement to the research processes," and 3) sustainment of a loose, yet solid grasp so as to "let our research unfold in a way that preserves its own integrity and let it tell its own tale" (p. 7). Kim, then applied this framework to narrative inquiry and underscored the importance of learning to think narratively.

Referencing Connelly and Clandinin (2006), Kim (2019) outlined four considerations important to thinking narratively: 1) imagining a life space, 2) living and telling as starting points for collecting field texts, 3) defining and balancing the commonplaces, and 4) investing the self in the inquiry. The first and third considerations both include place, added to Dewey's dimensions of experience by Connelly and Clandinin. The first consideration essentially refers to the imaginary, the space in which an idea is given life and unfolds. They characterized this space as multidimensioned and ever changing. The third consideration refers to attending to context (temporality, sociality, and place) from the outset of the study and throughout the analysis.

In explaining the second consideration, Kim (2019) then outlined two "starting points" for data collection first proposed by Connelly and Clandinin (2006): "imagining the life as lived

in the past (telling) and living the life under study as it unfolds (living)" (p. 9). For example, interviews, photographs, and conversations may be used to establish *telling*, whereas *living* is acquired through observation and participation in the field. The fourth consideration refers to the relationships between researcher and participants. Connelly and Clandinin called for researchers to be "self-conscious of their potentially intimate connection with the living, with the field texts collected, and their research texts," and they intimated the need for researchers to "deliberately imagine themselves as part of the inquiry" (p. 482). Kim (2019) presented narrative inquiry as a vulnerable genre, arguing that vulnerability strengthens researchers' ability to understand the "lived experience under study" (p. 19). Narrative inquiry requires "moral, ethical, emotional, and intellectual commitment" (p. 19) by way of the researcher to those sharing their stories and lives. In the next section, I state my position in relation to the topics of study, and present myself as a "narrative character" within this study.

Statement of Positionality

It is necessary to disclose some of my own personal connections to the topics introduced thus far because I drew inspiration for this study from my experiences. I describe my gender and sexual identities as queer. Although I have encountered, and myself use, terms that are perhaps more specific, I particularly like the term *queer* because it seems to defy definition. It exists in the murky grey area of being and not being - *neither*, *both*, *and*. However, until recently, I did little actively to seek out community or make my queerness known to others. It was not until I started playing tabletop roleplaying games with other queer people that I began embracing and celebrating my queerness, so to speak, and reflecting on how and why my queer identity had become so much more salient in my life. This consideration has been largely facilitated through conversations between myself and other individuals with whom I play.

In my experiences participating in tabletop roleplaying games such as Dungeons & Dragons, I often find that I embody the experiences of my characters, experiencing deep emotion and stress as I lend my voice, time, and energy to exploring the constructed reality of the game space through my characters. The "online" and "offline" worlds, or real and virtual, often overlap in ways that produce complex interactions and relationships between characters and players. Part of this journey has been the exploration of my queer identity while navigating with my fellow players what that means. I recognize that although I endure and struggle against prejudice and discrimination related to my gender and sexual identities, and feel as though my identities are not always accepted or respected, through roleplaying I have, in conjunction with others, cultivated a safe space to live out and realize these identities.

I am led to consider how certain spaces or contexts and the structure of those spaces invite and welcome the pursuit of certain identities while discouraging others. In addition, these experiences have inspired consideration for how other individuals who identify as sexual and gender minorities may perceive and process roleplaying experiences in regards to the construction of these identities, and how roleplay influences and is used intentionally during this process. Although this project has grown into something that is uniquely mine, the seeds were sown in that distinctly queer and playful space that I, along with the other players, constructed together, and is supported as much through my reading of literatures on identity and literacy, among others, as through the enthusiasm and support from those with whom I first embarked on this ridiculous and life-changing adventure.

Putting It All Together

The chapters and sections up until this point have been guided by my stated research paradigms and my personal interest and investments in the topics and population of focus within

this study. The work of Fleckenstein et al. (2008) is reflected in the strong use of (spatial) metaphor within my paper, which I use to navigate and negotiate the boundaries between ideas and determining the scope of view to which the study attends. It was also foundational to my understanding and inclusion of the ecological definition of legibility. I have also channeled aesthetic play through flirtatious conversation with multiple fields of study and playful use of metaphor in order to maintain the integrity and wholeness of the constructs.

As for the design of the study, Kim's (2019) guidance regarding how to think narratively has contributed in multiple ways. Because storytelling is a central feature of tabletop roleplaying games, collecting and analyzing stories regarding player experiences has a satisfying symmetry. This study focuses on the *telling* of stories, particularly focusing on how participants make sense of their own experiences through the stories they tell and how they answer questions related to their experiences. However, I also want to acknowledge that the *living* of stories is happening at the same moment a story is told, and, like the co-constructed narratives central to the tabletop roleplaying game experience, the research space and the interactions between myself and the participants influence and are influenced by the *telling* of our stories.

The narrative and ecological frameworks each underscore the importance of outlining the bounds of the study, as well as attending to how context impacts the storied lives of participants and the stories that are told. For this work, it is important to acknowledge the historic marginalization of the queer community, the population central to this study, and to maintain consideration and compassion for how topics may connect with various traumas associated with this lived experience among both the participants of this study and myself. Both of these frameworks underscore the importance of considering my relationships with the research context

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and reducing the distance between myself as the researcher and the participants of the study. Grounded in these considerations, the next section outlines the design of the study.

The Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the concepts of legibility, space, and play, paying special attention to how queer individuals negotiate legibility of their gender and sexual identities within the context of their experiences participating in tabletop roleplaying games. I am interested in how participants make sense of themselves and their experiences, and in what ways legibility, space, and play are woven into the fabric of their stories. To that end, this study situates itself within a grounded theory approach and utilizes qualitative methodology through the use of interviews. In the remainder of this chapter, I outline the design and implementation of this study and discuss how my research frameworks have guided the process. First, I describe my target population and recruitment strategy, the desired and achieved sample size, and then discuss my participants. Then, I discuss the intake, survey, and interview process I used. Lastly, I detail my approach to data analysis.

Target Population and Recruitment

This study focused on recruiting English-speaking gender and sexual minorities over the age of 18 who had experience participating in tabletop roleplaying games. There is not much known about this population, and it was initially unclear how many participants I could expect to recruit for the study or what a representative sample might look like. However, it was my intention that at least 30% of participants be people of color. My recruitment plan consisted of two stages. In the first stage, I cast the net broadly and interviewed individuals as they completed the initial intake survey. After I had reached around half of the interviews, I looked more closely

at the participants to consider whose voices might be missing so that I could be more intentional in selecting participants that filled identified gaps.

My process for recruitment included contacting Austin-based organizations with a focus on gender and sexual minorities as well as organizations with a focus on tabletop roleplaying games. I either emailed these organizations or reached out via Facebook with the study details. I also posted flyers in spaces around campus, as well as on community boards at various cafes or other local hubs, and relied on personal connections to recruit participants. All communications contained study details, my contact information, as well as a link to the IRB consent documentation and intake survey. Although my own search for participants was focused in Austin, participants were largely acquired through snowballing effects, with the details of my study even re-posted by a participant to the "Gender Detectives" Slack community for those with a shared interest in the popular queer podcast, "Gender Reveal."

Sample Size

In order to focus my recruitment efforts, it was necessary to set a preliminary goal regarding the number of interviews I would conduct. It is common for qualitative research studies to determine an appropriate sample size through *saturation*, which can be understood as the point at which collecting further data will not likely contribute to new information or perspectives related to the research questions. However, Malterud, Siersma, and Guassora (2016) argued that the concept of data saturation does not offer fulfillment guidelines and does not facilitate research planning, instead leading to individual and arbitrary "rules of thumb." They instead suggested that "information power" is a more useful concept for estimating the sample size needed to answer research questions aptly. Information power consists of five factors: study aim, sample specificity, use of established theory, quality of dialogue, and analysis strategy.

Small samples are appropriate for theory-rich studies with narrow research aims and specific populations that utilize strong, in-depth dialogue and case analysis. The largely exploratory nature of the study, its limited theoretical foundation, and its use of cross-case analysis, suggested a larger sample size would be needed. However, my research questions are narrow in scope and pertain to a highly specific population, and the study includes conducting in-depth interviews, which all served to reduce the necessity of a larger sample size. With these factors in mind and with consideration to my own capacity to conduct, transcribe, and analyze the interviews, my goal for data collection included gathering a sample of 15 to 20 participants, with four to six people of color.

Collecting a Diverse Sample

It is important to note that though I recognized the importance of gathering a diverse sample, my initial recruitment strategy did not include reaching out to organizations centering specific subsets of the queer community, such as queer people of color or queer disabled people. Part of this oversight has to do with low personal awareness of how and where people gathered within the queer and tabletop communities. I did not have a strong social media presence prior to the recruitment phase (not even have a Facebook account) and was not involved with any groups outside of my graduate program, so I had little knowledge regarding the make-up of the organizations from which I was recruiting. The bulk of the problem, however, is that when developing my recruitment strategy, despite my familiarity with and understanding of the importance of attending to intersectionality, it did not occur to me that I might need to intentionally seek out queer people of color or disabled queers in spaces specific to their particular intersection of experience rather than the broader catch-all organizations. This was a critical blind-spot and not something that I recognized as such until much later in the process

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with my awareness of how whiteness features in many queer spaces strengthened through time spent in an actual queer organization. Throughout stage one of data collection, I recognized the low representation of people of color within my sample, and in my consideration of why, I questioned the prevalence of queer people of color within the tabletop roleplaying game community and considered how histories of oppression might be functioning in the expectations or assumptions people of color may have held regarding the study and myself as a white researcher. Although multiple factors may have been at play, what was ultimately lacking was a critical examination of my methodology and consideration for how my recruitment strategies may have been excluding people of color.

Around the time that I realized the flaws within my approach, the Covid-19 pandemic had taken center stage globally and was immediately joined by the nation-wide Black Lives Matter protests prompted by the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in May, 2020. I suspended data collection efforts for this project for several months during this time. It is important to note that when I initiated recruitment attempts again, conversations regarding requests for free labor from people of color were prominent in the queer spaces I occupied. Because this project did not include payment for participation, I felt uncomfortable making direct requests for help from the queer people of color in my social circles at the time whom I knew to play tabletop roleplaying games. Instead, I posted announcements in the spaces to which I had access and contacted other queer organizations that centered people of color and disability. These attempts were not fruitful.

Final Sample of Participants

In the end, I had 17 participants who completed all phases of data gathering. All but four participants lived in or around Austin at the time the interviews took place, with three living

outside of Texas and one in a different country (and continent) altogether. Two of the participants living in Austin were not U.S. citizens, though both permanent residents, with one born in Chile and the other in France. All but one participant was white, with the sole non-white person identifying as Latinx.

The ages of participants ranged greatly from early 20s to late 50s, with an average age of 34. Similarly, the range of experience with tabletop roleplaying games varied widely from 3 to 40 years, with an average starting age of 16. All but one participant indicated involvement in a campaign in the last year, whereas 10 indicated current engagement with an active campaign. Of the 17 participants, 13 indicated they had filled the role of DM/GM for past campaigns.

Three participants indicated that their current gender identity matched the gender they were assigned at birth, two (cis)males and one female. The remaining 13 participants shared gender labels that included non-binary, agender, (gender)fluid, (gender)queer, and trans(gender man/masculine). Three of these 13 participants shared more than one gender label, with all three using the term non-binary in conjunction with a second label (either agender or transmasculine). As for identities related to sexuality, none of the participants identified themselves as straight or heterosexual. The following terms for sexuality were used by participants: *bisexual, pansexual, homosexual, gay, queer, sexually fluid, demisexual, and panromantic.* Of the 17 participants, 13 described their identities using the terms *bisexual*, *pansexual*, or *homosexual/gay,* with six of these 12 using a combination of these and other terms. The remaining four either used the term *queer* (3) or *demisexual* (1) to exclusively refer to their sexuality. The terms and frequencies for age, experience with tabletop roleplaying games, queer identification, and ethnicity/nationality can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	# Years Playing	Sexual Identity Labels	Gender Labels	Race/Ethnicity, Country of Origin, Place of Residence
Alex	43	31	Pansexual	Genderqueer	White, US, Texas
Caitlin	22	8	Bisexual, gay	Female, cis-woman	White, US, Texas
Elliot	30	14	Bi/pan	Non-binary	White, UK
Faebig	28	2	Queer, bisexual	Queer, non-binary	White, US, Texas
Galad	31	7	Queer	Agender, nonbinary	White, US, Alabama
Gordon	58	40	Bisexual	Cismale	White, US, Texas
June	22	3	Bisexual	Nonbinary	White, US, Texas
Kay	25	4	Bisexual/demisexual	Fluid	White, US, Texas
Marlowe	24	9	Gay/homosexual, panromantic	Transmasculine, masc-of-center non-binary, pretty boy	White, US, Texas
Morgan	57	40	Pansexual	Gender-fluid	Latinx, Chile, Texas
Ro	41	32	Queer, pansexual, sexually fluid	Agender, non-binary	White, US, Alabama
Ryan	20	4	Queer, bisexual, gay	Transgender man (FTM)	White, US, Texas
Sasha	39	30	Queer	Non-binary	White, US, Texas
Seega	29	8	Demisexual	Agender	White, US, Texas
Simon	27	16	Pansexual	Agender/genderless	White, France, Texas
Wyn	31	16	Pansexual	Male	White, US, Texas
Xai	41	25	Queer	Non-binary	White, US, N. Carolina

Procedures

All potential participants were first directed to an online intake form where they were first asked to verify that they met the three participation criteria: 1) over the age of 18, 2) experience with tabletop roleplaying games, and 3) gender or sexual identification on the LGBT/Queer spectrum. Upon confirmation, participants were then asked to read the informed consent documentation and to indicate whether they agreed to the terms of participation and consented to use of their data for research purposes. Only after participants had verified they were eligible for participation and provided their consent were they directed to begin the survey portion of this study.

At no point were participants asked for their legal names or any information that could potentially identify them to others. However, in the case that identifiable information was shared, all survey responses and interview transcripts were de-identified and labeled with the pseudonyms chosen by each participant. The only other potential for participant identification existed in the email addresses they used to correspond with me. I, for example, use an email address that includes my full name. It was necessary to keep a record that allowed me to link chosen pseudonyms to email addresses so that communication necessary for the study could occur. These email addresses were stored in a password protected file on my personal laptop, as were the interview recordings. De-identified transcripts and survey data were placed in a shared drive folder that could be accessed by individuals listed on the IRB for this study, which included my faculty supervisor and another graduate student.

Surveys

The purpose of the survey was to collect demographic information for later description of the sample that might also help mitigate any potential bias in recruitment, to guide interview

questions, and to pair qualitative interviews with some quantitative data with the intention of enriching participant profiles or categorizations created during analysis and further situating the experiences shared by participants. The survey consisted of 25 questions asking participants to provide information regarding their tabletop roleplaying experiences, gender, and sexuality, in that order, with the last four questions combining these three topics.

I attempted to be as consistent as possible in the wording of questions and the types of questions included in each section of the survey, though the difference in topics necessitated small changes or additional items. Examples of questions included: "For how many years have you been playing tabletop roleplaying games," "Approximately how many people do you have in your life who DEFINITELY know about your **gender identity** AND with whom you can talk about it openly," and "How long have you been able to talk openly about your sexual identity with the people mentioned in the previous question?" In addition, participants were asked to classify the relationships (e.g., friend, partner, family member, etc.) they had with the people they reported typically playing and the people with whom they felt comfortable discussing their gender and sexual identities. Participants were also asked to rate the importance of various aspects of game play to their overall enjoyment of tabletop roleplaying games. I also asked participants how they described their gender and sexual identities, as well as which pronouns should be used when referencing them. A full list of the survey questions can be found in Appendix A.

Demographic Information and Addressing Potential Sample Bias

By sourcing a large proportion of my sample from organizations focused on tabletop RPGs, there was some risk in collecting a biased sample of gamers who were more dedicated and experienced with tabletop RPGs. This imbalance was mitigated by adding demographic

questions to the survey portion that covered years of experiences, frequency of play, and average campaign length. This allowed distinctions to be drawn among participants in the sample and provided increased specificity in how findings could be interpreted and applied to a wider population. For example, gamers who are newer to tabletop RPGs may have different experiences from those who have played for longer.

Collecting a sample of participants representative of (a)sexual and (a)gender minorities relies on self-labeling by participants. This fails to capture individuals who do not identify as such or who are not "out" as queer, and who are therefore less likely to participate in studies seeking queer participants. There was some concern that this could lead to a sample of individuals who were more established in their identities, which may have affected the way they engaged with tabletop roleplaying games. It could also have led to a higher homogeneity of participants as a result. This was addressed by asking participants direct questions about where they were in relation to the identities they espoused, such as how long they had held certain identities and to what extent they felt comfortable expressing these identities openly with various people in their life, including the people with whom they played TTRPGs.

