25 Sexuality and the Erotic in Role-Play

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Role-play and role-playing games engage the imagination. Through whatever media role-playing occurs, the opportunity to create or take part in developing narratives allows for the imagining of what could be, even if it never was. This chapter considers how role-play and the erotic intersect, and specifically answers one question: what are the relationships between sexuality, the erotic, and role-play?

This chapter focuses on three key areas of interest: sexual and erotic themes and imagery in role-playing games; erotic role-play and player interactions; and sexual and erotic role play outside of game contexts. The first section largely focuses on how sex, sexuality, and the erotic have been represented in role-playing games. This section covers both rules in games which allow for the playing out of sexual acts as well as the representation of character sexuality. The second section looks at erotic role play and player interactions, examining studies

of how role-players incorporate sex into their games. The final section looks at sexual and erotic role-play behaviors in non-game contexts. This section encompasses activities that can be argued are playful, but do not revolve around a set game. Through using these three key themes to discuss sexuality and erotic role-play, this chapter provides a good introduction to contemporary research on the topic.[1]

Sexual and Erotic Themes and Imagery in Role-Playing Games

The first aspect of erotic role-play to be discussed is perhaps the most obvious from the perspective of those who play games. The representation of erotic themes and imagery in games will be discussed in this section from both narrative and mechanical aspects as the erotic is present in games both in the telling of stories and also as gameplay. This subchapter addresses various live-action role-playing (larp) mechanics for handling amorous interactions, gendered power dynamics in tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), and representations of queer sexualities in tabletop and online role-playing. But first, let us start with representations of sexual and erotic themes in TRPGs.

In the beginning, tabletop role-playing game manuals were apparently devoid of sexual or erotic content. As Ian Sturrock (2015) found, "the first Tabletop Role-Playing Game [sic] (TRPG) *Dungeons & Dragons* (Arneson and Gygax 1974) does not mention love, romance, sex, or even, for that matter, women (player-characters can be Men, Dwarves, Elves, or Hobbits)" (p.64). Sturrock posits that the lack of sexual content in the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* is largely due to its roots in wargaming. Early editions of the game emphasized rules and strategy for battle over other aspects which assist and support role-play. As scholar Joseph P. Laycock notes, by all accounts at the beginning, "…the game was hopelessly confusing for anyone who did not already have a detailed knowledge of wargaming" (2015, p.44). The connection between early editions and wargaming not only means that the gaming experience was centered on combat mechanics, but it is also probable that the narratives which emerged from this early version of the game also centered on martial themes **(see also Chapter 3)**. This changed with later iterations of the game.

In an ethnography of tabletop players, Fine (1983) observed that players utilized their physical constitution score, usually a metric of a character's physical health in battle, as a way to determine how many times their character could have sex in one night. Likewise, Fine observed the use of fantasy sexual violence against

female non-player characters amongst all-male groups of players. Although Fine

does not discuss whether or not the appearance of sexual violence in the tabletop

games he observed connected to warfare tactics, as is unfortunately the case in the

real world (Vikman 2005), it does present an interesting counter-narrative to the

idea of role-playing games as a desexualized, all-male activity. The narrative of

the geeky, virgin, teenage boy playing *D&D* has been a common one in North

American press for decades (cf. Nephew 2003,p.182).

Although this chapter is about the representation of sex and the erotic in games, it

seems unavoidable to cover some gender power dynamics related to sexual

violence as these themes seem to arise out of the mechanics for sexual gameplay

in early tabletop games. Fine's (1983) ethnographic study of tabletop role-play

noted both a lack of women players and a lack of female characters in the groups

he studied. Whilst players believed the lack of women around the gaming table

was due to biological, "intrinsic differences between the sexes" (Fine 1983, p.64),

Fine found that the "…games are structured particularly for male characters…

male players comment that female characters should be treated as property and

not as human beings" (Fine 1983, p.65). Such attitudes were visible in

publications devoted to RPGs and related culture when the topics of how to bring

more women into gaming, and how to create gender-specific rules for female

characters were discussed (Trammell 2014; cf. Petersen 2014). Such attitudes were not universal, but a "locker room atmosphere" was common (Sturrock 2015, p.64). Furthermore, players interviewed by Fine commented that they often felt constrained by the presence of women players because it would "…prevent characters from engaging in fantasy rape…" (Fine 1983, p.69). In this secondary example, when sex does emerge as a narrative theme in tabletop role-playing, it is often through a narrative of violence.

