

TTRPGS' COLLABORATIVE STORYTELLING AS A VECTOR FOR TRANS-GENDER CONNECTION

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ABSTRACT

Table-Top Roleplaying Games (TTRPGs) are arguably more popular than ever. These games provide a system that encourages collaborative storytelling, and this reflective piece aims to explore the capacity of this storytelling method for cross-gender connection. As it is possible for players to inhabit gendered roles different to their own through play, TTRPGs allow for a simultaneity of player-gender and character-gender that offers a unique storytelling potential as bridges across gendered divides are built, and stories are shaped by a multiplicity of interconnected gender identities. Ultimately, this reflective piece aims to explore how gender shapes the stories that people tell while playing TTRPGs and, conversely, how TTRPGs open up unique possibilities for connection with alternative gendered perspectives. This piece also aims to queer the storytelling capacities of a form that has historically displayed hostility towards alternative experiences and presentations of gender, despite, as this piece will argue, its ironically natural predisposition towards trans-gender connection. The current rise in popularity of a storytelling technique that allows and encourages trans-gender connection is significant, as it suggests a willingness and desire to create these moments of connection across gendered boundaries despite the demands of the patriarchal society that we live in. Specifically, this piece will examine the queer play of contemporary table-top role-players Ally Beardsley and Beth May and reflect on my own experiences as a queer *Dungeons & Dragons* player.

INTRODUCTION

Table-Top Roleplaying Games (TTRPGs) have become increasingly popular thanks to video broadcasts such as the *Dimension 20* campaigns and podcasts like *Dungeons and Daddies*, in which these games are played for an audience (termed 'actual play series'). This reflective article explores how these series build gaming narratives that cross gendered divides through the unique capacity for play with gender that TTRPGs allow. Though TTRPGs have a troubled history with representations of marginalised gender identities, contemporary table-top players such as Beth May and Ally Beardsley have nevertheless constructed narratives which interconnect their voices with their characters' to query and queer patriarchal gender expectations. My analysis of contemporary play will be interwoven with reflections on my own experiences as a queer *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D) player which will further demonstrate TTRPGs' capacity to create a space that invites and allows us to redefine gendered binaries through play.

SITUATING TTRPGS AND GENDER

TTRPGs, especially older systems like *D&D*, have a contentious relationship with their marginalised player bases. Jaako Stenros and Tanja Sihvonen (2015, p.73) note that despite public perception of *D&D* as 'dangerous, blasphemous and alternative, the culture of tabletop-playing games has remained fairly conservative'. They examined *D&D*'s sourcebooks: manuals designed to guide players through the system. Persephone Blue Berge (2025, p.337) also identifies a persistent hostility to any marginalised gender identities within *D&D* sourcebooks, pointing out that 'early editions of the game included sex-based limitations on characters' statistics (female characters had arbitrary, misogynistic limits on their strength, for example)'. These arbitrary limitations encouraged a culture that used 'realism' as an excuse to keep women and queer players at the margins. One of my favourite board games as a child offered players the choice between 'Hero' and 'Woman Hero' as their starting characters, and of course, the 'Hero' had a higher strength score. From a very early age I have been disappointed by the gendered capacities of the rules-as-written. Of course, these attitudes are not confined to the *D&D* handbooks. Foucault (2018, p.1421) speaks of attitudes to non-normative sexualities more broadly, stating that 'in order to gain mastery over it in reality, it had first become necessary to subjugate it at the level of language [...] and extinguish the words that rendered it too visibly present'. The culture of silence that emerged surrounding the inclusion of queerness in TTRPG sourcebooks was a means of such linguistic subjugation. If the sourcebooks did not provide a mechanic for playing queer, they implicitly prohibited queer play.

However, an understanding of the performative nature of gender makes it possible to see that TTRPGs are suited towards the queer play that they reject. Judith Butler (2002, p.174) argues that 'if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse

of primary and stable identity'. TTRPGs provide players with a game system that encourages fantastical thinking. Therefore, Butler's concept of gender being a 'fantasy' that is produced via 'discourse' shows us that a storytelling format where every element is constituted via the players' performances is a space in which a multitude of alternative gendered imaginings can take place. I have always found that the performative nature of TTRPGs enables a mode of play that encourages players to play fast and loose with gender, and I will explore the ways this manifests in home games and in contemporary actual play media.