My original intention was to begin the survey with a short block of demographic questions that would both mitigate sample bias and inform recruitment efforts. Unfortunately, some of these demographic questions were omitted from the survey after rearranging the structure of the survey in ways meant to mirror and complement the interview questions and flow. In doing so, I split the demographic questions across the sections of the survey and forgot to add back in questions not specifically related to the established sections, in this case location and racial/ethnic identity. I had concluded stage one of data collection with eight completed interviews before I realized that these demographic questions had been omitted. After

recognizing the mistake, I added those questions to the survey, emailed all participants who had previously completed the interview process with a request for this demographic data, and for individuals who had already completed the survey, but not the interview, I either gathered this information in our correspondence while scheduling the interviews or during the interview itself.

In addition to the omitted demographic questions, there was one other issue with the survey. One of the questions in each of the sections asked participants to select all that apply from a list of items, but the questions were set so that participants could only choose one from the list. Luckily, the first and second participants to complete the survey informed me of the issue, and I was able to fix it before anyone else was confronted with the same problem.

Interviews

After participants completed the online survey, they were contacted via email to set up an interview time. The email included a copy of the informed consent documentation and a link to an online scheduling site where participants were able to choose from available 2-hr time slots within a two week period. Although two hours were slotted, participants were asked to plan for a 90-minute interview. The extra time was allotted for unforeseen circumstances that could have affected the start time of the interview and to avoid feeling rushed during the interview process. Participants were initially given the choice to meet either in-person or online via video call. Despite foreseeing potential issues that may have impacted the flow of the interviews and the smoothness of the audio recordings, the online option was included in order to reduce the amount of time and effort required from participants and to increase comfort regarding their anonymity and safety. However, due to pandemic-related safety concerns and the onset of necessary social distancing restrictions, all interviews occurring after March 2020 were conducted online. Up until that point, in-person interviews were conducted on campus in reserved and private rooms,

and the online interviews (at least on my end) were also conducted in private spaces either on-campus or in my home. Audio recordings of the interviews were collected via an app on my phone.

The interviews were semi-structured with prepared questions consisting of three parts in the following order: tabletop roleplaying game (TRPG) experiences, gender and sexuality, and the relationship between queer identities and tabletop roleplaying games. The interview questions for this study were derived from a similar study I had first conducted as part of a qualitative methods course. I altered and expanded the list of questions to suit this project better and used those initial interview experiences to inform my choices on how to structure both the interview questions and the interview space. I also had a peer colleague, who was listed on the IRB for this project, conduct an interview with me as the participant using the new draft of questions, though they were free to change the order of the questions or add to the list of questions as they felt necessary during the interview. This was useful as it both helped to situate my own experiences within the context of this study, and informed my understanding of how it felt to be interviewed. The colleague who conducted my interview was also interviewed by me for this study, and we were able to debrief together regarding our experiences as both interviewees and interviewers. Although our familiarity with one another no doubt affected our comfort with the interview process, it was an illuminating and helpful exercise.

My general approach to the interview process was grounded in my desire to connect with and serve the queer community, which I claim as my own, which included efforts to make the interview process as enjoyable as possible for both participants and myself. I attempted to imbue the interview space with care, compassion, and understanding, as well as gratitude for their willingness to contribute their stories. I also tried to be explicit regarding my expectations for the

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space, stating clearly what we would be discussing and that they were in control of what they shared. Although my research questions necessitated asking participants to consider and share negative experiences, I made intentional choices regarding the depth to which these topics would be explored. I took into account what I was personally capable of holding in regards to the emotional weight of participants' stories and how participants might feel after the interview concluded. In my perspective, it would not have been ethical to press participants to talk about or share traumatic events that they had not adequately processed, and to conclude interviews with participants feeling raw or exposed. Likewise, it would not be ethical to allow myself to become overwhelmed or unable to maintain my own composure amidst the vulnerability of participants. Thus, I arranged and designed questions in ways that I hoped would regulate the tension of the space and provide balance and flow.

Although I kept consistent the original prepared list of questions throughout each interview, I also attempted to leave space for other avenues to be explored and allowed the conversation to stretch out toward other topics or areas brought up by participants. During the 90-minute interview period, I engaged with participants primarily through posing questions relevant to the study. Although it was necessary to be strategic in the use of the interview period with the participants, I also tried to ensure some degree of reciprocity between myself and the participants, occasionally sharing my own personal experiences or anecdotes as I felt the situation warranted. Additionally, once I felt satisfied that the interview questions had been sufficiently answered, I opened the floor for further conversation and participant-generated questions. I stated clearly that all of the questions that I asked of participants they themselves were free to ask me. These less formal periods of conversation often led to new insights or avenues for questioning. Furthermore, by recording my own responses and contributions during

these conversations, and in conjunction with my notes taken during each interview, I was able to document my own reflections and musings about this project as they occurred in the interview space.

The questions regarding TTRPGs were designed to lead participants to consider various aspects of game play and how these aspects have impacted their experiences. These questions were arranged at the beginning in order to help participants and myself ease into the interview space and build rapport before discussing the potentially more sensitive topics of gender and sexuality. By beginning with tabletop roleplaying games, space was also made for participants to make connections to gender and sexuality without being prompted. Example questions in the tabletop roleplaying games section included: "How were your first experiences playing tabletop roleplaying games?" "What attracted you enough to keep playing?" and "What made a favorite campaign special or different from other campaigns?" Other topics explored in the questions included character creation, players in the campaign, game structure, and emotional responses to game play experience. A full list of the prepared questions for this section can be found in Appendix B.

The next section of the interview included questions that delved into how participants have come to understand themselves in relation to gender and sexuality, without drawing explicit connection to tabletop roleplaying games. I spent time considering how to balance the questions so as to leave space for depthful responses without emotionally overwhelming the participants or myself. Because I anticipated that experiences around gender and sexuality might be difficult for this population to reflect on and share, I began this section of the interview by acknowledging this difficulty and by reminding participants that they were able to stop at any point during the interview, skip questions, or request a break. It was my hope that participants would not feel

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pressured to provide more information than was comfortable for them, and I stated explicitly that whatever they were able to contribute was appreciated and valued. Furthermore, I chose to include in the interview only two questions specifically asking participants to share negative experiences, one regarding their tabletop roleplaying experiences and one regarding their queer identities, and made the decision not to press for more details regarding these experiences, limiting myself to clarifying questions. Additionally, these two questions regarding negative experiences were followed by questions requesting participants to consider and share their positive experiences.

The first questions within the gender and sexuality section asked participants to share the labels they use for themselves and to share their definitions for those terms. This was an important addition to the survey questions because language is a tool with which we all have a different relationship. By asking participants to define the labels they use, it was my intention to avoid or minimize assumptions about participants due to differing use of language. Example questions included the following: "When and how did you come to understand yourself as [queer]?" "How have you navigated your [queer] identity and expressing that identity?" "How have you been able to connect with your [queer] identity or the [queer] community?" Again, these questions were designed to allow participants to draw their own connections between their gender and sexual identities and their tabletop roleplaying game experiences.

Only in the last section did I explicitly ask participants to consider how their tabletop roleplaying experiences and their gender and sexual identities might be related, though these questions may have been answered in earlier sections depending on how participants responded. Example questions included, "What has been your experience playing a character with a gender or sexual identity different from your own?" "How might your experiences with tabletop

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roleplaying games be different if/when you play with other [queer] people versus when you do not?" and "How have your roleplaying experiences impacted or been impacted by your gender and sexual identities?"

Once the interviews were completed, the audio recordings were transcribed using an online transcription service, and the transcripts reviewed for errors and de-identified. Then, I sent the transcripts to participants to allow them the opportunity to expand on anything or clarify responses. Participants were not obligated to provide comments on the transcripts, but all comments were considered during the analysis process if participants chose to submit them. As I considered the participants themselves to be the best authority on the meaning of their own words and stories, it was important to acquire their feedback whenever possible. A total of five participants provided feedback on the transcripts, which included making small line edits, clarifying details, or providing additional context for their initial responses. It has been my hope that participants feel accurately represented throughout this process.

Data Analysis

This study was an exploration of the ways in which the concepts of legibility, space, and play intersect with tabletop roleplaying experiences of gender and sexual minorities through the analysis of qualitative interviews. Cho and Lee (2014) suggested that grounded theory is best used when the aim of the research question is to develop explanatory theory for a phenomenon within a specific context and for a specific use, or to uncover a pattern of behavior. Charmaz (2006) argued that comparison is fundamental to grounded theory. It is through dialogue with the data that the researcher "[makes] fundamental processes explicit, [renders] hidden assumptions visible, and [gives] participants new insights" (p. 55). Therefore, the analysis was based in grounded theory and likewise utilized the constant comparative approach, which entailed the

analysis of data from the onset of collection rather than waiting until all interviews had been conducted. This approach allowed later interviews to be guided by themes emerging in previous interviews, strengthening the power of the interview process to uncover important and relevant experiences shared among or differentiating a sample.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) recommended the use of memos and diagrams throughout the analytic process, which they suggested help capture the thoughts of the researcher and "force the analyst to work with concepts rather than raw data" (p. 120). During the interviews, I took notes to capture connections I made across interviews, ideas for new questions, and quotes that I found surprising, beautifully phrased, or in direct opposition to other responses, either the current interviewee's earlier responses or another participant's. After the interviews, I read over my notes and synthesized or expanded on ideas in memos. This process helped to ensure that important insights were not lost and to identify possible codes and concepts that could be used to create explanatory diagrams. The memos also served to track any changes to questions asked during the interview process and the reasoning behind such changes. As the interviews were transcribed and re-read, new memos and notes were added during this process. Memos were an integral part of my qualitative approach and were used throughout data analysis.

Charmaz (2006) stated that "coding is more than a beginning; it shapes an analytic frame from which you build the analysis" (p. 45). As outlined by Charmaz, coding consisted of two parts: initial coding and focused coding. During initial coding, fragments of data were studied closely and analyzed for their significance in relation to the research questions. The codes established during this process were then condensed or streamlined, and their appropriateness evaluated as part of the focused coding process. Focused coding is used to "pinpoint and develop the most salient categories in large batches of data" (p. 46) and to define conceptual

relationships. The goal of combining categories and relationships formed through analysis of queer player experiences participating in tabletop roleplaying games was to establish, on a more general level, an understanding of how the concepts of legibility, space, and play relate to one another, and then more specifically, how queer players negotiate legibility or make sense of themselves within the game space.

As with quantitative data, qualitative data must establish the equivalent of the reliability and validity of the findings, their trustworthiness. Thus, the data analysis for this project utilized member checking and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing includes extensive discussion between a researcher and an impartial peer regarding the findings and the overall progress of the study. Spall (1998) stated that these discussions should include "issues related to preliminary data collection and initial analysis, as well as the next methodological steps and the concluding analysis" (p. 280). Peer debriefing utilizes co-workers and peers as sounding boards both to help with problem solving and ensure that interpretations are grounded in the data rather than personal biases of the researcher. Member-checking contributes to the credibility of the results by gathering participant perspectives on interpretations generated by the researcher. This validation method "addresses the co-constructed nature of knowledge by providing participants with the opportunity to engage with, and add to, interview and interpret data" (p. 1802). Like peer debriefing, member-checking helps to ensure that participant voices are not muddied or overpowered by researcher bias.

Member-Checking

As part of this project, research participants were provided the opportunity to clarify or comment on both the transcripts from their interviews and the associated interpretations included in the results write-up. Additionally, I relied on member-checking during the interview process

itself, sharing my summaries of what a participant had said and asking them whether my interpretations were accurate. The transcripts and select portions of my analysis and process models were shared via a Google Doc that allowed participants to leave comments or suggested edits, though some provided their feedback via email or other modes of communication. Three participants provided commentary regarding my analysis, none of which was contradictory to my interpretation, and primarily consisted of expanding on their initial responses by including additional details or examples.

Peer-Debriefing

Beyond my dissertation committee and my faculty supervisor, there were two individuals with whom I consulted regarding various aspects of the project. The colleague and close personal friend who was mentioned as having interviewed me above was an on-going source of support and feedback throughout this project. This study was largely inspired by our shared interests and experiences as queer individuals who enjoy tabletop roleplaying games (having played in three campaigns together), and our graduate experiences within similar fields. They made themselves available to listen while I clumsily tried to draw out and articulate the web of connections and relationships I was holding in my mind between my interviews, the ideas central to this study, and what I was seeing and experiencing elsewhere in the world. Their perspective and feedback were invaluable during this process. I regularly took notes and recorded some of our conversations, and they would occasionally outline or map out the ideas I shared with them in order to capture those ephemeral thoughts.

The second individual with whom I debriefed was both experienced with tabletop roleplaying games and a person of color, though did not identify themselves as queer. Additionally, they had knowledge of the field that I recognized as relevant to this study. Once it

became clear that I was likely not going to be able to include more interviews from queer people of color and that my final sample of participants would primarily be white, I reached out to a graduate peer to get their perspective on where considerations of race might be missing from my data and my analysis, as well as to provide their perspective on why my attempts at recruiting people of color were largely unsuccessful. Due to limits on their own time, we decided the most effective way to use our time would be to conduct a modified interview, paying specific attention to where their experiences may have diverged from the participants in my sample and how race may have played a factor in these differences. Additionally, they also agreed to read through and offer feedback later regarding my analysis of their interview and my participants' interviews.

Lastly, this study was also frequently discussed in the queer spaces that I occupied, with many individuals sharing interest in the project. These informal interactions with these queer groups, particularly one consisting of queer disabled members, were extremely helpful in clarifying language, providing nuance to my analysis, as well as highlighting potential implications and limitations of the project.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

In this study, I explored two research questions: 1) what do the experiences of queer players of tabletop roleplaying games reveal about the relations among the constructs of legibility, space, and play?; and 2) how do queer players negotiate legibility or make sense of queer identities in the context of their experiences with tabletop roleplaying games? To answer these questions, I examined how players made sense of their own play experiences and what conditions players associated with play they saw as encouraging or discouraging, paying particular attention to play involving their queer identities. Play is, by definition, intrinsically motivated and pleasure-focused, thus the findings I present also fall along this valence of what feels good to players, including consideration for what drew players to the space, what enticed them to return, and what they ultimately perceived themselves as getting out of the experience.

In this chapter, I explore the potent and powerful moments of pleasure, what I refer to as *the magic,* borrowing from one of the participant's words*,* experienced by players through their engagement with tabletop roleplaying games. I begin this discussion by demonstrating the salience of legibility throughout the stories and reflections shared by players regarding their tabletop roleplaying experiences and the pleasure they obtained through their engagement. Additionally, I establish the intimate connection between the concept of space and player perceptions of *the magic,* demonstrating that pleasure is in the experience of *crossing-over*, moving beyond perceived limitations and barriers and into spaces players associated with possibility and potential. Then, drawing on player accounts of these experiences, I identify five forces that constitute *the magic*, components that not only regulate the pleasure possible within the play space, but also maintain the threshold and bounds of the space. I also discuss what

players did within the space, or in constructing the space, that can be understood as cultivating these vital ingredients of play and pleasure.

Pleasure in Legibility

The player experiences explored in this section demonstrate that *legibility, or making sense,* was intimately connected with the pleasure of players, with *the magic* consisting of surprising moments of clarity and creation when meaning sprung forth in ways that could not be anticipated. Players found joy in being able to construct new understandings of themselves, others, and the worlds they occupy, and to pursue new possibilities. In this way, *the magic* was associated with being able to read and be read clearly, and being able to write their own stories, to stretch and expand outward toward the unknown, toward potential and possibility. The pleasure of players was associated with seeing and connecting to others, coming into new realizations about themselves, and being able to explore and interact with new possibilities. This is what I consider to be the central phenomenon of the grounded theory I constructed through analyzing my data.

I begin by illustrating with quotes from my participants examples of when they were describing the moments of clarity and of joy they derived from tabletop roleplaying games. As I do so, I use the pronouns that each participant told me they preferred including the pronouns they used when describing a particular character they played, although my tendency is to default to using "they/them." Seega stated that tabletop roleplaying games presented opportunities to "get to know people in ways that are really unique and that are hard to find elsewhere," also reporting that they had been able "to express my queer identity to my partner while playing with him in ways that I don't otherwise have means to." Additionally, for Seega, *the magic* was in the "terrifying," yet "real" moments where "everything is on the table," and everyone is connected

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deeply with the story and each other. For example, Morgan shared that roleplaying allowed them to see new "facets" of their friends through the opportunity to "spend time as other people, as our different characters." For Marlowe, *the magic* was associated with that "sense of connection, that sense of shared wavelength" where players are "feeding off one another's energies," sharing that the best moments for them were when "some light goes off and some connection is made" that allows them to "see different facets of my friends" that they would never get the opportunity to see outside of tabletop roleplaying. Marlowe shared a particular favorite point in play, which they described as a "dynamic and connecting moment, [...] a very genuine and personal moment." Likewise, Ro shared that being "able to connect to somebody else" who was "deeply connected to the stories in the same way" made all the difference to their roleplaying experiences. *The magic* was in being afforded opportunities to see each other clearly and in ways that were not accessible outside of their gaming experiences.

