

# Queering the Dice: How gender and Sexuality impact play in Dungeons & Dragons

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## Introduction

Tabletop Roleplaying Games (TTRPG) such as Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) rely on the intersection of fixed rules, Dungeon Master (DM) prepared setting and prompting, and Player character (PC) interaction to develop complex storylines. Throughout this Dissertation, I will explore the representation of gender and sexuality in different editions of the D&D rulebooks, then compare to the experiences of Player and DM concerning how they choose to follow the rules and how they choose to disobey them. Chapter one focuses on gender when it comes to PCs in the official rules in past and current editions of the game and how a player's gender can impact gameplay experience. Chapter 2 focuses on the representation of NPCs in official rulebooks, how their gender and sexuality is shown and the importance of this representation for players. The final chapter addresses the role of the DM in play, the expectations and how they can be queered, and what the benefit of this is.

## Chapter 1: Building Character: Gender in play

A core aspect of D&D is building and roleplaying as a character. Individuals who fill the player role in the game create characters with which to explore the games they are involved; These may be one-off adventures or longer form campaigns where the story continues between sessions- the general experience is that a player will inhabit one character per game- fleshing them out with background, aims, personality & abilities etc.—then developing them further during play as they experience situations and live in the fantasy world created with the DM. There are exceptions to this rule, of course, the possibility for PC death in-game could lead to a new character having to be made or just the chance a player may not want to play their character anymore through boredom, or they already achieved their desired goal and now wish for something new. This character is the player's vessel for being in the game's world and can be as similar or different to the player as they like.

To make a PC, players use rules from the appropriate player's handbook (PHB) for the game they are taking part in. This is decided by the DM, The rules within different editions vary, but the general format is the same; a character's building blocks are as follows:

- Ability scores: When acting in D&D, players are asked to roll dice to determine an outcome. This is usually a 20-sided dice. Each character has a set of Ability scores that give a different number (a modifier) to Add or Minus from the roll depending on how good or bad a character is at the given task. These numerical values are either rolled for with dice or chosen by a set of standardised methods. For ability scores, ten is considered to be an average skill and provides a +0 to the rolls given. Scores falling on either side shows a character being better or worse than average and a larger or smaller modifier. Six abilities are given these scores- Strength, Constitution, Dexterity, Intelligence, Wisdom and Charisma. Certain races then have a bonus to these skills to increase them immediately. E.g. A character may have an intelligence score of 17; this shows an exceptional aptitude for things like recall of

information, deduction or the ability to cast spells. Meanwhile, a 7 for charisma skill means they struggle with skills that involve persuasion or performing, or from a roleplay standpoint, may lack confidence.

- Race: Characters chose a race to play that offers aesthetic choices and also determine potential bonuses to a character's ability score or specific abilities.
- Class: A characters class is the equivalent of their job, and a player can choose from a list of 8. A players class determines the bulk of their skillset.
- Background: This adds features specific to a PC's lore (as decided by player and DM) so that there is synergy between their history and skillset. This also informs roleplay decisions.

This formula is mostly the same from 1<sup>st</sup> edition to 5<sup>th</sup>, with the changes mainly falling in its aspects rather than the overarching structure. Outside of this, players also have complete control over the backstory, morals, gender, age, sexuality and aesthetics of their character. The books provide suggestions for some of these (e.g. 5th edition PHB describes Tieflings as a race of humanoids with horns and tails due to infernal heritage. In the rulebook, they're also described with "skin tones covering the full range of the human spectrum but also include shades of red" (Crawford & Mearls, 2014: pg 42) though this is shown under an image of a Tiefling who is purple) such choices are primarily in the hands of the player.

1st edition D&D Formats its character-building as follows; “Each player develops the abilities of his or her character through random number generation (by means of dice rolling) to determine the basic characteristics of the persona, the abilities.

The player then decides what race the character is, what the character's class is, the alignment of the character, and what the character's name is to be” (Gygax, 1978: pg.8) The focus of 1<sup>st</sup> edition is on the statistics, with ability scores limiting choices a player can make about their character.