It is difficult to read Fine's (1983) account and not draw parallels between tabletop role-playing's wargaming roots and the early conflation between sex and violence. Role-playing games are unique as a medium as they seem particularly prone to narrative and mechanics having a close relationship due to the emphasis on diegetic realness. That is to say, because of players' commitment to their characters, every action, every plot point must feel believable for the narrative being constructed and the theme and setting for the game. The existence of sexual violence in a game themed around war seems to make diegetic sense even if it is distasteful and a morally questionable play activity (Brown 2015a).

Aside from the representations of gender and sexual violence as a mechanic, suggestive and sexual imagery have had a clear presence in role-playing game source books since the very beginning, so to suggest that early tabletop games were completely devoid of sexual content is not accurate. The original *Dungeons & Dragons* and its supplements featured illustrations that showed naked breasts. Towards the end of the 1970s these illustrations disappeared, only to reappear in the 1990s (Trammell 2014; Stenros and Sihvonen 2015). Furthermore, although the source books were desexualized, sex was included in the practice of play, as Fine's account above attests. Additionally, Jon Peterson (2014) notes that *D&D* co-creator Dave Arneson's gaming group at the time of testing rules for the upcoming game did not shy away from sexual themes: "Contemporary records show them to be exclusively male, and as the game took after exuberant settings like Fritz Leiber's Lankhmar and John Norman's Gor, it contained play elements that might not have been explored in mixed company. For example, a surviving *Blackmoor* character sheet has an early attribute listing for 'Sex,' but rather than indicating gender it is a numeric value that came into play under certain circumstances (11)." Such elements did not make it into the published rule books – and Gor is rarely discussed as an early influence of *D&D* **(see Box Insert 25.2)**.

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (*AD&D*) (Gygax 1977) introduced sexual themes and female player-characters and it is interesting that both were introduced at the same time. It is perhaps more fascinating that sex is still seen as a type of mechanic, as in Arneson's *Blackmoor*. As Sturrock notes, "this edition of *AD&D* is notorious for its 'Harlot' encounters table (also known by players as the 'Random Prostitute Table'), allowing the Games Master to randomly determine which kind of sex worker the players encounter…" (Sturrock 2015, p.64). So sex was introduced, but not for the purposes of narrative romance but rather as a feature of the game's economy. The existence of the 'Harlot' encounters table provides insight into the types of sexual narratives which could emerge in game and additionally makes some allusion to how early versions of the game were viewed as deliberately exclusionary - both in the sense that encountering sex workers may dissuade some women from role-playing and in the sense that the Harlot table only lends itself to a particular type of narrative (**see also Chapter 9**).

[Box insert 25.1 near here.]

Reducing sexuality, amorous interactions, and the erotic into a mechanic was common amongst early role-playing games which emphasized the systemic and simulation aspects of role-play. However, it is telling that these mechanics were often meant to be used for goal-oriented expressions of sexuality. The most common form of sexuality was Seduction, and it was used mostly to manipulate a person to get them to do something plot-relevant that was not in their best interests. Dramatic, narrative, and experiential results of sexuality did not become widespread in role-playing game source books until the 1990s with popular games such as *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991).

A sea change in addressing sexuality in role-playing games started in the 1990s. A key work is *Vampire: The Masquerade* (Rein-Hagen 1992) where seduction checks represent both a mechanical rule and a narrative guideline. Players are given context of when to rely on mechanics and when instead to allow narrative to emerge between characters. Seduction checks are only to be performed, "…if a player is trying to use their character's supernatural charm to gain false intimacy with another character" (Brown 2015b, p.82). In this example, seduction can be thought of as a type of survival strategy; rather than ambush their prey, players can instead choose to use social stats to charm their way into feeding. However, *Vampire: The Masquerade*'s treatment of sex is not automatically reduced to a

mechanic, but contextualized with flavor texts. The description of the ability ends with a caveat stating, "If the emotions and motives [of the player-character] are true, then you should ignore this system and role-play it out" (Rein-Hagen 1992, p.217). So then, if the player wishes to genuinely seduce a character for purposes other than strategic feeding, the rule system for rolling dice gives way to a more fluid, storytelling system which allows for the emergence of erotic content away from the roll of the dice.