The main attraction of tabletop roleplaying games for Gordon was "fantasy, [...] imagination and getting to do things that were impossible in the real world." Their pleasure was rooted in "getting to play inside worlds I enjoy." Ro shared being "drawn to any story that starts to unfold, that shows me what is possible, what is possible for that character and ultimately what is possible for people to do." Ro felt pleasure in tabletop roleplaying when they "could see that a story had potential" and could feel this "sense of power" within it. They associated this power with moments when they "could envision that character's hopes and dreams and see myself through that character's eyes" and when the space would open up and they were able to "interact with the world" and "try things out and explore." Faebig shared that "seeing is a good word" to describe the best parts of the game, stating that the game "lets you put out parts of yourself, and try it out, and then you can kind of gauge the reaction of other people. [...] And then they jump

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off of that and then suddenly you're like, okay, I feel comfortable to do that more, you know."
Faebig discussed this feeling of being seen as liberating, particularly in regards to their queer
identity, stating that by "giving space for that in the game, we give permission to do that in our
own lives." Likewise, Galad shared excitement in moments when they were doing something
with their character and then had this realization that they could do that same thing in their own
life, "I can literally do whatever I want with my own self."

In noting that "this theater of the imagination sort of game [...] became testing grounds
for ways of self-conception and self-address," Marlowe recounted that their best experiences
with tabletop roleplaying were "moments of self-creation" when they were "playing around with
something and kind of realized that this works and this feels good." Likewise, Galad felt joy in
moments "when I'm able to respond in the moment dynamically as my character," "anytime that
I've felt like I really connected with my character, like I've developed something in my character
that actually makes sense" and feels "true to what my character thinks." Ro stated that tabletop
roleplaying games "can show us exactly what reality is through pure fiction," sharing that their
"greatest joy of gaming" was "all the possibilities of imagination shared with others, that the
truth that can be evoked, not just inside my own head but through the collaboration with other
creative people."

For Ryan, the improvisational and collaborative elements of tabletop roleplaying games
led to stories "so different from every other real life experience I've had and also every other
book I've ever tried to read, [...] from a story that I would choose to sit down and write, because
you have to react in the moment, [...] to think on your feet and [...] work with other people in
order to get where you want to go." Ryan shared that because "it's not a story I'm familiar with
[...] I'm always being surprised by it and being forced to think about it." For Ryan, the

unanticipated directions a story could unfold were central to his overall pleasure of the game. For Caitlin, their enjoyment of tabletop roleplaying games was associated with the opportunity to express themselves in ways not possible in more planned or structured mediums like drawing. Caitlin felt as though tabletop roleplaying games were a more "natural way to express yourself" because "it's just like in the moment, you're not really thinking [...] you just do it. You just get in that head space and you just say things." For Morgan, one of the pleasures in roleplay was being able to "stretch" out toward possibilities, to "stretch my acting ability, stretch my imagination" and engage in unfamiliar experiences, "the stranger the better."

Players reported that *the magic* occurred in moments of play, of creating fictional stories and engaging in imaginary circumstances that unexpectedly struck a chord and resonated deeply within players. *The magic* opened up space for players to experiment and explore and provided new perspectives allowing players to see possibility and potential where they had not before. This section also demonstrates that for players, the collaborative and improvisational aspects of gameplay led to the more dynamic experiences and unanticipated outcomes they associated with *the magic,* and were deeply important to the sense players were able to make within the space.

Setting the Stage

The previous section discussed how legibility was tied to the pleasure experienced by players, and related this pleasure to the clarity and creation associated with the meaning-making process happening through deep and immersive play. In this section, I discuss the conditions that set the stage for *the magic* to occur. Through players' accounts of their tabletop roleplaying experiences, I determined five key components that players associated with their most pleasurable and memorable moments of play: connection, dynamism, alignment, tension and balance. These forces were shown to be instrumental in not only regulating the pleasure

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experienced by players, but also in establishing and maintaining the integrity of the play space and its immersive threshold. The following sections discuss each component, with player accounts used to inform each component, and provide examples of what players recounted perceiving or doing in the space that contributed to the presence of these components.

Connection

Connection refers to establishing a link or bond that facilitates access or passage between elements that have been brought together into a shared space, which for players included emotional, physical, and imaginative spaces. Players spoke about connection to other players, characters, and the game world itself. It is important to note that the interview questions used to generate these responses did not refer to space, which reinforces the salience of this concept for players. Table 3 shows examples of the language used by players that inform this concept of connection and shared space.

Table 3

Player Language Illustrating the Concept of Connection

Connection	"connected to that [character]," "not terribly connected to the setting," "connecting to one another" (Ro) "some light goes off and a connection is made" (Marlowe) "I related to those characters," "not connected to my character," "my character is not connecting to [the setting]" (Galad) "People I'm really connected with" (Ryan)
Shared Space	"engaged in that space" "all in that space" (Ro) "space with other people," "You're all in the space that you're sharing" (Galad) "in a similar energetic space," "shared wavelength of energy and enthusiasm," "all thinking in a similar space," "a different energy level than someone else" (Marlowe) "It's presence," "They're all present" (Marlowe)
Entry	"when you get into it," "into the world" (Elliot)

Dynamism

Dynamism refers to the extent to which a space stimulates or makes change possible through the interplay of various forces acting within or on the space (e.g., players, characters, game mechanics, etc.). Players noted dynamism in their appreciation for when the space was open to possibility and allowed change to unfold in ways that were unexpected, unpredictable, unrestricted, unforced, and unique to the particular convergence of elements present within the space. This concept was also informed by moments in gameplay that players described as taking on a life of their own, using words like "natural," "organic," and "real." The feeling of being able to move or react freely was also strongly linked to this concept.

Table 4

Player Language Illustrating the Concept of Dynamism

Possibility and Potential	"the possibility for that to unfold" (Ro) "gives a possibility," "all the things that I wish were possible" (Galad)
Complexity and unpredictability	"unpredictability," "having to deal with the consequences of unexpected outcomes" (Ro) "where we made surprising narrative decisions" (Marlowe) "you could not possibly have imagined"
Ability to move and respond freely	"locked in that space" (Ro) "doesn't feel like three characters locked in a room" (Marlowe) "I just stay stuck" (Galad) "able to respond in the moment" (Galad)
Organic, natural, real	"it kind of grew organically" (Morgan) "It's organic, it's natural" (Marlowe) "I tend to grow my characters' personalities as they go. [...] I tend to let them grow with the campaign " (Morgan) "had great chemistry" (Marlowe)

Alignment

The concept of alignment refers to an arrangement of elements in a consistent direction or pattern within a space that produces the sense of a cohesive collection or shared purpose. Alignment is a particularly salient feature in many tabletop roleplaying experiences and references the moral and ethical outlook ascribed to characters and used by players to help determine the consistency and appropriateness of various actions possible to characters during gameplay. Player accounts that inform the concept of alignment referred to the extent to which players perceived their or their characters' goals, perspectives, interests, and skills as meshing with other elements in the space. Players also mentioned occasional conflict between choosing actions that better aligned with their characters and what would be most fun for the group, illustrating how actions can facilitate alignment in one respect while diminishing alignment in other regards. An interesting aspect of alignment mentioned by only one player is the ability to focus, concentrate, or direct attention toward the game itself, with the player noting difficulty in playing games online in virtual settings that afforded too many distractions. This example, however, underscores that intentional effort is required to maintain alignment.

Table 5

Player Language Illustrating the Concept of Alignment

Alignment/Shared Direction	• "going off on tangents" (June) • "decided that he was gonna wander away from everyone else" (Kay) • "I wasn't acting in alignment with my character" (Galad) • "all on board or exploring the story in that way" (Ro)
Shared goals/priorities	• "doing my best to help my campaign" (Kay) • "somebody who clearly doesn't want to be playing, but still is for whatever reason" (Caitlin) • "A reason to be with your team" (Gordon)

Balance

Balance refers to the extent to which elements within the space are proportional to the needs or purpose of the space, and is necessary in order to avoid a tipping point that leads to the space falling apart. Players discussed the need for balance across different spheres of their tabletop roleplaying experiences, such as player and character attributes, the different elements involved (i.e., game mechanics, narrative building, and socializing), distribution of power, and the amount of time and energy players direct toward the game space in comparison to other responsibilities or commitments elsewhere. For example, players discussed balancing the skills and abilities of characters with the challenges they faced in the game world.

Table 6

Player Language Illustrating the Concept of Balance

Players	• "A balance of people is always fun" (Katherine) • "Too many people to balance" (Faebig)
Party	• "It was a very good balance", "a wonderful mix" (Marlowe) • "We want to well-balance this" (Ryan) • "Try to have a balanced party", "none of us is being the main character" (Amy)
Characters	• "I tried to build my character a little bit more balanced" (Kay)
Game, Story, Social	• "Good balance between character motivations and player fun" (Faebig) • "There's a balance," "you have to balance those" (Gordon)
Game world, game space, outside world	• "It was a little too much to balance" (Seega) • "I can also pull back when I don't have the energy to engage" (Ryan)
Power and control	• "distributed authority," "I didn't have complete authority" (Alex)

Tension

Tension refers to the extent to which the boundaries of the space or the elements within it are being stretched and implies a buildup of pressure or energy that players seek to resolve. This pressure is what drives the story forward. Tension in the game was marked by moments when players were unsure of what the outcome of an action might be, were anticipating possible outcomes, or were expending resources toward achieving a specific outcome. Players referred to tension as salient in their identification with their characters and their desire for those characters not to die, a game outcome universally decried. Tension was also felt in moments when DMs had developed what they hoped would be a compelling story complication for the players in their campaign. Similarly, players experienced tension when facing challenging circumstances or experimenting in ways that pushed at the bounds of their comfort.

Table 7

Player Language Illustrating the Concept of Tension

Resolution of arc	• "There's this tension that builds" (Seega) • "we're in the last stretch" (June)
Skills and abilities	• "Allow me to stretch" (Morgan)
Characters/ Relationships	• "Antagonistic relationships" (Seega) • "Antithetical to each other, the complete opposites," "character animosity" (Faebig) • "A little uptight" (June)
Relax	• "Relax" "it's harder to loosen up" (Kay) • "They can come and relax" (Morgan) • "I can sort of relax" (Katherine) • "not hold onto them so tightly" (Faebig)

Interdependence Among the Components

As has been established, *the magic* refers to the special moments of play that players associated with the most pleasure and enjoyment, and seemed to be made possible through the

interplay of the five key components: connection, dynamism, alignment, balance, and tension. Like water running through pipes, play requires establishing and maintaining a connection point or bridge between each space. Sufficient alignment of the pipes is necessary for establishing each connection point and facilitating unrestricted flow and movement (dynamism) between elements in a complex system of give and take (balance). Appropriate pressure (or tension) is also needed to propel the water forward without bursting pipes or allowing leach-in of harmful elements. However, water is also flowing into the system from multiple sources with varying levels of reliability, and the pipes are of different sizes, occasionally springing a leak (also dynamism). The system requires constant attention and small adjustments to maintain or improve the flow, but there are brief and unexpected moments when chaos and order converge and the system drives itself, resulting in *the magic*.

In a similar fashion, players construct, join, and alter spaces to help facilitate their play experiences. The play space is a complex system in a constant state of change that either supports or hinders *the magic* from happening. Although elements shift within the space in ways that can neither be predicted nor controlled, including the players themselves, players also make intentional adjustments to regulate the flow and stabilize the system in ways that increase the likelihood for *the magic* to occur. The negotiation of legibility was vital both in establishing connections to sources of pleasure and in the functioning of the play system itself.

Through consideration of player accounts of their tabletop roleplaying experiences, this section illustrates how player interaction or anticipated interaction with various elements in the space, such as other players or characters, influenced and was influenced by player perceptions of legibility. Furthermore, the player experiences I describe next also demonstrate the significant

crossover among the five forces constituting *the magic*: connection, alignment, dynamism, balance, and tension.

Interaction with Players

Players shared that experiences of belonging, acceptance, validation, appreciation, and accommodation were all important contributors to their overall perceptions of safety and comfort within the space and their willingness to take risks and be vulnerable, all important attributes for depthful play.

Belonging. For Caitlin, playing with people she knew well was an important element in her most enjoyable roleplaying experiences, sharing that "there's just something about it where [...] everybody's gonna be in it for each other." Kay shared that "playing can be complicated" if they do not know the other players well, noting that it can make it "harder to loosen up, harder to make sure that the DM is hearing me [...], harder to have a really good time" because they are "trying to get to know people, but trying not to step on people's toes." Alex associated their more enjoyable roleplaying experiences with groups where they "had that kind of bond" with other players, sharing as examples close friends and other autistic individuals. June's accounts also supported the importance of playing with individuals with shared experiences or identities, noting that because their social circles primarily consisted of "women and gay people," even in situations where the players are unfamiliar, "you can usually go in knowing that you can trust them." These experiences illustrate how familiarity impacted the desire of players to engage. In contrast, Alex discussed the difficulty of "integrating" into a campaign with a "cis-hetero guy kind of environment" and a "vibe there that made me cautious."

Similarly, despite describing their tabletop roleplaying experiences during this time as "generally great fun," Morgan shared that as a Navy corpsman, they would not have felt

"comfortable enough to take the chance" of playing a woman due to their perceptions of the culture. Although Morgan acknowledged the possibility that they may have been "maligning" the people they gamed with and that "they may have accepted it perfectly," Morgan served in the Navy "even before don't ask, don't tell," stating that "if that sort of thing comes out and becomes knowledge back then, [...] if anybody even thought that you were gay, you would be investigated and possibly discharged." Morgan clarified that at the time, "gay" was used as a "catch all term" for anybody "that wasn't strictly cis het."

Morgan also shared positive experiences playing as a teenager with "friends that I really cared about" and by whom "I felt very accepted." However, Morgan also stated that "bar none the best gaming group" with whom they had played was "90%" queer and had "all met in the queer community," which for Morgan made the game better because "we were all already quite able to be honest and be ourselves with each other." The presence of the players from Morgan's campaign in queer spaces was associated with their willingness to be vulnerable and take risks with each other and contributed to Morgan feeling "super comfortable" leaning into, or taking risks with, their roleplaying, having noted that "it's easier for me to get into character with this group and do the funny voices and everything else than it ever has been." Although they had not engaged in tabletop roleplaying games with groups of primarily queer individuals, Alex surmised that in doing so they might "feel more comfortable [...] getting more into the roleplaying side of it," having stated earlier in the interview that it was "easier to let my guard down" and be more expressive with players to whom they felt more connected. This strongly mirrors Morgan's experiences in their primarily queer campaign.

Although Elliot shared that tabletop roleplaying games "[are] always a fun thing," Elliot felt as though their process of coming into themselves as non-binary had created distance

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between them and their "old friends" and felt as if they had "grown apart slightly." Elliot associated the "very cis male space" with "crude" humor that did not align with their own perspectives as a queer individual and their disinterest in brash displays of masculinity. They shared feeling "uncomfortable in these scenarios" and a desire to not be there during these "pits of roleplaying." Elliot was also unwilling to push back against these moments in gameplay, sharing discomfort in being "the lone voice in the room." Although Elliot did not describe the dynamic of the group as "unfriendly," there also was not a system in place to voice concerns. Furthermore, whereas Elliot had shared their bisexuality with the group, they had not yet done so with their non-binary identity. These experiences led them to feel "boxed in," uncomfortable, and isolated, which diminished their confidence and desire to "really delve into a character's identity" and engage other elements of the space in deep and playful ways. Ultimately, Elliot felt as though they had not played tabletop roleplaying games to their "full potential," and that they might feel more comfortable taking risks with their roleplay "in a space with all other kinds of queer players."

Acceptance. Ro extended their appreciation for acceptance to their roleplaying experiences, stating their preference to play with individuals "who are not judgmental or creating value judgments of how other people imagine a scene or a character for that matter." In discussing a favored campaign, Galad attributed the space with a "shared sense of non-judgment, in the sense that [...] no one's going to be judging me [...] It's just like acceptance of other people." In referencing the improvisational element of roleplay, Marlowe asserted that "you're supposed to be able to fall on your face and be totally cozy with it, and you do best with people that you can do that with." Seega shared having difficulty being vulnerable and playing with straight people due to a projected sense of judgment, stating that even without evidence to

"suggest that they're being judgmental," the fear remained "that they are and they will judge you."

Ro associated the experience of being judged with feeling unsafe to roleplay, the consequence of which is "just kind of silencing myself." In contrast, Morgan reported that "finding a group of friends, a lot of them just like me, who accept me unconditionally for who and what I am" helped grow their own self-acceptance. Their ability to accept and embrace their own queer identity and "feminine side [...] made it easier to do things like other characters, different voices, acting basically. It made me less self-conscious about it." Whereas Ro associated judgment with silence, Morgan associated acceptance with finding their voice.

