



The construction of LGBT+ identities in tabletop role-playing games

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The Construction of LGBT+ Identities in Tabletop Role-playing Games

Samantha Louise Davies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
Sheffield Hallam University
for the degree of MA English by Research

May 2021

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Abstract

Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) provide a unique opportunity for the creation of LGBT+ characters and narratives. There is a gap in existing scholarship in this area, but the research that is available suggests that TTRPGs are likely to present LGBT+ themes in a manner that is biased to its authors views. This thesis aims to determine the ways in which TTRPGs engage with LGBT+ identities within their rulebooks, and the ways in which TTRPG players construct their LGBT+ characters as a result.

This study utilises mixed methods research, combining analysis of rulebooks focused on queer theory and ludology, and a survey of existing TTRPG players in order to achieve the aims set out above. The result of this research primarily discusses a demographic of young, queer adults who have consistently played as at least one LGBT+ character within a TTRPG.

Overall, this study found that indicates that the construction of LGBT+ identities within TTRPGs is ultimately a collaborative effort between the rules as written, and the player's actionable usage of them within a game. With regards to the fluff reality of the game, this meant that players typically ignored game content in favour of creating their own, personalised lore to match their ideal game world. With regards to the mechanical reality of the game, this instead meant that, while rulebooks could provide a clear overview of the author's intent towards the place of queer content within their game design, players could purposefully choose to ignore any information provided by the game, as they functioned as the final authority on what rules were allowed within the game.

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Glossary

The following glossary aims to provide definitions for a few of the terms used throughout this thesis, primarily with the intent of providing some context for those who have little experience with tabletop roleplaying games, or to provide a definition for uncommon academic terms.

Term	Definition
d(x)	Within TTRPGs, dice are commonly referred to as (x)d(y)s, with the (x) referring to the number of dice used, and the (y) referring to the number of sides that a given die has. Commonly, if only one die is being used, the (x) is omitted. For example, a d6 is a single six-sided die, while a 2d20 would be two twenty-sided dice.
Fluff Reality	The fluff reality is the fictional, narrative aspect of a TTRPG – everything that fits around the meta rulings which enable a character to take actions within the game world. To provide examples, this may include player’s roleplaying in-character conversations, or describing the appearance of their characters. The word fluff is used here instead of an alternate term like “in-character” because fluff is a term often used by TTRPG players to mean the world of a game as distinct from its rules. This term is borrowed from Atmore (2017), and is discussed further in Chapter 2.2.4. See also Mechanical Reality.
Game Master (GM)	A Game Master is a player who oversees the other players in a TTRPG, narrating the details of the game that aren’t controlled by the players – generally, this will be everything in the game apart from the Player Characters. The GM is often given a different title that aligns with a given TTRPGs genre; for example, the GM in <i>Dungeons & Dragons</i> is called a Dungeon Master.

Mechanical Reality	The mechanical reality is the meta, rule-based aspect of a TTRPG within which actions are presented as mathematical abstractions – providing the structure around which the remainder of the game exists. For example, if a player must roll a die to attack an enemy, this rule is taking place within the mechanical reality. This term is borrowed from Atmore (2017), and is discussed further in Chapter 2.2.4. See also Fluff Reality.
Non-Player Character (NPC)	A character in the fictional world of a TTRPG whose actions are controlled by the GM. This term may refer to other humanoid characters that act much like the PCs, or to monsters with no level of intelligence.
Player Character (PC)	A character in the fictional world of a TTRPG whose actions are controlled by one of the players. A Game Master is the only player who doesn't control a Player Character.

Chapter 1 — Introduction

1.1 Research Question and Study Aims

Tabletop role-playing games, or TTRPGs, are a unique genre of games that are played with the use of a ruleset and spoken (or, occasionally, written) word. In these primarily character-led games, players take on the role of in-game avatars, known as player characters, who exist within a fictional world, often created by another player known as a game master. TTRPGs themselves come in the form of books, providing systems of mechanical rules which the players can utilise in order to add elements of structure to their world. The most famous of these systems is the 5th edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (2014), which is perhaps better known than the TTRPG genre itself, though many other games exist. While TTRPGs can make use of visual aids such as maps and figures to enhance gameplay, one of the most popular aspects of the genre is that the only required components are a system of rules, a set of dice, and the players themselves.

By design, TTRPGs allow their players the opportunity to construct unique and personal character-based narratives, as players are responsible for generating their own characters and stories – in contrast to the more defined experience of playing video games, where players must use the characters and follow the stories set out by the game engine. Players are able to include any content that they find interesting and enjoyable, while excluding anything that they dislike. This high level of personalisation is commented on within *Dungeons & Dragons*, where players are told that ‘above all else, D&D is yours. The friendships you make around the table will be unique to you. The adventures you embark on, the characters you create, the memories you make – these will be yours’ (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 4).

TTRPGs are played with equal input from the game makers and the players themselves, given that players are easily able to replace or remove any decisions of the game maker that they dislike. This is particularly unique to TTRPGs due to the ease with which it can be done; within a video game, for example, one would require a fairly in-depth knowledge of how to code a game if one wished to alter it. Within TTRPGs, players need only to decide as a group which rules they do not want to

use; this is something that is true of all TTRPGs, not only *Dungeons & Dragons*, as expressed above.

For LGBT+ individuals or those who simply hold an interest in the topics of gender and sexuality, this opens up a space in which players may purposefully and explicitly place LGBT+ characters and topics at the centre of their game. Players may create idealised worlds where LGBT+ individuals never experience discrimination as they would in the real world, or else they may create worlds wherein LGBT+ player characters may overcome prejudice and rebel against cruelty as a form of meaningful yet completely safe wish fulfilment. There are two major research questions that this study plans to explore:

Research Question 1:

- *How do TTRPGs engage with LGBT+ identities within their rulebooks?*

In order to answer this question, this study will be analysing two TTRPGs, looking specifically at the text that is provided in the core rulebooks used by players, with the goal of addressing the ways in which these books are choosing to present LGBT+ identities. The titles chosen for the purposes of this study are *Dungeons & Dragons* (2014), and *Monsterhearts 2* (2017), which markets itself as a queer game.

Research Question 2:

- *How do TTRPG players knowingly construct LGBT+ identities in their player characters?*

In contrast, this question aims to address the ways in which players take the LGBT+ content provided by the games and personalize it, expanding upon it creatively. This will focus on the ways in which participants purposefully create LGBT+ themes and characters within their games through the use of empirical research methods in the form of surveys.

1.2 The Importance of this Study

This study began as a result of my undergraduate dissertation, which investigated the relationship between player and character identity within *Dungeons & Dragons*, a well-known TTRPG. As part of this dissertation, I conducted a survey with the intention of gathering data from players of *Dungeons & Dragons* regarding their opinions on the matter of player vs character identity. In doing this, I found that only around 10% of my participants identified as heterosexual, with the remaining participants falling on the LGBT+ spectrum. I had not been actively seeking out LGBT+ participants when doing this — I had, instead, approached a local *Dungeons & Dragons* group made up of young adults.

In the results, participants spoke frequently about the benefits of combining their TTRPG group's collaborative creativity with a structured game in order to create meaningful narratives that allowed for the exploration of LGBT+ topics within a welcoming environment. This train of thought became central to my choosing to do this research, as it suggested that studying TTRPGs could be of great benefit to queer identity research as a whole. After all, if participants were making a point to discuss the utility of TTRPGs as a method of exploring queer narratives during research that wasn't actively seeking this data, then surely this meant that there was something to be gained by gearing research towards queer identity. Furthermore, this also suggested that LGBT+ people are interested in engaging with this variety of research, and therefore that creating the chance for such individuals to discuss their experiences would prove fruitful.

Finally, I believe it worth mentioning that this study holds personal significance to me because of my own experiences as a bisexual woman who has been playing TTRPGs with other LGBT+ individuals for a large portion of my life. TTRPGs have formed an important creative outlet for both myself and my friends for a number of years now. I have found great joy in creating LGBT+ characters who are allowed to explore themselves within an environment free of hate, and in doing so found that I

was able to tailor these stories to whatever aspects of sexuality exploration that I found most interesting.

Chapter 2 — Literature Review

2.1 — Introduction

This literature review discusses previous research into TTRPGs and LGBT+ identity, specifically through the lens of ludology and queer theory, and the manner in which these disciplines interact. In order to do this, the chapter has been divided into two sections: the first provides an introduction of TTRPGs, and the existing research surrounding them, as well as providing an insight into ludology as it relates to TTRPGs; meanwhile, the second section is a discussion of queer theory as it relates to LGBT+ identity, and an overview of the research into LGBT+ identity in TTRPGs.

2.2 — Tabletop Role-playing Games and Ludology

While far from non-existent, studies that are concerned with TTRPGs, as this literature review will go on to discuss, are in short supply. Those that look beyond *Dungeons & Dragons* are, themselves, even rarer. As such, there is little in the way of an existing framework through which TTRPGs can be addressed, accommodating for their unique structure and live elements. With the aforementioned information in mind, this study will make use of ludology, the study of games, as a framework through which it shall address the data gathered.

2.2.1 Defining Tabletop Role-playing Games

First, in order to discuss the topics of TTRPGs, we must reach a definitive conclusion on their definition. To begin this, we must first define what is meant by a role-playing game. This is far from an easy task, as there is no universally accepted definition of the term ‘game’ (see Ehrett & Worth, 2012). One potential definition, given by Frasca, is that games require ‘an explicit set of rules, and a defined space and time’ (1999; n.p.). However, this definition runs into the problem of conflating the idea of *play* with the term *game*, as Vidart’s work shows that play does contain strict rules (Vidart, 1995; n.p.). The example given is that of a child pretending to be a plane pilot. The child adheres to the rule of acting like a pilot, rather than acting like a car driver, or a doctor (see Vidart, 1995).

Therefore, in defining games, we must find out what separates a game from the act of play. Developing on this idea, Frasca suggests that the difference between a game and play comes not from the possession of rules, but from the result that comes about as a consequence of those rules. With this in mind, Frasca provides the following definition: a game is an 'activity organized under a system of rules that defines a victory or a defeat, a gain or a loss' (Frasca, 1999; n.p.). This provides a rough definition for the word game upon which to build.

Next, this study will draw from Arjoranta's (2011) discussion of defining role-playing games, with the intention of providing a more precise definition which can be used in conjunction with the wide variety of structures and forms that can be found within TTRPGs. Arjoranta's piece points towards a definition by Hitchens and Drachen (2009; pg. 16):

1. **Game World:** A role-playing game is a game set in an imaginary world. Players are free to choose how to explore the game world, in terms of the path through the world they take, and may revisit areas previously explored. The amount of the game world potentially available for exploration is typically large.
2. **Participants:** The participants in the games are divided between players, who control individual characters, and game masters (who may be represented in software for digital examples) who control the remainder of the game world beyond the player characters. Players affect the evolution of the game world through the actions of their characters.
3. **Characters:** The characters controlled by players may be defined in quantitative and/or qualitative terms and are defined individuals in the game world, not identified only as roles or functions. These characters can potentially develop, for example in terms skills, abilities or personality, the form of this development is at least partially under player control and the game is capable of reacting to the changes

4. **Game Master:** At least one, but not all, of the participants has control over the game world beyond a single character. A term commonly used for this function is “game master”, although many others exist. The balance of power between players and game masters, and the assignment of these roles, can vary, even within the playing of a single game session. Part of the game master function is typically to adjudicate on the rules of the game, although these rules need not be quantitative in any way or rely on any form of random resolution.
5. **Interaction:** Players have a wide range of configurative options for interacting with the game world through their characters, usually including at least combat, dialogue and object interaction. While the range of options is wide, many are handled in a very abstract fashion. The mode of engagement between player and game can shift relatively freely between configurative and interperative.
6. **Narrative:** Role-playing games portray some sequence of events within the game world, which gives the game a narrative element. However, given the configurative nature of the players’ involvement, these elements cannot be termed narrative according to traditional narrative theory. (Hitchens & Drachen, 2009, pg. 16)

As Arjoranta rightly points out, the primary issue with this definition is ‘the demand that all role-playing games have a game master, and a game master defined in a particular way, is questionable’ (2011; pg. 5). The role fulfilled by the game master differs between games depending on the rules that are provided. For example, game masters within *Dungeons & Dragons* are typically required to provide all the information about the world that the player characters exist within, while the game master in *Monsterhearts 2* is instead told to ask the players to provide some of their own information regarding the fictional world. Additionally, not all self-defined TTRPGs require game masters. For the purposes of this study, however, the definition provided by Hitchens and Drachen, as seen above, is an actionable definition. While the functions of a game master differs between *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Monsterhearts 2*, they still adhere to the definition provided as they

both ‘adjudicate on the rules of the game’ (Hitchens & Drachen, 2009, pg. 16). Furthermore, while a separate definition would need to be sought out for TTRPGs that do not possess a game master, it remains a perfectly suitable definition for TTRPGs that do possess one.

In conclusion, for the purposes of this study, TTRPGs can be understood as an ‘activity organized under a system of rules that defines a victory or a defeat, a gain or a loss’ (Frasca, 1999; n.p.), while also adhering to the definition provided by Hitchens & Drachen (2009, pg. 16). The current form of TTRPGs that reflects this definition is usually understood to have been developed in the 1970s, primarily as a response to the release of the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974 (see Mason, 2004).

2.2.2 Ludology, The Study of Games

Hitchens and Drachen’s (2009) definition notes that TTRPGs contain elements that ‘cannot be termed narrative according to traditional narrative theory’ (Hitchens & Drachen, 2009; pg. 16). These non-narrative elements are central to the experience of playing TTRPGs, with the most prominent example being the rolling of dice to determine the outcome of events, and the associated rulesets each TTRPG provides to facilitate that action. They must, therefore, be central to the ways in which we study them. As such, it is important that we look beyond narratology, which is incapable of addressing non-narrative elements. Ludology is generally defined as ‘a discipline that studies games in general, and video games in particular’ (Wolf & Perron, 2003; pg. 14). This methodology emerged from a perceived lack of an actualised discipline that could appropriately address games, and the ways in which they differed from more conventional narratives, such as a novel.

Ludology posits that games aren’t held together by traditional narrative structures, and that they are rather formed with player activity at the centre of their experience, a phenomenon referred to as simulation. Simulation is a core aspect of ludology, marking it as a ‘radically different alternative to narratives as a cognitive and communicative structure’ (Aarseth, 2001). In essence, to ‘simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system’ (Frasca, 2003; pg. 223). By creating a model of

behaviours which reacts to player-based stimuli under set conditions, game creators are able to simulate experiences that players can directly interact with and affect. To adapt Frasca's own example about planes (see Frasca, 2003), a fantasy novel is a representational piece of media that 'excel[s] at producing both descriptions of traits and sequences of events' (pg. 223). It provides the reader with information about a sequence of events which they are able to interpret in a number of ways, but that they cannot manipulate and alter in any way. Meanwhile, *Dungeons & Dragons* is a game which 'allows the player to perform actions that will modify the behavior of the system' (pg. 223) in a way that allows for the simulation of, for example, combat and exploration.

This distinction between narrative and simulation is typically clear to anyone who has played a game before — as Eskelinen (2001) argues, 'outside academic theory people are usually excellent at making distinctions between narrative, drama, and games. If I throw a ball at you I don't expect you to drop it and wait until it starts telling stories' (n.p.). Eskelinen further suggests that push back against the use of simulation as a separate approach to narratology likely comes from a lack of familiarity with the concept, rather than there being a more suitable approach for such a unique medium as games. Given then that simulation is so distinctly separate from traditional narratives, ludology is certainly a suitable methodology through which to analyse the data gathered during this study, as it is able to contend with the structure at the core of TTRPG gameplay.

2.2.3 Avatars Within Ludology

Within ludology, an avatar is 'a virtual, surrogate self that acts as a stand in for our real-space selves, that represents the user' (Waggoner, 2009; pg. 9). Furthermore, the spaces in which avatars are used must 'involve choice in the creation of one's avatar', providing 'substantial scope in which to exercise choice and create meaning' (Waggoner, 2009; pg. 9). The construction of identity is essential to the construction of an avatar. Typically, this terminology is applied to video game characters. However, this thesis proposes that avatars are analogous with Player Characters within TTRPGs, and so are worthy of discussion within this literature review. For example, the Waggoner's description of an avatar includes multiple points that line up with the purpose of a player character: the idea of a surrogate self, the

involvement of choice in their creation, and a substantial scope within which to create choice and meaning.

Player activity through the avatar is one of the key driving forces behind simulation, which as noted before is a central tenet of ludology and the way in which people interact with games. This activity can typically be separated into two forms: diegetic activity, which is concerned with 'what the player's avatar does as a result of player activity' (Wolf & Perron, 2003; pg. 15), and extradiegetic activity, which is concerned with 'what the player is physically doing to achieve a certain result' (Wolf & Perron, 2003; pg. 15). While different, diegetic and extradiegetic activity work in tandem: for example, an avatar jumping within a video game would be diegetic activity, while the button press required for said jump to occur would be extradiegetic activity. Within TTRPGs, an example of this may be the rolling of dice, an extradiegetic activity, so that the player character may make an attack within the game, a diegetic activity.

Furthermore, Wolf & Perron (2003) tell us that extradiegetic activity is ergodic — that is to say, a player must perform a physical action in order for avatar action to occur. As mentioned before, this usually refers to the act of pressing buttons on a controller, though video games may also feature other control methods, utilising keyboard and mouse input, or more unique methods such as those found in motion controlled VR systems. The most immediately obvious iteration of this within TTRPGs is the rolling of a dice — a clear, physical action with a clear in-game result. However, a notable difference between activity within video games and within TTRPGs is that, while video games have a set amount of diegetic actions available decided by the manner in which the game is coded, TTRPGs are improvised gaming experiences that allow for a somewhat limitless potential for diegetic activity, dictated only by what the players at the table agree to. Central to this improvisational nature is that players merely have to state the diegetic activity they wish characters to perform, with no other form of input required.

