Playing with Gender: A Narrative Inquiry into Two Gender Diverse Peoples' Stories of

Exploring Gender in Tabletop Roleplaying Games

by

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Abstract

Tabletop roleplaying games allow players to creatively explore their identities in an enjoyable, social context. Identity exploration may be an especially important task for gender diverse people, who may experience difficulties in creating a positive gender identity due to stigma. In this study I address the questions: how do gender diverse people explore their identities through tabletop roleplaying games? How does their TTRPG play support their well-being? And how does their TTRPG fit into the broader story of their lives? I use a narrative inquiry approach that seeks to understand and represent participants' experiences in the broader context of their lives. Narrative inquiry also helped me understand and represent my own position relative to the research questions and the participants. Working with two participants, T and Chloe, I created narratives that tell the story of their gender identity development and TTRPG play situated within the broader context of their lives. I conducted two interviews with each participant then wrote a draft narrative of each of their experiences. I met with participants a third time to review the draft narrative and then made changes based on their feedback. I discuss their narratives in terms of the concepts of psychological space, identity exploration, identity development, and intersectionality. I highlight the relevance of this research to counselling psychology, in that this study provides evidence that TTRPGs may be an effective intervention for supporting the identity development and well-being of gender diverse people. I also share a narrative account of my own experiences of gender exploration in which I engaged in relation to the stories of T and Chloe. In all, I hope that the narratives shared in this study provide ways for readers to imagine new ways to support gender diverse people—using TTRPGs or other approaches—and to imagine new ways for understanding themselves.

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Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) are a family of games that involve players roleplaying as characters and collaboratively creating a fictional narrative. TTRPGs are played out as a conversation among players. These games have traditionally been played in person with players using pen and paper to keep track of game information such as character abilities and hit points (i.e. the amount of damage a character can sustain), although TTRPGs can also be played online, or by correspondence (i.e. mail or email). TTRPGs originated in 1974 with the publication of the first edition of Dungeons & Dragons and have become increasingly popular over the years (White et al., 2018). The publisher of Dungeons & Dragons estimates that 50 million people have played their game alone (Wieland, 2020), and there are now thousands of different TTRPGs for players to choose from.

Typically, a TTRPG will be run by a single player called the *dungeon master* (DM) or *game master* (GM). Although TTRPGs vary in the levels of control assigned to the GM and other players—and some TTRPGs are played with no GM at all— the GM traditionally establishes the fictional world of the game, sets the goals of the game, and roleplays the denizens of that world—called *non-player characters* (NPCs)—who make up the supporting cast of the game's story. The other players control the protagonists of the story, called *player characters* (PCs). TTRPGs typically include an element of chance in determining the progress of the story. For example, in the most popular TTRPGs, such as Dungeons & Dragons and Shadowrun, dice are used to determine if a character's desired action is successful. TTRPGs are played out in meetings called sessions. TTRPGs can be played in a single session or across multiple sessions. When a TTRPG lasts many sessions and covers several story arcs it is called a *campaign*.

I first started playing TTRPGs in 2015. I had been playing board games regularly with a group of friends and two of these friends were playing a TTRPG campaign. They would tell us stories about the game. I was attracted to how creative and engaging their game sounded and I asked them if they would start a new campaign with me. Along with two other players, we started a new game using the system Pathfinder with my friend Josh acting as the GM. I loved the freedom that TTRPGs allowed. Unlike board games, which have strict sets of rules that make gameplay flow in predictable ways, TTRPG gameplay allowed whatever you could imagine and agree upon with your fellow players. TTRPGs were also exciting to me because they were driven by narrative. I loved being able to tell a story with my friends that was fun, dramatic, and funny.

For me, TTRPGs were a way to stay connected to my friends. It was a (schedules permitting) weekly opportunity to meet up and have fun together. TTRPGs were a creative outlet for me where I could combine pieces of the stories that I loved—from novels, movies, and TV—with my own ideas. TTRPGs also let me play with different ways of being. I think many of the PCs that I made represented ideals that I strove for. For example, I created a PC named Guiton LeSabre to be an exemplar of strong, silent, cool masculinity.

After the first campaign that our group played, I took on the role of primary GM and ran several campaigns over the next nine years. In 2019, I and two friends, Lee and Craig, with whom I had been playing a campaign decided to start a new campaign, record our play, and publish it online as a podcast. This type of podcast that lets listeners sit in on TTRPG play is called an *actual play*. We called our podcast The Neon Streets. Between 2020 and 2024 we recorded and published 65 episodes of the Neon Streets that spanned two campaigns. In 2022, we received a message on Twitter from a listener asking us to set up a Discord server so that fans of The Neon Streets had a place to connect and discuss the podcast. Discord is an online platform

that allows users to create and control servers that consist of text and voice chat rooms. We created a Discord server and listeners slowly started to join. As I monitored the server and engaged with listeners, one thing that I was struck by was how so many of our listeners were trans, nonbinary, or otherwise gender diverse (i.e., they were identifying with genders other than the binary gender they were assigned at birth). I wondered why so many gender diverse people liked our podcast—which was run by three cisgender men—and more generally, I wondered what the appeal of TTRPGs was for gender diverse people.

I went online and read about gender diverse peoples' experiences playing TTRPGs. Players shared that TTRPGs gave them opportunities to be the people that they wanted to be, which, for many of them, was not or had not always been possible in their real lives. The motivation to roleplay a character that you want to be like was similar to my own experience and is also a consistent finding in the academic literature on gender diversity and TTRPG play, which I review in the next chapter. I wondered how gender diverse people explored their identities through TTRPG play, and I wondered how that exploration supported their well-being and fit into the story of their life. When I needed a topic for my thesis, I came back to this wondering, and these questions became my research questions.

At the same time that I wondered about the place of TTRPG play in gender diverse peoples' lives, I worried about the political and social environments that gender diverse people were living in. In the United States and at home in Alberta, laws were being passed to: restrict access to gender-affirming medical care for transgender youths (French, 2024; MAP, n.d.); notify parents when two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other gender and sexual minority students (2SLGBTQ+) joined gay-straight alliances at their school, potentially compromising their safety (Gibson, 2022); notify parents when students started using different

pronouns at school, thereby potentially compromising their safety (Gibson, 2022); and restrict

transgender people's access to public bathrooms (Lavietes, 2024). Gender diverse and other

2SLGBTQ+ youths experience high rates of bullying and other forms of victimization compared

to their straight cisgender peers (Abreu & Kenny, 2018; Gower et al., 2018a). Hostile political

climates and social stigma have been linked to the serious disparities in health and well-being

that gender diverse people experience compared to their cisgender peers (Schanzle et al., 2023;

Tebbe & Budge, 2022). These disparities include higher rates of depression, anxiety,

post-traumatic stress disorder, disordered eating, self-harm, substance use, and suicidality among

gender diverse people (Tebbe & Budge, 2022). With such serious disparities, it is extremely

important that scholars and practitioners look for ways to support gender diverse people's

well-being. Two factors found to be associated with the well-being of gender diverse people are

positive identity development and belonging (Barr et al., 2016; Coburn et al., 2022; Doyle et al.,

2021; Gower, 2018b; Higa at al., 2014; Tebbe & Budge, 2022). My own experience, which was

supported by my literature review in the following chapter, suggested that TTRPGs are effective

for helping players develop their identity and create a sense of belonging. TTRPGs, then, seemed

like they may be an effective intervention for supporting the health and well-being of gender

diverse people.

In this study, I will explore the questions of how gender diverse people explore their

identities through TTRPG play, how their play impacts their well-being, and how their play fits

into the broader story of their life. In the following chapters, I explore these questions with two

participants, T and Chloe, using a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In

chapter two I present my literature review on the TTRPGs and their value for helping gender

diverse people explore their identities. In chapter three I describe narrative inquiry and relate the

story of how this research project developed and why I chose narrative inquiry as a methodology.

I also introduce my participants, T and Chloe, and outline the procedures I used to conduct this

study. In chapters four and five I present the stories of T's and Chloe's gender identity

development, which include, but are not limited to, how TTRPGs impacted that development. In

chapter six, I discuss the stories of T and Chloe in terms of psychological space, identity

exploration, identity development, intersectionality, and their relevance to the practice of

counselling psychology. In Chapter seven, I tell my own story of gender identity exploration as I

experienced through my work with T and Chloe. Finally, in chapter seven I offer my conclusions

based on my research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this review, I will briefly outline the history of research on TTRPGs as therapeutic tools before moving into a discussion of the benefits of TTRPG play. I conclude the review by looking at several master's and doctoral theses that have inquired specifically into how TTRPG players explore gender identity through TTRPG play. I highlight relevant theoretical work on TTRPG and identity exploration and findings from primary research that suggest TTRPG play is useful for identity exploration. For all of the primary research, I offer critiques on study methodologies.

TTRPGs as Therapeutic Tools

For one of my classes I wrote a proposal for a TTRPG-based social-emotional skills group for structurally marginalized teens. In my research for that paper, I found that researchers have been exploring the benefits of TTRPG play for some time. Dungeons & Dragons First Edition—the original TTRPG—was released in 1974. In 1986, Zayas and Lewis published the first research that looked at Dungeons & Dragons as a therapeutic tool. The authors included Dungeons & Dragons in an after school social skills group they ran for eight- and nine-year-old boys in New York. The school had identified the boys as having a variety of social-emotional challenges, and Zayas and Lewis found that playing Dungeons & Dragons promoted group cohesion and helped them develop their social-emotional skills. Several other authors (e.g., Abbott et al., 2021; Daniau, 2016; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013; Slaughter & Orth, 2023; Wright et al., 2020) have also found that TTRPGs are effective for promoting social-emotional skills in populations such as gifted children, forensic inpatients, and college students.

Blackmon (1994) wrote about a very different application of TTRPGs. He described a case involving his psychotherapy work with a young man Blackmon described as schizotypal

who had serious difficulties forming relationships. Blackmon was having difficulty building

rapport with the client, but found that when the client started discussing his TTRPG play in

sessions, they were able to discuss difficult, emotional topics in the context of the clients'

roleplay. Eventually the client was able to discuss his issues more openly with Blackmon, which

Blackmon credited to the client being able to safely explore his fantasies and emotions through

his character in the game.

Blackmon's (1994) observations about the therapeutic value of TTRPG play are

reminiscent of therapeutic approaches such as drama therapy and play therapy. In both of these

approaches to therapy, imaginative play is understood to let people express themselves in ways

that would be difficult or impossible otherwise (Kedem-Tahar, 1996; Koukourikos et al., 2021).

Through imaginative play, people can express thoughts and feelings through characters. The

psychological distance between the player and the character gives the player a sense of safety,

which lets them more freely explore parts of themselves that may be too confusing or painful to

explore directly (Kedem-Tahar, 1996; Koukourikos et al., 2021). In addition, through play,

people may be able to express things that they do not have words for, which is why play therapy

is often used with young children (Koukourikos et al., 2021). As imaginative forms of play,

TTRPGs bear similarities to expressive forms of therapy such as drama therapy and play therapy.

Like Blackmon, I believe that TTRPGs have value for helping people explore themselves

in ways that might otherwise be difficult or impossible. As part of my project, I wanted to better

understand the research on TTRPGs and gender identity exploration, especially gender diverse

peoples' identity explorations. I was pleasantly surprised to find that there were several

researchers and theorists who had noticed gender diverse peoples' attraction to TTRPGs and

inquired into their experiences. This was a small body of literature, but one that appeared to be

growing quite quickly. I could not find peer-reviewed articles that addressed the topic of gender

exploration and TTRPGS, however, there were a number of doctoral and master's theses on this

topic. Despite the lower quality of these studies, I decided to review them in this chapter because

they are highly relevant to the current research and offer valuable insights despite their

limitations. Before reviewing these doctoral and master's thesis studies, I will discuss several

peer reviewed articles and book chapters that address the benefits of TTRPG play and highlight

their value for helping players explore their identities.

The Benefits of TTRPG Play

I found several peer-reviewed articles and book chapters that addressed the value of

TTRPG play more generally, including processes of self-exploration and identity development.

Coe (2017) conducted a grounded theory study of motivations for playing TTRPGs. Using

convenience and snowball sampling, Coe recruited 16 cisgender participants, most of whom

were white. 14 participants had experience playing TTRPGS, and two did not. Coe selected these

two as non-confirming participants to help him understand how motivations to play TTRPGs

may differ from motivations to play other games, such as basketball or soccer. Coe's interview

questions were guided by his own experiences playing TTRPGs as well as by the concept of

immersion (Bowman and Standiford, 2016, as cited in Coe, 2017)—the depth of a person's

engagement in a game—which he suspected might be a motivating factor for playing TTRPGSs.

Coe generated two themes to describe participants' motivations for beginning TTRPG play:

Being Recruited, and *Creative Curiosity*. *Being Recruited* involved participants looking for social

interaction and safety in TTRPG groups and having friends ask them to play. *Creative Curiosity*

involved participants looking to TTRPG play for an opportunity to express themselves

creatively. Coe identified five motivations that participants had for continuing to play TTRPGs:

Imaginative Creativity, *Belonging and Interacting*, *Relief and Safety*, *Learning*, and *Exploring and Knowing Self*. *Imaginative Creativity* involved participants being motivated to create characters and stories, *Belonging and Interacting* involved participants looking to meet social needs, and *Relief and Safety* involved participants looking to destress and find comfort in TTRPG play. *Learning* involved participants being motivated to learn from the experiences of their TTRPG characters and apply those learnings to their life, and *Exploring and Knowing Self* involved participants being motivated to play characters with varying degrees of similarity to their own identities as a way to explore different ways of being and behaving. Coe synthesized all seven of these motivating factors into a single, higher order motivating factor that he called *Becoming*, which he described as participants being motivated to achieve a more ideal identity and/or state of being through meeting their psychological, social-emotional, and developmental needs. The categories *Learning* and *Exploring and Knowing Self* are most relevant to my current research project, as they suggest that some people engage in TTRPG play to explore new behaviours and identities.

   In her book, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*, Bowman (2010) discusses the value of roleplaying games (RPGs)—which include TTRPGs, live action roleplaying games (LARPs), and computerized RPGs. She identified three important functions of RPGs: problem solving, community building, and identity alteration. These functions are similar, respectively, to Coe's (2017) themes of *Learning*, *Belonging and Interacting*, and *Exploring and Knowing Self*. Bowman discussed problem solving as the first key function of RPGs. She argued that RPGs serve as contexts for players to learn important social-emotional, cognitive, and cultural skills, among other kinds of skills. For example, stressful in-game situations may help players develop emotion regulation skills, and conflict among characters can help players develop conflict

resolution skills. Players can also learn perspective taking as they imagine how their player

character (PC) would behave and compare their PC's perspective to their own. Bowman also

highlighted the cause and effect learning that can happen in RPGs. For example, a player who

decides to have their PC lie to a non-player character (NPC) may learn that a consequence of

such an action is a damaged relationship. For cultural learning, Bowan argued that when culture

is made salient in games, RPGs also have the potential to teach players about other cultures.

Bowman also talked about how TTRPGs can help players develop important cognitive skills,

such as listening comprehension and verbal expression.

Bowman (2010) discussed community building as the second important function of RPG

play. She described RPGs as contexts where people can come together and create a sense of

belonging. Bowman noted that many TTRPG players feel socially alienated and that this aspect

of TTRPG play may be especially important for them. Bowman argued that RPGs are useful for

helping people with social challenges build relationships since the psychological distance

between player and character helps people feel more comfortable interacting with others and

building social bonds.

Bowman (2010) identified identity alteration as the third key function of RPGs. She

noted that roleplaying a character in an RPG can affect how players understand themselves.

Drawing on the work of MacKay (2001, as cited in Bowman, 2010), Bowman suggested that

through creating and playing a PC, players can create a sense of unity in their real lives,

which—like all of our lives—are often characterized by chaotic and fragmented experience. This

perspective reminded me of the words of Carr (1986), who wrote:

> Our lives admit of sometimes more, sometimes less coherence; they hang together
>
> reasonably well, but they occasionally tend to fall apart. Coherence seems to be a need

imposed on us whether we seek it or not. Things need to make sense. We feel the lack of

sense when it goes missing. The unity of self, not as an underlying identity but as a life

that hangs together, is not a pregiven condition but an achievement. Some of us succeed,

it seems, better than others. None of us succeeds totally. We keep at it. What we're doing

is telling and retelling, to ourselves and to others, the story of what we are about and what

we are. (p. 97)

Bowman argued, and I agree, that TTRPGs offer players a space to create coherence in their life

stories through narrative play.

Speaking broadly about her primary research on TTRPG play, Bowman noted that RPG

players drew on their roleplay as a source of learning and self-exploration, which is similar to

what Coe (2017) found. In particular, participants shared that through playing their RPG

characters they have come to better understand aspects of their out-of-game identities. As one of

her participants noted, "All my characters teach me something about myself because I get to

externalize a part of me and really look at how it interacts and plays with other people" (p. 177).

Bowman described this aspect of RPG play as "try[ing] on different hats" (p. 127), that can help

players enhance aspects of their identities or explore traits that contradict aspects of their

identities, all in the safety of an imaginary world. As Bowman explained, safety comes from an

understanding that a player's primary identity—their sense of self—still exists in the

out-of-game world and can remain intact, regardless of their actions as a PC in the game world.

The potential for RPG play to lead to growth and learning is in the permeability of the boundary

between the in- and out-of-game worlds that lets a player put pieces of themselves into the game

world, play with them, and take new learnings and self-understandings from that play back to

their out-of-game world.

Gender Identity Exploration in TTRPG Play

In her essay on roleplaying gameplay as resistance, Cross (2012) discussed fiction as a "laboratory of dreams" (p. 71). This is a concept coined by Rose (1994) that frames feminist fiction as a space where people can freely play with social and political ideas outside of the restrictive demands of everyday life. Creators and audiences of feminist fiction can imagine new possibilities for being, behaving, and organizing communities and societies and can imaginatively test out these possibilities. As Cross explained using the words of Rose (1994),

> Activism is always grounded in a challenging present that demands immediate,
> short-term solutions merely to get us all to the next day of resistance; what can be lost in
> that struggle for scraps of earth is a vision of a better world. Rose argues that "more
> thinkable and sustainable futures are nurtured by these dreams and myths of other
> wor(l)ds; and feminists, whether working inside or outside the laboratories, have need of
> the laboratory of dreams" (Rose 1994, p. 229). (p. 72)[1]

Cross argued further that feminist praxis is one and the same as imagination—that without an imaginative vision of the future, there is no way to act meaningfully on the world–and that fictional worlds are ideal spaces to form this praxis. In terms of my research, this idea is exciting since it frames players' identity exploration as a political act and highlights how this kind of imaginative exploration can positively impact not only the players, but also the worlds around them.

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[1] The concept of the laboratory of dreams has strong resonances with narrative inquiry as a methodology. As will be discussed at length in the next chapter, narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) embraces the transformative potential of stories: stories give us space to imagine ourselves and our worlds in new ways, which opens up the possibility for new ways to act on the world. This quality of stories is part of my justification for using narrative inquiry as a methodology. I hope that through telling the stories of my participants and myself in relation to each other, the reader will find some space to imagine themself and their world in new—and I hope more generative and just—ways.

Like Coe (2017) and Bowman (2010), Cross (2012) argued that roleplaying involves processes of identity exploration and becoming. Cross specifically addressed the process of becoming in terms of gender. She argued that as players play PCs in their imaginary world, they interact with gender norms in active ways. Rather than being passively formed by gender norms imposed on them by their environments, through roleplaying, players actively construct gender identities in dialectical relationships with gender norms, and these identity explorations can open up new ways of gendered becoming in life outside of the game. Cross described living this process of gendered becoming in her own roleplay—she spoke mainly about video roleplaying games rather than TTRPGs—which reverberated into her life outside of her roleplay:

Self and other dissolved, and I became aware of a process of becoming in my gendered life, a horizon that I might never reach but one worth pursuing. It was this cascade of realizations that led me to draw strength from my fictional characters in World of Warcraft and Neverwinter Nights and realize that what was true in the virtual world may be true in the physical one. It allowed me to direct my own process of becoming and continuity between myself and my roleplayed characters became apparent. Just as in the game, I first began from what I knew; it then metamorphosed into something beyond that and finally fed back into me. (p.75)

Cross's work highlights the value of roleplaying games for self-exploration of gender and, through the concept of the dream laboratory, links this self-exploration to the possibility of creating new political and social realities. When we see new possibilities for ourselves we can move towards them and grow and change, and when we change ourselves we open up new ways of acting on the world.