For Faebig, the deep acceptance they experienced playing with other queer players was associated with feeling "like I could be myself, [...] like I could engage as this character because I felt really safe to do that. [...] I could be as dumb as I wanted to and it wasn't a big deal." Furthermore, Faebig noted that playing with other queer people "seemed to really open up and give me space to breathe," which allowed them to lean into aspects of their queer identity they had never been "very open or out" prior to their tabletop roleplaying experiences. Being around others who understood the queer experience was associated with opening up space to be as you are, because queer people, as suggested by Seega, "understand what you're going through. They get it, and you don't have to spend time explaining it." Faebig further supported this sentiment in their acknowledgement that even queer people "make assumptions about other people, but we understand the importance of getting it right when we can and fixing it when we don't. If you're cis, it's a privilege, you don't have to think about your gender or how you fit in or don't fit in."

Ro stated that "because of who I am and the fact that I don't want to be regularly misgendered," they felt "much safer in queer or queer friendly spaces," noting that not

understanding someone's gender is rarely an issue in queer spaces "because, honestly, who the fuck cares?" They went on to suggest that what matters is "you are a person" and whether "my nervous system is telling me you're a safe person to be around." In contrast to a perceived tendency of cis-het individuals to make value judgments and a reluctance to accept what they do not understand, Ro perceived queer people as being able to accept others without requiring that they lay out the intricacies of their identities. These excerpts introduced an association between additional labor and the ability to exist as queer in heteronormative contexts. Through reducing the imperative to explain themselves and an increased willingness for individuals to entertain the unknown, queer spaces were associated with the ability for players to exist comfortably as themselves.

Appreciation and Accommodation. Players found it important to have experiences where they perceived others as valuing their presence, which players associated with showing appreciation and care for their lived experiences, as well as adapting the space around their needs and interests. For Wyn, who described himself as an "eternal GM," what makes the game special as a player is "when it feels like my choices really did matter. Like when I can kind of see a little bit of a twinkle of the GM's eye, like, Okay, I didn't think of that. I have to change some things." Rather than feeling "railroaded into things," Wyn appreciated when the GM would "really let the story flow from what the character's choices were." For Caitlin, what made a particular campaign special was the opportunity to "explore an actual character arc," which she attributed to her DM's intentional efforts to provide each character with "screen time" through inclusion of side stories alongside the main narrative. Ultimately, she felt the "biggest difference" between feeling engaged in a campaign or not was the DM "putting in the effort to personalize it." Similarly, Kay felt as though their DM's "attention to each player and each player's character

was basically helping us become more invested in the campaign because we each had our specific motivation." Seega described a frustrating situation transitioning an explicitly queer campaign they had been leading to another DM due to limited capacity to lead it herself. Seega shared that it was important to the other queer players involved to follow through on the queer storylines they all had already established with their queer characters. However, the new DM, who notably did not belong to the queer community, pushed forward with a storyline more in line with his own interests, which was indicative to Seega of "either a lack of attention or a lack of caring."

Marlowe shared experiences playing in a campaign with "the guys you kind of think of stereotypically when you think of cis straight white RPG players," and noted the players were "hesitant to accept and warm up to correction" regarding their use of they/them and he/him pronouns. Marlowe shared that with "a certain type of person, there's this kind of weighing what's worth fighting about and what isn't." Marlowe figured that because they were only meeting with these people "every couple of weeks for three hours," they could deal with it, but instead "it became increasingly more, not hostile, but antagonistic [...] and I didn't really want to be involved with those people."

While acknowledging that they liked and were friends with the group of "guys" with whom they typically played, Kay shared experiences similar to Marlowe's, noting that "not all of them are necessarily super respectful of pronouns or sensitive or even pay attention." Because their "main goal of D&D is to have fun" and stopping game play to reinforce correct pronoun usage "would not be a fun time for everyone," Kay initially struggled to find a solution that would take into consideration this balance of player needs. However, Kay stated that if they were to DM again, they would include a conversation at the beginning of the campaign confirming

everyone's pronouns and setting the expectation that players do their best to distinguish the pronouns of players from their characters.' Additionally, upon the realization that each of their campaigns had been led by a "cis white dude," Kay reported an interest in playing with a more diverse group of players, thinking that playing with "more queer people, trans people, [and] women" would change the "dynamic" and make it "easier for everyone's voice to be heard."

Ro drew a connection between recruiting from queer spaces and their ability to play in the ways most enjoyable to them. The "shared history or approach" Ro perceived among other queer players better aligned with the types of stories and experiences they sought in their campaigns, sharing a disinterest in and personal boundaries around engaging with players "stuck in this very binary and often misogynistic space of how a story should be played out." For both Seega and Ro, their queerness was integral to the types of stories they were interested in exploring and required that they play with other individuals who appreciated its importance. By actively seeking out other queer players and establishing clear boundaries for themselves, both Ro and Kay demonstrate examples of how players accommodate their own needs, while also establishing safe space for others.

Players appreciated efforts within the space to accommodate needs in ways that allowed them to engage comfortably and contribute meaningfully. Ryan shared that the DM from a favorite campaign was particularly skilled at introducing "different mechanics in different aspects of the story to appeal to each player." As an example, Ryan described a player in the campaign who had difficulty speaking up in large groups. In response, the DM gave the player "some sort of weird warlock power" and a task connected with one of the "current mysteries" of the narrative. The introduction of this mechanic allowed the player to "interact with the team...in a way that's in-character" without "being forced to talk and interact in the same way." Not only

did the DM accommodate this player's discomfort by adapting the system, they did so in a way that added value to the entire campaign and ensured that the player's contributions were meaningful to the overall story. Ryan also suggested that the ability of their "team" to be "adaptive like that" was made easier over time as players grew to "know each other a little bit more" and better understood "what kind of things everybody wanted."

Morgan suggested that it was "just as important" to understand what kinds of experiences were deeply uncomfortable or triggering for players. For example, one of the boundaries Morgan made clear they would never cross as a DM was including "a rape scene of an NPC [non-player character] or one of the player characters," stating that "consent is a big thing in my social circle," which they described as queer members of the BDSM and kink communities. Morgan noted consent being so prominent that a book was actually released providing advice and tools for how to "deal with people's sensitivities in gaming," such as a checklist with questions to ask players prior to the start of the game. In introducing the Veils and Lines system Simon used at the start of each of their campaigns, *veils* were described as "themes that players are okay with happening in the game, but we don't want to go into descriptions of them," and *lines* as "things that might trigger people that we just do not have in the game at all." Rape and child abuse were explicitly excluded from his campaigns. Simon's decision to incorporate the Veils and Lines system into his campaigns stemmed from experiences in which he had "hurt people by not knowing about this," and his desire to "make everybody feel safe."

Whereas rape and child abuse were fairly standard boundaries for players who mentioned incorporating these types of systems, players shared differing opinions about the existence of systemic oppression, like homophobia, into their games. Some players appreciated opportunities in game to work through conflict or explore more complex narratives involving these issues,

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whereas others noted preferences for imagining and playing in idealized spaces where gender and the gender of sexual partners was not a source for discrimination.

Summary. It was important for players to feel as if they were on the same page with others in the space, feeling more connected to and trusting of individuals with whom they perceived a common bond. Players also shared a need for understanding and acceptance, as well as care and appreciation. Gordon provided an excellent summary in stating the following:

> Play, for me, takes place within a space of understanding with another person, that we
> have, or at least we can both access, a common or shared frame of reference, [...] a shared
> base of knowledge on some level. [...] And I think an ability to exchange defensiveness
> for openness, and the understanding that openness doesn't result in hurt, it doesn't result
> in violence or anything like that."

As Gordon suggested, players felt as though play required that they be open with each other, and that they be able to trust the people around them to treat their vulnerabilities with care.

Interaction with Characters

Whereas the last section focused on interactions between players, this section considers how the legibility was interwoven into player accounts regarding their interactions with characters, and how these interactions relate to the five core components of *the magic.*

Although every player commented to some degree on the importance of their interactions with other players to their overall enjoyment of the game, with many stating the social aspect as one of their primary motivations, players talked far less about their engagement with their characters in the game world. However, for some players, their ability to connect with their character and immerse themselves in the game world through their character was significant to their play experiences. Players discussed how characters provide opportunities to explore

possibilities, including queer identities, and how strain disrupted connection to the immersive play space.

Holding on Too Tightly. Many players noted that over time their characters often ended up much different than they had intended. Kay described their initial character as "me, but in fantasyland" or "what I wanted to be in fantasyland." Because all of their "[dice] rolls were garbage," Kay's character, designed to be an agile elven ranger, instead became "the clumsiest elf," working with a wolf who somehow was "better at climbing ladders than she was." Kay shared that "every time there was a ranger specific thing that needed to be done, [the character] would try and would fail miserably." Instead of becoming frustrated with the divergence of who they thought this character would be, Kay was instead able to adapt and move forward. In a similar vein, Galad suggested that "trying overly hard" to act in alignment with their character or trying to force an outcome could cause them to feel "stuck" and lead characters into becoming an unwanted "archetype of themselves." Galad and Kay's accounts suggested that holding on too tightly to expectations could feel constraining and close off opportunities.

Straining. Although Faebig reported that they thoroughly enjoyed their first campaign and loved their first character, they "had a hard time connecting to him [...] and really understanding his motivations and stuff," sharing that "it just felt really flat." As a self-professed "talker," Faebig felt constrained by their character's low charisma score, finding it difficult to engage with other characters or move the story along. In contrast, Faebig stated that they "really jive" and "felt in a groove" with their current character, which they attributed to having "a better sense of how to build the character and what I wanted from them." Faebig associated their difficulty connecting to their first character with both being a first time player learning the rules

of a complex game and roleplaying a character with personality traits too different from their own.

Although they "could not physically relate," Galad found unexpected ease and enjoyment playing a character with "incredibly high agility and really decent strength to go along with it." They shared feeling powerful, "like God running around" with two swords. For Galad, this character was associated with feeling uninhibited and free. In contrast, Galad's moments of frustration were associated with "dissonance" between themselves and their characters, using as an example a situation where they made a decision they felt was not "acting in alignment" with their character and that led to severe consequences in-game. Galad felt their response was more indicative of their own stress and anxiety regarding the circumstances of the game, describing themselves in the moment as "feeling really frantic" and thrown "way off guard" due to intimidation related to playing a character they considered "way smarter than me" and their own difficulty responding to improvised dialogue posed by the DM.

Galad's heightened negative emotions associated with their roleplaying ability pulled attention away from their character, causing them to feel disconnected. This example from Galad illustrates how players can experience difficulty forming connections with characters when they perceive their abilities as being overly strained by the effort. Furthermore, Galad's experiences suggested that some character attributes and abilities were more closely tied to the abilities of the player. For example, although the physical actions of characters are typically narrated and their success determined through dice rolls, their speech and cognitive ability are more often influenced by the improvised acting, problem-solving, and decision-making of the player. Therefore, players may perceive their own abilities as constraining the potential of the story and their character within it.

Transgressing. Gordon described a roleplaying game where "acting up" by female fighter pilots in the Russian military, such as "distilling your own vodka" and "affairs with whoever," was rewarded through game mechanics that provided players with needed bonus points that increased their chance of success during missions. Similarly, Gordon shared enjoyment playing characters that "very much had beliefs that I don't have." As an example, Gordon described a character's belief that because the sun moved so slowly across the sky and travelled from one side of the world to the other in the span of a day, his party, who would be walking faster than that, should be able to travel anywhere in the world in less time. For Gordon, "messing around with that" and having to deal with the consequences of those erroneous beliefs was described as "a ton of fun." Having earlier mentioned playing a trickster type character that regularly subverted authority by "playing the fool" himself, Gordon stated, "Just as it's fun to be the trickster, it's also fun to be guileless and to be completely sort of open and wide-eyed at things." The "silliness" of these transgressive character types, through their conflict with the established order, opened up "possible avenues" for Gordon to have experiences that he would not have had otherwise.

Exploring Queer Identity. For many players, tabletop roleplaying games presented them with opportunities to stretch out and explore gender and sexuality in ways they felt were not possible in their day-to-day lives. For example, Morgan shared that around 16 or 17, when they began "experimenting with gender identity for the very first time," they "would occasionally [...] play a female character," stating that tabletop roleplaying "was another way for me to kind of explore that part of myself." Other players also shared experiences where before coming into their understandings of themselves as queer, they had played characters that they now felt were connected to that process. For example, Elliot described playing "quite an effeminate character"

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with few "traditional masculine traits," and though at the time they "didn't think of them as non-binary," they still felt "subconsciously something was going on." Alex also associated being drawn to "strong female characters" with their journey toward gender nonconformity. However, some players did not initially feel comfortable engaging in even this type of experimentation.

Marlowe explained first entering into tabletop roleplaying at a point where they had "basically no awareness of what it was to be transgender," knowing only that they "resonated more with stories with male characters" and found it easier to connect with male roles, their habitual pursuit of which became an expected eccentricity amongst their friends. Despite this reputation, Marlowe shared being nervous about roleplaying "being much more personal" than acting or videogames and feeling like "it was me in that role," which for them meant an expectation of playing a female character and a perception that it would be "weird" to do otherwise. Perceptions of greater intimacy and overlap between character and player increased the initial sense of risk Marlowe associated with playing a male character, highlighting an underlying belief that to do so under these conditions would transgress the bounds of social acceptability.

Despite feeling "super cozy" with all of the players at the table, Marlowe described themselves playing a female character in their first campaign as "very, very quiet" and not participating much, which was considered strangely out of character. Marlowe attributed their subdued presence in their first campaign with "a bunch of anxiety over [...] gender oriented things," specifically "doing or saying the wrong thing" as the only female-assigned person at the table playing the only female character. This anxiety was related to both "weird pressure expectations" related to female gamer stereotypes and their growing dissociation from female identification. Marlowe's discomfort and anxiety around female-identification and performance

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was mirrored in their experiences playing a female character, and like Galad, this strain acted as a barrier to their ability to connect to their character and feel immersed in the space.

In contrast, Marlowe's "first self-insert character," described as "very, very boisterous," "a giant ham, a giant Prima Donna" and as taking "a whole bunch of care in his appearance," was perceived as being "much easier to make a driving force in narrative" and "to interact with NPCs [...] and with the other player characters." At the height of their outward attempts at being "the het-ist, cis-ist lady there ever was," Marlowe was playing this "male character who had a lot easier time with social interaction and with making active direction in his life than I absolutely did," with Marlowe ultimately stating that the character was "the person that I kind of needed and wanted to be" in ways they could "never have admitted at the time or probably wouldn't even have been able to think of at the time." Since that first male character, Marlowe shared that they typically come away from the character creation process "with a kind of effeminate weird-looking cisgender or trans masculine-leaning person [...] very close to my own conception of a pretty boy." Marlowe's characters also tended to include subcultural elements of goth, metal, and punk, arenas where they indicated "success experimenting with gender and sexual performance." These three subcultures associated with "feminine-looking men," along with tabletop roleplaying games, represented sites where Marlowe, as an AFAB [assigned-female at birth] individual, could "get away with" pursuing masculine forms of gender expression without arousing suspicion of their queerness. Furthermore, these different spheres worked in concert, with Marlowe using the subcultures to inform the design of their masculine characters, and their characters to explore and test out these new forms of masculinity. Marlowe drew a strong connection between the ease and enjoyment associated with playing their first male character and their own eventual identification as a "transmasculine pretty boy."

Kay shared intentionally using a male character to explore a growing awareness of themselves as gender fluid and to consider actively their own connection to masculinity. For Kay, playing a male character presented an "opportunity to be a different gender […] than people perceive me as. However, describing this first experience as an "unsuccessful attempt," Kay expressed experiencing frustration when their male character was consistently referred to with feminine pronouns and found it upsetting to try "to use D&D to play with gender and to play as a boy, but then not getting that acknowledged or really respected by the other players." Kay attributed this in part to the lack of visual representation within tabletop roleplaying games that makes it difficult for players to differentiate players from their characters, having stated earlier in the interview, "you can say what your character looks like all day, but [...] there isn't always something that people can see to identify with your character's chosen appearance. Even if you draw a picture [...] they don't necessarily think about that. They think about you and what you look like and how you're speaking about your character." The use of feminine pronouns by other players for Kay's character was indicative of their own perceptions of Kay as a woman, and although Kay was still using she/her pronouns at the time, the conflation of player-character identity was jarring and disrupted Kay's ability to stay immersed in the game world and cultivate through their character a meaningful connection to masculinity.

For many players, their ability to connect deeply with their characters and the game world was dependent on the level of strain involved with maintaining the integrity of the characters and their ability and willingness to explore new possibilities safely.

Connecting the Dots

The examples provided in the previous sections regarding the engagement of players with other elements in the space demonstrate the interdependence among the five components

regulating the pleasure players experienced in the play space. These examples also illustrate how legibility influences and is influenced by the tabletop roleplaying experiences of players. This section will summarize the interplay among these components and their relationships with the broader concepts of interest: legibility, space, and play.

