Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books

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In this article, we are asking why representations of LGBTQ themes and characters have been so scarce in the context of role-playing games. A preliminary analysis of the first three decades (1974–2005) of English language RPG source material shows that when the topic has not been silenced altogether, it has been met with reactions that seem humorous or extreme in hindsight. Our aim here is to map an alternative history of role-playing game source books, one that pays attention to queer sexualities, and connect these representations to other cultural spheres.

Introduction

Games that deal with sexuality are few and far between, and games that deal with non-normative sexualities are even less common. Generally speaking, games and game worlds have not been inclusive of individuals or themes that are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ; for practical reasons, we will use 'queer' to refer to LGBTQ in this article).[1] Explicitly queer content has started to appear only relatively recently in genres where sexuality is considered relevant for the portrayal of the fictional world or the characters inhabiting it, such as simulation and role-playing games.[2]

Although there is substantial research on role-playing games and player cultures that surround them,[3] non-normative sexualities seems to be a topic that still calls for initial study. Furthermore, the various histories written on

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1. Note also that the article uses terminology found in the research material, some of which is not considered appropriate or correct today.

2. Adrienne Shaw. "Talking to Gaymers: Questioning Identity, Community and Media Representation." Westminster Papers, 9.1, 2012, pp. 67–89.

3. For examples, see: Gary Alan Fine. Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983. Daniel Mackay. The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art. Jefferson: McFarland, 2001. Sarah Lynne Bowman. The Functions of Role-Playing Games. How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity. Jefferson: McFarland, 2010. Markus Montola. On the Edge of the Magic Circle. Understanding Role-Playing and Pervasive Games. Doctoral dissertation, University of Tampere. Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2012.
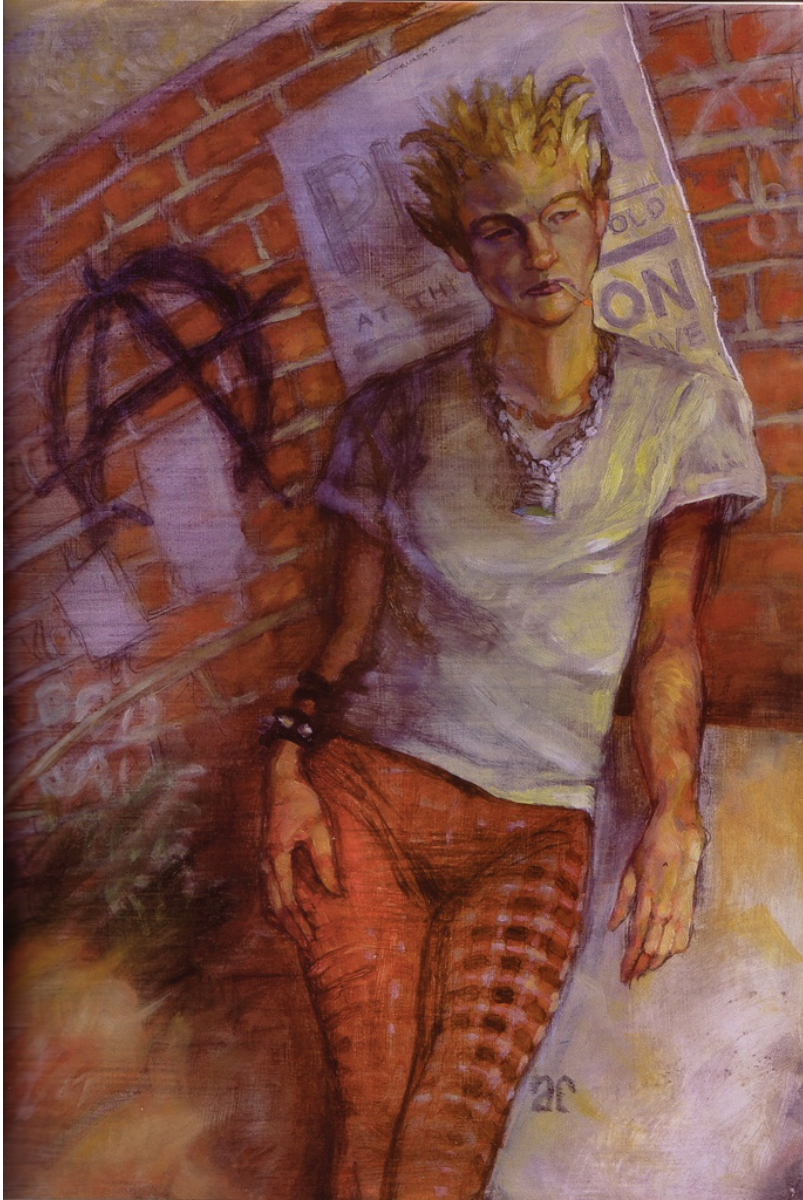
A Wilder from White Wolf's Changeling: The Dreaming (1997).

role-playing games are mostly silent on the topic as well; gender is sometimes discussed, but sexuality is scarcely mentioned at all.[4] In the context of digital games the academic discussion on representation and identification is further

along, but since the practices of play are different in analog, social games, that discussion is not directly applicable here.[5]

Despite its long history as something that is perceived as dangerous, blasphemous and alternative, the culture of tabletop role-playing games has remained fairly conservative, especially so when it comes to social issues. However, since role-playing games are shared social game experiences that use textual sources as starting points and not as determining guidelines, the actual practice of role-playing may have had content markedly different from the guidebooks. This article, however, concentrates on the representation of queer sexualities in role-playing game source books, not on actual play practice.

On the basis of an examination of English-language RPG source books from years 1974–2005, our starting point is the observation that queer themes have been either completely absent or extremely sporadic for most of the history of role-playing games. Where the topic has not been silenced altogether, it has often been handled in a way that seems odd, humorous, or extreme in hindsight. In this chronological research article, we will track down both textual and visual mentions and hints at queer sexualities and see how they function within the context of the game. The instances of male homosexuality – as those we initially started to look for – as well as 'queerness' more generally are then analyzed as representations in the context of cultural studies and the discussion on identity politics. Our survey is far from comprehensive, and indeed, this article is intended as an opening into a new field of study.[6]

Basics of Role-playing Games

When analyzing characters in role-playing games, one of the most important things to consider is the function of the character position. Game characters vary from being a near-invisible tool (almost like a cursor on the screen) used to implement changes on the game world, to a complex depiction of beings akin to real-like humans with rich personal histories. This progression from a cursor

4. Michael J. Tresca. The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games. Jefferson: McFarland, 2010. Jon Peterson. Playing at the World. A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures from Chess to Role-Playing Games. San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012. Shannon Appelcline. Designers & Dragons. A History of the Roleplaying Game Industry. Silver Spring: Evil Hat Productions, 2015.

