




Monster Power. Rebel Heart. Gay Sword

Queer Structures and Narrative Possibility in PbtA Tabletop Roleplaying Games

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Abstract. Much of the scholarship on tabletop roleplaying games (TRPGs) has focused on representation of queer characters and ‘cues’ that signal to queer audiences [1]. Yet recent independent TRPGs have moved beyond cues that queer play is merely tolerated and instead integrate ludonarrative structures that actively encourage queer interactions. Drawing from queer game scholarship and discussions by queer game designers, this article uses the idea of the ‘playground’ of game design [2, 3] to identify queer structures in three Powered by the Apocalypse (PbtA) TRPGs: *Voidheart Symphony* (2020), *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* (2021), and *Apocalypse Keys* (forthcoming). In this case study, I show how these games frame key elements (safety tools, Conditions, personal doom, Bonds, and media inspirations) as structures [4] that actively support queer narrative possibility. I argue that these structures engender shared outcomes, namely: encouraging emotions, showcasing messy characters, clarifying the power of fiction, recognizing tension between community and self, reframing violence, and building inter-player support.

Keywords: Queer games · Tabletop roleplaying games · Powered by the Apocalypse

1 Introduction

1.1 Queer TRPGs: A Troubled Legacy

The history of tabletop roleplaying games (TRPGs, often stylized TTRPGs) and queerness is contentious. On the one hand, mainstream TRPGs (like *Dungeons and Dragons*) have been constricted by the conservative roots of the medium. As Stenros & Sihvonen note in their history of queer representation in TRPG sourcebooks, “queer sexualities started to figure in the role-playing game books towards the end of the 1980s. However, in these early depictions, male homosexuality is presented as especially villainous, traitorous, and deceitful” [5]. Early TRPGs featured limitations on character gender [6] and even labeled queer identities as “sexual disorders” [5, 7]. Broadly speaking, the evolution of queerness in TRPGs, like queer video games, has followed a two-pronged path: 1) industry-supported games have made limited effort towards basic representation while 2) independent TRPGs push the boundaries of queer game possibilities.

In TRPG spaces, like other game spaces, queerness can be understood in two modes: 1) representing the experiences and identities of queer folks and 2) “as a way of being, doing, and desiring *differently*” [8]. As queer game scholar Bo Ruberg notes [8], this latter model builds on decades of queer theory [9–11] that examines queerness as a force that disrupts hegemonic structures. Queer game scholarship that addresses TRPGs has focused predominantly on queer representation, usually by examining sourcebooks and social dynamics. Stenros & Sihvonen argue for increased queer representation when they write “even the most fleeting mention, a veiled remark, would signal that the game world does indeed feature queer people” [5]. They call such signals ‘cues’ for queer players—noting that “cues for queer play remain a controversial issue... The publisher and designer, the creators of the urtext, signal if queer play is tolerated, encouraged, or expected” [1]. While signals for queer representation in TRPGs are important, overfocusing on cues neglects possibilities for queer play that goes “beyond representation into the mechanics, aesthetics, interfaces, and development practices of games” [3]. While games like *D&D* have recently added invitations for queer players and characters [6], mainstream TRPGs have struggled to develop meaningful queer *structures*.

While game scholars have begun exploring independent video games and the “Queer Avant-Garde” [3], less notice has been paid to indie TRPGs built around queer structures. Designer Naomi Clark noted in an interview with Ruberg that she didn’t want her roleplaying card game, *Consentacle*, to be “about queerness at the level of characters or narrative. Instead, the queerness comes out in the interactions between people” [12]. Likewise, Avery Alder said that “games are made queer when they have structural queerness. Structural queerness is fundamentally about challenging the frameworks of how stories get told. It’s about subverting systems through queer mechanics and creating new ways of seeing desire” [4]. This idea of ‘structural queerness’ is fundamental to TRPG design that reshapes the narrative possibilities of play through queer interactions. This study examines such structures across three Powered by the Apocalypse TRPGs—*Voidheart Symphony (VS)* by Minerva McJanda, *Thirsty Sword Lesbians (TSL)* by April Kit Walsh, and *Apocalypse Keys (AK)* by Jamila R. Nedjadi—to explicate a toolkit for storygame design that opens possibilities for queer play.