The capability for spoken word to act as extradiegetic activity within the context of a TTRPG may be seen as an example of speech act theory in practice. Speech acts can be defined as follows:

[A] type of act that can be performed by speaker meaning that one is doing so. This conception still counts resigning, promising, asserting and asking as speech acts, while ruling out convincing, insulting and whispering. This definition leaves open the possibility of speech acts being performed wordlessly, as well as speech acts being performed without saying that you are doing so. (Green, 2020; n.p.)

Within the context of a TTRPG, a player's statement that their character did something could be considered a speech act, as through the extradiegetic utterance of words a player character takes diegetic action. In many ways, this is also a performative utterance, which is defined as an utterance wherein 'the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of the, doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as saying something' (Austin, 1962; pg. 5); for example, a common performative utterance is promising to do something. In stating such a promise, the speaker not only says something, but also performs the promise itself. To further this example, within a TTRPG stating that your character picks up an object is not only speaking, but is also performing an action within the world of the game. However, within the context of a TTRPG, a statement may only be considered a performative utterance in this manner if the other players within the group allow it to be. This marks one of the most unique aspect of TTRPGs: the fact that the entirety of the game, from the rules provided to the character's actions, is only possible if the players allow it to be. Players being able to perform any action that they wish so long as they group at large agrees to it differentiates the medium greatly from that of video games, which are restricted by their coding in a way that human creativity is not.

2.2.4 Mechanical Reality Versus Fluff Reality

As a result of the unique aspect of TTRPG design mentioned in the previous section, wherein players are able to undertake any action within a game so long as the players agree to it, TTRPGs create a situation wherein the player character avatars, and the fictional events and reality that they exist as a part of, are 'a process of joint construction between the individual players, the gamesmaster, and the group as a whole as they interact with the rule set' (Atmore, 2017; n.p.). These rule sets, which are usually given as part of an external source in the form of rulebooks, provide the

players with two elements that make up all TTRPGs: *mechanics* and *fluff* (see Woods, 2012). The mechanical reality of a game refers to the ‘mathematical abstractions of actions’, and the fluff reality of a game refers to the ‘rules for how to understand the fictional reality [of the game]’ (Atmore, 2017, n.p.). Regardless of whether a game is deemed rules-heavy or ‘rules-lite’, the players’ ‘relationship with the world [is] defined by the ruleset’ (Woods, 2012; pg. 26). As a result, games which focus on combat, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, are likely to have a large number of mechanics for combat, leaving social aspects to exist as fluff, while the opposite will be true for social led TTRPGs, such as *Monsterhearts 2*. While not commonly used terms by any means, I have chosen to use these terms throughout this thesis because I believe that they accurately describe the apparent separation between the rules as written and the rules as interpreted by the players, which is an aspect that my research questions aim to address.

TTRPGs typically provide two sets of challenges. The functional challenge of the game, relating to its mechanical reality, comes from its mechanical aspects, found in rolling dice and attempting to beat the odds. The emotional challenge embedded in the fluff reality, meanwhile, comes from ‘trying to piece together what is happening in the diegesis or deal with difficult decisions’ (Cole & Giles, 2019; n.p). While the mechanical reality can be easily laid out in the form of rulebooks, the fluff reality exists primarily within the game as it is being played, and in the challenges that the players must overcome. As the emotional challenges found in games can grant a similar eudemonic experience as media consumed for the purpose of psychological growth (see Hartmann, 2013), the player’s agency ‘involved in overcoming these emotional challenges [is] important’ (Cole & Giles, 2019).

This concept of a mechanical reality and a fluff reality can be readily linked to the research questions of this thesis. The first research question, which is aimed at the ways in which TTRPGs engage with LGBT+ identities within their rulebooks, is mostly concerned with the mechanical reality of the games. While TTRPGs do provide written text which exists within the fluff reality, such as providing context for the character options that detail what a normal elf, dwarf, and so on looks like within *Dungeons & Dragons*, the most important job of their rulebooks is to provide the mechanical reality within which the game is played. As such, the analysis of the

Dungeons & Dragons and *Monsterhearts 2* rulebooks will be mostly concerned with the mechanical realities presented by the games.

In contrast, the second research question, which is aimed at addressing the ways in which TTRPG players create LGBT+ characters, is most likely to be concerned with the fluff reality of the games. The fluff reality can be easily and readily altered with little effort on the part of the players. This is largely because players require no game design knowledge when altering the fluff reality, where altering the mechanical reality can lead to unfair or even unplayable games. As such, the analysis of the survey results is most likely to be focused on a discussion of the fluff reality of the games, as the aspect that the players have ease of control over.

2.2.5 Rules Within TTRPGs

The mechanical reality of a game defines the world within which a TTRPG takes place by providing a system of rules. Ryan (2019) further discusses the importance of rules in relation to play, stating that meaning and significance can only exist within a game because of its rules. For example, TTRPGs make extensive use of dice, often requiring a specific number of sides, thereby being ‘crafted to perform a specific type of action’ (pg. 164). Beyond the context of the game, this action is meaningless. But, the action is ‘made significant by the rules of the game’ (pg. 164), gaining meaning only because of the mechanical reality within which the action is being performed. This does not, however, mean that the rules are always set in stone. Commonly within TTRPGs, rules are liable to be changed, which ‘is exemplified in the common practice of creating “house rules.”’ (Shank, 2015) Rules may be dynamic and fluctuating, but they provide the structured foundation upon which the overall simulation is built, providing that they are agreed upon by the players.

Montola (2008) provides an approach that combines the work of Fine (1983) and Björk and Holopainen (2003) in order to divide game rules and game goals into categories based on that which they affect. These categories are as follows: endogenous rules, which are rules and goals ‘defined in the game structure’; exogenous rules, which are rules and goals ‘brought to the game activity by players to give it meaning’; and diegetic rules, which are rules and goals that ‘[exist] within

the fiction of the role-play' (pg. 23). Diegetic rules in particular align with the understanding of diegetic activity undertaken by avatars within ludology, as discussed above.

Furthermore, Montola proposed 3 rules which all role-playing in general, including TTRPGs, follow. These are referred to as the world rule, the power rule, and the character rules, and are as follows:

- 1) Role-playing is an interactive process of defining and re-defining the state, properties and contents of an imaginary game world.
- 2) The power to define the game world is allocated to participants of the game. The participants recognize the existence of this power hierarchy.
- 3) Player-participants define the game world through personified character constructs, conforming to the state, properties and contents of the game world. (Montola, 2008; pg. 23-24)

These rules, as well as providing an insight into the power dynamics allocated to and enacted between players, also helps define role-playing as it is seen within TTRPGs. Its requirement of players separates it from standard collaborative storytelling, and allows for a formal variety of make-believe, with a 'game world [that] is fluid and undergoing a constant re-definition process ... [which is] restricted by the current state of the game world; thus, the process of constant iteration does not allow completely arbitrary or random changes' (pg. 24). As such, TTRPGs are defined by the fact that anything can happen, but only if the table agrees to it — that is to say, so long as the players believe that the actions and changes being made suit the game world.

In addition to the above more pervasive rules, games also contain 'manipulation rules' (Frasca, 2003; pg. 232), which do not provide end goals for a game, but rather restrictions and allowances. For example, a manipulation rule within chess may be that 'pawns can only move forward' (pg. 232). Game designers are limited in the

amount of manipulation rules that they can create, as simulations are limited experiences, and as such may be used to convey ideologies through the inclusions or exclusion of certain real-world issues, and how these issues are implemented, should they be included. As an example of this, *The Sims* ‘dealt with gay couples ... not just through representation ... but they also decided to build a rule about it. In the game, same-gender relationships are possible. In other words, homosexuality is really an option for the players and it is included in the simulation’s model’ (pg. 232). Had the game designers been more conservative, they could have instead chosen to make same-gender relationships impossible instead.

TTRPGs differ in their implementation of manipulation rules, however, because they are not only implemented by the game designers — they are also implemented by the players of the game, who can choose to include or disregard any given rule, should they desire to. As the *Player’s Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast, 2014) states, ‘D&D is your personal corner of the universe, a place where you have free reign to do as you wish’ (pg. 4). This attitude is similarly carried by players, who generally agree that ‘the final authority for what rules meant and how they should be applied did not reside in the rule book ... [but rather] lies with the gamemaster, in relation to the group’ (Atmore, 2017; n.p). This creates a situation wherein TTRPG players are able to create manipulation rules, as well as TTRPG authors.

The rules which allow players to manipulate the game in this manner can be defined as a meta-rule, a ‘rule that states how rules can be changed’ (Frasca, 2003; pg. 032), which indicates one of the many differences between simulated work and narrative work. The authors of simulations, who allow and encourage their work to be changed by others, are certainly different from the traditional role of an author of narratives, whose work can typically be interpreted in a relatively limited number of ways.

2.3 — LGBT+ Identity Within Tabletop Role-Playing Games

Alongside the use of ludology as a methodological framework, this study shall be utilising queer theory as a methodology through which to approach the specific

topics of sex, gender, and sexuality within both the book and survey analysis. Furthermore, the following discussion aims to provide some context for the overall argument that studying TTRPGs is of benefit to queer identity research by examining the ways in which they intertwine, and providing examples of other research into the relationship between TTRPGs and queer identity.

2.3.1 TTRPGs as a Space for Exploring Identity

TTRPGs provide a space in which many individuals are ‘more comfortable talking about race and gender’ (Clements, 2019; n.p.), as it is most commonly played amongst a small group with pre-existing ties to one and other. The familiar environment enables a space in which openly talking about identity, in relation to either the avatar or the player, becomes more acceptable and common. Otherness is a common feeling amongst those with gender identities and sexualities beyond the established societal ‘norm’ (Poor, 2012). Within TTRPGs, this otherness may be explored in a healthy environment through the identity of the avatar. Elves, for example, are often ‘used to engage various cultural tensions’ (Poor, 2012; n.p.) in worlds lacking a non-White human ‘other’. While Poor’s research relates first and foremost to race, as otherness is commonly felt by LGBT+ individuals this research also indicates that there is likely value to be found in utilising TTRPGs as a space for exploring queerness through the safety of an avatar.

Sometimes, players who are playing outside of their own gender and sexuality may find themselves performing stereotypes to reinforce their avatar’s identity. For example, within O’Neal’s (2012) research, a male player portraying a female avatar would typically perform a ‘heterosexual, feminine identity’ (n.p.). When discussing an ancient enemy, the female characters would ‘take time to discuss how their ancient enemy was once sexy’ (n.p.). Choosing to ‘discuss his appearance rather than his behavior is indicative of a desire to perform a specifically feminine identity’ (n.p.), as well as a reinforcement of stereotypes. In this way, players may be restricted in the extent to which they explore identities outside of their own, as they fall back on utilising stereotypes rather than attempting to create unique characters.

One issue that may possibly arise when playing TTRPGs with the intent of using them to explore identities is that of bleeding. Bleed ‘is experienced by a player when

her thoughts and feelings are influenced by those of her character, or vice versa', with 'a classic example of bleed [being] when a player's affection for another player carries over into the game or influences her character's perception of the other's character' (Jeepform Group, 2010; n.p.). Bleed is not inherently a bad thing; for example, '[b]leed is instrumental for horror role-playing' as 'it is often harder to scare the player through the character than the other way around' (Jeepform Group, 2010; n.p.). However, when exploring sensitive topics such as gender and sexuality, bleed may cause group tensions. When exploring sexuality in particular, in-game relationships between player characters, or else between player characters and non-player characters controlled by the game master, may become difficult 'if some of the players in the group are romantically involved with each other ... particularly if one or more of the players is of a jealous disposition' (Crawford et al, 2005; pg 179). As a result, TTRPGs are more likely to be used as a space for exploring LGBT+ relationships by players from 'mature, thoughtful groups ... [that] are presumably comfortable with relationship-oriented role-playing' (Sturrock, 2015; pg. 102), with other groups being more likely to instead focus on other aspects of roleplay.

2.3.2 Queer Theory and Going Against the Norm

Queer theory is concerned with a process of deconstruction and recognition: both within media, and within history and the world around us at large. It aims to deconstruct current social norms and, in doing so, create a space for experiences that exist outside of heteronormative and gender-normative lifestyles. 'Queer' as a term was, and in many places still is, used as abusive slang. However, it has also been reclaimed in many LGBT+ circles, and is used as an umbrella term for those who belong to sexual and gender identities which are culturally marginalized. As a whole, the term 'queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire', and while it is 'prominently associated with those who identify as lesbian and gay ... queer is in association with more than just gay and lesbian, but also cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery' (Jagose, 1996; pg. 3). It represents the entire spectrum which exists outside of the enforced norm.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers one possible definition of queer as 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality

aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically' (Sedgwick, 1993; pg. 7). This idea of queer representing something decidedly other appears to be consistent across literature, with the crucial factor being whether being 'Other' is deemed a good or a bad thing. In many ways, these definitions are characterized by something that they are not, rather than something they are. To be queer isn't to be gay; it is instead to not fit a hegemonic and cisheteronormative culture, ranging from social systems to legislative and political systems.

As seen from the definitions given in the previous paragraphs, the term 'queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire' (Jagose, 1996; pg. 3). As such, we can see that sex, gender, and sexuality – which is representative of one's desires – is an essential part of understanding what it means to be queer, and therefore are concepts that are essential to queer theory itself. Within the context of this study, sex is defined as 'a combination of bodily characteristics including: chromosomes, hormones, internal and external reproductive organs, and secondary sex characteristics', which typically involves the 'classification of a person as male or female.' (GLAAD, 2021; n.p.). Gender, meanwhile, is defined as a combination of one's gender identity and gender expression. Gender identity is '[a] person's internal, deeply held sense of their gender. ... Most people have a gender identity of man or woman (or boy or girl). For some people, their gender identity does not fit neatly into one of those two choices' (GLAAD, 2021; n.p.), while gender expression describes the '[e]xternal manifestations of gender, expressed through a person's name, pronouns, clothing, haircut, behavior, voice, and/or body characteristics. Society identifies these cues as masculine and feminine, although what is considered masculine or feminine changes over time and varies by culture' (GLAAD, 2021; n.p.). Finally, a person's sexuality '[d]escribes a person's enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to another person' (GLAAD, 2021; n.p.); there are a large number of sexualities, but usually they indicate an attraction to the same sex, another sex, both a same and other sex, or none at all.

Beyond its relation to sex, gender and sexuality, queer theory 'suggests that all bodies and psyches are offered intelligibility through their relationship to a particular set of norms, ones that privilege the idealised white, heterosexual, middle-class, young, normatively sized and abled body' (Jagose, 1996; pg. 2). This set of social

norms, by its nature, cannot actually refer to a normative body, but rather a fantasy — an unachievable normativity, which an individual may come close to, but never fully embody. In this sense, while focused primarily on those who are marginalised by their non-normative gender and sexuality, queer theory also indicates that other groups don't exist within the norm, and rather an approximation of it.

The nature of identity as presented by queer theory is strongly aligned with ideas first put forward by Butler (1990), who posited that gender is 'a set of free-floating attributes ... performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence' (pg. 24). An excellent example of this is given by Warner (2004), who argues that gender is understood through the assumption of an approximation to an ideal of normalised gender presentation held by a given culture; as 'in practice, judgements of gender identity are based on public performances, not private parts' (pg. 324).

Queer theory draws attention to the relationship between the 'cultural matrix' (Butler, 1990; pg. 24) through which gender, and therefore sex and sexuality, is understood, and those who are perceived as belonging to identity categories which are rendered "impossible" under those matrices. Furthermore, as it is 'impossible to separate out "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained' (Butler, 1990; pg. 3), queer theory points towards a nuanced viewing of these subjects, suggesting that there is no one universal queer experience.

With the above in mind, it is also important to note that there are issues that may be faced when drawing upon queer theory within research; notably, that 'a queer researcher may eschew offering a clear definition of their terms, for they do not want to risk essentializing or reducing any of the categories' (Warner, 2004; pg. 326). As such, it should be noted that any definitions that are given within this study are made in reference to this study in particular, and do not attempt to account for all queer experiences.

2.3.3 LGBT+ Identity and the Portrayal of Sex, Gender, and Sexuality

This study aims to address sex, gender, and sexuality, as aspects of identity which are different but undeniably possess a large amount of overlap in the ways in which they are addressed and interacted with. There is a ‘close relationship between gendered speech and the enactment of heterosexual [and other] identit[ies]’ (Cameron & Kulick, 2003), and as a result this study will benefit from seeking to address all aspects of queer identity simultaneously.

Additionally, research has demonstrated that it is important to examine sex, gender, and sexuality within the sociocultural context that they exist as a part of (see Levon, 2014). While this would usually refer to the real-world experiences of participants, it also suggests that simulations existing within the fictional realm provided by TTRPGs will possess unique elements specific to the context of the games. For example, Honeycutt, Richard, and Swirsky (2016) found that ‘gay, transgender, and bisexual people [when] compared to heterosexual people are more preoccupied with message planning regarding their sexuality’ (n.p.). Within the context of TTRPGs, this may indicate that LGBT+ individuals put more thought into the expression of a player character’s gender identity and sexuality than a heterosexual individual would. This of course is speculation, and will be further discussed in the analysis sections of this study.

When considering portrayals of sex, gender, and sexuality within TTRPGs, it may also be worth considering how these things are portrayed within narrative media, as players, game masters in particular, frequently ‘steal’ from such sources (for an example of this language use, see LeeringShrimp, 2018). Narratives within mass media ‘often [elide] the realities of LGBT teen bullying and suicide’ (Gordon, 2016; pg. 1261), avoiding topics which may be seen as potentially offensive, and therefore too dangerous to work with.

2.3.4 Gender and Sexuality within the Mechanical Reality

As described within section 2.2.4., the mechanical reality is the ‘mathematical abstractions of actions’, in contrast to the fluff reality, which is the ‘rules for how to understand the fictional reality [of the game]’ (Atmore, 2017; n.p.). Both *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Monsterhearts 2* possess mechanical abstractions of aspects of a character’s identity — for example, a number representing the character’s

intelligence, or how volatile they are. As such, the gender identity and sexuality of player characters exist not only within the fluff reality that players create for their games, but also within the mechanical rules that the games provide for their players. Garcia discusses points related to this idea as part of a comprehensive overview of the relationship between gender identity and *Dungeons & Dragons* since its creation, often in relation to and reinforced by ‘the temporal depictions of men and women in popular culture from the 1970s to the present’ (Garcia, 2017; pg. 232). In particular, the notion that TTRPGs possess inequalities ‘consciously and unconsciously embedded within [their] systems’ (Garcia, 2017; pg. 234) indicates that games have an explicit impact on the assumptions and identities of the characters created within them due to the mechanical systems that they intend characters to be created with. To further this point, TTRPG players who don’t possess a roleplay-based preference for playing a certain type of character will choose their character traits based on ‘mechanical efficiency’, allowing ‘mechanical elements ... to reinforce the stereotypes of each fantasy race’ (Clements, 2019; pg. 14). As such, it is important to interrogate not only the fluff reality provided by the TTRPG books, but also the mechanical reality through which the player character is created.