Forming *connections* that facilitate access to *the magic* required that players be open and honest about who they were, a process entailing varying levels of risk depending on the context. *Tension* was created when players took risks or entered into situations with unknown outcomes, such as choosing to disclose queer identities, "doing funny voices," or trying on a new class of character. Safety, associated with maintaining boundaries, could also be understood along a spectrum of tension — too much tension and the rubber band snaps. This applied to both personal boundaries and the boundaries holding the game space intact. In this study, players noted instances when maintaining personal boundaries felt in conflict with maintaining the immersive experience for other players, while also demonstrating that disruption to personal boundaries compromised their ability or desire to maintain their presence within the space. This extended to the relationships between players and their characters.

Thus, striking a balance between the needs of players and other elements was important to maintaining the bounds of the space. Players sought to minimize the risk of this breakdown in boundaries by entering spaces more aligned with their own identities, interests, and experiences, where players perceived an increased likelihood that their boundaries would be respected or maintained. Although this applied to physical spaces, such as those occupied by queer individuals, it also applied to the characters players occupied and their perceptions regarding their ability to establish and maintain the integrity of their characters. Establishing this base level of safety, supported through affirming experiences in the space, increased confidence in players

to move in ways that felt natural and which were important to their willingness and ability to connect deeply with other elements in the space.

In contrast to queer spaces, cis-hetero spaces were associated with a sense of struggle against perceived *barriers*, as illustrated by feeling "boxed-in." Deep connection and immersion was *obstructed* in situations where players had first to clear out space for themselves to be seen clearly and to exist comfortably. This process required time and effort that could otherwise be directed toward actually playing the game. Furthermore, distorted versions of reality, such as projecting onto straight people judgment that might not be there or judging their own abilities, limited what players were able to see as possible in the space. When these barriers were eliminated, indicating increased *dynamism* within the space, queer players perceived greater potential for pursuing depthful play. Ultimately, establishing safety and comfort among players was foundational to their engagement.

The Impact

The previous section discussed the interrelations between legibility and the five components needed to set the stage for *the magic*, particularly demonstrating how safety and comfort were foundational to the ability of players to immerse themselves in the game space. Players needed to feel as though their full selves could exist in the space without harm and that they could move freely. They also needed to feel safe to explore and experiment and sufficiently comfortable in their ability to deal with the awaiting challenges. The sense players made of themselves and the space was interwoven with the fulfillment of these needs. However, though the construction of meaning was effortful, the experiences shared by players also showed that the process of making sense could be immensely pleasurable. Like learning to read or write, moving forward can be clumsy and laden with uncomfortable struggle. However, there are also moments

when everything comes together, when the page dissolves and the reader is suddenly immersed in the potential and possibility of the imagination, able to see clearly and create freely. These moments are what make the struggle worth it, and what motivated the players in my study to continue forth into the unknown and unfamiliar. In this section, I discuss how venturing deeper into play was associated with greater and more lasting impacts for players, the most common being friendship and community. However, players also shared being able to make sense of themselves and their experiences in profound ways.

Self-Exploration, Personal Growth, and Queer Identity

In this section, I discuss how players used the game space and their characters to process their queer identities and other aspects of their lived experiences.

Faebig shared difficulty establishing lasting relationships and feelings of mattering to people in their lives, attributing this to moving frequently during their early life and losing touch with friends and family to whom they had once felt close. In contrast, Faebig's character "has no doubt that she's worth the time." In comparison, Faebig described their character as travelling from "town to town [...] wooing tavern girls and blowing their minds," while also being "really caring and what they needed in the moment." Faebig liked the idea of their character being "a little transient," while also being "open enough for all of these people" and able "to make connections that are meaningful, but not hold onto them so tightly."

Similar to the way Faebig's early experiences were translated into their character's unwillingness to settle down, their character's youthful age of 19 was associated with the age Faebig first began realizing "queer is a thing," while their sexually liberated approach to "wooing tavern girls" was connected to the barriers Faebig perceived in exploring their own queerness since that time. Faebig also described "a wishfulness sometimes of branching out and

connecting in different ways," wondering if they had "closed themselves off to experiences," and what it would be like "to have really intimate relationships with other people," such as through polyamory. For Faebig, their character provided an outlet to consider possibilities and to reclaim experiences they wish they had been able to have since recognizing themselves as queer, including being more present within the queer community.

Additionally, Faebig associated their tabletop roleplaying experiences with being "a little more open lately about talking to other people and putting myself out there," which they attributed to both "playing a character that is so good at that" and having established a core group of friends through their tabletop roleplaying experiences. Faebig pointed to their character as inspiring these changes and their friends as providing the needed safety net, stating that "having friends now makes it less daunting to put yourself out there because there's not as much risk [...] If it doesn't work out, fine. I have friends I like better anyways." Along with being more outgoing in their approach to meeting new people, Faebig also connected their roleplaying experiences and deep connection with other queer players in their campaign with their ability to be more open with their queerness and to pursue more opportunities to connect with the queer community. Furthermore, Faebig traced out their process of being friendly with people in their campaign to being friends outside of the game space. In regards to their willingness and comfort in texting members of their campaign as friends, Faebig stated that "the game is what let me do that [...] outside of the game though. It was a transition for me where we were texting all the time for this game and then I was like, oh, I'm just going to text you this other thing." Faebig's experiences traces the path from safety and comfort to risk and vulnerability, and how this cycle opens up possibilities for the self to be read and written in new ways.

Like Faebig, Galad shared that they "bring a lot of stuff from ideas I'm already working through in my own sphere into the game thing" which allowed Galad to "develop them or explore them" in the game space and then "process them over here" outside of the game. One of the things that Galad mentioned processing through game play was gender identity, sharing that they and their partner "came up with this method of rolling sex" (determining sex through dice rolls), for the game system they were creating, "which gives a possibility of being intersex." Galad stated that "I almost became my queer self in sort of hijacking this game and its development because I didn't necessarily have community or people to share this stuff with, so I sort of stealthily just filled this game and the world with all the things that I wish were possible."

Additionally, Galad shared that sometimes "it's hard to open up yourself to a possibility of a new idea or [...] accepting a certain pattern of thought or philosophy or whatever," but by exploring that in my character" they were able to "remove myself from that a little bit." Galad reported that "I'm not hard on my character in the way that I'm hard on myself," so they felt that roleplaying was "a really good tool for me to be able to figure out how I feel about things." The processing happened outside of game play, as well, with Galad reporting that sometimes, "as I'm moving through my day, I'll be like, this is a [character] situation. What would [character] do?" They described their relationship to their characters using the temperance tarot card, which features "two cups and the water's flowing between them, but you can't tell if one's flowing to the other." Through their characters and engagement in imaginary worlds, Galad noted that they "get used to the feeling of recognizing that there are no constraints on what I can do, [...] can imagine as doable." Through engaging in the game world as their character, Galad was able to realize that "I have the same agency over how and who I want to be here, too."

Seega reported that they were able to understand their own experiences better through playing their character, noting places where their character's experiences diverged from their own. For example, Seega thought that "my male character is defensive in ways that I don't have to be. And I'm defensive in ways that he doesn't have to be." Seega shared that their character "isn't permitted" to engage the "emotional expression piece [...] in the same ways that I am." Seega also noted differences in the ways they each move in the world, feeling as though "he is a lot more respected. The things that he says, the things that he does, he expects to have some space for authority to get things done and to get what he wants. And there are a lot of places in my own life where I don't feel that." These experiences reminded them "the reasons why I'm not completely happy with being in this world and being seen as a woman," but they also highlighted "the ways toxic masculinity affects people in ways that are just catastrophic, destructive, and how we are in a society where we have just crushed men into this position, and it ends up hurting us, them, society, progress." This process also helped uncover ways that Seega had internalized their own "toxic masculinity issues."

Seega was also able to explore their relationship with demisexuality through their character. Seega shared that they were "a terrible person to date because I didn't realize or understand my own orientation, and I was just super mean and defensive" in ways they recognized as "part of why I really resonate with the character" from their last campaign. The character's issues with emotional expression that were a "big part of his backstory and his current struggles, his places of growth," were also tied to his demisexuality. Through an intimate relationship between their character and another, Seega was able to work through some of their own struggles with demisexuality, while also exploring a main feature of their character's story

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arc. Their campaign provided an opportunity for Seega to "experience what it's like to be a partner with someone, to be supportive to them in a place that's safe and very, very queer."

Friends, Family, and Community

This section includes examples of how play experiences expanded outward into the establishment of deep connections among players, which included friendship, family, and community. For example, Elliot shared that their biggest take-away at the end of each campaign was "having done all these adventures together [...] having something you've all been through, like a story together, even if the story is silly or whatever." For Elliot, these shared roleplaying experiences strengthened the bond between players. Morgan explained that the most important aspect of their gaming experiences is the "close knit companionship" between their friends created through "actually spending time with them, not just being in the same room with them." June also pointed to "the time spent with friends over an interactive media" as the most impactful element in forming deep connections with others, sharing that "it's even more interactive [...] because someone is creating the world actively while you are changing it." The collaborative element of the space and depthful engagement facilitated intimate connections among players.

Players also appreciated opportunities to create family, whether between players or characters. Sasha shared that one of the best parts of a favorite campaign was that "this group of ragtag misfits could come together and just take care of each other." For Seega, the "actual quests" involved in their tabletop roleplaying experiences were "only a means to an end" to what they perceived as the most valuable outcome of their participation, "having this formed family, this found family created." Marlowe stated that their tabletop roleplaying games have resulted in "a good sense of community," sharing that "at this point in my life, almost all of my friends who I'm very close to, I have through RPGs." In reference to queer individuals, Morgan shared that

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"we have to have communities, we have to help each other because I'm not sure that anybody else is going to. [...] Gaming is just another way to build those communities." For many players, their tabletop roleplaying experiences were tied to the formation of these social bonds. The experience of roleplaying allowed players to see different sides of the other individuals with whom they played and to connect with each other on a deeper level. Establishing these deeper relationships facilitated more meaningful play experiences. The following example, while exclusive to only one participant and extreme in circumstance, demonstrates what is possible within the game space through joint collaboration among a community of players characterized by a high degree of trust and mutual support.

Morgan described their wife as one of their "gaming partners," having played "in a lot of games together" over 12 years of marriage. When Morgan's wife died, the players from their latest campaign came together to retire her character. Morgan's wife was given "a really good ending" where she "sacrificed herself for the whole group" and "got to be the hero of the piece for that session." Morgan reported that the DM, a close friend, "did a whole lot better in his world than God did in this one." That the players from Morgan's campaign were willing and able to hold the pain and sorrow of that moment together, to explore such depths of vulnerability, is a testament to the love and care and community Morgan and their wife were able to cultivate around themselves. This provides a profound example of how players are able to find and create meaning beneficial to their lives beyond the game space.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Many players' descriptions of what they enjoyed most about tabletop roleplaying games — the possibility and potential — also mirrored their own relationships with queerness, suggesting perceptions of an intrinsic compatibility between tabletop roleplaying games and queerness, or at least the potential for such games to be molded in queer ways. Take for example, Galad's response to being asked what the term *queer* meant to them:

> The first thing that came to mind was just all possibilities. Like everything is possible, there are no hard limits or boundaries to what I could consider or find worth thinking about doing. [...] Other more specific terms kind of gained their power in already defined things. So, you kind of know what things are gonna look like before. And I really liked the openness in queer because everyone gets to decide what their version of queer looks like, and I just think that is so radical and wonderful.

For Galad, *queer* was defined by its lack of definition, and thus meant an expansive inclusivity and potential for taking any shape, including shapes that have not yet been imagined. Faebig shared similar sentiments regarding the term, "I think it encompasses most of the things that I feel, which is just kind of like fluidity and being one thing but not, and just kind of like existing, you know, it doesn't have to be one thing." These accounts illustrated a common desire that queer people be afforded the ability to decide for themselves who they are and what that means, and that they have the space to unfold in ways that even they might not anticipate. They also indicate that players valued permeable boundaries that can flex and stretch to accommodate a multitude of complex identities and experiences. Thus, the underlying concept of tabletop roleplaying games, to the participants in this study, represented a very queer enterprise.

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In considering *the magic* surrounding tabletop roleplaying games, I am also reminded of a host of terms that one can describe as very queer. The prefix "trans-" means to move beyond, across, through, or to change, which is a fitting descriptor for most play experiences. With their consciousness projected into the realm of imagination, players *transfer* parts of themselves into another space and are thus *transported* to new worlds where they are *transfixed* in *transitional* and temporary spaces of *transgression* and *transcendence*. Boundaries diminish, becoming *transparent* and permeable, allowing clarity and *transfusion* between elements. In order for it to extend beyond this imaginary space of potential and possibility, players must make sense of *the magic* and *translate* it into themselves, constructing a new door through which the magic can flow outward. It is through the struggle of crossing over that the player emerges *transformed*. I use these terms to help guide the remainder of this discussion before concluding with a return to the construct of queer legibility.

It is also important to note that there are multiple interdependent spaces being negotiated by players simultaneously: the outside world, the play space, and the game world. The concepts discussed throughout this chapter describe the flow between these various levels of experience and how access to *the magic* can be disrupted at multiple points. In the next section, I begin by discussing the first concept, *transference*, before going on to *transportation* and *transfixion*; *transgression* and *transcension*; *transfusion, translation,* and *transformation*; and *transformational containers* .

Transference

Transference: The process of moving from one place to another; redirecting to another place

To access *the magic* requires that players cross through its threshold and into the realm of possibility and potential. However, there are multiple doors through which players must cross in order to reach that pivotal space, moving from the outside world, to the play space, to the game world. Additionally, something must initially draw players to the doors and then propel them forward. Players shared their experience of approaching some doors and turning away from others, not seeing anything of themselves in the space beyond. From their outside vantage point, players needed to perceive within the play space the potential to exist comfortably as themselves; thus, spaces they deemed unsafe were avoided. The queer identities of players were salient in their perceptions regarding the safety of spaces and in their decisions to engage. Players were also motivated by opportunities to explore and experiment with who they were and who they could be. The findings suggested that many players were enticed into the play space by personal interest in particular genres or activities, like storytelling and acting, and that these activities were wound up in their own understanding of themselves, representing various facets of their own identities. Ultimately, before taking the risk of stepping into the unknown, players needed to be able to see themselves in the space beyond. These findings closely resemble Coe's (2019) findings that players in tabletop roleplaying games were motivated by *becoming*, as well as Oyserman's (2009) *identity-based motivation* with its three main postulates: action readiness, dynamic construction, and interpretation of difficulty.

In the remainder of this section, I discuss how player perceptions regarding the potential of the space and the design of characters and settings relate to the *transference* process. I also consider how needs across multiple spaces influenced the ability of players to connect and be

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present in various spaces. Additionally, in envisioning the research space as its own site for play, I use this concept of *transference* to address why so few people of color were ultimately represented in my study.

Characters and Setting

Having so far discussed what motivates players to approach and enter the game space, I saw it as important to consider the actual transference process. Designing characters and the game setting was the primary way that players transferred parts of themselves into the game world. It was also through this transfer of imaginative energy that the space took shape and substance, with the integrity of the space influenced by the investment and continued engagement from players. Whereas the setting can be understood as the structure of the play space, the characters can be understood as the doorway through which players entered and interacted with the world. When players felt disconnected from their characters, they had difficulty immersing themselves in the world. For example, Galad shared that even when they recognized a "setting as very cool, [...] just awesome and the story is interesting, if my character is not connecting to it or if I'm not connected to my character, then I'm just like, 'eh.'" Characters were important connection points that players needed to establish in order to be present within the game world.

Directing Energy

Players also described that they had limited energy to devote toward different spaces, and that their energy and focus was sometimes pulled away from these spaces, either due to a desire to expend their energy toward pursuits they found more meaningful, or because of perceived threats elsewhere. For example, in a critical moment of gameplay, Galad shared being anxious over their roleplaying ability in comparison to their DM. This preoccupation in the play space

meant that their ability to maintain connection with their character was strained. Similarly, the misgendering that Kay experienced through the improper use of pronouns by other players was distracting for Kay and pulled their attention away from their character and thus out of the game world.

Additionally, a motivation for entering the play space shared by a few participants was the need for relief from the circumstances in their outside lives. For example, Xai reported that playing characters that "could make things happen, could take care of things, could stop people from doing things that they didn't like" fulfilled as "power fantasy that I had as a young kid," who was "bullied a lot...and felt pretty powerless to do things." As another example, Alex shared that RPG's provided them with "a sort of refuge or safe space to retreat from everyday life," sharing that "having that fantasy world to create and control was a way for me to sort of focus energy away from dealing with my discomfort with everyday life." As an autistic individual, Alex reported that the "real world is very confusing" and that in their role as DM they found relief in "being in control of the world and being able to understand all the forces within it." However, although this outlet provided an important balance to Alex's lived experiences as an autistic adult, their role as a DM also made it possible for them to ignore and distract themselves, such as through "prepping for games," from issues in their life they did not want to confront, namely their burgeoning conflict with the gender they were assigned at birth.