The limitations for the Strength ability score are shown to the right, which is the most limiting of all the scores as on top of racial and Class-based caps for the ability. It also features different caps for characters of

different genders. PC's below or above a certain ability score are blocked from certain classes or races; this is the same for all the core abilities. Once a character has decided their scores, only then do they move forward with the rest of character creation. 1<sup>st</sup> edition makes it so players can't be anything but good at their selected class without breaking the rules, something their DM may or may not allow them to do. This is largely because early D&D was heavily focused on Gygax's opinions on dungeon crawling; “the efficient slaughter of monsters for the maximal acquisition of loot.” (White, 2020: pg.4). While this caters to certain players and their playstyles well, it isolates some who may not seek optimisation. Such as a young paladin finding his feet who's not charismatic or strong, but the player intends to address this throughout the adventure as he slowly gains confidence in himself- or a character with a disability, such as dyslexia or in the case of physical disability a character who is blind or deaf. This is something players may wish to do to represent themselves in-game. The lack of these options 1<sup>st</sup> edition D&D is not necessarily a sign they did not happen; throughout the game's history, players have been inclined towards twisting the rules. Gygax's original view

STRENGTH TABLE I.

Ability Score	General Information
3	
4	
5	Here or lower the character can only be a magic-user
6	Minimum strength for a gnome, half-orc or halfling character
7	
8	Minimum strength for a dwarf character
9	Minimum strength for a fighter character
10	
11	
12	Minimum strength for an assassin or paladin character
13	Minimum strength for a ranger character
14	Maximum strength possible for a female halfling character
15	Maximum strength possible for a female gnome character, minimum strength for a monk character
16	Maximum strength possible for a female elf character
17	Maximum strength possible for a female dwarf or female half-elf or male halfling character
18	Maximum strength possible for all non-fighter characters
18/01-50	Maximum strength possible for a female human or male gnome character
18/51-75	Maximum strength possible for a male elf or female half-orc character
18/76-90	Maximum strength possible for a male half-elf character
18/91-99	Maximum strength possible for a male dwarf or male half-orc character
18/00	Maximum human strength

Figure 1: Gary Gygax. (1978) Strength ability score table, PHB 1<sup>st</sup> edition Pg 9.

of the game is historically very fixed, condemning fan-made or 'homebrew' content as "not dungeons & dragons" (White, 2020: pg4). This point of view and inability to accept alterations to his original concept of the game is evident in the limitations of character creation in 1<sup>st</sup> edition- players are fixed into Gygax's view of what an adventuring party should be; in his eyes, women should be weaker than their male counterparts, rogues cannot have virtuous motives, fighters must rely on strength over dexterity. Straying from this in any form, Homebrew, or simply ignoring the notion of optimising stats for the highest chance of success is breaking the rules, breaking the norms and queering the system. This tradition of homebrew rules continues to this day, with players even selling their independently made content on websites such as Kickstarter or DMsGuild to add to the game. Nowadays, this tends to be a supplement to a complete rewrite of rules; Due to the 5<sup>th</sup> editions more advanced ruleset and more accessible format.

An important thing to acknowledge in the development in Dungeons & Dragons is that it has changed hands from Gary Gygax to Wizards of the coast (WOTC), by 5<sup>th</sup> edition, the focus on supporting a more varied approach to the game became more important. Instead of ability scores being decided first to limit what your character can do- a player is encouraged to choose Race then class first, with ability scores coming much later in the character creation. They still fulfil the same role and hold the same importance, but now a player is not blocked from any race or class due to their ability scores at initial character creation. The option to play a character who is not necessarily 'good' at what they do is optional but built into the game. Allowing for acknowledgement and support of varied playstyles. There are no gender or race-related limitations in this edition, with race-based bonuses also recently becoming optional in, *Tasha's cauldron of everything* (Wizards RPG Team,2020), which added official variant race rules. These allow players to choose to alter racial traits if they wish to; unhindered by generalisations. In general, WOTC has made improvements to make the game more inclusive to players varying playstyles and identities around the table.



But what's the Benefit of this? What does a player have to gain from a character the game would consider to be flawed? For most, the potential to make far more meaningful stories and experiences for the players involved. There is value in success but also being able to struggle or lose, - it's humanising, messy, imperfect, and often makes the game reflect its own players. That's what makes people so invested. In Isbister's *How games move us*, the chapter on social play is an excellent representation of this. Isbister describes the cognitive and visceral immersion we feel when we take part in social play, her analysis is about multiplayer video games- but the same experiences apply to D&D gameplay as well. Isbister believes that the ability to connect so deeply with our player characters or avatars- "opens up the possibility for powerful emotional experiences that arrive out of a co-performance of roles while engaging in rich, genuine shared experiences." (Isbister, 2017: pg53) this means that when we act as our PCs we are engaging in meaningful social interaction, though the setting itself is fictional, the corresponding feelings and takeaways are very real. Isbister goes on to describe this in the context of a Multi-user dungeon (MUD) player named Ava who after losing her leg in a car accident created a character in the game that represented herself, having a missing leg and prosthesis. The other players in the game were able to interact with this aspect, allowing for Ava to work through issues in a fictional 'safe' environment be it potentially unintentionally at first. Ava's character went through development, even finding romance with another player within the MUD. She describes working through the physical and emotional impacts of virtual amputation and prosthesis with her MUD partner, and the two found a comfortability in this. The act of being able to work through this in a social play environment was important for Ava, allowing her to take steps forward in her own recovery after her accident. Ava is quoted as saying "I made love in the MUD before I made love again in real life [...] I think that the first made the second possible. I began to think of myself as whole again." (Isbister, 2017: pg55) the process of roleplay, and creating a character with a disability was important to Ava, not from a mechanical standpoint but an emotional one. She queered the idea of an adventurer, straying from the norm in terms of physical ability.