In contrast, if a TTRPG decides to not represent gender and sexuality within its mechanical reality at all, this may result in players completely ignoring a game’s potential for exploring LGBT+ characters and themes. Given that ‘there is little doubt that the world of *Dungeons & Dragons* is largely geared toward a masculine, rather than a feminine, fantasy’ (Mussett, 2014; pg. 190), and that within the current edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* gender is ‘not important’ (Clements, 2019; pg. 15) to the mechanics provided by the rulebooks, players are discouraged from interacting with gender at all and are likely to default to playing cisheteronormative male characters due to the masculine leaning culture of the game.

2.4 — Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the research which acts as a foundation for this study. Throughout the analysis chapters of this study, connections will be made with this research where it is relevant to do so.

Chapter 3 — Methodology

In order to approach this study, both ludology and queer theory are being utilised as conceptual frameworks, providing the techniques with which to approach how the nature of TTRPGs can influence LGBT+ player character identities. Ludology provides analytical tools capable of dealing with the unconventional simulations found in games, which is necessary due to TTRPG's ability to provide simulated experiences that allow the player to alter the game as it happens. Queer theory, on the other hand, provides more insight into the effect that players may have on the game, thanks to its specific focus on sex, gender and sexuality, and therefore into the identities of the player characters.

This study will be focusing on two TTRPGs, with the intent of allowing for comparison between different games and allowing for in-depth analysis. The two chosen games are *Dungeons and Dragons*, and *Monsterhearts 2*. *Dungeons & Dragons* was chosen primarily because it is by far the most well-known TTRPG, and therefore accounts for a large number of players' first experiences with TTRPGs, as well as having a large realm of cultural influence, which can be seen in its frequent reference in other media. Additionally, while *Dungeons & Dragons* may not mechanically concern itself with LGBT+ identity, it is often brought into the fluff reality aspect of the game through roleplay, possessing a high number of LGBT+ fans and with LGBT+ aspects being brought into many of the available campaigns, including 'Storm King's Thunder (2016), Tomb of Annihilation (2017), and Dragon Heist (2018), along with oneshots like No Foolish Matter (2017)' (Tremeer, 2019; n.p.).

Monsterhearts 2 was, in contrast, chosen because it engages with LGBT+ themes in both its mechanical and fluff realities, requiring players to engage with their avatar's gender and sexuality in order to fully play the game — choosing to ignore aspects of character identity relating to sexuality would also force the player to ignore moves such as Turn Someone On, for example. *Monsterhearts 2* doesn't possess the immense reach that *Dungeons & Dragons* has accumulated, but there are a number of actual play podcasts and shows which utilise the game, and it has earned itself a dedicated following in its own right.

In order to answer this study's research questions, two methods of collecting and analysing data have been utilised. Overall, the use of two sets of data intends to provide a look into the framing of the before and after of the TTRPG gaming process, presenting an overview of how the game is set up, and the lasting effect that the game has on the player.

Research Question 1:

- *How do TTRPGs engage with LGBT+ identities within their rulebooks?*

This first research question will be answered with a close reading analysis of the two primary rulebooks for the respective games: the Player's Handbook for *Dungeons & Dragons*, and the standard *Monsterhearts 2* book for *Monsterhearts 2*. Close reading analysis was chosen in response to this research question for its ability to 'excavate previously hidden qualities of a media artifact' (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011; pg. 289) – something that would prove essential when trying to highlight the ways in which the rulebooks presented LGBT+ identity outside of explicit discussions of sexuality and gender. It was important when choosing this analytical framework to find a technique that would ensure that the subtextual ways in which rulebooks presented LGBT+ identities could be uncovered.

This process involved first reading the entirety of each rulebook and marking down the sections which were relevant to the character creation process, in order to determine the passages within the books that would require analysis. Following this, the character creation sections were combed for any text which directly referred to queer content within the games, and then for any text which could be viewed as allegorical for LGBT+ experiences. Having done this, the remaining text was analysed through the perspectives of ludology and queer theory as described within sections 2.2 and 2.3. For ludology, this most prominently involved discussing the mechanical reality versus the fluff reality, the input of the game designer versus the input of the players, and the manner in which the simulated nature of the game is used in constructing LGBT+ content. For queer theory, this meant discussing the ways in which the fluff reality presented gender and sexuality within the game world

of the rulebooks, as well as the ways in which the mechanical reality more subtly embedded manipulation rules which would enforce particular mentalities on queer content when utilised.

For the purposes of this study, the primary rulebooks were chosen to be analysed in particular because they are of great importance to the games, as it is necessary for players to read them in order to understand and participate in the aforementioned TTRPGs as a player. As a result, all player characters created within these games will have been directly influenced by the rulebooks, both with regards to what the characters are mechanically able to do, as well as what the characters are intended to act like within the fluff reality of the games. Furthermore, many of the studies discussed within the literature review chapter have examined the rulebooks of TTRPGs within their work, indicating that there is a precedent for the analysis of these books (see Clements, 2019; Garcia, 2017; Shank, 2015; etc). Any extra content that has been published for these game systems will not be analysed within this study as they are not absolutely necessary for players to read in order to participate in gameplay, and this thesis simply isn't long enough to enable a close reading analysis of a number of other books.

Finally, a close reading technique was utilised in order to answer this research question in the hopes that doing so would help to further prove that studying TTRPGs can prove beneficial when simultaneously studying queer identities. As discussed in section 2.3.2, queer theory utilises a process of deconstruction and recognition in order to view media through a queer lens. A close reading analysis uses a similarly deconstructive perspective in its method of study, highlighted by its position as a 'process-driven practise rather than a product-drive one' (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2011; pg. 294), wherein numerous readings will continue to reveal new analytical data from a text as the researcher continues to deconstruct it.

Research Question 2:

- *How do TTRPG players knowingly construct LGBT+ identities in their player characters?*

The second research question will be answered with the analysis of two surveys: one with a focus on *Dungeons & Dragons*, and one with a focus on *Monsterhearts 2*. These surveys were designed to have very similar questions for the purposes of comparison, and were undertaken by individuals who had created and played at least one LGBT+ character within the respective games. Given the ability of surveys to gather ‘factual data, for example, people’s ages, genders, incomes or use of services, ... [as well as] to gather people’s opinions, ideas, attitudes, knowledge and experiences’ (Matthews & Ross, 2010; pg. 203-4), they were a clear choice for the method through which to gather both quantitative and qualitative data regarding how TTRPG players construct LGBT+ identities. It is worth noting here that the quantitative data mentioned was gathered with the intent to provide general information on the participants who were filling out the survey and to thereby act as a background to the qualitative data, rather than as a primary form of research in and of itself.

Surveys were also chosen for their ability to ‘compare the characteristics and experiences of different groups of people or to look for relationships between different characteristics’ (Matthews & Ross, 2010; pg. 204). Within this study, these different groups were *Dungeons & Dragons* players and *Monsterhearts 2* players, and the different characteristics were their varying opinions on the treatment of LGBT+ identities within TTRPGs. Finally, surveys were chosen for the practical purpose of gathering data from large groups of people in a short period of time regardless of distance, as well as providing a standardised experience for all participants, ensuring that they are answering the exact same questions. As this study was primarily undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was essential that all participants were able to engage with the surveys in a manner that ensured their safety, as well as complying with social distancing procedures.

The total sample size for the *Dungeons & Dragons* survey was 349 responses, while the total sample size for the *Monsterhearts 2* survey was 23. This disparity, as well as the demographics of these surveys, are further explored within Chapter 5. Each survey consisted of 24 questions, which can be viewed in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2. These surveys were created through the online service Qualtrics, and were sent to participants over a number of Reddit forums focused on TTRPGs as a general topic,

as well as to those specifically dedicated to *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Monsterhearts* 2. There forums included r/rpg, r/DnD, r/PBtA, and r/Monsterhearts.

This process was done online rather than in person for a number of reasons, chief amongst which was to gather data from as diverse a participant base as possible, and to provide a greater level of anonymity to those who wished to participate, due to the potentially sensitive nature of discussions surrounding gender and sexuality. The ease with which ‘anonymous’ (Matthews & Ross, 2010; pg. 206) surveys can be created was an important factor when choosing to pursue this particular form of research. To further this point, participants were provided with a consent form on the first page of the survey in order to ensure that anyone uncomfortable discussing gender and sexuality would know in advance that this is what the survey would be exploring, as well as to adhere to the ethical guidelines set out by Sheffield Hallam University (see Sheffield Hallam University, 2021).

Within the two surveys, each addressing one of the two games this study focuses on, participants were asked a series of questions regarding the ways in which they consciously chose to represent the gender identities and sexualities of their characters while they played TTRPGs. Each survey utilised near identical questions, with the intent of providing comparable sets of data upon completion. Where questions differed, it was due primarily to mechanical differences between the games which were being directly addressed within the survey.

This study does come with a limitation, in that I myself am involved in the culture surrounding TTRPGs; a fact that led to my interest in the subject in the first place. As an active participant within TTRPG communities, there is the potential for the results to be viewed with a bias towards my own gaming experiences. The use of surveys which can reach a larger audience attempts to mitigate this, by providing qualitative data which directly transcribes the participant’s experiences, rather than allowing conclusions to only be drawn from rulebooks and quantitative data.

This closeness to the subject also comes with benefits, however. TTRPGs, as a whole, utilise specific jargon both given by the games and generated by the communities, which may make it difficult for a completely fresh pair of eyes to fully

comprehend what is being said by participants. Additionally, having played the game, I have first-hand experience of the potential positive effects that playing an LGBT+ character within a TTRPG may bring.

Chapter 4 — Analysis of the Game Books

4.1 — Introduction

This analysis shall be done in four parts. The first shall discuss the mechanics through which *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Monsterhearts 2* are played; the second shall discuss the expectations of queer content that are laid out by each rulebook; the third shall discuss the creation of LGBT+ characters within *Dungeons & Dragons*; and finally, the fourth shall discuss the creation of LGBT+ characters within *Monsterhearts 2*.

This analysis will be focusing only on the character creation options provided by the Player's Handbook for *Dungeons & Dragons* and the official rulebook for *Monsterhearts 2*. Both games — though this is particularly prevalent in *Dungeons & Dragons* — provide official content outside of these books which expand upon the character creation process, as well as possessing a large amount of player created content which any group may choose to include in their game should they wish, due to the individualistic nature of TTRPGs. By focusing only on the two aforementioned texts, a more in-depth and complete analysis can be provided within this study's limited words. The purpose of this analysis is primarily to answer the first research question, by exploring the ways in which TTRPGs engage with LGBT+ identities within their rulebooks.

4.2 — Game Mechanics: How the Games Work

This section will provide a short explanation of how both *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Monsterhearts 2* are played from the perspective of a player, with regards to both their character creation systems, and how those characters work in action. The goal of this section is to ensure that those who are unfamiliar with the games can understand their mechanical reality (see Section 2.3.4) as they are discussed throughout later sections.

It should be noted that this discussion focuses primarily on the mechanical reality of the games, because the fluff reality of the games involves far less specialist knowledge to understand; instead, the fluff reality represents the ‘rules for how to understand the fictional reality [of the game]’ (Atmore, 2017, n.p.), and is built upon a combination of the fiction provided by a TTRPGs rulebook and the fiction created by the players as they prepare for and play within their personal game world.

4.2.1 Dungeons & Dragons

When creating a character within *Dungeons & Dragons*, players are required to make three important choices: their race, class, and background. Combined, these three elements provide all of the mechanical aspects required for character creation. A character’s race could, in a sense, be more appropriately called their species, and indicates whether a character is an elf with a Dexterity bonus, or a dwarf with a Constitution bonus. A character’s class is analogous to their job or party role, with options such as barbarians, clerics, rogues, and wizards. Finally, their background determines who they were before the game began, such as a criminal, entertainer, or hermit. Of these three elements, both race and background features remain the same throughout play. Class features, however, evolve as the character gains more experience by defeating monsters. This requires the players to make further mechanical choices, such as what variety of spells their wizard knows. Outside of these three mechanical elements, the remainder of the character creation process within *Dungeons & Dragons* happens within the fluff reality. This includes aspects such as the gender and sexuality of the characters, as well as their personalities, relationships, and so on. As a result of this, *Dungeons & Dragons* provides more mechanical rulings for combat than it does social situations.

In game, *Dungeons & Dragons* makes use of a system focused on a polyset of dice: a D4, a D6, a D8, two D10s, a D12, and a D20. While all the dice are used throughout the mechanical aspects of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the D20 is used most often, as that is the die used to determine the results of actions with uncertain outcomes. In order to get their player character to perform actions, a player describes what their character does to the game master, and the game master decides whether the character is able to perform these tasks. If a player attempts an action with an uncertain outcome, such as attacking an enemy, the game master

asks them to roll a D20 and to add any relevant bonuses the character possesses to the resulting number. These bonuses are provided by the aforementioned mechanical aspects of character creation, and indicate where a character's skills lie.

The game master determines the success of these rolls by comparing them to the Difficulty Class of the task at hand, which is a numerical representation of how difficult a given action is. If the player rolls higher than the Difficulty Class, the action goes forward as they planned. If they roll lower, however, they fail to do what they wanted, and suffer the consequences. Either way, the game master describes the outcome.

Using the basic rules detailed above, a *Dungeons & Dragons* game usually lasts around 4 hours in length, though realistically players can play for as long or as short a time as they want to, with each instance of the game being referred to as a session. These sessions typically make up part of a larger campaign, which is the term used to describe an overarching story being told over a number of separate sessions. Self-contained sessions, which are intended to tell an entire story in a single sitting, are referred to as one-shots.

4.2.2 Monsterhearts 2

Monsterhearts 2's system was built upon the framework of another TTRPG: *Apocalypse World* (Baker, 2010). This framework is known as the Powered by the Apocalypse (PbtA) engine, and has grown to become the foundation for a large number of narrative-driven TTRPGs. Within PbtA games, players create their characters by choosing Skins, which act as a profile that contains all the necessary information for creating a character within the game. This is the primary mechanical choice that players make during character creation, differing strongly from the number of mechanical options required within *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Monsterhearts 2 is designed to be played in scenes, a term used to evoke the idea of a scene within a television show. This metaphor is used to show players that 'not every moment has to happen 'on screen'' (Alder, 2017; pg. 13), indicating that they should only focus on aspects of the narrative that they find interesting, and to allow scenes to come to an end once the exciting parts have finished. The game master

has ultimate power over when scenes begin and end, but are encouraged to share this authority with the players whenever it would make sense to do so.

Within these scenes, players make use of the first main game mechanic, Moves, in order to perform actions. Moves are ‘rules for doing particular things, and many involve rolling dice once they kick in’ (Alder, 2017; pg. 14). Moves are divided into Basic Moves, which every player character has access to, Skin Moves, which player characters have access to depending on the Skin they’ve taken, and a Sex Move, which is a unique move that player characters also gain access to through the Skin they’ve taken.

The second main game mechanic is Strings, which are a mechanical representation of the ‘emotional power that you have over others’ (Alder, 2017; pg. 16). Skins provide a couple of starting Strings, as well as a number of ways in which you may gain Strings as you play. A player character can gain strings on other characters whom they hold some influence over, and in return other characters may gain strings on that player character. By using the *Pulling Strings* Basic Move, player characters are able to spend the Strings that they have on a character to influence them — primarily to tempt them to do what the Move user wants, though the move can also be used to grant Conditions or increase the effectiveness of dice rolls against that character.

4.3 — Expectations of Queer Content

This section aims to provide an overview of the stated expectations of queer content within both games. This will include looking at areas of the books which outright discuss LGBT+ themes, be it with regard to gender or sexuality, and aims to establish what the games’ expectations for their players are with regards to the creation of queer content.

4.3.1 Dungeons & Dragons

Within the Player’s Handbook, the most explicit reference to queer themes is found within the ‘Personality and Background’ chapter. Under the heading ‘sex’, players

are told that they 'can play a male or female character without gaining any special benefits or hindrances' and that 'likewise, your character's sexual orientation is for you to decide' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 121). This indicates that queer content is intended to exist purely within the fluff reality of the game, having no mechanical impact of any kind. Additionally, this marks the only use of the term 'sexual orientation' throughout the entire book. Players are told to 'think about how your character does or does not conform to the broader culture's expectations of sex, gender, and sexual behavior' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 121). This places gender and sexuality firmly within the fluff reality of the game, as *Dungeons & Dragons* relies on players to include it in their character descriptions, rather than in the mechanics provided throughout the character creation process. This indicates that *Dungeons & Dragons* is not focused on creating a queer environment, but certainly has room for the players to do so themselves, as players are encouraged to experiment with gender and sexuality within the text.

Alongside the information about gender and sexuality given by *Dungeons & Dragons*, players are given the example of a male drow cleric as a figure that doesn't conform to cultural expectations of gender. A male drow cleric 'defies the traditional gender divisions of drow society, which could be a reason for your character to leave that society and come to the surface' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 121). Within *Dungeons & Dragons*, a drow is a variety of elf, while clerics are magic users who gain their powers from the deity that they worship. This apparent gender expectation amongst the drow is not actually mentioned under the drow information provided earlier in the book, where they are primarily described as prejudiced, believing 'that surface-dwelling races are inferior' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 24). There are no mentions of their opinion on gender beyond that they worship a female 'goddess' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 24). From this, we can infer that typically only women are allowed to act as clerics to the drow goddess. Following on from this, players are told that they 'don't need to be confined to binary notions of sex and gender', with a number of examples. One is that some elves are 'androgynous', having been made in the image of 'Corellion', an androgynous elvish god (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 121). Once more, *Dungeons & Dragons* highlights elves as existing outside of a traditional gender binary, as we may expect to find in western cultures, within the context of their religious practises. Within a real-world context, it

is clear that '[t]he intersection of gender and religious identification [can trigger] negative social interactions' (Naseem & Adnan, 2019; n.p.), and that many LGBT+ individuals have had negative experiences with religious structures throughout their lives. As such, player response to the framing of elven gender through the lens of religion is likely to be dependent on a particular player's experiences with religion. For some, this may represent the ability to reclaim religion which has previously harmed them, while for others this may represent a reminder of a reality that is unwelcome within their games.