After the turn of the millennium, many TRPG rulebooks for the inclusion of sexual activity became available. *Book of Erotic Fantasy* (Kestrel and Scott 2003), *Naughty & Dice* (Morgan and Morgan 2003), *Sex and Sorcery* (Edwards 2003), and *Encyclopaedia Arcane Nymphology* (Desborough 2003) are perhaps the most notable. These rule books were written under Open Gaming License as compatible general supplement to d20 games **(see Chapter 16)**, which rarely discussed sexual themes directly. The sex supplements contain world-building information in addition to game mechanics, although the emphasis is on magic items, spells, sexually transmitted infections, and pregnancy (cf. Sturrock 2015). Although the sexual themes addressed in *Vampire* and other games **(see Box Insert 25.1)** were surely influential, their roots can be traced back to fan-created supplements like *The AD&D Book of Sex* (Bluebaugh 1992) and *The Complete*

Guide to Unlawful Carnal Knowledge (Anonymous 1992) both distributed free online during the 1990s (Stenros & Sihvonen 2015).

Thus far we have largely focused on depictions of heterosexual relations. Role-playing game books have over the years started to represent queer sexualities as well. As Jaakko Stenros and Tanja Sihvonen (2015) discuss, for a long time queer sexualities were absent from role-playing game source books. This started to change in the late 1980s with rare mentions of genderfluid chaos gods and treacherous homosexuals. One of the first times queer sexualities were clearly and openly addressed was when *Central Casting: Heroes of Legend* (Jaquays 1988) source books featured a table of Sexual Disorders (see Table 25.1) that lists such things as Transsexualism, Shyness, Homosexuality, Sadism, and Necrophilia. According to the book "All Sexual Disorders are considered to be Darkside, or unsavory, personality traits by most societies, fantastic or otherwise. (71)" In later books by the same publisher there were explicit position statements from the designer warning against bringing such abominations into play. As with sexuality in general, queer sexualities became part of role-playing games through game mechanics. Although Central Casting's books are rare examples of combining explicit morals with statistics, random tables in other role-playing games started to include the possibilities of homosexual characters occasionally.

[Table 25.1 here]

Stenros and Sihvonen have further noted that *Vampire: The Masquerade* and the other games and supplements that followed from publisher White Wolf increased visibility of queers in role-playing games during the 1990s. Thematically all alternative cultures, homosexual included, seemed to fit within the game's *World of Darkness* – itself largely positioned as the alternative to the mainstream of fantasy following in the footsteps of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Indeed, even if queer sexualities and experiences started to appear in numerous genres from cyberpunk to superheroes, fantasy seemed quite resistant until the new millennium. Queer themes are still rarely featured in central positions in role-playing games, but such RPGs do exist, e.g. *Blue Rose* (Crawford, Elliot, Kenson & Snead 2005) a romantic fantasy game, *Monsterhearts* (Mcdaldno 2012), a game about sexy teenage monsters and messy relationships.

The flavor texts present in White Wolf's games usefully provide a context and setting for sexual interactions to emerge through gameplay. As other studies on online role-playing games have found, this is important for how players engage

with sexuality in the game. In a study of *World of Warcraft* forums, Alexis Pulos found that, "the positioning of heteronormative as good against queer as bad is a polarizing strategy that not only creates a hostile space but produces homophobic players that learn to govern or discipline other players" (Pulos 2013, p.90). In this example, it was Blizzard's censorship of guild names which referenced homosexual or queer culture that arguably contributed to a rise of homophobic discourse amongst the player base. Although this study focused on forums outside of the game, the rules developed to censor and police queer guilds inside the game led to a pervasive and palpable homophobic atmosphere. Even exogenic or social rules outside of the game have an impact on what is made available for play inside the game. In this sense, both endogenic (in-game) and exogenic rules affect in- and out-of-game player behavior with regards to sexuality.

Considering these issues, it is of little wonder that so many single player computer role-playing games (CRPGs) seem inclined to treat sex (and romance) as a mechanic rather than as a part of an overall narrative. *Dragon Age 2* (*DA2*), for example, has been criticized for its gamification of relationships through the purchasing and giving of gifts. Peter Kelly writes that there are two main problems with the game's representation of romance:

First, they assume that romance and dating can be easy by following only

a few simple, reductive steps. Do X, Y, and Z, and the girl is yours. There

is no room in this equation for unpredictability and naturally occurring

chemistry, honest commonalities, or even pure physical attraction...