An alternate benefit of queering character ability rather than the representation of self is the rebellion aspect. Breaking the predetermined expectations to make a character who is optimised for adventure success purposefully for the creation of narrative or simply just because it is how they enjoy playing is queering character creation. In Halberstam's *Queer art of failure*, she discusses the concept of playing to lose, And how this self-inflicted 'failure' is resistance against mainstream power structures. Halberstam describes this as a feminist act, though the act itself can reject western feminist ideals of what feminism should be, remarking that "the limits of a feminist theory that already presumes the form that agency must take." (Halberstam, 2011: Pg 127). This mentality references the intersectionality of feminism and how western ideals of agency and power are not always the desired choice or way to resist harmful power structures. Stating Value in "silence, stubbornness, self-abnegation and sacrifice" (Halberstam, 2011: Pg124) as a type of feminism that is at its most potent in Anticolonial and Antiracist contexts, outright rejecting roles imposed on them by western influence but also its feminism. Players who queer characters in this way strive to break expectations, creating a character who intentionally breaks stereotypes or features of their chosen PC build- a bard who is uncharismatic, a barbarian who is mild-mannered- choosing to not use the class' rage mechanic. The purposeful rebellion against the rules is placing storyline and roleplay choices at a higher value than being statistically successful. This playstyle is often viewed as 'casual', inferior to traditional statistic lead play or 'hardcore' gameplay. Rowan Kaiser bluntly exposes the subtext of this:

*"For gamers, terms like "Hardcore" and "Casual" are a code with clear meanings. So lets be real, and call a spade a spade: "Hardcore" means Dick. Or rod. Or johnson. Or, for the critical analysis fans out there, the phallus. "Hardcore" equals masculine. "Casual" means feminine". (Kaiser,2010)*

In later editions, limitations are fewer mechanically but this same resistance against play is found elsewhere- modern resistance in TTRPG not only breaks rules

set by the game but expectations set by players largely ones about gender and 'gendered play' as described by Kaiser above. In order to understand this, it's important to understand the demographics of D&D a little; *Tabletop RPG design in theory and practice at the forge* (White, 2020 :pg7) pins the demographics in the early days of D&D to be estimated at about 95-98% male, (or at about 85% when it came to Gygax's personal estimates). They note that in 2006 demographics remained largely the same being "middle-class males in late teens to early 20's" (White, 2020: Pg.8) though at

this time the hobby was beginning to attract more players outwidth of this description. In 2020 Wizards of the coast released infographics to update this information, showing how the divide is changing to become less male

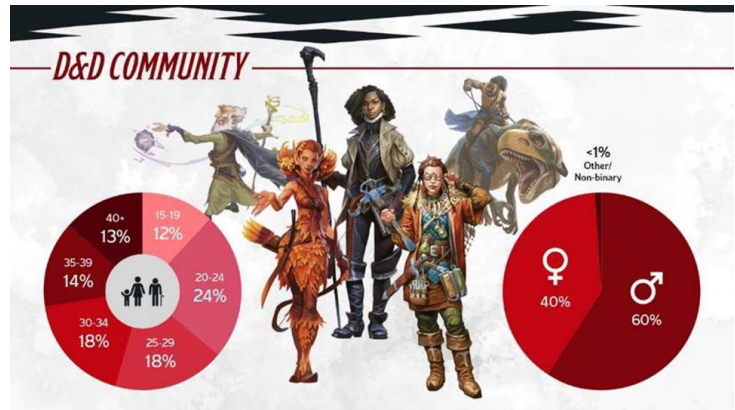


Figure 2: Wizards of the Coast (2020) D&D demographics infographic

dominated after the game's 47 years of growth. As shown on the graphic the gender split is now around 40% female and 60% male, with >1% identifying outside of the gender binary, this is representative of the 50million people strong player base. Students are still the most prolific age group, but it is notable to see a large section of heritage players who have likely continued on playing from earlier editions. Nowadays D&D finds its home largely online, playing over a video call, in the sharing of stories or homebrew content in forums - but recently an additional way to enjoy has become more popular, 'Actual-play' streamers on twitch now play full campaigns out to an online audience of thousands- allowing for an insight into the game previously not witnessed as now you take a seat in the room with the players rather than just being told the events. It's more personal, and open to much more scrutiny.