Cross (2012) gave us a way to understand how gender identity exploration happens in TTRPGs and why it is valuable. Now I want to review several research studies that specifically inquired into experiences of TTRPG players and gender identity exploration. In her master's thesis, Just (2018) looked at how women roleplayers resisted gendered expectations through playing TTRPGs and LARPs. Just interviewed 12 women LARPers and 12 women TTRPG players about their experiences and also engaged in participant observation during one session of Dungeons and Dragons and one LARP session. Just was new to both of these groups. She transcribed the interviews and coded them using a combination of deductive and inductive codes. For the deductive codes, she explained that she used the theoretical constructs of *reflective characters*—characters that reflect aspects of the player's out-of-game identity—and *oppositional personas*—characters that are highly dissimilar from the player's out-of-game identity—to inform codes, as she believed these were important constructs for understanding her research question. Just created other codes inductively. From these codes, Just created three overarching themes: *Collective Storytelling*, *Oppositional Personas and Reflective Characters*, and *Personal and Societal Impact*. Collective Storytelling involved players' enjoyment of the social and creative aspects of roleplaying, and how these two aspects were combined in RPGs with players collaborating to create a narrative. Participants shared that they often felt a strong sense of comradery with their gaming groups, and this comradery created a sense of safety that let them be more creative in their roleplay. In this theme Just also included instances of men discriminating against women in RPGs. The participants described men speaking down to them, assuming they did not know anything about RPGs, or treating them as if they did not belong in roleplaying spaces. One trans woman shared an experience of attending a LARP getaway where the organizers told her that she had to bunk with the men. She tried to stay in a tent but was not

allowed to do this either. The organizers eventually let her stay in the foyer of the women's

cabin. The participant described being treated with hostility by organizers as well as the other

women at the camp. Just argued that these instances of gender discrimination undermine

comradery and impede players' ability to engage in roleplay safely and creatively. In her theme

Oppositional Personas and Reflective Characters, Just noted that participants would sometimes

play characters with different genders than themselves, which she considered an oppositional

persona. In this theme, Just seemed to mainly describe the oppositional personas and reflective

characters that her participants had played, rather than their reasons for playing these characters

or the impacts that they had on them. These impacts were addressed in the final theme, *Personal*

and Societal Impact, but I wonder if the use of oppositional personas and reflective characters as

deductive codes made it difficult for Just to analyze the relationships between the types of

characters participants played and the impacts that they experienced, as she does not address

these relationships. In her final theme, *Personal and Societal Impacts*, Just looked at the value

that participants found in their roleplaying. Just highlighted roleplaying as an emotional outlet

where participants felt they could express feelings that they could not express in other areas of

their life. One participant noted that she felt more able to express masculine traits, such as

assertiveness, without fear of being perceived as bossy or angry. Just described this type of play

as "passive resistance" (p. 38) to gender norms, a description which I feel does not recognize

participants' agency in their gendered play. As Cross (2012) noted, participants actively engage

with gender norms when they roleplay: this participant made an active choice to play a

masculine gender expression, which she felt unable to express outside of the game due to social

pressures. In this way, she was actively negotiating her personal understandings and expressions

of gender through her play. Regarding societal impacts, Just highlighted how roleplayers stood

up against sexist and racist behaviour of TTRPG players and companies, which led to
anti-oppressive changes in the cultures and practices of those groups and companies. My overall
impression of this study was that Just's data analysis demonstrated limited trustworthiness,
particularly with respect to her use of deductive codes, which I feel may have limited her ability
to understand participants' experiences of gender exploration through roleplay. Despite this, it is
interesting to see that Just's findings were similar to those of Coe (2017) and Bowman (2010) in
that she found that her participants played RPGs to meet social needs and to play with and learn
about aspects of themselves.

In another master's thesis, Bendele (2019) looked at the ways that men negotiated
masculinity through TTRPG play. Specifically, Bendele's research questions were:

How do men understand their involvement in tabletop roleplaying games? How do men

understand their experiences of masculinity? What connections are there between

involvement in tabletop roleplaying games and experiences of masculinity? (p. 22)

All seven participants in this study, who were each interviewed once, were cisgender men. Three
identified as straight, two as gay, one as demisexual, and one did not identify their sexual
identity. Bendele coded interview transcripts using inductive and deductive codes. Bendele
derived the deductive codes from his research questions quoted above, which were informed by
his review of theories of masculinity. Bendele created three overarching themes. Bendele called
the first theme *These spaces are filled with diverse characters…but not people*. This theme
centered on participants' experiences of playing TTRPGs in groups that consisted mainly of
white men. Despite largely homogenous groups, most participants described having played
characters that differed from their out-of-game sexual and gender identities and that this type of
roleplay was accepted by their groups. The second theme was called *You don't have to be manly*

to play TTRPGs, but you do have to be smart. Being smart is the alternative to being strong, which centered on what Bendele saw as participants' experiences of constructing masculine identities using their intellects. I was not convinced of the importance or the validity of this theme as Bendele offered little in the way of thick and rich descriptions of participants' experiences to highlight how they experienced intellectual play as relating to their masculinity. As part of the theme, Bendele also reported that several participants felt empowered by playing characters that were different from themselves, but Bendele did not explain these experiences further, leaving me to guess at what these experiences were actually like for participants. I wonder if Bendele's short interview lengths and the theoretical framework he used to guide his study limited his ability to inquire more fully into participants' experiences of masculinity in their TTRPG play. Bendele called his third theme *These spaces facilitate intimate connections, even if these connections are only between characters.* This theme centered on how TTRPG play helped the participants meet their social needs. In particular, participants discussed feeling connected to other characters in the game through their roleplay. Bendele interpreted this as a sign that TTRPG play helped participants express emotions and experience intimacy within the game, which they may have trouble doing outside of the game. Once again, Bendele offered little evidence to support this interpretation, which made it difficult for me to trust. Bendele's methodology had several limitations including short interviews and perhaps an overreliance on deductive approaches to coding. However, my biggest frustration with this study was that Bendele focused exclusively on participants' experiences of masculinity in its development of interview questions and in its data analysis. I suspect these decisions may have obscured—or perhaps transformed—players' gender explorations that did not involve masculinity. In this way, I wonder if Bendele really created what he set out to study: he asked about masculinity and he

found masculinity. I wonder if, had he had asked more about how participants' played with gender and subverted masculinity in their play, Bendele would have learned about how his participants' TTRPG play destabilized their experiences of masculinity.

In their master's thesis, Shepherd (2021) combined ethnography and narrative inquiry in a study of participants' identity building processes. Five 2SLGBTQ+ participants from their local TTRPG community took part, some of whom Shepherd knew personally. Shepherd designed a TTRPG world and played a campaign—consisting of 10 three-hour game sessions—with their participants, observing and noting how they explored their identities in the game. Shepherd also conducted five interviews with each participant where Shepherd asked them questions that explored their 2SLGBTQ+ identities and gender identity development, as well as their experiences playing Shepherd's game. Interviews were semistructured, with Shepherd choosing several prompts to guide each interview, such as "Can you tell me the story of how you came to terms with your LGBTQ+ identity?" (p.19), and "Tell me a story of a moment from the campaign that has had an impact on you" (p. 19). Shepherd provided brief narratives (approximately two pages each) for each player that outlined some of their early contexts and experiences with gender and gender identity development, but did not explore participants' previous explorations of gender in TTRPG play. Through their collective play and through the interviews, Shepherd found that participants tended to create characters that included aspects of their out-of-game identities and that they experienced *narrative empathy* for their characters. Narrative empathy—a concept borrowed from Keen (2006, as cited in Shepherd, 2021)—refers to a person's emotional attachment to a fictional character. Shepherd suggests that narrative empathy is the mechanism by which character's in-game experiences impact player's out-of-game understandings of themselves. In interviews, participants reflected on their

similarities and differences with their characters and how their play allowed them to express

aspects of themselves that they did not express in their out-of-game lives. Participants also spoke

about how their characters gave them opportunities to revisit and relive stories from their past in

some way, such as the participant who described their character as "the kid I never was in high

school and refused to be. It is kind of fun going back and being like, 'what if I was enthusiastic

about this?'" (p. 51). During their play, Shepherd noted that the table was open and accepting of

players' exploration of their PC's genders and sexualities, and that these explorations led to

discussions around the table where players reflected on their out-of-game genders and

sexualities. Shepherd concluded that TTRPG play can be a useful tool for exploring 2SLGBTQ+

identities when players feel safe and free to do so within the social contexts of their group.

Additionally, Shepherd highlighted the value of gaming groups as contexts for reflecting on

TTRPG play and relating it to—and integrating it into—players' out-of-game identities.

Shepherd noted that one participant did not report experiencing narrative empathy with his

character and did not report engaging in identity exploration during the game. Shepherd

discussed this participant's experience to illustrate how TTRPGs, when they are welcoming and

supportive, can provide invitations for players to explore identities, but that TTRPG play does

not necessarily involve identity exploration: sometimes players just play for fun. I appreciated

that Shepherd drew on narrative inquiry to better understand participants' experiences, however,

their engagement with this method seemed superficial. Their interviews were highly structured

compared to the structure that Clandinin (2023) recommends for narrative inquiry, which may

have silenced some of the participants' stories. In addition, Shepherd does not engage with the

reflective aspects of narrative inquiry, giving the reader little insight into how Shepherd's own

experiences may have shaped the inquiry, or how the inquiry shaped Shepherd's personal

understandings of gender and sexuality. This study was heavily guided by theoretical

frameworks, such as narrative empathy and queer theory. This structure may have focused

Shepherd's attention to important aspects of participant experience, but I wonder if it may have

also had the effect of flattening participants' experiences to fit in more neatly with these guiding

theories. In my reading, it felt at times like the participants' experiences were reduced to

examples of theoretical constructs. This left me little room to imagine other interpretations of

participants' experiences or how participants' experiences could shape my own understandings

of sexuality and gender.

For his master's thesis, Barnhart (2024) conducted a mixed methods survey to answer the

question: "what impact do identity and identity-making processes through TTRPG play have on

the experiences and storytelling of TTRPG players?" (p. 19). The author recruited 20 participants

from three TTRPG-centered Discord servers. (As noted in Chapter 1, Discord is an online

platform which lets users create servers that host message boards and voice chat rooms).

Barnhart chose to recruit participants on Discord servers because of their relatively smaller size

and greater community cohesion compared to other platforms such as Reddit and Twitter, which

he felt would reduce deliberately inaccurate responding to survey questions. He chose a small

sample size because many of the survey questions collected short-answer qualitative data and a

small sample size was more practical for data analysis. The sample included nine gender diverse

people—including eight nonbinary people, three gender fluid people, one demimasculine person,

and one demi-boy—and 11 cisgender people—including nine men and one woman. Nine of the

participants identified as heterosexual on the survey, five as bisexual, two as gay, two as asexual,

and one did not clearly identify their sexuality. Barnhart asked participants questions about their

identity, their experiences of playing as PCs, their experiences playing as GMs, and their

experiences as 2SLGBTQ+ players. All participants were over the age of 18, with most

participants being between the ages of 20 and 40. Barnhart coded surveys by breaking them into

smaller pieces and coding each piece individually, and synthesized these initial codes into several

themes, which he called *Identity*, *Perspectives*, and *Gender and Sexuality*. For *Identity*, Barnhart

discussed participants' experiences of: playing a variety of PCs with different identities from

their own; including aspects of their own identity in their characters; discovering new aspects of

their PCs gender and sexual identities through play; and discovering aspects of their own identity

through playing characters with identities that differed (at least initially) from their out-of-game

identities. In the *Perspectives* theme, Barnhart discussed participants' experiences of playing

with and through their PCs worldviews and personal values. Participants shared that they

included their own values in their PCs and that their characters often adhered to these values in

idealized ways, such as by always standing against injustice. Participants also shared that they

created characters with idealized traits and bodies, such as being exceptionally charismatic or

brave and having bodies that were more feminine than players' bodies. Barnhart did not ask

questions about how participants' roleplay impacted their life outside of the game, which limited

insight into this phenomenon, but some participants indicated that their roleplay impacted their

identity outside of the game. For example, one participant shared that through roleplaying a

genderqueer character they realized that they were gender fluid. Barnhart's theme *Gender and*

Sexuality mainly addressed aspects of identity already covered in the Identity theme and seemed

largely superfluous. Barnhart's findings were limited by the choice to use a survey, which gave

no opportunity for Barnhart and their participants' to discuss participants' responses. His

findings, however, tended to line up with those of other researchers, in that participants indicated

that they played TTRPGs as a way to live out idealized fantasies and explore aspects of

themselves to some degree, which at least occasionally impacted their out-of-game experiences.

In their doctoral dissertation, Morris (2022) conducted a mixed methods survey of a

convenience sample of queer young adults 16 years old and older with some knowledge of or

experience playing TTRPGs. Morris recruited participants by posting in 2SLGBTQ+ TTRPG

Facebook groups. Morris's survey used closed- and open-ended questions to collect demographic

information, participants' perspectives on TTRPGs and TTRPG system design, and participants'

experiences playing queer TTRPG systems. Morris reported that they coded qualitative results

thematically, but did not give a detailed explanation of how they did this. Morris' goal was to use

the information collected to help them create an original TTRPG system. This review will focus

on the results of the survey that related to identity exploration, although this was only a small

part of Morris's study. Morris was able to recruit 331 participants, mostly between the ages of 16

and 35. Participants mainly identified as white New Zealanders, with some participants

identifying as Maori and other ethnicities. Morris did not give a complete break down of the

genders of participants, but reported that: 75 participants identified as women and most of them

as cisgender women; 54 participants identified as men and most of them as cisgender men; and

75 participants identified as nonbinary. Three hundred and seventeen participants indicated that

they held at least one 2SLGBTQ+ identity. For the quantitative results, almost all participants

reported that character creation was an important part of TTRPG play for them and that their

characters were important to them. Three hundred and six participants reported that they had

created characters that are similar to themselves in some way and 229 participants reported that

they had created characters that they wished they were more similar to in their out-of-game lives.

Two hundred and fifty-eight participants reported that they explored their gender identity through

TTRPG play, 265 reported that they explored their gender expression, and 239 reported that they

explored their sexuality. Two hundred and forty-seven participants reported that character

creation helped them learn something about themselves, and 215 reported that their roleplay had

helped them learn something about themselves. Regarding the results of the short answer survey

questions, Morris generated several qualitative themes that related to identity exploration

including: *Players and Party*, *GMs & DMs*, *Comfort, Communication & Respect*, and

Characters, Queerness, & Identity. The first three of these themes related to the context in which

participants played TTRPGs. Participants reported that it was important for them to play in

groups that had open minds towards issues of queer identity and were respectful of how players

played those identities with their PCs. Participants also noted that, for exploring queer identities,

it was useful to have a GM who collaborated with players and focused on queer narratives. In the

theme *Characters, Queerness, & Identity*, Morris discussed participants' experiences of

exploring new queer identities through characters that differed from themselves, which

sometimes led to new understandings of their identities outside of the game. Participants also

discussed learning about their identities through playing heterosexual and cisgender characters,

or through playing characters that were very different from themselves in other ways. Morris's

survey provided evidence that queer TTRPG players use TTRPGs as a way to explore their queer

identities, and that the social context of the TTRPG game is an important factor in their ability to

explore these identities.

Concluding Remarks

There is little research in the area of gender exploration through TTRPG play, and much

of the research that exists is not peer-reviewed and has significant limitations in terms of

methodologies. The qualitative research studies were hampered by insufficient exploration of

researcher positionality and its impact on findings as well as by deductive approaches to coding that may have obscured participants' experiences. The mixed methods surveys gathered information on a broad range of topics relating to gender and TTRPG play, however, these studies were limited by their non-probability sampling methods, which do not allow for generalization beyond the samples, and by the researchers' inability to follow-up on participants' qualitative survey responses. Despite these limitations, this body of literature points to the value of TTRPG play for helping people of all genders explore their gender identities, as well as other aspects of their identity. This literature suggests that TTRPG play can help players meet important social needs while providing a context for them to learn about themselves and transfer that learning to their out-of-game lives. I see my research project adding to this body of literature in two important ways: (1) this body of literature provides little context for the lives of participants and how TTRPG play fits into participants' lives, which I hope to address in my research; and (2) this body of research uniformly fails to address how researchers are implicated in their studies and how that may affect both the findings they generate as well as the researchers' own experiences. I believe this first point is important for helping people interested in using TTRPGs as an intervention to help gender diverse and gender questioning people explore their identities. I believe this second point is important for generating trustworthy findings. I believe this second point is also useful for helping people imagine how thoughtful engagement with queer narratives and/or TTRPG play might help them explore their own gender identities.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Coming to Narrative Inquiry

To understand my choice to use narrative inquiry as my method, you need to understand the story of how this thesis project came to be. Early in my degree, I talked to my supervisor, Dr. Melissa Tremblay, about potential projects. Because of my background in youth work, I was interested in doing research with structurally marginalized youth. Melissa was already working on a project investigating structurally marginalized youths' experiences with police. She suggested that I choose a topic that would fit under the umbrella of this project so I could utilize that project's funding. So, I developed a proposal to research the experiences that unhoused youth had with police. With Melissa's guidance, I chose qualitative description as a guiding methodology for the project. Qualitative description is a pragmatic approach to research that "is the method of choice when straight descriptions of phenomena are desired" (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 339). Researchers using qualitative description tend to be interested in gathering information from participants and representing that information in straightforward ways that address their research. Because of its simplicity, qualitative description seemed like a good approach to use as a novice researcher.

When I worked with structurally marginalized youths, I came to understand more deeply that their lives are complicated and that their histories—which often included abuse and neglect from caregivers and others, frequent changes in caregivers and placements, violence, housing instability, experiences of prejudice, mental health challenges, and substance use—were important to understanding their behaviour. My work at Yellowhead Youth Centre (YYC) was particularly influential in developing this understanding. YYC is a youth treatment centre run by the Alberta Government that functions as a last-stop group home for youth with significant

behavioural challenges and also houses short-term secure service programs (i.e., the youths are locked in) for youths who have demonstrated especially dangerous behaviours (e.g., suicidality, risky substance use, frequent running away from home, and/or violence) and for youths who are or who authorities believe are at risk of being sexually exploited in the sex trade. As a frontline residential youth worker at YYC, mine and my colleagues' practices with youths were guided by policies rooted in a behavioural modification approach that focused on maintaining a structure of rewards and punishments to shape youths' behaviour. We were also taught to take trauma-informed and relational approaches to working with youths, but in my experience, behavioural approaches tended to dominate and override these gentler, more humanistic approaches. In my experience, staff often treated the youths' without a consideration of their histories and their experiences of their current contexts, which felt wrong to me. It felt like this kind of practice failed to treat the youths like full human beings and risked causing them harm or aggravating the pain and trauma underlying the institutionally unacceptable behaviours that led social workers and caregivers to take the youths to YYC in the first place.

When I thought about using qualitative description for my work with unhoused youths, it felt similarly wrong: I did not want to inquire into their experiences without a deliberate consideration of their histories and context. I wanted to understand my participants as full human beings, which I hoped would help me better understand their experiences with police. While I believe qualitative description could be bent to this use, it did not seem like it was structured to help me understand participants in this way. I wanted a methodology that would help me investigate participants' stories in the context of their lives.

Narrative inquiry

I turned to narrative inquiry and I started reading the methodological writings of

Clandinin and Connelly. Narrative inquiry is based on the understanding that experience is

narrative: people tell stories about themselves and others to make sense of their pasts and to

guide their present action (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). So, from this perspective, to understand

experience a researcher must understand participants' stories. As Connelly and Clandinin (2006)

explain,

> Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of
>
> thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the
>
> phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry is to adopt a particular view of experience as
>
> phenomenon under study. (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006, p. 477)

Furthermore, since narrative inquirers understand experience as narrative, they recognize that

their understanding of participants' experiences is also narrative. Because of this, Clandinin and

Connelly (2000) say that, "narrative is both the phenomenon and the method of the social

sciences" (18). Narrative inquiry is the study of stories through the telling of stories. Practically

speaking, in terms of my research with unhoused youths, I was attracted to narrative inquiry as a

method because I believed that it would help me to understand and to represent the interactions

of unhoused youths with police in the way that these youths actually experienced those

interactions, which is in the storied context of their lives.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have elaborated on how narrative inquirers can better

understand the stories of their participants with their metaphor of the three-dimensional narrative

inquiry space. In this metaphor, as inquirers attend to participants' stories, they do so with

attention to the dimensions of time, place, and sociality. When attending to the dimension of

time, inquirers pay attention to how participants have a past, present, and a future. Their experiences in any given moment are informed by past experiences and imagined futures. In narrative inquiry, understanding experiences necessitates understanding how experiences have emerged from previous experiences and how experiences are understood in relation to imagined future. Within the dimension of time, narrative inquirers also pay attention to how people, places, and phenomena change over time. The dimension of place includes the physical contexts that surround a person. Narrative inquirers pay attention to people's experience of their physical contexts and how those contexts and experiences change over time. The dimension of sociality includes people's personal and social conditions. Personal conditions refer to internal aspects of a person that shape their lives such as hopes, desires, feelings, morals, and aesthetic preferences. Social conditions refer to a person's social context including social forces and people.