5. Adrienne Shaw. Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. Anna Anthropy. Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2012.

6. Indeed, we encourage readers who are aware of queer representations in role-playing game source books not mentioned in this article to contact the authors.

to an avatar to a possible person is tied to the game context. Genre, theme, and general aim of the game play an important part in setting up the context. For example, games focusing on exploration of terrain and violent conquest have less use for multifaceted character constructs than games examining societal issues or simulating alternative social structures.

Today's role-playing games span this whole spectrum. In fact, as the term "role-playing game" (RPG) suggests, one of the most important aspects of the RPG is 'playing a role', adopting and adapting characteristics in order to become someone else for the purposes of a game. However, role-playing games are not always about nuanced character study. In the dawn of role-playing games, play consisted mainly of fighting, exploration of space and adventure, while character development referred to measurable statistics, not growth of a personality. Furthermore, this tradition is still alive and well, even if it is nowadays only one approach to role-play among many.

In the 1970s and 1980s, role-playing games were generally not dealing with societal themes. When RPGs were attacked as subversive and dangerous, the defense was that they were simply make-believe and imagination.[7] Considering the context where role-playing games emerged – a male-dominated wargaming community – it is not surprising that the themes concerning sexuality or gender were not dealt with in the source books. Jon Peterson's meticulous history of the roots of the original *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), *Playing at the World*, notes that the wargaming community that the role-playing hobby grew from was a particularly conservative youth culture.[8] Sexuality was hinted at in the earliest publications, but those instances were quickly removed in later editions. It seems that role-playing games and their source books in the 1970s were based on rather conservative and conformist values.

Indeed, the role-playing hobby acquired its reputation as a dangerous subculture in the 1980s based on its alleged flirting with demon worshipping, not its sexual open-mindedness. A case in point of this is the coverage of role-play conventions by the popular press. For instance, Michelle Nephew notes in her dissertation *Playing with Power* how this kind of reportage tends to show "aging boys" as awkward and desexualized – while often also including a picture of a token woman, scantily clad. In the popular media, both role-playing games and their players have been considered remarkably asexual for a

7. See, for example, Gary Gygax quoted in Michelle Nephew. Playing with Power: The Authorial Consequences of Roleplaying Games. Doctoral dissertation, The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2003.

8. Peterson, 2012.

long time. Indeed, portrayals of *Dungeons & Dragons* in the media often act as shorthand for males who are overweight, socially awkward, living with their parents – and perpetually single.

The objectified and sexualized women in the visual material commonly associated with role-playing source books have been there from the very beginning. Bare female breasts can be found from the very first edition of D&D. However, there was a clear move away from such sexist imagery by the late 1970s, coinciding with a debate on female character and players.[9] Although sometimes used in imagery, sexual themes did not proliferate in role-playing games. Alas, sexuality was not the only essential element of real life missing from role-playing games. This passage, from the description of clerics in the extremely popular 'Red Box' version of *Dungeons & Dragons* (1983) is particularly telling of the attitude of the publishers at the time:

> *In D&D games, as in real life, people have ethical and theological beliefs. All characters are assumed to have them, and they do not affect the game. They can be assumed, just as eating, resting and other activities are assumed, and should not become part of the game.*

We can assume that sexuality is covered by this statement: 'it should not be part of the game.'

However, source books and actual practice of play are two separate issues. Playing of tabletop role-playing games are poorly documented, but Gary Alan Fine's ethnography *Shared Fantasy* conducted in late 1970s amongst role-players shows for instance that, at least among his informants, raping of female non-player characters by male player-characters was rampant in the games conducted by all-male player groups. The source books only provide the starting point for role-playing games, and they cannot determine player contributions and the actual practices of play.

Feeling Your Way in the Darkness

Queer sexualities started to figure in the role-playing game books towards the end of the 1980s. However, in these early depictions, male homosexuality is presented as especially villainous, traitorous, and deceitful. There are also a few scattered instances of characters that can be described as transgender

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9. Aaron Trammell. "Misogyny and the Female Body in Dungeons & Dragons." Analog Game Studies, 2.4 (2014). Online at http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/10/constructing-the-female-body-in-role-playing-games/ Jon Peterson.

or genderqueer – but also transphobic. There is Slaanesh, for example, the god of lust and excess, who has fluid gender expression and who inhabits the Warhammer fantasy world (from *Realm of Chaos: Slaves to Darkness*, 1988).

When it comes to the introduction of queer themes, GURPS (*Generic Universal Role-Playing System*) led the way with a licensed game based on the Wild Cards novels, *GURPS Supers Wild Cards* (1988). There you could find a closeted gay homophobe, an anti-hero imported from the novels called *Mack the Knife*. Similarly, in the superhero supplement for *I.S.T. International Super Teams* (1991), there is a closeted gay man from the Soviet Union (a gay hero living with AIDS was cut from the manuscript, but published online years later). Perhaps the most positive mention of queerness is to be found in *Bunnies & Burrows* (1992, inspired by Richard Adams' novel *Watership Down*), which contains a passage that describes how a male bunny in heat will hump anything, including inanimate objects and other male bunnies.

Mackie Messer (Mack the Knife; real name Detlev Mackintosh)

Created by Victor Milán

Born: circa 1970, Hamburg, Germany

Appearance: Mackie is a nervous, pallid little (5' 7'', 125 lbs.) hunchback with straw-colored hair, a long thin nose, sunken cheeks, and a thin-lipped mouth. He's prone to facial tics and his skin has a dry-parchment quality that makes him look older than he really is. He is usually very poorly dressed in stained, worn jeans and a scruffy black leather jacket.

Wild Card Ability: Mackie can make the molecules of his body resonate to change their phase and interpenetrate other materials. He can walk through walls, and he can also make his hands vibrate very rapidly so that they can cut through any known substance. (Against a very hard substance, he would have to cut more slowly.)