This is especially the case for Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB) players and People of Colour (POC) though it is experienced at any level of play, professional or not. Critical Role (CR), is a 5<sup>th</sup> edition actual-play streaming series company. CR players Marisha Ray and Aimee Carrero both experienced resistance for their characters (both of whom are females- playing female characters), Facing aggressive comments in the chat of their streams criticizing their gameplay. In *Gaming*

*representation*, Dewinter and Kocurek’s chapter on *women and the exclusionary cultures of the computer game complex* summarises some of the backlash Ray was facing; as visualised in one of the many emails Ray received during the run of CR’s first campaign and likely continues to receive. They describe of how the industry largely “does not take women seriously as gamers and women are rarely let off so easily in the game. Rather, women’s in-game failure is largely ascribed to gender, and their successes are ascribed to some man- a boyfriend, a brother- who played on their account or a man who

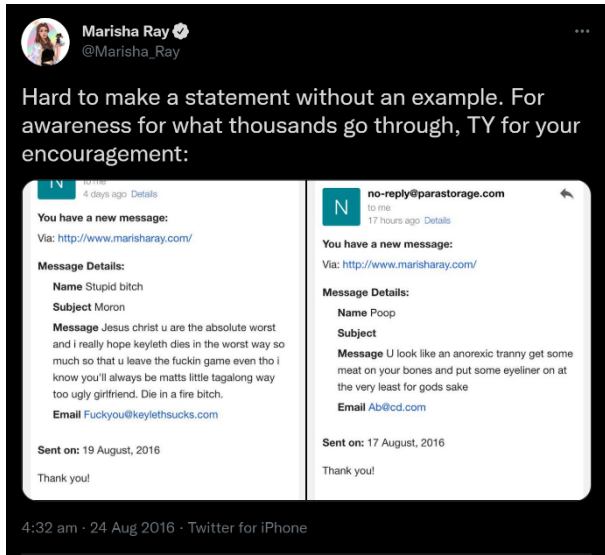


Figure 3: Marisha Ray sharing Misogynistic emails via Twitter. 2016

had gone easy on them” (Malkowski & Russworm, 2017: pg 65). In the email from Fuckyou@keylethsucks.com, the sender does exactly this, addressing her with misogynistic (and transphobic) language and attributing her place at the table (as the creative director of Critical Role and a player on the series’ main cast) to her

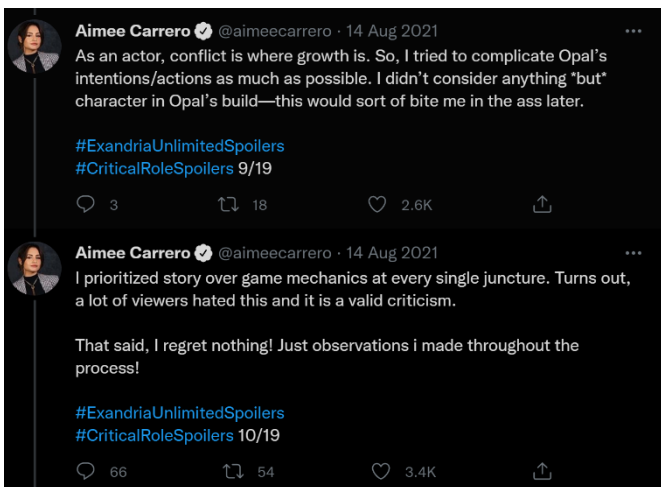


Figure 4: Aimee Carrero's Exandria Unlimited campaign wrap up. 2021 pt9.

connection to husband Matthew Mercer, CR’s DM. Carrero’s experiences are similar though lacking the attachment to a man at the table that ray has, it is important to note her Latina heritage for context that she is a POC D&D player as previously stated the criticism that affects AFAB players is also present of POC players, especially those who fit into both demographics. Carrero received widespread backlash for playing a character who was