The sociality dimension also includes the relationship between the research and the participant (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquirers pay attention to the relationships that they have with participants and with the stories that participants share, and understand that these relationships shape their understandings. As Connelly and Clandinin (2006) put it, "Narrative inquirers cannot subtract themselves from relationship" (p. 480). In narrative inquiry, the researcher understands that they are fundamentally part of the phenomenon that they are studying. From this perspective it becomes important for researchers to inquire into their own experiences to understand how those experiences shape relationships and participants and understandings of participant experience.

I recognized this relational aspect of narrative inquiry as helping me address another concern that I had about doing research with unhoused youths. My experiences growing up were extremely different and much more privileged compared to the structurally marginalized youths I

had worked with. I recognized that, were I to engage in research with this population, I would

have to consider how my experiences would shape my relationships with participants, and

therefore the entire research project. Qualitative researchers generally accept that their

positionality—their worldview—-influences the totality of the research process (Holmes, 2020).

Holmes (2020) recommends that researchers engage in "[o]pen and honest disclosure and

exposition of positionality [that] shows where and how the researcher believes that they have, or

may have, influenced their research" (p. 3). However, too frequently it seems to me, qualitative

researchers limit discussions of their positionality to a circumscribed statement that declares

identities they hold, which they believe to be relevant to their inquiry (e.g., Anderson et al.,

2022; Limberg et al., 2022). This practice allows a reader to wonder about how researchers'

worldviews may have impacted their study, but provides little insight into how their

understandings of the world impacted the decisions they made during the research process. Some

authors go beyond making a positionality statement by reflecting on how their positionality may

have impacted the study in their research texts (e.g., Botha et al., 2020). But even in these cases I

find myself, as a reader, left wondering how researchers navigated all the complicated decisions

in the research process with consideration of their relationship to the research topic and

participants. For example, in their study on autistic people's understandings of autism and

stigma, Botha and colleagues (2020) state that the lead researcher was autistic and that being

autistic may have changed the way they interpreted the experiences of their autistic participants.

They suggest further that a non-autistic researcher may have interpreted the results differently.

Without further inquiry into what their experience was as an autistic person and how that

experience shaped the study, the reader is left to speculate using their own understanding of

autistic experience.

Throughout a narrative inquiry researchers explore how their experiences have shaped the research process, and they represent that exploration narratively in their final research text. I saw this aspect of narrative inquiry as a useful way to help me understand how my experiences were shaping my understandings of the experiences of unhoused youth, and as a way to show the reader that understanding so that they could make informed judgments about my interpretations. I thought this was particularly important for this research project considering my lack of lived experience being unhoused. I worried that, if left silent and unexamined, my experiences could, unbeknownst to my readers, come to dominate the stories of my participants.

Changing My Research Topic

For nearly a year I worked with two agencies that supported unhoused youth in Edmonton trying to locate participants, but was unable to find enough participants to complete my study. So, with only about 10 weeks before I was supposed to complete my thesis, I had to change my topic. I had been wondering about gender diverse peoples' experiences with TTRPGs for a while, and I saw that moment as an opportunity to explore that topic. I had the same concerns about working with gender diverse people as I did about working with unhoused youth: I was concerned that understanding the context of their broader lives would be essential for understanding their experiences playing TTRPGS, and I was concerned that my lack of lived experience being gender diverse would impact my research project. Because narrative inquiry helps address these concerns, I saw it as a useful method for this study.

The Place of Theory in Narrative Inquiry

Unlike other approaches to qualitative research, narrative inquiry does not typically use theoretical frameworks to guide the research process. Instead, narrative inquiry begins with understanding experiences as it is lived and told to us by participants. Where other approaches

may aim to apply, test, and extend theories, the goal of a narrative inquiry is more to create "a

new sense of meaning and significance with respect to the research topic than it is to yield a set

of knowledge claims that might incrementally add to knowledge in the field" (Clandinin &

Connelly, 2000). Theory has a place in narrative inquiry, but it tends to be integrated into how

the inquirer understands participant narratives rather than as a guiding framework for the study.

Finding Participants

The short timeline that I worked under shaped my decision to study gender diverse

people and TTRPG play. With my involvement in the TTRPG community, I believed that I

would be able to find participants on short notice. I posted recruitment messages in The Neon

Streets Discord server and in TTRPG communities on Reddit (a website made up of online

forums) explaining the research study and the inclusion criteria. I explained that I was looking

for one or two people who identified as trans, nonbinary, or otherwise gender diverse or gender

questioning and who felt that playing TTRPGs had helped them understand their gender. Within

24 hours of posting the message on The Neon Streets Discord server I had two people contact me

to say that they were interested in participating and these were the participants that I ended up

working with for the study. They chose pseudonyms for themselves for this study, which were T

and Chloe.

T

T is 24-year-old, white, non-binary person who lives in Arizona. She is married to her

husband, who is a trans man. T has been formally diagnosed as autistic. T is also disabled and is

an ambulatory wheelchair user. T has a postsecondary degree. At the time of our conversations,

T had listened to all of my podcast, The Neon Streets, and was an active member of the The

Neon Streets Discord server.

Chloe

Chloe is a 26-year-old, white, transfeminine nonbinary person living in Louisiana. She is married and living with her husband, Remy, who is a trans man. Chloe and Remy have a polyamorous relationship. Chloe has a high school diploma and is hoping to return to school for postsecondary studies. Chloe suspects that she is neurodivergent in some way, but has not had the resources to get formally assessed. At the time of our conversations, Chloe had listened to some of my podcast, The Neon Streets, but was not an active member of the Discord server.

Procedure

I spoke to participants individually online with audio and video using the secure conferencing platform Jitsi. I spoke to each participant three separate times using a structure borrowed from Clandinin et al. (2013): in the first meeting I asked participants about their experiences, in the second meeting we went over a tentative annal I had created and they clarified and elaborated on their experiences, and in the third meeting we reviewed a draft narrative I had created. Because of the short timeline I was working under, I scheduled all of the interviews close together. I met with T for the first time on a Tuesday, for the second time on Thursday of the same week and for the third time the following Thursday. I met with Chloe for the first time on the Monday before my third meeting with Chloe, for the second time on Thursday of the following week, and for the third time a week and a half later on a Monday. In the first meeting with each participant, I focused on asking participants about their experiences of exploring their gender through TTRPG play. The only predetermined structure that I used in the interviews was making sure to ask participants to share their story of how they came to understand their gender and how TTRPG play fit into that story. My questions to participants in the interview were guided by a consideration of Clandinin and Connelly's (2000)

three-dimensional narrative inquiry space: while they told their stories I asked questions to better

understand how the dimensions of time, sociality, and place impacted their experiences. In the

second meeting I focused on working with participants to better understand the chronology of the

events that they had described in the first meeting and on asking followup questions that I had

after transcribing and reflecting on our first interview. I transcribed the first and second

interviews verbatim. Between the second and third conversations I created an anonymized draft

narrative that told the story of their experiences as I understood them and of my experiences of

the interviews. In the third conversations, I brought the draft narratives to participants. I read the

drafts aloud to participants and invited them to follow along in a shared Google Doc. I invited

participants to interrupt me to clarify, elaborate, or comment on aspects of the draft narrative. I

also asked participants to choose pseudonyms for all the people in their narratives and let them

decide which information to change in the narratives to protect their identities and how to change

that information. After I had read the draft narratives I asked participants if they felt that it

reflected their experience as they understood it. I also asked participants what their experience of

speaking to me and hearing the narratives was like. I did not transcribe the third interviews

verbatim since much of the interviews involved me reading the draft narrative aloud. Instead, I

listened to the recordings of the interviews while reading the draft narratives and made sure that

participants' feedback was incorporated into final versions of the narratives.

For the first two interviews with T, we experienced connection difficulties: there was

significant lag between when we spoke and when the other person heard. We turned off our

cameras to try to reduce the lag. For our third interview when we went over the draft narrative,

we were able to get a strong connection so we left our cameras on. In the second interview with

T there was significant lag even with our cameras off, which made it more difficult to

communicate, but we were able to navigate sharing speaking time by saying "over" (as one would on walkie-talkie) when we were finished talking. Chloe and I had fewer connection issues although in each conversation I was disconnected at least once and had to rejoin the meeting, which caused some interruptions to the flow of the conversation. Despite these connection issues, it felt to me like I was still able to communicate effectively with participants. Upon reviewing the transcripts it seemed to me like we were able to hold onto the thread of the conversations after interruptions.

I also wrote my own reflections after each interview. I wrote other reflections throughout the research project as I reflected on my participants' stories and my own experiences. I used these reflections to inform the final narrative accounts that I wrote for each participant and to inform my discussions of these accounts.

Analysis

I analyzed the data from the first two interviews within one week of conducting the second interview so that my memory of the interviews was fresh in my mind. During transcription, I made notes about different plotlines that ran through the participants' stories. I then read and reread the transcripts. Rather than coding the transcripts for smaller units of meaning as I would do for other qualitative methods, I noted what I thought were important threads in the participants' stories using the comment feature in Google Docs. I then tried to understand how the threads were connected, and how they existed in tension with each other. I did this by drafting narratives while constantly revisiting the original transcripts to ensure my narratives reflected my understandings of participants' experiences as they had related them to me. This process involved many false starts and revisions as I tried to create narratives that wove together all the various threads of their stories. For T, I found that their stories had a clear

chronology, and I decided to weave the various stories they shared into a single chronological

narrative that highlighted what they called the "oh fuck" moment of realizing they were

nonbinary as a turning point in their life. Chloe related her stories with a looser chronology than

T and without a clear dramatic turning point the way T had. Despite my intention to keep

interviews to one hour, my first two interviews with Chloe went over three hours as she and I

explored the interconnected stories of her life. I tried to arrange Chloe's story chronologically as

that was what made the most sense to me, but for her early life I found that it was easier to tell

some of her stories without adhering to strict chronological order. When Chloe reflected on her

experience of hearing the draft narrative, she shared that, despite sharing her story with a messy

chronology, it was helpful and therapeutic for her to hear her story put into a chronological order

as she had always found the story of her life to be hard to understand. When T heard the draft

narrative, they asked me to make some changes to the language I used. In particular, I talked

about how T's "oh fuck" moment led them to "restory" their life, which was language that I used

to reflect my narrative understanding of experience, but T preferred the word "recontextualize,"

so I changed the wording in the narrative to reflect their experience. In creating the two

narratives that I created with my participants, I took a broad perspective on their experiences.

While this study was aimed at understanding participant's experiences with TTRPGs, the

narratives cover their journey of gender exploration as they related it to me. As such, their

experiences with TTRPGs are nested in the other stories of their lives. This approach is informed

by a narrative understanding of experience that sees experience as continuous over time. This is

to say that our experiences "grow out of other experiences, and our experiences lead to other

experiences" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and therefore to understand an experience we need

to understand how the experiences that led to it and that followed from it.

The Relational Ethics of Narrative Inquiry

Clandinin (2023) describes relational ethics as "the very heart" of narrative inquiry (p. 17). What I understand this to mean is that narrative inquirers take on a great deal of responsibility when they enter into a research relationship with their participants. In a narrative inquiry, participants share stories that explain the way they understand themselves and live their lives. Barry Lopez (1990) noted that,

> The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves. (p. 60)

People's stories give meaning to their lives and as narrative inquirers we have a responsibility to care for these stories. This is especially important since, when we share stories, the stories are opened up to possible reinterpretation, which can then change the way participants understand and live their lives. Clandinin (2023) calls on narrative inquirers to live an ethics of care in their relationships with participants, which involves collaborating with participants to help them retell their stories in ways that will care for them into the future. My above discussion of the importance of understanding my own positionality relates to relational ethics: the stories that I bring to the narrative inquiry space and that I live alongside participants can shape their stories, and therefore I have a responsibility to reflect on what stories I am bringing to that space and how I live those stories out in relation to participants. If, for example, I am living stories of prejudice towards gender diverse people and I bring those stories to the narrative inquiry space, those stories could harm participants. It was important to consider how I engaged participants throughout the research process, since my engagement had the potential to shift participants'

stories in ways that, if done carefully, could help them, or if done carelessly, could harm them. Because of this, Clandinin and Connelly (2020) note that:

> Ethical matters need to be narrated over the entire narrative inquiry process. They are not dealt with once and for all, as might seem to happen, when ethical review forms are filled out and university approval is sought for our inquiries. Ethical matters shift and change as we move through an inquiry. They are never far from the heart of our inquiries no matter where we are in the inquiry process. (p. 170)

Clandinin (2023) highlights another ethical consideration of narrative inquiry, which is that narrative inquirers should consider how participants' stories shape the lives of the narrative inquirer. She draws on the work of David Morris (2002, as cited in Clandinin, 2023) and Keith Basso (1984, as cited in Clandinin, 2023) to make the point that when we hear participants' stories, and when we internalize them and reflect on them in the context of our own lives, they have the potential to change us, to make us reconsider the ethics of our own lives, and to make us want to live better lives. I believe that this aspect of narrative inquiry is extremely valuable. It calls the researcher to recognize that they are not only generating findings to add to the body of knowledge in their discipline, their stories and their lives are also changing as they engage in narrative inquiry. Likewise, this aspect of narrative inquiry calls on the reader to consider that they are not simply accumulating knowledge to be applied to, for example, further research or practice, but that their own stories can also shift and their lives can change. I believe that paying attention to those changes invites opportunities for further growth. Because of this, I believe it is valuable for the narrative inquirer to discuss in their research text how their experiences of inquiring into participants' narratives have shifted their own stories. I have included such a discussion in the Discussion chapter under a section titled A Space to Explore Myself.

Chapter 4: Narrative One: T

Connecting with T

I posted a message at 9:53 AM to the Neon Streets' discord server introducing my

research project and asking people who were interested in participating to message me or send

me an email. At 9:57 AM I received a message from T:

Hello! I saw your post in the Neon Streets discord about your research project, and, as

I'm nonbinary, I wanted to let you know I'm available to help if you still have a spot!

I sent T a consent form and we scheduled to meet online the next day. I had a frustrating time

trying to find participants for my original thesis topic, so I was excited to have someone respond

so quickly and positively.

T joined the meeting and we immediately had internet connection issues. I was running

the meeting on a conferencing platform I had not used before, so I was not sure if it was an issue

with one of our connections, or with the platform. I could see their face and what looked like

their bedroom in the background. They were smiling, with wavy, brightly coloured hair and

glasses. A cat wandered across their desk and they spoke loving reprimands to it as they moved it

to the floor. I was nervous, but excited to talk to them. My small, cluttered, apartment was in the

background of my stream. I was not sure what T would think of me. They were on the Neon

Street's Discord server and I knew I had seen them post, but I could not remember anything

about them. I figured they had listened to The Neon Streets. What did that mean for our

relationship? They had probably heard me tell ridiculous stories about such characters as

Miloska—the widowed lesbian cab driver who is always exhausted from working day and night

to save up money for a robot companion—and Felix "Komodo" Templeton, a small, abrasive,

and very sexual detective. I thought about how I had dealt with gender specifically, and

difference more generally, in the podcast. I had regrets: I should have included more trans

characters, I should have addressed race, I played too many men. But I also thought about

Cyobotron, the sleek, metallic postgender cyborg hacker who used they/them pronouns. I put

Cybotron into the Neon Streets in part because a postgender cyborg hacker sounded awesome to

me, but also in part to signal to gender diverse listeners that this would be a show where we

would try to be inclusive and respectful of gender diversity. I wondered if Cybotron had made T

feel more welcomed into the audience, or if Cybo had made them more open to talking to me

now. I wondered how my performance of my own gender on the podcast, and the genders of all

the characters I played might already be shaping the narrative inquiry space. When we went over

the draft narrative in our third interview, T told me,

> It's actually really funny because that was one of the things that my wife was like, "Oh
>
> my God, you need to listen to this! Also, there's a nonbinary character!"...And at the time
>
> I was like, "Wow! There sure aren't a whole lot of people like me in just, you know, in
>
> media," and so I was really excited to find something with a nonbinary in it.

I asked them if they liked Cybotron, and they told me, "Oh absolutely! They were so cool." I had

been worried about tokenism in my depiction of minoritized identities in The Neon Streets, so it

was nice to hear that Cybotron, at least, had made T feel more welcome as a listener. T also told

me that they appreciated hearing that I have a bit of a lisp. They shared that they wanted to

produce their own actual play sometime in the future and were self-conscious about their lisp,

but hearing my lisp made them feel more confident. I know sometimes people are

complimentary just to be polite, but it seemed like listening to the podcast had been meaningful

for T and that felt really good to hear. T shared later on that they were happy to have been able to

help me with my research, since they felt The Neon Streets had helped them when they were

going through difficult times. Up till then, I had thought about my role in caring for my

participants through working with them to better understand their stories, but I had not really

thought about how my participants were caring for me too.

Beginning our Conversation

We introduced ourselves across a delay of several seconds. T's video stream was

choppy, what I would call slide show, as the image only updated once every few seconds. While

I wanted to keep our cameras on so that we could see each other's body language, I also wanted

to make sure we could talk to each other as smoothly as possible. I suggested we turn off our

video streams to see if that would fix the audio delay. T agreed, so we shut them off and it did

help a little. Now that we were sharing approximately the same temporality, I introduced the

study, went over consent, and started a conversation with T about their experiences with gender

and tabletop roleplaying games. We met three times, always with some level of asynchronicity in

our digital space. Through these conversations I began to understand how T was navigating

interconnected and overlapping stories of family, religion, politics, gender, and queerness as they

composed their life story, and how TTRPGs provided them a space for play and exploration that

helped them interrupt and reimagine these stories. Through these conversations, T and I also

built on and explored the inquiry space that we created, which included shared—but

separate—experiences of the Neon Streets, the parasocial relationship that came with that, as

well as our coming together to talk about T's experiences with gender and TTRPGs.

Ironically, considering my critique of positionality statements in the Methods section, I

started the conversation by positioning myself in relation to my identities: I am white, I'm

straight, I am a cisgender man. I explained that while I do identify as cisgender, my experience

of my gender has expanded as I have gotten older. I did not elaborate on that at the time, but as I

reflect on it now, I think what I meant is that I have come to recognize in myself, accept, express, and value a greater range of emotions and behaviours, which are not characteristic of hegemonic masculinity, and which I had policed, and had had policed by others, as a child, teen, and young man. T offered that I was "cis plus," and I liked the sound of that.

I was initially nervous to ask them about their gender. Asking about gender felt intrusive especially as a cis (plus) person. While I have certainly read a lot about gender and gender diversity, I have not had many frank conversations about gender experiences. So, I started by asking T about their experience with TTRPGs, since this was a shared interest and felt like safe ground. T said they have been playing TTRPGs for about six years. In high school, their now wife, then partner wanted to play TTRPGs with them, and so they started watching the show Critical Role—a web series of people playing TTRPGs—to learn about TTRPGs. I was nervously anticipating having to ask them about their gender, and because of this I quickly ran out of things to say, so, I dove into my question about gender:

> Mm, ok, ok, cool. So, in terms of gender, so, can you tell me a little bit, of ,sort of, about your, I don't even know…

I was embarrassed listening back to this part of the interview. I was speaking fast and stumbling over my words. I would say something, realize that I was making assumptions,and then edit my phrasing in real time:

> …I'm thinking about it in my head like, like a journey maybe, but maybe that's not the right metaphor, for, like, how you came to understand your gender and—and realize you weren't cis—If you ever felt like you were cis.

I felt silly and a bit ignorant. But they responded with kindness and candor, which helped

establish a space where I felt comfortable and safe talking about gender with them, which I

greatly appreciated: "Yeah, absolutely!" From there, we explored their stories as they moved

backwards and forwards in time and shifted from place to place within a changing web of

relationships.