Lack of Diversity Within the Sample

So far, I have discussed how *transference* was related to the entrance of players into the game space. However, I also found *transference* to be a helpful concept in understanding why I experienced difficulty recruiting queer people of color into the research space. To provide needed perspective and depth to this discussion, I turn to conversations I had with one of my

peer-debriefers, a Black female colleague who had relevant content knowledge and experience with tabletop roleplaying games. Zendaya (a pseudonym we both agreed I would use) suggested two main reasons for the non-existent representation of Black queer players within the study: (a) Black fatigue, and (b) Low representation.

Black Fatigue

In this section, I draw on Zendaya's perceptions that the toll of systemic racism and prominent discussions around police violence prevalent at the time of the study may have contributed to the low representation of people of color, particularly Black people, in my study. As Zendaya reported, "this year is a hard year for white people asking Black people about race." She stated that her willingness to provide feedback on my project was definitely rooted in our "shared graduate experiences," suggesting that outside of those circumstances, she "might be a little, No, thank you. I don't want to talk about George Floyd and I know it's going to be a question." Zendaya shared that these conversations are "so different for me now" because as a graduate student, she's "always talking about race stuff," and thus more comfortable engaging in these kinds of conversations. She wondered what the experience would be like for other Black individuals, who may be "worried about not liking the questions and having to sit through it." Particularly because I, as the researcher, am a white individual, Black people "might be hesitant talking about sensitive topics." Zendaya suggested that amidst a backdrop of nationwide discussions regarding the trauma and oppression of Black people, entering the research space to talk about their lived experiences with a white researcher may not have been perceived by potential Black participants as either safe or comfortable.

Low Representation

In addition to repercussions of Black fatigue, Zendaya also acknowledged that the low diversity within my sample "might just be the numbers." She found the gaming and tabletop community predominantly populated by white individuals, stating that "there's like one Asian person" that she regularly sees while attending various gaming related events. In consideration of why there might be a lower proportion of people of color within the tabletop roleplaying community, Zendaya could only speak to the Black experience, suggesting it could be because "a lot of Black parents" have negative associations with Dungeons & Dragons due to being "heavily into the church." Zendaya shared that as a child, she had become "interested in this site where we would write stories and roleplay as wolves." When she mentioned the site to her mom, her mom "freaked out saying that D&D is satanic devil-worship" and had to "check the whole site, every little detail before she would let me play." Zendaya described her mother growing up in a church "where people would be running up and down the aisles catching the spirit, falling out," but Zendaya also suggested that "there's a big difference between white churches and Black churches." Although Black churches have the typical "church stuff," there is also this element of "overcoming the white people, overcoming the world, making sure that it doesn't stomp you out." Amidst the Satanic Panic of the 1980's, Zendaya described how her mother's church "would have lost their minds about white people worshipping the devil, that would have 100% been a thing that they would have been talking about — See what white people are doing, make sure you don't get caught up. [...] You gotta be careful, they'll pull you in." In reference to her own early experiences, Zendaya suggested that "people of color who might have been interested just get pushed away from it when you're young enough to have to listen to your parents." Zendaya reported that even as an adult, she did not feel comfortable disclosing her involvement

with tabletop roleplaying games, choosing instead to tell her mother that she plays "board games every week."

Zendaya's accounts suggest that tabletop roleplaying games may be perceived by people of her mother's generation as antithetical to Black identities, which are often grounded in their Christian faith and opposition to Whiteness. She suggested that the fear from older generations may have impacted the ability of younger generations of Black people to pursue this type of play. Although Zendaya noted that her generation was less likely to have the same misgivings about tabletop roleplaying games as representing a detriment to their faith, stating that "the group of people that would say Harry Potter is demonic are the same group of people that would say D&D is demonic," the lack of diversity within the space may discourage other Black people from entering, thus perpetuating the cycle. Despite these barriers, Zendaya eventually made her way into the realm of tabletop roleplaying, which indicates that, for her, the potential in the space was worth the risk. Her experiences within the space will be discussed in further sections.

Transportation and Transfixion

Transportation: the process of carrying or being carried away from one place to another.
Transfixion: the process of holding or being held in place by surprise, interest, or shock.

In the previous section, I discussed how entrance into the play space required that players be able to see themselves on the other side and how the transference of their energy toward this space was integral in its establishment and maintenance. In removing potential barriers and crossing the threshold, players were *transported* to another realm of experience and *transfixed* within the space. Whereas transference occurs at the point of crossing into a space, *transportation* and *transfixion* occur within the space. Although the terms may appear somewhat contradictory in definition, *transportation* and *transfixion* occur simultaneously and account for the immersive aspects of the game. A useful metaphor might be kayaking, where the boat

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and its occupant are held captive but also swept forward by the force of the river, and the

occupant is actively navigating each bend and drop in their forward descent. Players can get

carried away making jokes and goofing off in the play space, and they can also be swept away by

the story and totally engaged in their anticipation of what happens next.

In the remainder of this section, I discuss spatial presence and narrative transportation

theory, and I consider the concept of flow in relation to the experiences of immersion described

by players.

Spatial Presence

In this section, I discuss tabletop roleplaying game characters as representing a mediated

space that players occupy as they are *transported* and *transfixed* within the game world. I also

discuss how the ability of players to make sense of their environment is supported through the

immersive experience the game potentiates.

In addition to facilitating the connection with the game world, players positioned

characters as spaces they occupied, using phrases like "getting into character" or "moving in the

characters." Through discussion of personal boundaries, players also demonstrated an

understanding of themselves as occupying specific space distinct from the world around them. In

the metaphor used above, characters, social roles, and identities can thus be reimagined as the

boat through which players may operate and interact in any given space or circumstance.

This is very similar to the concept of *spatial presence,* a term Wirth et al. (2007) defined

as "a binary experience, during which perceived self location and, in most cases, perceived

action possibilities, are connected to a mediated spatial environment, and mental capacities are

bound by the mediated environment instead of reality" (p. 497). Balakrishnan and Sundar (2011)

stated that the concept of *spatial presence* was derived from the term, *telepresence,* referring to

"teleporting of actions to a remote physical location, using instrumental devices that feel and work seamlessly" (p.497), such as through the use of virtual communications platforms like Zoom. Applying these two concepts to tabletop roleplaying games, what players perceived as possible (action possibilities) was bound by their ability to make sense of their characters and the narrative world of the game (mediated environment). Furthermore, characters were *instrumental devices* connecting the consciousness of players to the imaginary space of the game world.

Balakrishnan and Sundar (2011) used the concept of *spatial awareness* in relation to virtual reality simulations and suggested that the definition supplied by Wirth et al. (2007) was helpful in distinguishing simulated virtual reality from the "purely psychological reality" and differentiating it from similar concepts, like *transportation,* that they associated with the "unconstrained" possibilities of the imagination. The authors explained that VR environments allowed players to explore from a first-person perspective and were helpful in facilitating the sense of "being there." Balakrishnan and Sundar were interested in what aspects of the simulations most contributed to that feeling of being present in the space and to losing awareness of the technology itself. They specifically examined navigation and navigability, which were associated with the ability of individuals to "find their way and move from one point to another" within virtual settings. They stated that navigation involves "both the physical act of movement and the cognitive act of deciding where to go." This concept ties in with ecological frameworks of legibility, which refer to the sense individuals make of their environment and of themselves within it, crucial to their ability to navigate effectively.

Balakrishnan and Sundar (2011) argued that the navigability of the virtual space was connected to the ability of individuals to build mental models of the space and that *transportation,* the feeling of "being there," led to more substantial mental models. They also

found that although participants in the high narrative transportation group had higher scores related to their mental models of the space, they rated themselves as having less awareness of the space than those in the low narrative transportation group. The authors suggested that this phenomenon was related to the individuals in the high narrative transportation group learning about the space in connection with other goals, which in their condition meant finding clues to solve a mystery, whereas the low transportation group were not given a goal within the space. Their findings suggested that players make greater sense when they are immersed, and that challenge is important for immersion. However, their findings also suggest that players may not always be fully aware of how they are impacted by their play experiences.

Narrative Transportation Theory

The previous section discussed how *transportation* was important to the sense players were able to make within a space and their ability to navigate effectively. In this section, I consider *narrative transportation theory,* proposed by Green and Bock (2002), which states that immersive experiences can lead to changes in the consumer of the text.

Green and Bock (2002) based their conception of *transportation* on Gerrig's (1993) metaphor of a traveler who departs from their world of origin and returns from their journey changed in some way. The authors stated that when an individual is *transported* through a story, "parts of the world of origin become inaccessible," meaning that their awareness of the world around them is diminished. Furthermore, *transportation* is also associated with "a loss of public self-awareness." When players are *transported* into the game world, they leave "public self-consciousness behind as well" (p. 324). The authors stated that, at a minimum, *transported* individuals are changed through gaining memories of the experience, though they also noted changes in emotional response and even belief were possible. As the level of immersion in the

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narrative experience increases, so does the potential for change. When players are successful in transferring their consciousness into the boat and thus begin their journey down the river, they are completely immersed in the task of navigating the boat. To have their attention drawn elsewhere means to no longer be *transfixed* within the boat, and if they are not in the boat, they cannot be changed by the experience.

Flow

Green and Bock (2002) suggested that the concept of *transportation* was similar to Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of flow, which Brown (2010) also associated with important features outlined in his definition of play, including diminished consciousness of the self and freedom from awareness of time. In this section, I discuss the concept of flow as it related to the experiences of players.

Flow is the state of being fully immersed in an intrinsically motivated activity, to the extent that self-consciousness and awareness of time diminish, and positive emotional states emerge. Flow must be prefaced with a sense of purpose in the activity, a match between the individual's abilities and the abilities needed to complete the task, and direct feedback. This deep immersion in an activity results in optimal performance in completing the task at hand (Peifer et al, 2020). As Green and Bock (2002) stated, optimal flow activities are "considered to be ends in themselves" (p. 326), indicating an intrinsic desire to continue with the task, another feature of play as defined by Brown (2010).

Returning to my kayaking metaphor, safe navigation of the river requires that individuals be able to maintain their own personal boundaries, which means understanding their own limits and choosing appropriate challenges. In order for players to understand their limits, they must test them, which can be an uncomfortable and clumsy process. For example, a few players shared

that they had difficulty connecting to their first character or feeling fully present in the game

world during their first campaign. Among other factors, players attributed this to the added

challenge of learning the rules. This friction made it difficult for players to feel fully immersed in

the experience. Similarly, if players perceived the space as too easy or boring, they had a

difficult time staying engaged. Players with experience as a DM reported the importance of

setting appropriate challenges for players and of players sharing pleasure in "stretching," rather

than "straining."

In addition to balancing the tension between challenge and skill/ability, players needed to

find pleasure in the challenge and reported multiple ways to be immersed in the game space.

Ryan shared that one of his friends appreciated the "metagaming" aspects of the game, which he

viewed as opportunities to work creatively within the confines of the system, as well as opening

up possibilities for the story. Gaining mastery over the rules meant that he was able to respond

dynamically within the space. However, for some players like Ro, the exciting challenge of

roleplaying was in exploring the depths of the human experience, which included play styles and

narratives that leaned into emotional expressiveness and vulnerability among players and

characters. However, both of these examples drove and were driven by conflict in the narrative

game world and required that players respond to the challenge. These examples also demonstrate

that what grabs the attention and focus of one player may not for another. Similarly, players

experienced difficulty with different aspects of the game, such as the improvisational element of

roleplaying, mastering their character's abilities, and even getting along with other players.

Nearly every player talked about *the magic* in terms of being in the same space with other

players and moving together as one toward a common goal, thus, *transportation* and *flow*

required that players collectively negotiate these experiences. This was demonstrated in players

investing time and effort toward accommodating the needs of other players, which included

discussing potential triggers, introducing new mechanics, and crafting magical items or side

quests for specific players. Furthermore, the mutual support and collaboration among players

with diverse skills and abilities enabled players to have experiences that went beyond what they

perceived themselves to be capable of individually.

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Transgression and Transcension

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> *Transgression:* the process of stepping beyond accepted or imposed boundaries
> *Transcension:* the process of climbing above the normal range of existence or experience

In my consideration of *transportation* and *transfixion,* I discussed the pleasurable

experience of being swept away by the tides of the narrative game world, as well as how striking

a balance between the ability of players and challenges they found meaningful was an integral

part of this experience. Furthermore, Green and Bock (2002) demonstrated that the journey was

shown to produce change in the traveler. In this section, I explore the journey itself and the

pleasure players experienced in testing the limits of and moving beyond their own bounds. I also

return to conversations with my peer-debriefer, Zendaya, to discuss race and gender with respect

to the safety and comfort of players in the space, as well as the pleasure of pushing boundaries.

Transgression

Even as *transportation* was characterized by moments of free flowing and dynamic

movement and activity and the feeling of being carried forward, the actual journey forward was

frequently disrupted by moments of struggle and discomfort, or even boredom and disinterest, as

players were confronted with new experiences and negotiated the travel itinerary with their party.

Although these moments may have been experienced as more effortful and slow-moving, they

were nonetheless associated with progress and accomplishment. However, as has been discussed,

once effort moved into the territory of strain,   or if the risks were perceived to outweigh the

reward, it could undermine the desire of players to expand outward into the realm of potential and possibility. The desire to *transgress* boundaries through play, one of the main functions of play proposed by Omasta and Chappell (2015), to leap forth and embrace the unknown, was mitigated by the need of players to feel safe and comfortable. Thus, players cycled between modes of stepping out of their comfort zones and re-establishing their safety and comfort, which sometimes meant retreating back to earlier spaces. This closely resembles Gutiérrez's (2008) assertion that Third Space represented a type of zone of proximal development, and also that these learning spaces must be identity-affirming and provide individuals opportunities to expand outward through appropriate challenges. Although it was important that players feel safe or comfortable making mistakes, players also used the space to explore what they perceived as impossible in their own lives. For some players, this transgression was associated with their queer identities and purposeful violation of heteronormative power structures, to live and exist unapologetically as themselves, if only within the game world.

Because queer identity was a salient theme within the play of the participants interviewed, I now return to my conversations with my peer-debriefer, Zendaya, to discuss race, gender, and their intersection within her tabletop roleplaying experiences.

Safety and Comfort

The following accounts from Zendaya endorse the importance of safety and comfort within the play space to the ability of players to engage in ways that are pleasurable, and demonstrate how race and gender relate to these experiences.

Like many of the players in the study, Zendaya reported that her experiences with tabletop roleplaying games occurred almost exclusively with white players. As the only Black woman among four white guys, Zendaya described her first experience with tabletop roleplaying

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games as "awkward" and "uncomfortable." Of the four white male players, two were described as welcoming, one "not as much," and one "not at all." During this gaming experience, Zendaya reported that one player "kept hitting on me," and one told her that "feminism was stupid and that affirmative action was unfair." Zendaya thought that although race was prominent, "womanhood was more salient" for her in this space, sharing that those comments would likely not have happened had she been a Black man. Aside from the one white guy who had invited her, Zendaya reported that this group was "patronizing" at best.

In contrast, Zendaya "felt more kinship" with her second campaign with players who, in addition to the initial white guy who had invited her to the first campaign, Zendaya described as "neurodivergent, queer, and a lot less serious." There were also more female-assigned players. Zendaya reported that "seeing the other ways that they were exploring with their characters, leaning in, making jokes, made it so that I could do it, too." For Zendaya, the best tabletop roleplaying experiences were when "everyone's laughing, everyone's in on the joke, no one is secretly mad. Everyone is in the scene and laughing about what's happening in the scene, something ridiculous, something over the top and outlandish." The sense of shared space and wavelength endorsed by Zendaya as important was likewise reported by the queer players. She further stated that in order to get to that point of joyful, uninhibited play, there had to be "comfort with all of the other people at the table," meaning "no one sitting here is the butt of the joke, we are all laughing, but it's not at anyone there. And mutual understanding of what would be normal and all choosing not to go that direction. We all collectively saw the path we were supposed to take, and took a hard left." Zendaya's assessment of what was needed for her to feel comfortable roleplaying in the space and to express enjoyment in *transgressive* and collaborative play once again aligned with the accounts from queer players.

Race and Gender

Zendaya also discussed how race and gender operated in the play space, and associated her enjoyment of the game with opportunities for transgressive play.