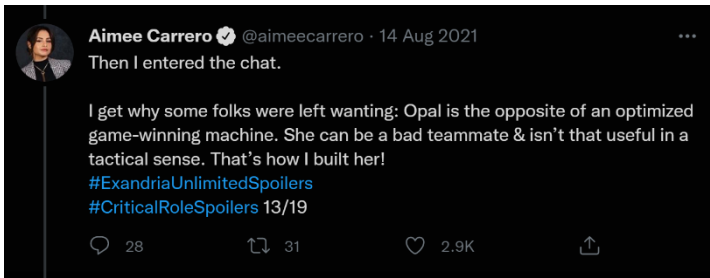


Figure 5: Aimee Carrero's Exandria Unlimited campaign wrap up. 2021 pt13.

designed flawed with the intent to grow and change, but as she says in her tweet “that’s how I built her!”. The criticism received for how she was playing was so extensive that over the show (CR’s Exandria Unlimited) which ran for only 8 episodes she felt the need to explain her character

choices on social media twice, an extract from the second of these shown.

Carrero’s choice to focus on characterisation over mechanics is not a bad way to play, exploring and building character are some of the core tenants of D&D after all. Her character build is also firmly in line with the 5<sup>th</sup> edition rulebooks which are far more accepting of different playstyles, even discussing ways to support playstyles akin to Carrero’s in the DM’s guide. Yet many of the, once again largely male (around 75% male in 2015 (Grey, 2018: Pg 165)), twitch audience flooded to comment sections to inform her she was playing the game wrong, enforcing the ‘hardcore’ take on the game- where optimisation is more important than roleplay and any variation on this is something offending players need to be saved from by ‘those who know better’ or harassed for.

Carrero and Ray are both an indication of how despite years of development the impact of gender on D&D is still present, no longer in mechanics weighing on handicapping female PCs-but in the enforcement of rules and expectations on players by players. Reinforcing ideas of success and failure with no real benefits, but instead, hold players back from the freedom to create stories more meaningful to them.

## Chapter 2: Love in a Dragon-Filled Dungeon: Queer NPCs in official content

Players have complete control over their character's identities, but what of the non-player characters (NPC) that inhabit the worlds we play in? In homebrew settings, a DM has control over this- being able to make a world as queer as they like, but what if you choose one of the pre-existing settings where characters come pre-packaged and ready to go? In this chapter, we investigate the representation of sexuality in the current sourcebooks of D&D. The subjects of this analysis are *The wild beyond the Witchlight* a 5<sup>th</sup> edition companion adventure released by WOTC in 2021, and *The Explorer's guide to Wildemount* a 5<sup>th</sup> edition setting and rulebook released by WOTC and the aforementioned Critical Role (CR) in 2020. The setting features content from the world created for their streaming show of the same name by DM Matthew Mercer. These two are particularly good examples of how queer representation works in D&D as it shows both explicit and what can be implied as examples of queer sexuality within the rulebooks themselves and the characters within them.

In *Wild beyond the Witchlight* (WBW), Characters important here begin with a carnival of the book's namesake; The Witchlight. Specifically, its two Heads- Mr Witch and Mr light. Two Shadar kai (elves from the Shadowfell, an emotionless plane ruled by death and decay) who traded circuses with it's previous owner after a disagreement on whose circus was better. They agreed to switch back to their original circuses when the two meet again. Their previous circus kept in with the dark themes of the Shadowfell, whereas the Witchlight carnival is more flamboyant and joyful. As for the heads themselves, Mr witch was an orphan who worked his way up to caretaking the clocktower of a wealthy family, who paid him barely anything but occasionally brought him to their home for dinner. Though his work was dull, he searched for any joy in it he could. He got on well with the eldest son of the family, who would become Mr Light. Light was the most joyous in a family

who were morose, this is the norm for those who dwell in the Shadowfell, but he found joy in expressive makeup and clothes. He strived to break free from his family's shadow where he wouldn't be accepted as himself, so bought a circus and the two run away together in the night, changing their names, telling no one and leaving behind any connection or inheritance- Mr light was disowned by his family at this time finally "embracing the unconventional lifestyle, fashions and friendships he desired" (Wizards RPG Team, 2021: pg.27). The two have been partners in crime since, rarely leaving each other's side and sharing a caravan to sleep in. The book describes how they've grown in the years together- "gradually these morose, emotionally stunted Shardar kai transformed into the fun-loving free spirits who secretly dread the day when the two carnivals cross paths again" (Wizards RPG Team, 2021: Pg.24). They now find themselves in debt to the coven wreaking havoc throughout the campaign that the players are working against. Mr Witch and Mr Light's story can be seen as heavily queer coded, the running from his disapproving family being especially so. It is easy to read their lives as an analogy for Queer individuals running from harmful environments to begin again in a place they feel they can be themselves and thrive, creating safe communities with colourful and expressive natures that support others also in need. It's unclear if the intention for the history of the Witchlight Heads to be an analogy for queer experiences but this narrative is one that is common in the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer+) community given its history of unwelcoming and homophobic parental environments and one that's often expected by younger queer individuals. In Robertson's *growing up queer* she discusses the new normal of LGBTQ+ youth and how despite an increase of rights and visibility for queer experiences when it comes to kids and their families the narrative is still "one of peril" (Robertson, 2019: pg.122). Robertson's experiences with youth groups for Queer teens show that the real-life narrative often didn't reflect this- at least for the teens she met within groups in northern America. Often they still feared the potential rejection when breaching the topic of gender and sexuality with parents. Robertson states "LGBTQ-Identified children face the ultimate rejection by loved ones when they are simply not accepted by their families because of their gender or sexuality. [...] The specific fear that their parents would disown them and force