Second, these tips suffer from the same bottom-line issue…Sex is treated

as a prize or a reward for playing the game correctly, rather than another

aspect to romance and love (Kelly 2015, pp.57-8).

Whilst there are obvious issues with the treatment of sex as a prize at the expense

of other aspects of human sexuality, there are some connections between the rule-

governed experience of sexuality in digital role-playing games and in the

mundane world. Kelly writes that "...in the mid-1800s, women and men were

considered to be part of separate ideological and cultural spheres, thus 'rules'

were in place to help guide successful courtship... there were common steps and

stages of courtship or dating to which a vast majority of individuals in modern

Western culture adhered" (Kelly 2015, p.57). An important connection is made

here between the way sex is treated in digital role-playing games as a prize or

reward and the way sex has traditionally been treated in the 'real' world. The

Victorian example is particularly useful as it highlights how after a long and

probably tedious period of following the rules of courtship towards marriage, sex was 'unlocked' for the courtly participants.

Alternately, Nordic larps demonstrate a greater variety of types of intimate experiences. Stenros (2014, also 2013) analyzed the game mechanics used for amorous and sexual interactions in Nordic larps and divided them into four rough, partly overlapping categories: establishing the events, outcome resolution systems, expressive and symbolic methods, and adjusting to the level of sexuality. Each of these categories abstracts sexuality when it is being modelled, but different aspects are emphasized.

When *establishing the events*, the emphasis is on the narrative and dramatic aspects determining what happened. This is usually done verbally, for example taking a timeout and discussing what happens. Sometimes the scene is enacted as in a radio theatre, creating a soundtrack for other players to hear and react to while refraining from physical enactment. In such cases the emphasis shifts from determining for the people involved what happened, to performing for others. It is also possible to switch to more tabletop like enactment of the sexual scene, or to use *a meta room*.

[Box insert 25.2 near here.]

O*utcome resolution systems* are akin to traditional tabletop methods, where game mechanics are used to determine what the result of the sex is. Was the sex good? Did a seduction succeed? Was a child conceived? This can entail the combination of character ability scores and some randomizing elements, but can also feature mechanics like reading a random fortune cookie-like text that is then used as basis for an interpretation of the events.

Expressive and symbolic methods seek to capture feelings of doing an amorous physical act together, one that is creative, embodied, pleasurable, metaphoric – and possibly awkward. Through exaggeration, distancing, and symbolic action it can be fairly difficult to establish exactly what happened, but the general feeling of the proceedings, presence or absence of chemistry, and the embodied nature of the activity create an emotional picture of the sex, open to personal interpretation. For example, performing a back rub to symbolize sex falls into this category. Other possibilities include singing, dancing, and hand games (e.g. pattycake). There are also more structured versions of this such as arm and body painting and

Ars Amandi. This last one is a stylized mechanic that recodes hands, arms, neck, upper back (above the shoulder blades) and the area above breasts as the erogenous area of a human. Love is made by touching and rubbing these areas while looking the other in the eye and breathing heavily (Wieslander 2004).

Finally, there are methods for *adjusting to the level of sexuality*. These mechanics tap into the experience of sexual acts which the player can exaggerate in her mind, while reining in the action. Examples include simulated sex with clothes on, playing with dildos, or substituting touching of the face for kissing, kissing for foreplay, and foreplay for intercourse. Larps where sex is not simulated but played as is do exist as well, but they are rare.

Although the mechanics just described originate in larp, Stenros' (2014) categories have wider relevance as they underline how simulation methods carry implications about the activity being modeled. The method chosen obviously implies what is being modeled, for example, intimacy, exchange, manipulation, or pleasure. However, they also reveal what is seen as sexual, and what kind of sexual activity is seen as worthy of being modeled. Some methods assume that sex happens between exactly two people, with one giving and the other receiving

(e.g. the back rub), while others are broader in terms of participants, genders and power relations. Furthermore, some mechanics thrive on matching player and character desire, while others make it easier for players to enact sexual situations they may not find erotic. Of course, the mechanics provided by designers may not be the ones players end up using: players can decide to use different mechanics than those proposed by the larp organizers.