MASCULINITIES IN TTRPGS

One prominent *D&D* player that plays with gender in her performance is Beth May. Her performance as Ron Stampler in the *D&D* podcast *Dungeons and Daddies*, is deeply satirical of hypermasculine behaviour. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (2018, p.1214) suggests that to 'posit the Woman is to posit the absolute Other,' refusing 'that she could be a subject, a peer'. To play tabletop games as a woman is to enter a space which instantly renders her alien. I have vivid memories of longing to join various *D&D* clubs but not wanting to be the only player there that was not a teenage boy. In spaces that are so dominated by men, your otherness is tangible, but May is acutely aware of her otherness, and plays with it, producing a narrative woven from two overlapping gendered voices. *Dungeons and Daddies* is a comedy podcast which narrowly toes the line between comedy and an affective commentary on gender roles and masculinity. We can see this when Ron Stampler sees another character use magic for the first time in the campaign, and when asked how it feels seeing that, May's response (in Burch et al., 2019) is: 'Emasculating.' This response is punchy, and pokes fun at the macho comparison between men that results in emasculation of one and affirmation of masculinity for the other. It is also funny because of the absurdity of the response that is created by the overlapping of May and Ron's voices. It is May who makes the comedic decision to respond, from her position of alterity, prioritising a comedic jab at hyper-masculine behaviour over a more in-character response informed by Ron's experiences as a man. Melissa Allen (2024, p.171) comments that '*D&D* is a space where men expect to feel comfortable and safe', adding another layer of humour to May's response. It catches listeners off guard to hear such open criticism of masculinity in a space that so often caters towards it. Perhaps as a small way of resisting TTRPGs constant catering towards the patriarchy, I tend to play female characters despite being non-binary, as I feel an urge to balance the gender of the tables I play at. I also feel that, like in May's performance, any commentary on patriarchy and misogyny in-game lands doubly hard when it forces the players to acknowledge that those same systems operate at their very table.

Despite the podcast being a comedy, it also delves into more serious territory, especially when examining the relationship between Ron Stampler and his father. Towards the end of the campaign, the players watch a sequence of Ron's memories, the first of which is when Ron's father forces him to dive from a high board and refuses to help him learn to swim. The Dungeon Master (DM), Anthony Burch (in Burch et al., 2021), describes how Ron's father 'puts his hands behind his head and just looks at Ron. And Little Ron, you are kicking as hard as you can and sucking in water into your mouth, and you can feel yourself falling underneath the water'. Burch uses water imagery across these memories to indicate helplessness. This helplessness is reversed by the final memory sequence, as Burch details how Ron's father attempted to kill Ron, and how Ron accidentally pushed his father into a lake. Burch draws a parallel between the first incident at the pool and this last one, by saying that 'he is beginning to—much like you did at the pool—he's beginning to flip up—' and 'he's flailing'. Now it is Ron's father that feels the helplessness of drowning. This is a satisfying conclusion to the story that May and Burch have been telling together, as the cycle of abuse perpetuated by the assumption of patriarchal power is broken. Their story is made much more resonant by the connection and layering of their gendered perspectives that the form enables.

TTRPGS' QUEER PLAY

Having seen how Beth May plays with the categories of masculine and feminine, it is now possible to look at methods for queer and trans play. Emma French explores this idea in an article about *Dimension 20's Misfits and Magic*. French (2025, p.159) argues that for the *Misfits and Magic* players, the 'language of derivation becomes transformative, framing the actual play show as a counternarrative'. Derivation (the process of using other stories, genres, or narrative elements in your storytelling) is fairly common in TTRPGs. For example, a common trope I have seen clamoured for is a masquerade ball session, as this potentially allows for the furthering of romantic narratives, as well as the opportunity to utilise costumes and masks as metaphor, which lends itself particularly well to queer storytelling. Once again, narrative layering, this time not only of gendered perspectives but also of texts, produces a queer narrative that would not be possible outside of the TTRPG.