Zendaya stated that "the first group was very straight, maybe that's why it wasn't fun. The most interesting things that happened, I did." She reported that one of the players said that he "would never play with anyone who was chaotic evil — it's just so against anything that I would do," to which Zendaya thought, "But wouldn't that make the story more fun, what do you mean?" According to Zendaya, "white straight cis men have a lot of rules, a lot of things that they have to do to be white straight cis men, and those rules suck, and everyone else has to play by those rules for them to be comfortable being white straight cis men." This mirrors Pratt's (1991) assertion that "ideas and identities are on the line" as individuals enter into contact zones, particularly those characterized by unequal power distributions. Zendaya shared that "in that first space I had two options: I could either be myself and have fun, push boundaries, or I could get along, let things go or not do something I wanted to do [...] In the second space, everyone knows about the rule that I just broke, and no one cares or thinks that I need to follow that rule — we can all just be free." These accounts support the need and appreciation expressed by the queer players interviewed to have opportunities to *transgress*, to step beyond the bounds of white cis-heteronormativity and explore queer worlds, queer stories, and queer expression.

By "exercising gender and sexuality" through their play in ways they could not outside of the game space," Zendaya noted that players in her second campaign "opened up the floor to play with other things" like class and race. In regards to the all-white players of her second campaign, Zendaya recognized that "race isn't something that anyone else is playing with, but I can, and they get that it's a natural extension of where I'm at." She went on to state, "my play

that had to do with race was really welcomed — and that however I went about filling my cup, fulfilling those needs, I was allowed to do that." Recognizing that she did not know "what it's like for queer people of color," she imagined tabletop roleplaying games as "being a really powerful space" in which to explore that intersection. Zendaya attributed her comfort in playing with race through her characters to "playing with other people who know what it's like to be the only one in a room." Although Zendaya recognized that the white players in the second campaign could not know what it was to be black, many of the players occupied marginalized spaces that contributed to their greater understanding and appreciation of the importance of being allowed to be fully present and represented within the fabric of the worlds they occupy.

 In contrast, Zendaya shared that "in that first group, I could explore, but no one would get it," demonstrating perceived illegibility of her identities within the space. Furthermore, in playing with the first group, Zendaya came to realize that within the game world, "if you weren't human, there wasn't really race, which meant that we're all nothing, but that actually means we're all white. You guys are thinking about this as a race neutral world, you're thinking about this as London, England, and everyone is white. Even the dwarves." The blatant sexism and racism exhibited by the players from her first campaign and the erasure of her identity as a Black woman within the game world made the space unwelcoming for Zendaya and thus constrained her ability to engage meaningfully with the play space. Although the white players in her second campaign might not fully understand Zendaya's play with race, their greater awareness of and experience with marginalization contributed to Zendaya feeling safe and comfortable making sense of that part of herself through her play.

Zendaya's experiences closely mirrored the experiences of the queer players interviewed as part of this project, who also felt greater affinity among women and those who were

neurodivergent or queer, and associated their most frustrating experiences with campaigns that primarily consisted of straight white men. Even with the participants themselves being white, the whiteness of the straight men was salient in the descriptions they provided, suggesting a connection between whiteness and the perpetuation of heteronormativity and the gender binary. Furthermore, transgressing the rules imposed by "cis-straight white men" was pleasurable for Zendaya and the queer participants within this study. In Zendaya's account of her party's collective recognition of and choice to turn away from "what would be normal" and the "path we were supposed to take," she positioned herself and the players in her campaign as fluent in "cis-straight white men," echoing Gee's (1989) conceptualization of *multilinguality* within the context of Discourses. Queer players likewise demonstrated a keen awareness of the distinction between queer and cis-heteronormative narratives.

Transcension

The forward pursuit associated with play afforded players with new perspectives in which to view the world and themselves. In my consideration of *transcension*, I am reminded of an interview between Joe Rogan and Terry Virts, a retired astronaut who spent over 200 days in space. Having seen the earth from the unattached perspective of the space station, he shared that, upon returning, no matter where in the world he was, he always felt at home.

As players continually pushed through each boundary and opened themselves up to new experiences, they were able to *transcend* the bounds of their own perspective, growing in their awareness of themselves and their environments, and in doing so were able to rise above boundaries by which they had once been constrained. As individuals climb above their own limited perspective, what they once viewed as imposing and insurmountable barriers lose their salience and magnitude. The relationship between player and character was demonstrated to be

an empowering one, lending authenticity and efficacy to a player's perception of themselves and their goals, emotions, and endeavors. Galad, for example, shared that through adopting the perspective of their character, they were able to recognize the barriers by which they had once felt constrained as often self-placed and lacking in substance. Many players had similar realizations about gender and undermined the authority of cis-heteronormative structures through their play.

The *transcension* of players also led to increased perceptions of connectivity between themselves and their environment, which not only bolstered their sense of support, but also their care and appreciation for the lived experiences of others. For example, Simon's adoption of the Veils and Lines system was in direct response to an incident where he had accidentally caused harm to another player through inclusion of demonic themes in the campaign he was running. Recognition of that initial transgression and its subsequent repair opened doors for more affirming and enjoyable play.

Transfusion, Translation, and Transformation

Transfusion: the act or process of diffusing, permeating, or infusing into or through
Translation: the process of expressing or being expressed in another form or medium
Transformation: induced or spontaneous change in form

As players expand outward in their comfort and confidence and grow more well-rounded in their perspective, as if patching together satellite images into a three-dimensional model of the space they and others inhabit, they are able to create distance between their immediate surroundings by adopting a different perspective. Boundaries and limitations that at one point filled their entire frame of view, diminish in prominence when viewed from a distance. As players push forward, expanding their own boundaries and climbing above others, *the magic* also makes other boundaries transparent and permeable, allowing the flow and *transfusion* of

elements between spaces. Players in my study described experiencing this permeability and

transparency, noting their ability to see different facets of their friends or in feeding off each

other's energies, the effect of which was to feel more connected.

In other respects, the concept of *transfusion* is related to what players referred to as *bleed*.

Examples of this include when the conflict between characters in-game leads to conflict between

players out-of-game. Players also noted that their life circumstances would often bleed into their

gameplay in unexpected ways, with characters progressing through narrative arcs that players

associated with their own experiences. Although these moments of bleed were often

unintentional, they were nonetheless meaningful to players. For example, Seega, in her

relationship with her male cisgender character, was able to view the worth of the feminine

aspects of her identity through his ultimate goal: creating a loving family of his own. His ever

present desire to live a gentle, sensitive, quiet existence caring for loved ones and fostering

intimacy with others was explored in the narrative, lending a sense of authenticity to the player's

desires to do the same. His struggle with his own shame regarding these needs reflected her own

struggle with shame for wanting children as a genderqueer person hoping to be seen as

authentically masculine herself. Through her relationship with her character, Seega endorsed a

feeling of validation for these desires that bled into her everyday life and helped her begin the

process of breaking down her relationship with toxic, binding aspects of her own masculine

identity.

Seega's ability to use game playing to process the hurt and shame attached to her queer

identities in ways that led to actual change in her life was made possible through intentional self-

reflection and conversation with others about her experiences. In order for players to *translate*

imagination into reality, they must integrate their experiences into their full selves. Although

players are living beings who are in a constant state of change by merely existing, as illustrated through Leander and Bolt's (2005) use of the rhizomatic framework, *transformation,* the type of monumental shift that is lasting and profound, requires that players go through the struggle of making sense of, constructing space for, and expressing these new experiences beyond the confines of their imaginations.

Transformational Containers and Transformation Through Christ

As I was struggling with translating the complex and distinctly three-dimensional web of ideas and connections from my mind into the frustratingly linear medium of a dissertation, with the goal, of course, to "emerge" with my doctorate, I was having difficulty figuring out my next move and feeling stuck, tired, and frustrated. On our evening walk over the phone, I was also trying to walk my mom through all of the"trans-" words I had carefully outlined. As I was ending my thought about how struggle was inherent and necessary to this process of transformation, I gave a small laugh at the zeal and excitement in my voice feeling like a preacher at their pulpit. To my surprise, my mom's thoughts were in a similar place, with her drawing an association between the "crossing-over" I had described and her own process of "coming into" and "being reborn through" Christ.

Although I recognize that these experiences are powerful for many individuals, including other queer people, I personally have experienced great pain in my own interactions within church spaces. I see this as a shame. As someone who loves to sing with others, delights in the narrative power of metaphor, and appreciates few things more than a good old fashioned potluck, the idea of church, of belonging to a strong and vibrant community, is appealing. But I think there is something beyond the safety and comfort individuals experience in holding faith that

draws people through the door, and to the play space of tabletop roleplaying games for that matter — to make sense of oneself, and in so doing, find direction, and purpose.

Along with tabletop roleplaying games, many of the queer people I know, myself included, are drawn to the occult in some form or another, finding meaning and connection through mysticism, spirituality, and magic. Although the central phenomenon of this study is derived from the prevalence of magic within the prototypical fantasy setting of Dungeons & Dragons, my use was also tied to player accounts of magic in their own lives. I was struck by one particular moment from Galad's interview where I had asked them about their literacy practices outside of tabletop roleplaying. While they noted keeping a journal, they also included tarot cards within their examples, stating:

> I love it so much because the characters change every time I read with the deck. Like one card might take a little bit of a different shape depending on what situation I'm working in or what the general time is. And so balancing me and my situations around with my understanding or relationship to the characters in the tarot is very influential to me, I think, in figuring out how and where to expand.

Galad's note that the reading changes based on the assemblage of cards, Galad, and Galad's relationships to the cards very clearly positions tarot within the realm of literacy, and their use of tarot as a navigational tool to guide personal expansion demonstrates the narrative power of this reflective practice. Ultimately, Galad's account of their use of tarot closely resembles how players shared making sense of themselves through interaction with the game world and their characters. Galad's relationship with tarot reminds me of how members of my family talk about their relationship with the Bible, with their understanding of various verses and stories becoming more nuanced and complex over time.

In this section, I take a deeper look at how the process of *transformation* relates to Christianity, drawing on the Dungeon Master Pastor, among others. I also consider how other scholars have conceptualized *the magic* of tabletop roleplaying games, paying special attention to the concept of *transformational containers* used by Bowman and Hugass (2021) in their most recent article (published in March!) about roleplaying games, and *navigational play* (Kemper, 2020).

Transformation Through Christ

Rory Philstrom, the Dungeon Master Pastor, runs a blog of the same name with the aim of dispelling the fear that tabletop roleplaying games will somehow lead disciples of Christ astray, and demonstrating the potential for tabletop roleplaying games to magnify the teachings of the Bible. The Dungeon Master Pastor suggested that there are four marks of an "epic life": lasting direction, higher purpose, real risk, and unexpected rewards (Philstrom, 2016a). An epic life that has lasting direction is characterized by movement and forward progression. Higher purpose refers to contributions toward and participation in circumstances that go beyond the individual. An epic life also includes real risks, forgoing "safety and comfort for the sake of direction and purpose" (para. 3) and unexpected rewards, which may, having gone through the experience, include "unexpected courage to face even larger foes" (para. 4). The Dungeon Master Pastor then relates these qualities of an epic life to the life of a disciple and how they are transformed through their epic journey toward Christ, rewarded with a "gift so unexpected it's terrifying – resurrection from death" (Philstrom, 2016b).

Joel Van Dyke of Street Psalms, wrote an article in 2019 inspired by Transfiguration Sunday, an Eastern Orthodox holiday celebrating when the true nature and divinity of Jesus Christ is shown to his disciples when godly glory emanates as light from his being. Van Dyke

discusses how the disciples were not able to comprehend the magnitude of what they had witnessed and quickly distracted themselves with worldly concerns. Van Dyke writes, "Like Peter, I am far too often transfixed on the shallow nature of what I can manage or control. Like Peter, I find it difficult to simply dwell in the mystery and the wonder of the glory of God that stands before me in the transfigured Jesus" (Only through Resurrection). He continues with "Although we squint today, our tired, transfixed eyes will be fully open and transformed on the other side of the journey that lies ahead" (Only through Resurrection). The author suggests that one's attention or gaze must be directed on Christ, and only through taking in the sight of Christ and truly seeing his glory does the disciple emerge reborn. This process requires that the disciple turn toward the glory of Christ and step toward it, rather than fall back to the safety and comfort of their mundane lives. It involves taking a risk, but the reward is entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven.

These examples demonstrate similar transformational processes as the one outlined throughout this chapter, and underscore how presence and vulnerability are essential to the experience. I now turn to the metaphysical and how tabletop roleplaying has been associated with ritual space and magic.

The Magic Circle and Transformational Containers

Bowman and Hugass (2021) discussed the transformative capacity of roleplaying experiences and describe roleplaying spaces as *transformational containers*, which they defined as "spaces explicitly and intentionally designed to facilitate personal growth and encourage communal cohesion, consent, and trust" (Role-Playing Communities as Transformational Containers section, para. 2). They related the construction of these spaces to concepts of *magic* and *manifestation,* stating that the root of magic is its transformative capacity and the "the

collective agreement within the community to support it" (para. 1). They described magic as

involving ritual construction of a *magic circle,* in which community members "draw status,

strength, power, or insight through embodiment" (para. 1) of other identities and ways of being.

The authors described the *transformational containers* bound by the *magic circle, as* "playful

spaces in which participants cross a threshold" into an "agreed-upon reality with different rules"

(The Limitations of the Magic Circle section, para. 2).

Bowman and Hugass (2021) stated that the roleplay space resembled the ritual space

conceptualized by Turner (1969) in that they also included three phases: 1) separation from

mundane reality, 2) entrance into liminal space, and 3) reincorporation into daily life. My own

conceptualization of the play space included *transference,* in which players projected their

consciousness into the imaginary realm, and *translation,* where players returned to themselves.

This also closely resembles the metaphor of the traveler used by Green and Brock (2002), with

the journey including both a departure and a return. However, an important distinction between

ritual space and play they identified was the degree to which participants believed *the magic* to

be real. Part of what the authors witnessed from roleplayers was a need to construct *alibis* in

order to engage in immersive play, and to include within their social contracts a shared

understanding of the happenings within the play space as not "real."

Drawing on the work of Kross and Ayduk (2016) on narrative self-distancing, the authors

suggested that although it was important for players to feel immersed during the game, adopting

third-person perspectives may also reduce shame and enhance meta-reflections when

"streamlined with the player's own narrative identity" (Narrative section, para. 3). Faebig

illustrated this reorganization process in how they described their character as transient, tying

this to their own early life experiences of themselves moving quite often. Because their character

succeeded in making connections with others despite being transient, they themselves made intentional efforts based on in-game experiences to be more outgoing and more connected to others in their community. This translation of safe in-game experiences permitted Faebig to take risks in their life. The above suggests that complete immersion in the retelling of the narrative can be detrimental. The process of comparing experiences allows for more insight, and the presence of barriers between the self and the character helps players achieve purposeful integration.

Bowman and Hugass (2021) suggested that constructing an alibi was a powerful mechanism that "allows for playful transgression of self-presentation," but that the distance created between the player and the game world through adoption of an alibi was also "a barrier for the transfer and integration of play experiences into one's daily life." If players are only able to engage playfully through the use of characters providing needed alibis to "obviate responsibility for their actions within games," the transformative effects of the space are unable to pass through the walls players construct between their play experiences and their full sense of self. However, the authors asked, "What happens when we adopt a view of self as consistent and fluid between player and character?" (Cognitive Dissonance, Role-Distancing, and Conformity section, para. 5).

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to attend first to what contributes to players perceiving the bounds separating these spaces as fluid and permeable. In the framework that I created, transgression was key to the perception of diminished bounds, and transgressive play required feelings of safety and comfort among players. Likewise, Bowman and Hugass (2021), drawing from Winnicott's (1960) concept of *holding containers*, argued that in order for participants to harness the transformative power of immersion in a roleplaying space, the players

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within the *magic circle* must "feel sufficiently secure within the group to explore their authentic selves" (Ritual section, para. 2), echoing the concept of *internal safety* used by Miller (2015), a condition necessary to the type of risk-taking beneficial to personal growth. Players needed to feel safe from the shame of "performing social roles inadequately or transgressing norms of acceptable behavior" (Alibi section, para. 2). Bowman and Hugass argued that the ability to be vulnerable and intimate within the play group was a product of the group's co-constructed social frame that allows players to drop other social expectations safely and make room for novel experiences of the self through characters in a reality set apart. This strongly resembles my own findings from the interviews with queer players included within my study. Once players felt sufficiently safe and comfortable within the play space, they were able to begin pushing bounds and expanding what they understood as possible for themselves. These transgressive experiences were vital in contributing to the holistic perspectives needed for players to *transcend* what they perceived as limiting their ability to move freely, while also diminishing the integrity of those bounds, making them both *transparent* and permeable and allowing a process of *transfusion* and *translation* from character into the full self of the player.