Erotic Role-Play and Player Interactions

While the previous section discussed how sexuality is represented and the types of erotic content designed into role-playing games, this section looks at player interactions with games and each other which involve sexuality or erotic content. The section is sub-divided to address two aspects of interaction. The first part will define erotic role-play and provide a context for how it happens in online and offline games. The second section will look at studies concerning interactions between players and the games themselves including how players interact with characters in single player games.

Erotic role-play (ERP) is role-play which invokes erotic, sensual, and sexual themes. We can also define it as a participant-defined activity that involves the

incorporation of sexual or erotic content into pre-existing role-play scenarios. This type of direct, player-to-player interaction has been found to offer a variety of pleasures to players, and not just the obvious ones. Although it is assumed that people engage in erotic role-play to live out sexual fantasies or for onanistic reasons, this is not always the case. A persistent stereotype nevertheless exists that erotic role-play, especially online, is performed for out-of-character arousal and carnal pleasure.

Interestingly, not all role-play mediums define the purpose of ERP the same. A focus group with tabletop role-players who included erotic content in their games found that even they had preconceptions about online erotic role players. Brown notes that "…tabletop participants made efforts to distinguish themselves as different from online erotic role-players through their difference in motivations to erotic role-play. In their view, erotic role-play in online virtual worlds is done only as a masturbation aid, whereas they view the erotic role-play they involve in their tabletop scenes as directly contributing to the game in some way" (2015b, p.110). An interesting distinction between different forms of role-play emerges in the suspicion faced by online erotic role-players. Because tabletop role-play occurs in-the-flesh and in a group setting, participants can be sure that even if another player experiences arousal from a play session, they do not physically act

on it. The fact that online erotic role-play is mediated through a computer and thus lacks physicality causes suspicion that the sometimes anonymous player on the other end of the screen may be partaking in the activity for gratification of sexual desire.

Brown's 2015 study found that the pleasure of developing a cohesive narrative around a character, developing friendships with other players, and experiencing a diversity of sexual scenarios which may or may not be desirable in the 'real' world were all justifications for enjoyment of erotic role-play. In particular, "… erotic role-play is not always about thrill-seeking and carnal pleasure but also… some erotic role-players find pleasure in the contemplative and active syncopation between their personal views of sex and relationships outside the game and the actions and behaviours of their characters inside of it" (Brown 2015b, pp. 108-9). So, pleasure is gained not only from the fantastic elements of sexual role-play, but also from the mundane. Or in other words, pleasure can be gained from both the perspectives of the player and the character.

Likewise, the same study found that the fantasy element of role-playing games allowed players to experiment with types of sexualities which are undesirable

personally or culturally, or even physically impossible, in real life. In this way, erotic role-play can be thought of as an opportunity to ameliorate forms of sexual interaction which sound pleasant, but are impractical or even harmful. In one example, magic spells or healing potions might be used during an erotic role-play session involving rough BDSM as a type of aftercare (Brown 2015b, p.74). Or in another example, sex outdoors is made much more pleasant when it happens in a digital forest away from the hard ground, unpleasant climate, insects and birdwatchers found in the 'real' wilderness.

Finally, Brown found that erotic role-play offers the pleasure of friendship to its participants. Although it might be expected that romantic relationships will develop between players, there is currently no evidence to suggest this is the case for online communities. This does not mean, however, that erotic role-players do not experience a type of *bleed* wherein the experiences of characters have an impact on the thoughts, feelings, emotions, and actions of players (Bowman 2014), but rather that the development of a romantic relationship between people whose characters are romantically involved has been found to be uncommon (Brown 2015b). It is worth noting that the results of Brown's online study conflicts with Bowman's (2014) findings which demonstrated the development of intimate relationships amongst larpers was not uncommon.