ST 8 (-15 points) IQ 10 (0 points) Speed: 5.25
DX 9 (-10 points) HT 12 (20 points) Move: 6
Damage: Buzzsaw punch 2d+2 impaling; Thrust 1d-3; Swing 1d-2

Advantages:
Ambidexterity (10 points)
Patron: Senator Gregg Hartman on 12 or less (40 points)

Disadvantages:
Bloodlust (-10 points)
Intolerance: Homosexuals, Jews, Jokers, Homeless (-10 points)
Jealousy (-10 points)
Sadism (-15 points)
Ugly (-10 points)

Super Advantage:
Insubstantiality (Switchable +1; Can turn parts of body insubstantial selectively +2; 98 points)

Power and Super-Skill:
* Vibration Power 20 (Buzzsaw, 160 points)

Buzzsaw-16 (works on all kinds of materials +6, 64 points)

Skills:
Brawling-12 (8 points); English-8 (½ point); German-10 (0 points); Running-9 (½ point); Scrounging-9 (½ point); Streetwise-14 (10 points)

Quirks:
Identifies strongly with Mackie Messer of Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*
Constantly whistles ''Mack the Knife''
Reads slowly and with difficulty
Dislikes women
Hates his real name

Mackie's mother was a Scots prostitute. His father was a high officer in the Bundeswehr, or so his mother always claimed. Actually he was a American deserter from 'Nam. Mackie grew up on the streets of Hamburg, sporadically schooled, usually in trouble. He went to Berlin in late 1980s and hooked up with the revived Red Army Fraction terrorist group. He met Gregg Hartmann when the senator was kidnapped by the RAF and Gimli's Jokers for a Just Society. It was there, also, that he became a Hartmann puppet and was maneuvered into going berserk and killing his fellow terrorists to free Hartmann.

Mackie is an authentic psychopath. He hates his real first name (which is German slang for homosexual). He has a morbid hatred of homosexuals, predicated on his fear that he might be one . . . and he hates women as well. He also hates Jews, bums, jokers, and anyone who's better off than he is (which is almost everyone). Only fear and pain turn him on. His hunchback has nothing to do with the wild card. It is the result of a birth defect and causes him constant pain. He fancies himself a Marxist, but actually knows little about politics. He loved working for the terrorists because he loves to kill, personally and up close.

His hand can cut through anything physical. He is the perfect assassin. Deadly, remorseless, unstoppable. He loves and will do anything in the world for Senator Hartmann.

Character description of Mackie Messer from GURPS Supers: Wild Cards (1988).

The earliest mentions of queers in RPG source books are either inspired by

mythological or specific fictional texts – or these characters seem to be included for the purposes of comic relief. As HIV/AIDS was becoming more of a social issue in the course of the 1980s and starting to figure in all kinds of cultural texts, hints of it also made their way into role-playing game materials. At times, the moral panic around queer sexualities was very prominent also in the context of role-playing games.

The darkest representation of homosexuality at the time comes from publisher Task Force Games. In 1988 they released a game called *Central Casting: Heroes of Legend*. In its source book, being transsexual, asexual, gay, bisexual, fetishistic, voyeuristic, or necrophiliac are all listed as sexual disorders and examples of terrifying dark sides of personality.

The same publisher mentions homosexuality in its later works as well. In *Heroes Now!* (1991), they have a designer position statement that expresses a wish that these kinds of abominations (such as being gay) should not be brought into the game at all. If they for some reason had to be included, these dark features should be played in such a way that they would be awful burdens and obstacles which the player characters would try to get rid of. The game is positioned as having explicit conservative values. When writing about homosexuality and other "perversions", the game's authors declare that a sexual relationship is appropriate only between husband and wife, all perversions can be tamed and cured, and using the role-playing game for experimenting with a 'wrong kind of behavior' is a very bad idea:

> *Despite "popular" trends in culture and psychology, the authors of this book believe the following three statements to be true:*
>
> - *Any sexual relationship other than between a husband and wife is wrong.*
> - *Perverse sexual desires are a form of learned and ingrained behavior and as such can be controlled, overcome and eventually replaced by healthy desires and behavior.*
> - *Using roleplay to vicariously experience wrong behavior is a bad idea.*
>
> *While we are not called to be judges, it is our belief that those who chose to continue in perverse behavior will ultimately be held accountable for their actions. Those who seek to brainwash society into accepting such behavior as normal are only making the problem worse for themselves and others.*

649F: Sexual Disorder [D]*

> * All Sexual Disorders are considered to be Darkside personality traits by most societies, fantastic or otherwise.

These are what many societies consider aberrant behavior, usually because of religious doctrine. Whether societies in a fantasy world consider them so is up to the GM. Yet it should be taken into consideration that, historically speaking, most societies have not condoned the behaviors list below. Take care in presenting and roleplaying these disorders, since a flippant, careless, or callous stance may embarrass, annoy, or offend othr players and GMs alike.

Instructions: Roll 2d8, and total the results. Then match the total against *Table 649F* to select the disorder.

Roleplay: Like the person addicted to drugs, characters afflicted with sexual disorders may feel a need to fulfil their sexual needs (the stronger the Trait Strength the greater the need).

Most Cultures and societies consider anything other than straightforward sexual desire for members opposite sex as abnormal, even evil and unclean. As mentioned previously, this is often due to the moral climate established by prevalent religions. In such societies, practioners of these behaviors may be persecuted and punished (even marital infidelity may be severely punished). On the other hand, where something is banned, one may be certain that unscrupulous types will find some way to make a profit from it.

Be wary of what the character may go through if his "secret" is discovered. More often than not, a character with a sexual disorder will attempt to hide it from others, either out of fear or shame (although a character afflicted with transsexuallism may attempt to hide his true sex). It is not uncommon for a character afflicted with a sexual disorder to imagine himself to be normal or OK and try to live with it rather than change.

2d8	649F: Sexual Disorder (roll 2d8)
2	**Transsexualism.** Believe oneself to be the spirit of one gender trapped in the body of the opposite gender. May express itself as constant Transvestitism.
3	**Complete disinterest.** No sexual desire.
4	**Shyness.** Uncomfortable around opposite gender, difficult to talk with them. At the extreme, it may be a fear, either Gynephobia (fear of females) or Androphobia (fear of males).
5	**Homosexuality.** Sexually attracted only to persons of same gender as oneself.
6	**Bisexuality.** Sexually attracted to persons of both genders (usually more strongly to one than the other).
7	**Transvestitism.** Sexually excited by wearing clothing of the opposite gender. May try and pass oneself off as a someone of opposite gender, which may be difficult unless the character is also androgynous (neither strongly male nor female in appearance).
8	**Nymphomania (F)** or **Satyrism (M).** Abnormally strong, uncontrollable desire for sexual experience.
9	**Sadism.** Derive pleasure from inflicting or viewing pain in others. Often combined with masochism.
10	**Masochism.** Derive pleasure from having pain inflicted upon oneself. Often combined with sadism.