them to leave the house was particularly vivid for them.” (Robertson, 2019: pg123). Robertson puts this dissonance between expectation and reality down to the “barrage of claims in news media about the precarity of LGBTQ youth”(Robertson, 2019: pg122) which is reinforcing fears of coming out. This kind of representation in media is what makes the narrative of Mr witch and Mr light appear so queer- especially to queer readers, despite it having no actual comment on sexuality or identity. When preparing content for NPCs Wizards of the Coast gives a DM just enough- They intend for you to make your own choices when running a setting, improvising and fleshing out characters as you see fit so often only give limited information for DM’s to build upon, or not, at will. This usually includes Pronouns, Physical description, personality, stats, motives and a brief backstory that explains how they fit in with the current adventure- Mr witch and Mr light’s being what was discussed above. When it comes to queer identities sexuality is usually left out of this in the core rulebooks.

Explorers Guide to Wildemount (EGTW) is an exception to this, showing the clear representation of same-sex pairings existing, and that they have an impactful place in world history just as heterosexual pairings do. The ruler of the Kryn Dynasty in the Xhorhas area of Wildemount is The Bright Queen, Leylas Kryn, a female dark elf who has ruled over the Dynasty for multiple lifetimes, having died and been reincarnated. Dusk Captain Quana Kryn is the general of the Kryn’s forces and “has been Leylas’ partner for three of her lifetimes, and five of Leylas’s. She is wholly devoted to her people-and her queen.” (Mercer, 2020: Pg 40) The relationship between the two is romantic, EGTW specifically referring to them as partners and showing them sharing a last name- but also even in their short mention in the book Mercer insures to mention the caring nature of their relationship, explicitly stating Quana’s concerns over Leylas’ mental health. Whereas Witch and light in WBW have almost 2 entire double spreads to themselves, their relationship and history, The Bright Queen and The General have all but 2 paragraphs due to the purpose of the books being different- WBW being an adventure module for a DM to run, while EGTW is a Setting- describing locations, history etc. all things a DM needs to create their own adventure module in a premade world- In this case the world of Critical



role (CR) podcast's second series. The influence of CR being a streaming show is seen in the rulebook, in fact, the LGBTQ+ representation is likely part of this- as the show features queer cast, PC relationships and gender identities throughout. Therefore, the writers of the book had a commitment to representation in the rulebook to accompany the campaign faithfully, especially for characters who already exist in the shows canon like The Bright Queen.

WBW's Witchlight heads represent the 'queer coding' aspect of representation, their positioning as LGBTQ+ in the rulebook is up to interpretation. Something D&D is known for, as a DM is encouraged to take creative liberties- leaving their sexuality to be a Schrodinger's box situation. Both queer and not queer at the DMs discretion. The ambiguity of NPCs, overall, allows for people to queer characters as they please- but it does create a lack of secure representation within the media that comes with explicit acknowledgement of the normalcy of queer identity. Robertson states "same-sex attractions, behaviours, and relationships depicted in mainstream media as normal, healthy, developmentally appropriate human behaviour continue to be the exception" (Robertson, 2019: Pg 103) which is why the inclusion of explicit content such as in EGTW is so important- it shows that queer identity is a normal part of life and one that isn't optional. The Bright Queen is a powerful woman, and a key player in the events of the world- she's also queer. Her identity in that sense isn't written in as a plot point, it's not a tragic moment of abandonment- it's just who she is.

Though EGTW is the exception to the lack of explicit queer attraction in official content, and the representation inside is small, it has importance to LGBTQ+ players in being able to see themselves included in a game, outside of what they make for themselves. Additionally, success in print is important for showing that the mainstream consumer will support queer identity in core rules. This can lead to more representation of the same kind in the future, and already has. Though WBW as most of the core rulebooks lacks reference to sexuality- it does follow suit in another form of equally important representation seen in EGTW, that of queer

gender representation, showing a promising future for a more explicit showing of queer identity in official D&D content.