Although erotic role-play is a way in which people engage with sexuality in role-playing games, there are many other instances in which people use games to mediate sexual interaction. Cindy Poremba (2007) describes a type of play mediated by games which intentionally invokes forbidden expressions of sexuality or, at least, sensuality. Giving the example of the game *Twister*, she writes, "The popularity of *Twister* lies in its forbidden play or brink status: the framing of the game allowing the temporary reinscribing of rules of intimate social distance" (Poremba 2007, p.772). Whilst brink play is about pushing against the edge of socially acceptable play more so than role-play, it deserves the space here for discussion because arguably many role-playing games also invoke a type of reinscribing of social rules **(see also Chapter 24)**. The easiest example of this is larp wherein the social norms of monogamy might be pushed to the brink by touching or kissing players other than one's partner. Whether or not players feel real emotion for the person or character their character happens to be kissing (as would be the case if there was bleed between character and player), is irrelevant for the act to be considered brink play. The very prospect of transgressing a social norm through role-play is enough to qualify the act.

Along the same vein, scholars have examined the romantic interactions between players and non-player characters in videogames. In the context of CRPGs specifically, Annika Waern (2015) found that players of *Dragon Age* games experience strong emotions for non-player characters. She writes that, "experiences of jealousy and guilt are perhaps the strongest indications of a bleed-out effect in *Dragon Age*" (Waern 2015, p.35). Many fans also reported that the romance options in the games caused them to develop a particular attraction to one or more non-player characters. Waern (2015) documents that on later playthroughs, when players tried alternate romance options in the game, they often experienced feelings of jealousy or guilt. Further, when starting a new character in the game for an alternate playthrough, many reported that choosing the same romance option as their previous character made the game feel as though the non-player character was having an affair.

Waern's research also discusses how players fall in love with non-player characters in single player role-playing games. She writes, "The concept of 'pixel crush' is not unheard of in computer games. It refers to the emotion of being 'physically attracted' to an animated character..." (Waern 2015, p.37). In this sense, there is a romantic, sexual attraction to pixels on the screen but whether or not the players act on this attraction and whether or not it could be considered

erotic role-play is debatable. Rather than pathologize 'pixel crushes', Waern is

quick to note that the fantasization or romaticization of unreal characters is no

different to teenage idolization of pop stars. In consideration of this, 'pixel

crushes' are probably just that: crushes. It is unlikely, but not impossible, that

players role-play in single player games with NPCs for the gratification of sexual

desire, and some of this is due to the narrative limits of digital games.

Sexual and Erotic Role-Play in Non-Game Contexts

Not all sexual or erotic role-play happens within the context of games. Although

this is an under-researched area, a few notable studies have been conducted on

sexual and erotic role-play that occurs elsewhere. Brown (2015c) has used the

concept of *brink play* (Poremba 2007) to study and delineate activities which may

be considered borderline cases of sexy analog play. For example, a garter toss at a

wedding can certainly be said to contain sensual or erotic undertones, but as an

activity, it is firmly located in the realm of traditional gesture and not a game

(Brown 2015c). But a follow up question might ask if the activity is role-play. It

would be a difficult, although not impossible, argument that the newlyweds are

playing the role of bride and groom (in whichever gender combination they

prefer). Although certainly some bravado, theatrics, and acting go into the act of

removing a piece of lingerie from a spouse's leg in front of friends and family, it

likely does not fit into the definitions of role-play used within this book, but perhaps would be at home in a more social-psychological taxonomy of play.

There are other gray areas that are not as easily defined. One such example might be dress-up sexual play. Commonly found in adult or lingerie shops, outfits which resemble occupational uniforms (e.g. naughty nurse, macho police officer) can be viewed as facilitating a type of erotic role-play (Harviainen 2012; Brown 2015b; Brown 2015c). However, Harviainen (2012) notes that the narratives and character development such costumes inspire tend to be thin and tenuous.

There exists a definition of costuming which takes into consideration both the act of dressing up for sexual play *and* the embodiment of a character the costume represents. Fron et al (2007) summaries Eicher's (1981) concept of the communication of 'three selves'- the public, private and secret - through dress and how it might apply to play below:

> Public- ones presentation in the public sphere; Private- when engaged with family and friends; and Secret- when by oneself, when the bulk of fantasy play takes place...Public, costumes worn in a public context, such as a

festival or holiday which are not anonymous; Private, costumes worn

among friends or in the context of family/childhood play; Secret, which

could include both activities that are solitary or intimate (such as sex play)

and those which are public and anonymous (Fron, Fullerton, Morie, and

Pearce 2007, p.12).