This process of renegotiation also occurs across other *Dimension 20* campaigns, through performances given by the player Ally Beardsley. The campaign *Never Stop Blowing Up (NSBU)* also engages with derivation, as *NSBU* takes place quite literally inside an action movie. As a result, we get Beardsley (a nonbinary player) playing Russell Feeld, a male video store employee, who is displaced into the body of Jennifer Drips, a female cat-burgling action movie character. Like TTRPGs, action films are also largely perceived to be a male preserve. Beardsley seems keenly aware of this, and delivers a performance like May's, designed to humorously satirise hypermasculinity. They initially describe Jennifer Drips in motion as she 'slow-motion flips back, one leg gloriously filling the screen' (*Be Kind, Rewind*, 2024, 43:18-43:34), the attention paid to her body serves as a nod to the ways in which women in films are typically 'styled accordingly' to the 'determining male gaze' that beholds them (Mulvey, 1975, p.11). It also cleverly serves to set up some bathos as Russell is transported into Jennifer's body, and Beardsley describes his movement as 'just kind of swishing back and forth, and the latex is like... (mimics squeaking)' (*Be Kind, Rewind*, 2024, 1:45:13-1:45:22). Where Jennifer was 'gloriously' comfortable moving her body, Russell makes uncomfortable movements, unused to inhabiting a body that is on display. Beardsley also takes a moment to note how Russell is feeling

emotionally. They state that Russell ‘feels real bodily fear in a way that he hasn't ever felt before’ (*Be Kind, Rewind*, 2024, 1:46:19-1:46:32). Thus far, Russell has moved through life in a body that is unchallenged, and now that has changed, he must renegotiate his relationship to the world around him. From their position as someone whose gender is non-normative, Beardsley uses the system of *Never Stop Blowing Up*'s dual characters to weave a narrative about the experience of changing from a normative to a non-normative body, effectively telling a transgender story with cisgender characters.

Berge (2025, p.347) suggests that conservative *D&D* players believe that ‘the power of transformation must not disrupt a cisnormative fantasy’, however, the transformative power of TTRPGs enables players to do exactly that. In the *Dimension 20* campaign, *Cloudward, Ho!*, Beardsley plays Olethra McLeod, a transgender woman. During the introduction sequence in the first episode, in which viewers are introduced to Olethra, a baby at the time, she is referred to neutrally by every character, using terms such as ‘baby’ and ‘kiddo’ (*On High We Go*, 2025, 13:50-14:22). Continually utilising gender-neutral language for Olethra at a point much before she would have articulated her own identity disrupts the ‘cisnormative fantasy’ of bioessentialist assumptions. The players use the imaginative capacities of *D&D* to imagine a world in which bioessentialist rhetoric is inconceivable. To see a style of play that is so unapologetically transgender is incredibly heartening to me given the current climate of hostility towards transgender people. This consistent affirmation of self-determination creates a transgender narrative that would not be possible outside the imaginative frame of TTRPGs. Furthermore, Beardsley's play style proves that TTRPGs have the power to query and destabilise existing power structures through imaginings of alternative worlds.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, TTRPGs allow for much more expansive stories to be told about gender, as the game systems themselves enable the interconnection of two potentially different positionalities. We can see this process employed in contemporary actual play media to shape narratives that effectively criticise patriarchal codes of behaviour or imagine entirely trans-positive environments. Overall, this demonstrates that TTRPGs allow for a unique point of connection for gendered perspectives that results in nuanced and affective narratives. Furthermore, it is possible to see that TTRPGs have much wider capacities for connection than simply among the tables they are played at, as they can be used to imagine worlds that provide alternatives to the power structures that we live under. TTRPGs also provide a space that encourages layering of gendered perspectives, and therefore encourages their players to connect with a different gendered positionality than their own by inhabiting it. Ultimately, TTRPGs are a space that has always been invested in gender, I find that the narratives being told are shifting from conservative to inclusive, and I hope that this reflects wider changes taking place in our society.

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