## Chapter 3: Bringing a lonely God back to earth: Queering the DM

The role of DM is an integral one to the game of D&D. The DM serves as the player's guide, a part of the story, telling them when to roll, creating and describing the world and scenarios the previously discussed PC's interact with. Though as with all D&D, experiences and preferences vary between games and players, of all the players at the table the DM is generally expected to work the most- preparing the events prior to each session and keeping track of plot threads, NPCs, making maps or tokens and general organising. They hold the most information out of anyone at the table, knowing everything about each character's background and skill set as well as everything about the world and its inhabitants- filling the role of a not necessarily dependable narrator in a story for the players at the table. Whether it is through a premade storyline or setting as described in chapter 2 with WBW and EGTW, or a Homebrew story completely of the DM's design- they are the players' gateway into the world, and the stories acted out to begin with their plans- though often these change drastically due to PC influence.

Unlike players a DM throughout their campaign will take the form of many characters, some opposing players, others who aid them. Unlike PCs DM's aren't encouraged to flesh out these characters as much- base-level information, motivations, personality and stats are necessary but due to the sheer number of characters a DM is expected to fill to bring the world to life their characters are generally expected, or in some cases encouraged, to be stripped back and lesser than that of the PC's as any more than this would begin to take away from the role of the PCs as the focal point of the story. This aspect of play mirrors a common theme in the gaming industry, that of valorising the player. The idea that every aspect of the game should be designed for the player, and only for them- that the act of creating a playable experience's only goal is to provide the best possible experience for the player where those involved in the making of it in the grander scheme do not matter outside of their role to provide and serve. It's a mentality that leads to practices harmful for those in the industry, such as 'crunch'- Mandatory and uncompensated overtime for game developers in order to meet

deadlines, a harmful practice that prioritises the consumer over the health and wellbeing of those working on the project. In the context of the wider games industry, the impact of this is experienced only through the word of mouth of developers who are able to speak out. There's a divide in the relationship between those who make and those who play leading to consumers rarely gaining insight into the development of games as they are being produced, instead they are left to speculate from small insights in trailers and announcements. When it comes to tabletop, however, this relationship is far more personal. Players and DMs sit together to play a game in constant development by the DM- At every stage, there is discussion and interaction, and yet the same mentality of optimising the players' enjoyment above your own is still encouraged in a similar way but what happens when the expectation of this role is altered?

When queering a subject the viewer must get close, taking the fictional setting and becoming intimate with it. As much as games grapple with fantasy they're also always partially real- grappling with real emotions, or even storylines that reflect ourselves- games are a unique medium in that they allow for an even closer connection with this kind of material. The agency a player has over the game gives a much more intimate relationship to the feelings it invokes, good and bad, in a space that is safe to be intimate. The feelings don't disappear when we play a game because it isn't real as most would expect, it's instead quite the opposite as Juul writes in *the art of failure*; "when we feel a humiliating defeat, we really are filled with emotions of humiliation and inadequacy. Games do not purge these emotions- they produce the emotions in the first place." (Juul,2013: pg 4). So, what does this mean in the context of our DM?

To queer the DM is to have an indivisible connection full of the same feeling and value that players are allowed, after all the DM is a player just one with a different role. I have been a DM on and off for a few years now, and have struggled with the concepts of keeping at an arm's length from the game at all times- not wanting to step on the players' toes, wanting them to get the most engagement and the most valuable experiences from sessions I've run- while finding myself suffering in

return. There was a while where I found myself too distressed to play, the divide between DM and player far too great, leaving me lonely at the head of the table and hating a game I was building. I wanted my players to enjoy themselves so much, to the point I stopped noticing what it was costing me. There's a common Joke among DM's that they are a God surveying over creation with death at their fingertips, cackling manically watching players navigate a world of their making- many are happy like this, and for them, they shouldn't change a thing about how they play but for me sitting in that seat is lonely, and separates me from one of the most important, and in my experience, most fulfilling parts of any roleplaying game. Connection.

