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This thesis is a rhetorical analysis of gamebooks for the tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) *Dream Askew* by Avery Alder and *Wanderhome* by Jay Dragon. Using *Dungeons and Dragons* as the ubiquitous example of a TTRPG that operates on foundations of hierarchy, coloniality, and violence, I consider the reframing of discourses that their designers achieve through how they structure character and world creation and player interaction. These games exemplify counter-hegemonic, decolonial practices of game design and play by undoing the player-gamemaster hierarchy, changing the apparatuses that mediate in-game and out-of-game discourses, and increasing the value of lived experience and subject positionalities for players and characters. Collaborative processes and structures that increase player agency and relationship-building shift the objectives of gameplay from conquest and domination to building a mutually satisfying narrative and emphasizing the value of empowering and uplifting other players. I’ll also be attentive to the structure of *Dream Askew* and *Wanderhome* in my primary analysis, taking inspiration from their configurations as a conversation and a journey, respectively. Through considering these games as attending to a broader range of experiences and reimagining game design for a more inclusive audience, I position them as examples that can inspire game designers to consider the discourse their games enact and TTRPG players to recognize what a game’s structures restrict or enable in their play experience.

CHANGING THE GAME: THE RHETORICAL APPROACH OF “NO DICE, NO MASTERS”
TABLETOP RPGS

by

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to Emma, Charlotte, and the Champions of Valinwood.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

This is a story about stories. Some of the stories are my own from a lifetime of characters I've said hello and goodbye to or see you later in hopes that I will. Although these stories and the characters through which I live them begin in my imagination and in a game's fantastical world, to say they are less real than any other stories in my life would be to discount their importance. These stories, after all, are just as present in my memory as anything that has happened in my life, and the characters are segments of my personality just as much as any other trait I can identify. As Hanna Brady so insightfully shares, "We're made of stories: real ones and true ones and made-up ones"—so the stories we tell and how we tell them are deeply important to who we are (64). This is also a story about tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) and the stories we tell through playing games with each other. Game designers imbue their games with structures that guide the stories and how we participate in them, so those structures play a role in how we story our fantasy lives, which become part of what constitutes us. Two games, in particular, invite us to think differently about how we play TTRPGs and what kinds of stories we tell—but before I get to those, I'll share a little bit of the "story-stuff" (Hanna Brady's term) that informs the kind of story I'll be telling you.

A new world opened to me in 1991 when a sixth grader introduced me to *Dungeons and Dragons* (D&D) by offering to be the dungeon master (DM) for a one-player campaign. We started the first session at his house, and he became the authority on how to do adventure in this fantasy world he had created. The one-year difference in our ages suddenly seemed much more monumental. I don't even know if he was a good DM, and I recall we didn't play that many times, but I soon found a group to start gathering with after school. One of our friends' moms was an English teacher, so while she sat at her desk grading work, we shoved student desks into

a circle and imagined we were anywhere but in a classroom. The details of that game are long gone from my memory. A few years later, we all found ourselves folded into a larger group when we discovered some adults pretending to be vampires in the local coffee shop tucked behind a shared video rental and stationery store. They were not sitting around a table rolling dice but instead moving around, having private conversations in hushed tones, and occasionally playing rock-paper-scissors to resolve conflicts.

We got our hands on the book *Laws of the Night (Mind's Eye Theatre): Rules for Playing Vampires*—what a title! The book was a LARP (Live Action Role Playing) conversion of the *Vampire: The Masquerade* (VtM) TTRPG, and we delved into the enticingly taboo gothic-punk world contained in this thin volume. We joined the game, and eventually, the adults moved on, and a younger crowd of junior high kids had replaced us as the new blood. Our core group stayed together for other games as well—we played the *Marvel Super Heroes* TTRPG, *Magic: The Gathering* (MtG) and several other collectible card games, board games, and we made up our own rules for a *Dragonball Z* game (I have fond memories of playing it, but I can't recall any rules and imagine they were terrible). I continued with VtM in college as a player and storyteller, and I've filled my adult life with games of all kinds.

The first large group of friends I made after moving to North Carolina in 2006 came courtesy of a vampire LARP, which eventually led to my discovery of bofferLARPs—weekend-long events that involve camping, roleplaying, and fighting battles with foam weapons and shields. After finding my friendly local game store (FLGS)—shoutout to Atomic Empire in Durham, NC—I picked up MtG again and played semi-seriously for several years. That led to the *Netrunner* living card game, and while hanging around the store between games, I noticed a Millennium Falcon model on the shelf that belonged to a miniatures game—something I had

never tried, but I couldn't resist anything *Star Wars*. That one purchase hooked me on *Star Wars: X-Wing Miniatures*, which I still play every week. I've traveled all over the country to compete in *X-Wing*, and I regularly go to game conventions to play in tournaments and demo the newest board games. My current RPG group has been together for over 12 years. We have played several RPG campaigns in different systems, lots of board games, and countless hours of *D&D*—first around a table and then virtually through Roll20 (an online platform) for the last couple of years of social isolation. I started that first *D&D* experience in fifth grade with 1989's *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons 2nd Edition* and currently play *D&D 5th Edition*, released in 2014, and it's only recently that I began really thinking about the structures underpinning the entire game.

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All I can remember of my first D&D character was that I created an elf who was a lone, wandering adventurer. At one point in the adventure, the DM introduced his character from another campaign as an NPC—a nonplayer character. This character was a much higher level than mine and had a group of followers he would send ahead of him to do his bidding, and he primarily used them to fight enemies and seize treasure. I remember being awed that he had people to do his bidding, and I said that I wanted some. The character said, “Get your own damn followers!” My character was embarrassed, and so was I—had I committed a gaming faux pas? I didn't know enough to separate my character from myself yet, but what I did know was that I admired this other character portrayed by an older kid who was the master of this new world that I was just stepping into. The character intimidated me, and my admiration came from his power over my character and his followers—he embodied domination, authority, hierarchy, violence,

and conquest. Those were the traits I expected D&D heroes to demonstrate for a long time.

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CHAPTER II: THE FOUNDATIONS OF DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

My TTRPG gaming group still plays *D&D* as our primary game because we are comfortable with it, not to mention it is ubiquitous and nostalgic. We all played it as kids, and it's still with us decades later. I've occasionally introduced games that are radically unlike *D&D* (*Apocalypse World*, *Blades in the Dark*) to the group with varying levels of success—it turns out it's hard to reorient to a completely different way to approach roleplaying. What led me to seek new games was dissatisfaction with *D&D*, which was initially hard to place. As I read *D&D* gamebooks more critically and paid closer attention to my experiences while playing, I started to understand that the version of roleplaying that had become so ingrained for me was built on colonial structures of conquest and power. A common joke about *D&D* characters or parties is to refer to them as “murder hobos”—those who eschew any solution except violence and mayhem. While I haven't experienced this in the extreme, combat is a central theme of *D&D* and was one of the pillars of the original game design.

Being in danger of being killed, and therefore needing to kill to prevent death, was part of the risk configuration built into *D&D*, which relied on “elements integral to all roleplaying games: combat, battle, and conflict,” according to *D&D* co-creator Gary Gygax, as Michael J. Tresca explains (72). Most *D&D* campaigns tend to walk a line between outright murder hobo attitudes—that is, an embrace of violence for its own sake—and violence for survival's sake, but still often revert to bloodshed as a default method for solving conflict. The *D&D Starter Set* features an introductory adventure, “Lost Mine of Phandelver,” which thrusts the characters together as a band hired to escort a wagon safely to another town. After a brief description of their journey so far, the book asks the DM to give the players a few minutes to do character introductions and “think about how their characters came to know their dwarf patron...if a player

is hard-pressed to think of anything, suggest something simple” (Lost Mine 6). This brief interaction constitutes “a great opportunity for the players to contribute to the adventure’s backstory” (Lost Mine 6), consisting of two paragraphs designed to set them on a path into an adventure.

There is explicit, endemic violence on display throughout the scripting of the introductory adventure. The first thing that happens after this brief introduction is that the player characters (PCs) come upon two dead horses and are almost immediately attacked by hidden goblins, “the first of many combat encounters in this adventure” (Lost Mine 6). When the PCs make their way to the goblin leader, he is holding a human acquaintance of theirs captive, ready to kill him. The options presented in the book include a fight with the goblin or an attempt at conversation, which ends with the goblin exhorting the group to kill a rival goblin in exchange for his prisoner. Could the players conceivably work out a truce with the goblins outside the bounds of the adventure as written? Yes, if they felt agential enough to do so and had a responsive DM willing to go off-script. However, as written, all paths (even conversational) lead to violence.

Combat remains a core element of *D&D* in the most current iteration, which players usually approach beginning with the *D&D Player’s Handbook 5th Edition* (PHB). The book lays out the three categories that constitute a typical adventure: exploration, social interaction, and combat (Mearls and Crawford 8). The other two books that make up the basic game are the *Dungeon Master’s Guide* (DMG) and the *Monster Manual* (MM). These three separate volumes set up the central relationship between the people who play the game together: the DM builds the world and imparts the story to the players, and the players make choices in response to the information the DM shares. While *D&D*’s creators present it as a collaborative storytelling

game, and sessions and campaigns often make space for the players to have agency to shape the DM's world, the game does not begin by design as a communal process. The DM may take on complete creative control by writing a homebrew campaign (one set in their own fictional world), or may rely on existing texts (the DMG, MM, and numerous published adventures), situating the DM as an interpreter and intermediary for an existing world and story—which they may still tweak and adjust with their own elements. Players often begin with just the PHB, and they choose mechanical statistics and generic background concepts that are world-agnostic and, since they fit with D&D's overall themes and milieu, any character should be able to meld into any D&D world seamlessly. While the DM and players may discuss character options and can create interesting story hooks that tie into the campaign history, people, or locations, that process is not strictly necessary to get a character on paper and can function as a later revision that does not change the character's core statistics, personality, or background.

For those groups who fully integrate their character creation experience, a DM still often directs the process, imparting world knowledge to the players rather than involving them in building a world to suit their desires and ideas for their characters. Whether using published *D&D* source materials or creating and populating their own world, the internal logics of hierarchy, violence, and monolithic (rather than collaborative) processes thoroughly guide the experience. Even if a group desires a collaborative process, and it's certainly possible to add that to the preparation for a *D&D* campaign, there is no framework in the PHB for how players can work together. While the group I play with is a group of friends who also play TTRPGs together, and we often send emails or text each other about character ideas when preparing for a new campaign, we are comfortable enough to do so and add conversations to our character creation process outside of what the PHB describes. For as long as we've been playing together and as

many times as we've created new characters for new campaigns, I still often ask the DM when thinking of the possibilities, "What's this like in your world?" In no way does he demand that we ask, but *D&D*'s hierarchical arrangement is so pervasive that it creates player-DM relationships unlike anything in our personal relationships.

There are plenty of *D&D* players who don't begin with a group of friends and seek a group at their FLGS, online, or through the *D&D* Adventurer's League—the "ongoing official campaign for Dungeons and Dragons" (Organized Play). Anyone can create a PC using the Adventurer's League guidelines and get a spot at the table for a game, which could be with a home group that decides to participate in the campaign, with people in public or semi-public venues such as an FLGS, gaming convention or another public gathering, or by finding an opening through an online platform. Players can choose to continue with a group regularly or drop in with their PC in a variety of games, so there can be variable degrees of relationships with other players and PCs, ranging from a single experience together to an ongoing game that has both players and PCs getting to know each other better over time. The commonality is that these experiences often involve no contact before the game other than possibly scheduling questions, so the PC creation process takes place individually rather than collaboratively. The published campaign's adventure modules provide the DM with world creation, a narrative arc, and a population of NPCs. This way of playing a TTRPG most strongly expresses the non-collaborative nature of *D&D*. It shows one of the reasons it remains popular: because the player experience can thrive in an individualized, episodic, hierarchical game environment. The two games I'll analyze later require a dedicated group to participate in collaborative world and character building and aren't designed to offer a consistent, modular experience. The idea of the Adventurer's League is that the sessions are character-agnostic—the DM preps the same way

independently of which players and characters will attend, the narrative unfolds along a similar arc, and each player's experience centers on their character. The same group of characters isn't necessary to any ongoing story, and any given player may progress through adventures with a rotating cast of fellow players and characters. This way of playing *D&D*, while being the experience that many people either specifically seek or have as their only method of accessing a TTRPG, leads to character-building that prioritizes the PC's abilities and personal gain over relationship development and narrative consistency in a developing world over which they have a great deal of influence.