Other examples given for this point are far more general, referring to 'a female character who presents herself as a man, a man who feels trapped in a female body, or a bearded female dwarf who hates being mistaken for a male' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 121). All of these examples rely on an understanding of what is expected of traditional gender roles within the real world, rather than those found only within the game world. This is particularly notable with regards to the idea of a 'bearded female dwarf'. Players are expected to find this to be a subversion of gender norms, due to the foregrounding of the adjective 'female' within the context of a bearded dwarf, a traditionally masculine image. However, dwarves are not humans, and therefore there is no reason to assume that they experience gender as humans do. As such, the text is indicating that non-human races within D&D largely follow our human understandings of gender, or at the very least are subject to these standards. This is almost certainly a result of the text prioritising the player's schematic knowledge of gender over the development of alternate gender norms, in order to facilitate ease of play. Given that the players' 'relationship with the world [is] defined by the ruleset' (Woods, 2012; pg. 26), the designers of *Dungeons & Dragons* are likely to have believed that the ability of players to relate to the various races through a human lens was more important than creating truly in-human beings.

In discussing these matters of gender and gender expression, *Dungeons & Dragons* seems reluctant to use the word transgender, despite seemingly attempting to exemplify the transgender experience in providing as an example 'a man who feels trapped in a female body' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 121). This is a simplified understanding of one possible transgender experience, that does not address the non-binary experience whatsoever, given that the example still relies heavily on the

traditional gender binary. Additionally, the use of the 'trapped' metaphor paints a bleak image, presenting the idea that a transgender individual's body is a cage from which they are unable to escape. By conceptualising transgender people in this manner, the Player's Handbook presents being transgender as a largely negative experience, characterised by being trapped within your own body. Yet, this metaphor is presented alongside the statement that players 'don't need to be confined to binary notions of sex and gender' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 121), which by itself suggests a far less binary notion of gender than the one presented to the readers in the examples given. The metaphor itself is likely given in an attempt to aim at a wide audience, which may not be entirely familiar with LGBT+ terminology. However, it is undeniable that the use of the 'trapped' conceptual metaphor, alongside the use of human gender norms in non-human cultures, creates a cisheteronormative presentation of gender within the Player's Handbook by separating trans people from their bodies, and treating it like a container from which they cannot escape, rather than as something that is integral to their being. Given that queer theory 'suggests that all bodies and psyches are offered intelligibility through their relationship to a particular set of norms' (Jagose, 1996; pg. 2), this may be an attempt on the writer's behalf to normalise the trans body. However, as discussed in section 2.3.2., this normative body is an unachievable form, and attempting to enforce it upon transgender individuals can only be harmful.

4.3.2 Monsterhearts 2

Upon opening the *Monsterhearts 2* rulebook, the first information the reader is greeted with is a description of the game's intended audience. Within this text, *Monsterhearts 2* tells us that it is 'queer, meaning that it pushes back against the heterosexist framework that underlies so many of our culture's stories' (Alder, 2017; pg. 6). Immediately, this sets up the game as one that interacts with gender and sexuality on an intimate level. By indicating that the game itself is 'queer', rather than being a game that features LGBT+ content, *Monsterhearts 2* presents itself as a game that is queer within both the fluff and mechanical reality, creating a situation where it is all but impossible to play the game unless you are willing to engage with queer themes.

Furthermore, the use of the word 'queer' rather than the term LGBT+ or similar suggests that the game is choosing to tackle the contentious nature of the word. As discussed within section 2.3.2, while the term queer has been largely reclaimed by the LGBT+ community, it has a history founded in an idea of otherness — focusing on an understanding of 'sex, gender, and desire' (Jagose, 1996; pg. 3) that differs from the cisgender heterosexual societal ideal, rather than approaching LGBT+ concepts in isolation. To further this idea of creating a game that is explicitly queer, *Monsterhearts 2* provides what it refers to as an agenda, which intends to 'communicate the spirit of the game' (Alder, 2017; pg. 9). This agenda is presented as follows:

- Make each main character's life not boring.
- Keep the story feral.
- Say what the rules demand.
- Say what honesty demands. (Alder, 2017; pg. 9)

Of these four ideals, keeping the story 'feral' is perhaps the most unique, given that it is likely deliberately paradoxical when compared with the following ideal, which indicates that players should stick to the rules. The evocation of imagery associated with wilderness in this situation may suggest that the author intends for the game to avoid what is socially accepted as the norm, and to allow players to act outside of established social decorum. This is further evidenced as the text elaborates on its meaning, encouraging players to avoid the impulse to 'domesticate [the] story' (Alder, 2017; pg. 10). This conceptualisation of a story being 'feral' is connected to the game's stance as inherently queer, with domesticity being used to represent the creation of cisheteronormative stories as a form of contrast. Given that gender is 'a set of free-floating attributes ... performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence' (Butler, 1990; pg. 24), the conceptual metaphor of ferality represents a performance that rejects the culturally constructed practise of gender coherence, and instead asks players to act upon the instincts instilled in their character's regardless of the greater cultural context. Moving further into this chapter, players are told to allow the story's 'messy, chaotic momentum [to] guide it forward' (Alder, 2017; pg. 10). With the notion that the game intends for itself to be perceived and played as a queer experience in mind, this indicates that

Monsterhearts 2 believes queer stories are inherently 'messy' and 'chaotic', and should be portrayed as such. Given the game's desire to push back against a heterosexist framework, it is possible to infer that the idea of creating a 'feral' story, as described by *Monsterhearts 2*, is the method through which the players can create a story that is wholly queer and not held back by cultural standards. To follow this metaphor to its logical conclusion, if creating a story that adheres to ideas of gender and sexuality norms is to create a domesticated story, then creating a story that is predominantly queer is to create one that is feral because it is free from societal pressure.

However, *Monsterhearts 2* discussion of queer content extends beyond the first pages where it details its agenda and audience. In fact, further into the first chapter readers are presented with the heading 'Queer Content' (Alder, 2017; pg. 36). Here, players are provided with text that emphasizes the importance of queer relationships within both the mechanical reality and the fluff reality of the game. For example, players are told that 'queer content will make your game more interesting' (Alder, 2017; pg. 36). This further incentivises players to utilise queer content within their game, given that a key purpose of TTRPGs is the creation of interesting narratives. With regards to the mechanical reality, players are told that 'trusting and taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the mechanics' (Alder, 2017; pg. 36) is one important way that they can introduce queer content to their games. The example given following this is that '[a] main character can roll to *Turn Someone On* regardless of respective genders, and the incentive to do so is baked into the core of the game' (Alder, 2017; pg. 36). As *Turn Someone On* is a Basic Move available to all characters, it is therefore a central mechanical ability within the game that any player may make use of. Given that there are six Basic Moves in total, to ignore this move would remove a significant portion of the game's playability. In this manner, *Monsterhearts 2* is right in saying that the reason to use this move is baked into the core of the game – as not using it would put you at a significant disadvantage when compared with other members of a group who were. Meanwhile, with regards to the fluff reality, players are told that 'beyond trusting the mechanics to do interesting things, think about representation and look for opportunities to explore queer possibilities' (Alder, 2017; pg. 37). Players are very clearly pointed towards creating queer stories, rather than creating stories which simply feature LGBT+ content.

Monsterhearts 2 provides a number of examples of chances to explore queer possibilities following this statement, which prominently exhibit ways in which the game's monster-based content can interact with the game's inherent queerness. One such example is the following:

Explore what it means to be betrayed by your body, whether it's becoming a flesh-eating monster that stalks the night, or being trans and experiencing the wrong puberty, or both. (Alder, 2017; pg. 37)

Here, the trans experience is compared to the experience of transforming into a monster, through the lens of being betrayed by your body. The notion of going through a wrong puberty, in particular, speaks to the idea that a trans person's identity is inherently correct, and that it is their body which is wrong, not their sense of self. In being betrayed by their body, they are not forever trapped within it, but rather are presently experiencing a misalignment between how they would like their body to be, and how it presently is. In the use of the present participle verb 'experiencing' (Alder, 2017; pg. 37), Alder suggests that a trans person's body betraying them is an action that can eventually be halted, rather than something that is inevitable for the remainder of their lives.

4.3.3 Comparison

In comparing *Dungeons & Dragons* with *Monsterhearts 2*, it is immediately clear that the books approach the matter of LGBT+ content within their games very differently. Within *Dungeons & Dragons*, it is only briefly mentioned and is presented as something that only exists within the fluff reality of the game, and therefore only if the players decide that they wish to create a fluff reality that engages with those topics. Meanwhile, within *Monsterhearts 2*, both the fluff reality and the mechanical reality of the game is undeniably tied to queer themes, rendering it impossible to play the game without engaging with these subjects.

Interestingly, both books utilise conceptual metaphors when discussing the transgender people within their texts. Within *Dungeons & Dragons*, trans individuals are presented as people who are 'trapped' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 121)

within bodies that do not match their true gender, as though their body is a prison from which they cannot escape. Meanwhile, within *Monsterhearts 2*, trans individuals are portrayed as being ‘betrayed by [their] body’ (Alder, 2017; pg 37), which once again separates a trans person from their body as though it is capable of making its own decisions about how it develops. In contrast to *Dungeons & Dragons*, however, *Monsterhearts 2* does not present the trans experience as something unchanging. Within *Monsterhearts 2*, trans individuals are not irrevocably trapped within a form they hate, but are rather presently being betrayed by it – implying that it is possible for the betrayal to end, and for a trans person to become happy with their body. Overall, *Monsterhearts 2* presents a more positive view of the trans experience, and grants trans individuals a greater amount of agency in that they are not trapped, and are able to do something about the ways in which their body betrays them.

The following sections on character creation have been separated between both *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Monsterhearts 2*, as their character creation processes are radically different from one another. By analysing the character creation processes specifically, sections 4.4 and 4.5 aim to answer the first research question – how do TTRPGs engage with LGBT+ identities within their rulebooks? – in relation to both the fluff-based and mechanical process of building a player character.

4.4 — Character Creation within Dungeons & Dragons

The mechanical aspects of character creation within *Dungeons & Dragons* involves making three primary choices: a player character’s race, class, and background. Any other choices that are made with regard to character creation happen entirely within the fluff reality of the game, including those of the gender and sexuality of the character, as mentioned in section 4.3.1.

4.4.1 Race

The Player’s Handbook presents the reader with 9 playable races. Within the context of *Dungeons & Dragons*, the term ‘race’ is used to describe beings that are so different that they could arguably be separate species, ranging from humans, to dragonborn, to halflings. As seen in the description of a ‘bearded female dwarf’

(Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 121) as an example of subverting gender norms, *Dungeons & Dragons* utilises our understanding of societal human norms as a way of imagining the fantasy world it is creating. By using the term race rather than species, *Dungeons & Dragons* attempts to humanize these fantasy beings, and the players are given the impression that each race shares a number of traits in common. For example, despite seemingly being different species, humans and elves are able to have children together called half-elves. Of the 9 races in the Player's Handbook, only elves and dwarves are explicitly mentioned within the discussion of LGBT+ content presented within the Player's Handbook (see Section 4.3.1). Additionally, it is worth noting that the information regarding LGBT+ characters isn't presented alongside the rest of the racial information, but instead is placed in a separate section within the Personality and Background chapter. This may have been done in order to further impress that gender and sexuality act as a part of the fluff reality which is separate from the mechanical aspects of the game. With this in mind, this study will interrogate the ways in which certain races are presented within the Player's Handbook. These races are elves, half-elves, half-orcs, dwarfs, and tieflings. The reasons behind choosing each of these races to focus on is elaborated upon below.

Beginning with elves, the Player's Handbook clearly presents elves as the most intentionally queer of the available races, given that they are the only race that is not beholden to our human schematic knowledge of gender and sexuality. We can see this in the description of drow elves, wherein 'a male drow cleric defies the traditional gender divisions of drow society' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 121), suggesting that drow society is matriarchal and male drow elves don't tend to hold significant positions within religious orders. Once more in the vein of religious foundations of gender, players are also told that 'the elf god Corellon Larethian is often seen as androgynous ... and some elves in the multiverse are made in Corellon's image' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 121). In both these examples, elves are presented as having different cultural understandings of gender within the context of a connection to religion – with clerics being a class that gains access to magic through their gods. A further discussion of this connection between gender and religion is seen in section 4.3.1.

Elves are also described as physically androgynous, with ‘no facial hair and little body hair’ (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 21), and with both male and female elves being ‘about the same height’ (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 21). This androgyny is specifically one that leans towards a feminine description, due to the lack of facial hair, rather than one that embraces both the masculine and feminine. Alongside the indication that elves are a largely androgynous race, players are told that elves are also an incredibly beautiful race. Elves possess an ‘unearthly grace and fine features’, and they ‘appear hauntingly beautiful to humans and members of many other races’ (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 21). This association between androgyny and beauty – particularly a beauty that is described as ‘otherworldly’ (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 21) – is not necessarily a positive representation of non-binary individuals. On the one hand, elves provide players with a race where androgyny is the norm, who adhere to gender norms that are different to our own; albeit they must still possess a relatively human understanding of gender, seen in the use of the terms male and female, rather than using an entirely separate system. On the other hand, however, are two issues: the first being that elves embody a very specific image of androgyny, and the other being that the portrayal of androgyny as inherently and always beautiful may be damaging to those who don’t fulfil the conventional cisheteronormative ideal of a beautiful person. Elves are described with feminine language, with their lack of facial and bodily hair being a key indicator that they are not intended to be perceived as masculine. Furthermore, much of the language used to describe elves paints them as ‘slender’ and ‘elegant’ (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 21), both traits which can be associated with an idealised, cisheteronormative view of how women should be.

When discussing elven individuals, the Player’s Handbook uses the phrase ‘him or her’ (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg 22) instead of the neutral pronoun ‘they’, despite the fact that elves are fairly consistently described as androgynous beings. This is similarly seen in regards to elven naming structures, where players are told that there is ‘little distinction ... between male names and female names’ (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 22). Despite outright telling players that a number of elves eschew traditional gender structures in later chapters, when elves are first introduced in the early pages of the book they are treated as a race that follows human gender norms. In regards to elven names, it is also interesting to note that players are told

that 'on declaring adulthood, an elf selects an adult name, although those who knew him or her as a youngster might continue to use the child name' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 22). This is somewhat allegorical to the trans experience of choosing a new name for oneself; an important step in outwardly portraying the gender expression of the gender identity that trans people belong to.

Following along from elves, dwarves are also presented as an example of differing gender experiences, with the example being given that of 'a bearded female dwarf who hates being mistaken for a male' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 121). However, where elves are presented as existing outside of our human gender norms, dwarves are presented as having to contend with them. The prominence of facial hair within their given culture is also indicative of a more masculine gender experience, when compared with the feminine presentation of elves. Dwarves are often associated with masculine imagery, particularly because 'fairy tale dwarfs are almost always male' (Morgentaler, 2015; n.p.). *Dungeons & Dragons* does immediately subvert this expectation by depicting a female dwarf on the page's art, but this is emphasised in the highlight of beard imagery within the text. Players are told that '[m]ale dwarves value their beards highly and groom them carefully' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 18) – they are not told what, if anything, that female dwarves value in their place.

In contrast to the androgynous yet feminine elves, who 'have no interest in mining [metals]' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 22), the masculine dwarves are 'known as skilled warriors, miners, and workers of stone and metal' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 18). This love of mining is even carried over from the fluff reality and into the mechanical reality in the form of the ability Stonecunning, which is granted to all dwarves and makes it so that 'Whenever [they] make an Intelligence (History) check related to the origin of stonework, [they] are considered proficient in the History skill and add double [their] proficiency bonus to the check, instead of [their] normal proficiency bonus' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 20). In contrasting the two races, it is clear that *Dungeons & Dragons* attempts to frame dwarves as a traditionally masculine race, interested in the masculine activity of mining, and being described as 'solid and enduring' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 18) dwarves; meanwhile, elves are presented as traditionally feminine, with textual focus being placed on their

‘hauntingly [beauty]’ (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 21), and their attractiveness to the other races.

Alongside elves, players are also given the opportunity to play as a race known as half-elves; born from the pairing of a human and an elf, half-elves are described as a people who are ‘walking in two worlds but truly [belong] to neither’ (Wizards of the Coast; pg. 38). Half-elves are certainly intended to be allegorical to the experience of being outside of the culture of one’s parents, indicated by the idea of not belonging. This is most obviously allegorical for the experience of mixed-race individuals, given that half-elves are quite literally a mix of two of the game’s races, but they also represent a distinct other within the game’s fluff reality. They are described as being ‘set apart by their emotional and physical differences’ (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 38), which pertinently describes the experiences of many LGBT+ individuals.

Furthermore, many half-elves are presented as ‘unable to fit into either society’, and thereby ‘choose lives of solitary wandering or join with other misfits and outcasts in the adventuring life’ (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 38). This description, whereby half-elves ‘enjoy the company of other half-elves, [who are] the only people who truly understand what it is to live between these two worlds’ (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 39), can be likened to the concept of chosen families, which is found throughout queer culture. A chosen family ‘consists of people we find to fulfill the roles of support, teaching, comfort and kinship’ (Shirey, n.d.; n.p.), and are often incredibly important to LGBT+ individuals who were pushed out of their biological families due to their gender or sexuality. The discomfort of not ‘fit[ting] in to either society’ (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 38) of one’s parents is an experience that many LGBT+ individuals unfortunately have experienced first hand.