Wyrding the Self and Navigational Play

In my discussion of *spatial sense*, I introduced the concept of navigation, which entails that an individual first makes sense of themselves in relation to their environment and then moves in an intentional direction toward some established goal or end point. Tabletop roleplaying games provide needed perspective that allows players to make sense of themselves in new ways. Like climbing to the top of a tree, players may be able to determine whether they are headed in a desirable direction and may even identify new goals for their travel. Introducing the concept of *navigational play* in reference to their own LARP (live-action roleplay) experiences,

Kemper (2020) stated that roleplaying games can be used intentionally to facilitate this navigation process in the lives of players. The main purpose of navigational play is "to try and see yourself outside the bounds of the mythic norm," and can be used as a tool "to decolonize the body and search for liberation from internalized oppression" (Navigational Play section, para. 1). Kemper described the playstyle as self-exploratory and liberatory, and as allowing players to "feel free of or investigate a particular marginalization" rather than "constantly inhabiting your own oppressive world" (para. 1). Navigational play can be used to "steer" the self through play experiences in order to "seek emancipatory bleed" (para. 1), a term used to explain the *transfusion* process between character and player. Navigational play consists of two components: steering for liberation and reflective writing. Steering is described by Kemper as when players make decisions within the game world due to out-of-game reasons, and thus steering for liberation entails players purposefully seeking out liberatory experiences. Reflective writing refers to comparing how fictional experiences relate to the lived experiences of the player.

Kemper (2020) charted out how players can engage in reflective processes before, during, and after their roleplaying experiences. The first step is to consider what type of exploration is wanted within the play space and how that may fit within the bounds of the narrative plot of the game world. This includes character creation, features of the game world, and narrative themes. Players within my study shared different kinds of intentionality regarding character creation that influenced the types of roleplaying experiences they had. For example, Galad shared that character creation in the game system developed by them and their partner is almost entirely determined by dice rolls. Although this may at first glance seem to remove the ability of players to mold their character toward liberatory play, they viewed this character generation system as

providing them with opportunities to play characters they would not have been able to imagine themselves.

The second step is to negotiate what this experience can look like with other players by expressing needs and wants for the space and *playing to lift,* a concept Kemper (2020) borrowed from Vejdemo (2018), meaning that responsibility for the drama and overall play experience is shared among co-players. They must work together to realize the intentions and goals of everyone in the play space. This is evident in what players referred to as "session zero" where players worked out what the campaign would look like and shared what they hoped to see in the game and what they did not want to see in the game, such as through the Veils and Lines system.

The third step includes carefully considering what kinds of actions will be taken within the game world, with players looking out for opportunities to "experience things you may never get to do in your daily life" (Actions You Can Take Inside of the Larp section, para. 1). Although Kemper (2020) does not use the word *transgression*, it is evident in their advice regarding actions to take during play: "If an action is prohibited for someone of your social rank, do it. If an activity is something you wouldn't be expected to do, do it. If a style is something you have been prohibited from wearing because people like you are not allowed, wear it. If your ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation usually prohibits you from owning something, buy it" (para. 1). For players like June and Gordon, "playing the fool" or trickster type characters that subverted expectations opened up possibilities to venture in directions that would otherwise not have been possible.

The last step involves documentation of and reflection on the experience, with Kemper suggesting that players keep field notes and document their reactions to various aspects of the

game. During the process, it was crucial that players examine the separation between themselves and their characters. Through this comparative process, players might be able to "see clear threads about your own desires and oppressions" (Taking Field Notes at Larps section, para. 4) or notice patterns in their play style. This process was described as important for not only integrating play experiences in ways that are meaningful to the lived experience of the player, but also can be used to direct players to more enjoyable and liberating play in the future.

Lastly, I want to discuss Kemper's (2020) stated association between navigational play and the *wyrding the self*. Kemper described how the word *weird* has its etymological roots in the Anglo Saxon word *wyrd,* meaning "the action of controlling one's fate" (What is Wyrding? section, para. 1). The author argued that roleplay "affords us the actual ability to *wyrd* ourselves, that is to shape ourselves and our conceptions of self through play" (para. 1). Kemper went on to state that "the ability to shift who we are to fit the game [...] allows us players to explore the selves we could never be, or that we might have been [...] When you begin to alter yourself through this type of investigation and play it is taking fate into your own hands" (para. 2). Kemper concluded with the assertion that to be weird "was actually a powerful and radical act of controlling one's destiny" (para. 2). While *weird* has its roots in magic, the term, along with *strange* and *peculiar*, is synonymous with the term *queer.* Thus, it is fitting that the very queer enterprise of tabletop roleplaying games holds the potential for queer players to come into their own power.

Queer Legibility

The final topic I want to address in this discussion is that of queer legibility, returning to and positioning the construct within the broader literatures of identity and literacy. The conceptualization of identity I have used throughout my project draws from the post-structuralist

perspective that conceives of individuals as dynamically constructed through interactions with the environment with multiple, ever-shifting, and possibly contradictory identities. Like the playful and exuberant "reading" of the 9-year-old manga enthusiast described by Leander and Bolt (2005), meaning making is often organic, fluid, and unconsciously determined. As has been described in the section on transportation and spatial presence, many individuals are unaware of the learning that they actually experience without intentional reflection, reorganization, and integration with prior narrativization of their life experiences. Stage models of identity are perhaps so compelling for this reason. They seem to provide a trajectory for the queer experience, and their use in clinical settings, in particular, can be a powerful tool in providing queer individuals with the language to describe their experiences and to adopt progressive goals to work toward as they attempt to make sense of what a queer identity means in their life.

However, stage models of queer identity, and stage models more generally, have also been criticized (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001; Kaminski, 2000; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). Kaufman and Johnson (2004) outlined four primary limitations. They argued that the first limitation is that stage models position identity as a linear and goal-oriented process. Even stage models like the Transgender Emergence proposed by Lev (2004), that acknowledges non-linear identity pathways, nonetheless present the stages in a linear narrative with a clear progression from negative to positive identity experiences. The second limitation is in regard to the understated social context of identity negotiation, with identity and behavior emphasized. In contrast, in this project, I have used concepts like the *rhizomatic assemblage* proposed by Leander and Bolt (2005) to position identity as the perpetual movement and interaction between the self and the environment. One of the environmental factors that many queer individuals negotiate throughout their lives is stigma, with associated oppression and violence. Kaufman and

Johnson argued that, contrary to the suggestions from stage models that culminate in final stages of identity development characterized by terms like *integration* (Troidan, 1989; Lev, 2004) or *synthesis* (Cass, 1979; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996), stigma management is a lifelong process that is never resolved. Lastly, stage models do not account for the breadth of variance in how queer identities are experienced from moment to moment and how they co-exist and intersect with other salient identities, such as disability or race or societal roles or professional/work identities. Ultimately, Kaufman and Johnson argued that research into queer identity development is better served by attending to the processes that underlie all types of identity development. In their own research, this has meant drawing on *reflected appraisals* and *situational identity negotiation* while remaining cognizant of how stigma intersects with these processes.

Although not often explicitly stated within identity theory, *literacy*, or the process of making sense, is inherent in many identity theories, such as the concept of *reflected appraisals* used by Kaufman and Johnson (2004), which refers to the perceptions an individual has regarding how others perceive them. These appraisals are central to the sense individuals are able to make of themselves and their social environments and how they negotiate comprehension of these identities moving forward. I endeavored to further the interconnection between identity theory and literacy through my use of the term *legibility* in reference to queer identities.

In my study, I sought to explore how queer players of tabletop roleplaying games negotiated legibility of their queer identities within the context of tabletop roleplaying games, and the findings of my study underscore the importance of being able to make sense of oneself within social environments. Players needed to see themselves within the possibility and potential they perceived within the play space. The legibility of players was intimately connected with their desire to enter certain spaces, the sense they made of themselves and their environments

within the space, and their experience of pleasure within the space. The play space was full of opportunity and potential where players were allowed to read and write themselves into different realms of experience. Furthermore, the transformational effects of play, particularly regarding self-concept are well-substantiated in the literature (Bowman and Hugass, 2021: Green and Brock, 2010; Balakrishnan and Sundar, 2011), and were particularly important to the self-concept of players.

Players shared that among their most meaningful play experiences were when their DM intentionally centered the experiences of players. By making special accommodations to the game, DMs demonstrated that the presence, needs, and contributions of players were not only recognized, but valued. This study also demonstrated that in environments characterized by acceptance and appreciation, players felt more comfortable engaging in the types of immersive play associated with personal growth and expansion. Acceptance, and a distinct lack of judgement or punishment, created environments where players felt safe to make mistakes, as well as to explore and experiment, which included breaking rules and pushing boundaries. This study demonstrated that transgression was vital to the tabletop roleplaying experiences of the queer players interviewed, as well as my peer-debriefer, Zendaya. However, my data also showed that as players grew more confident in their ability to pursue affirming modes of gender expression in their lives, they felt less of a need to play with gender in their roleplay, indicating that transgression is indicative of unmet needs.

The accounts of players within this study demonstrate that moments of conflict, like all interactions, are learning opportunities. It is vitally important that the sense that is made in these instances of disruption are not violent to the self-concept and autonomy of individuals. As members of a marginalized community, and often multiply marginalized communities, such as

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neurodivergent and queer, the importance to players of finding spaces of relief and refuge, let alone growth and expansion, cannot be overstated. Furthermore, one of the most important findings is in how the transformative power of tabletop roleplaying games was facilitated through intentional steering and reflection of their play experiences. This process was crucial to the ability of players to build bridges between their play experiences and the fullness of their lived experiences.

Ultimately, my findings support the assertions of Kaufman and Johnson (2004), as well as other post-structuralist scholars of identity (Pfeffer, 2014), that negotiation and maintenance of queer identity follows the same interactional processes as any other identity. However, possibility and potential, dynamic movement and fluidity, concepts that participants associated with the term *queer* are also central to my conceptualization of *legibility* itself. Whereas the field at one time prioritized the establishment of a stable identity, the accounts of my participants suggested experiences of pleasure through destabilization, as it was through being willingly unsettled and intentionally troubling the waters that participants were able to glean new perspectives and insights into themselves, each other, and the worlds in which they lived. The queer players of tabletop roleplaying games within my study found joy in making sense to others, of others, and of themselves. However, this process of meaning-making requires that individuals enter the unknown, and though feeling unsettled can be uncomfortable, when supported appropriately, participants also found it exhilarating and liberating.

Lastly, this study's focus on pleasure and its consideration for the barriers to pleasure not only decenters oppressive narratives of the queer experience and provides a vantage point from which we can see oppressive structures more clearly, but also highlights possible avenues for how we can nurture and grow these experiences elsewhere. The participants within this study

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demonstrated that legibility is not only about how they are read or read the world, but also their ability to use the tools at their disposal to write themselves in new ways, to make new meaning, to extend outward toward potential and possibility. Ultimately, I affirm what other queer visionaries of color have argued before me — pleasure is a matter of equity; and although minimizing harm is important, maximizing pleasure, particularly through attention to the experience of legibility, is where *the magic* happens.

Consent Form and Survey

Thank you for your interest in participating in this research study. Below you will be asked to verify that you meet the participant requirements. If you meet all requirements and provide consent to the terms of participation, you will then be directed to the survey portion of the study. After the survey has been completed, you will be contacted within two weeks to set up an interview time using the email address you provide.

All three of the following criteria are required for participation in the study. Please verify that you meet all criteria by selecting all that apply.

- I am over the age of 18. (Please specify age)
- I hold a gender or sexual identity that falls under the Queer/LGBT spectrum (non-binary, agender, bisexual, trans, asexual, etc.).
- I have experience with tabletop roleplaying games (either as a player or DM/GM)

Before participation in this research study begins, please read the Informed Consent Form, which outlines the purpose of this research study, how you will be asked to participate, and how your information will be used. After you have read the document, please indicate whether you agree to the terms of participation. [Link to Consent Form]

If you have any questions regarding the Informed Consent Form, please email Eboneigh Harris at eboneigh.harris@utexas.edu.

Do you consent to participate in this research study?

- Yes, I consent to being included in this research study.
- No, I do not wish to participate.

Now that you have consented to participate and have indicated that you meet all criteria for participation, please complete the following survey. The survey is expected to take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete.

You may stop the survey at any time by closing your browser. You may withdraw from the study at any time by emailing Eboneigh Harris at eboneigh.harris@utexas.edu.

Interviews will be scheduled via email. Please provide the email address you check most regularly below.

The following questions will ask about your tabletop roleplaying experiences.

For the following questions, enter only the number with no commas or spaces.

- For how many years have you been playing tabletop roleplaying games?
- At what age did you first start playing tabletop roleplaying games?

Have you played a tabletop roleplaying game in the last year?

- Yes
- No

Are you currently engaged in a campaign?

- Yes
- No

Do you have experience running a campaign as a DM/GM?

- Yes
- No

With whom among the following have you played in a campaign? Select all that apply.

- Parent
- Sibling
- Friend
- Partner
- Co-worker/Supervisor
- Neighbor
- Other (Please specify)

Which of the following ways have you played tabletop roleplaying games? Select all that apply.

- In-Person
- Video chat
- Text chat
- Other (Please specify)

Please rate the importance of each of the following items to your overall enjoyment of tabletop roleplaying games. (Not at all important, Somewhat important, Moderately important, Extremely important

- Character development
- Roleplaying Strategy
- Storytelling Community building
- among players
- Combat

For the next few questions, please think about the longest running campaign in which you have participated.

For the following questions, enter only the number with no commas or spaces.

- Approximately how many sessions was your longest campaign?
- On average, how many hours long was each session?

On average, how often did your party meet?

- Twice a week
- Once a week
- Twice a month
- Once a month
- Other (Please specify)

The following questions will ask about aspects of your gender identity.

Does your current gender identity align with the gender you were assigned at birth?

- Yes
- No

How would you describe your gender identity?

Which pronouns would you prefer to be used when referring to you?

Approximately how many people do you have in your life who <u>DEFINITELY</u> know about your **gender identity** <u>AND </u>with whom you can talk about it openly?

- 0
- 1-2
- 3-4

- 5 or more

In regard to the previous question, how would you describe your relationship with those individuals? Select all that apply.

- Parent
- Sibling
- Friend
- Partner
- Co-worker/Supervisor
- Neighbor
- Support group
- Other (Please specify)

How long have you been able to talk openly about your gender identity with the individuals selected in the previous questions?

- Less than a year
- 1-5 years
- 6-10 years
- More than 10 years

Have you ever played a character with a **gender identity** different from your own?

- Yes
- No

Have you played in campaigns with individuals who <u>DEFINITELY</u> knew about your **gender identity** <u>AND</u> with whom you could talk about it openly?

- Yes
- No

The following questions will ask about aspects of your sexual identity.

How would you describe your sexual identity?

Approximately how many people do you have in your life who <u>DEFINITELY</u> know about your *sexual identity* <u>AND</u> with whom you can talk about it openly?

- 0
- 1-2
- 3-4

- 5 or more

In regard to the previous question, how would you describe your relationship with those individuals? Select all that apply.

- Parent
- Sibling
- Friend
- Partner
- Co-worker/Supervisor
- Neighbor
- Support group
- Other (Please specify)

How long have you been able to talk openly about your sexual identity with the individuals selected in the previous questions?

- Less than a year
- 1-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 6-10 years
- More than 10 years

Have you played in campaigns with individuals who <u>DEFINITELY </u>knew about your *sexual identity* <u>AND</u> with whom you could talk about it openly?

- Yes
- No

Have you ever played a character with a **sexual identity** different from your own?

- Yes
- No

Interview Questions

What pronouns do you use?

Pseudonym?

Tabletop Roleplaying Games (TTRPGs)

1. What TTRPGs are you familiar with?
2. How did you come to play TTRPGs? Tell me about those first experiences.
3. What did you like about TTRPGs? What made you keep playing?
4. What is your favorite part about TTRPGs?
5. What is your most favorite campaign? What makes that campaign so special to you?
6. Tell me about your current campaign? How is it different from past campaigns?
7. Other than the game-specific mechanics of building characters, what is your process?
8. What kind of characters do you typically play? Are there certain character types that you are drawn to over others or characters you feel particularly attached to?
9. Who do you primarily play TTRPGs with? How are your game experiences different when playing with different groups?
10. Tell me about a moment in gameplay where you felt joyous, buoyant, or free.
11. Tell me about a moment in gameplay where you felt upset.
12. Do your role-playing experiences ever bleed into your daily life or vice versa? What does that look like?
13. Do you ever contribute to any creative products stemming from your roleplaying experiences? Blogs, journals, comics, art?
14. What do you think you have gotten out of your experiences playing TTRPGs? What is the biggest take-away?
15. Are there other areas in your life where you are able to play or be playful? What are those experiences like?

Queer Experiences

1. How do you typically identify when it comes to your gender and sexuality? What labels do you typically use for yourself? What do these labels mean to you, how would you define them?

2. When did you first learn those terms and from where?

3. When and how did you come to understand yourself as queer? What was that process like for you?

4. How have you navigated your queer identity and expressing that identity?

5. How do you connect with your queer identity or the queer community? How have you built that connection over time?

6. Tell me about a moment in your life where you felt upset due to experiences related to your queer identity.

7. Tell me about a moment in your life where you felt joy in your queer identity?

Tabletop Roleplaying Games and Queer Identity

1. How do TTRPGs and identifying as queer appear on your personal timeline?

2. How has being queer influenced your role-playing experiences?

3. How has playing TTRPGs influenced your queer identities?

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