2d8	649F: Sexual Disorder (continued ...)
11	**Too Prude.** Convinced that sex is bad in any form. Despises all who lower themselves to it, including self. Roll a d8. If the result is 6-8, the character is actually suppressing or trying to hide his own sexual disorder. Reroll the disorder on this table.
12	**Voyeurism.** A "Peeping Tom" who is sexually excited by watching others perform sexual acts.
13	**Fetishism.** Sexually attracted to or excited by a specific person or thing. The character may have a secret collection of fetishes. Roll a d10 on the subtable below to select the object of attraction.

1	Women's clothing (not for wearing, though).
2	Men's clothing (not for wearing, though).
3	Shoes.
4	Hair – particularly women's hair.
5	Select from *Table 867: Body Locations.*
6	An animal.
7	Select from *Table 649C: Phobias.*
8	Select from *Table 863: Gifts & Legacies.*
9	A type of person. Select on *Table 750: Others.*
10	A relative. Select on *Table 753: Relatives.*

2d8	
14	**Necrophilia.** Sexually excited by dead bodies.
15-16	Roll 1d2+1 times for multiple sexual disorders.

From here — Return to the Table that sent you here . . .

Sexual Disorder table in Central Casting: Heroes of Legend (1988).

Tables for random generation of events or effects were a widespread trope in early role-playing source books. Such tables were places where queer sexualities and relationship options could slip in as if through the cracks. The Central Casting books are an extreme, explicit example: in *Cyberpunk 2020* (1990) there is a table where you can end up creating an ex-lover for your character – of the same sex. *Over the Edge* (1992) does not have a random table, but a list of

examples of secrets a character might have. On the list we can find, "You are gay and feel the need to keep this a secret", but also "You worked for the CIA" and "You are a cannibal."

Generally speaking, queer sexualities started to break in more noticeably in games belonging to the cyberpunk genre. A particularly interesting example of gay male representation is offered by *Cyberspace: Sprawlgangs & Megacorps* (1990). In it a homosexual gang called 'Models', consisting of handsome male fashion models, randomly assaults beautiful women in the street. They cut their faces with knives, then point the finger at them and shout: "Now we are prettier than you!" The source book also explains that even though all the members of this gang are openly gay, "they will not 'stoop' to prostitution as a matter of 'pride'".

These early representations of male homosexuality are interesting in the sense that clearly there was a wish to bring in more contemporary, "adult" themes among RPG designers, but handling such matters was very awkward. It looks like conservative designers felt compelled to include these kinds of themes – while advising against actually playing with them. It is notable that while it is strange to read these storylines and character descriptions today, some of these were ground-breaking at the time of their publication. Later on it has turned out that there were gay designers working on those games, as well, but even they struggled with the narrow-minded politics of representation at their disposal.

There are allegations that some companies, such as *Dungeons & Dragons* publisher TSR and *Warhammer* publisher Games Workshop, have periodically had rules that banned the depiction of queers. Although such claims are common, we have thus far been unable to substantiate them. Nevertheless, it does not take effort to interpret the TSR Code of Ethics from 1984 relating to rape, lust, and sexual perversions to also ban queers: "Rape and graphic lust should never be portrayed or discussed. Sexual activity is not to be portrayed. Sexual perversion and sexual abnormalities are unacceptable." It has to be noted that the general acceptability of these themes has always depended on the games' target demographics, too. For instance, it is easy to encounter claims that the sexuality of god Slaanesh was diminished by Games Workshop in 1990 when the company started to address a younger player-base.

A New Day Starts at Dusk

A watershed moment in the treatment of queer sexualities in RPGs is the influential game *Vampire: the Masquerade* from 1991. In fact, the whole game

SPRAWLGANGS | **MODELS** | 15

LEADER: Jimmy Idle.
CORE MEMBERSHIP: ≈ 120.
ASSOCIATED MEMBERSHIP: ≈ 5,000 worldwide.
DEMOGRAPHICS: 100% male, age 16-25.
HEADQUARTERS: Decibel Death Club, San Francisco.
TURF: Castro Street District.
IDENTIFIERS/COLORS: High fashion clothes (currently, Eros Flynn baggy coveralls), styled hair.
ACTIVITIES: Assassination, modelling, industrial sabotage and espionage, drugs, shopping.
GENERAL ATTITUDE: Aloof.
COMMON EQUIPMENT: Sensory Cyber Systems, DNI and razornails (all concealed). Most SF members have Beretta M98's.
SPRAWLGANG TYPE: Dealer.
ALLIED GANGS: Dick Van Dykes, Shades.
ENEMY GANGS: Airboys, Ginos ("greasers"), New Hitler Youth, Road Kills ("filth"), Untouchables, WASPs ("preppies"), Net Heads.

COMMENTARY

This gang is, interestingly, made up of the most cold-blooded killers in the city. They are without exception beautiful young men (some of them made so with the help of surgery) who model for fashion videocatalogs and shows for their day job. At night, however, they don stealth black coveralls and perform elaborate spy and sabotage missions for the Megacorps. Some are quite intelligent — skilled CyberDeck operators and covert operations experts. Those with skulljacks have the placed so as not to detract from their appearance, of course. Models only employ cyberware which can be fully concealed.

Groups of Models will roam the City at night, randomly attacking people on the street, especially beautiful young women. They deliberately scar their victims, laughing and yelling "Now we're prettier than you!" This is not just a bunch of pretty psychotics, however: the Models have a well-run criminal organization, with an international network devoted to gathering and selling sensitive information.

The Models are often given the derogatory names of *Style Queens* and *Pretty Boys* by their enemies (often the WASPs and New Hitler Youth). While the entire membership is unabashedly homosexual, they will not 'stoop' to prostitution (as a matter of "pride").

Though an international gang, the Models' HQ is in San Francisco.

Note: Beretta M98's are custom 95R's with integral silencer and laser targeting.