Alongside half-elves, player characters can also be half-orcs. Unsurprisingly, a half-orc is to humans and orcs what a half-elf is to humans and elves. One of the primary differences between the two is that elves are presented as a playable race within the Player’s Handbook, while orcs are not – instead, orcs are presented as a hated race that is more comparable to the monsters controlled by game masters instead of the good hearted adventurers controlled by the players. As part of the fluff information of half-orcs, players are told the following:

Each half-orc finds a way to gain acceptance from those who hate orcs. Some are reserved, trying not to draw attention to themselves. A few demonstrate piety and good-heartedness as publicly as they can (whether or not such demonstrations are genuine). And some simply try to be so tough that others just avoid them. (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg 41).

In this quote, half-orcs are described as a people who are all seeking acceptance from the world around them – yet again presenting the idea of a race that is othered by society in a manner that is against their will. If we take this to be allegorical for the LGBT+ experience, given that LGBT+ individuals often contend with being othered, then this suggests that LGBT+ individuals want to be accepted into cisheteronormative societies that view them as something to be hated, and are willing to permanently change their behaviours in order to do so. However, in defining the term queer (see section 2.3.2), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick states that queerness is when ‘the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, [or] anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically’ (Sedgwick, 1993; pg. 7). By defining the term queer as something that cannot be made to fit within a monolithic society, this depiction of half-orcs as an other that wants to alter themselves to be viewed without hate would suggest that they wish to take away the otherness that makes them queer in the first place.

The final race worth noting is the tiefling race, due to their overwhelming popularity in the survey demographics, and the frequent discussion of tieflings being an inherently queer race throughout the results (see section 5.4). The aim in this section of the analysis is to uncover whether tieflings are presented as queer within the Player’s Handbook itself, or whether this framing of tieflings as queer comes entirely from the player community. Tieflings are yet another race presented as other and cast out from general society, much like half-elves and half-orcs. When describing tieflings, the Player’s Handbook begins by telling players that ‘[t]o be greeted with stares and whispers, to suffer violence and insult on the street, to see mistrust and fear in every eye: this is the lot of the tiefling’ (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 42), which immediately shows that tiefling are treated with even more hatred than half-orcs. Perhaps the most distinctly queer statement in the description of the tieflings is that

‘[t]heir appearance and their nature are not their fault but the result of an ancient sin, for which they and their children and their children’s children will always be held accountable’ (Wizards of the Coasts, 2014; pg. 42). Many LGBT+ individuals have been forced to deal with hatred from individuals who believe that a fundamental part of their being – namely, their gender and sexuality – is a sin, as well as hatred aimed at them over a perceived choice, when in reality they never chose to possess the gender and sexuality that they do.

Much like elves, a number of tieflings also choose names for themselves in a manner that could be viewed as allegorical for a common transgender experience. In the case of tieflings, ‘some younger tieflings, striving to find a place in the world, adopt a name that signifies a virtue or other concept and then try to embody that concept’ (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 43). This further emphasises the apparent connection that many participants in the survey draw between tieflings and the experience of being queer.

Overall, there are very few mentions of purposeful queer content within the Player’s Handbook when it comes to the portrayal of the various races. The text which does connect with LGBT+ themes does so primarily through portraying a race as having been othered from society at large, rather than through the positive portrayal of their connectedness to anything resembling a queer community.

4.4.2 Class

Within *Dungeons & Dragons*, classes provide the ‘primary definition of what your character can do’ (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 45). Within the fluff reality, this is a player character’s calling, and defines where they get their powers from – be it through rigorous training or being born with magic. Within the mechanical reality, this provides player characters with the majority of their abilities, and defines what they can access with regards to armour, weapons, and spells. As characters play through the game, they gain experience points, which eventually allow player characters to level up their class, granting access to stronger abilities. While the race chapter provides around two pages worth of fluff information for each race, each class only has around a page of fluff information, with more focus instead being placed on the mechanical abilities provided by each class. As *Dungeons & Dragons* states in later

chapters, there are no 'special benefits or hindrances' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 121) given for any aspect of a character's gender or sexuality, meaning that there are no mechanics dedicated to the depiction of these identities. Therefore, classes feature less of a clear link to LGBT+ themes through the depiction of otherness seen in the races.

However, in looking at a select few of the classes provided in the Player's Handbook, it is possible to notice one of the few links between the mechanical reality of *Dungeons & Dragons* and the queer content that it is capable of creating. Charisma is one of the six ability scores given to players, intended to represent the range of actions that they may want to roll a dice to determine the outcome of. Within the context of *Dungeons & Dragons*, Charisma is defined as a measure of a player character's 'ability to interact effectively with other. It includes such factors as confidence, and eloquence, and it can represent a charming or commanding personality' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg 178). Of this description, the most interesting part for the purposes of this study is the idea of Charisma representing a charming personality. If a character is attempting to persuade another character by charming them, Charisma is the ability score that would be utilised to resolve the attempt. While seduction is not the only way in which to charm someone, it is certainly an effective way to do so, and creates the potential for interesting, romance-based storylines. As a result of this, there is a somewhat tenuous link between Charisma-based classes and the mechanical benefits of playing a bisexual character; that is to say, a character that is capable of engaging with non-player character's romantically regardless of their gender identity. The classes that most heavily rely upon the Charisma ability are the bard, the sorcerer, and the warlock.

The first of the Charisma based classes is the bard, a magic user who casts spells through the act of playing music. Bards are 'master[s] of song, speed, and the magic they contain' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 51), and so tend to possess a lot of versatility with regards to possessing abilities for both in and out of combat. Secondly, the sorcerer is a Charisma based class that are able to cast spells because they are born with an innate magic, or else they have been granted an innate magic through an event in their life that forever changed them. A sorcerer grows by 'learning to harness and channel their own inborn magic' (Wizards of the

Coast, 2014; pg. 99), which is an unchangeable part of them, in contrast to other magic using classes which have typically sought out the magic that defines them. The final Charisma based class is the warlock. Warlocks are magic users that are 'defined by a pact with an otherworldly being' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 105) which grants them magic. These otherworldly beings are not gods, and are typically presented as entities that would have cult-like followings, such as a 'demon prince, an archdevil, or an utterly alien entity' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 105).

Of these classes, both the sorcerer and the warlock features a discussion of relationships. With regards to the sorcerer, this comes in the form of a 'magical birthright conferred upon them by an exotic bloodline' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 99) or, in other words, magic that is gained through the unconventional relationships of their ancestors. As such, sorcerers may possibly be used as an allegory for children with LGBT+ parents, who are marked as different because of their heritage. This allegory is not inherent in the text, however, and instead relies upon the players themselves to take it up. Similarly, a warlock is defined by their relationship with their patron, who is a being of great magic that gifts them power. Again, the context of this relationship is up to the players to decide – they are not mechanically restricted by the book in this way, and are told that they may have a 'friendly, antagonistic, uneasy, or romantic' (Wizards of the Coast, 2014; pg. 106) relationship with their patron, as examples. As such, the warlock has the potential for a queer relationship baked into it, but by no means enforces it on players that have no interest in such things.

Overall, the classes found within the Player's Handbook provide even less queer content than the races discussed in section 4.4.1., likely as a result of races possessing a more monolithic culture, while class descriptions attempt to accommodate anyone that could theoretically take on a given profession or manner of training. The connections which can be made to LGBT+ themes are entirely allegorical, with the most distinct link being between Charisma based classes and the portrayal of bisexual characters, due to their being a minor mechanical benefit in a situation where a character geared for seduction being able to approach a larger number of non-play characters.

4.5 Character Creation within *Monsterhearts 2*

The mechanical aspects of character creation within *Monsterhearts 2* involve choosing a character profile called a Skin, and then making further choices within that Skin to define the player character's identity, stats, and moves. Additionally, there are a number of basic moves that all player characters have access to. In order to answer the first research question, this analysis shall first address the moves available to all characters, before discussing the Skins themselves. As stated in section 4.2.2., moves are 'rules for doing particular things, and many involve rolling dice once they kick in' (Alder, 2017; pg. 14). All player characters have access to six basic moves, which encompass the general tasks that *Monsterhearts 2* has deemed necessary to exist as part of the mechanical reality. This includes the social actions of Turning Someone On, Shutting Someone Down, and Keeping Your Cool; as well as the physical actions of Lashing Out Physically, and Running Away; or even the mystical action of Gazing Into The Abyss.

The self-professed queerest move in *Monsterhearts 2* is Turn Someone On. According to the text, '[t]his move is at the of how *Monsterhearts* understands sexuality, especially teen sexuality. We don't get to decide what turns us on, or who. Part of your agenda is keeping the story feral, and that means letting your character's sexuality emerge in all of its confusing and unexpected glory' (Alder, 2017; pg. 18). This is a distinct example of a 'manipulation rule' (Frasca, 2003; pg. 232), as discussed in section 2.2.5., in that it provides a restricted viewpoint for how player characters can experience attraction within *Monsterhearts 2*, and therefore conveys an ideology surrounding queer content: that it must be included, and that player characters, and in addition the real world teenagers that they represent, don't get to decide how their sexuality evolves. Queer content is not only an option for players, but it is mandatory to enjoy the game to its fullest. TTRPGs are unique in that these manipulation rules are not only implemented by the game designers – they must also be accepted and implemented by the players of the game, who could easily choose to ignore or alter a rule. However, given that Turn Someone On is one of only six basic moves within the game, attempting to play the game without utilising this move would severely neuter the experience of playing *Monsterhearts 2*. In

designing the game this way, Alder has made it so that players must engage with queer content, or else they will find themselves playing a particularly lacklustre game.

As is common throughout all PbtA games, player characters in *Monsterhearts 2* choose a Skin: a profile of sorts which provides them with all the information necessary to complete the mechanical side of character creation, as well as providing a number of prompts that may be used to generate the fluff elements of the player character. More specifically, Skins contain the following information: a description on how to play the given Skin; an identity list that provides the player with potential options for their name, appearance, and origin; two backstory prompts which provide strings on fellow players; their stat options; their Darkest Self mechanics; their advancement mechanics; their Sex Move mechanics; and finally, their Skin Move mechanics. Players are encouraged to not 'worry about mechanics' (Alder, 2017; pg. 61) while they are choosing their Skins, instead choosing 'the Skin that they're most compelled by, based on the picture, flavour text, and anything else that catches their eye' (Alder, 2017; pg. 61). By prioritising fluff over mechanics in this manner, *Monsterhearts 2* presents itself as a game focused on narrative and character above all else.

Furthermore, *Monsterhearts 2* describes itself as a game which 'explores the terror and confusion of having a body that is changing without your permission' (Alder, 2017; pg. 7). Looking at the Skins as a collective, this can be seen as a consistent theme throughout their design. The Skins are used as a representation of teenage experiences, framed through the lens of various fantasy monsters – specifically with the aim to represent the experiences of teenagers who were caused terror and confusion due to their queer identities. Interestingly, *Monsterhearts 2* is very aware of this connection, as it goes on to state that the 'monstrosity [of the player characters] is also allegorical, standing in for experiences of alienation, shame, queerness, and self-destruction' (Alder, 2017; pg. 7). *Monsterhearts 2* ensures that queerness is written directly into its mechanical reality through the Skins it provides, and so ensures that any characters created for use in the game are unavoidably queer themselves.

Each Skin is granted a title which describes the profile using monster terminology. These monster representations largely focus on very conventional and culturally recognisable monsters, such as the Ghost, the Ghoul, the Infernal, the Vampire and the Werewolf. Each monster is depicted in an allegorical manner for a highschool stereotype upon which the players are able to build. Interestingly, there is an exception to the naming rule, in the form of the Queen and the Mortal, which both fulfil monster movie tropes rather than actualised monsters, but still allow for the allegorical representation of teenage stereotypes. The Queen is based primarily on the stereotype of a high school girl that is exceedingly popular and is able to dominate social circles as a result. While the monster implied by, say, the Vampire, is certainly clear, the monster implied by the Queen is left to the player to decide. According to the text, 'the Queen can range from being a mundane human teen all the way to weird cosmic horror. More than any other Skin, you're in control of just how supernatural to make them' (Alder, 2017; pg. 139). This is yet another reinforcement that the players have ultimate control over all final decisions made in the actual playing of the game, and provides the option for players to create whichever monster they believe is the most fitting to represent the stereotype of a queen bee. Meanwhile, the Mortal is based upon the trope of a human being falling in love with a monster. The Mortal 'get[s] power by giving away [strings]' (Alder, 2017; pg. 135), mechanically representing that they desire the loss of control that comes from being a mere human surrounded by supernatural beings, and allowing the Mortal to fulfil the stereotype of a teenager who only falls in love with people who are dangerous or otherwise bad for them.

While less immediately apparent than the text outright declaring its queerness, this dedication to portraying LGBT+ characters can be seen in the way that Skins present the optional names as part of the identity list. Players are given a short list of potential names for their player character, though players aren't mechanically required to use these names. While none of the identity terms are divided by gender, this is perhaps most notable under the description of names, which are perceived within western culture as largely gendered. By presenting the list of names as a whole, rather than one divided by gender, *Monsterhearts 2* indicates to its player that anyone, of any of the various appearances and origins granted by the remainder of

the identity list, may possess any name, regardless of whatever their gender identity may be.

Each Skin includes a sex move, which are mostly ‘triggered in the exact same way, by having sex with someone’ (Alder, 2017; pg. 48). The exceptions to this rule are the Fae, whose sex move triggers when they lie naked with another person, and the Vampire, whose sex move triggers when they deny someone sexually. None of these sex moves specify the gender or sexuality of the other participant, or requires that the player character be of a certain gender or sexuality to benefit from the effects of the sex move. In doing this, *Monsterhearts 2* creates a situation wherein player characters actually mechanically benefit from being bisexual, rather than a same gender attracted sexuality, as they can then use their sex move with, or against, a large number of characters. Additionally, the design of sex moves encourages open experimentation with a character’s sexuality – except for in the case of the Vampire. As mentioned, the Vampire possesses an interesting sex move, in that it activates when they deny someone sexually, rather than when they have sex. The sex move is written as follows:

When you deny someone sexually, gain a String on them. When you have sex with someone, lose all Strings on them.

This is one of the only instances within both *Monsterhearts 2* and *Dungeons & Dragons* where asexual individuals are represented in any manner, be it in the fluff reality or the mechanical reality. While it is primarily a player’s decision whether they interpret this mechanic as a representation of an asexual person rather than, say, a person who derives pleasure from stringing along others, this move ensures that asexual people can be included within a game that otherwise focuses entirely on the creation and encouragement of overtly sexual situations.

Overall, *Monsterhearts 2* enforces queer themes within all aspects of character creation. Within the fluff reality, *Monsterhearts 2* consistently provides players with purposefully allegorical material wherein the Skins, based on teenage and monster stereotypes, allow players to explore what it means to be a queer teenager.

Meanwhile, within the mechanical reality, *Monsterhearts 2* forces players to engage

with these metaphors by embedding them within manipulation rules that players are required to use if they wish to play a complete game.

Chapter 5 – Analysis of the Surveys

5.1 — Introduction

Overall, the *Dungeons & Dragons* survey received 349 responses, while the *Monsterhearts 2* survey received 23. This disparity was expected, as *Dungeons & Dragons* has a far larger audience than *Monsterhearts 2*, although the size of the difference in responses was surprising. A possible reason for the significant difference in the number of responses may be that *Dungeons & Dragons* is a far more accessible game than *Monsterhearts 2*, given that *Monsterhearts 2* is published independently. Another is that participants may be more willing to discuss *Dungeons & Dragons* characters than *Monsterhearts 2* characters, as *Monsterhearts 2*'s focus on the queer experience view through the lens of teenage monsters makes it a more sensitive topic of discussion than the fantasy adventuring world of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The purpose of this analysis is primarily to answer the second research question, by exploring the ways in which players knowingly construct LGBT+ identities within their player characters.

Throughout this analysis, a coding system has been used to separate the qualitative responses given for the survey. Within this system, each response has been numbered based on the order in which it was received; additionally, D&D is used to refer to responses to the *Dungeons & Dragons* survey, while M2 is used to refer to responses to the *Monsterhearts 2* survey. For example, the code (D&D; 001) would be used to indicate that a qualitative response had come from the first survey response received for the *Dungeons & Dragons* survey.

5.2 — Demographics

The survey participants were asked to provide a brief overview of their own gender identity and sexuality, as well as an overview of the gender identity and sexuality of their most played player character. This was done in order to provide a point of comparison between their own real-world selves, and the fictional avatars that they

adopt when playing a TTRPG. To this end, participants were also asked whether their identity differed from that of their player character.

Overall, there were 349 responses to the *Dungeons & Dragons* survey, and 23 responses to the *Monsterhearts 2* survey. Overall, the high level of responses to these surveys combined suggests that there is value to be found in studying TTRPGs as a space for the exploration of LGBT+ identity, as a large number of participants felt strongly enough about the inclusion of LGBT+ content in their games to take an interest in the survey.

In order to provide a clearer image of those who answered the survey, participants were also asked to provide the age range that they fell into. The vast majority of participants were between the ages of 18 and 30; within *Dungeons & Dragons*, only 7.91% (25) of participants were 31-40, and 1.27% (4) were 41-50, while within *Monsterhearts 2*, 11.11% (2) of the participants fell into the 31-40 age range. It is likely that the majority of participants were younger not because TTRPGs have an overall younger fanbase, but because the surveys were posted to Reddit forums. This meant that participants who spent more time online, and who browsed Reddit, were the most likely to see the surveys. Therefore, this data can be said to represent the thoughts of a younger TTRPG demographic, rather than an older one.

5.2.1 Gender and Sexuality of the Players

Of the 316 responses received regarding the gender of participants in the *Dungeons & Dragons* survey, the most common gender identity amongst the group was nonbinary at 39.56%, followed by cisgender women at 30.70%. Not accounting for individual unique responses within the 'other' category, the smallest group amongst participants was transgender women, at only 2.22%.

Of the responses given for 'other', both 'genderqueer' and 'genderfluid' were given multiple times. Additionally, multiple participants described themselves as 'unsure', or else stating that they 'don't know yet' or are 'uncertain'. One participant simply responded that 'I wouldn't [describe my gender]', when asked to do so within the survey.