Another approach to character building that frequently shows up in *D&D* is min-maxing or power gaming, which privileges combat abilities over the story. Min-maxing identifies what is least useful for a character to be effective at a particular game aspect and allocates resources away from those areas and toward essential mechanical options. If a player is creating a spellcaster, for example, and wishes to min-max, they will avoid taking spells with story potential and focus on those that inflict the most damage on enemies. They'll also gear their other character choices toward optimizing those spells. There's an audience for this gameplay style, as you can find extensive online resources to help you min-max. Websites like RPGBOT publish class guides with color-coded ratings for each character choice in the game, and it's entirely possible to build a combat-effective PC without any thought by choosing only the most highly-rated options. Plenty of articles and internet forums feature "broken" builds that exploit a game rules interaction among a collection of abilities to enable game-warping effects, such as the potential to quickly dispatch a significant foe, which truncates the possibilities of other players to play a role in the combat and for a narrative arc to arise as they strive to defeat their enemy. Or it may be a particular combination of traits or classes that don't make immediate narrative sense (a

paladin who worships a deity but also takes levels in warlock and thus makes a bargain with a diametrically opposed demonic entity) but enable greater power in combat.

While some players and DMs will work on stories that can explain and make satisfying dramatic tension out of such choices, providing such justifications is not necessary according to the rules. Any player can choose anything in the book at any time, and there is no need for fantasy logic to explain how they accessed such knowledge, abilities, or powers. Enabling these kinds of approaches to character-building, which prioritize mechanics that govern combat abilities over personality and social traits, is part of what yokes *D&D* to a colonial mentality of domination and violence and minimizes the necessity of collaboration and story to a satisfying experience. Some players want to create the most potent PC they can imagine, which may be what they are looking for in their play experience. The approach to *D&D* character building varies wildly on a spectrum, from those who fill in a personality and background and choose the mechanical components based on organic development or fun factor to players who take the approach of filling in the numbers on a character sheet first and then developing a personality to match or eschewing personality altogether. The world that approach imagines is one in which lived, embodied experiences don't shape how we interact with the world. Instead, it's a world that generates individuals with traits that arise from nothing to define that character's lived experience.

By following the steps as the PHB presents them, players determine things like their character's intelligence (which governs learning and reasoning) or their skills in specific areas without placing those traits in context or determining a narrative basis. A character might be highly skilled in medicine without explaining why or how their character knows how to stabilize wounds or diagnose diseases. The player may later invent a story that describes their time as a

healer's apprentice or how they learned to care for themselves in a hostile environment, but the story justifies the mechanical expression rather than the player creating a story and then selecting a class, abilities, and skills that integrate with the character's history. That is not to say the choices must be obvious—a healer's child could just as easily be averse to anything related to medicine and intent on performing acrobatics as a street entertainer. That kind of story could develop from either approach. Working backward from numbers on the page to a story to explain them is undoubtedly an approach that I've often taken, and I've found it to lead to dissatisfaction with the character. This numbers-first approach is perhaps expressed in its most extreme form by tournament *D&D*, which pits players in a battle royale or gauntlet-style combat against DM-controlled adversaries or each other to determine who can be the last person standing or defeat the most enemies. This style of *D&D* may be an exercise in min-max character design, or the DM may hand players completed characters. It also lets players showcase a deft command of maximizing the PC's attributes with combat tactics. While playing this way eschews narrative in a way that Adventurer's League games or ongoing campaigns don't, it lays bare the extent to which mechanics that enable violence are integral to the game.

This flexibility contributes to *D&D*'s popularity—players can get together to use extraordinary powers and fight their way through swaths of monsters as they position miniature figures on a map or grid, making it more of a tabletop wargame. Or they can play a campaign that emphasizes their personalities and how they navigate social intrigue, politics, and exploration. Ultimately, however, there is always the possibility for violence, and the promise of rewards of weapons, armor, magic items, gold, and experience points that ultimately serve to make your character more formidable should combat arise (and it usually does at some point).

It's difficult to break free of *D&D*'s gravity when discussing TTRPGs, and not just because of its long history. The fifth edition continues to be extremely popular—it dominates Google searches, accounting for over 57% of TTRPG title queries (over five times as many as the next title), and according to Thomas Weinberger's stats, it is nearly 53% of all games played on Roll20. It offers an appealing entry to TTRPGs—it's full of familiar fantasy elements, promises adventure and fun, and has a ubiquitous presence in the fantasy roleplay genre. Its visibility in game stores through a high volume of books published and the presence of an officially organized play community contribute to it often being someone's first exposure to the genre. It does, however, feature a specific and limiting kind of discourse—more specifically, one that creates defined hierarchies and false binaries between game rules and narrative and privileges an individual and dominating mindset over a collaborative, generative, and decolonial one.

Games, especially TTRPGs, are based on discourse. Multiple discourses take place for players, including with each other through their personas, with the game's other apparatuses (dice, miniatures figures, maps, books, etc.), and with whoever is in the leadership position and has the responsibility for rule adjudication, narrative, world-building, or other aspects of the hierarchy that exists in the game's structure. Specific frameworks in *D&D* guide the discourse that takes place, frameworks that recent game designers have started to purge from their creations to shift the discourse to a different concept for what a TTRPG is and how it functions.

CHAPTER III: INNOVATIVE ROLEPLAY DISCOURSES

Two games, *Dream Askew* by Avery Alder and *Wanderhome* by Jay Dragon, reimagine several of the core concepts from *D&D* and other TTRPGs. They resist the hierarchical DM-player relationship, resituate people and character positionalities, and change the mediating apparatuses to arrive at a different configuration of discourse. Specific elements of *Dream Askew* and *Wanderhome* modify the traditional structures found in *D&D* and adjust even the innovative *Apocalypse World* to move further toward a counter-hegemonic, decolonial practice of game design and play. *D&D* and similar games give the gamemaster an outsized creative responsibility compared to the players; in contrast, *Dream Askew* and *Wanderhome* distribute that role among all the participants, framing it as a shared responsibility and investment in creating the type of fantasy world they negotiate with each other to find a mutually satisfying composition of people, places, and narrative content. The character creation process in both games is collaborative and holistic, encouraging personas who are profoundly and meaningfully attached to each other and their world. Gone are the statistics, abilities, and powers that enable domination—down to their bones, these personas have characteristics and make choices that let them nurture and feed each other toward narrative, emotional, and relational fulfillment. One of their most innovative shifts—replacing dice (or any other random result determiner) with token gaining or spending to enact specific character actions or outcomes—creates agential, embodied experiences of character choices, successes, and failures.

I consider these two games together because they are part of an ongoing conversation—their creators are aware of and influenced by each other's work. They are points along a continuum of development that continues to push the boundaries of what came before. Avery Alder's moniker for "the game engine shared by *Dream Askew* and *Dream Apart*" (*Dream Apart*

is the companion game that shares a book with *Dream Askew*) is “belonging outside belonging” (172). To create a game that runs on *belonging outside belonging*, Avery Alder instructs you to conceive of a marginalized group that builds a community that “stands in sharp relief to a larger, looming dominant culture” and suggests rooting it in “lived experience and personal affinity” (162). That concept, centered on a precarious relationship and “an uncertain future,” drives the game’s creation and structure (Alder 162). One of the significant features of *Dream Apart* is the “no dice, no masters” (NDNM) system, which involves players making choices in the absence of a DM-style central authority preparing a story or determining where it goes (Alder 8). In the acknowledgments for *Wanderhome*, Jay Dragon recognizes NDNM and *belonging outside belonging* as inspirations for the game (Dragon 244). These two significant features enable these games to deliberately uncouple *characters* from the dominant cultural hegemonies that rule most traditional TTRPGs, thus enacting a counter-narrative to the real-world basis (in which the *players* exist) for those structures. Removing a central authority makes players collectively agentive in imagining a world evolved beyond ours in how people engage with violence, gender identity and expression, subject positionality, or any other topics important to the players, and enables a fuller expression of lived experience shared between the player and their personas or the other beings or setting elements they may portray.

The genesis of this approach to game design is relatively recent, so with *D&D* as the original point on the timeline, the 2010 release of Meguey Baker and D. Vincent Baker’s *Apocalypse World* (AW) becomes a divergent point and a lodestar for many TTRPGs that follow. There is now an abundance of games that claim *Powered by the Apocalypse* (PbtA)—a term used to describe the framework around which AW is built—as their lineage, which according to Vincent Baker, only means that AW inspired them to such an extent that their

creators want to use the PbtA name and have followed the policy for doing so (Baker, Open Letter). While there are no set design elements that signify something as PbtA, one of the hallmarks is describing what PCs can do as “moves,” which exist in *Dream Askew* in a different form. *Dream Askew* is a PbtA game; although Avery Alder expresses AW as a direct influence, she recognizes that “*Dream Askew* started as a remix of *Apocalypse World*, and slowly took its own shape” (47). Avery Alder asks that other designers consider if their game is “about a marginalized community attempting to live just outside the boundaries of a dominant culture” and if it fits with the lineage or draws inspiration from the final chapter of *Dream Askew/Dream Apart*, which is written toward aspiring designers and contains advice on designing your own game (172). The discourses within the designs of these games are where I’ll spend most of our time here, but there are more significant conversations about TTRPGs in which *Dream Askew* and *Wanderhome* play essential roles, so a brief mention of those will hopefully provide some useful context. As Naomi Clark explains specifically about queer game creators, there’s a growing trend of questioning “norms and conventions about how games, or specific game genres, are expected to function” (4). By changing the fundamental nature of what a TTRPG can be and opening space for new conversations, players can engage in stories that honor lived and embodied experiences and a more comprehensive range of subject positionalities. To enable this, *Dream Askew* and *Wanderhome* work to undo the dominant narrative that *D&D* tells. Hanna Brady’s vision of storytelling in games contains a “multitude of heroes” with different stories that resist a single, dominant variant whose “overwhelming signal strength homogenizes our frame for the world and lies to us by saying there is a right story instead of infinite stories” (65). Creating spaces that center stories and identities that *D&D* and other traditional TTRPGs marginalize, following the dominant culture that spawned the hobby, makes room for disrupting

the “right story.” *Dream Askew* and *Wanderhome* introduce specific innovations to a game’s structure that enable different kinds of discourses to happen within the game and around it, creating a play experience that is attentive to more expansive possibilities.

Moderated Discourses

Let’s start with the discursive properties operating in each game I’ve mentioned so far—*D&D*, *Apocalypse World*, *Dream Askew*, and *Wanderhome*. Each has a different set of mediating apparatuses that influence the multiple discourses that can take place and, in some cases, create a discourse not available in the other games. The first significant discourse takes place between the primary source material and its reader—for *D&D*, that is typically the PHB rather than the DMG or MM, but the other three games have a single gamebook. Each book of source material for all these games articulates constraints that govern the choices available to players and characters, and some implications spread outward from these governing principles. In *D&D*, especially its original incarnation, which draws heavily upon a mid-20th century, white male-dominated fantasy culture, coloniality, hierarchy, and domination through violence are the cornerstones upon which the constraints rest. Despite the changes over time and several editions, even the game’s current iteration has those cornerstones residing underneath its surface. *Dream Askew* and *Wanderhome*, however, reject those cornerstones, replacing them with ones that upend the hegemonic structures that limit the multiple discourses between players and the game, players with each other, and players with an authority figure (a discourse that *Dream Askew* and *Wanderhome* largely remove).