MODEL

Profession: Sneak
Level: 5th
Hits: 70
AT(DB): NoA(10) or LBA(5)
Fire: +90 Machine Pistol (Beretta M98 — a custom 95R)
Melee: +80 Razornails
Skills: +45 Electronic Bypass, +40 Culture, +40 Equipment, +50 Exploit, +30 Stalk & Hide

Description of the Models gang from Sprawlgangs & Megacorps (1990), an organizations sourcebook for Cyberspace.

series of World of Darkness (WoD) took sex and sexuality among its main themes. WoD presented players with an unprecedented array of sexual encounter options, naturally including bloodsucking as the principal form of

having sex between vampires. These games unmistakably targeted a different audience, one that at least self-identified as more mature and more contemporary than earlier role-players. As Paul Mason has wryly noted:

> *[…]* Vampire *and its successors took role-playing out of its core constituency (which could perhaps be pithily, if unkindly, be described as* Lord of the Rings-*reading social inadequates) and established an alternative fief – in this case that of undead-obsessed 'goths'.*[10]

Indeed, Michelle Nephew makes the argument that White Wolf, the publisher of *Vampire*, was consistently playing with fears of parents in order to position role-playing games as subversive.[11] The *Vampire* creators and the audience they attracted presented themselves as 'alternative' in every sense of the word. Black-dressing "gothic" people obviously welcomed homosexuals and other queer characters with open arms, even if just to join forces in gaining a subculturally significant status together.

Over the years World of Darkness-related publications not only included suggestive queer imagery (such as the opening image of this article from *Changeling*: *The Dreaming 2nd edition*), but they also extensively discussed queer sexualities. Especially the fictional parts which were meant to set the atmosphere and exemplary characters could be openly queer and non-normative. The text of the game is often defiant: these exemplary characters are politically inclined and they evoke ideas of positive discrimination. There is, especially in the early inclusions, an air of tokenism as oftentimes the whole point of having gay characters seems to be having gay characters. Interestingly, one also does get a feeling that many of these roles are actually written by gay people themselves.

In the 1990s, a lot more positive attributes start getting attached to queer characters in RPGs. For instance, in many source books from this decade the special power of homosexuals is being good-looking. These exemplary gay characters always have more Appearance points than the regular guy. The only officially ugly gay character in WoD is probably in the first *Clanbook: Nosferatu* (1993) clan book. Even gays are affected by putrefactive blood.

The influence of WoD in developing and distributing positive representations of queer characters cannot be overestimated. In a few short years the depictions

10. Paul Mason. "In Search of the Self. A Survey of the First 25 Years of Anglo-American Role-Playing Theory." Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination. Edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros. Vantaa: Ropecon ry, 2004, pp. 1–14.

11. Nephew, 2003.

EQUALIZER

Quote: *Why can't* (lifts assailant by scruff of neck) *we all just* (shakes assailant like rat) *get along?* (tosses assailant against wall)

Prelude: You had known you were different since you were a child, but your parents were strict and didn't talk about things like that. The other kids at school, however, had plenty of words: *faggot, queer.*

Then you went off to college and met Doug. Eloquent and outspoken, Doug was a member of ACT-UP and active in several on-campus gay-rights groups. With him, you felt comfortable about yourself for the first time. He brought you out of your shell and made you realize that the guilt you felt was the world's problem, not yours. Common cause blossomed into friendship and thereafter into romance.

Doug was, perhaps, too outspoken for his own good. It started when a truck tried to run the two of you down. As you hit the pavement, the truck screeched to a halt, and six guys — frat boys by the looks of them — jumped out. They carried lumber, chains, baseball bats — a melange of weapons — though the looks on their faces were identical. They hissed the old epithets at you: *faggot, queer.*

For you, it was over pretty quickly. You felt a beer bottle shatter along your right temple, and you barely even registered the rain of blows that cracked your back and ribs. You heard, as if underwater, Doug's faint, gurgling cries, and the impact of wood and metal and glass into flesh. You couldn't lift a finger to help him.

The pain engulfed you, subsided … and then flared up again stronger than ever. You stared up through mist into the face (?) of the most repulsive creature you had even seen. Maybe the preacher was right after all; maybe you'd died and gone to hell.

If so, this was a particularly merciful devil. It held out a cracked claw and gently lifted you off the ground. It cradled you to its chest and placed its wrist next to your mouth. Then you looked down and saw Doug's broken corpse. Part of you died

again in that moment. Ever since then, you have devoted your unlife to protecting the oppressed members of society — Kindred and kine alike.

Concept: You are a normal guy who has been hardened by the past few years. Your Attributes and Abilities reflect a fairly bright person with a decent education. You have learned quite a bit about "the system" and its hypocrisy, and this knowledge has led to the development of a few less-than-ethical Abilities.

Roleplaying Tips: You are rather shy at heart, particularly now that you have become a monster. You don't like to appear in front of people and prefer to watch the world go by from hiding. If you do talk to others, Kindred or kine, you are generally polite and unassuming. Injustice of any sort enrages you, however, and in its presence you are likely to enter a roaring frenzy.

Equipment: VW Bug, backpack, books

48 ⚜ CLANBOOK NOSFERATU
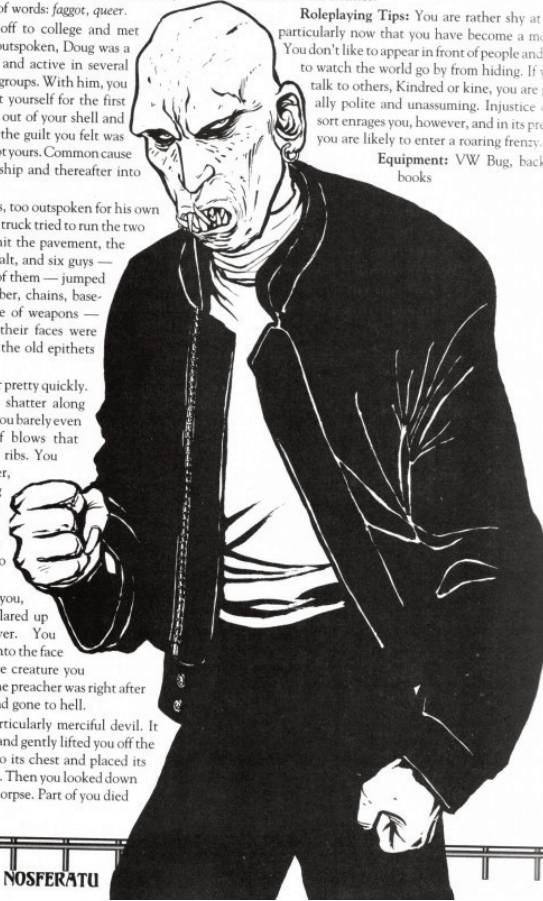
Equalizer from Clanbook: Nosferatu (1993) is a paradigmatic example of a character that is all about being gay.

of gay and other non-normative characters became normalized and publisher White Wolf had proven its open-mindedness and earned queer credentials. After that, gay characters could be portrayed as evil and strange again, but in

a more meaningful and humane manner. For example, in Vampire supplement *Montreal by Night* (1997), there is a gay Sabbat group called Queens of Mercy (that has ties to real world gay history) which beat up straight people. They also organize rituals for which they kidnap regular people, dress them up, and make them compete in absurd things like high-pitch screaming. In the end, these kidnappees are forced to act out the catfight between Joan Collins and Linda Evans from the TV show *Dynasty*.