As mentioned, alongside their gender, participants were asked to provide information regarding their sexuality. Of the responses received for *Dungeons & Dragons*, the most frequently answered sexuality was bisexual at 32.06%, with the least common sexuality being heterosexual at 3.81%.

Of the responses given under other, 12 of the 39 participants described their sexuality as 'queer', indicating that this is a term a number of people associate with and choose to identify with on a significant personal level — alongside its more general use as a term within noun phrases such as the queer community and queer theory. Further responses given under other included those such as 'biromantic asexual' and 'demisexual panromantic', which utilises a split attraction model commonly associated with asexual and aromantic individuals who wish to describe the attraction that they experience towards others in a more in-depth manner.

Gender Identity	Percentage	Total
Nonbinary	39.56%	125
Cisgender Female	30.70%	97
Other	11.08%	35
Cisgender Male	8.86%	28
Transgender Male	7.59%	24
Transgender Female	2.22%	7
Total		316

Figure 1: Gender Distribution of *Dungeons & Dragons* Participants

Sexuality	Percentage	Total
Bisexual	32.06%	101

Asexual	24.76%	78
Homosexual	16.83%	53
Other	13.02%	41
Pansexual	9.52%	30
Heterosexual	3.81%	12
Total		315

Figure 2: Sexuality Distribution of *Dungeons & Dragons* Participants

Within the 23 responses for the *Monsterhearts 2* survey, the most common gender identity found within participants was similarly nonbinary at 50%, followed by cisgender women at 27.78%. This matches the demographic found within *Dungeons & Dragons*, though with an even more distinct nonbinary response. Again much like with *Dungeons & Dragons*, the smallest group amongst participants was that of transgender women at 5.56%. The responses provided for 'other' once more included 'genderfluid', as well as 'demiboy'.

Following this, within *Monsterhearts 2* homosexuality was the most frequent response at 27.78%, with the least frequent being heterosexual once more, at 5.56%. This differs from the results seen with *Dungeons & Dragons*, given that bisexual was the 2nd most frequent answer alongside asexual.

Once more, 'queer' was given as a response by those that chose other, alongside 'prefers no label'.

Gender Identity	Percentage	Total
Nonbinary	50.00%	9
Cisgender Female	27.78%	5

Other	11.11%	2
Cisgender Male	5.56%	1
Transgender Female	5.56%	1
Transgender Male	0.00%	0
Total		18

Figure 3: Gender Distribution of *Monsterhearts 2* Participants

Sexuality	Percentage	Total
Homosexual	27.78%	5
Bisexual	22.22%	4
Asexual	22.22%	4
Pansexual	11.11%	2
Other	11.11%	2
Heterosexual	5.56%	1
Total		18

Figure 4: Sexuality Distribution of *Monsterhearts 2* Participants

Both participant groups appear to possess a particularly diverse gender and sexuality composition, with more participants of LGBT+ identities than non-LGBT+ identities. While this cannot be said to represent the makeup of every TTRPG group, it does indicate that TTRPGs are a point of interest amongst those with non-conforming gender identities and sexualities. It may also come as a result of LGBT+ individuals having a stronger interest in the subject of this study, as they are more directly affected by the potential results.

5.2.2 Gender and Sexuality of the Player Characters

Following the above questions, participants provided data on the identity of the most prominent LGBTQ+ player character that they had previously created and played as in *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Monsterhearts 2*. In doing this, participants were first asked what the gender and sexuality of these characters was, much the same as they were asked to describe their own gender and sexuality.

Within the *Dungeons & Dragons* response group, the most common gender identity for player characters was cisgender female at 33.78%, followed by cisgender male at 25.68%. Interestingly, both cisgender identities had an increase in the percentage of participants who identified with that gender identity when compared to the percentage of players who identified with them. Nonbinary decreased from 39.56% of participants, to only 22.07% of player characters. Of the response given for 'other', there was once more a number of 'genderqueer' and 'genderfluid' responses. Some responses given were indicative of participants actively engaging with non-human understanding of gender, with an example of this being the response 'They're a construct with no gender but uses male pronouns'. Within *Dungeons & Dragons*, construct is the term used to describe artificially created living beings, akin to robots. As seen in section 4.3.1, the Player's Handbook expects the non-human races featured within *Dungeons & Dragons* to adhere to the player's human knowledge of gender. This response therefore shows a willingness in the participants to alter the given fluff reality of the rulebook in order to experiment with non-human understandings of gender.

Additionally, a number of responses were given that showed participants had yet to decide whether their character was cisgender or transgender, or else that they were okay with their character being interpreted in either manner. One such response said that their player character 'Identifies as a male but honestly? I haven't decided if he's cis or trans and im not gonna either', while another stated that their player character is 'presented as a cis male, but there's no reason he couldn't be a trans guy'.

With regards to sexuality, the most common response was homosexual at 33.78%, followed by bisexual at 22.97%. Once again, the answers given for this question differed from those given for the corresponding question regarding player sexuality.

Of the response given for ‘other’, ‘queer’ was a common response, as well as split attraction labels such as ‘demisexual lesbain (sic)’, aligning with the results seen amongst the player responses. One response stated that ‘It was not important to their story so I never gave them a specific sexuality’. This is a response decidedly unique to the player character results, as it only makes sense in the context of a fictional character, and exemplifies the nature of LGBT+ themes within *Dungeons & Dragons* as being something that only exists if the players themselves wish it to. As sexualities aren’t grounded in the mechanical reality of the game, it is entirely possible for players to leave it out of their gaming sessions without needing to alter the game’s rules.

Gender Identity	Percentage	Total
Cisgender Female	33.78%	75
Cisgender Male	25.68%	57
Nonbinary	22.07%	49
Other	10.81%	24
Transgender male	4.50%	10
Transgender female	3.15%	7
Total		222

Figure 5: Gender Distribution of *Dungeons & Dragons* Player Characters

Sexuality	Percentage	Total
Homosexual	35.14%	78
Bisexual	22.97%	51
Pansexual	18.02%	40

Asexual	12.61%	28
Other	10.36%	23
Heterosexual	0.90%	2
Total		222

Figure 6: Sexuality Distribution of *Dungeons & Dragons* Player Characters

Within the *Monsterhearts 2* response group, the most common gender identity for player characters was cisgender male at 40.00%, followed by cisgender female at 20.00%. Once more, a pattern emerges wherein cisgender identities are the most common gender identity amongst player characters, despite not being the most common identities amongst the players themselves. The two responses given for other were both 'demiboy', a label which is used to provide a more specific depiction of one's nonbinary experience. Meanwhile, the sexuality results for *Monsterhearts 2* revealed that homosexual, bisexual, and asexual were all scored equally at 30.00%. This closely aligns with the demographics of the participant's sexualities.

Gender Identity	Percentage	Total
Cisgender Male	40.00%	8
Cisgender Female	20.00%	4
Nonbinary	20.00%	4
Transgender Male	10.00%	2
Other	10.00%	2
Transgender Female	0.00%	0
Total		20

Figure 7: Gender Distribution of *Monsterhearts 2* Player Characters

Sexuality	Percentage	Total
Homosexual	30.00%	6
Bisexual	30.00%	6
Asexual	30.00%	6
Pansexual	10.00%	2
Heterosexual	0.00%	0
Other	0.00%	0
Total		20

Figure 8: Sexuality Distribution of *Monsterhearts 2* Player Characters

As with the participant groups themselves, the player characters proved to be overwhelming LGBT+. With regards to gender identity, both *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Monsterhearts 2* player characters were more likely to be cisgender than the participants themselves. Meanwhile, while demographics of specific sexual identities within the player characters differed from those found within the participants, player characters remained primarily LGBT+, with heterosexual being the least common sexuality within both surveys.

5.2.3 Player Identity Versus Player Character Identity

Both the *Dungeons & Dragons* and the *Monsterhearts 2* survey found that the majority of participants played characters that were of a different gender identity and/or sexualities to their own, but that were still resoundingly LGBT+. Within *Dungeons & Dragons*, only 12.02% of participants played a player character with an identical identity to themselves, and within *Monsterhearts 2*, only 10.00% of participants played player characters with identical identities to their own. This is a clear demonstration of participants having an interest in using TTRPGs as a medium through which to explore gender identities and sexualities outside of their own.

Does this differ from your own identity?	Percentage	Total
Yes, in both gender and sexuality	43.24%	96
Yes, in gender	18.02%	40
Yes, in sexuality	20.72%	46
No	18.02%	40
Total		222

Figure 9: Sexuality Distribution of *Monsterhearts 2* Player Characters

Does this differ from your own identity?	Percentage	Total
Yes, in both gender and sexuality	20.00%	4
Yes, in gender	30.00%	6
Yes, in sexuality	40.00%	4
No	10.00%	1
Total		20

Figure 10: Sexuality Distribution of *Monsterhearts 2* Player Characters

Overall, the demographics for this survey indicated that a large number of LGBT+ participants held an interest in creating and discussing their TTRPG-based LGBT+ characters. This data can be said to represent a younger, predominantly queer demographic, and the ways in which they play TTRPGs.

5.3 — LGBT+ Characters Within Tabletop Role-playing Games

This section will provide an overview of the responses given by participants that pertain to utilising queer content within TTRPGs as a general medium. This involves looking at why participants choose to play TTRPGs, the ways in which a player character's identity informs how the participant plays as them, how a player character's identity informs how they are treated within the world of the game, and some examples provided by participants of situations where their character's gender and sexuality had a direct impact on the manner in which the game was played.

5.3.1 Why Play TTRPGs?

To begin this section, this study will first look at the answers given to the question 'Why do you play *Dungeons & Dragons*/*Monsterhearts 2*?' A large number of qualitative responses were provided with regards to this question. As such, this section will aim to provide an analysis of common themes within the responses, providing examples when necessary, rather than analysing every individual response received. These themes were identified while coding the survey results, by reading over the responses given for this question and grouping them together based upon shared opinions. In particular, when words or phrases were used by multiple participants, this was taken note of in order to create a picture of the general opinions provided.

An immediately apparent theme throughout the response to this question was the importance of TTRPGs as a social tool. Participants frequently spoke of finding enjoyment in 'cooperative storytelling' (M2; 02), a concept which is central to the mechanics of both *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Monsterhearts 2*. In particular, TTRPGs provide a space in which players can create stories through cooperative storytelling with their friends; this sentiment was expressed frequently, with participants stating that '[I enjoy Dungeons & Dragons] Because my friends play it and I like roleplaying with them' (D&D; 203). By allowing players to '[spend] time with friends' (D&D; 201), TTRPGs provide a space for 'community and creativity' (D&D; 158) that cannot be found in the majority of video games, which are restricted by the limits of the machines they are designed to run on. Within TTRPGs, games are only limited by the imagination of those playing them – to the extent that mechanics of the game can be highlighted or ignored as the players wish.

Following on from the idea of a cooperative story that participants have creative free reign over, it is unsurprising that the second theme which emerged throughout these responses is the idea of ‘escapism’ (D&D; 014), and the creation of an ‘escape from reality’ (D&D; 017). Players enjoyed ‘living out fantasies or ideals through [their] characters’ (D&D; 137), and thereby being able to act as someone other than themselves for a while within the context of a fantastical game world and a safe player environment. There were also participants who played TTRPGs because it enabled them to explore real world situations safely, in contrast to those who sought to separate their games from reality as a form of escapism. One participant found that TTRPGs provided them with a space where they could explore aspects of their own lives that were denied to them as a teenager, stating that it was ‘Fun to explore teenage drama, in consideration of all the paths that weren't open to me due to depression and repression’ (M2; 09). It is possible that this sentiment was found in the *Monsterhearts 2* results rather than the *Dungeons & Dragons* results because of the genres each game represents, with *Dungeons & Dragons* being based around high fantasy, and *Monsterhearts 2* being a more realistic representation of horror and urban fantasy.

Following on from the concept of genre within TTRPGs, the final point of note seen throughout responses was a consistent discussion of participants enjoying TTRPGs because they enjoyed the game mechanics and the genre that they fulfilled. With participants identifying themselves as ‘fantasy nerd[s]’ (D&D; 114) on multiple occasions, or mentioning their love of ‘the horror genre’ (M2; 06), it is clear that the fluff reality that these TTRPGs provide within their rulebooks matters to those that play them just as much as the mechanical reality does. Participants enjoy the chance to ‘engage in and play around with the fantasy (and other) genres’ (D&D; 043), and utilising the tools provided by the games to ‘interact with a new and unexplored world’ (D&D; 043). One participant stated that they found joy in being ‘able to explore a character as a living being’ (M2; 01), a process which TTRPGs are very suited for due to their capacity for simulation (see section 2.2.2.). As players act out their character’s actions, they may seem more alive than characters only experienced through a conventional narrative because the player is able to interact with a model of behaviours that reacts to player-based stimuli.

Overall, participants seemed to enjoy playing TTRPGs because they provide a safe space in which to collaboratively tell stories that can create experiences ranging from escapism to introspection at the behest of those playing. Participants also showed that they enjoyed playing TTRPGs with interesting mechanical and fluff realities, and that this separated the games from simply improvising a story with a group of friends.

5.3.2 How Participants Perform Their Player Character's Identity

This section aims to address the ways in which participants knowingly portray their player character's gender identity and sexuality. Once more, as there was a large number of qualitative responses to this question, this analysis shall aim to categorise the common themes present throughout responses, providing examples as necessary. Participants largely responded to the sentiment of their character's gender identity and sexuality informing the gameplay within a TTRPG in one of two ways: stating that their character's identity had no impact on the ways in which they portrayed them, and that the sexuality or gender identity of characters rarely ever mattered within their roleplay; or else, that their player character's identity did hold significance within the game, and therefore had an impact on the way in which they were portrayed.

Firstly, this study will be looking at responses that fit into the first category: those who believed that their character's gender identity and sexuality had no impact on the ways in which the character was portrayed. For many participants who found that gender and sexuality had no impact on their player character's portrayal, it was because '[they] don't think much about it' (D&D; 097). For these participants, it wasn't that they viewed gender identity and sexuality within characters as something that is only portrayed in a negative light, but rather that they didn't consider its implications within their personal games whatsoever. Participants still 'use[d] both pronouns' (D&D; 116) for characters that had a nonbinary gender identity, but didn't believe that any other aspect of their player character's actions may come as a result of being LGBT+. A further example of player's choosing not to interact with gender and sexuality within their games indicated that their 'DM doesn't make sexuality or gender a big thing' (D&D; 186). By choosing the extent to which the game interacts with these themes, a game master may prevent players from exploring these aspects of their character, regardless of whether or not the TTRPG itself would be

suited to such an exploration. While this is an easier task within a game such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, which doesn't feature any mechanics based on gender and sexuality, it does mean that the attitude of players towards the construction of gender and sexuality within their games is just as important as the TTRPG framework itself. This also aligns with the attitude generally seen amongst players that 'the final authority for what rules meant and how they should be applied did not reside in the rule book ... [but rather] lies with the gamemaster, in relation to the group' (Atmore, 2017; n.p). This manner of response was also seen in the *Monsterhearts 2* survey, with one participant simply responding 'None' (M2; 04) with regards to the question 'In what ways does your character's identity affect how they are treated in-game?'. Other participants indicated that '[t]heir [character's] sexuality hasn't been brought up' (D&D; 004), or else that 'many of my party members have not realized my character is LGBT+, as is the case for the NPCs' (D&D; 052). In both cases, be it at the behest of the game master or as a result of a choice on the player's behalf, queer content is not relevant within the games because those playing the game have decided that it doesn't need to be brought up or shared.

A second reasoning behind the belief that a character's gender and sexuality did not impact roleplay can be seen in this relatively representative response, which was given as part of the *Dungeons & Dragons* survey, and presented as follows:

I mean, I don't really see how his sexuality would impact roleplay besides deciding who he'd be attracted to. Unless bigotry was a big part of the game's story, and I've never really been in a game with that theme. (D&D; 084)

What is notable about this is that it suggests that sexuality would only impact the way in which a character is presented if they are actively engaging in a romantic activity, or if they are suffering as a result of it. While this was given as part of the *Dungeons & Dragons* survey, this response does in some ways highlight one of the driving forces behind *Monsterhearts 2*'s centralisation of queerness as a theme, and thereby its inclusion of queer mechanical features. *Monsterhearts 2* tells us that 'When their [queer youth's] stories are told, it's either dis-empowering tragedy tourism or a sanitized and toothless portrayal that fails to capture the chaos of lived experience' (Alder, 2017; pg. 36), and it seems that this participant has had a similar experience.

This idea of gender identities and sexualities only affecting games negatively, is further seen when participants say that their character's identity '[doesn't create] much of a difference. They are just a person' (D&D; 054). In saying this, the participant shows a belief in the idea that defining oneself by one's gender or sexuality is bad, and in doing so has seemingly decided to prevent their character's gender and sexuality from affecting their performance of the player character at all.

Another response indicated that they 'enjoy the fact that [their] character ISN'T affect in game by their sexuality or gender presentation ... [because the game] allows for a universe in which queerness or gender divergence is an accepted norm' (M2; 13). This participant, alongside a number of others, assumed that the survey was seeking out negative experiences. It is worth noting that the question that this response was given to was not framed in this manner: participants were asked 'In what ways does your character's identity affect how they are treated in-game?', with no indication towards the responses requiring good or bad experiences. A further example of this variety of response reads as follows:

Actually, not that much! My DM is thankfully very cool with a world where homophobia isn't a Thing I Have To explore. There are some women who aren't interested but that's fair either way. Anyways I would say most reactions related to identity probably come from the way they present themselves as a brash, confident, strong person with quite a few "traditionally masculine" attributes. Thankfully, the option to shut up assholes is there in 99% of cases. Good DM good fun. (D&D; 075)

Here, the participant immediately states that their character's gender and sexuality doesn't affect how they are treated in game because their game master has created a world where 'homophobia isn't a Thing I Have To explore' (D&D; 075), suggesting that the only possible way for the game world to interact with a character's sexuality is in the form of homophobia. Interestingly, this participant does mention ways in which their character's sexuality is represented within the game world at large: 'women who aren't interested' (D&D; 075) in the character, for example, are a rather benign illustration of the game world responds to the way in which this participant's player character expresses their sexuality. However, as this is not an overwhelmingly

negative experience, the participant has dismissed it as inconsequential when answering the question.