A player approaching D&D interacts with a text that will describe how to create a character, teach them the game’s rules, and explain how magic works—these are the PHB’s three major sections (Mearls and Crawford 6). Under the heading “How to Play,” it introduces what it

calls the basic play pattern, which is that the DM narrates a description of what the PCs observe, the players respond with what their PCs would like to do, and the DM describes the results of their actions (Mearls and Crawford 6). The next concept the PHB introduces is dice, explaining that players will use this additional apparatus to determine “success or failure” when “the outcome of an action is uncertain” (Mearls and Crawford 7). Thus, even before beginning the character creation process, players know a few things. They are responsible for character choices but not outcomes, which puts them in a relationship with two potential mediators of what they desire to accomplish—the DM and the dice. The DM may be able to narrate the outcome, in which case the discourse accounts for the current in-game situation, which includes the actions and reactions of any non-player characters (NPCs) the DM controls, the other PCs in the scene, and the physical and social constructs of the game world.

There are additional complexities in the person-to-person discourse involving the multiple roles that each participant brings to the game. The players navigate what Dennis D. Waskul describes as “the precarious margins between reality, imagination, and fantasy” (19) and the “liminal symbolic boundaries” (22) between the coexistent roles of person, player, and persona. The person is grounded in reality and brings complex social positions and motivations for seeking narrative fantasy to the game, of which the other players and the DM may have varying levels of awareness. The player role mediates the person and persona—they bring their roleplaying skill, rules knowledge, and imaginative and improvisational abilities to bear in successfully occupying the position of a player of the game (Waskul 21). A PC’s persona is influenced by “the choices they make, the outcome of those decisions, chance, and the ongoing dialectical relationship between consequences and personal adjustments” (Waskul 25). That role is again complex, as both the person and player have a stake in what happens to the persona. An

ongoing internal (and depending on the group, possibly external) discourse about a decision or action's motivation derives from the *persona*'s psychology and lived experience, the *player*'s sense of the delicate narrative balance that incorporates the other players and the DM's presence in game situations, and the *person*'s lived experiences and desires they bring to the game world—all three roles fold into these moments. This endlessly complex set of factors is also always mitigated by the presence of the DM, who “occupies a supreme status” (Waskul 20).

When a DM responds with an outcome based on the narrative, they are responding to the multiple roles the other people at the table occupy—even if they are interacting directly with one player, the outcome has the potential to influence all the players, people, and personas—and has their own positionality in mind. Their choice has the potential to interact with the person's preparation and creation. It communicates how they utilize the authority of their player role and has narrative implications if that outcome is delivered through or involves one of the DM's personas (which may occupy varying degrees of meaning for the DM and player personas). The DM's choice is also discursively complicated in that it may involve information hidden from the players—a common way that DMs make a world feel real and alive is by having actions and decisions taking place off-screen between various DM-controlled personas, some of which the PCs may not know and will never encounter. The DM has to consider what generates their response—forces that move behind the scenes to influence the narrative, NPC persona traits and attitudes, how the outcome will affect their ongoing story and change the relationships between all the involved parties, coherence with the world and how the person/player/persona presented the inciting incident, what it will do to and for the persona, whether the player and person need something to go right or wrong, and the “rule of cool” (allowing something to be possible or

succeed just because it would be cool and figuring out the implications later). So yeah, a lot is going on every time the DM responds!

When the DM or players introduce dice, there's another modifying apparatus with all sorts of intricacies. Sometimes it's clear what dice a situation calls for—if a PC is attempting to hide from enemies or “slink past guards, slip away without being noticed, or sneak up on someone,” they will roll using their Stealth skill (Mearls and Crawford 177). The DM may decide to contest that roll with an NPC's Perception skill, so then both people will compare results to see who “wins.” Players typically roll their dice in the open and announce their total, and the DM responds with the outcome. The DM might roll their dice in full view of the players and let the random number generation determine what happens. They may also roll behind a DM screen—a fold-out barrier that sits on the table between them and the players with reference tables on the DM side—an apparatus that introduces a layer of uncertainty to the results of chance. If it's a hidden roll, the DM must decide—do they let the result stand, or do they fudge it (ignore the die result and decide on the opposite)? The perception of a die roll remains, but there's a more extensive interaction at work. Does the DM do all their rolls in secret, or only certain ones (and what does their choice of when to do so indicate), and do the players suspect that the DM fudges their rolls? It's intertwined with the role's authority, as the DM can decide to harm or hinder characters, choose not to, or allow chance to govern everything. The players may perceive that the DM is protecting them or a story element or that the DM is unduly punishing them for some reason, so concepts of goodwill, fairness, and where to place blame or accolades (dice/chance, a person, or the PC or NPC who took the indicated action) are in play as well.

Returning to Dennis Waskul's idea of chance influencing personas and its role in the dialectical relationship, gamers often celebrate the possibility that dice will determine the

outcome of an action as an element of verisimilitude in an otherwise fantastical world. Dennis Waskul, on page 25, cites two of the role-players from his observations:

I enjoy rolling the dice because I like the fact that I can't control everything...chance is so important, because it is the only way to really simulate reality in the game setting. I mean, life doesn't really happen according to how we really want it to, so chance helps to keep things pretty real.

Persistent throughout *D&D* and other games that introduce chance through dice or some other RNG is the idea that randomness enters and disrupts discourse, bringing its entropy unconnected to anything agential in the universe into the conversation and acting as a moderating force on the discourse happening between the players and their various roles. The dice can direct the discourse but are not an extension of their player's will or desire (unless the DM is fudging their rolls). Sometimes it's as simple as "that's the way this happened because the dice said so" ("*your character fell off the tower because of pure chance*"), but that doesn't mean that die results aren't always without causation. At best, they provide an end point from which to work backward and determine causation. "*As you lose your balance and attempt to grab onto the ledge, your hand lands on a scorched and pitted stone on the tower's edge. Your mind has a split second to register the scars of an ancient battle before the weakened stone crumbles in your grasp and you feel yourself falling into space.*" We'll see as we discuss *Dream Askew* and *Wanderhome* that the fiction's narrative outcomes ask us a different question about how the world operates.

The first chapter in the *D&D PHB* instructs players in building a character. As I previously mentioned, players can create characters entirely independently, thus placing the discourse around creating a persona between the person/prospective player and the gamebook. The steps are: choose a race, choose a class, determine ability scores, describe your character, choose equipment, and come together. The *PHB* still categorizes the available choices as races,

and each comes with a set of “racial traits” that determine some basic information about the character. Some characters are more intelligent, some are stronger; some can see in the dark or are “menacing” (half-orcs)—these all derive from the chosen race (Mearls and Crawford 40). *D&D* presents players with essentialized races as the primary basis for their characters from the very start of character creation. The essentialism of *D&D* races has been a fraught and popular topic, and we are only recently starting to see Wizards of the Coast (WotC, *D&D*’s publisher) beginning to make changes to remove determinism about the different peoples in their world. For players not aware of the conversation or who just pick up the PHB at their FLGS, the book tells them that if they create a dwarf, they are physically tougher than some other races, are probably law-abiding and generally good, and have abilities to use certain weapons and tools (Mearls and Crawford 20). While the book explains that some of these attributes stem from culture, it still creates strong links between culture and race. After choosing an essentialized race, players determine their abilities, which govern (for example) how strong or intelligent they are. A standard array of scores is available, or players can elect to spend a pool of points on their scores. Another common method that isn’t in the book but exists in previous editions is rolling dice and letting chance have a say in the ability scores. Between that and choosing equipment, a few short paragraphs encourage players to think of possible background material to fill in some history and personality from broad categories presented in the book, some of which will provide additional mechanical aspects to the character—for example, a character who trained or worked as an entertainer gains bonuses to their acrobatics and ability to perform, and they know how to use a disguise kit and play an instrument (Mearls and Crawford 130). Players then choose the equipment that will keep them alive on an adventure and the weapons they will use to inflict

harm on their enemies. Finally, when the character is complete, the player can open discourse with their friends and DM about if the characters know each other and how they may have met.

The book assumes the place of being the sole discourse with a prospective player until they enter the “fantasy frame” that Sean Q. Hendricks describes as “the frame in which the characters live, breathe and act” (43). This element moves beyond the “game frame”—where the rules constrict players and constitute boundaries for what is acceptable during play—to enact a discourse that creates “a shared culture, or set of beliefs and understandings about the fantasy frame. The sets of beliefs and understandings that are included in each individual’s frame are adjusted based on the discourse, and the intersection of the sets becomes closer to a single intersected fantasy frame that is shared by the participants” (Hendricks 43). The game frame in which people started creating their personas and formed the beginnings of the player identity is suddenly linked with the fantasy frame, which the DM may have developed independently from the players or sought feedback on and will continue to develop as the shared discourse continues. Without any experience and with little history between PCs, we can expect that players may not be “fully engaged with the world in such an introductory game” (Hendricks 47). Despite the eventual discourse between players and DM, the basic structure of *D&D* only introduces it as needed, and the game could begin and continue without any of those practices.

Dream Askew and *Wanderhome*, on the other hand, integrate character and world creation in the beginning stages of the game and enable other collaborative discourses to take place beforehand that will influence and pay off when it’s time to approach the game and fantasy frames. This integrated practice derives from the lineage of *Apocalypse World* that traces forward through both games. While *AW* doesn’t completely break from *D&D* in that the number values assigned to character traits (statistics, or stats) quantify a character’s strength in those

traits, *AW* integrates relationships into traits by including History (Hx) as a stat. The players make some choices from their playbook independently (more on the playbooks and character creation in a bit), then take turns introducing their characters. That process includes taking another round of turns in which players tell each other character an Hx value with a statement attached until each character will have an Hx stat for each *other* character in the session. An example from the Angel playbook: “One of them put a hand in when it mattered, and it helped you save a life. Tell that player HX+2” (Baker 24). Players generating stats for each other is entirely nonexistent in *D&D*, which also doesn’t codify character history. While *D&D* players will often create narrative history ties for their characters, those ties have no bearing on how the game operates mechanically—characters in *D&D* are not more or less likely to succeed or fail at anything related to another character based on their shared history.

The statement that accompanies the Hx stat may be as simple as “Hx+1. Everybody knows a bit about you and where you’ve been” (Baker 48) or “Hx-1. You’re kind of strange yourself” (Baker 78), and it may apply to several other characters. The playbooks also offer modifications to what another player tells you—they might instruct you to subtract or add to the number other players give you without their knowledge, which creates incongruous relationships where the characters (and players) have shared narratives with asymmetrical understandings of their interpersonal implications. The final step in the Hx portion of character creation is for each character to ask the other character for whom they have the highest Hx value to choose which stat of theirs the other character finds most interesting, and that stat gets highlighted. Players use the Hx number when they attempt to help or interfere with another character, add to it at the end of a game session based on developing relationships with other characters, and when their characters harm or heal another character.

This entwining of shared personal histories with game mechanics moves beyond D&D in the character creation process and gameplay by linking the narrative elements of a character's social life with their functional ability. While D&D character backgrounds provide mechanical bonuses and abilities, the primary relationship is between the character and elements of the world, which can exist along a broad spectrum of prominence in the campaign setting. In *AW*, however, the primary relationships are between the characters, so the concept of building a character independent of the others does not exist. The process is also conversational and collaborative between all the players and the Master of Ceremonies (MC)—*AW*'s version of the DM—following the playbooks' mechanical designs as well as the example of what that should look like:

“Damson, have we fought shoulder to shoulder? Dune, I think maybe one time you left me bleeding, does that make sense to you? And Bran, just so you know, I think you're prettiest, and smartest too.”