Homosexual Fantasies

While horror, cyberpunk, and some other genres started figuring and negotiating queer sexualities during the 1990s, the fantasy genre lagged behind. *Dungeons & Dragons* remained free of gay influences due to company policy. Not even the brothel description of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* hinted at queer sexualities. Perhaps most striking of all is the lack of homosexuality in *Theatrix Presents: Ironwood* (1995), which is an RPG adaptation of a pornographic comic with the same name. The role-playing game is surprisingly tame, and only hints faintly at homosexuality.

However, all of this does not mean that fantasy was completely free of homos. *Rolemaster: Shadow World* (1996) had a gay character and some world description, although only in the web supplement. In the source book of *Fading Suns: Lods of the Known Worlds* (1996), it is stated that the (fairly strict) church does not frown on any sexual orientation. *HârnMaster 2nd edition* (1996) has a table relating to character creation, where everyone has a 10 per cent chance of ending up gay or bisexual. In *Warhammer Fantasy Role-Play, 2nd Edition* (2005), there is an opaque reference to a count having taken a liking to a beautiful young man. Sometimes the references are so vague that they seem almost as if coded, and the designers would only confirm their intentions on internet forums.

The classic *Dungeons & Dragons* supplement of *The Temple of Elemental Evil* presents an interesting case. The original came out in 1985 and is obviously queer free. The sequel, *Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil* (2001) features an allusion to a closeted gay couple, Rufus and Burne. This is the relevant passage, describing their habitat:

> *An inner wall identical to the curtain wall surrounds this main structure.*
> *It has towers with a single gate (same as those in the barbican), creating*
> *an inner bailey surrounding a keep, called the donjon. The donjon has four*

> *levels with a grand hall, a feast hall, a huge kitchen, many storerooms, an*
> *apartment for Rufus and Burne, a vast library, and guest chambers.*

We think it is fair to say that this quote does not exactly shout gay. Yet the principal author Monte Cook is sure about it:

> *It was not the intention of the original creators of Rufus and Burne (who*
> *were PCs together and played through the adventure) that they were gay.*
> *   However, it was absolutely my intention to portray them as such in*
> *Return to the Temple of Elemental Evil (there's only the one bedchamber*
> *for them in the entire castle), without saying "and they're gay," which would*
> *be silly. (Silly because it's really not an issue, and because I didn't identify*
> *straight characters as such.)*[12]

As social mores were changing and other role-playing games started to include references to homosexuality, fantasy tried to keep up, but in a very covert way. However, player cultures were still not following the books, and that was starting to become visible when player creations achieved higher circulation and visibility due the expansion of computer networks.

Towards Rule 34

In the mid-1990s, as the Internet was starting to figure in the lives of early adopters, fan supplements to role-playing games began to surface. The tone in these web publications was playful, as they featured spells like 'Mordenkainen's lubrication'. Some of these had openly sexual themes, such as (the unofficial) *GURPS Sex* (1993) and *The Complete Guide to Unlawful Carnal Knowledge* (1996). The latter compared homosexual relations to interracial marriages (such as human-elf) and featured an essay on the topic of, 'has anyone played a homosexual character'. It also suggested plot points such as 'reverse rape' (described as a gay man raped by a woman). The guide contained a tongue-in-cheek reference to choices of professions for gay people:

> *Homosexuals are, however, rumored to be found in disproportionately high*
> *numbers among certain groups, such as adventurers, who have often been*

12. Cook quoted from webforum ENWorld. http://www.enworld.org/forum/
showthread.php?157547-Gay-PCs-or-NPCs/page8&p=2746140&viewfull=1#post2746140. Interestingly, in the computer game version of Temple of Elemental Evil (2003) there is a gay sub-plot (one of the first in videogames): a pirate named Berham openly flirts with his male gaming buddies, promising eternal love and worship if he is freed from the hands of his captain.

*driven to adventure because they couldn't quite fit into normal society, and
the priesthoods of faiths which require celibacy, since the priests never need
to explain their lack of interest in conventional marriage.*

After the year 2000, there was a rush to publish general RPG supplements on
sexuality. Some of these tried to take advantage of the open d20 license, but a
"quality standard" provision was added in time to prevent *Book of Erotic Fantasy*
(2003) from being issued under the license. The book contains a passage that
recalls the description of beliefs from D&D red box:

> *Sexual orientation has no impact whatsoever on a character's ability scores,
> fighting prowess, spellcasting, class abilities (with the exception of prestige
> classes that might require a character to be one sexual preference or another),
> or other mechanics of the game. A gay character lives, eats, and breathes
> like anyone else and can be kind, just, cruel, selfish, loving, haughty, or
> amusing… just like anyone else.*

It is interesting to note this supplement explicating that out of all 'humanoid
races, humans tend to be the most diverse sexually.' Other sex supplements
published around that time included a new version of *The Guide to Unlawful
Carnal Knowledge* (2003) and *Nymphology* (2003); *Naughty and Dice* (2003) was
based on *GURPS Sex*. Some of books had well-meaning and inclusive takes on
queer sexualities, although the texts were seldom particularly insightful.
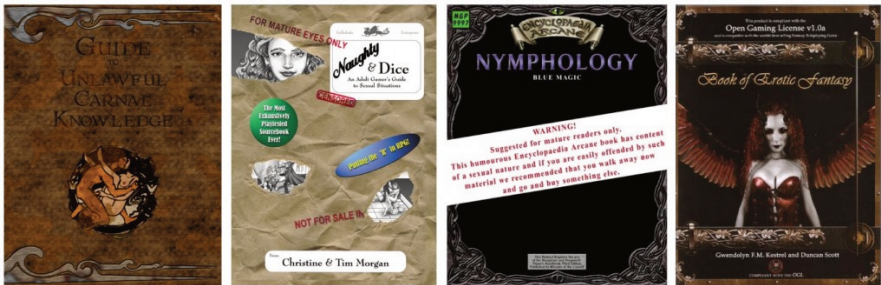
Four general supplements for sexuality in role-playing games from 2003.