We Didn't Talk About Queer People at All

They began their story by situating themselves within their family and within the stories

of politics and religion that their parents were living and teaching their children. Through our

conversations, I came to understand that family, religion, and politics were central to T's story of

gender, so I will start my telling of T's story in the same way. T grew up as the oldest of four

siblings in a "super conservative" and Christian family. T was born in California, but when they

were five the family moved to Arizona, which was more politically conservative. T explained

that this move was motivated by their parents' concerns over progressive ideas being taught in

California schools. Their family was heavily involved in their church, and T attended Sunday

services and various youth clubs every week. They told me that church was an important place

for them in their life as a young person, that it was a safe space where they had friends and

always felt accepted and loved by the community and by God. T told me that their church had

helped them through difficult times.

As a kid within this religious conservative context, T explained that they knew very little

about queer people. They shared that in their family,

> We didn't talk about queer people at all, I didn't even know what, like, the word gay or
>
> queer meant until I was in, like, sophomore year of high school or something like that.

T told me a story about watching a crime show with their mother when T was in high school. In the show there was a gay character and T's mom sat T and their sister down and explained that being gay was not, "of God." T's mom told them that even if it was not a choice to be gay, it was a choice to act on that desire, and in that choice you were sinning against God. They told me that was their first conversation about gay people. T shared that their parents avoided the subject when they could, and that they never talked about transgender or nonbinary people. T had to learn about those identities through the internet.

We're All Twelve, We're Not That Strong

With a playful English accent, T explained that they were raised to be a "prim and proper little young lady," but that as a kid they were confused by the way that people were socialized into gender roles,

> I always hated when teachers would split the classroom by like boys and girls… I was like, "Who cares?" or when they're like, "Oh we need, we need six strong boys to carry these chairs." …We're all twelve, we're not that strong.

They shared that they enjoyed playing with different gender expressions. For example, T shared that as a kid they enjoyed playing make believe as masculine characters, which felt "different and new," but also enjoyed wearing dresses and playing feminine characters. They also shared a story about being cast as Puck in their middle school's adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In this adaptation Puck was written with he/him pronouns, and T remembers their initial excitement at getting to play a masculine character, although their theatre teacher insisted on switching Puck's pronouns to she/her. T also found ways to challenge the gender roles that were being imposed on them. For example, T explained that when an adult would ask for boys to help

with a task, such as carrying chairs, T would volunteer and was sometimes allowed to cross that confusing gendered divide and help, which felt good.

As I listened to their stories of gender confusion, play, and nonconformity, I was taken back to my own experiences of school. I remembered how we would tease and bully, and were teased and bullied, when we did not perform gender appropriately. Attending to the social dimension of their stories, I wondered to T if their gender nonconformity made it hard to fit in with other kids. T shared that they had trouble fitting in throughout elementary and middle school, but they felt that had more to do with being autistic than with their gender expression. As I was going over the timeline of events in their life in the second interview, however, something jumped out to T,

> Oh actually! In middle school, I remembered, in youth group specifically, that was where I started feeling a really big divide between me and the other girls in youth group. They started doing the stereotypical middle school girl where they're just gossiping all the time, sitting on the sidelines, and they don't want to play any of the games, and they see a toad or whatever and everyone squeals and runs out of the room in a fright. I remember being so utterly confused by all of that and I felt such a disconnect there, but then none of the boys also really wanted to hang out with me because I was a girl still. And so, then I was in this weird spot of genderedness where I wasn't performing gender suitable for anyone in that group.

Finding my People

T shared that it was in high school that they started, "finding my people." For most of high school, their best friend Amanda was "very tomboy-y," which showed T that they were not the only person "straddling that line" of binary gender, and helped them see that that in-between

place was an OK place to be. In high school, they met and started dating their wife, Juniper—a

trans woman who would transition after high school. Their wife was a Dungeon Master and

wanted to get T involved in TTRPGs. T started learning about the hobby by watching the actual

play web series Critical Role,

> I just had so much fun with characters and seeing the story they were telling and it was
>
> like "Oh my god I need to get in on this!" and yeah, I was hooked pretty much instantly.

In high school they also met their friend, Matt, with whom they also played TTRPGs. During the

first Dungeons and Dragons campaign they played together, Matt came out to T as gay, which

helped T challenge their prejudices against queer people that they had learned growing up. T

explained that,

> On my own I had gotten to the point of "Oh well, I guess it's fine if they do that but, like,
>
> eeeeeehhhhh they probably shouldn't."

But now, T explained to me, "it was like, more real, because I actually knew someone," and the

abstract prejudice they held against queer people did not hold up in the face of their real

relationship with Matt. They explained with a laugh, and I laughed with them, that this

experience opened up the door to seeing that "queer people are neat."

T shared with me that they were also becoming more aware of queer people through the

social media blogging site Tumblr. They explained to me that their parents were adamantly

against social media and forbid them from creating social media accounts. Tumblr was one of the

only social media sites that T could access without making an account. One of the Tumblr

bloggers they followed was Thomas Sanders, who rose to internet prominence by making and

sharing comedy skits on the social media platform Vine. T told me:

> And then he came out as gay and started producing more queer content and so that was
> one of the transitionary things where I was like, "Oh yes, I'm in this like, just like this
> silly goofy neutral space," and then all of a sudden it was like, "oh but I like him, so. And
> he seems like a good person and not just a sinner."

T liked Sanders, and his coming out made them reevaluate some of the prejudices against queer people that they had been taught growing up. When Sanders came out as gay, T was experiencing confusing feelings of attraction to girls. T shared that it was confusing for two reasons: because they did not understand that they, identifying as a girl then, were able to have crushes on girls; and because they were not sure if their attraction to girls' bodies was sexual or if it was T wanting to look more like those girls, because T felt insecure with their own appearance. T shared that they had an "inkling" that they were going to have to address these feelings at some point, but for a while they did their best to explain the feelings away as T just wanting to be really good friends with the girls they were feeling attracted to. T shared that these feelings were a bit scary, in part because T did not know if being attracted to girls would affect their relationship with their partner, and also because they worried that those desires were sinful. They wondered if God had made them bisexual or if there was something wrong with them. In the midst of all of this confusion, Thomas Sanders released a question and answer video where he addressed the relationship between queerness and Christianity. T shared,

> I was struggling with the two seemingly dichotomous identities. And then Thomas
> Sanders is Catholic and so he talked a little bit about his journey and finding out it was
> ok, that he could be queer and Christian at the same time, and that just like broke me.
> And I was like "Oh fuck! There it is! Ok, it's ok, I'm not just like evil." And that was
> really, that was really what let me allow myself to identify as bi.

When rereading this piece of the interview, I could start to feel the tension that T must have been under while they were beginning to understand this part of their identity, how they were being pulled in two separate directions. They had been given a story by their parents that being queer was not OK, and yet they were having queer feelings. For a young person who did not know what "gay" and "queer" meant until sophomore year of high school, I imagined that it was extremely scary, which helps me imagine just how powerful it was for T to have someone validate and help reconcile those two identities.

As I wrote the research text, I reflected on this story alongside T's stories of church, religion, and not fitting in with peers. I remembered how they told me that church was a place where they always felt safe, accepted, and loved, and I thought about how much more significant experiencing those feelings would be in the context of not fitting in with their peers. I thought about how scary it must have been for young T to embrace their bisexuality, since they may no longer have felt safe, loved, and accepted at church, and, if the community found out, maybe not welcome at all.

T went to high school during the Trump presidency, and they shared that they were seeing how Trump's queerphobic rhetoric and policies were causing fear among queer people on Tumblr. Trump was elected before T was aware that they were bisexual. They told me that it was scary to see all the queerphobia from Trump and his supporters during this time, and that seeing this queerphobia also helped T address their own queerphobia. T tells me that it was their friend Amanda that they turned to to help them unpack their thoughts and feelings about queerness and queerphobia during this time. They explain that Amanda was agnostic, and that it helped to be able to talk to someone from outside of their church.

During the summer after high school, before going to college, T came out as bisexual to some people in their life. They tell me that despite their parents' views on queerness, they came out to their mom. T shared their mom's reaction:

the first thing out her mouth was, "Oh well are you still going to marry

my-wife's-name?" And so because it was going to be a quote "straight relationship," it

was quote "OK."

T shared that this did not feel like acceptance of their bisexuality, but at least it seemed like their mom could tolerate it. I noticed a silence around their dad's reaction to their coming out, and I asked if they were out to their dad as bisexual. They said, "Just my mom. Um, yeah," and I sensed a real heaviness around that topic. I remembered that they told me their dad was emotionally abusive, and I decided not to push any further.

It Was Just Little Things

T moved away for college and the following summer they started a new campaign with their friend Matt and two others. The campaign used the system Monster of the Week, which is made to tell episodic stories of humans fighting supernatural monsters, along the lines of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *The X-Files*. For this campaign, T made their player character a bisexual nonbinary magic user named Lynx. They explained to me that they gave Lynx they/them pronouns because they thought it would be fun and interesting and help differentiate the character from the player. I asked them what it felt like to play a nonbinary character and they told me,

At first it felt a little weird. I remember really struggling with like, not necessarily

remembering the pronouns, but figuring out how to construct the sentences around that.

Because you know, like I said I hadn't really been in those circles. So, it definitely took a

> little bit to get used to using their proper pronouns. But afterwards, and after everyone
>
> else started using them for me it just felt like it fit. It felt right. Like, it gave me a little
>
> flutter in my chest. It was like, "Hey!"

I pressed them further about what they liked about playing Lynx's gender, and they explained

that Lynx was more masculine than they were at the time, and that when playing Lynx, they also

played with their real world physicality, dropping their voice to a lower register and taking up

more space with their body. I asked if there were any specific moments that stood out as good

examples of playing Lynx's gender in the game, and T tells me, no, there were not specific

moments, that it was,

> just, in general, being able to play in that space and do something different than what I
>
> had before. Like it wasn't, you know, too different. It wasn't anything necessarily big. It
>
> was just little things like being able to try something new, like my voice.

> I remembered my own TTRPG play experiences and remembered the at times

complicated dynamics that developed among the players in our games. I wondered how the

dynamics in T's group might have impacted their decision to make a nonbinary character. I asked

T about the group of players they were playing with. T went into a description of the other PCs

in the game: there was a booksmart character, another magic user, and Steve, who was "just a

regular normal person." It was interesting to me throughout the interview how we both had

trouble distinguishing between PCs and players, which is something that happens in my TTRPG

gameplay as well. At one point during the conversation, I even called them Lynx! I followed up,

asking specifically about group dynamics, and they shared that it was the same group they had

played their first campaign with, so everyone was comfortable with each other. They also

explained that having Matt come out as gay to their group helped create a game space where they felt comfortable experimenting with gender:

> And so because he trusted us enough to share that with us, I think it really made it easy to be like, "Yeah, okay in this group of people I can absolutely experiment with my character's gender and pronouns and kinda just see where that takes me."

T shared that Lynx was also important to them as a source of strength and inspiration. T explained that they got very sick around the time they went off to college, which made it necessary for T to use a wheelchair for a long time—in fact they are still an ambulatory wheelchair user. Unlike T at the time, Lynx was healthy, strong, and able-bodied. In T's words:

> Having a big powerful character who was confident and knew what they wanted was really nice and it gave me something to lean on to, I was able to channel Lynx a little bit when I was feeling really bad, and I was like, "No, no, no. It's OK. Lynx can get through this (laughing) so you can get through it!"

When T went back to school, they started playing a new campaign with Matt and some other players. In this campaign they made a player character with she/her pronouns named Salkia, who was an Aaracokra (a race of anthropomorphic birds) sky ship pirate. T explained that In real life you do not often hear people using third person pronouns to refer to you, but in a TTRPG, people are constantly referring to your character using third person pronouns, and hearing people constantly refer to Salkia using she/her pronouns felt wrong. In T's words: "it felt like it was settling wrong in my chest."

The "Oh Fuck" Moment

The COVID pandemic arrived that year and T found themself alone in a dorm room for months. At the time, they were working on a writing project,

I was like oh I can have a nonbinary character, y'know, like diversity is cool and good

and I want to be inclusive of all people and so I wanted to do research for this nonbinary

character. And as I was reading I was like, "interesting, very interesting."

I understood from this story that T was struck by how the research they were doing into

nonbinary identities resonated with their own experiences. T shared that they sought out

guidance about transgender identities from their only transgender friend, without explaining that

they were having questions about their gender:

At one point I texted him and I was like, "hey so like, what does your gender feel like for

you? Like, how, how did you know you were trans? What was that like for you? And so

yeah, he explained what his journey was like and I was like, "Huh huh, interesting.

Okay." And then I packed it away for a couple weeks and just, like, ruminated on that a

little bit, and then eventually I was like, "Naw I think that there might be something

here." And every time that someone would say "she" for me or use my name I was–I like

kinda cringed a little. And I was like "Ohhh, we're going to have to unpack this aren't

we."

I asked T if that was a scary moment, and they said it was. They described it as an "Oh fuck

moment," because when they realized they were nonbinary, they also realized that their

relationship with their family was going to fundamentally change. T explained that while their

mother did not accept their sexuality, she could tolerate it as long as she believed T was in a

straight relationship, but when they realized they were nonbinary, they knew their mom could

neither accept nor tolerate that identity. They explained to me, "that's too different, that's too

weird. You can't pretend that's not there."

I understood that this was a major crisis for T. They had started telling a new story about themselves as a nonbinary person and this story was not only interrupting their previous stories about their gender, but also the stories of family that they had been living for their whole life. T explained to me that during this time they sometimes wondered if they were faking being nonbinary to be "cool," but that they were able to create narratives about themself that affirmed their experience:

> Being able to look back, you know, at how excited young T was to play Puck because the script called Puck "he,"—and Puck in general is just very gender non-fuckery—it really helped validate me and make me feel like I wasn't just faking it and that this was legit.

Through our conversations, T explained to me that they reflected on their past experiences and found "lots of little nuggets to see that like all along I was nonbinary." What I understood from this story is that T was not only telling and living a new story about themselves as they moved into the future, but were looking backward in time and recontextualizing stories from their past to help create a coherent narrative of themselves as having been nonbinary "all along." This narrative helped T feel more confident about being nonbinary.

T also started recontextualizing their experiences of TTRPG play. They described how they came to understand their experience of playing Lynx in a new light:

> I one hundred percent thought that that would just be the character and like… (sighs) when, when I started it de—like (breaths), I didn't go in consciously thinking that I wanted to try on these pronouns, it just kinda ended up (laughs) happening that way. Um, yeah, it was, it was definitely like a shock to me, um, like when I, when I did realize I was nonbinary, it was like, "Ohhh, that's why–that's part of why I had so much fun playing Lynx."

They explained to me that within the context of a safe group of people, and with the buffer that comes from roleplaying a character,

> I was given a safe place where I could experiment with being a different gender without feeling like I needed to have it all figured out immediately. Because, "Oh no guys, it's fine! I'm just learning and because I'm just playing them." And it gave me an opportunity to take it slow and let myself be open to the idea that I'm different than how I thought I was my whole life. It just made it so I had a safe place to experiment with it before I was ready to admit it to myself even. But I was still able to get, like, that little microdose of being gendered properly.

In this recontexualization, Lynx had given T a chance to safely explore their gender in a context where, because of their family and church's prejudices, and because of an increasingly queerphobic political climate, being nonbinary did not feel safe.

> T shared that they also looked back on their experiences of playing Salkia differently after realizing they were nonbinary. I asked T if playing Salkia had helped them realize that she/her pronouns were not a good fit for them, and they explained that they did not realize that in the moment. As they said to me,

> it took a little bit, like a couple months after we had to finish the campaign—because, you know, COVID— before I made that connection, but once I started using they/them pronouns, I was like, "Oh my god, this feels so much better."

> T tells me that they returned to playing Lynx after they realized they were nonbinary. T, Matt, and others played a campaign that picked up 10 years after the previous Lynx campaign. I asked them if there was any difference in their experience of playing Lynx in the two campaigns, and they shared,

I definitely felt more confident doing it. I remember when I was first playing Lynx I

tripped up trying to form sentences with their pronouns a lot of the time and just like

getting used to the whole—really just engaging with the concept of what nonbinarism is.

Whereas the second time that I came back to them, I was more confident and I knew what

I was doing in terms of that. And so, I think that did also reflect into Lynx even though

they were always a very confident person. I think by being more confident in playing

them and knowing that I was playing them the way that I wanted, it helped to boost that

feeling of confidence. Lynx is so special to me because they opened that door for me and

so being able to revisit them and get back into the way that they think and the way that

they are, because each character is so very different, it was really cool experience,

especially because I'm in such a better place physically and mentally than I was when I

was 18. Like, they grew with me as a character.

Continuing to Explore Gender Through Roleplay

T told me that they have continued to play TTRPGs, and while most of the characters

they played had they/them pronouns, they have tried playing characters with different pronouns.

They explained that this was partly about trying on new pronouns for themselves. As they

explained it,

I think it's a fun way to explore it without necessarily wanting to commit to it yet. So

even though I feel pretty solid in my pronouns, every so often I like to toss in something

else and see how we're feeling about that one.

They played Rat, who used it/its pronouns.

It was an orphan kid. I was playing a Bard with it. I struggled using its pronouns more

than I have with any other character because I have not had a whole lot of in-person

interactions with people who use it/its. And so it was really interesting and I had to

correct myself a lot. That one was one where I definitely was like, "no this is one

thousand percent not for me." But Rat was a little gremlin-ish and so it worked very well

for it.

T played another character with she/her pronouns named Kitt. I asked them what it was like

playing a she/her character after realizing they were nonbinary. They explained to me that,

for the most part it's really just fun and like, you know, those are Kitt's pronouns, and not

mine, and especially because my friends don't mix up my pronouns when they're talking

about me, I think that helps a lot. But sometimes, some days where I'm feeling really

dysphoric—meaning like I feel like my body feels particularly feminint—it doesn't really

upset me but it feels more personal than normal. But for the most part it's just neutral and

I'm able to have that separation between myself and the character.

T told me that they were currently playing a he/him character. They explained that playing Henry

helped them understand that he/him pronouns fit better than she/her pronouns, but still did not

feel quite right. As they explained to me,

[Henry] is like an investigative reporter, and so I took a lot of inspiration from Tin Tin, if

you're familiar with those comics. I grew up on them and so they're really special to me

and so that's been really fun. I have found that I like,on a sliding scale of she/her, he/him,

and they/them, I like he/him pronouns better than I do she/her. Like if I were to get

misgendered in one way, I would prefer that it was with he/him pronouns. But they still

don't feel quite right. And so, I don't use them, but like, if someone out in the wild called

me "he" I wouldn't be upset, because I would be passing as something other than a girl.

New Family Stories

T was also telling new stories about family. T tells me that when they realized they were nonbinary, "It felt like there was like, solidly a wedge driven between me and the majority of my family." They are now out as nonbinary to both of their sisters, and both of their sisters are accepting and diligent about using T's proper pronouns and new name, which has had a profound impact on T. As they said to me, "Every time that they use my name and my pronouns, it makes me *so, so, fucking happy*." But through our conversations I got the sense that they had been very scared to come out to their sisters. Although T had wanted to come out to one of their sisters for a long time, it was T's sister coming out to T as bisexual that gave T the courage to come out. T explained that they were actually outed to their other sister when their sister's friend saw their pronouns displayed in a Zoom lecture. I understood that family was very important to T and, considering their strained relationship with their parents, that having their sisters know and accept them as a nonbinary person was helping them tell a new, positive story of family.

Narrative 2: Chloe

Opening the Vault with Chloe

Chloe messaged me a few hours after I posted about my thesis research in the Neon

Streets Discord server.

> hi! my name is Amber, I've been listening to The Neon Streets for a while with my
>
> husband, Remy (I know he's active in the server but I don't know how much cause I just
>
> joined) anyway, I'm trans, and I feel like TTRPGs have definitely helped me figure out
>
> my identity (and stopped me from wanting to yeet off this mortal plane lol). I'm available
>
> pretty much all the time forever if you still need some people to interview

I got in touch with her to schedule an interview. Chloe told me she was starting a new job

and did not yet know her schedule, so we tentatively set a date and time to meet. She also told

me that she had changed her name since she first introduced herself. I was reminded of Clandinin

and Connelly's (2000) observation that we always enter into research in the midst of living our

lives. I got the sense that Chloe was in the midst of some important transitions in her life.