As MC, pay attention as the characters' Hx are developing, this is great stuff, and jump in with questions and contributions of your own: “hey, when Dune left Keeler bleeding, was that the time [choosing a name at random] Preen attacked the holding, or a different time?” (Baker 104)

The book also provides notes for the first session that suggest the MC, following the character introductions and Hx process, should begin by suggesting, “let's follow the characters around for a day and get to know them. Cool?” (Baker 125). Instead of immediately directing characters into a conflict (as the *Lost Mines* adventure does) or an intricately constructed world, the MC becomes an observer looking for what interests and motivates the characters, and the game allows everyone to explore and have some agency over what intrigues them about their characters, the other characters, and the world they are starting to build.

While the beginning of an *AW* game successfully orients players to relationships and histories over mechanics, setting it apart from *D&D*, both games still utilize chance as a factor in

their narrative development. For *D&D* characters, any shared histories or relationships they form during the game have strictly narrative effects (they don't affect die rolls), while those connections (expressed as Hx) in *AW* can affect the die rolls and thus the likelihood of something happening. Despite these differences, the worlds that exist in both games feature chance as a force that can interfere with the outcome of a character's decision. In *AW*, as the narrative drives characters toward interacting in a way that prompts a die roll, a successful outcome varies based on the Hx value, with successes further increasing by how much that value modifies the die. A player then considers how the die results increase how well their character knows another and works backward from the mechanics to a narrative explanation. While *AW* and *D&D* both utilize dice to introduce chance, *AW* positions the narrative outcome differently. In *D&D*, the basic pattern is a player describes their character's action, the DM calls for a die roll, the character succeeds or fails, and the DM makes any necessary rolls and narrates the outcome. Both the DM and player outcomes have an element of chance. With the actions available in *AW*, called moves, the first step is still the player describing their actions. The player then rolls dice. The available outcomes are success with multiple or major benefits, success with a single or minor benefit or a drawback, or failure. In the case of failure, the MC can respond with a move of their own, which a die roll never governs. Character failure is the MC's opportunity to make "as hard and direct a move" (Baker 190) as they see fit, which is best if it's "irrevocable" and, while not necessary, "mean is often good" (Baker 117). The MC's role is to "be a fan of the players' characters" but also to serve as an antagonist (but not an adversary) by looking "through crosshairs" and responding "with fuckery and intermittent rewards" (Baker 116).

So, *AW* works on some of the same principles as *D&D*—random chance frequently intercedes in the narrative. While the MC is, in theory, more limited than a DM because their

agency to act is not universal, their moves always succeeding still grants them an absolute power to shape the narrative that the players do not have. The MC is responsible, much like the DM, for creating, populating, and portraying the NPCs and the world outside the characters' living space. There is also the choice to inflict harm as an outcome, defined as various levels of physical violence. The game keeps emotional and social consequences in the realm of narrative interaction, but the list of possible gear highlights the potential for injury and death. Most of the playbooks come with at least one weapon in their gear collection, and the ones that don't provide alternative sources of violence (a gang at your disposal) or the means to obtain a weapon.

AW succeeds most in moving away from *D&D* in the playbook method of character creation. Players choose a playbook that streamlines the creation process with a relatively short set of choices—name, look, a set of stats, moves, and perhaps a unique characteristic or possession, all chosen from prebuilt lists of options. Players make these choices independently but simultaneously, in the same place, and quickly progress to the conversation and collaboration of building shared histories. While the pillars of *D&D* are exploration, social interaction, and combat, *AW* has different goals in mind. The gamebook lays out a simple agenda for the MC: Make the world seem real, make the characters' lives not dull, and “play to find out what happens” (Baker 106). The *AW* gamebook doesn't simply and neatly encapsulate the point of the game like *D&D* does, but it provides that playing is about finding out what characters do when they come together in a terrible, messed-up world to figure out how it got like it is and if they can get out of it by finding a way either backward or forward (Baker 16-17). The game centralizes the characters' lived experiences in a way *D&D* does not, and it does that by foregrounding conversation, which should take precedence over rules. “All these rules do is mediate the conversation. They kick in when someone says some particular things, and they

impose constraints on what everyone should say after. Makes sense, right?” (Baker 11). The MC has the entire gamebook as their playbook, and the person taking on that role begins in conversation with the game’s inner workings. Being in conversation with the *AW* book is a similar experience to reading the *DMG*—it hands you the responsibilities and guidelines that come with being the driving force behind the game world’s creation, and you are engaging with what makes the game tick and how to make it function as intended for the players.

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When I introduced Apocalypse World to my RPG group, it seemed like nothing else I had ever seen, and I expected a radical shift from the D&D campaigns in which I had been the DM. We chatted about characters, and one of the players had chosen the Hardholder, so we had some definite attributes for where they lived. I don’t remember how many sessions we played, but eventually, the hold fell into conflict, and the characters gave it up as lost and ventured into the wasteland. They tried to take a new hold by force with the remnants of their gang. What started as an exploration of what it took to keep people together and safe while managing threats to that safety became fraught with violence and led to the characters leaving and searching for something better—social interaction, combat, and exploration.

It still felt different from D&D. The characters felt more lived in and organic, and the relationships granted us plenty of sources for conversation and interpersonal and social conflict. So why did it devolve into violence? Was there any way to avoid it in such a harsh world? I don’t know, but we didn’t finish the campaign—it never came to a conclusion, and for the first time, we left a game hanging without an ending. It just stopped. And I was unsatisfied. I could have done a better job, but I wasn’t sure how to,

and in some ways, I felt like I was fighting the game's tendencies. I love post-apocalyptic settings and the idea of games that bring roleplay to the forefront, so what wasn't working for me? Why was I not enjoying the MC-character or MC-playbook conversations the game was facilitating? I didn't know it at the time, but I knew I was still looking for something that felt like it was going further in imagining a world that plays by different rules.

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There are now many hundreds of games that claim inspiration from PbtA. The list at RPGGeek shows 242 titles, itch.io has 597 games tagged as PbtA, and DriveThruRPG has 1,620 items in the Apocalypse World Engine rule system section. I had read a few and tried running two of them—*Blades in the Dark* and *Dungeon World* (the D&D version of *AW*)—but both ended like *AW* had, with us giving up on the campaign. They both were novel at the start, but I still found myself in a hierarchical role, facilitating stories that contained violence, had aspects that reinscribed the colonial mindsets so prevalent in *D&D*'s framework, and did not sufficiently offer a reimagining of our world through a fantasy frame supported by a game frame that reimagines the mechanical aspects. I didn't have the concept at the time, but thanks to Hanna Brady, I now know I was searching for games that do away with rules (both in their mechanics and the rules of creating a TTRPG): “Rules about ingredients aren't the rules of storytelling and they aren't the rules of any genre. Throw them boisterously out of the window” (63). On my typical Monday night, I arrive at my FLGS, set up some tables for *X-Wing Miniatures*, and then browse the RPG shelf while I wait for other players to show up. I still didn't find what I was seeking despite flipping through any TTRPG book that caught my eye and even buying some to read at home and dream about having time to play one day. I called on my gaming friends to

chime in, asking, “What are some tabletop RPG books/systems that you think do a good job of being antiracist, affirming LGBTQIA+ characters, and/or taking a decolonizing approach to storytelling and world-building?” Several people mentioned *Dream Askew* and *Wanderhome*, so I made those my next two purchases. I haven’t played either game yet, but I knew why multiple people thought they were good choices after reading the books. While very different games, they both move even further beyond *AW* in imagining the possibilities of a different gaming experience and fantasy frame.

As I get into these books, I want to honor their approaches to TTRPGs. Avery Alder (she/her) tells us that *Dream Askew* is “a conversation, an exploration, and an experiment” (8). Jay Dragon (no pronouns, just name) talks about the “start of a new journey” that *Wanderhome* contains (9). In my conversation about and with those books, I hope to make my engagement with *Dream Askew* an exploration and experiment and to go on a journey with *Wanderhome*. As I enter the conversation with these two books, I want to be attentive to what they tell me about the kind of game and world they are constructing.

CHAPTER IV: DREAM ASKEW

Dream Askew doesn't immediately stand out for its size—at half letter, it's in line with other independent or small-publisher offerings in the RPG genre. What is unusual is that it offers two games in one book that share “dream” in their titles and, on the back cover, the question “What do you do next?” (Alder cover copy). The back cover has one sentence about each game, then in large text at the bottom, “Two games of belonging outside belonging” and “no dice, no masters” (Alder cover copy). Those two terms—one of which suggests the kind of community you might build with the characters, and the other which tosses two core tenets of the RPG genre out the window—are where I'll start exploring. I also want to mention the tagline for *Dream Askew*: “Queer strife amid the collapse” (Alder cover copy). Placing “queer” on the cover reminds me to be attentive to how the game expresses queerness through how it handles gender identity and expression and its construction. As Naomi Clark points out, “diversifying the content of games” and investigating “how to queer the structure of games” are two significant strands of conversation (3).

In terms of content, neither *D&D* nor *AW* foreground queerness as an element of the game. The *PHB* has a brief section under “Character Details” in “Chapter 4: Personality and Background” entitled “Sex:”

You can play a male or female character without gaining any unique benefits or hindrances. Think about how your character does or does not conform to the broader culture's expectation of sex, gender, and sexual behavior.

You don't need to be confined to binary notions of sex and gender. The elf god Corellon Larethian is often seen as androgynous or hermaphroditic, for example, and some elves in the multiverse are made in Corellon's image. You could also play a female character who presents herself as a man, a man who feels trapped in a female body, or a bearded female dwarf who hates being mistaken for a male. Likewise, your character's sexual orientation is for you to decide. (Mearls and Crawford 121)

The playbooks in *AW* put hints toward gender identity in the “Look” section, which also includes adjectives for clothing, face, eyes, and body. The choices include man, woman, ambiguous, transgressing, concealed, or androgyne. Sex runs throughout the game, and each playbook has a special move that occurs when that character has sex with another character. The danger in building representation into the game without fully realizing “the expression of queer lives” or creating a world with queerness at its center, as integral to its existence rather than character options without a greater context or prominence, is that the game retains the potential to reinscribe recognizable gender hierarchies (Clark 6).

In addition to the narrative content making more space for queer lives, a game’s mechanical aspects can be another site for designers to enact a queering influence. Naomi Clark troubles the binary conversation between ludologists and narratologists who insist that tension will always exist between the narrative content of games and the mechanical structures that differentiate games from other narrative forms. If these two poles are in tension, game designers have to regulate that tension with their designs so that players don’t experience “ludonarrative dissonance” (Clark 8). Queer games neatly sidestep that tension through “the refusal to obey orthodox conventions about games, and a willingness to embrace bare systems, that makes it easier for queer games to achieve striking new forms of interplay and consonance between the experiences and aspects of queer existence they represent and the structures of interaction players encounter” (Clark 9). Ludonarrative dissonance is “not a vivid concern” for queer games, so I’ll also be searching for the ways *Dream Askew* (and later, *Wanderhome*) finds space to subvert conventions about both narrative and system to enact a queer gaming ethos (Clark 9).

The book introduces NDNM on page 8, recognizing that players may come to it with instincts formed from other TTRPGs and that it will be a transition to enact the different play

styles that NDNM games ask of players. Recognizing that it may come easier to some players than others, it refers prospective players to an appendix entry with tips to help the transition. “Troubleshooting the Transition” lets us know there will be no dice and no Game Master, but also no “character sheets with numeric stats” to rely on, so “unlearning some instincts and techniques, and cultivating others” can be part of the transition (Alder 174). An integral part of that transition is knowing what to do as a player when there is no preparation to fall back on, when you can’t “delegate...to dice and prep” (Alder 175). The dreams are not games in which anyone operates with outside tools that can bear the responsibility of moving the narrative forward—there are no maps to follow, no monsters waiting behind the door, no dice to determine if the sneaking rogue gets spotted or the MC can move against the characters, no notes about what NPCs are doing behind the scenes that might come to fruition. The players have agency, and the game removes other agential elements from the conversation, placing the responsibility for outcomes with what players choose in the moment and offering no alternative. No masters means no a lot of other things that are seen as necessary elements to keep a game moving forward toward a goal or conflict—and often, it means no goal or conflict may be present for long periods. And the appendix tells us that it will be okay.