We're Here! We're Queer!

In the early 2000s, the representations of queer identities in RPGs proliferated.
Although core fantasy was still largely a no homo zone, most other genres were
interspersed with a wild bunch of non-normative characters, too.

Throughout the nineties, GURPS had continued to occasionally feature setting-appropriate mentions of homosexuality. Usually the tone was very matter-of-fact, trying not to make a big spectacle of the gay content. Gradually, queer representations started to become more varied and more prominent. Particularly, the publisher White Wolf continued on this track with its superhero game *Aberrant* (1999), where many of the primary supplements had prominent gay characters, some of who were also tied to the metaplot of the setting. Sometimes the representations went a bit over the top, though. In *Aberrant*, a wish-fulfillment power fantasy, the wishes being fulfilled are certainly fairly stereotypical.

In *Player's Guide* (2000), a gay superhero gang Queer Nova Alliance is introduced. Its gang members include a once-bullied nightclub owner from Ibiza named Ironskin, a drag queen named Glamora, BDSM-related character called The Master, the protector of San Francisco named Rainbow, and self-cloning Tommy Orgy. In this game, the most powerful guy in the world, Divis Mal, also happens to be gay, although he is not a member of this posse.
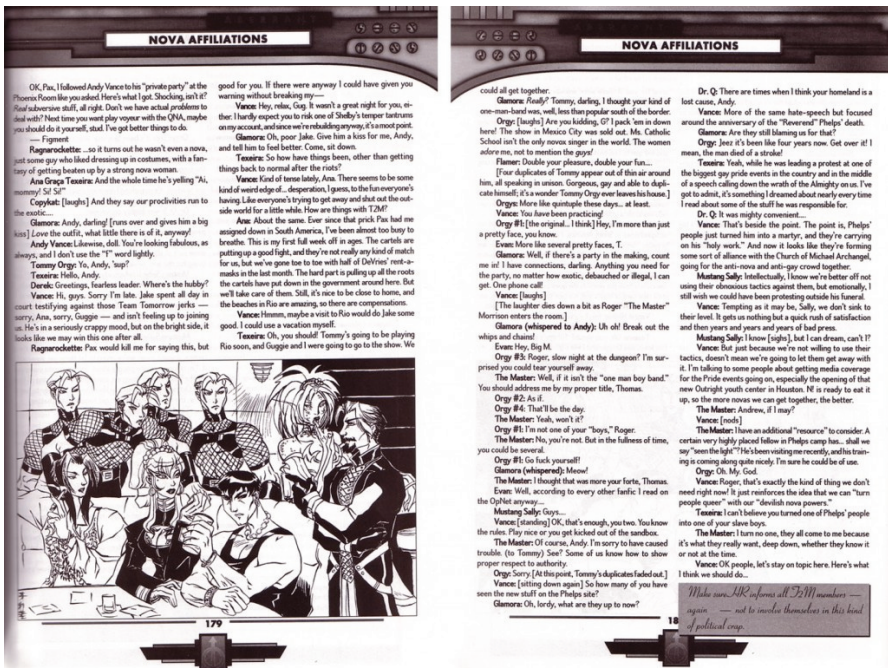
Transcript of a meeting of the Queer Nova Alliance, from Aberrant: Player's Guide (2000).

After the turn of the millennium the representation of queer sexualities seemed

to start to normalize in role-playing game source books. For example *Blue Planet 2nd Edition Player's Guide* (2000), *Love and War* (2003), *Mutants & Masterminds: Freedom City* (2003), *Unknown Armies 2nd Edition* (2002) all feature queer content. It seems that a key factor is the publisher; some publishers (e.g. Green Ronin, White Wolf, Atlas Games, Steve Jackson Games) considered queer people a part of their audience. Sometimes the wording in these source books is still awkward, but the intent seems inclusive, although representations of gay male sexuality are obviously much more prominent and varied than, say, those of transgender people.

At the very end of the period under scrutiny here is one more source book that should be discussed for its progressive, yet gratuitous depictions of queer sexuality. *Blue Rose* (2005) belongs to the genre of "romantic fantasy", and it is decisively targeted at female players. The world it portrays is based on feminist and egalitarian principles in the style of Mercedes Lackey, Diane Duane, and Tamora Pierce. As in these books, this game is rife with sensitive and lovable gay boys. The source book has names for different kinds of love – heterosexual (*cepia luath*) and homosexual (*caria daunen*) – and makes a point saying that same-sex love was born in myths before straight love. The introductory adventure in the core book features young boys who are secretly in love with each other.[13]

It thus seems that in the 2000s it is possible to have a strongly queer-themed role-playing game out in the market, and nobody thinks twice about it. Whereas in most RPGs queer relations are relatively easy to bypass if the players are not interested in trying them out, in *Blue Rose* that may not be possible. If one would really try, the same-sex couples depicted in the book could perhaps be interpreted as "just friends", but rewriting the central world-shaping mythos would take a lot of effort. Why even consider such an option? The discussion on the general acceptability of such queer thematics is clearly indicative of the history of role-playing games, which has not been inclusive or unbiased towards such content for a very long time.

Possible People

On the basis of our observations, it is clear that the role-playing game industry has been rather conservative overall when it comes to representations of queer sexuality. Here we have searched for queer sexualities in role-playing game

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13. Another noteworthy RPG source book published in 2005 is Wraethu: From Enchantment to Fulfilment, based on the Wraethu novels by Storm Constantine. The game features male humans transformed into hara, an androgynous hermaphrodite species. Sexual themes are present.
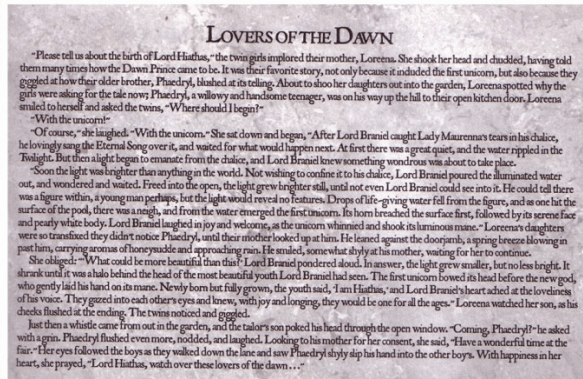
Blue Rose (2005) mythos explains the birth of homosexual love.

source books, but a key question remains: Do queer characters matter and if yes, to whom?