The day before the interview, Chloe messaged me asking to push the interview back a

half hour because she had her first shift that afternoon. When the time came, Chloe joined the

chat. She was sitting in her room with her hair up in a towel, sipping on a soda. Her husband

Remy came in and Chloe explained that he was the one who introduced her to The Neon Streets.

We chatted while Remy helped Chloe with her medications. Remy left the bedroom and then we

were ready to start the interview.

My conversations with Chloe felt markedly different from my conversations with T.

When I asked T to tell their stories they tried to stay close to my questions and checked in with

me to make sure they had fully addressed my wonderings. When I asked Chloe questions she

would start telling one story and that story would spin off into other stories and other stories until we could no longer see where we started. Early in my first conversation with Chloe, while she was recalling an interaction with a friend online, Chloe remarked,

> I remember… hm. What a phrase: I remember. My memory's not that good… All over
> the place.

Specific dates were tricky for Chloe and some of her memories were fuzzy or would bleed into other memories. In our second conversation, I asked Chloe if anything had resonated with her from our first conversation and Chloe said that she had been thinking more about how her roleplay with a past PC named Shane—who used he/him pronouns—had felt like a final exploration of masculinity before she transitioned away from a masculine identity. Chloe explained that she had not thought about that experience in that way before our conversation,

> Quite frankly I'd never really thought about that until I was intentionally sitting down and
> thinking about TTRPGs and gender. I just thought about it like, "Last time I played a
> dude. Never doing that again." you know? That's not to say that I was lying [about it
> being a final exploration of masculinity]. I wasn't. I just–when I do things in the moment
> I am not introspecting myself at all.

Chloe explained that she felt like she needed someone to ask her questions to help her access some of her memories: "the memories are all there, I've just lost the keys." Chloe told me that there is a scene from the cartoon Adventure Time that she resonates with. In the scene, something traumatic has happened to Finn and he says to his best friend Jake the dog,

> "Oh wow! That one's going in the vault. Kerplunk!" and Jake's like, "wait what?" and
> he's like, "Yeah all the things that are too much for me to think about they go in the vault!

> Kerplunk!" And he goes, "You're even conscious that you're doing it?" And he's just
>
> like, "Yup!"

When reviewing the transcripts, I saw that Chloe had said "Kerplunk!" in our first conversation

after she had trouble remembering how she was punished for forging her mom's signature on a

school form. With this story of the vault, Chloe was explaining that she has trouble remembering

because she has locked away—unconsciously, as she clarified later—memories of overwhelming

experiences. I recognized that this story was helping Chloe make sense out of a history that was

full of holes.

> Chloe explained that she did not do a lot of introspection because it makes her sad. I

remarked that it seemed like she was doing a great job at it during our conversations. She

explained,

> People have always told me—like professionals, like therapists—you know, they're like,
>
> "wow you understand yourself so well!" And I'm like, "Please don't say that, cuz it
>
> makes me feel like you don't get it (laughs)."

What they don't understand, she explained, is that she is kinder to herself when she is reflecting

with other people compared to when she is reflecting by herself. I asked her if that kindness was

real or faked, and she told me, "Fifty-fifty. Fake it till you make you know?"

What I understood from this exchange was that it was hard for Chloe to visit some memories

because she would end up focusing on the painful parts and criticizing herself, but that when she

could reflect back on those memories with caring others, she was able to visit memories that

were too sad to visit by herself. Furthermore, when she was reflecting with others, it seemed like

she felt compelled to tell a different story of herself: one that was more kind and caring than the

one she told to herself, and one which, once told, still felt like it held some truth. From listening

to T's stories, I felt that T had a good sense of narrative unity in her life, that T had probably visited these memories a number of times before and had organized them into a meaningful story. But with Chloe, we were visiting some memories that had been locked away for a long time. Interviewing in narrative inquiry—and in qualitative research in general—is always collaboration between interviewer and interviewee, but it seemed like our collaboration really helped Chloe gain a sense of narrative unity in her life that she had previously been missing and searching for. When I reviewed the draft narrative with Chloe, I asked her what it was like for her to hear what I had written about her experiences. She told me this:

> It's a little surreal. Like, I kind of—except for the part where you keep looking to me for answers about things, I almost feel like I'm reading about somebody else's life, you know? Just because, like, it—I never…I never can organize it so neatly in my head. Kind of like back at the beginning when I was like, "My earliest memory dot dot dot fuck my actual memories." Because trying to figure my actual earliest memory is like trying to collect flour in a strainer, you know what I mean?

I told her I was trying to represent her experiences in a way that felt accurate for her and I asked her if the narrative did feel accurate, or if it felt too surreal. She told me:

> It feels very accurate to my experience. It doesn't feel surreal in that like, "Oh this looks like it's written about another person," it's just, like, it feels like I've been trying to make it all fit chronologically for a very long time and it's never worked. And having somebody else help me out has kind of bridged that gap.

I asked what she thought she might get from this narrative in the future, and she told me:

> I think if I'm allowed to keep [the narrative], when I finally go to therapy I'm just going to be like, "Hey! Here you go! I can go through the highlights with you but I just—that's

way more organized." It's not one hundred percent, like it doesn't have every event that's

ever happened to me, but some pretty important defining memories are there that I will

not remember off the dome.

By the end of our work together, "What a phrase: I remember," reflected for me the journey that

we undertook together back into Chloe's memories that were difficult for her to visit alone. It

reflected the experience that Chloe had of unlocking the vault and making new connections

among old, painful memories. This was a process that was lively and messy and long—despite

my intention to keep conversations to one hour, our first two conversations lasted three hours

each—but which helped her create new stories of herself. These are stories that we will both take

with us, and that will, perhaps, take us somewhere new.

Telling Two Stories of Gender

I felt more comfortable talking about gender after my first two interviews with T, so I

decided to start the interview by asking Chloe about her journey of understanding her gender,

and she began to tell me. She started by explaining that she identifies her gender in two ways

depending on who she is talking to. To many people, Chloe identifies herself as a trans woman

because "that is the most understandable thing for people." She explained that the most

important thing for her is that others gender her correctly in their speech—she uses she/her

pronouns—and identifying as a trans woman is the simplest way to get them to do that. Her

"actual identity," she explained, is a nonbinary transfeminine person. Later in the conversation

she elaborated on why she often tells a cover story of being a trans woman by explaining that

people have criticized her for "doing too much" with her gender, and she now feels that "the

more words you add to your identity the less people take you seriously."

Chloe told me that while she now identifies as nonbinary, it was a bit complicated for her

to come to terms with the masculine aspects of herself since there was a lot about masculinity

that she hated as a kid. She explained that she was expected to perform a certain, limited version

of masculinity, which she never felt like she achieved, and which left her feeling like a defective

boy who was "soft or weak."

Moving Around Chloe's Early Places

Partway through our conversation—which took a labyrinthine route through Chloe's

memories, jumping forwards and backwards in time, and moving from place to place at a speed

that was often hard for me to follow—Chloe began talking about her dad, explaining that he was

an early critic of her gender performances, often telling her to "man up!" I invited Chloe to talk

more about her early life experiences. Chloe explained that these are sad stories, and I let her

know that she did not have to share anything that she did not want to. She assured me that she

wants to share these stories. Chloe took me far back:

So, my earliest memory… You know what, fuck my actual memories. I spent the first

four years of my life travelling around the United States with my dad, because he's a

welder. And we travelled as a family, it wasn't just the two of us. We went to all kinds of

places that I don't remember. Apparently we went to something like 30 different states

and we went to a country in the Caribbean, Aruba. It's like right above Venezuela. I don't

remember any of that, cuz I was less than four years old. And then when I was four we

got in a big wreck in Texas. That pretty much ended us travelling as a family, which quite

frankly is bullshit (laughs). Like, we stopped right before I was of the age to start really

making memories. So, I just have stories from other people about all the cool stuff I did.

Apparently we went on a pirate ship and went paragliding and I went to the Grand

Canyon.

Chloe explained to me that her life story started with family stories that she only remembers

through other peoples' telling. Stories about being together as a family, travel, and adventure that

were cut short by a car crash. I understood from her telling that she was angry that she cannot

remember these times and that her family never made more memories like this. As our

conversation proceeded, I understood that the family life she remembers first hand was mostly

filled with pain and sadness.

Chloe told me about the early places she lived. She started with her paternal

grandparents'—her mawmaw and pawpaw's—house in rural Louisiana where she lived with her

family when she was about eight years old. But this recollection sparked another, and Chloe

interrupted herself, "Aha, memories from before Mississippi! Coming back. I got it." Chloe told

me that before living with her mawmaw and pawpaw, she lived with her family in a different

small town in Louisiana. She told me that at that time she was about six or seven years old, and

that she and her older brother Jon were often left alone to play in the woods by their trailer for

the whole day while their parents were, as she told me in the colorful language of her brother,

"methed up fuckin' in the barn." She told me that her most vivid memory from that time was of

her mother forcing her and her brother to eat spoiled milk with their cereal because she did not

believe it was spoiled. The stories Chloe told me about this place were stories of neglectful

parents.

From there, Chloe's family moved to live with Chloe's mawmaw and pawpaw. Chloe

does not remember why they had to move, but she thought that her parents might have had

financial problems. Chloe described her mawmaw and pawpaw as kind and caring people who

have been constant supports throughout her life. Chloe remembered asking her mawmaw if she could live with them permanently. Her mawmaw explained to her that if that happened, they would need to have more rules, and Chloe's life would end up being similar to how it was living with her parents. Chloe said she replied, "you don't know how [my mom] treats us." Chloe told me that she had been trying to tell her mawmaw that she was being mistreated. Chloe shared that her mom still does not understand what life was like for Chloe as a kid and tells this story like it is a joke.

Chloe explained that from her mawmaw and pawpaw's house, her family moved to Mississippi to live with her maternal grandmother Mary, "she's kind of a horrible bitch. Like, she's racist and she thinks that cops should just be able to kill people." Chloe told me that Mary was usually away working, and so Chloe's family lived in her old roach-infested trailer mostly by themselves. While living there, Chloe was enrolled in a private Christian school with an all-white student body. Chloe explained that the Black kids went to the local public school, which had a reputation for being dangerous. Chloe shared she had almost no interactions with people of colour.

Chloe's parents bought a new trailer when Chloe was about 14 years old, and the family finally had somewhere nice to live. Shortly after they moved, however, Chloe's dad filed for divorce. Chloe told me she remembers exactly what year it was because her brother had just graduated from high school. She told me she found out her dad had planned to wait until both she and her brother had graduated, but, she explained, "he decided he had had enough. So, Jon was worth staying for but I wasn't."

The internet was another early place for Chloe. She described it as a place where she started exploring her sexuality and gender, but also a place where she was exposed to

inappropriate relationships. When Chloe was in grade two, she learned about pornography from a friend and started searching for it online. Along with pictures of naked women she also found an adult dating site and made a profile. Her dad found out and banned her from using the internet. But her dad was out of the house working so much that Chloe was still able to use the internet while he was away. When she was around eleven years old, she started looking at gay porn and found out that she was attracted to boys, but it took her some time to understand what that meant for her. She explained:

> I knew I was queer for a long time but I had a poor understanding of what it meant to be queer. Cuz I was like, you know, I was in that space where I was like, "I am boy. I like boy. I must be gay man." And then I continued to be attracted to women so that couldn't be true.

She would eventually come to understand herself as bisexual. Around that same time, she also started talking to a trans woman online about her gender. Chloe described coming across a post on Reddit from a trans community and feeling confused that being transgender was even an option. She messaged the moderators asking to talk to someone, and this woman was the person who responded. She shared part of an important conversation she had with this woman:

> I remember we were having a conversation about being trans and I was like, "How does somebody know if they're trans?" And she, a trans woman, was just like, "If I put a button in front of you, and if you hit that button you would have a woman's body, would you do it?" And I was like: "Questions." I was like, "but is it reversible, like, what kind of body? Blah blah blah blah." And she was like, "No. No questions. No caveats. Would you push the button?" And I was like, "I mean, yeah." and she was like, "Boom! Trans!" And I just, like, "Ah." And that was a really important moment for me I think.

Chloe explained that this relationship was very meaningful for helping her understand who she was. She shared that when she first was introduced to the concept of transgenderism, something just "clicked,"

> The moment I understood that it was really a possibility, I was like, "Oh yes. Yeah, one hundred percent." But I was also in a position where I was like, "but that's never going to happen for me. That can happen for other people, of course, but not for me."

When we reviewed the draft narrative together, Chloe's reaction to this story was, "And look at me now." I sensed Chloe felt a lot of pride in reflecting on just how far she had come since she was a young trans person who was scared to express her gender in a way that felt right. She told me that she also felt pity for her younger self:

> I just needed somebody there for me. I just needed a hug. I needed to be told that I was OK and I wasn't some sort of freakish monster, you know?

Chloe shared several reasons why she was scared to come out as trans, "I think I was afraid I was wrong—if I was wrong and suddenly everyone knew and then I had to walk it back one day." She also worried that would never actually be able to transition because of the cost, "and then I've just outed myself as this thing that is growing increasingly dangerous to be and I never get to see any benefits of it, you know?" She was referring to the growing hostility towards trans people that she was feeling from the people around her. She told me this story,

> I remember back when there was a supreme court ruling in America that made it illegal for you to stop people from going into a bathroom because you think they're the other gender. And that was a *big* deal. That was a *big* deal. And my uncle, who up until that point in my life was one of the nicest people I knew, he was so kind to me. And, granted until he learned that I was actually trans, he continued to be that nice to me. But this

conversation was very much the tipping point for me being like, "Oh, I can no longer

trust you." We were in an argument about it and he was like, "And now all these men can

just come up into the women's bathroom and they can just rape whoever they want!" And

I was like, "Uncle Jim, I don't think someone who rapes is concerned about the legality

of going into a room. And he hit me with the, "Why do you care so much, you one of

'em?" And I was not ready to come out, you know? For (laughs) very obvious reasons.

But just conversations like that every time I saw my family, every time, like, queer people

came up as a topic with strangers, you know? Just— (sighs) I don't know. It was like

even if I actually do manage to transition and enjoy the way that I look, I'm just going to

get (laughs) hate crimed. And quite frankly, that has proven to be true. I just knew that

nobody but my grandparents and my closest friends would continue to love me if I came

out.

Chloe rightfully feared for her safety and her relationships. Her relationship with her dad was an

especially big concern for Chloe. In her words, "It's like, if I ever want my father to love me I

have to '*be man*'."

Living with Dad

Even though he was often away from home for work, Chloe's dad seemed to be the

person who had the most impact in shaping the gender stories that Chloe learned and lived in her

early life. Chloe told me stories about her dad teaching her to fight and to make weapons,

breaking things when he was angry, and punishing his children—who he believed were both

boys—for "pussy shit" that strayed too far from the stories of masculinity and heterosexuality he

expected them to live. Chloe told me that her dad once beat her brother "back and blue" when he

suspected her brother was gay. She told me that she played football for years trying to live up to

her dad's expectations and that once she hurt her back during practice. She mentioned it to a

friend on the team who urged her to tell the coach, but Chloe refused, saying that "that's going to

go badly for me." Chloe's friend told the coach anyway, and the coach called her dad. She told

me:

> and then my dad did nothing, until the next day when he came to pick me up from school
>
> and he just drove right past football practice. And I was like, "but I have football
>
> practice." and he went, "No you don't." And I was like, "What do you mean?" And he
>
> said, "Well if you're going to fake being in pain so that you don't have to do the work,
>
> then you don't need it." So, this punishment, I genuinely don't remember if it was for this
>
> or [another situation], but he set up a punishment where—obviously after the
>
> beating—where everyday when I got home from school I had to run two miles nonstop in
>
> the Mississippi heat.

Chloe told me that her dad was at work when she was supposed to be running and that her mom

was in charge of enforcing the punishment, but that her mom "didn't have the heart" to enforce

the punishment and turned a blind eye. She shared:

> I remember at the time and for a long time after that, I looked down on my mom for not
>
> following through on my punishment. I was like—because of the culture I had been
>
> raised in, because of the things my dad put in my head—I was like, "Wow, mom's such a
>
> pussy for not (laughs) abusing me."

It sounded to me like Chloe had internalized her dad's punitive approach to enforcing gender

roles. After hearing this story I remarked to Chloe that it sounded like she must have really

looked up to her dad. She answered me with another story:

I wanted his approval so fucking badly. I wanted to know for a fact that he loved me and I never got that, you know? I could probably count on one hand the number of times he said, "I love you." We used to, as a family, go out bowling, back when we did things together. And I remember one time we were bowling and I was, I don't know, 13 or something—I've always been a very loving person, even when I was a kid, even when it was being actively beaten out of me, because I think even back then I was trying to project the love that I wanted to feel, you know?—and we were at the bowling alley and it was all four of us and I would shoot my shot, I'd finish my turn and then I would run over and I would grab my dad, and I would hold his hand and I would give his hand a little kiss, cuz I loved him, and then, like the fifth or sixth time I did that, he went, "Jesus kid, we're not on a fuckin' date," And I never tried to show affection to him ever again.

I said to Chloe that that sounded painful and she agreed. She summed up the message that she received from her dad about showing affection as, "don't be a faggot."

While she was telling me these painful stories about her father, Remy came into the room and quickly gave Chloe a painting of a panda that he made. It was a very cute painting. I wondered if he could hear her talking about those sad memories from the other room and thought the panda might give her some comfort. "Remy has been getting a lot more into art lately," Chloe told me, "and it makes me very happy. He keeps bringing me cute little watercolour things and I love it. Life is so much better these days, damn!" I was happy to see that Chloe and Remy seemed to be living a story of love and care after Chloe had lived through so much pain, sadness, and neglect.

Chloe's dad was an important part of another narrative thread that wove its way through many of her stories. When Chloe first reached out to me she alluded to having felt suicidal, and

depression and suicide were often lurking in the backgrounds of the stories she related to me.

Chloe explained that as a child she had trouble recognizing emotions. She shared that she does

not have good interoception, so she does not get much feedback from her body about how she is

feeling. She shared that her dad taught her that emotions were "all in your head," suggesting that

she should be able to easily overcome negative emotions. I understood from this that it was and

is hard for Chloe to regulate her emotions, because she has trouble feeling them until she is

overwhelmed and she had a dad who did not understand enough about emotions to help her learn

how to regulate them. She told me that, as a kid, she thought she did not have emotions.

However, when she was stressed, without any way to recognize or regulate her emotions, she

would get overwhelmed and "meltdown." When this happened, she would turn her emotions

inward. She explained:

> I never wanna be like my father. I never want to hurt people like he has. I never wanna
>
> hurt people at all. And I know how fucked up and traumatic it can be to watch someone
>
> go on a rage and break shit, you know? So, that gets turned inwards and I hurt myself in
>
> some kind of way. And because I care so much about not upsetting other people, it's
>
> always in some way that I can hide, you know? I never cut myself when I was younger,
>
> um, simply because I knew it left scars. I knew it left, like, open wounds that people
>
> could see. So, it always came down to just hitting myself on the leg. And at a certain
>
> point that stopped being enough to calm me down, so I started imagining what I could do
>
> that would be more severe. And I grew up around guns. I grew up knowing the concept
>
> of death. I wasn't—there was never a moment that I can remember in my life where I was
>
> innocent to the idea that people could die, you know? So, it was like the moment I started
>
> escalating the concept of self-harm in my head, it jumped straight to, "You should

fucking do it. You should just kill yourself." And it's become kind of like a default

thought process that I have a really hard time getting rid of, even like nowadays. Just cuz,

like, I have a really hard time controlling my inner monologue. It gets away from me.

And she's a bitch (laughs). She's really mean.

Chloe shared that this suicidal inner monologue is something that she still deals with when she

feels overwhelmed, although, as we will see later in her story, it has become much easier to deal

with.

High School

After Chloe's dad and mom divorced, her mom started dating a younger man, who Chloe

disliked, and she and her mother moved in with him in a shabby travel trailer in another town.