In this distinction, secret forms of dress are directly related to fantasy, which lend

themselves easily to intimate, sexual forms of play. This distinction is of interest

as it highlights that the wearing of costumes for types of sexual play is about more

than aesthetics. Whilst a basque top and hold up stockings might be worn because

they look and feel nice, the act of putting on the lingerie can function as the taking

on of a character. Through Fron et al's (2007) reading of Eicher (1981), the act of

putting on lingerie can switch participants to their secret self which, can be

considered a type of role-play. This is certainly the case when the lingerie

happens to be styled with reference to an occupational uniform. Within the

occupational roles of nurse and patient or police officer and criminal there are

clear power dynamics which dictate who does what to whom. These power

dynamics emerge as a type of sexual role-play when the costumes are worn and

the secret self is allowed to play.

Although costumes are perhaps the most visible expression of the power

dynamics involved in erotic role-play, other accessories and objects arguably have

a similar effect. A dog collar, for example, signifies sexual submissiveness within

some communities. The act of wearing a dog collar, even in public, is an act

which allows for role-play. In fact, it has been argued that BDSM (bondage,

domination, sado-masochism) sex is a type of live action role-play. J. Tuomas

Harviainen (2012) provides a breakdown of how, even without costumes, the

shifts in power dynamics of individuals which take place during BDSM play

sessions are similar to larp. As Harviainen notes, "After the [play] session has

ended, the normal everyday power dynamic between the participants – which may

or may not be equal – is restored" (2012, p.62). This example is similar to how

power dynamics within a group of friends might shift during a role-play session

when one friends takes the role of game master, but shifts back at the session's

end once the game is over.

The final example of erotic role-play occurring outside of games focuses on role-

play which occurs in chatrooms. Virtual sex, the general term for online sexual

activity, has been well documented. In fact, early studies of the internet noted that

"in cyberspace, this activity [virtual sex] is not only common but, for many

people, it is the centerpiece of their online experience" (Turkle 1995, p.223).

Of course, not all virtual sex can be considered erotic role-play as there must be a

distinguishing role-play element to qualify the act. Cybersex, for example,

occupies an interesting grey area between role-play and reality. Cybersex has

been defined as "…a process of provoking, constructing, and playing out sexual

encounters through a single interactive mode of communication… also like phone

sex, participants draw from a vast repertoire of socio-cultural symbols to construct

a drama that compresses large amounts of information into the very small

experiential space of a text medium" (Waskul 2003, p. 79). Within this definition,

there is no defining characteristic of the self. It remains unclear whether or not

cybersex is experienced as a kind of co-authored erotica with fanciful characters,

or if it is - like phone sex - meant to be a faithful representation of the wants,

desires and physiologies of the participating authors.

Whilst virtual sex in MMORPGs, or any variant of an online world, presumably is

a form of erotic role-play between player characters, there is significant ambiguity

over whether or not the same is true in cybersex. For example, in John Campbell

study of gay men's chatrooms, he found that within the online communities studied, there was a central ethos "…that interactants are representing their bodies in good faith" (2004, p.124). If it was discovered that a chatroom member had misrepresented themselves or their body, consequences such as "…the loss of online friendships, as well as teasing or outright attacks on the main window of a channel" (Campbell 2004, p. 124) were found to occur. In this example of cybersex, there is a strong emphasis on being as faithful to reality as possible to avoid potentially misleading another chatroom participant. Campbell is quick to note, however, that "this is not to suggest that there is no room for fantasy on these channels but rather to indicate that assuming a fantasy persona is acceptable only within a context explicitly understood by all parties as a fantasy performance, otherwise it is considered deception" (Campbell 2004, p.125). So then, for practitioners of cybersex, role-playing or fantasy is only acceptable if it is explained to all participants. There is an expectation that those engaging in erotic play in chatrooms will attempt to represent themselves as faithfully as possible, unlike other forms of erotic role-play which happen in games or in virtual worlds.

Summary

This chapter has looked at three aspects of sexuality in role-playing games. It began by looking at the representation of sexuality and the erotic in digital and analog games where it was determined that an over emphasis is placed on the mechanics of sex in tabletop role-playing games. Few games provide narrative context for how erotic content can enter role-play scenarios, preferring instead to treat sexual performance as something that can have a quantifiable outcome. In relation to larp, four categories of game mechanics for handling sexual activity were discussed and the implications they have for the experience created.

