

Abstract

I have conducted an ethnography observing Monmouth University’s Dungeons and Dragons Club. There is a growing LGBTQIA+ presence in the Dungeons and Dragons community worldwide, so I intended to explore the relationship between roleplaying and queer students. I propose that Dungeons and Dragons provides a safe space for LGBTQ+ students to explore their gender identity through roleplaying as different characters. I interviewed 7 members one-on-one and then did a club-wide survey. 16 people participated in the survey, and the overall results showed that Dungeons and Dragons provides a liberating outlet for LGBTQIA+ students to express and explore their gender and sexual identities.

Introduction

Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) is a table-top, interactive roleplay game created in 1974 by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson (Hosch 2023). It was created because Gygax wanted to allow players to experience fantastical adventures like characters they would read in books. Over the years, the fantastical roleplaying game has achieved massive popularity. In 2019, 40 million people claimed to be fans of Dungeons and Dragons (Jarvis 2020). The game is commonly associated with the demographic of straight, white males, which it did primarily start out with. Within recent years, however, there has been an uptick in LGBTQIA+ members in the D&D community. This has caused controversy among traditional and new gamers; queer players are now at the forefront of the Dungeons and Dragons campaign. Studies have shown that playing Dungeons and Dragons can offer therapeutic utilities and different psychological avenues typically pursued in the field of mental health (Henrich & Worthington 2021). Gameplay has been found to provide a safe environment for its players to explore hypothetical scenarios, including gender and sexuality. Players can gain better self-awareness by being allowed the space to evaluate their mental and emotional states. Dungeons and Dragons allows players to play as any type of character imaginable; their only limitation is their imagination.

I propose that Dungeons and Dragons provides a safe space for LGBTQ+ students to explore their gender identity through roleplaying as different characters. By observing and conducting in-person interviews and surveys with gamers at Monmouth University’s Dungeons and Dragons club, this study provides an examination of the psychological benefits D&D can provide its LGBTQIA+ players. Dungeons and Dragons can provide a safe outlet and welcoming community for its gamers to better understand and explore their sexuality and gender identity.

Participant Observation

To gain a general understanding and better comprehend gamers motivations, participant observation was a requirement for this small-scale study. A total of 17 hours were conducted observing gameplay, asking questions, and learning about the world of Dungeons and Dragons. I sat in on two different campaigns: Pirates of Baorr and Vampires of Strad. Pirates of Baorr consisted of 9 gamers and 1 dungeon master. It is a “homebrew” game, meaning that the Dungeon Master largely created the world and narratives at play. The campaign has been running for over a year with players typically playing as the same character. It largely takes place on the continent of Baorr in a world called Crusage. Together, the characters play as a band of misfit pirates. Characters include half-orcs, body snatchers, druids, half-links, elves, and water benders.

The Vampires of Strad is thematically gothic and traditionally vampirine. This world is pre-built and some gamers have already participated in this campaign prior. Almost every player plays as a woman in this campaign, even though several players identify as male or nonbinary in the real world. This gender-swapped narrative revolves around Camilla, an evil vampire queen that gamers must defeat.

Methodologies

A 10-question survey focusing on gender and sexuality and its relatedness to gameplay was created to conduct this small-scale study. To gain a general understanding of Monmouth University’s population of D&D players and their gendered experiences related to roleplaying, the survey was given to 16 members. The club consists of over 20 members, but because of the nature of the game, member attendance and participation fluctuates based on how many campaigns a player is involved in. Table 1 and Table 2 provide the survey questions that active members filled out. The survey was anonymous to protect player identities.

In-person interviews were conducted on 7 active members that were participating in current D&D campaigns. The interviews were largely conducted after campaign play and ranged from 20 to 30 minutes. Hand-written notes were taken to record participants answers. Questions ranged from general Dungeons and Dragons rules and gameplay, personal experiences, and opinions regarding exploring gender and sexuality through characters. The topics largely expanded on the survey questions to gain a more detailed understanding of participant views. All interviews were conducted anonymously to protect participant’s identity and preserve comfortability.