Chloe explained that because of the divorce, one of her parents—she never got the full

story—stopped paying for her private school. She ended up missing half of a semester before

enrolling at a majority Black public school for the last nine weeks of her freshman year. Chloe

explained that her dad had taught her that people of colour were dangerous. So, Chloe, filled

with her dad's racist stories, came to a school that was almost entirely Black, and on the first day

she had an interaction with a Black classmate that challenged those racist stories:

The first person who spoke to me was a Black guy, and he came up to me and I was like

picking at the school lunch because it was really bad there. It was like a wheat roll that

was about as dense as my hand and a thin chicken patty. It was a grilled chicken patty

that had the texture of cardboard. And he sat down across from me and he was like, "hey

how's it going?" And I was like, you know, mentally I'm suspicious but also I was

intelligent enough even back then to be aware that it would not be a safe thing for me to

be racist to someone when I'm in the minority. So, I was like, "You know, not bad, how

about you?" And he was like, "That food sucks doesn't it?" (laughs) and I was like,

"Yeah it's *really* bad." And he was like, "Did you bring cash?" And I was like, "Why

would I bring cash?" And he was like, "There's vending machines." And then he handed

me some money and he said, "I'll show you." And he walked me to the vending

machines and he got me lunch.

Chloe explained that this experience taught her to reexamine her prejudices. Chloe shared that

this experience also helped shape her view that adults are responsible for overcoming their own

prejudices, something that came up often in our conversations,

I have more understanding of people who are prejudiced than I would like to. But it

also—like, I don't think any adult has an excuse. Kids get raised that way and that's

unfortunate but you hit a certain point and it becomes your responsibility, you know?

And not just your responsibility. I genuinely don't understand how a person with any

modicum of intelligence can go through life and meet people who are minorities and then

continue to think racist thoughts…Once you've had a few conversations with the kind of

people you're prejudiced against, I don't give you any more grace. You're done. (laughs)

Move on, start deconstructing.

Chloe was talking about racism, but she was also talking about the queerphobia that she learned

from her dad, and that she experienced from others. In her words,

I had a lot of prejudices and I think a lot of my reluctance to transition had to do with

those prejudices. Because I knew that I would be the target of those prejudices.

Chloe, her mother, and her mother's boyfriend moved to a different shabby trailer in a

different town and Chloe started her sophomore year at a new high school. In our second

conversation, Chloe and I created a timeline to help me understand the order of events in her life.

When I saw how many times she had moved, I asked her if she lost friends because of those

moves. She said she did and that each time she moved to a new place she had to make new

friends. She also shared each time she moved, she had to leave behind belongings that would not

fit into her luggage. She told me she does not have childhood objects, like stuffed animals, the

way that she finds other people do, "I don't possess anything that I've had for more than five or

six years, you know?" I felt sad when she told me this. It seemed to me like Chloe felt

disconnected from her past, with so many memories unconsciously "kerplunked!" into her vault,

and the artifacts that might have served as keys left behind in old trailers.

At her new school, Chloe shared that for the first time in her life, she started making

friends that really seemed to care about her. Though Chloe had already come out as bisexual to

her mom and brother, having caring friends helped her come out as bisexual at school. She

described this as "kind of a healing experience a little bit, because everyone knew I was bi.

Nobody cared." I asked her if it had changed her perspective on what it might be like to exist as a

queer person and she said, "One hundred percent." It was not just that she was out as bisexual

and felt accepted by her friends, she shared that she also saw how being openly queer could

impact other people. Seeing that impact helped her decide to come out as trans. She told me this

story:

> I had a friend named Kevin and Kevin had some bad ideas about queer people. And I
>
> didn't know that. But, like, I came out as bi and then like a week goes by and Kevin pulls
>
> me aside and he's like, "Hey, I just wanted to let you know that I was really homophobic
>
> like a month ago, but you're just like a normal person, and you've really changed my
>
> mind on that a lot." And that I think was the exact moment I decided that one way or

another I'm going to live as my authentic self, because if just being me can change

someone's mind about queer people, then it's worth being a little less safe.

Though she had made that decision, it would still take her several years before she came out to

anyone as trans.

Chloe's mom broke up with her boyfriend and told Chloe that they were going to move

again. Chloe told me, "the exact words I said to her were, 'You're moving. I'm good.'" Chloe

decided she wanted to stay in that town, at that school, with the friends that cared about her. She

arranged to live in a friend's garage. She told me she was made to feel like part of the family,

until they blindsided her by kicking her out. She and that friend stopped talking. Chloe went to

stay with another friend for the remainder of high school. He stopped talking to her part way

through her senior year and, though she could imagine some potential reasons, he never told her

why. After graduation, that friend's family told her she needed to leave. Despite these issues,

Chloe explained that she had other good friends during that time, and several that she still keeps

in touch with.

Transitions and TTRPG Play

After graduation, Chloe decided to move back in with her mawmaw and pawpaw. She

told me that up to that point, that year she spent with them was the best year of her life. In her

words, "For once in my life, I got just genuine love and support, you know? I don't know anyone

as warmhearted as my grandparents." She found a job and became best friends with her

coworker, Ezra. They started playing TTRPGs together with one of Ezra's friends and one of her

high school friends. She told me this group "didn't carry the weight of previous social

hierarchies," which I understood to mean that she felt like she had less pressure to behave in

certain ways and had more freedom within this group. The game system was

homebrewed—made up by the gamemaster—and was set in a post-apocalyptic world where the

PCs had superpowers. Chloe explained to me that the players played versions of themselves,

using their real names. Chloe explained:

> So, I played a character with my deadname. And that was my first TTRPG experience,
>
> and it just frustrates me a little bit in retrospect that I made that decision because I knew
>
> then that I was trans, I was just, "well I'm never going to do anything about it!"

Chloe shared that in the beginning, she was able to separate herself from her PC enough to enjoy

playing with her PC's superpowers, but that as the game progressed and her character had to

work through moral dilemmas, she found that she was inserting herself into the character more

and more. As she did that, she experienced a disconnect with the character's gender presentation

that mirrored the disconnect she felt in real life. She told me:

> I ended up playing that character a few more times but it was like every time I played him
>
> it was a little harder, you know? It felt like playing pretend in not a fun way.

When she told me this, I asked her why she had felt like she could play a feminine character or

come out as trans to this group of friends who, from her stories, seemed so open and accepting.

In fact I asked her this question three times, and each time I asked, she took me in a different

direction. She told me some of the stories I have already told you: stories of having to constantly

move throughout her childhood, stories of friendships breaking down and being kicked out of

friends' houses, and stories of family and community members expressing transphobia. I

understand now that even with a supportive group of friends, Chloe had lived her whole life in a

context that was confusing, unstable, and hostile towards gender diversity, and this had taught

her to be extremely careful with how she expressed herself. She explained to me:

It was like I had the desire to live authentically, but I didn't know how. I didn't know how

to trust the people around me, because I had lived in a state of suspicion and fear for so

long that it felt like sticking my hand in a fire and expecting it not to get burned.

Chloe decided to move away from Louisiana. Despite having some very positive

relationships there, she hated Louisiana. As she explained it:

If you try to be someone who's different, people look down on you. If you say that you

want to leave, people who are really entrenched will look down on you for that.

She said she felt like a crab in a bucket, being constantly pulled back into a family and a

community full of hateful people. She shared that it got to the point that she was talking to a

military recruiter about enlisting with the navy just to get out of Louisiana, even though she

hated the military.

Around this time, Chloe ended up going on a road trip to Colorado with friends and was

impressed by its beauty. She mentioned to her dad how much she liked it there and hoped to live

there one day. He told her that she should just move there, and she said she did not have the

money. But she took her dad's advice and decided to move anyway. When she told him, he told

her he was proud of her and gave her some money to help her get started. She said she would

never have made it to Colorado without that money. Chloe said she was surprised by her dad's

support and I was too, considering the stories I had heard about him. I asked why she thought her

dad had done this, and she told me:

I'd like to think that on some level he recognized what a piece of shit he'd always been,

you know? But I think it might be simpler and sadder than that. He gave me a piece of

advice and for once in my life I took it.

So, maybe he was trying to make amends, or maybe he was just rewarding Chloe for finally

listening to him. Chloe shared that giving her money did not fit with her dad's pattern of

behaviour and she still is not sure why she did it. I wondered if he had some regrets about how

he lived his life and maybe that was his way of helping Chloe avoid the path he had taken.

Before she moved to Colorado, Chloe came out as trans to her best friend, Ezra. She told

me,

> He and I hung out a lot, like we were–neither of us was in a great place at the time. And I
>
> was living at my grandparents and they have a pond with a little pier on it and we would
>
> regularly just go sit out there after one activity or another and just talk for hours and
>
> hours late in the night, getting to know things about each other. And one day I just like, in
>
> the middle of a conversation just dropped that I was trans and immediately started crying.
>
> And he just hugged me and he was like, "I don't fuckin care what you are, you're my
>
> friend." He's a good dude. He didn't get it at the time. He gets it a lot more now. But
>
> like, he didn't need to get it because he loved me…It was a really important moment for
>
> me. And then I went to Colorado and I proceeded to not fucking come out!

She told me that Colorado was more progressive than Louisiana when it came to issues of

difference, but that it still did not feel safe,

> I didn't trust the people around me, cuz Colorado is a pretty liberal place, you know? But
>
> liberal in America does not mean "Ally" necessarily, you know? Liberal in America just
>
> kind of means "centrist." And that's generous frankly. So I wasn't worried about getting
>
> hate crimed purely for my appearance, but I didn't think that I would be taken seriously if
>
> I came out to anyone. And in fact the only person in Colorado that I told, I only told
>
> because he called me out for wearing a bra and then he called me a slur and quit that job.

Chloe also did not have any friends in Colorado and did not build any friendships while she was there. I wondered how that social context might have made it more difficult for her to come out. Despite these challenges, Chloe started hormone therapy while living in Colorado. She stayed on it for three months before she had to move again, this time because she had called the police on an abusive roommate while he was threatening his girlfriend and Chloe feared retaliation. She moved to Arizona to live with her best friend Ezra and his girlfriend. Unfortunately, in Arizona her hormone treatment was not covered, so she had to discontinue it.

Before she moved to Arizona, she decided to come out as trans to everyone in her life over Facebook. She told me:

There were gonna be other people there, who like they didn't know me at all before, so I was like this could be a fresh start. This could be, this could be what I always wanted. This could be me running away, you know?

Now she was living openly as a trans woman and using she/her pronouns. Chloe told me that her family's response was not accepting of her exactly, but it was at least tolerant and none of her family was openly critical of her gender. When I asked about her dad, Chloe said that she assumed her dad knew she was trans, but that she had not talked to him since she came out.

While Chloe was living with Ezra in Arizona, they played a TTRPG together with other friends. Chloe played a character named Shane Clearwater, who used he/him pronouns:

He was just a good kid. He was sixteen, cuz I was like, I wanted to play a character that is leaving home basically as young as he can get away with it, so that he can go make money for his family. He was a bard[2], he played a harmonica. And he also was, like, I

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[2] A bard is a class of character in Dungeons & Dragons and similar TTRPGs that uses magical artistic performance, such as music or poetry reading, to inspire friends and subdue foes.

played him as a pacifist and not just, like, I went in with that mindset, like outwardly. He

had taken a vow of pacifism to a specific goddess.

Chloe shared that she played Shane as the person she thought she could've been if she were a cis

man. Chloe also shared that through playing Shane she learned about standing up for herself. In

Shane's game, Shane adhered to a strict vow of pacifism that caused friction between himself

and his companions, as he would not break it even when using violence would keep him and his

friends safe. Eventually, Shane's God (played by the dungeon master) spoke to him and told him

that he did not have to adhere to a vow he had made as a child, and that sometimes violence is

necessary to defend yourself and those you care about. Because of this exchange, Shane's

understanding of pacifism shifted: it is better to be nonviolent, but sometimes violence is

necessary as a last resort for people to be able to live peacefully and safely. I asked Chloe if she

had learned anything from Shane's story. She told me that her brother had always tried to teach

her that same lesson about violence but that it had never stuck. Chloe said she learned that lesson

better through playing Shane. I asked Chloe if she had ever had to put that learning to use, and

she told me a story about standing up for her husband Remy in their workplace when a customer

was being aggressive and transphobic. She told me,

A couple years back I probably wouldn't have said anything, you know? I probably

would've just continued to tell Remy to sit in the back. But I am past the point in my life

where I'm going to just passively hurt the people I love, even if I'm scared.

I understood from this story that Chloe was able to put into practice a value that she had

internalized through her play with Shane.

Chloe told me that her living situation with Ezra and his wife Delilah broke down when

Delilah became jealous of Chloe's friendship with Ezra. Chloe ended up moving in with her

brother in Mississippi, back in the trailer that her parents had bought before they divorced. Two

months before the move, she had begun a TTRPG campaign with her brother and his friends. In

this campaign, she played a character named Amber Moonshine, a monk who practiced the Way

of the Drunken Fist and who used she/her pronouns. Chloe explained to me that it started as a

joke. She shared that she was drinking a lot at the time to cope with chronic feelings of

depression, so she made an alcohol-themed character. Chloe was using she/her pronouns at this

time, but she was still using her deadname, which was androgynous. She told me,

> I was in that (sighs) that self-defeating mindset that queer people can have sometimes of
>
> like, "Well I just don't wanna make it harder for anyone else to accept me." I don't want
>
> them to have to learn a new name because then they just won't do it and then I'll see how
>
> much they actually don't support me.

Chloe was trying to make her transition as unobtrusive as possible for the people in her life by

keeping her deadname because she was terrified of finding out that her friends did not care about

her enough to respect her gender identity. Playing Amber, however, gave her the experience of

having other people refer to her in-game by a feminine name, which shifted her feelings around

her name. As she explained to me,

> I got called basically nothing but Amber for a few weeks by the group . Um, and I was
>
> just like, "Yo this shit actually kind of slaps?" This is—God I can't remember the
>
> term—Gender euphoria.

She told me a story about coming home one day after a session of playing Amber,

> Everybody was calling me Amber and I realized one day, I, just like at the end of a
>
> session, started crying when my roommate [Ezra] was like, "Hey, deadname how did the
>
> session go?" And I just started weeping… I just kinda realized that I could choose to be

who I wanted as long as I considered myself worthy of putting in the effort for, you

know? And it was just a little thing! It was just, like, being called a feminine name.

So, Chloe felt like she was worth the effort and started going by Amber and it turned out that the

people in her life thought she was worth the effort too and called her by her name.

Living a New Story of Care with Remy

Things were difficult for Chloe during this part of her life. She could not find work and

felt like a burden on her brother and their other roommate. She also had a falling out with the

dungeon master of her TTRPG group and was asked to leave the group. But it was during this

time that she met her husband Remy. The two lived in different towns and met through a dating

app. They started spending time together, and she told me:

I moved in with him almost on accident. Cuz like I had been coming down to visit and it

was getting harder and harder to leave every time and it was time for me to go home and

I just started crying and I couldn't make myself leave.

Chloe and Remy moved in together and Chloe told me that living with Remy has been a new

kind of experience for her. As she put it, "I've never lived with somebody who just gave me

grace when I fucked things up, you know?" Chloe shared that she was aware that she can be a

difficult person to live with. She has trouble staying organized and keeping up with household

chores, which can cause friction with roommates. Chloe says she suspects she has some sort of

executive dysfunction, but she has never had the resources to get an assessment done. She shared

Remy has some of the same issues, and that unlike previous roommates, he understands her

experience and believes her when she talks about her challenges with motivation and

organization.

Remy is also transgender and when Chloe and Remy met, Remy had not yet transitioned. Remy had had similar experiences to Chloe with abusive parenting. Chloe told me, "He already knew [that he was transgender] but he was like, 'there's no point.' He was in that place that I used to be in." Chloe shared that even though she did not have access to gender affirming medical care, she was still doing her best to express her gender in feminine ways that felt authentic to her. Chloe shared that Remy seeing her express her gender the way she wanted to helped him recognize that he could do the same.

Chloe told me that her relationship with Remy has helped her be kinder to herself, because Remy cares for her and challenges her negative self-talk. Chloe talked about her husband throughout our conversations and almost every time he came up, she would mention how much she loved him. Understanding the lack of care that Chloe had experienced from many people in her life, it was beautiful and life-affirming to hear the stories of Chloe and Remy caring for each other and to see them caring for each other as Chloe and I had our conversations.

Chloe's relationship with Remy has also helped Chloe deal with her suicidal thoughts. She shared with me,

> I want to live, I have things to live for, I'm in love. I one day want to move somewhere that I like being and I think that's actually possible. I want to go back to school. It's kind of a joke, but Remy and I—I used to—I really like space. I wanna go to space. More than almost anything. I want to be in space so bad. And one day Remy and I—it was like towards the end of us doing some psychedelics—we were just sitting in the car chillin' and I looked over at him and I just started crying and I was like, "I'm never going to go to space!" Because [it's] statistically very unlikely that I make it to space, you know? And he was just like, "Oh, oh honey no!" So, we—I cried for a minute and then he

pushed me back and he looked at me and he was like, "You're gonna go to space!" And I

was like, "I'm—I'm gonna to space?" and he was like, "You're gonna go to space! And

I'm gonna hug every cat in the world! And these are accomplishable goals that we're

gonna succeed at!"

She summed up her reason for living this way: "It's hope, at the end of the day. I felt hopeless for

a very very long time." Remy and Chloe have built a life together where they have love, care,

connection, dreams, and hope for the future, which have all given Chloe reasons for living.

As we wrapped up our second conversation I asked Chloe to broadly reflect on the role

that TTRPG play has had in her life. She told me that TTRPG play has been a way for her to

explore relationships with other people and with herself and to be "unabashedly creative." She

shared that she felt comfortable with her gender and she believed TTRPGs were important for

helping her find that comfort. She explained:

> [TTRPG play] helped me understand what it would be like to step into the shoes of
>
> another person and to be that person and that I could be someone who wasn't me,
>
> necessarily. I could be someone who wasn't what I thought I had to be.

Chloe felt that the role of TTRPGs had shifted in her life. She saw TTRPGs as being

"therapeutic" for her as a younger person when she was figuring out how to be who she wanted

to be and how she wanted to express her gender, but now that she was older she saw them as

more of a way to connect with her friends and express herself creatively. Chloe explained that

she feels that she is now ready to work on her own issues directly, perhaps in therapy, rather than

working them out indirectly through roleplay.

That being said, Chloe shared that she has become more intentional with creating

characters that mirror aspects of her real life, which suggests to me that she is still using TTRPGs

to explore her out-of-game experience. In her early days of play, she "never put a second

thought" into why she created the characters that she did. But now, she shared:

> I think a lot more about, not just the character and the life they've lived, but also like
>
> thematically, like what that means in a—I don't know how else to put it—like in a literary
>
> analysis kind of sense. Like, what the themes of their life translate to.

She shared that she is intentional about creating parallels between her own life and her characters

and gave the example of a character that she was playing at the time named Holly Rose:

> "I want to inspire hope," is kind of her vibe. It's really interesting the dynamic she has
>
> with her parents where it's like, they taught her dozens of ways to kill a man and she very
>
> explicitly tries not to kill people when she fights. Under her ideals on her character sheet
>
> it says "I will show mercy to those I was taught not to." So, like, she has the capacity for
>
> great harm, but she directs that towards helping people as much as she possibly can. And
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> I guess that kind of reflects a little bit on my life with, like, if my parents were the people
>
> that they are except that they're good people. Cuz my, my dad and my brother taught me
>
> how to fight and my taught me how to shoot guns and how to (laughs) make fuckin pipe
>
> bombs and like all this shit, and I just have no desire to hurt people and Jon always told
>
> me that you can't be a pacifist unless willing to enact great harm, otherwise you're just a
>
> victim…but real life isn't a game and when you have the capacity for great harm and the
>
> willingness to do it, sometimes that can be option number one instead of option sixteen,
>
> you know what I mean?...I just wanna be able to direct the things that I was forced to
>
> learn into a good place.