The appendix reminds us that in *Dream Askew*, “things work differently” (Alder 174). The troubleshooting tips address the player role and the game frame¹, so what else can a player think about when trying to understand what might be different than past experiences? Here are

¹ As a reminder, Sean Hendricks’ game frame refers to the rules rather than the game’s world, fiction, and narrative (fantasy frame), and Dennis Waskul’s player role refers to the positionality of mediating between the person and the persona (character)—the player negotiates between the real-world person, the persona, and the game’s rules to enable the character to operate within the game and fantasy frames effectively.

Avery Alder's solutions for anyone struggling with the changes, summarized from the "Troubleshooting the Transition" section on pages 174 to 177:

- Decide what your character does *and* whether it works out or not
- Start trying things out, but be patient and curious
- It's okay to say, "hold on a sec," or "I don't know," or "Can we do this?"
- Invent new logics on the fly and ask if people think your idea will be fun
- Set up other players' characters to look cool
- Challenge the other characters in a way that lets them shine
- Don't force conflict, but embrace it as an opportunity for collaboration, generosity, and openness
- Don't stress about keeping everyone together, and don't worry about jumping between narratives or combining them
- "You've got this. It's going to be great."

These tips suggest several differences from what players might expect, not the least of which is a complete agency to decide outcomes, unmitigated by dice—I'll want to follow this thread in a bit. The experimental nature of *DA* is evident in the tips that point toward an ongoing discourse in which players find success through trying things, asking for suggestions, and negotiating what is of interest for the group (or part of the group) to follow. It also seems that any notion of conflict is not adversarial but generative. Unlike other TTRPGs, *Dream Askew* doesn't require players to "know...how to manipulate a vast system of practical gaming knowledge that specifies what a fantasy persona can and cannot do" (Waskul 21). The successful, effective player does not have mastery over what the Incapacitated condition does to

a character, calculating how many damage dice to roll if they fall 70 feet, or even what moves are available in the other playbooks for them to choose from when improving their character.

Player success, typically related to a game's ludology, is inextricably entwined with narratology in *Dream Askew*. Effectiveness doesn't mean using a combination of powers and exploiting game rules to do maximum damage to the balor demon or using your successes on the roll for a "go aggro" move to make your gang win the fight, but instead means having productive discourse that creates engaging narratives through sharing the responsibility between all the players. The transition that *Dream Askew* asks of players is a move against the "bracketing of the person from both player and persona...implicit in the activity itself" that Dennis Waskul suggests as part of how we behave in any institutional or occupational setting—"marital roles are often suspended when people are at work, work roles are suspended when people are at home, and so on" (26). The additional complexity in TTRPGs comes when navigating the "precarious distinction between player and persona...crucial to role-playing games," which Dennis Waskul identifies as a matter of knowledge (26). The player has knowledge of game rules and possibly even the mechanics of aspects of the game world (adversaries, environmental obstacles, etc.). While the persona must act accordingly to the logics of those rules, they must have the appearance of naturalistic decision-making and awareness. Players risk disrupting the fantasy frame if they have read the adventure module they are playing or know the mechanical details of the monster they are fighting *and* let that knowledge cross the player/persona boundary in a way that is inconsistent with the persona's reality.

Dream Askew may feel different to players because it shifts the standard bracketing. The discourse operates across the player/persona boundary when a player is doesn't know what to do or can't figure out how to make their move happen and follows Avery Alder's suggestion to ask

the other players about how to do what they have in mind—“I can say just the right thing to extinguish your fear and bolster your confidence, but I don’t know what that would be. Any ideas?” (175). Asking questions like this opens a dialogue with other players. The response relies on the persona roles, but the players are considering not what a prescriptive rule tells them to do but what creates possibility and potential for both players and personas. Gameplay with interconnected ludology and narratology enables a more seamless and constantly shifting player/persona boundary and disrupts several hierarchies that underpin more traditional TTRPGs. Rather than the player engaging through the game frame and the persona through the fantasy frame, which frequently results in one taking the dominant role depending on what the session demands, *Dream Askew* puts them all in the same conversation and doesn’t require players to subserviate one to keep the frames intact. Since sharing player knowledge is encouraged, and the game should be a space to communally negotiate what that knowledge means and how to incorporate it into the fantasy frame, players with a better grasp of the player role aren’t able to leverage that familiarity (whether intentionally or not) to dominate the persona conversation. While *D&D* operates on a vast apparatus of player knowledge that governs persona actions and often yokes success to maximizing the player role, *Dream Askew* removes most of what falls under that category. *Dream Askew* resists hierarchical frameworks by simplifying the player role and disrupting the ludonarrative binary, and what remains is configured as a shared discourse.

And how about that last tip? I can’t remember another gamebook in which the creator told me it was okay if I messed up or didn’t know everything, that the game would be good, and I would be good at it, even if I made mistakes. As someone who worries probably too much about fulfilling the player role by having a thorough knowledge of the rules and committing a lot

of information to memory—and I know I’m not alone in doing so—it’s a relief to hear from the person who made the game that I don’t need to do that, and that even if I struggle making the transition to a different way of being a player, it will work out.

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I was a storyteller for a VtM LARP for a couple of years. My player role became introducing plots, portraying NPCs, and mediating when the rules came into play. All vampires had supernatural powers called Disciplines. There were a lot of them. I knew that most of them were present in the game, so I wanted to make sure I was prepared for players to use them. I felt like it was my responsibility to know them thoroughly. On November 25, 2008, I created a spreadsheet with 164 rows that detailed every Discipline power, the relevant attributes, requirements to use it, associated costs, and any special effects. I would study that sheet and ended up memorizing a good portion of it, and I carried it around with me at the game—but my goal was never to have to use it because I had the information committed to memory. Would the players have thought less of me if I didn’t know every rule? Probably not, but even though the game was primarily social and narrative, there was still room to be more or less successful as a player by the standards underlying the game’s structure. I’m still the local judge for X-Wing Miniatures at my FLGS, and during tournaments, the pressure to know the rules is even greater. I’ve spent a lot of time preparing for tournaments by studying the rules reference in great detail and having conversations with a national group of tournament judges about unclear items. When I run a tournament, the players expect me to respond quickly, confidently, and accurately to their questions. I’ve also had to develop skills at accurately checking game states based on delicate physical arrangements of game pieces

without disrupting what's on the board. Competitive miniatures gaming is different than a TTRPG, of course. Still, I realize, reading just the first few pages I've chosen to look at in Dream Askew, how much of my gaming experience is based on a player role that values thorough knowledge and expertise.

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No Dice

The moves in *Dream Askew* are prompts that help players guide their characters and determine what they say next, and they use a token gaining and spending mechanic instead of dice, which I will explore after discussing the moves' basic framework. The move concept in *Dream Askew* is slightly different than its first iteration in *AW*. As I mentioned before, *AW* uses dice to introduce chance each time a character makes a move. Specifically, it's two six-sided dice (2d6), potentially with the addition or subtraction of a modifier based on a stat or Hx, to arrive at a miss (six or less), a weak hit (seven to nine), or a strong hit (10+), which result in the MC making a move, the player getting a minor success (such as choosing one outcome from a list) or a major success (maybe choosing three outcomes from a list), respectively. Like *D&D*, *AW* operates in a world where choice and chance collide to determine if a character can do what they intend, and if they don't, the MC has to either let the result be the whims of fate or work backward from the result to narrate a causation for the randomly determined outcome.

In *Dream Askew*, Players can be explicit about the move they are doing (“I’m going to **get out of harm’s way**) or describe their characters’ actions (“I’m going to leave the room before anyone brings up what happened to my sister”—it doesn’t have to be *physical* harm), depending on what will be helpful for the other players (Alder 31). There are three types of moves: regular, weak, and strong. A Weak Move shows “your character’s vulnerability, folly, or

even just plan rotten luck;” a Strong Move is when “your character’s skill, power, astute planning, or good luck come to bear and transform a situation” (Alder 31). Strong Moves are also opportunities to “honour the significance” and “play to [the player’s] success” (Alder 31). In any situation, the players can fulfill what the appendix tips suggested about deciding outcomes by choosing for something negative or positive to happen, depending on where they see the potential for narrative interest or complicating the situation for themselves or other characters.

Each playbook defines Regular Moves, and unlike Weak and Strong Moves, they require no token, so they are more purely an open-ended prompt to continue the narrative rather than a choice that leads to a player-determined outcome. All the playbooks have the Regular Move “Take action, leaving yourself vulnerable” available in addition to their role-specific options. The Torch character role, for example, has the Regular moves “Share food or advice with someone” and “Ask: ‘How could I deepen your sense of belonging and purpose in this place?’”—each playbook has moves that instruct the player to ask something (Alder 66). Unlike actions in *D&D* or moves in *AW*, these don’t necessarily resolve immediately—indeed, no game mechanic inserts itself at this point to determine an outcome. Instead of the typical play pattern in which a character acts, the DM or MC calls for a die roll, and the narrative proceeds from that fixed point of the result, the moves in *Dream Askew* resist fixing the story in place. They also enable a more expansive discourse—rather than a player and game master negotiating an action while the other players observe, which may or may not include a die roll, the players enter into a communal conversation in which they bring their characters’ desires and lived experiences to bear in making meaning out of the move, and that invites an ongoing, shifting, interconnected understanding of what changes (and will continue to change) as they explore that narrative space. Even in cases where the conversation is only between two characters, it will never follow the

player-game master hierarchy. It will resist a fixed outcome and offer opportunities to involve other players in different ways. These are essential to the game's decolonial framework, as is the apparatus that replaces dice.

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In a recent D&D session, the demon lord we were fighting had taken an artifact, and we desperately needed to keep him from escaping with it. My character had an opportunity to act just before the demon vanished to another plane of existence, dooming us to fail in our major quest. I used a feature I had just gained upon becoming a level 10 cleric that allowed me to beseech my deity for help. I asked for the demon lord to be trapped with us, unable to escape, hoping it would buy us time to get the artifact back. The other characters saw me doing what looked like a prayer, and I had to roll percentile dice—2d10, which gives a percentage between 1 and 100—and get a ten or below to succeed. When it came up as 08, it was one of the more exciting dice results we had seen in the campaign. We celebrated for a few seconds, the DM described the demon lord's look of confusion and disbelief, and we continued the fight. It was a thrill at the time to feel like I had saved the campaign, but it ultimately felt a little hollow. I hadn't earned it in a narrative sense, as we'll see with the Strong Moves below—nothing I had done in the campaign with this relatively new character made it the outcome that my character needed or deserved. Whether it succeeded or failed was also out of my hands, so the DM and I would have to extrapolate backward any narrative reason for my success once we knew the result. The other players were bystanders as they discovered the chance result of a binary situation. Finally, it ultimately lacked narrative significance—by chance, the combat continued, but it could have easily ended or continued through other means. How

we succeeded had no bearing on what that success entailed (we continued fighting as we had been, defeated the demon lord, and kept the artifact). Since it involved the hierarchical DM/player conversation as the primary framework, any narrative repercussions were situated in that relationship and did not affect the character relationships. That's not to suggest that D&D can't have that. Still, in my experience, the narrative result of die rolls often has significance only within the DM-player/character conversation, so character actions often don't come with the potential for rich inter-character narrative development.