Following on from the above, the second category of responses was those that believed there their character's identity impacted how they chose to portray them. One participant responded that they would occasionally start sessions with their genderfluid character by '[describing] how they are presenting ... though [they] almost never give any indication from them verbally how they identify' (M2; 09). In this instance, the character's identity has an impact on the game's setup, during an out of character moment. Furthermore, many participants found that they could explore their own identities through exploring the gender and sexuality of their player character. One participant responded as follows:

My characters, at this time, were helping me to be able to explore my own gender as I was struggling to find a term that I felt fit me or pronouns that felt right. This particular character is an agender changeling that uses any and all pronouns, but is most commonly referred to using he/him pronouns due to a masculine appearance. Gender was a concept that he didn't particularly understand, as at the time I was struggling to understand my own gender, so he is as comfortable in a masculine presenting form as he is in a feminine presenting one. His disconnect with gender also plays into his sexuality as he doesn't understand the concept behind it in other societies either so he finds that he is pansexual and equally (and without preference) attracted to all the genders he comes across out in the world. (D&D; 166)

As with many other participants, this response shows that thought has been put into the ways in which the player character acted because the participant was exploring their own identity simultaneously. A separate participant indicated that '[their cleric channelled] a lot of things [they] learned about transgender clerics and other holy people in ancient Rome, Greece, Anatolia and Mesopotamia, from a period when [they were] desperately diving through history looking for anyone like [them]' (D&D; 072). Both responses show that participants are willing and able to put a lot of time and research into portraying character's that conceptualise their own real world experiences of gender and sexuality, and that in doing so were able to learn about

their own identity within a largely queer context. It is possible that the lack of queer inclusion in the mechanical and fluff realities provided in the Player's Handbook is actually responsible for this, given that it leaves an empty space in which players can create their own understandings of LGBT+ themes, and in doing so discover aspects of themselves.

Other participants indicated that their character's identity affected how they played as them because they enjoyed developing the queer aspects of their character alongside their character's personality and backstory. One participant indicated that their character's identity '[m]ostly [affected] how they interact with others' (D&D; 129), going on to detail that their character was 'not very bound to performing femininity' and that '[t]here's anxiety related to what failure means to them, but, sexuality and gender performance wise, they're very on the nose and not ashamed at all' (D&D; 129). Interestingly, one participant responded 'not really at all' with regards to whether their character's identity informed how they acted as them, but then went on to say that they 'do try to actively work on them not becoming stereotypes of their identities, purely for [their] own (and [their] party's) enjoyment' (D&D; 124). This is arguably a clear case of a player character's identity affecting the way that the participant chooses to portray them, though the participant themselves may not have considered it as such. This contrasts with the finding of O'Neal (2012), which suggested that players who are playing outside of their own gender and sexuality would fall upon stereotypes, such as with a male player performing a 'heterosexual, feminine identity' (n.p.) when portraying a female avatar. In attempting to avoid stereotypes, the participant has designated certain behaviours as unacceptable for their character, and therefore has defined their character by things that they cannot be. While the first participant didn't note what stereotypes they were avoiding, it is worth considering that they will be LGBT+ individuals within the real world who possess the behaviours that are being written off as stereotypical. In doing so, this participant has unwittingly denoted that an LGBT+ person acting in a stereotypical manner may ruin the 'enjoyment' of the players at a table.

This is further reinforced by another participant's response, which stated that they did feel their character's identity was informed by '[trying] to contrast stereotype[s] by making an openly gay character who understands himself very well, while still going

through other highschool issues, as an homage to all the proud confident gay young people [they] knew in highschool' (M2; 17). This response contends with the issue of invalidating certain LGBT+ people because they match stereotypes by indicating that the participant is building from their own experiences with 'proud confident gay young people'. By purposefully approaching stereotypes, this participant has framed their character based upon what they are, rather than what they should not be.

Overall, participants who did not feel that their performance of their player character was affected by said character's gender and sexuality held this opinion either because they assumed any affect that could be had must be negative, and they did not include such negativity in their games, or else because they never thought to include it at all. Meanwhile, participants who did feel that their performance of their player character was affected by the character's gender and sexuality held this opinion because they explored their own identity through their character, or because they believed it aided in creating an interesting and realistic player character.

5.4 — LGBT+ Characters Within Dungeons & Dragons

This section will look at the information given by the participants regarding the game-specific aspects of their player character. For *Dungeons & Dragons*, this involved asking about their player character's race and class — as well as the ways in which these two aspects interacted with their player character's gender and sexuality. Finally, participants were asked whether they believed any races or classes were associated with a particular gender or sexuality.

Of the 220 responses received regarding the race of participant's player characters in the *Dungeons & Dragons* survey, the most populous answer was actually the 'other' option, which 24.09% chose. Some of the frequent responses under this option were 'changelings'; participants that wished to specify that their elf was a 'drow' elf; and, the most frequently given response to other of all, 'homebrew' races. A homebrew race is one created by the players of the game, rather than one derived from official content published by Wizards of the Coast; examples included a 'harpy'

race, a ‘demigod’ race, and a ‘gnoll’ race. Following this, the most populous race from the Player’s Handbook was humans at 15.91%, followed by half-elves at 14.09%, and tiefling at 10.91%. There were more half-elves than elves, who were featured in 7.73% of responses. The least used race from the Player’s Handbook was the dragonborn, which no participants claimed to have played. The second least used races were gnomes and halflings, who both had only 1.36% of the responses each.

Similarly, participants were asked to provide their player character’s class. Of the 220 responses received, the most populous answer was actually a three-way tie between rogues, warlocks, and other – each featuring within 12.73% of the responses. The least popular class featured in the Player’s Handbook was the paladin, at only 3.64% of participants.

Class	Percentage	Total
Other	24.09%	53
<i>Human</i>	15.91%	35
<i>Half-Elf</i>	14.09%	31
<i>Tiefling</i>	10.91%	24
<i>Elf</i>	7.73%	17
<i>Half-Orc</i>	5.45%	12
Genasi	3.64%	8
Aasimar	2.73%	6
Tabaxi	2.73%	6
Warforged	2.27%	5
<i>Dwarf</i>	1.82%	4

Goliath	1.82%	4
<i>Gnome</i>	<i>1.36%</i>	3
<i>Halfling</i>	<i>1.36%</i>	3
Aarakocra	0.91%	2
Firbolg	0.91%	2
Yuan-Ti	0.91%	2
Goblin	0.45%	1
Lizardfolk	0.45%	1
Orc	0.45%	1
Bugbear	0.00%	0
<i>Dragonborn</i>	<i>0.00%</i>	<i>0</i>
Hobgoblin	0.00%	0
Kenku	0.00%	0
Kobold	0.00%	0
Turtle	0.00%	0
Total		220

Figure 11: Race Distribution of *Dungeons & Dragons* Player Characters
(Races featured in the Player's Handbook have been italicised)

Class	Percentage	Total
<i>Rogue</i>	<i>12.73%</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Warlock</i>	<i>12.73%</i>	<i>28</i>

<i>Other</i>	12.73%	28
<i>Bard</i>	9.55%	21
<i>Fighter</i>	7.73%	17
<i>Cleric</i>	7.27%	16
<i>Wizard</i>	7.27%	16
<i>Sorcerer</i>	6.26%	14
<i>Druid</i>	5.45%	12
<i>Barbarian</i>	4.55%	10
<i>Monk</i>	4.55%	10
<i>Ranger</i>	4.09%	9
<i>Paladin</i>	3.64%	8
Artificer	1.36%	3
Total		220

Figure 12: Classes Distribution of *Dungeons & Dragons* Player Characters
(Classes featured in the Player's Handbook have been italicised)

Following this, participants were asked whether they found any relation between their character's gender and sexuality, and their race and class. As seemed to be the case for the majority of the questions of this nature within this survey, participants either expressed that they couldn't see a connection between the two aspects at all, or that they found that there was actually a rather interesting and distinct connection between the two that they actively chose to explore. Very rarely did anyone fall in between the two extremes of this answers. For those who found no connection between race and sexuality, the response given was once more a simple 'No. I really don't see how their race or class affects their gender and sexuality' (D&D; 157). Participants of this mentality had either not considered the possibilities of this

connection whatsoever, or else had deemed any possible connections as a negative idea that they did not want within their games. This is consistent with the finding of section 5.3.2..

For those who did see a connection between gender and sexuality, and race and class, the connection often seemed to be formed on the basis of othering. Races that are viewed as other within the Player's Handbook, such as 'tiefling [and] drow' (D&D; 041), were appealing to LGBT+ participants specifically because of the otherness and rejection from society that they represent. One response stated that 'Being a tiefling honestly goes hand in hand with being weird and derided by certain societies within the dnd setting' (D&D; 117). It is worth noting that nowhere in this response does the participant say that this is an indication of gender and sexuality, and we are rather left to infer it from the question that they were answering. To this participant, being 'weird and derided by certain societies' (D&D; 117) is something that is so clearly associated with the LGBT+ experience that it doesn't need to be directly pointed out within the response. Another example of participants discussing this connection with otherness is as follows:

Although it tends to be a common joke, I do think that the LGBT+ community at large tends to gravitate towards characters who are seen as "other" — often tieflings, drow, genasi, or other races who are marginalized within the handbook, and this often applies even if they face no marginalization within the roleplay itself. (D&D; 144)

As discussed in the section 4.4.1, races within *Dungeons & Dragons* abide by human understanding of gender and sexuality, despite the fact that they are not actually human. Interestingly, some responses showed that players had taken it upon themselves to alter the fluff reality they were given, and to create differing gender and sexuality norms. Participants would specify that the information they were given was true specifically within the context of their campaign. For example, one response stated that 'in our campaign aarakocra's society is much less restrictive when it comes to gender and sexuality than the humanoid counterparts. My character is also very nonchalant about that partially because they don't know or care about human views of their LGBT status' (D&D; 067). Here, the participant has

purposefully altered the human lens that *Dungeons & Dragons* views its races through in order to create a culture that is entirely unbound by human understandings of gender and sexuality. Interestingly, this has created a character that is arguably not LGBT+, as they are unlikely to classify themselves as LGBT+ if they do not know of human views on gender and sexuality. As such, this character is still being perceived somewhat through a human lens in the describing their character as a being of 'LGBT+ status' (D&D; 067), through drastically less so than is seen throughout the Player's Handbook. A notable example of this was given by one participant, whom responded that 'I think elves exist outside of the "human" gender binary. All elves are genderfluid, you heard it here first' (D&D; 181). While this is phrased as though it is a relatively unique idea, given the use of 'you heard it here first' (D&D; 181), this is actually heavily implied by the Player's Handbook, as discussed within section 4.4.1.. It is possible that, in their desire to create their own fluff realities surrounding *Dungeons & Dragons*, a number of players actually forget what information is actually provided within the text of the games.

As was discussed within section 4.4.2, participants found that playing a Charisma based class somewhat lent itself to the creation of LGBT+ characters. As one participant puts it, '[p]laying a charisma based caster class [meant that] my character is more open and outgoing, especially with his interactions with others. Although he has two romantic prospects, he is still very much a flirt with people of all genders' (D&D; 179). In having a high Charisma score, players benefit from creating characters that are willing to flirt with a wide array of individuals, in the same manner that a character with a high Strength score would benefit from participating in arm wrestling contests. In contrast to this statement, a participant noted that when playing '[a]s a cleric it is interesting to explore the divide between sexuality and religion'. Clerics are Wisdom based classes, and this interest is generated not from the mechanical implications of the Wisdom ability score, but instead from the manner in which sexuality and religion intersects, which exists entirely within the fluff reality.

Overall, participants who did not feel there was a connection between gender and sexuality, and race and class held this opinion for the same reasons participants did not believe that there was a link between their performance of a player character and that player character's gender and sexuality: because they had never thought to see

such a connection, or because they had deemed any possible connections as unnecessarily negative. Participants who did feel that there was a connection between gender and sexuality, and race and class held this opinion primarily on a basis of othering, which many races within *Dungeons & Dragons* are written as contending with, or else due to their own creations within the fluff reality, which could redefine the experiences of one's race or class as queer.

5.5 — LGBT+ Characters Within Monsterhearts 2

As above, this section shall look at the information given by the participants regarding the game-specific aspects of their player character. For *Monsterhearts 2*, this involved asking about their player character's Skin, as well as the identity words used to describe the character, and the moves chosen during character creation. Furthermore, participants were asked to describe any ways in which they believed these aspects interacted with their player character's gender and sexuality, as well as whether they believed any Skins were associated with a particular gender or sexuality.

Of the 20 responses received regarding the Skins of participant's player characters in the *Monsterhearts 2* survey, the most frequent answer was once more the 'other' option, which 30% of participants chose. These were once more largely homebrew responses, meaning they were created by the players of the game, with examples including 'The Unchained' and 'gnome'. Following this, the most frequent Skin was the Ghost at 20%. Following this were 5 skins — the Cerberus, the Hollow, the Mortal, the Vampire, and the Werewolf – each with 10%. The remainder of the Skins had not been played by any participants.

Skin	Percentage	Total
Other	30.00%	6

The Ghost	20.00%	4
The Cerberus	10.00%	2
The Hollow	10.00%	2
The Mortal	10.00%	2
The Vampire	10.00%	2
The Werewolf	10.00%	2
The Chosen	0.00%	0
The Disciple	0.00%	0
The Fae	0.00%	0
The Ghoul	0.00%	0
The Infernal	0.00%	0
The Queen	0.00%	0
The Serpentine	0.00%	0
The Witch	0.00%	0
Total		20

Figure 13: Skin Distribution of *Monsterhearts 2* Player Characters

As discussed in section 4.5, the Turn Someone On is purposefully designed to be queer on a mechanical level, as it is possible to Turn Someone On ‘regardless of respective genders, and the incentive to do so is baked into the core of the game’ (Alder, 2017; pg. 36). One participant discussed this move at length within their survey response, providing the following in response to the question ‘Please describe any occasions where your character's gender and/or sexuality has had an impact on roleplay within a game.’:

[T]he biggest issue is that the game mechanics don't really allow for exclusive sexuality. The 'turn on' mechanic working blanketly, relatively, strikes me as problematic and has made me and other players uncomfortable in game. I like mature content and I think the mechanic could be tweaked. Sometimes I homebrew it for player's comfort so they can only be 'turned on' by certain genders. Player comfort is more important than realism. (M2; 03)

Here, the participant has found fault with the fact that within the mechanical reality of the game anyone can turn on anyone, because that isn't necessarily true within the real world. Many individuals experience attraction to a single gender, be it the same as or opposite of their own, and are therefore not represented within the mechanics as written in the game. Additionally, this participant discussed the idea of 'player comfort [being] more important than realism]' (M2; 03) within their games. Given the desire for 'community and creativity' (D&D; 158) that players consistently spoke of within their responses (see section 5.3.1), it is unsurprising that this participant valued their fellow player's comfort over the mechanical accuracy of their gameplay. The ease with which rules can be altered to accommodate for this comfort is a unique aspect of TTRPGs that cannot be found in video games, which instead require a complex understanding of game design in order to modify the code of the game. It is likely that the accessibility of rule changes within TTRPGs helps player's construct LGBT+ identities within their games in a manner that is true to the queer intent of the game, but more importantly in a manner that promotes player comfort.

This participant spoke on this move further in the response to a separate question, this time when discussing whether they believed *Monsterhearts 2* was a good medium in which to explore LGBT+ characters and themes. For context, they found that the game was 'Sometimes' a good medium, for the following reason:

Again, while the pan-sexual-identity turn on feature is interesting and real, it requires a certain type of group to play with and is a bit insensitive towards people who simply don't experience certain kinds of attraction. The idea of another player having control over someone's sexuality AGAINST THEIR WILL is very uncomfy for even the closest dnd groups. (M2; 03)

Here, the participant states that they think the ‘turn on feature is interesting and real’ (M2; 03), making clear that their issue with the move does not come from finding the mechanical design poor, but rather because it is ‘insensitive towards people who simply don’t experience certain kinds of attraction’ (M2; 03). Another participant expressed a similar sentiment, noting that ‘A lot of the characters lean bi cause you want to use your moves on as many people as possible’ (M2; 01). Given that the TTRPG depicts itself as a game about queer identity (see section 4.3.2), it is interesting to see that the survey suggests that *Monsterhearts 2*, as written, has problems with allowing participants to portray same gender attracted characters.

Participants spoke frequently of the interaction between the mechanical elements of the game, and the ways in which it allowed for the creation of LGBT+ characters. One participant stated that ‘[s]ince vampires drinking blood is usually seen as sexy, using The Feeding normally turns into a funny, awkward mess. Plus, the Vampire’s sex move plays into being asexual really well’ (M2; 07), which indicates that the Vampire does provide a method through which asexual characters may be included, and therefore explored, within *Monsterhearts 2* – as discussed within section 4.5.. Even players who admitted that they didn’t ‘think about it [how their character’s Skin interacts with their character’s gender and sexuality] much’ (M2; 11) also suggests that they must be interacting with LGBT+ themes ‘since there’s a sex move’ (M2; 11), even if they were unsure how exactly this interaction played out.

Overall, participants rather resoundingly found there to be a connection between gender and sexuality, and the Skins and moves of *Monsterhearts 2* because this was reinforced within both the mechanical and fluff realities as essential and unavoidable parts of the game.

5.6 — Are TTRPGs a Good Medium for Exploring LGBT+ Characters?

To end the survey, participants were asked whether they believed their respective game was a good medium through which to explore LGBT+ characters and themes.

When asked to answer the question ‘Do you believe that [*Dungeons & Dragons/Monsterhearts 2*] is a good medium through which to explore LGBT+ characters and themes?’ with either a yes, sometimes, or no response, not a single participant on either survey said no.

While 72.64% of participants responded yes to the question ‘Do you believe that *Dungeons & Dragons* is a good medium through which to explore LGBT+ characters and themes?’, in the follow up qualitative responses many participants mentioned that *Dungeons & Dragons* was a good medium with which to explore these ideas, but only if the group that is playing allows it to be. Similarly, within the *Monsterhearts 2* survey, the most common answer to the question ‘Do you believe that *Monsterhearts 2* is a good medium through which to explore LGBT+ characters and themes?’ was yes, at 66.67%, followed by sometimes at 33.33%. Participants also found that having a group that was interested in exploring these themes was necessary to the game’s ability to represent them, but overall there was greater discussion of the game’s mechanics alongside this.