Interview Results

Of the 16 survey participants, 7 of them participated in in-person interviews. Based off the one-and-one interviews and general discourse during observation, the results demonstrate:

- Many players have become friends with each other outside of Dungeons and Dragons and are heavily involved in the club to pursue and continue meaningful relationships with each other.
- Players feel comfortable to express their sexual and gender identity within the Dungeons and Dragons club and feel welcome to do so because of the large population of LGBTQIA+ members in the club.
- Players feel that Dungeons and Dragons is a safe community to express transgender narratives within the role-playing campaigns.
- Campaigns often reflect real-world social and political scenarios, adding an element of fantasy realism to gameplay.
- Because of fantasy realism, players feel that mindsets and worldviews are expanded in a positive, collaborative way.

Conclusion

Dungeons and Dragons offers players the opportunity to explore the bounds of imaginative roleplay and fantasy. This has proven to be a useful conduit for many LGBTQIA+ members. The nature of the game allows players to step out of reality and enter a fantastical, limitless world. Players can identify as any type of character they want; they can remove the confines of physical reality and express their inner desires however they appear. The bounds of heteronormative and transgressive norms do not confine the world of Dungeons and Dragons. Now, more than ever, Dungeons and Dragons has been the most inclusive and diversified it has ever been. Members of the queer community can participate in interactive role-playing scenarios with people akin to them. The results from this study show that Monmouth University’s Dungeons and Dragons club provides a safe atmosphere for LGBTQIA+ students to show their queerness in imaginative ways. Students can step outside of society’s binary boundaries and explore different identities. Dungeons and Dragons has become a growing community, within Monmouth University’s institution and worldwide, that offers a freeing and therapeutic atmosphere for LGBTQIA+ members.

Table 1

Dungeons and Dragons Survey

- How long have you been playing Dungeons and Dragons?
 - Less than six months
 - Six months to a year
 - Over a year
 - Multiple years
- Do you identify with the LGBTQIA+ community?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Prefer not to say
- Has Dungeons and Dragons provided a safe community for you?
 - Yes
 - No
- Have you ever played as a character that does not identify with the same gender or sexuality as you?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Prefer not to say
- Does playing Dungeons and Dragons offer any therapeutic measures regarding sexuality or gender for you?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Prefer not to say

Table 2

- Do you, or anyone you know, began playing Dungeons and Dragons as way to explore their gender identity or sexuality?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Prefer not to say
- Has Dungeons and Dragons helped shape your identity through sexuality or gender?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Prefer not to say
- Does Dungeons and Dragons offer a new form of social play that exceeds the bounds of binary gender expression?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Prefer not to say
- Do you recommend Dungeons and Dragons as an outlet to people who might be questioning their gender or sexuality?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Prefer not to say
- Has Dungeons and Dragons offered exploration or liberation from traditional gender roles or forms of expression for you?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Prefer not to say

Survey Results

Of the 16 members who participated in the survey (Table 1 & 2), all answered the questions provided in the questionnaire. The group’s results demonstrated:

- Players’ involvement in campaigns ranges from 3 months to upwards of 9 years.
- 56.25% of players identify as members apart of the LGBTQIA+ community.
- 100% of players report that Dungeons and Dragons has been a safe community for them.
- 75% of players report having once played as a character that does not have the same gender identity or sexuality as themselves.
- 11 out of 16 (68.75%) survey participants agree that Dungeons and Dragons offers therapeutic measures regarding gender and sexuality struggles.
- 18.75% of players report that Dungeons and Dragons has helped shape or better understand their sexuality or gender.
- 100% of players report that Dungeons and Dragons offers a new form of social play that allows players to explore boundaries outside of binary gender norms.
- 18.75% of players recommend Dungeons and Dragons to friends or family who might be questioning their own gender or sexuality identity.
- 56.25% of players report that Dungeons and Dragons has offered an exploration of the gender spectrum and liberation from traditional gender roles or modes of expression.

Additional References

Henrich, S., & Worthington, R. (2021b). Let your clients fight dragons: A rapid evidence assessment regarding the therapeutic utility of ‘Dungeons & Dragons.’ *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health, 18*(3), 383–401. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2021.1987367>

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Jarvis, M. (2020, April 23). *2019 was the biggest year for Dungeons & Dragons in the RPG’s almost 50-year history, says Wizards of the Coast*. Dicebreaker. <https://www.dicebreaker.com/series/dungeons-and-dragons/news/dungeons-and-dragons-2019-biggest-year>

Please direct all feedback to: Paige Harrington, Monmouth University;
 s1303231@monmouth.edu