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Using dice to determine outcomes is a simple and typically binary act—a player rolls, declares their number, and succeeds or fails. The system in *AW* introduces additional complexity, but the action itself is still centered on the player, while the character engages only with the outcome. There is also no certainty with dice, which is the point of having a random determiner. There are no RNG mechanics to moderate using Weak and Strong Moves; instead, players use tokens. A Weak Move is paired with taking a token from the supply, while a Strong Move involves returning a token to the center of the table. Moving a token has a certainty that is consistent with the player agency essential to *Dream Askew*. It also offers the potential for being an embodied act imbued with meaning for the player and character both, which disrupts the disconnect between the mechanical and narrative outcome present in rolling dice. Avery Alder further explains why the game uses tokens:

The tokens create a narrative rhythm by ensuring that characters experience complications, stumbling blocks, and mistakes made as they work toward their victories and accomplishments.

Tokens also help players coordinate expectations about what efforts will be successful, whether risky undertakings will succeed or fail, and what consequences will emerge from

an action. If a player reaches into the centre of the table as they describe their character's next move, the group knows that this is a moment of weakness or miscalculation. Everyone is on the same page: this would be a fine time for things to go awry. If a player spends a token, it sends a different message: let this character have a moment of glory, they've certainly earned it. (32)

Replacing dice with tokens is a profoundly decolonizing move for a game to make. The world that *Dream Askew* creates for both the players and the characters is one in which outcomes are only functions of choices that the characters make based on their discourse within the fantasy frame and honors their embodied, lived experiences (as we'll see with the other caretaking the game does). Nothing is due to chance, so the players and characters have complete agency over their experiences within the game. The gestures associated with the tokens have meaning in a way that rolling dice does not. When players roll dice as a moderating apparatus for their discourse, it is not the physical act of picking up the object and rolling it that has significance, but the roll's outcome—the number and its expression as an action within the fantasy frame. *Dream Askew* attaches deliberate meaning to the act itself that modifies the discourse, so it's not just the token or what the token represents but what the player communicates by reaching for or placing a token. It opens the possibility for bodily communication that is typically absent with die rolling. While a player might couple a physical reaction with a die roll—an intake of breath before a critical one or arms up in the air after a major success—it's rarely discursive in a way that *Dream Askew* makes space for.

The other players can look for cues as a player reaches for a token and comprehend that player's physicality as part of the discourse about their character's decisions, which again entwines the player and persona roles and can more intricately influence how the narrative proceeds. Perhaps how they take the token wordlessly indicates that their failure or disappointment also contains resolve, ambition, or a sense of opportunity. It's never just failure,

but failure mediated by future possibilities. Placing a token back in the pool is, as Avery Alder suggests, a signal to celebrate the character's accomplishment but also an embodiment of the necessity for making a physical (the player) and social, political, or emotional (the character) effort to enact positivity. Instead of chance being the force that rewards the player and character, it's their willingness to endure hardship and make a physical (player) and social, emotional, or political (character) effort to enable and enact their positive outcome. How the player gives the token is part of the discourse as well—it has the potential to influence how the other players celebrate their glory. Is it triumphant, an act of immense will, a last gasp, the lifting of a weight? The embodied act is laden with the possibility of inspiring the embodied reactions of the other players as well as the verbal fantasy frame discourse that follows the character's success.

Token moving is such a simple mechanic, but one that can bear the weight of so much that is integral to the game—it removes randomness and grants agency, carries meaning for players and characters, and locates achievement and satisfaction on the collaborative, communal reward of interactions. Each character's Lure, another way to gain a token, further strengthens the celebration and uplift of other characters and players as a core game experience. Each Lure involves an interaction between characters that sets one up “to really shine, playing to their strengths and goals” (Alder 40). The Lure is another way for the characters' interrelatedness to shine; by enabling someone's narrative success, characters also nourish their own prospects for later success. This concept is another way for characters to earn their spotlight, aside from hardship and setbacks, but it indicates through one of the few actual mechanics the strand that runs throughout the game of building each other up. The game works best when the players look for opportunities to enable the other characters, which results in success represented by the integrated ludological and narratological passing of tokens.

No Masters

Here we have the other half of the game’s significant promise and its divergence from more traditional TTRPGs—not only is there no random element of chance, but there is also no central authority to narrate or adjudicate the results of any player’s actions. Beyond that, no single person is responsible for creating, populating, maintaining, and motivating the world and its inhabitants.

Dream Askew fulfills Hanna Brady’s exhortation to throw the rules about ingredients out the window and presents a character creation process not only with no dice but with no hierarchical arrangement—no stats, no mechanical adjustments from other characters (like the *AWHx* exchange), and no gamemaster to influence or ask about choices. Even the parts that involve something external to the character—choosing relationships and asking questions about the other characters—are configured as part of a collaborative conversation that has implications for the community in which the characters will live (Alder 16-17). This beginning is not extremely unlike *D&D* in that players often have some inkling of the world but make character choices without full knowledge of the extent of the fantasy frame in which they’ll play the game. The overview that the facilitator shares with the players before they choose introduces the game’s version of the apocalypse and situates the characters as a group who came together to form a “queer enclave” (Alder 46). Players choose things from their playbooks that make their character unique within the community and start thinking about questions to ask other players later that will help further define their relationships, shared histories, and the community’s nature.

In addition to their own character, players will make another set of choices in a significant departure from other TTRPGs—the players all start to build something they will

potentially portray during the game, but this time it's a Setting Element. Rather than having a gamemaster introduce players to a previously constructed world, the players are communally starting to build the world in which they will play. Each Setting Element will have two desires of its player's choice that represent how minor characters may act or how the landscape changes (Alder 20). They also come with tips for playing them, when to pick them up or give them to another player, and what moves they have. Players will know that the fantasy frame for *Dream Askew* will contain Varied Scarcities, a Psychic Maelstrom, Society Intact, the Digital Realm, Outlying Gangs, and Earth Itself. Unlike games with masters, however, the responsibility for defining what those Setting Elements are and portraying them in the game falls to the players. As Avery Alder puts it, "world-building in these games is a collaborative process, and it gains power from curiosity and conversation" (36). The players also make choices about their enclave's visuals and conflicting elements by circling choices from a worksheet; the rest is blank space for drawing a map and filling in as play continues.

The game reveals its commitment to collaborative world building in the way players start the game—instead of moving to a traditional narrative scene, the game begins by making time and space for more exploration of what exists in the world around the characters. After character introductions, players transition into Idle Dreaming, a play mode where the players start talking about their questions, curiosities, tangents, and musings; they explore the fascinating, unknown, scary, and beautiful parts of their world. They create stories about the land, history, and residents, and they ask and answer questions and follow those conversations where they lead. The material the players generate during Idle Dreaming forms the basis for scenes they decide to play out, and they can always return to this mode of play when they feel the need to find the next compelling thread or are uncertain about where to go next (Alder 24). The isolated, monolithic

tasks usually reserved for a game master are entirely communal and collaborative in this game. So too is the responsibility for determining how minor characters (there aren't NPCs in *Dream Askew* since players will portray them) and the larger world factor into the narrative. The notion of a dominant story is nonexistent, and players have equal responsibility and agency in contributing to the world. As Avery Alder suggests, players should all "pay attention to whether everyone is being given equal space to talk and contribute. If you notice one or two voices taking over the conversation, you can shift the spotlight by asking questions of the players who've been quieter...make sure everyone is being given equal opportunity, but don't demand that everyone make equal contributions" (28). The game, the world, and the people in it don't belong to any one person. Stories won't fix in place with a single narrative, and there is room for everyone's history and lived and embodied experiences to exist alongside each other.

Not Mechanics, But Still Important

While NDNM blends the ludology and narratology with a rules-light approach to queer the TTRPG space and makes a decolonizing move when it comes to hierarchies, fixed stories, and player agency, there are several other conversations the gamebook has with the facilitator or players that are just as important to the work it does to move the genre forward. I'll touch on each of them briefly to wrap up our time with *Dream Askew* before moving to *Wanderhome*.

Gender is another way that the game disrupts the male-female binary, and even though *D&D* and *AW* mention gender, they don't make it part of the character conversation in the way *Dream Askew* does. Each *Dream Askew* playbook has players choose a gender from this list of possibilities (not all choices are on each playbook): agender, ambiguous, androgyne, bigender, butch queen, cyber dyke, dagger daddy, emerging, femme, gargoyle, gender fluid, goddess, hard femme, high femme, ice femme, man, masc, predestined, raven, stud, tomboy, transgressing,

two-spirit, void, warrior, woman. There's also a page specifically about gender that tells players that they will be "contending with gender" (Alder 82), making it integral for all players to think about as they prepare to play the game. Some carry meaning from the real world and may be "tied to racial community, positioning characters intersectionally," while others are specific to *Dream Askew's* world (Alder 82). It's revealing that *The Arrival*—someone who has arrived from where society is more intact—is the only playbook with man and woman as options. Those intact ideas don't belong to anyone from the Enclave, and a player who chooses man or woman is still free to define what that word means and make it part of a conversation where it's not a default that anyone will assume.

Things the players should do when they encounter a gender word: imagine, ask, search, invent, and continue to define it through play (Alder 82). The world then becomes one that imagines there is no notion of a binary and even pushes beyond the idea of a spectrum. For the people who inhabit this world, it's "an ongoing conversation and conflict" that doesn't have to be like anything we understand from reality, asks what's possible, and is an integral aspect of creating the world (Alder 82). The conversation is for all players, not just those who may choose to make gender part of their play experience. It builds in resistance to the fantasy frame being able to reinscribe real-world gender binaries and essentialism.

The game also makes sure, unlike many other TTRPGs, to address concerns for the person and not just the player or persona. Avery Alder recognizes that players will have different lived experiences related to the game's narrative content, so the game is full of structures and ideas that help players support each other when dealing with what the player experiences through the persona, the story's real-world ramifications, and the environment in which the embodied act of play takes place. There's a part in the section about character Lures that references the Lure

entry from the Midwife playbook in *Dream Apart*, the half of the gamebook that dreams about a fantasy shtetl, which “helps create a dynamic of service and care between the midwife and the rest of the community” (Alder 40). It’s a fortuitous description of how that character functions; the entire book creates a **dynamic of service and care** between the players and between the game and the rest of the gaming community. It’s the first gamebook that I remember ever including a land acknowledgment. In her design notes, Avery Alder mentions that she wasn’t sure about including the digital realm setting element but recognizes its importance in a world of online harassment, disruptions to our electoral systems, and digital exploitation of our desires. She also looks at the game as a way to tell stories that can help explore how we figure out “what comes next if we work together” to make a “community when we’re all sick, crazy, and afraid of each other” (Alder 85).

The game overview also contains content warnings for violence, gangs, oppression, bigotry, and queer sexuality (Alder 46). This warning refreshingly alerts players to issues about which they may need to care extra for themselves and the other players and positions some of the troublesome game elements as worthy of a warning. Violence is inherently part of *D&D* and even *AW* (and gangs, oppression, and bigotry often appear in those narratives), but in those games, it’s effortlessly glorified. Defeating the monsters or rival gangs with bloodshed is something the characters strive for, and it’s not the kind of horrific, upsetting extreme that needs a warning—it’s usually promised to players as part of the excitement. *Dream Askew* lets players know that things will happen that should be difficult to deal with and doesn’t position them as so inherent to the characters’ lives that the players should accept it as normalized.

Additionally, *Dream Askew* is about “what precarity means for actual queer people” (Alder 48). The game asks players to think beyond their entertainment and use it as a vehicle for

discussing things that pertain to meaningful social and political conversations. In constructing the game with these elements, Avery Alder elevates the genre to enable conversations that we often find in academic settings.