So, while gender may not be the focus of her exploration, Chloe is continuing to explore herself through TTRPG play and perhaps these explorations will continue to open up new stories for her to live by.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Space, Exploration, and Becoming

> "[W]e live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories
>
> planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we
>
> planted—knowingly or unknowingly—in ourselves. We live stories that either give our
>
> lives meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by,
>
> quite possibly we change our lives." —*Ben Okri, A Way of Being Free*

T's and Chloe's narratives are stories of growing up in stifling contexts where they were given stories of gender that left little room for them to imagine different stories to live by. Their stories are those of searching and reaching out for new relationships and new stories that could open up new possibilities for how they live their lives. In this chapter, I want to offer an interpretation of T's and Chloe's narratives that focuses on how they both created and found spaces where they could imagine new stories of themselves, creatively explore those stories, and find the support and safety they needed to live out those stories in ways that support becoming. In this section I use the term becoming to refer to efforts that people engage in to achieve a more ideal identity (Coe, 2017), or in narrative terms, more ideal stories to live by (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

When thinking about T's and Chloe's stories, I was drawn to the metaphor of space for thinking about how they were able to tell and live—and were prevented from telling and living—new stories about themselves. For me, the concept of space evokes a sense of freedom and exploration: physically, when we have space we can relax, move around, and explore and

when we do not have space we are confined or trapped. Without space, we are stuck where we

are, inert and unchanging. As a metaphor, space can be used to think about the psychological

freedom that people need to imagine themselves in new ways and try out new stories to live

by—in narrative terms, we could say that this psychological freedom allows people to tell new

stories about themselves and to explore those stories through the telling and living of them. From

my work with T and Chloe, I have come to understand that there are several ways that people

can find and create this kind of space: by physically moving to new places, by creating new

relationships, and by engaging with new stories. Physical places give us space when we move

away from the places that hold the stories of our pasts into new places that have their own stories

and hold new opportunities for creating new stories about ourselves. Relationships give us space

through the safety that they provide: when we feel accepted and cared for, the spaces of our own

experience become less frightening and we can explore them knowing that if we discover things

that feel too frightening, sad, alien, unacceptable or otherwise difficult to approach, we have the

support of the people around us to help us manage those feelings and to keep approaching the

horizons of our own becoming. Relationships also give us space in that when we enter into

relation with another we enter into their world and see things from their perspective. In relational

spaces, we can see ourselves from the other's perspective in a new light and from a new angle,

which can give us new ways to understand who we are and who we are becoming. Similarly,

stories give us space in that they take us out of our own experience and put us into the experience

of another and let us explore the world of the other's perspective. Rose's (1994) concept of the

laboratory of dreams is a space metaphor for understanding how fictional stories give us a way

to imagine and experiment with new stories to live by. When we create fiction we can include

pieces of ourselves and our worlds in the fictional narratives. This lets us imaginatively explore

what might happen if we were to change aspects of ourselves or our worlds, which opens up new

possibilities for interacting with our real worlds. As I have been writing this thesis, I have been

experiencing some tension whenever I think about the differences between the worlds of fiction

and the worlds of our lives. In my literature review, I tended to use the terms in- and out-of-game

when referring to imagined and real worlds in the context of TTRPGs, rather than using the

terms such as imagined and real. This is because the more I thought about the relationships

between imagined and real worlds, the more the boundaries between them began to blur. Of

course, imagined worlds are not real in a physical sense: the characters are not alive and we

cannot visit the places. Likewise, physical worlds are not imagined in the sense that they have a

real physical presence outside of our minds. But, as we have seen in the narratives of T and

Chloe, when we create works of fiction, we put real pieces of ourselves into those works, and we

take pieces from those worlds back into our physical worlds and make them real. TTRPGs, as

fictional narratives, are laboratories of dreams. They are spaces where players can make the real

imaginary and the imaginary real and test out new stories to live by that can ultimately inform

processes of becoming in their out-of-game lives.

Space, Exploration, and Becoming in T's Narrative

In T's early life, the real spaces in which they were allowed to exist and explore were

heavily controlled by their parents, which affected the spaces that T could imaginatively explore.

Before T was old enough to start school, their parents moved them to a different state in order to

prevent T and their siblings from being exposed to queer stories. As a result, T grew up in a

context where they were given traditional, binary gendered stories to live by. They were raised

with a story of being a "prim and proper little young lady," and their world was marked by a

silence where queer stories could have been. Their parents avoided discussing queer people to

the point that T did not even have the words to describe what queerness was. The space that T

had for imagining new stories to live by was constrained by a lack of queer stories and language.

T still worked to resist the restrictive gender stories they were given within the space that

they had. They did their best to reach out of their confined space to try to tell and live different

stories of gender. T's story of putting away chairs is an example of this: adults told T and their

peers that moving chairs was a job for strong boys and although T did not have an understanding

of queerness, they understood that their body was strong enough to lift chairs and they sought to

live a story of strength that resisted stories of feminine weakness they were being given. Another

example is when T was cast as Puck in the school play: with Puck using he/him pronouns in that

particular adaptation, T saw a space opening up that would have let them explore what it felt like

to embody a masculine character and to be referred to in masculine ways. Unfortunately, that

space was closed off when T's teacher insisted on changing Puck's pronouns to she/her[3].

As a young person, church was a place for T that felt loving and accepting. T had

relationships at church that helped them through difficult times. I imagine these relationships

gave T space to explore themself in certain ways: religiously and socially, perhaps. But these

relationships also constrained their exploration of their queer identities. T's relationship with

God, whom T initially understood as condemning queerness, made them feel stuck and unable to

explore the queer desires that they were feeling. But a new space for exploration opened up for T

when the Tumblr blogger they liked, Thomas Sanders, shared his story about reconciling his

queerness with his religiosity. Sanders' story gave T the space to imagine God as loving and

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[3] I am compelled to note the irony of a teacher fluidly changing a character's pronouns in an attempt to prevent a child from playing a character of a different gender. In an attempt to prevent gender fluidity they exposed how fluid it is by changing a character's pronouns without changing anything else about the character.

accepting of queerness, and themself as a queer Christian, which ultimately helped T embrace their feelings and come out as bisexual.

T also found space to explore themself by physically moving away from their parents when they went away to college. From T's stories, it was clear that their parents were not supportive of diverse genders and sexualities. When they came out to their mom as bisexual, she was tolerant but only because she believed that T would still be living a story of heterosexuality with their partner. T shared that they had never come out to her dad as bisexual. Without support from their parents, I imagine T would not have felt very safe or supported exploring their gender at home. In contrast, in their college town they were away from their parents and were in a new place that was socially progressive and held stories of acceptance and support of gender diversity. At college, T made new friends who were supportive of gender diversity. It was during COVID, when they were largely confined to their dorm room that T really started exploring their gender in earnest. They created a nonbinary character for a fictional story they were writing and that imaginative space gave them space to imagine themselves differently. They also had the support of a transgender friend. While T did not explicitly tell that friend that they were questioning their gender, I imagine that having relationships with transgender people gave T a sense of safety that if they did come out as nonbinary, they would be accepted and supported. That friend also shared their story of gender exploration with T, which gave T a new space to consider their own gender. While T was physically stuck in the small space of their dorm room, they found space to explore their gender in the safety of a relationship with a transgender friend, in the stories that their friend shared, and in the fictional stories that T was creating themself. From this exploration, T was able to tell and live a new story of themself as a nonbinary person.

T's relationship with their friend Matt was an important space for gaining a new

perspective on queerness. Before Matt came out as gay, T understood little about queerness

except that it was sinful. After Matt came out, T had to reevaluate their understandings of

queerness from the perspective of their relationship with Matt. Within that relational space, they

looked at queerness differently and came to the understanding that "queer people are neat." T's

relationship with Matt also helped provide T a safe context for gender exploration when T and

Matt started playing a TTRPG campaign together. In our conversations, T noted that part of what

allowed them to play their player character (PC) Lynx as nonbinary was the fact that Matt had

come out as gay, which gave T the sense that it was safe to explore topics of gender and sexuality

in game. The game itself also created an imaginative space that helped T explore gender through

roleplaying Lynx—imagining what it was like to be a nonbinary person. In my literature review,

both the relational and imaginative aspects of TTRPGs were frequently cited as supporting

identity exploration in TTRPG play (e.g. Bowman 2010; Coe, 2017; Morris, 2022; Shepherd,

2021). The imaginative element of TTRPGs can allow players to explore gender, but this space is

constrained by one's relationships with the other players. That is to say, if the game master (GM)

and other players are not welcoming, affirming, and supportive of a player's exploration, then

players may not feel safe enough to explore. In T's experience, their relationship with Matt,

which was marked by Matt's queer identity, allowed T to more safely play with their PC's gender

in game.

T's gendered play within the game space of that campaign also highlights the blurriness

of the boundary between imaginative play and real life. When I asked T what how they played

with gender, they highlighted how they embodied their character physically (in-game, but in the

physical world) by changing their posture and changing their voice to express more masculinity

than they would outside of the game. Though the game was played out imaginatively through conversation, T was trying out different gender expressions in the real world, in their physical body. T also drew on Lynx as a source of inspiration when they were struggling with physical illness and disability. Lynx was physically strong, confident, and assertive and T explained that when they were feeling bad, they imagined how Lynx would deal with that situation and felt empowered and more able to address challenges outside of the game.

T began playing Lynx without the understanding that they were exploring their gender. When they reflected back on their play, however, they understood that Lynx had given them space to explore their gender before they were able to see that that was what they were doing. They shared that, "Lynx is so special to me because they opened that door for me." Lynx opened the door to an imaginative space where T, in the context of a safe and supportive group of players, could explore different stories to live by, embodying, and expressing gender, which opened up new ways of becoming in their life outside of the game. After playing Lynx, TTRPGs continued to be a space where T could explore their gender. They played characters across the gender spectrum, and, through their roleplay, were able to get a sense of which genders felt right and which did not.

Space, Exploration, and Becoming in Chloe's Narrative

Like T, Chloe's early places were confining in terms of gender stories. Chloe's dad was a strong presence in her early life and used coercive punishments to reinforce the gendered stories he was telling his children. Chloe knew from a young age that she was expected to play sports, to be strong, and not to complain. When Chloe and her brother fell short of her father's difficult expectations, such as when she got hurt playing football or when her dad suspected her brother of being gay, they were beaten and punished in other ways. Within these stories Chloe was not

physically or emotionally safe enough to explore new stories to live by, either imaginally or in

her behaviour. Within those confining stories of gender, Chloe learned to understand herself as a

defective boy.

Many of Chloe's early physical places were also confined. She shared small trailers with

her family and with other people whom she did not feel safe or comfortable around, such as her

mom's boyfriend and her mom's mother. Chloe was able to find some space to explore herself on

the internet, but she had to be careful because her dad had forbidden her from using it. On the

internet she found spaces where she was able to explore her sexuality and gender. It was on the

internet that Chloe was first introduced to the idea of transgenderism, which opened up a new

space for imagining who she could be. She also connected with a trans woman online and it was

in that relational space and within the stories that that woman gave her where Chloe first started

to understand herself as a transfeminine person, rather than as a defective boy who could not live

out her father's gender stories. As a young person stuck in very restrictive places and gender

stories, Chloe—like T— found spaces in the interstices of her life where she was able to begin

telling and living new stories.

Chloe also found space when her parents got divorced and her dad moved out. Suddenly,

she had distance from the person who had dominated her understandings of gender (and of

sexuality, race, and difference in general). In that space, Chloe was able to come out as bisexual

to her mom and start living a different story of herself. She also found relationships with new

friends that felt safe and accepting and in those relational spaces she was also able to tell and live

a story of herself as a queer person. Chloe's sense of safety, however, was impacted by being

abandoned by friends and supports during high school. When her mom moved away, she lived

with two friends who both ended up cutting contact with her and whose families kicked her out of their homes. Because of these experiences, Chloe had difficulty trusting people.

After high school, she had friends who were supportive of her but she did not feel safe enough to explore gender in those relational spaces. When she started playing TTRPGs with a group of close friends, that lack of safety led her to play a character who was masculine presenting. The imaginal space of the game is an opportunity to explore new stories of oneself, but without a sense of relational safety, that space alone may not be enough to allow exploration, which is what Chloe experienced. Chloe was brave, however, and within some of her more trusting relationships, she was able to come out as trans and start telling and living a new story of herself as a transfeminine person.

Eventually Chloe moved away from Louisiana. For her, Louisiana was a place that was full of prejudiced people who made her feel like she could not live as a transfeminine person. In moving away from those relationships she found more space to explore her gender. In Colorado, she started taking hormones, but had no supportive relationships where she felt like could be herself. When she moved from Colorado to Arizona, however, Chloe felt like she had enough space to start openly living a story of herself as a transfeminine person. Arizona was a fresh start with new people where she could be someone different. It was like a blank page where she could start writing a new story of herself. It might also have been important that she lived there with her best friend who knew she was trans and who loved and supported her. In that space, far away from her family in Louisiana, Chloe felt able to come out as trans to everyone in her life over social media.

While in Arizona, she started playing a TTRPG with a group that included her best friend. Her character was named Shane Clearwater, who used he/him pronouns. When Chloe

reflected back on her roleplay with this character, she described it as a "final exploration of masculinity" as she was transitioning to living life as a transfeminine person. Growing up, she was given stories of masculinity that were rooted in violence, control, and fear of emotions and difference. With Shane, she was able to explore positive aspects of masculinity that she would have liked to embody if she were a man. In our conversations, Chloe explained that she had not thought about Shane in those terms before, but in being able to reflect on her play with me in the narrative inquiry space, she was able to create a new story of how Shane had shaped her understandings of gender. Shane was a paladin—a holy knight—who had sworn an oath of pacifism to his god. With Shane, Chloe was resisting the stories of masculine violence that she had learned from her dad. Through Shane, and through the collaborative narrative created with the other players in the game space, Chloe created a new story of violence, learning to see violence as a tool of last resort to keep oneself and one's loved ones safe. Chloe ended up living out this story in an altercation at her and her husband's place of work, which highlights TTRPG play as a laboratory of dreams, where new stories can be explored and imagined and then brought to life outside of the game.

In Arizona and later in Mississippi, Chloe was living a gender story that did not feel entirely authentic. She was using she/her pronouns but was still going by her deadname because she was worried other people would not accept her if they had to make too many changes in how they addressed her. When she returned to Mississippi, Chloe started playing a TTRPG with a new group where she roleplayed a PC named Amber Moonshine. In that game, Chloe, for the first time, experienced other people referring to her with a feminine name, which helped Chloe realize that having a more feminine name felt right for her. That game and that character gave Chloe the space she needed to explore a new, more feminine identity. Chloe adopted the name of

her character in her out-of-game life and went by Amber for years, once again highlighting TTRPG play as a factory of dreams, with a porous boundary between the imaginal space of the game and the real world. Chloe still uses TTRPGs as a space to explore herself by bringing parts of her own stories into her games and playing with them to see how they feel, which may open up new possibilities for being and becoming as she moves into the future.

Chloe's relationship with Remy was another space where Chloe could imagine new stories for herself. Chloe had lived a story of hopelessness throughout most of her life. Even with all the growth and development that she experienced as she came to story herself as a transfeminine person and eventually live out that story, it seemed like she was constantly dragged back to a place where she felt like things would never get better. When she told me about having to move back to Mississippi after her living arrangement in Arizona broke down, it seemed like Chloe was in a hopeless place, without a job and feeling like a burden to her brother and roommates. When she met Remy, they provided space for each other to imagine new stories: Remy told and lived new stories of himself as a trans man and Chloe learned that she had things to live for, giving her hope for the future.

Situating this Study Within the Literature

The findings studies on TTRPG and identity exploration that I reviewed in the Literature Review chapter (Barnhart, 2024; Benedele, 2019; Bowman, 2010; Coe, 2017; Just, 2018; Morris, 2022; Shepherd, 2021) tended to converge on two findings: that TTRPGs provided a space for players to creatively explore aspects of their identity through roleplay and that TTRPGs provided a place for players to build social relationships and experience belonging. Studies also found that the social context of TTRPGs can affect how players explore gender identity (Just, 2018; Morris, 2022). One way that I see this study as fitting into the body of literature on TTRPG play and

identity development—and particularly gender identity developing—is through helping to

illuminate the ways that these themes are connected in a person's experience. For example, we

can see how the social context of the first TTRPG campaign that T played with their friend Matt

was important for helping T feel comfortable exploring gender. Matt's own identity as a gay man

helped T feel safe enough in the context of that group to explore their identity through playing a

nonbinary character. Another example is how Chloe's TTRPG play was initially a way to satisfy

social needs after she graduated high school, but that her TTRPG play evolved into a space

where she was exploring her gender. My study also fits into this body of literature by helping to

illuminate why it matters that TTRPGs can help gender diverse people explore identity and find

belonging. The narratives of T and Chloe show how dangerous and confining the lives of gender

diverse children, youths, and young adults can be. With this understanding, it becomes more

clear that spaces where gender diverse people can feel safe and comfortable exploring

themselves can be critical to supporting their well-being, and that TTRPGs have the potential to

be that space.

TTRPGs as Spaces for Exploration and Becoming and Their Relevance to Counselling

Psychology

I believe that TTRPGs can provide a space that, when the group feels safe and

supportive, can allow players to explore themselves, which can inform their becoming

out-of-game. In my interviews I focused on gender exploration but as Coe (2017) found,

TTRPGs, being so open to customization, can be used to explore all manner of identities. I think

that space—which I'm using as a metaphor for the psychological freedom necessary to explore

one's experience and to try telling and living new stories of oneself—can be found in many

different ways. In particular, in the stories of T and Chloe, I mainly saw them finding space by:

moving away from oppressive people and confining stories to new places where they could make

new stories; by creating new supportive relationships; and by engaging in creative

storytelling—including writing fiction, performing theatre, and playing TTRPGS. They also

found space in more subtle ways, such as when T resisted narratives of feminine weakness by

putting away chairs in her church. While space can be found in many ways, TTRPGs seem

particularly well-suited for creating spaces to support the telling and living of new stories

because the psychological distance that exists between player and PC inherently creates space

and because the fictional narratives created in TTRPGs can serve as laboratories of dreams

where players can try new stories to live by, which can inform their becoming outside of the

game. TTRPGs are also social spaces and when that social space is experienced as supportive

and affirming, they allow for a sense of safety that may support the self-exploration that happens

through the narrative play.

From the perspective of counselling psychology, TTRPGs are an attractive medium for

interventions to support the well-being and self-exploration of clients who hold marginalized

identities, including, but not limited to, gender diverse people. Part of what makes them

attractive is their current popularity: TTRPGs have seen a rise in popularity (Stuart, 2019) due to

their representation in popular shows such as Community and Stranger Things and due to the rise

in popularity of video RPGs, such as Skyrim. TTRPGs are easy to learn and play, and can be

shaped to fit players interests, needs, and goals. They allow for varying levels of engagement

depending on players' comfort levels, which would help facilitators meet clients where they are

at. TTRPGs provide social spaces where players can not only play with new stories to live by,

but also have those stories to live by affirmed and accepted by other people. In this way,

TTRPGs can function much like drama therapy, but unlike drama therapy, they have a structure

and a popularity that can appeal to a broad audience—including demographics that are

notoriously difficult to engage in therapy, such as youths (Oetzel & Scherer, 2003). Additionally,

since TTRPGs are played in groups, TTRPG interventions could be facilitated for more people

and at lower costs compared to individual counselling. Cost and accessibility are important

considerations for making psychological services available to more people. Cost effectiveness

and accessibility could be further enhanced by training support staff or members of the

community to facilitate TTRPG groups. Without trained therapists facilitating these groups they

may not have the same therapeutic value, but they could still have huge benefits for players.

Notably, the games that T and Chloe played were run by friends and acquaintances who have

varying levels of experience playing and running TTRPGs, and T and Chloe still experienced

these games as transformative. Recruiting and training non-therapists as TTRPG group

facilitators could further decrease the cost of such groups and create more spaces for people to

try telling and living new stories to live by. Supporting the grassroots creation of TTRPG clubs at

schools could be one way of doing this.

     Following the explosion in popularity of TTRPGs, there has been an explosion of

research into the therapeutic and educational possibilities of TTRPGs. I hope that this body of

research can support the creation of new interventions and community initiatives that will create

spaces for gender diverse people and others to imagine themselves in new ways, play with their

self-understandings, and support their processes of becoming. As prejudice and discrimination

against gender diverse people continues to grow, spaces for self-exploration are closed off, such

as with the changes to gay-straight alliances and pronoun changes in Alberta schools (French,

2024; Gibson, 2022). Socially supportive, imaginative spaces, such as those provided by

TTRPGs, are needed more than ever for gender diverse people.

Intersectionality in the Narratives of Chloe and T

That being said, working with my supervisor, Melissa, on revising my research document, she came to me with a wondering about how my study dealt with intersectionality and asked me to explicitly address this topic. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) is a theory that suggests that different forms of oppression and privilege interact—or intersect—to inform their experience. This theory guides us to consider, for example, how a Black woman's experiences, shaped by racism and sexism, will differ from a Black man's experiences, shaped by racism and male privilege. Importantly, these differences in experience cannot be understood additively. That is to say, a Black woman's experience cannot simply be understood by adding together a universal understanding of Black experience with a universal experience of womanhood. Rather, a Black woman's experience is shaped by being Black and a woman, but her experience of both being Black and woman will differ from, for example, a Black man's experience of being Black and from a white woman's experience of being a woman. Intersectionality suggests that people at each intersection of oppressions and privileges will have experiences that qualitatively differ from people at other intersections. Each person will, of course, have experiences that are unique to them, but this theory suggests that a person's intersectional identities will shape their experiences in important ways.

