Ludocharacter Resonance: Documenting Queer Play Strategies in Tabletop Role-Playing Games

Emily J. B. Morris

Te Kura Hoahoa—School of Design Innovation
Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington
Te Aro Campus, 139 Vivian St
Wellington 6011
Aotearoa—New Zealand
emily.morris@vuw.ac.nz

Keywords

tabletop role-playing games, dungeons & dragons, queerness, queer play, ludonarrative dissonance, character

INTRODUCTION

Research on tabletop role-playing games (TTRPG/s) is a relatively small area of wider game studies literature given the recent widespread popularity of titles such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (5th Edition, Wizards of the Coast 2014). Even smaller still is the intersection of TTRPG research with lenses such as queerness; while some scholarship has illuminated issues of queer and intersectional representation in TTRPGs,[1] as TTRPG designer Avery Alder (2013) posits, "we need to queer more than just the cover art in order to be talking about queer games." This sentiment similarly applies to research around TTRPGs: queerness is not merely (nor often) found in the pages of sourcebooks, but in the action of play that breathes life into them.

Shaw & Ruberg's paradigm of queer game studies (2017) encapsulates this understanding, yet is primarily focused on the application of queer theory, intersectional lenses, and the action of queering play to video game scholarship. I have argued this thinking can also more broadly be applied to TTRPG research (Morris 2024) to analyse how players queer TTRPGs through play, with a particular focus on character design and role-play. While a variety of documented methods of queering video and digital games exists,[2] there are no studies that document specific queer play methods (which I have termed *queer play strategies*) in TTRPG play. This is a relatively novel approach to TTRPG research,[3] where recent focus has placed emphasis on queerness in game design.[4]

The aim of the present study is to document and identify ways which queer players transform TTRPG play through various queer play strategies. This is part of my ongoing PhD research, which is concerned with examining how the action of queering might transform TTRPG play and players. Informed by the paradigm of queer game studies (Shaw & Ruberg 2017) and a hybrid theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934) and Butlerian performativity theory (Butler 1993), this study was a narrow but necessarily deep exploration into

how a player engaged in queer play over a sustained period. Using queer and qualitative autoethnographic methods (Jones & Adams 2010), the transformative fixed and fluid understandings of the reflexive self produced as part of the research (Boll 2024; Chang 2008; Custer 2014) were embraced to better understand how queer play could be transformative of not only the play experience, but players themselves. Autoethnographic data was collected from February 2024 to July 2025 from a weekly *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign I played in through a mixture of field notes, various transcripts, and memos. The data was then analysed using Critical Thematic Analysis methods (Lawless & Chen 2018) and interdisciplinary lenses including queer theory, feminist studies, masculinity studies, crip theory, and media studies to identify relevant queer play strategies. In a subsequent study, these findings were discussed with other players from the same campaign through semi-structured interviews to confirm and further findings.

The results showed that a wide range of queer play strategies could be identified from sustained long-term TTRPG play. Some of these linked clearly to existing queer play methods in video game-centric queer game studies, such as 'playing to lose' or 'playing for the purposes of no fun' (Ruberg 2015, 2019). However a large range of novel queer play strategies were also identified, ranging from 'leaning into vocal and/or symbolic dissonance during play' to 'developing queer ethics of care beyond violence and heroism.' Importantly, intersectional queer play strategies were also identified, such as 'queer crip play' and 'playing to heal,' both of which were used to explore ways in which disability could be experienced and felt bodily in TTRPG play experiences.

A major theme identified across these strategies was the novel concept of *ludocharacter resonance.* Drawing from the well-known concept of ludonarrative dissonance (Hocking 2007), which describes the disruptive phenomena in video games when the mechanics and narrative clash dissonantly and may disrupt the overall experience, ludocharacter resonance can be applied more broadly to any character-based game. Ludocharacter resonance occurs when the build and mechanics of the character (such as ability scores or class features in a *Dungeons & Dragons* context) reinforce the backstory and personality of the character, and vice versa. By leaning into ludocharacter resonance, which might utilise queer play strategies like designing a character to fail, authentic and engaging characters can be created and played that can be related to around the table resulting in a transformative play experience, as findings demonstrate. This is one example of a major contribution from this study. Other contributions include the cataloguing of a wide range of novel TTRPG-focused queer play strategies and the rich theoretical language used to describe them. Ideally, this research should encourage further exploration into intersectional queer play strategies identified in TTRPG play, and the transformative potential of such.

BIO
Emily Morris (she/they) is a queer designer, Teaching Fellow, tutor, and full-time PhD Candidate at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington's Te Kura Hoahoa—School of Design in Aotearoa New Zealand. Their academic interests are interdisciplinary, highlighting queer theory, feminist studies, (tabletop role-playing) game design, play, visual narratives, fan studies, crip theory, and transformative works, alongside design studies more broadly. Her upcoming games can be found at Splice of Life Games, and her academic blog can be found at Queer TTRPG Studies.

ENDNOTES

1 See: Carter 2022; Sihvonen & Stenros 2018; Stenros & Sihvonen 2015.

2 See: Chang 2015, 2017; Galloway 2006; Halberstam 2017; Juul in Ruberg & Shaw 2017; Lauteria 2012; Ruberg 2015, 2018, 2019; Sundén 2009.

3 Sihvonen & Stenros (2019a) have elsewhere discussed the role of queering play in role-playing games (RPG/s) but are primarily interested in queer play "produced in game spaces through game design and player action" (116). My research is less concerned with how RPG design may/may not facilitate queer play, but rather how players queer TTRPG play themselves through a combination of mechanic-based and role-play actions rooted in character performance.