The game also takes care of players in a way that is more attentive to looking after their wellbeing than many other TTRPGs. Many gamebooks focus exclusively on characters, setting, and rules and leave the interpersonal elements of a game for the players to figure out for themselves. *Dream Askew* insists that a game also needs to care for its players and give them the vocabulary and tools to care for each other as an essential part of playing the game together. These bits of care run throughout the book, but I'll pull out a few that I particularly like. The facilitator or organizer can find a quiet **space** to help players who might have difficulty with ambient noise. There's an entire page about the logistics of **food and comfort**— the host can provide a meal or snacks (“be generous and merciful” – page 10), offer water, be attentive to bathrooms, encourage stretch breaks, and ask about accessibility needs. **Safety** (on page 11) tells us how to create a “trusting atmosphere” and use “pause” as an agreement to check in about what someone needs to feel safe or express needs and boundaries. “**Ask questions**” and “**gentle corrections**” are tools to help the group negotiate words, concepts, and setting elements and assist with historical or cultural knowledge mistakes. Players should accept corrections graciously and with appreciation (Alder 13). The **facilitator is a teacher** for concepts and context and can use a single decision as a way in; they should think about the rhythm of learning and don't overload, teach to the players' curiosity, and use examples and model through play (editorialize on their decisions if necessary). Oh, and one more thing about food—this is the first gamebook I've ever seen with a recipe designed to both fit the flavor of the game and a provision for nourishing the players with food while preparing to play. The recipe also calls for plants that

grow well “in dialogue” and, if you can garden, combine into a meal that “can nourish you through the collapse” (Alder 50).

It’s a shared responsibility to be aware of fulfilling the entire group’s emotional, physical, embodied needs, so not only are these people coming together to play a game, but they are also using the game as a vehicle for working on being attentive to and caring for each other. The entire premise of gathering to play *Dream Askew* creates an atmosphere of vulnerability, learning, and honoring lived experiences. While other TTRPGs can often be about more than just the game, *Dream Askew* moves the experience beyond roleplaying together through attending to *how* to better roleplay together and what it means to everyone to do so in ways that other games rarely approach.

CHAPTER IV: Wanderhome

Now I'd like to begin our journey with *Wanderhome*. It's a gorgeous book, and it's unusual at a nine-by-nine-inch square—just looking at it gives a sense of its ambition and convinces me it will stand out. The cover depicts three bipedal animals walking through a sunlit meadow, orange and purple mountains in the distance, and puffy dandelions dotting the grass. It's full of beautiful, colorful, pastoral scenes depicting the journeying companions and the places and multitude of creatures found throughout the land. The book begins by introducing the road and the journey—for those who set out, “the road is a river that carries [them] home,” and the journey asks, “Where will we go? What will we see? We'll have to find out together. Will you join me?” (Dragon 6).

The journey takes place in the land of Hæth, which is “a **beautiful and boundless land, full of life and soul...a land of animal-folk...full of buggy livestock, pets, and wild creatures,**” has “a widespread **culture of hospitality...people who are fundamentally good,**” and is a world “**recently caught in war, but is no longer.** There is no violence here anymore” (Dragon 7-8). The bolding highlights these terms across the two pages of the introduction to Hæth, so from the start, we have assurances from our companion on the journey (Jay Dragon, journeying with us through the book) that we are safe here. Indeed, even those who were once mighty are now “exceedingly rare,” and though they wield (or once wielded) power, that power has weighed down their souls and the struggle has poisoned their goodness. They are not evil, but lonely (Dragon 8). We start to breathe a little easier and feel the sense of peace that permeates Hæth, and we cautiously take another step on the path, and maybe we can dare to begin imagining a world entirely without violence.

The next thing to learn as we set out is that our companion isn't going to tell us a story—stories “imprison the world” inside them and too easily glorify “powerful men...celebrate their victories and mourn their tragedies” (Dragon 9). Stories “build a reality where everything ties up neatly with a bow, and everything makes sense” (Dragon 9). Instead of a story, as we follow the book, we'll create our characters and maybe say goodbye to them, see new worlds that grow out of our imaginations and conversations, and watch the seasons and holidays pass by and mark the time. We'll travel our paths, trusting that they are right and that they will lead us home (Dragon 9).

We are still walking the path of player safety and comfort as we get into the tools that allow the conversation to continue healthily—the conversation is the journey, and it constructs the characters' journeys, so all players should have access to what they need for enabling a positive play experience. There's something on the bottom of the first page of this section that we'll come to down the road a bit, but for now, the tools: Let's do this instead; Do we want to?; Where to next?; What do you think?; Hold on; No; Walking away. These mediating phrases all serve to slow the pace, allow players to express their comfort and agency, and help them collaborate around issues that might cause discomfort or hurt. The end of this section also suggests that players can add “whatever tools feel right for us” for “helping everyone feel safe,” such as Script Change (<https://thoughty.itch.io/script-change>) by Beau Jágr Shelton or X-Card (https://docs.google.com/document/d/1SB0jsx34bWHZWbnNIVVuMjhDkrdFGol_hSC2BWPII3A/edit?usp=sharing) by John Stavropoulos (Dragon 14). These tools are additional ways for players to collectively manage the narrative's content, player consent, and personal safety.

So far, we've wandered a bit beyond even *Dream Askew* regarding what this game will provide for the players. *Dream Askew* included “pause” as its catch-all tool for player safety.

While it suggests that players use any other tools the group finds valuable, *Wanderhome* further delineates its safety tools and provides examples for the kinds of situations in which players can apply each one. The tools apply across the multiple roles and frames in which players operate—Hold on (a way to “halt what’s happening and switch gears to another topic”) may indicate that a player needs a break for the bathroom or to get a drink, that a character wants to go back and add to an earlier scene, or that a player feels minimized and wants to talk about it (Dragon 13). What these games share, however, is a foregrounding of safety before any information about how to play the game. This arrangement is a vital nod toward attending to the players’ lived experiences and recognizing that they inform the choices they make for their characters and how they construct the world in these empowering approaches to TTRPGs. It’s not necessary—and indeed, not desirable—for players to strive for artificial bracketing of the player, person, and persona. Creating safety tools for players to express how something that happens to their persona affects all three roles, sometimes in different ways, and how to manage those complex interactions through group discourse is a move that breaks down the binary oppositions between these roles that other games often encourage. Hold on.

I mentioned before that I wanted to share something from earlier in the journeying tools that also caught my eye. At the bottom of page 11 in the book, it’s a small paragraph under the heading, “Having Fun Together.” The concept of a TTRPG is so beholden to people sitting around a table, and that table signifies the space of being engaged with the game’s narrative. If players get up and leave, it’s often to take a break from being “in character”—perhaps to get a snack, step outside for fresh air, or process something that happened in the game. When players are around the table conversing, performing the actions relevant to the game, and not involved in other pursuits, they are playing the game instead of being out of the game by stepping away. In

LARPs, which are generally more physically dynamic, there are still areas designated as in-character (IC) and out-of-character (OOC)—anyone in an IC area is presumed to be interacting as their persona unless there is a physical signal otherwise, and OOC areas revert to player and person roles. Even *Dream Askew* mentions players sitting around a table, passing playbooks around a table, and interacting with a pool of tokens in the center of the table. In *Wanderhome*, however, the way to be playing the game expands beyond these boundaries. If a player is sitting back and not talking, curling up by the fire with a book, or off somewhere else drawing in a sketchbook, that is a valid way to be on the journey. “We all have different ways we travel” (Dragon 11). It’s essential to check in with the other players about how they are feeling and if they are having fun, but doing activities that aren’t directly pertinent to functional game elements is not necessarily not playing. *Wanderhome* expands how to play the game to include persona expressions that aren’t delineated or bound by the book’s few ludological aspects.

If you’d rather not talk about violence, you are welcome to skip ahead in our journey past this paragraph and the next. The introduction of Hæth as a land with no violence is also striking, especially in a genre that still allows for the possibility even when violence isn’t an overt part of the game. As the introduction indicated, those who were once violent are now lonely and isolated, so there’s no oppositional force to be the source of conflict. Nobody will come to try to harm or kill any of the characters, and they aren’t likely to seek out anyone who could have the capacity to do so if they desired. There is only one possibility for violence in the book at all, and it’s in the Veteran playbook. The playbook describes them as someone who wields “the blade that must never be drawn again,” but they have the only move (in this game, moves are called “things you can always do”) with a violent act: “Unsheathe your blade and immediately kill the person in front of you. Then, remove your character from the game. You cannot play them any

longer” (Dragon 106-107). If this one instance of violence occurs, it is the only one that will ever happen for that player. It will prevent their persona from continuing the journey or ever realizing a peaceful stopping place for that persona as they find their way home. There’s no home for someone who could do such a thing. The powerful and violent live at the periphery except for this one instance. Locating violence only in these two places—the fringes of society and in a rare, momentous event from a playbook (which likely happens well into a journey or maybe not at all)—lets the players and characters decide how they engage with it. They can construct a world without it. If the Veteran introduces it, the players and characters can use the world they’ve created to exhibit why it has no place, already knowing that the outcome will be the complete disappearance of the one who performed it. They can engage with the root of the violence, confident in the active rejection of its effects.

With this structure in place, the world that *Wanderhome* creates is one in which the characters live after violence, but their primary experience is engaging with its effects rather than violent acts themselves. One of the starting conversations for players is, “Do we want a more pastoral and upbeat journey, or a world that lingers more heavily on trauma and recovery?” (Dragon 15). Without being concerned with the possibility of violence stemming from coloniality getting reinscribed in the game world or any dominance imposing on the characters from any external forces, the players have complete agency in when and how they choose to take up those legacies. There is no GM to oppose them with any hierarchy, no NPC in the game who will attempt to hold on to colonial power, no society that will bear the terrible consequences of the past without the players having complete control of their characters’ subject positions relative to whatever elements they decide to introduce. Where to next?

Tokens and Failure

Like *Dream Askew*, *Wanderhome* uses tokens to reflect “the rhythm to the way we move through the world” (Dragon 18). Characters gain tokens for doing certain things and can spend them to influence the world. *Dream Askew* typically views taking a token as a moment of weakness or when things go wrong, which are moments when a player chooses for their character to fail. *Wanderhome* players can always choose to fail, but the actions that instruct players to take a token involve personal sacrifice, getting out of their comfort zones, or being more aware of the world around them (Dragon 18). Any player may stop to rest, express their true feelings, or “bask in the grandeur of the world, and describe it to the table” (Dragon 18). Spending a token is a way of saying, “I am taking a stance here” to solve a difficult problem, such as finding “what someone needs to give them a chance to change fundamentally” (Dragon 18-19). Jay Dragon points out that nothing in the game “concerns itself with failure” and that the game “isn’t preoccupied with failure” (19). Instead, Jay Dragon casts the things that we may commonly configure as failures—struggling, getting “passed over,” regretting, giving up—as mistakes, others making us suffer, or accepting the natural limitations of our bodies and brains, all of which simply put us on another path (19).

While the tokens retain the embodied act of taking and giving that they enable, the subtle shifts in how *Wanderhome* deploys them say something a little different about its world. The characters in *Wanderhome* all share most of the actions that gain and spend tokens, while in *Dream Askew*, the actions are housed exclusively in the playbooks and have little overlap. In *Wanderhome* most of the token-related actions are in a communal space in the book, not in individual playbooks. Each playbook has three or four items that deal with tokens amidst the many things the character can always do or do during seasonal holidays (which mark the time in

Hæth). The queer enclave in *Dream Askew* is where conflict and tension often drive the narrative. As such, the things characters can do are more independently organized and able to create an unstable group dynamic. *Wanderhome*, on the other hand, thrives on interpersonal harmony, which is reflected in the shared ways the characters experience the world. The lower stakes of taking and giving tokens seem, from reading the book, to enable a more fluid group interaction with each other and the world around them that doesn't rely on dissonance to create a narrative. After all, this is a journey, not a story. A commonality of experience underscores the idea that very different animals with very different backgrounds can all find a connection through the same bit of grandeur. And although it may ultimately mean something different to each of them, they share the threads that connect them just as they share the question all players, in a quiet moment, silently ask as they get ready to begin each session of journeying: "Where is my home?" (Dragon 24).