Response	Percentage	Total
Yes	72.64%	154
Sometimes	27.36%	58
No	0.00%	0
Total		212

Figure 14: Responses to the question ‘Do you believe that *Dungeons & Dragons* is a good medium through which to explore LGBT+ characters and themes?’

Response	Percentage	Total
Yes	66.67%	12
Sometimes	33.33%	6

No	0.00%	0
Total		18

Figure 15: Responses to the question ‘Do you believe that *Monsterhearts 2* is a good medium through which to explore LGBT+ characters and themes?’

Those who answered yes to the question of whether *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Monsterhearts 2* was a good medium for the exploration of LGBT+ characters and themes focused on TTRPGs abilities to provide a ‘blank slate’ (D&D; 029) within which players could ‘make whoever or whatever [they] want[ed] and put [themselves] into that person's shoes for a while. If you're curious about your own personal identity, you can make a character that fits into the identity that intrigues you and try it out for yourself’ (D&D; 029). The idea of discovering one’s own identity through the performance of a player character seems to be a common point of enjoyment for players of either game, as was discussed within section 5.3.2.. Multiple participants stated that ‘playing D&D is actually how [they] explored [their] own identities’ (D&D; 033), and that they believed TTRPGs to be a good medium for the exploration of identities in a larger setting because it ‘allows space for LGBT+ individuals to explore how their identities and experiences fit into a fictional setting’ (D&D; 033), indicating that a TTRPGs ability to simulate a fictional world was essential to its potential role as an exploratory space.

With regards to the discussion of *Monsterhearts 2*’s mechanical reality in particular, the overall sentiment was that it was difficult to play the game without touching upon LGBT+ characters and themes because the game was designed to enforce doing just that. As one participant stated, ‘Exploring concepts of identity is kind of a central theme of the game’ (M2; 05). By grounding the concept of queerness, *Monsterhearts 2* represents what one participant called ‘one of the best systems when it comes to LGBT+ characters because of the setting of the system as well as the inclusivity that the creators put into it’ (M2; 14).

Meanwhile, those who answered sometimes with regards to whether *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Monsterhearts 2* was a good medium for the exploration of LGBT+ characters and themes typically expressed a sentiment similar to the following:

As long as your with friends and feel safe, why not? Try on a new name or set of pronouns, see how it feels to romance someone of a different gender, say something in character you've been nervous to say otherwise. It's its own kind of pressure and it's own kind of freeing. (D&D; 152)

In other words, the sentiment that TTRPGs had the potential to be a good medium with which to explore LGBT+ characters, but only if the group that is playing allows it to be. On a similar thread, participants also expressed that they were unsure whether the 'multiple LGBT characters at [their] table ... [were] a reflection on the players vs the game' (M2; 15). In both circumstances, the group of players is framed as the determining factor as to whether or not a game is actively exploring LGBT+ characters and themes, whether it simply contains LGBT+ characters, or, sometimes, whether the game is even allowed to contain LGBT+ characters at all. This is yet another example of the important role that players take on within TTRPGs, due to their position as 'the final authority for what rules meant and how they should be applied' (Atmore, 2017; n.p). In this sense, it does not matter how inherently queer a game is designed to be: if the players at the table do not wish to engage with LGBT+ characters and themes, they will likely never do so no matter how long they play.

An interesting note on this argument is that this happens within many TTRPGs that are not intentionally avoiding LGBT+ themes, but that are instead focusing on some other aspect of the game that they find interesting. For example, one participant responded that 'LGBTQ identities can be a cool addition to some campaigns ... [b]ut, often these details don't matter too much as we are playing an adventure game' (D&D; 032). This highlights the disparity between the genre that *Dungeons & Dragons* is mechanically designed to represent, meaning that the majority of racial and class abilities are aimed towards, and its ability to represent LGBTQ identities. While queer player characters could certainly be played within *Dungeons & Dragons*, there is nothing within the game's mechanics that incentivises doing so, and so

focusing upon queer themes can often be overshadowed by a focus on what *Dungeons & Dragons* is designed to do: allowing player characters to go on adventures. A final participant response that is worth noting is as follows:

I don't need the themes to be front and centre, and I don't think they need to be — it's a group game afterall, and a sword & sorcery fantasy battlegame has a lot of other things going on — horrors of war, goodness of the human condition, the sacrifices you're willing to make to do something that you think will help, psychological consequences of Really Mattering and Really Fucking It Up, how it goes, you know. Exploring all of that from a queer perspective adds to it for me, and gives me my own representation and space to explore identity from, which is lovely. This all only works if the group is good and what we want out of pen&paper is similar enough that we can explore anything except vague annoyance. But this is true for exploring any character and theme, I suppose (D&D; 143)

As shown here, queer content doesn't have to be 'front and centre' (D&D; 143) within the game to remain relevant. Each player brings their own character to the table, and in doing so brings a unique perspective through which to view the story. So long as players are happy to work together, and are able to agree upon the themes that they may potentially be exploring, there is no reason that queer themes cannot be explored in any game.

Overall, it seems that when discussing whether *Dungeons & Dragons* was a good medium for the exploration of LGBT+ identities, participants largely discussed the fluff reality of the game — something that is largely left to the players to collaboratively create through their player characters and the world they exist within, and therefore placing the onus on the group as a whole to decide how gender identities and sexualities are expressed within the game. Meanwhile, within the *Monsterhearts 2* responses, participants were engaging more closely with the mechanical reality of the game when discussing its viability for exploring LGBT+ themes. Participants did note, however, that *Dungeons & Dragons* benefited from having a significantly larger player base than *Monsterhearts 2*. In the words of one participant, 'D&D has attracted a large portion of LGBT+ players, and that means it's

much easier to find a welcoming group in which you can explore gender and sexuality' (D&D; 190). This makes it clear that a TTRPGs utility as a medium for the exploration of LGBT+ identities is not dependent only on the game itself, but also on the players who are participating in a given game.

In light of this response — especially with the large number of participants that *Dungeons & Dragons* received in mind — it is fair to say that there is merit to using TTRPGs as a method through which to explore LGBT+ characters and themes. Furthermore, this response indicates that there is value in studying TTRPGs through the lens of queer theory, particularly with the goal of studying how players respond to queer themes within their games.

Chapter 6 — Concluding Discussion

As argued in chapter 4, TTRPGs are able to engage with LGBT+ identities within both the fluff realities of their game, which is seen primarily within *Dungeons & Dragons*, and within the mechanical reality of their game, as is seen with *Monsterhearts 2*. Overall, *Dungeons & Dragons* provided very little purposeful discussion of queerness within the game, and instead much of the queer content possible within the Player's Handbook as written comes from the otherness that is assigned to a number of the races. Meanwhile, *Monsterhearts 2* possessed a number of core mechanics that centred around creating a queer gaming experience which would be ruined if a player attempted to avoid creating and exploring LGBT+ characters.

Meanwhile, as argued in chapter 5, it becomes clear that TTRPG players are only able to construct LGBT+ identities within their games if both they and their groups choose to do so. Despite having far less queer content within its mechanical reality, *Dungeon & Dragons* showed that it had an overwhelming number of queer players who enjoyed creating their own LGBT+ themes and conditions purely within the collaboratively created fluff reality. In contrast, *Monsterhearts 2* enforced the involvement of queer themes through the use of manipulation rules, but that did not prevent some participants from being unsure of where this queer content actually appeared within their games.

Additionally, this research provided evidence that studying TTRPGs could prove beneficial to queer identity research as a whole, by showing that players themselves find value in exploring LGBT+ identities within TTRPGs. The ability for players to engage with queer content in an interactive manner on their own terms creates a unique environment where players can take on the persona of someone else in order to learn new things about themselves. Given that queer theory is strongly influenced by Butler's (1990) theory of performative identities and their relationship to a larger cultural matrix, the performance enabled by TTRPGs is nothing if not worthy of study through a queer lens.

Overall, the purpose of this thesis was to discuss how TTRPGs engage with LGBT+ identities within their rulebooks, and how TTRPG players knowingly construct LGBT+ identities within their play characters. In doing so, it found that the construction of LGBT+ identities within TTRPGs is primarily led by the information provided in the rulebooks, but is ultimately put into action by the individuals playing the games. As such, the construction of LGBT+ characters within tabletop role-playing games is ultimately a collaborative effort between the rules as written, and the player's usage of them thereof – with neither aspect holding more importance than the other.

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Appendix 1: *Dungeons & Dragons* Survey

CREATING LGBT+ CHARACTERS IN DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Thank you for taking the time to look at this survey, which is being conducted as part of my Master's thesis. You are being asked to take part in a study regarding the ways in which players create LGBT+ characters in tabletop roleplaying games. In particular, this study aims to address how LGBT+ player characters are created in two games: *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Monsterhearts 2*.

You have been asked to take part in this survey because of your interest in at least one of the aforementioned games. Completing this survey will involve answering questions concerning your experiences of and thoughts on the character creation process in *Dungeons & Dragons*. The survey should take 5-10 minutes to complete, depending on how much time you wish to commit.

It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part. You may withdraw from this survey at any time while you are filling it out, and you do not have to answer all the questions. As your data is made anonymous when submitted, you won't be able to withdraw your answers once finished. This data will be stored safely on my SHU drive, and deleted 6 months after the study has been completed.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please email me at b6016403@my.shu.ac.uk

Before moving on, please read through the following statements. Should any of these not hold true, you will not be able to continue with this survey.

- I am above 18 years of age.
- I have read the provided information for this study and have had details of the study explained to me.
- My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any point.
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any point while I am filling out the survey, without giving any reason for my withdrawal.
- I understand that once I submit my responses, they will be fully anonymised, and therefore can no longer be withdrawn as there is no longer a way of connecting them to me.
- I understand that I can decline to answer any particular questions in the study without any consequences.
- I agree to provide information to the researchers under the conditions of confidentiality set out within the information provided.
- I wish to participate in the study under the conditions set out within the information provided.
- I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised (so that I cannot be identified), to be used for any other research purposes.

- The University undertakes research as part of its function for the community under its legal status. Data protection allows us to use personal data for research with appropriate safeguards in place under the legal basis of public tasks that are in the public interest. A full statement of your rights can be found at <https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-this-website/privacy-policy/privacy-notice/privacy-notice-for-research>. However, all University research is reviewed to ensure that participants are treated appropriately and their rights respected. This study was approved by UREC with Converis number ER21803783. Further information at <https://www.shu.ac.uk/research/ethics-integrity-and-practice>.**

Your answers will be anonymised and cannot be traced back to you. If answering any of these questions makes you uncomfortable, remember that you are not required to answer them.

- Cisgender Male
- Transgender Male
- Cisgender Female
- Transgender Female
- Nonbinary
- Other

- Heterosexual
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Asexual
- Other

- 20 or younger
- 21-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51-60
- 60 or older

[]

This section asks you to answer questions regarding an LGBT+ PC that you have created. If you have multiple LGBT+ PCs, please answer these questions

with regards to the one that you have played the most, or that you feel the most proud of.

How would you describe your character's gender

- Cisgender Male
- Transgender Male
- Cisgender Female
- Transgender Female
- Nonbinary
- Other

How would you describe your character's sexuality?

- Heterosexual
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Asexual
- Other

Does this differ from your own identity?

- Yes, in both gender and sexuality
- Yes, in gender
- Yes, in sexuality
- No
-

In what ways does your character's identity inform how you act as them?

[]

In what ways does your character's identity affect how they are treated in-game?

[]

Please describe any occasions where your character's gender and/or sexuality has had an impact on roleplay within a game. This can include both positive and negative experiences, though please don't feel that you have to recount any negative experiences should this make you uncomfortable.

[]

What is your character's class?

- Artificer
- Barbarian
- Bard
- Cleric
- Druid
- Fighter
- Monk
- Paladin
- Ranger
- Rogue
- Sorcerer
- Warlock

- Wizard
- Other

What is your character's race?

- Aarakocra
- Aasimar
- Bugbear
- Dragonborn
- Dwarf
- Elf
- Firbolg
- Genasi
- Gnome
- Goblin
- Goliath
- Half-Elf
- Half-Orc
- Halfling
- Hobgoblin
- Human
- Kenku
- Lizardfolk
- Kobold
- Orc
- Tabaxi
- Tiefling
- Turtle
- Warforged
- Yuan-Ti
- Other

What is your character's alignment?

- Lawful Good
- Lawful Neutral
- Lawful Evil
- Neutral Good
- True Neutral
- Neutral Evil
- Chaotic Good
- Chaotic Neutral
- Chaotic Evil

Do you believe there are any ways in which your character's gender and sexuality interacts with their class, race, and alignment? Why or why not?

[]

CHARACTER CREATION

This section asks you to answer questions regarding character creation for D&D in general.

Do you believe that there are any races or classes associated with a specific gender or sexuality?

- Yes
- No

If yes, which races/classes, and why? If no, why not?

[]

Do you believe that D&D is a good medium in which to explore LGBT+ characters and themes?

- Yes
- Sometimes
- No

Why or why not?

[]

Thank you! If you have any final thoughts, please leave them below.

Please note that once you click submit, your answers will become anonymous and can no longer be withdrawn. If you wish to withdraw your answers now, please exit out of this page to do so.

[]

Appendix 2: *Monsterhearts 2* Survey

CREATING LGBT+ CHARACTERS IN MONSTERHEARTS 2

Thank you for taking the time to look at this survey, which is being conducted as part of my Master's thesis. You are being asked to take part in a study regarding the ways in which players create LGBT+ characters in tabletop roleplaying games. In particular, this study aims to address how LGBT+ player characters are created in two games: *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Monsterhearts 2*.

You have been asked to take part in this survey because of your interest in at least one of the aforementioned games. Completing this survey will involve answering questions concerning your experiences of and thoughts on the character creation process in *Monsterhearts 2*. The survey should take 5-10 minutes to complete, depending on how much time you wish to commit.

It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part. You may withdraw from this survey at any time while you are filling it out, and you do not have to answer all the questions. As your data is made anonymous when submitted, you won't be able to withdraw your answers once finished. This data will be stored safely on my SHU drive, and deleted 6 months after the study has been completed.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please email me at b6016403@my.shu.ac.uk

Before moving on, please read through the following statements. Should any of these not hold true, you will not be able to continue with this survey.

- I am above 18 years of age.
 - I have read the provided information for this study and have had details of the study explained to me.
 - My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction and I understand that I may ask further questions at any point.
 - I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any point while I am filling out the survey, without giving any reason for my withdrawal.
 - I understand that once I submit my responses, they will be fully anonymised, and therefore can no longer be withdrawn as there is no longer a way of connecting them to me.
 - I understand that I can decline to answer any particular questions in the study without any consequences.
 - I agree to provide information to the researchers under the conditions of confidentiality set out within the information provided.
 - I wish to participate in the study under the conditions set out within the information provided.
 - I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised (so that I cannot be identified), to be used for any other research purposes.
- I agree with the above statements

The University undertakes research as part of its function for the community under its legal status. Data protection allows us to use personal data for research with appropriate safeguards in place under the legal basis of public tasks that are in the public interest. A full statement of your rights can be found at <https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-this-website/privacy-policy/privacy-notices/privacy-notice-for-research>. However, all University research is reviewed to ensure that participants are treated appropriately and their rights respected. This study was approved by UREC with Converis number ER21803783. Further information at <https://www.shu.ac.uk/research/ethics-integrity-and-practice>.

ABOUT THE PLAYER

Your answers will be anonymised and cannot be traced back to you. If answering any of these questions makes you uncomfortable, remember that you are not required to answer them.

How would you describe your gender?

- Cisgender Male
- Transgender Male
- Cisgender Female
- Transgender Female
- Nonbinary
- Other

How would you describe your sexuality?

- Heterosexual
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Asexual
- Other

Which age range do you fall under?

- 20 or younger
- 21-30
- 31-40
- 41-50
- 51-60
- 60 or older

In your own words, why do you play Monsterhearts 2?

[]

ABOUT THE PLAYER CHARACTER

This section asks you to answer questions regarding an LGBT+ PC that you have created. If you have multiple LGBT+ PCs, please answer these questions with regards to the one that you have played the most, or that you feel the most proud of.

How would you describe your character's gender

- Cisgender Male
- Transgender Male
- Cisgender Female
- Transgender Female
- Nonbinary
- Other

How would you describe your character's sexuality?

- Heterosexual
- Homosexual
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Asexual
- Other

Does this differ from your own identity?

- Yes, in both gender and sexuality
- Yes, in gender
- Yes, in sexuality
- No

In what ways does your character's identity inform how you act as them?

[]

In what ways does your character's identity affect how they are treated in-game?

[]

Please describe any occasions where your character's gender and/or sexuality has had an impact on roleplay within a game. This can include both positive and negative experiences, though please don't feel that you have to recount any negative experiences should this make you uncomfortable.

[]

What is your character's skin?

- The Cerberus
- The Chosen
- The Disciple
- The Fae
- The Ghost
- The Ghoul
- The Hollow
- The Infernal
- The Mortal
- The Queen
- The Serpentine

- The Vampire
- The Werewolf
- The Witch
- Other

What identity words (Name/Look/Eyes/Origin) did you choose for your character?

[]

What moves did you choose for your character?

[]

Do you believe there are any ways in which your character's gender and sexuality interacts with their Skin, Identity, or Moves? Why or why not?

[]

CHARACTER CREATION

This section asks you to answer questions regarding character creation for Monsterhearts 2 in general.

Do you believe that there are any Skins associated with a specific gender or sexuality?

- Yes
- No

If yes, which Skins, and why? If no, why not?

[]

Do you believe that Monsterhearts 2 is a good medium in which to explore LGBT+ characters and themes?

- Yes
- Sometimes
- No

Why or why not?

[]

Thank you! If you have any final thoughts, please leave them below.

Please note that once you click submit, your answers will become anonymous and can no longer be withdrawn. If you wish to withdraw your answers now, please exit out of this page to do so.

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