More specifically, does representation of queer sexualities – and identification with and as the characters – matter? Adrienne Shaw's book *Gaming at the Edge*, an ethnography of queer players of offline digital games, shows that representation and identification are complex issues, and often players do not even seem to care about representation. Based on just reading role-playing game source books we are unable to comment if the same applies to role-playing games. However, if role-playing games are not just about exploration and conquest, but feature societal and personal themes, then we would tend to think that representation and identification have to be important for many players.

The literature on immersion and experience in the larp context supports this,[14] and so does the media panic rhetoric around role-playing games about players identifying too strongly with their characters and getting stuck in them.[15] One reason for this difference is that in analog role-playing games the character has a stronger presence and is more personal as players have

14. For examples, see: Heidi Hopeametsä. "24 Hours in a Bomb Shelter. Player, Character and Immersion in Ground Zero." Playground Worlds. Creating and Evaluating Experiences of Role-Playing Games. Edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros. Helsinki: Ropecon ry, 2008, pp. 187–198. Markus Montola. "The positive negative experience in extreme role-playing." Proceedings of DiGRA 2010 Conference. Experiencing Games: Games, Play, and Players. Stockholm, Sweden, 16–17 August, 2010. Jaakko Stenros. "Behind Games: Playful Mindsets and Transformative Practices." Gameful World. Approaches, Issues, Applications. Edited by Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015, pp. 201–222.

15. Nephew, 2003.

more agency in their creation and actions. On the other hand, in one emic theory of role-playing from the discussion forum The Forge, there are different stances towards how a player arrives at the decision concerning the character's action.[16] Stances include *Actor* (using only the knowledge of a character), *Author/Pawn* (decision based on player preference), and *Director* (affecting not just the character but the environment). It is interesting to note that none of these stances require identification with the character. In terms of play studies this implies that role-playing does not need to be pretend play (playing as if someone else), but can be and often is carried out as object play (play with conceptual objects, in this case characters).[17]

Even if identification were to be unimportant, through the concept of representation it is possible to think about what kinds of existences are *possible* in games. In her book, Shaw lists three arguments for representation: seeing people "like them" in media, seeing people unlike them (in order to educate about plurality), and seeing who is possible. It is this third category that seems most appealing to us and relevant in the study of role-playing game source books. These books are basically game rules; they delineate what the games and game worlds are like. Having any kind of queer presence signals that the game worlds can and do include queer people. Opening this kind of possibility space seems quite important. However, this remains speculation without proper player studies.

Conclusions

In this article we have started to construct an alternative history of role-playing game source books, one that shows that queer people have been and are possible in various game worlds at least since the late 1980s. Even when the terminology used and values embedded are questionable by contemporary standards, the inclusion of queer people signals the possibility of such lives in fictional settings.

For a long while, character actions and behaviors not directly related to questing and adventuring were not described in the worlds of role-playing games – or at least in the source books these practices were based upon. Questions of faith and activities such as eating were sometimes explicitly defined as not being relevant for role-play, even if characters were

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16. Ron Edwards. "GNS and Other Matters of Role-Playing Theory." The Forge. The Internet Home for Independent Role-Playing Games. 2001. Online at http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/4/

17. Stenros, 2005; see also Gordon M. Burghardt. The Genesis of Animal Play. Testing the Limits. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.

representatives of religions and there were rules for the consumption, purchasing, and demand of food as fuel. As these canvases of role-playing games started to become more varied, also sexuality began to play a more prominent role in them. The emphasis was no longer in simply approaching the character as a cursor in a fantastic world, but a plausible, possible character – a persona. Yet queer sexualities were usually completely absent from these texts, or they were in the end associated with derangement, chaos, and evil.

The influence of individual game designers and authors has no doubt been important, even in cases of many of the representations today being regarded as rather negative. The context where some companies had strict rules about the total erasure of queers even tiny mentions may have been important victories at the time. Even the most fleeting mention, a veiled remark, would signal that the game world does indeed feature queer people. However, grasping the importance of such occurrences cannot be achieved through studying the source books alone. Later the influence of player practices has grown, especially as the significance of internet has increased – although player debates in gaming related periodicals were significant from the beginning. It is evident that the more adventurous material usually emerges from fan forums.

It is worth noting that although the presence of homosexuals has grown and the handling of queer themes has become more nuanced during the period under scrutiny, intersectionality is still largely missing. As is evident from the examples in this article, for example, male homosexuals are predominantly white. Questions of ethnicity, although present in discussion around fantasy literature, did not seem to influence queers in source books in any significant manner during the first three decades of RPGs.

This is not to say, however, that role-playing games would be disintegrated with the world around them. Relevant to the queer context, the HIV/AIDS crisis was reflected in RPGs, although much of that was filtered through horror literature. Instead of being at the forefront of issues of representation and inclusion, RPGs have mostly followed trends emerging elsewhere in popular culture. Even the arguably most blatantly gay role-playing game from the period under scrutiny, *Blue Rose,* simply continues the thread where traditionally conservative and conventional role-playing games are becoming more inclusive due to adaptations from other media, in this case a specific fantasy sub-genre interested in gay characters. The *Wild Cards* RPG was one of the firsts to feature an explicit homosexual character, and *Vampire: The Masquerade* certainly owns a significant debt to the homoeroticism of Anne Rice's vampire novels.

To sum up, the early role-playing games silenced queer sexualities

completely, on the grounds of not being relevant for the gameplay. An approach that has followed, and that is still relevant, is that of veiled mentions. Queers are possible in the fiction if the reader pays close attention to the choice of words. There have also been blatant, agenda driven uses of queers, both arguing that queers are an abomination, and ones proclaiming inclusivity and alternativity. More recently, the inclusions of queer sexualities have been more matter-of-fact, described without underlining – unless queerness has somehow been a key theme in the game setting. The first three decades of role-playing game source books have shown us, how representations of queer sexuality have moved from the complete darkness of dungeons out into the open.