The chapter then covered studies of erotic player interactions with other players and non-player characters. From studies on erotic role-play in online environments, research has overturned the assumption only carnal pleasure can come from engaging with sexual or erotic themes online. Instead, a diversity of pleasure from narrative consistency to friendship building was discovered. Likewise, research which highlights 'pixel-crushes' and other emotional attachments to characters in single player, digital role-playing games were discussed.

The final section looked at erotic role-play which occurs outside of games. Examples of instances where sexual activities could be considered role-play were given which ranged from costumed sex to BDSM to cybersex. Cybersex was presented as an interesting gray area where participants were generally assumed to present an accurate, 'real' life version of themselves online with the occasional instance where participants could play out fantasies. Overall, this chapter has presented three areas of research on the topic of sexuality and role-play, but the authors must caution against taking this account as absolute. No doubt, scholars have yet to uncover other important aspects of the topic.

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Tables

Roll Result	Disorder Title	Disorder Description
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 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 someone of opposite gender, which may be difficult unless the

		character is also androgynous (neither strongly male nor female in appearance).

Table 25.1: Excerpt from Sexual Disorder Table (Roll 2D8) from *Central*

Casting: Heroes of Legend (Jaquays 1988, 71).

Box insert 25.1: Sex and Mechanics

The following examples are by no means exhaustive, but provide a sample of

games which integrate sex into RPG mechanics.

Bunnies and Burrows (1976): Perhaps the first example of tabletop game with

explicit rules for sex, players would take on the role of an intelligent rabbit.

Advanced Dungeons and Dragons: The above discussed Harlot encounter table

found in the AD&D Dungeon Master's Guide (Gygax 1979, p.192) requires a

d100 roll to determine the type of sex worker the player character's will

encounter. It is a randomisation mechanic which determines, in addition to sex,

whether or not player characters gain information or are robbed by the sex worker

they encounter.

Cyberpunk (1988): In this game, a flowchart used during character creation called the "Lifepath" was designed to help players define their characters and give them context before the game started. One options player could choose was "romantic involvement" which was used to determine what the character's romantic history was, which could lead to jealous rivals, jilted lovers, or true love having an impact on later gameplay.

Vampire: The Masquerade (1991): The above mentioned seduction checks are well exemplified in this tabletop game, wherein a player character's Manipulation and Persuasion scores are combined in a dice roll. If successful, the player character can seduce a non-player character, usually for the purposes of feeding.

The Book of Erotic Fantasy (2006): As an Open Gaming License supplement book for d20 systems, this handbook gives randomisation mechanics for a variety of sexual encounters, probability rolls for chance of pregnancy or contraction of sexually transmitted infections, rules for determining a satisfactory sexual performance, and spells specific to the erotic arts.

Dragon Age 2 (2011): The first digital example mentioned here, this game features a reputation system which has the potential to culminate in a sexual encounter with a non-player character. Gifts are purchased from a vendor using

in-game currency, and then given to a particular non-player party member to increase (or decrease) reputational standing.

Box insert 25.2: Glossary of Sexy RPG Terms

Ars Amandi: Simulation method for making love in larps by touching hands, arms and upper bad while looking each other in the eyes and breathing heavily.

Meta room: Metatechnique used in larp where a specific space, a meta room, is set aside for playing out sequences that do not fit the timeline of larp (like past events), more symbolic actions (such as dream sequences), or encounters requiring different simulations methods (sex scenes in an otherwise naturalistic larp).

Bleed: The conflation, or perhaps merging, of in-character thoughts, feelings, actions or reactions with those expressed out-of-character.

Erotic Role-Play (ERP): A general term given to role-play with erotic or sexual themes.

Gor: A fantasy setting for a series of novels written by John Norman which feature sexualised themes of slavery, bondage, domination, and servitude. Has

inspired role-playing games from *Dungeons & Dragons* to settings on *Second Life* (cf. Sixma 2009).

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[1] The three previous chapters, along with the rest of the book, provide an important backdrop for this chapter. Chapter 22 on immersion and Chapter 23 on the relationship between player and character attest that role-playing can allow for a playful engagement with unfamiliar identities and behaviors. Chapter 24 on transgressive role-play shows that there is possibility to engage with the unfamiliar – and even the forbidden.