4 See: Alder & St Patrick 2013; Berge 2021; Morris 2022; Sihvonen & Stenros 2019b.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alder, A. & St Patrick, S. 2013. *Beyond representation.* Video. Vimeo. https://vimeo.com/78106127

Berge, P. 2021. "Monster power. Rebel heart. Gay sword." In *Interactive Storytelling. ICIDS 2021. Lecture Notes in Computer Science,* edited by A. Mitchell & M. Vosmeer, vol. 13138. Cham, CH: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92300-6_16

Blumer, H. 1969. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ, USA: Prentice Hall.

Boll, T. 2024. Meet 'Me' in the Field(-Notes): The Selves and Self-Relations of Autoethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry,* 30 (8–9), 674–683. https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004231196921

Butler, J. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York, NY, USA; London, UK: Routledge.

Carter, T. J. 2022. *They Came to Slay: The Queer Culture of D&D.* 404 Ink Ltd.

Chang, H. 2008. *Autoethnography as Method.* New York, NY, USA: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315433370

Chang, E. Y. 2015. Love Is in the Air: Queer (Im)Possibility and Straightwashing in FrontierVille and World of Warcraft. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking,* 2 (2), 6–31. https://doi.org/10.14321/QED.2.2.0006

Chang, E. Y. 2017. "Queergaming." In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by B. Ruberg & A. Shaw, 15–23. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1mtz7kr.5

Custer, D. 2014. Autoethnography as a Transformative Research Method. *The Qualitative Report,* 19 (37), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2014.1011

Galloway, A. R. 2006. "Countergaming." In *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, vol. 18, 107–126. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttss5p.9

Halberstam, J. 2017. "Queer Gaming: Gaming, Hacking, and Going Turbo." In *Queer Game Studies*, edited by B. Ruberg & A. Shaw, 187–200. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1mtz7kr.22

Hocking, C. 2007. Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock. *Click Nothing*. https://www.clicknothing.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html.

Jones, S. H., & Adams, T. E. 2010. "Autoethnography Is a Queer Method." In *Queer Methods and Methodologies,* edited by K. Browne & C. J. Nash, 195–215. London, UK: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315603223

Lauteria, E. W. 2012. Ga(y)Mer Theory: Queer Modding as Resistance. *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture,* 12 (2), Article 6. http://reconstruction.digitalodu.com/Issues/122/Lauteria_Evan.shtml

Lawless, B., & Chen, Y. 2018. Developing a Method of Critical Thematic Analysis for Qualitative Communication Inquiry. *Howard Journal of Communications,* 30 (1), 92–106. https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2018.1439423.

Mead, G. H. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Edited by C. W. Morris. Chicago, IL, USA: The University of Chicago Press.

Morris, E. J. B. 2022. *Exploring Identity Through Gameplay: The Intersections of Tabletop Role-Playing Games, Game Design, and Queerness.* Master's thesis, Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington. https://doi.org/10.26686/wgtn.21508257

Morris, E. J. B. 2024. Queer TTRPG Studies: A Manifesto. *Queer TTRPG Studies*. https://queerttrpgstudies.com/queer-ttrpg-studies-a-manifesto/

Ruberg, B. 2015. No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games That Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt. *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking,* 2 (2), 108–124. https://doi.org/10.14321/qed.2.2.0108

Ruberg, B. 2018. Queerness and Video Games: Queer Game Studies and New Perspectives through Play. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 24 (4), 543–55. https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/706702

Ruberg, B. 2019. *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*. New York, NY, USA: NYU Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv335kw36.

Ruberg, B., & Shaw, A., eds. 2017. "The Arts of Failure: Jack Halberstam in Conversation with Jesper Juul." In *Queer Game Studies*, 201–210. Minneapolis, MN, USA: University of Minnesota Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1mtz7kr.23

Sihvonen, T., & Stenros, J. 2018. "Cues for Queer Play: Carving a Possibility Space for LGBTQ Role-Play." In *Queerness in Play,* edited by T. Harper, M. B. Adams,

&   N.   Taylor,   167–184.   Springer   International   Publishing.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90542-6_10

Sihvonen, T., & Stenros, J. 2019a. "Queering Games, Play, and Culture through
Transgressive Role-Playing Games." In *Transgression in Games and Play*, edited
by   K.   Jørgensen   &   F.   Karlsen,   115–130.   The   MIT   Press.
10.7551/mitpress/11550.001.0001

Sihvonen, T., & Stenros, J. 2019b. On the Importance of Queer Romances – Role-
Play as Exploration and Performance of Sexuality. *WiderScreen,* 22 (1–2).
http://widerscreen.fi/numerot/2019-1-2/on-the-importance-of-queer-romances-
role-play-as-exploration-and-performance-of-sexuality/

Shaw, A., & Ruberg, B. 2017. "Introduction: Imagining Queer Game Studies." In
Queer Game Studies, edited by B. Ruberg & A. Shaw, ix-xxxiv. Minneapolis,
MN,   USA: University   of   Minnesota   Press.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1mtz7kr.3.

Stenros, J., & Sihvonen, T. 2015. Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer
Sexuality in RPG Source Books. *Analog Game Studies,* 2 (5).
https://analoggamestudies.org/2015/07/out-of-the-dungeons-representations-of-
queer-sexuality-in-rpg-source-books/

Sundén, J. 2009. Play as Transgression: An Ethnographic Approach to Queer Game
Cultures. *DiGRA '09 - Proceedings of the 2009 DiGRA International Conference:
Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory,* 5, 1–7.
http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/09287.40551.pdf

Wizards of the Coast. 2014. *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition Player's Handbook.*
Tabletop role-playing game. Wizards of the Coast.