I subscribe to this theory and believe it is true of the participants in my study. Narratively speaking, identity can be thought of as a story to live by (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000)—that is, a story of the self that guides their thinking and action into the future. T and Chloe live at the intersections of different stories to live by that will shape their experiences. These stories to live by are themselves shaped by the social, political, and institutional narratives that are shared by the people that make up T and Chloe's environment. In T and Chloe's narratives, I tried to make

visible their intersectional identities—their stories to live by—as they were related to me. For example, you will read about how T's experience of TTRPG play was shaped by their stories of, for example, gender, disability, and religion. Chloe's experience of TTRPG play was shaped by her stories of, for example, gender and mental health. Some aspects of participants' identities are not as visible in their narratives—race stands out as an important example—and seemed not to be salient aspects of participants' TTRPG play. Chloe addressed race in her conversations with me, but her racial story to live by did not seem to have an impact on her play. It is common for race not to be a salient aspect of identity for white people (Hurtado et al., 2015), so this aspect of T's and Chloe's narrative is not surprising. However, I would invite readers to wonder and explore how Black, Indigenous, or other people of colour may experience gender identity exploration through TTRPG differently than white people. I would also invite readers to wonder and explore how other differences could impact people's experiences of exploration through TTRPG play.

Limitations

This study is limited in its exploration of gender diverse people's experiences by having only two participants who share similar identities. Both were white, identified as non-binary, and lived in the southern United States. Further research investigating the experiences of gender diverse people with other identities will be important work for the future. This study was also done under a short timeline, which limited my ability to seek out and respond to feedback from community stakeholders. One piece of feedback I received from Dr. Caso—a member of my committee—was that, as a cisgender person, my study would have been improved by centering the work of trans scholars in my literature review.

Chapter 7: A Space to Explore Myself

Through our conversations, T and Chloe came to new understandings of themselves and at the same time I was coming to new understandings of myself. As I heard their stories, transcribed, read, re-read, analyzed, and thought with those stories, they started to work on me in ways that I had not anticipated. As I discussed in the Methodology chapter, I, as inquirer, was not separate from the thing I was studying. My stories that I brought to the narrative inquiry space shaped this study, but my relationships with T and Chloe and the stories told to me in those relationships also shaped me and I want to share my story of that experience with you. I am sharing this story for a few reasons: (1) to encourage you, the reader, to—and help you imagine how—you might engage with the stories of T and Chloe in ways that may change your own stories in some way—for example by shaping your stories to live by, your stories of queerness, or your stories of professional practice; (2) to give the reader another story of exploration and change that could shape their stories; (3) to give myself a relational space—in relation with my thesis committee, and with you, my imagined reader—to think through my own stories of becoming. This last goal is typical of academic research, and is one that I believe is worthy for a graduate student thesis in counselling psychology. I hope that this study can add to the body of knowledge on TTRPGs and gender diversity, but I am also realistic in recognizing that it is likely that few people will read my thesis. I believe that the most important product of this research is my development as a researcher, counsellor, and human being. Counselling psychology, in particular, is a field where it is important to practice critical self-reflection as a psychologist's self is the tool of their practice, and the honing of that tool through self-reflection is paramount. By writing and making visible my self-exploration and the narratives I am constructing about

myself I am also hoping to be witnessed and affirmed in my growth and development, which I hope will help me consolidate some of those changes.

Hearing about how T and Chloe were shaped by the stories of gender given to them as children, I was taken back to my own childhood. I wondered about how my own gender expression was shaped by the people in my life. Unlike T and Chloe, I always felt fairly comfortable with the stories of gender I was given. That may have been due to my parents having less traditional understandings of gender compared to T's and Chloe's parents: as a child, at home I do not remember feeling pushed to be something that I was not. But I do remember noticing gender and understanding that I was a boy. I remember playing with other boys and excluding girls from our play, explaining this behaviour with gendered slogans such as "boys rule, girls drool."

When I started school, I could feel how my social world was divided by gender. There were girls that I liked to hang out with, but I remember feeling like friendships with girls were somehow inappropriate. As time went on, I spent more time with boys and less time with girls. While I was thinking about T's story of moving chairs as a child, it reminded me of one of my own experiences in school. I was in grade four and most of the girls in my class had started to work on a dance routine set to Shania Twain's Man I Feel Like a Woman. All the boys in the class, for whatever reason, decided to join in the rehearsal. We went from playing soccer and roughhousing at recess—usually just the boys, while the girls played with each other—to learning feminine choreography set to an explicitly feminine song. We practiced in the parking lot in the middle of school at recess—morning and afternoon—for weeks and we were having fun. I remember boys in older grades making fun of us, but since all the boys in our class were involved and enjoying ourselves, we felt safe enough to keep going. One day, however, the group

of girls who were organizing the dance approached us and told us that we were no longer allowed to dance with them. They told us that they were going to perform at the school assembly and only girls were allowed. I remember feeling disappointed, but at the same time I understood that we had been living outside of accepted stories of gender. This was a correction that felt inevitable.

Thinking back on this story it feels like an important moment. We, the boys, had found a space where we could try on new gender expressions. We were moving our bodies in new ways that felt fun. Those recesses in that parking lot were a space where we could explore new ways of being, new stories of ourselves. We were also breaking down the divisions in play and sociality that existed in our class, reimagining how we related to other children in our class. When we were told we could not participate, it closed off that space of imagining and reinforced that old story of gender that we had been living. This was how girls played. No boys allowed.

When T realized they were nonbinary, they revisited old stories and started making new sense of them. They put together their past stories of gender nonconformity and exploration in a new way that created a sense of narrative unity and helped them understand themselves as a nonbinary person. I started looking back at my own stories of gender and gender exploration and connecting stories together to create new narrative threads.

Dance and music seemed to be the context where I felt comfortable exploring and expressing femininity. I remember in high school in gym class we were learning a dance to a Beyonce song. Most of the boys in the class opted out, but I wanted to learn. I remember one of my teammates on the basketball team making fun of me. Looking back, it seemed like every foray into feminine expression was eventually met with criticism. I think this experience and similar experiences left a mark on me in terms of what I felt were appropriate gender

expressions. Looking back, it was not a conscious decision to perform my gender as more masculine, but I think that was the result, and feel that this masculine performance has been restrictive and uncomfortable in ways that are still difficult to put into words. As I am thinking back, I think I moved away from gentleness, openness, and vulnerability towards toughness and (feigned) confidence. This masculine story that I was living was productive in some ways: I think it gave me a sense of belonging by helping me create relationships with other men that felt emotionally safe (though not intimate). Ultimately, however, that lack of emotional intimacy in my relationships became a problem in my life: when I needed support, I felt like I did not have anywhere to go. I felt like it was not safe to show vulnerability in my relationships.

Even though my dancing was often closely policed by my peers, I always made my way back to it eventually. The music always felt like an invitation to experience and express myself in a different, more feminine way than I would in other settings. As a young adult, I went to a music festival in Austin, Texas. One of my favourite artists was performing at a club and I was overjoyed to have a chance to see her. Her name was Sophie and she had come to prominence by making music that combined feminine, pitched-up vocals and glittery synths with heavy, abrasive, masculine bass and percussion. I think I was attracted to the gendered feeling of her music: it moved freely along the spectrum of femininity and masculinity, combining sounds and lyrical themes in surprising and thrilling ways. Now, I see her music as space for imagining new ways of expressing gender and I think back then I certainly felt that, even if I had not made sense of it in those terms. The show was amazing, the crowd was electric, and I felt like I could move and dance freely in whatever ways felt right. Sophie played another show the next day, during the daytime, on the festival grounds. I was excited to see her again and I danced the same ways that I had at the club the night before. There was a group of girls next to me wearing University

of Texas shirts. I could hear them making fun of my dancing. It hurt my feelings and made me change the way I was dancing. A few years later at an electronic music festival I tried on my friend's sparkly dress ostensibly as a joke, but once I was wearing it it felt good. I wore it dancing that night. Without feeling like I was trying, I walked more femininely, talked more femininely, and danced more femininely. The friends I was with were encouraging and accepting and told me I looked good. The crowds at the festival were similarly accepting. That festival, with those people, and with that music provided a space where I could try new gender expressions and have them affirmed by people around me.

That festival happened during a transitional time in my life. I was unemployed and depressed, and a few months later I went back to school to study psychology. In all of the messiness of trying to sort out what I was going to do with my life, and then all the busyness of going back to school, finding a new job, completing an after degree, and pursuing graduate studies, I think gender exploration was relegated to a very low priority. I do not remember consciously exploring my gender or even thinking about it that often during that period. Looking back, however, I was interested to see that I always sought out contact with queer art, especially through movies and music. I watched a lot of queer films and most of my favourite musicians were trans, nonbinary, or gender-fluid. I think that despite not making much room for active exploration of gender, I was still looking for and finding spaces where I could feel gender differently, in the ways that I had at Sophie's show and at that music festival.

While I was working on this study, when others would ask me why I chose my topic, I would tell them the story that I told you in introduction: that I was curious about why so many gender diverse people seemed to be drawn to TTRPGs. But as I worked with T and Chloe, it became more and more clear to me that I had also been looking for a space where I could reflect

on my own gender. Within their stories of gender exploration, I found space to think about my own experience in new ways. From within those stories, I started to feel differently about my gender. I had understood for a long time that gender was not a binary construct and that, on the gender spectrum, most peoples' experiences fit somewhere between the two extremes of masculinity and femininity. I understood that I was somewhere in the middle of that spectrum, but hearing T's and Chloe's stories helped me feel that, which was a new experience for me.

        As I started feeling my way through these new experiences of my gender, I was guided along by T's and Chloe's words. Like T, I wondered to myself if I was trying to be more gender queer because it was cool and like Chloe, I worried about how to explain myself to other people. I understood that my experience was different from theirs—particularly because my gender assigned at birth had always felt somewhat close to my experience—but it was heartening in those moments to realize that other people have had these experiences when questioning their gender. In those moments, T's and Chloe's stories gave me a sense of belonging that made me feel safe enough to keep exploring my gender.

        The new story of gender I was starting to tell about myself was not as big of a change as the new stories that T and Chloe came to tell about themselves—I still identify as cisgender (or maybe, cis plus as T suggested)—but it still felt like a profound change. This new story felt awkward to live and tell as I had the same concerns that T and Chloe had had: how would this new story affect my relationships? Would my friends and family still be supportive and accepting of me if I started expressing my gender in different ways? While I was working on this project I was also dating, and I found that dating was a space where I could start living some of those new stories. I was meeting new people and within those new relationships I felt like I had a bit of room to live new stories since these people did not know my old stories. I tried being more

feminine, more open, and more gentle in those relationships and I found that the people I was

dating responded positively. Dating during this period, so far, has felt like a safe, relatively free

space where I can try out my developing stories of gender and see how they feel within

relationships.

For me, music and dance, and more recently dating relationships have been spaces where

I have found some room for gender exploration, but working with T and Chloe also made me

think about the ways that I had played with gender in TTRPGs. The first time I played a TTRPG

I made a player character (PC) named Guiton LeSabre. He was a rogue that I modeled after

strong, silent, masculine loner characters such as Clint Eastwood's Man with No Name from

Sergio Leone's westerns and Ryan Gosling's the Kid from Nicholas Winding Refn's Drive.

When I played Guiton I was mostly concerned with being and appearing strong, masculine, and

cool, but I found that this kind of expression was difficult because it annoyed the other player

characters and the other players. In trying to achieve what I saw as an ideal of masculinity in my

play, I found that I ended up creating conflicts with other characters that affected the enjoyment

of the other players. The problems with Guiton's behaviour came to a head in our campaign

when he (I) tried to make another player use their pet bird to scout out a sewer system. The other

character did not want to do this. I made Guiton use force to try to capture the bird and put it in

the sewer, but my dice rolls were not good enough and Guiton failed. He (I) was angry about the

outcome and became mopey, which led to further conflicts that ultimately ended up with Guiton

killing the other PC. This incident is something I look back on with shame. I was not concerned

about the other player's agency or fun, which are qualities that I now see as paramount to

creating positive and safe TTRPG experiences. I think I really hurt the other player's feelings

and positioned myself in the gaming group as a player who was difficult to get along with. In

reflecting back on my play with this character, I recognized it as an opportunity to learn about how aggressive expressions of masculinity can be damaging to relationships.

I created my next PC, John Spraynard, with this learning in mind. I still, however, modeled John after a paragon of cool masculinity—this time Raymond Chandler's iconic detective Phillip Marlowe of noir fiction. John was small and physically unimpressive so he did not tend towards coercive acts of violence the way Guiton had. But John was still a bit of a loner, more interested in maintaining an aura of cool and competence than he was with building relationships and collaborating with the other PCs. Instead of connecting with people, he held them at a distance using sarcasm and humour—something that I now recognize that I was also doing in my real life relationships. Ultimately, I found him difficult to play for the same reasons that Guiton had been difficult to play—he was hard to get along with. I ended up working with the game master (GM) to kill John off in the story so that I could create a new character. This character, Bonsen—also a man—was committed to collaboration and positivity. He was genuine, friendly, and attuned to the other PCs' needs in a way that my other PCs had not been. I only got to play Bonsen for two sessions before our campaign ended due to scheduling issues, but he gave me a chance to explore what it was like to be more open, caring, and responsive. It felt good.

After Bonsen it was a long time before I played another PC. Instead, I acted as GM for my gaming group, which I really enjoyed. In that role I played many non-player characters (NPCs) and was responsible for shaping the plot of the campaigns. Because of this, I took a broader view of the game that prevented me from heavily investing in or deeply exploring any of the NPCs that I played. This kind of play was deeply rewarding, but it did not lend itself to self-exploration in the same way that playing a PC had.

Just recently, only a few weeks before I started working on this study, I returned to playing a PC. This time I played a feminine character—an anthropomorphic cat named Fairway who used she/her pronouns. Fairway is a golf caddy who has taken to supporting another PC in their adventures. Fairway is fiercely loyal and committed to keeping her friends safe. I started playing Fairway just for fun, just like T and Chloe with their early PCs, but as I worked on this study, I started to see my play as a space for more intentional gender exploration. I thought about the ways that Fairway differed from me and sought to emphasize those differences in my play: I played with softness and caring, making room for the needs of the other PCs and trying to be responsive to them; and I played with being cute. Still in the midst of my play with this PC, I am not sure how it will impact my life outside of the game, but I am excited to see where this character takes me.

Working with T and Chloe has shifted my story to live by in profound ways. As I have revisited my own stories through the stories of T and Chloe I have found new ways to understand my experience of gender. I can feel how I too have been confined by the gender I was assigned at birth and recognize how I have sought out space to express myself in different ways and explore my gender. This new story of gender for myself has created new possibilities for how I can live my life going forward, which is both exciting and daunting as I think about who I want to become.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Gender diverse people often experience stigma because of their genders, which can have negative impacts on their sense of identity and their well-being. In this study I used a narrative inquiry approach to investigate the experiences that two gender diverse people, T and Chloe, had exploring their genders through TTRPG play, including how this play supported their well-being, and how it fit into the broader story of their lives. I worked with T and Chloe to explore their stories to better understand how TTRPGs could be used to support gender diverse people. I also explored their stories to give readers a space to imagine how to support gender diverse people in other ways and to explore their own genders through the stories of T and Chloe. Through their stories, I constructed an argument that TTRPGs can provide an imaginative, safe, and affirming space where gender diverse people can explore themselves and create new stories to live by. This kind of space is important because the environments that gender diverse people live in can be stifling and invalidating of their identities.

I also narrated my own experiences of playing TTRPGs, carrying out this research project, and exploring my own gender through the stories of T and Chloe. I did this to help myself and the reader better understand how my own stories have shaped this research project. In sharing my own story of gender exploration I also sought a space where I could continue to explore my gender and have that process witnessed and affirmed. I hope that this story can be another space for the reader to imagine how to support their own and others' self-explorations.

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Appendix A: University of Alberta Research Ethics Approval

Notification of Approval

Date: May 27, 2024

Study ID: Pro00142488

Principal Investigator:

Benjamin Rollans

Study Supervisor: Melissa Tremblay

Study Title: Tabletop Role Playing Games and Gender
Identity: Exploring Narratives

Approval Expiry Date: May 26, 2025

Thank you for submitting the above study to the Research Ethics Board 1. Your application has been reviewed and approved on behalf of the committee.

Approved Documents:

Recruitment Materials	
updated TTRPG Recruitment post for Reddit and Discord.docx	
Consent Forms	
Final TTRPG GENDER INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM (2).docx	
Questionnaires, Cover Letters, Surveys, Tests, Interview Scripts, etc.	
Rollans TTRPG interview guide.docx	

Any proposed changes to the study must be submitted to the REB for approval prior to implementation. A renewal report must be submitted next year prior to the expiry of this approval if your study still requires ethics approval. If you do not renew on or before the renewal expiry date, you will have to re-submit an ethics application.

Approval by the REB does not constitute authorization to initiate the conduct of this research. The Principal Investigator is responsible for ensuring required approvals from other involved organizations (e.g. universities/colleges, community organizations, school boards) are obtained, before the research begins.

Sincerely,

Carol Boliek, PhD
Associate Chair, Research Ethics Board 1

Appendix B: Information Letter and Consent form for Participants

Participant Information Letter

Title of Study: Tabletop Roleplaying Games and Gender Identity: Exploring Narratives

Principal Investigator: Benjamin Rollans, University of Alberta, brollans@ualberta.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Melissa Tremblay, University of Alberta, mkd@ualberta.ca, 7804923763

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study? You are being asked to take part in this research study because we are trying to learn about gender diverse people's experiences playing tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs). We want to work with you to understand your stories and represent those stories in a way that can help other gender diverse or questioning people. You do not need to be in this research study if you don't want to be.

If you join the study, what will you be asked to do?

You will be asked to participate in two to three individual conversations with Ben to talk about your experiences with gender exploration while playing TTRPGs and how TTRPG play may have helped your mental health and well-being more broadly. These conversations will be conducted online. Each conversation will take approximately one hour. Our conversations will be audio and video recorded and transcribed, though you do not have to turn your camera on if you do not want to.

During the final interview, Ben will show you a narrative account that he put together from your stories. At this point, you will be able to make changes to the narrative account so that it accurately reflects your experiences.

You will work with the researcher to share your experiences in a way that is comfortable, safe, and meaningful for you.

You are free to not answer any questions that you do not want to answer, and you can choose what information you want to share or not. In case any of the conversations are upsetting to you, Ben can provide a list of low-cost counselling supports in your area.

For each conversation session that you participate in, you will receive a $25 gift card. The gift cards will be given out immediately after each session (you don't have to wait until the end of the study to receive the gift cards). If you wish to leave the study at any time, you will still receive gift cards for the time that you put in.

What are the possible risks and discomforts? It is possible that sharing your experiences and thoughts may be upsetting or stressful to you. You will be provided with counselling and crisis intervention resources if you desire.

What are the benefits to me? Apart from the gift cards, sharing your experiences could help improve supports for gender diverse people. Talking about your experiences can help you better understand yourself and your experiences. Although these are possible benefits, it is also possible that there will be no direct benefit to you for participating in this research.

How will your information be stored and shared? Data collected for the study will be securely kept on an encrypted and password-protected computer for five years and will then be destroyed. Your name will be removed from your comments to make sure it is anonymous. Potentially identifying aspects of your stories will be changed to protect your anonymity unless you desire otherwise. Once data is appropriately anonymized, it will be shared in Ben's master's thesis and may be published in an academic journal or presented at an academic conference.

Do you have to be in the study? You do not have to be in the study. You can choose to stop participating at any time. You can choose to withdraw from the study at any time. If you want to

remove your individual conversations from the project, you will be able to do so until two weeks after your final individual conversation.

What if you have questions? If you have any questions, you can call Melissa Tremblay at (780) 492-3763 or contact Ben Rollans at brollans@ualberta.ca.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615

Participant Consent Form

Title of Study: Tabletop Roleplaying Games and Gender Identity: Exploring Narratives

Verbal consent dialogue: "The research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described."

___ YES, I will be in this research study.   ____ NO, I don't want to do this.

Participant Information

Name of Participant: _____

Signature: _____

Verbal Consent Given: ____

Date: _____