My current running campaign revolves around the concept of connection, the players drawn together by fate- connected by thousands of golden strands not only to themselves but to the world around them. They live in a web of NPCs, and backstory that they can shift and move. As they look onto the world, it looks back- responds. To do this, I purposefully fail & break the expectations of a DM, especially when it comes to NPCs. It's important for my players and I to live in a world with representation, we are a majority queer group, so the ability to see queer characters having an impact on the world and its history is something that was important when building up the homebrew setting of the world; Lesbian cleric allies, Bisexual councillors and pirate queens, non-binary liches, transgender goliath liaisons all barely scratch the surface of this- but importantly, they all have stories out-width of their queerness. The DM's guide describing NPCs as "bit players in the campaign, whereas the adventurers are the stars" (Mearls & Crawford, 2014: Pg89) is not entirely wrong in my style of play, the players are still the stars- they just are surrounded with characters also designed for growth and development. An example of this is Loreli Evesharana. She is a siren and one of the aforementioned pirate queens, though she was betrayed by her partner- leading to her assumed death at their hand and rescue by the organisation the adventurers find themselves a part of. They first met her putting on an intimidating front, untrusting and with high walls built to protect herself from further pain. One of my players, a pirate who could recognise and had been told stories of the queens,

quickly began trying to befriend her- managing to get past her intimidating façade far faster than I'd anticipated- and was able to get to know the fearful hopeless

romantic underneath. The two bonding over shared traumas, and eventually falling in love.

The relationship between the two was incredibly rewarding to see unfold, it's funny and sad, and features two people working together to support each other through healing. All the players' responses to Loreli changed her deeply, something I built her for, but still surprising to watch unfold as they helped her grow and heal through their actions; The party wizard wouldn't have been nervous to take her to coffee had he not known she doesn't leave the house much out

of fear, but overcoming his own anxieties to do it anyway so she wasn't lonely.

Their savant might have been more forceful when asking for information from her had he not been able to relate to Loreli's difficulty trusting people, the respect of boundaries thus creating a stronger bond between the two. All these interactions are small but developmental for NPCs and players alike. Something I'm aware wouldn't be the case without Loreli being an NPC with such a developed tie to the world, the things that bonded them wouldn't exist- their connection wouldn't be so deep, the interactions so meaningful and my connection to it so close. Having NPCs built like Loreli made me feel like a part of my own game again, rather than a God surveying a world I'm not allowed to touch.



Figure 6: Digby Lambert, (2021) Caspian and Loreli

The inclusion of such detailed NPCs that I'm invested in might label me as a bad DM, at least in the context of western TTRPG. However the most important part of play is that the players enjoy the game you run, which I'm proud to say mine do- though the truth is I'd be afraid to share my personal view on being DM in the online circles. AFAB DM's are in the minority still, though one that has seen growth in recent years. I've been told my roleplay focused character choices as a player are

'stupid' before, despite the fact I'm happy in them, and regretfully I'm aware my take on the DM role may get a similar response from some.

## In Conclusion

Gender and sexuality are two things most people don't consider when it comes to D&D, neither are listed on character sheets- come 5<sup>th</sup> edition there's little mention of either in the character creation section of rulebooks at all and yet both impact gameplay significantly for players still. The plague of hardcore and casual gameplay strikes at all levels of play professional and hobbyist, Player and DM- Which leads to the creation of unnecessary conflict making a growing section of the player-base isolated and unwelcome in important social spheres.

This isolation was increased by the exclusion of queer sexuality representation in official content, players have to alter the content in order to see themselves within the game- but in newer editions, this is beginning to change, showing the potential for a promising future of broader representation.

Taking into consideration representation, queering of rules, different styles of play and combining with the DM's role at the table shows how different styles of play can benefit players when used from the other side of the table too. The open-mindedness of allowing for the difference is useful, creating the potential for meaningful gameplay of a different kind.



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### Links to Illustrations:

Figure 1. Gary Gygax. (1978) Strength ability score table, PHB 1<sup>st</sup> edition Pg.9

Available at: <<https://archive.org/details/pdfy-my6p8niGqahpilXi/page/n5/mode/2up>>

Figure 2. Wizards of the Coast LLC, (2020). *D&D demographics infographic*.. [image]

Available at: <[Dungeons and Dragons Infographic Shows How Popular the Game Has Become \(gamerant.com\)](#)> [Accessed 20 January 2022].

Figure 3. Ray, M, (2016). *Marisha Ray sharing misogynistic emails she's received via Twitter*.

Available at: <[https://twitter.com/Marisha\\_Ray/status/768289843033976832](https://twitter.com/Marisha_Ray/status/768289843033976832)>

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Figure 4. Aimee, C., (2021). *Aimee Carrero's Exandria Unlimited Campaign wrap up*. Pt9

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<<https://twitter.com/aimeecarrero/status/1426560132595523585?lang=en-GB>>

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Figure 5. Aimee, C., (2021). *Aimee Carrero's Exandria Unlimited Campaign wrap up.*

Pt13

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Figure 6. Digby Lambert. (2021) Caspian and Loreli

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