The characters might have a primarily amiable existence, but that is not necessarily the case everywhere in Hæth. One of the most significant anti-colonial moves in *Wanderhome* comes in a note at the bottom of page 26, which contains one of the few mentions of conflict in the game. As the characters journey to new places, there will often be problems that "form naturally, as natures and kith slam against each other." (Natures in *Wanderhome* are the places, and kith are the NPCs). In the typical *D&D* game, the characters are tasked with or positioned as the ones who will fix whatever problem might be happening. Whether through conquest, diplomacy, or other means, fixing a problem often involves imposing their will on the people who inhabit the land, no matter the characters' connection to that place. Especially in longer-running campaigns, where the characters have amassed power and wealth, they may have the ability to do this unchecked or unchallenged. The characters in *Wanderhome* "are never going to

solve a place's problems. You are travelers from beyond. As welcome as you are, this is not your home, and the locals know far more than you do about how to resolve their struggles and worries. The best you can do is ease pain, tackle short-term challenges, and give someone tools that might someday help out" (Dragon 26). Setting up the characters as temporary allies and helpers who follow the lead of the people who inhabit the land rejects the savior mentality that suffuses *D&D* and other conquest and domination-based games. It returns the power to maintain agency over their own lives entirely to the NPCs, an uncommon paradigm for a game.

Players are also responsible for portraying those NPCs and, much like in *Dream Askew*, will pick them up and put them aside as necessary and share them among the group. It is the same for natures, which have descriptors and things they can do, reminiscent of the setting elements in *Dream Askew*. Of course, the game is a journey across a sprawling land. There are 36 basic foundations for natures (*Wanderhome's* setting elements) instead of just the six sufficient for a small, sheltered community. *Wanderhome* describes portraying characters, kith, and natures as "giving the world a voice" (Dragon 26). The players lend their voices to their characters and, just as crucially, to the rest of the world, so they should strive to do so with "as much compassion and respect as you would give your playbook character. Just because they aren't represented by a playbook, doesn't mean they are less than" (Dragon 28). While they don't have playbooks, the kith and natures have things they can always do, making them closer to characters than the move-less NPCs in *Dream Askew*. The months, seasons, and holidays also have descriptors and suggestions for what happens during those times and how they interact with the characters and kith. This arrangement unravels the hierarchy from having a central figure responsible for the world and the NPCs. It also works against the notion of the PCs as the primary and most important inhabitants of the world. Yes, these are the characters the players

chose and may feel the most affinity for, but that doesn't have to simultaneously devalue anybody or anything that is not a PC.

Even if playing with a guide, which is like *Dream Askew's* facilitator role, *Wanderhome* is consistently NDNM—the guide may build a playbook or just handle the kith, natures, and seasons. Players lend their voice to those game elements but with no “special authority or power over the rules or text” (Dragon 30). Groups may also change guides as often as they like, they may operate without one, or the guide role may come and go as necessary (Dragon 28). Hold on.

There are a few other important places in the gamebook I'd like to visit briefly.

Essentializing: Jay Dragon mentions the works of Brian Jacques (among others) as an inspiration but deliberately avoids the types of easy animal essentialism that are problematic in those books. The Exile playbook gives players the choice of deer, tiger, eagle, or skunk (or another rare or nomadic animal), which could have any two of these characteristics: pragmatic, pessimistic, sharp, explosive, tired, careless, jumpy, damaged, and ladylike. The range of choices offers players the ability to ignore the typical connotations of whatever animal they choose.

Land acknowledgment: This book has a great one as well, and the industry needs to follow the lead of these two books in including this recognition. **Identification:** Jay Dragon identifies as “a queer disabled game designer,” which helps work against the traditional hegemony of game design (253). **Care:** As I mentioned with some of Avery Alder's comments to the reader, it's refreshing to see a designer care for their readers and players. The idea of care for one another runs throughout *Wanderhome*, and Jay Dragon cares deeply for the people engaging with the game. I've never seen anything like this in any other gamebook, and what it does to treat the player with grace and remind us that a TTRPG doesn't have to be about clinging to a character in

their quest for power, fame, wealth, or any other achievement is simply beautiful. I'd like this to be our parting from our journey with *Wanderhome*.

The journey is bigger than any of us. Someday we'll all step away, die, retire, or just go along a separate path. There will come a day when I'm not the person you'll fall asleep next to, and that's okay. *Wanderhome* is a journey about the long arc of it all, and that sometimes means your character will depart. Your one character is not the center of this journey, and it's important to hold onto the ways it will continue past you. I know it's still hard to say goodbye. I'm sorry. (Dragon 43)

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CHAPTER V: CONSCIENTIOUS ESCAPISM

Content warning: violence.

During a D&D campaign I was the DM for, the characters had several interactions with a cult that was operating from a tower near the town where the adventure had started. The cultists were attempting to resurrect their deity, and their activities were causing strange weather changes and other supernatural effects that indirectly disrupted town life. The PCs went to investigate and see if they could stop the cult from pursuing their ends to help restore the town—and loosing a deity upon the world probably wouldn't be great for anyone.

The PCs approached the tower, rushing to the entryway with weapons drawn. The guards put up some resistance, but the PCs defeated them and moved inside, where they met another band of guards with the cult leader behind them. The charismatic man convinced them to cease the fighting and join the cult for dinner and revelry, where he tried to talk the PCs out of their attack. He explained that he didn't realize the devastation he was causing to the town and apologized for any hardship he had caused, but expressed that it was his divine duty to see his work through—work that he believed, in his view, would bring good to the world. The PCs were patient enough to accompany him to the roof for a ritual to see that he meant no direct harm to the town. Still, the human sacrifices necessary to empower the ritual drove the PCs to begin attacking the cultists again. After defeating them all, they made their way to the cult's stables to take mounts for the journey back to town.

They found a frightened young woman who explained that she had thought the cult was good when she joined but soon started to see through the leader's rhetoric and became

uneasy with the sacrifices. She wanted to go back home but was afraid to leave. The PCs told her what they had done, and while she found news of the bloodshed upsetting, she thanked them for giving her a way to escape. To them, though, she was still a cultist. One of the PCs drew his weapon, clearly intending to kill her. With tears in her eyes, she begged on her knees to just be allowed to go back to her parents. Not sufficiently moved by her pleas, the PC took her life.

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This episode happened several years ago but still sticks with me as a moment of cognitive dissonance. I was *sure* that the young woman's emotional plea would be compelling and that the characters could find a moment of redemption amid the cult's destruction (which I did expect). Once I saw that their first instinct was to kill her rather than show mercy, I amped up my roleplay of that NPC and tried to make her as lost, pitiable, and regretful as possible. It wasn't enough. I wrapped up that session shortly after they killed her, and I was shaken about what had happened. Had I gone too far in making the cult's actions inexcusable and implicated anyone involved beyond any possible nuance? Did I not sufficiently emote in a way that would reach the personas (even if the players were aware)? Or perhaps the PC who did it was playing the merciless side of a persona with a strict moral outlook—but if that's the case, why didn't the other PCs intervene?

Within my D&D group, we have had several long discussions about the problems of essentialism that persists throughout the game's history, and we've tried to be aware of how we approach the game and what we can do to resist those parts. We have paid attention to WotC's still-insufficient efforts to remedy those aspects of *D&D* and considered both our own and several third-party alternatives for the racialized traits presented in character building, ultimately

enacting a character creation process with more choice and a shift of characteristics to culture and upbringing, changed our term from “races” to “peoples,” and given thought to how we portray what have traditionally been the “monstrous races.”

Of course, we have work to do to be better about our hobby, and we always will. However, given our conversations and our general mindset about the problematic issues in *D&D*, it still surprised me that what happened in the cultist session didn’t give the other guys more pause. It made me think that maybe the violence and domination mindset was so ingrained in the game and so pervasive throughout our long collective history with *D&D* as our primary TTRPG that we were still subject to its influence in some aspects of the game despite our attempts to engage with it. Thinking back over 30 years of playing this game, I now wonder how often I reinscribed the settler-colonial mindset through my own character choices and actions in the game. And I am thankful for the work that Avery Alder, Jay Dragon, and other game designers are now doing to question and break down those hegemonies.

My group still plays *D&D* because we enjoy it, and despite my criticisms, it can still be fun—and there is room to work against the system to address its problems. As Lee Hibbard suggests,

While DMs do not always have the time to rewrite entire *D&D* races to be more inclusive and have fewer colonialist racist undertones, this is the most effective means of change that players and DMs can engage with. Working within the created world to remove homogenous moral views, as well as creating more nuanced and complex origin stories, helps push back against the hegemonic systems of power imbalance in tabletop gaming lore...Using a *D&D* game as a space for queer expression demonstrates the power and potential of a TTRPG and the ways in which it can be used to craft and design a story that allows people, especially queer people with minimal outlets for expressing their identities, to be themselves, or at least, some iteration of themselves.

So yes, it’s okay to play *D&D*! Just because we do does not make us racist, sexist, hierarchical colonialists. But it’s also imperative that we question and push at where those things

exist in the game, and *Dream Askew* and *Wanderhome*, even if we don't play them instead of *D&D*, give us the tools to do so. There is no reason a DM can't go into a *D&D* campaign without having built a world and start with conversations with players that will undo the hierarchy and give players agency in creating the game setting—something I realize I tried to do with a website to build a campaign setting in which I asked the playgroup to contribute locations, histories, and tell stories with each other before I was aware of these newer games and had the tools to capitalize on it. There is room to explore a *D&D* campaign where even things usually governed by dice are negotiated through discourse and account for player desires to maintain an exciting narrative rather than relegating the story to chance. The players and DM can agree to work forward toward desired outcomes rather than backward from a randomized result. The pause from *Dream Askew*, the journeying tools from *Wanderhome*, and the pre-game conversations about care, safety, and comfort can all be part of a *D&D* campaign.

Some may argue that games are escapism and that the charm of *D&D* is that it offers a Tolkienesque fantasy of mythical heroes that satisfies our desire for greatness; that the point is to achieve that bracketing from the person that allows us to set real-life aside and be the player and persona for a few hours at a time. What *Dream Askew* and *Wanderhome* offer, if we put them in conversation with *D&D*, are ways to question and undo the parts of that escapism and heroism that rely on conquering and dominating others, subsuming player agency to a hierarchical world organization and randomness over causation, and of bracketing the roles we take on in playing the game and creating a false binary between ludology and narratology. These other games ask us to partake in escapism while still attending to the possibilities our stories suggest for the real world by creating different conversations that can shift the discourses, open up space for new

ones, and attend to a broader range of lived and embodied experiences in our other games and larger gaming culture.

As Hanna Brady reminds us, “Humans tell stories to define ourselves to ourselves and to others, to explain our culture and family...stories are the fabric of our history and our ghosts...they create what is true. A story can as easily erase history and hide ghosts” (65-66). Stories are about— and affect how—we interact with each other in the story and the world.

The combination of accepting the improbable or impossible for the sake of story and accepting that we are story-stuff ourselves is a powerful tool for creating empathy. The more improbable or impossible, the wider our minds and imaginations cast and the more room there is to tell and understand a different story...so make fantastic queer games. Make queer fantastical games. Make something. Tell a story. (Brady 67-68)

While games may be for escaping the real world, we must consider whether what we do within that fantasy will enable us to hide the ghosts or leave that fantasy with a greater empathy that we can carry with us from our personas to our persons. Maybe the next kid who wanders through the FLGS and picks up a book to flip through the pages, becoming entranced by the fantastic heroes and spectacular adventures, will find their way into a changed gamer community. We can imagine a community discourse that empowers them to recognize the constraints embedded in the game’s structure and inspires them to keep changing the game.

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