1.2 Dragons on the Playground: Queer Cues vs. Queer Structures

Before we define and observe “queer structures” [4], and how can they be differentiated from shallower instances of representation, it is important to delineate how structures in TRPGs differ from other mechanical game systems. Ruberg writes that queer game designers have “demonstrate[d] how queerness can operate in video games beyond representation, and how game-making can function as a playground in its own right for exploring queer messes” [3]. This idea of an explorative ‘playground’ mirrors a framework in TRPG design, as Jay Dragon notes in a lyrical article titled “A Dozen Fragments on Playground Theory” [2]. Dragon describes a growing frustration with the characterization of TRPGs as rigid rule systems that players engage with in fixed ways. Instead, Dragon—like Ruberg—offers the metaphor of a playground, drawing an analogy to physical structures: slides, monkey bars, etc. While playground features might have an intended use, the *actual* use of such structures is interpreted by children (the players). As Dragon writes: “I have added a slide, because it is fun to slide down, and because

sometimes that is all that is needed. There are metal bolts exposed on the side of the slide, and the kids have invented their own game with those bolts...” [2]. TRPG mechanics intended to work one way by the designer(s) can be ignored or reinterpreted by players. At the same time, play might take place in what Dragon calls the “wide open field” where “structure is unneeded” [2]. The playground, as a metaphorical lens, is useful for examining TRPG systems not as singular, fixed mechanics (defined rules with concrete outcomes), but as structures (acted upon by players) within a flexible system of interpretation. Unlike most videogame narratives, where players only engage the surface of the system through “abstracted interface” [13, 14] players interact with the structures of TRPGs directly [4]. In the same way that the physical structures of a playspace anticipate, shape, and encourage the possibilities of play—so too the structures of a role-playing game shape emergent narrative *possibility*. In this sense, my analysis of these games focuses on 1) how their mechanics comprise larger structures of play, and 2) how those structures support queer narratives.

In looking at queer TRPG structures, we must note how such structures are distinct from more superficial elements. L. Laura McGee describes a problem in video games that interpret queerness through an oversimplified “shallow coating,” and notes “the metaphor is in the mechanics, but the mechanics are so simplified that the metaphor is meaningless” [15]. Likewise, Alder criticizes games that approach queerness through characters and narrative but neglect queer mechanics—noting that ‘desire’ mechanics in her game *Monsterhearts* stemmed out of a need to “make those mechanics queer” [4]. To this end, I’m defining game elements that provide superficial signals and representational flavor (what Anna Anthropy has called a “gay button” [16]) as queer *cues* [1], separate from queer *structures* that shape and anticipate narrative play.

To help distinguish these, here’s an example: many TRPGs provide a space for pronouns on character sheets. This is a mechanical cue to players that knowing and respecting the pronouns of other players and characters is important, that they should not be assumed, and is a “signal that the game world does indeed feature queer people” [5]. Compare this, however, to Jay Dragon’s game *Sleepaway*, which gives the following prompt, “For each camper, choose 2 genders (1 from each column):

- **Column 1:** “Masculine, Feminine, Full, Empty, Open, Closed, Ajar, Adjacent, Crossing Past, Above, Below Inbetween, Overflowing, Vacant”
- **Column 2:** “Cicada, Fox, Eagle, Pillbug, Worm, Faux Wolf, Dragon, Robin, Coyote, Lion, Moth, Butterfly, Tree” [17].

Sleepaway’s mechanics for describing characters’ gender(s) go far beyond being a cue that queerness is “tolerated, encouraged, or expected” [1]. By prompting players to 1) choose two genders, 2) consider the multiplicity of gender, and 3) think about whether they are more of an “Empty Faux Wolf” or an “Overflowing Worm,” *Sleepaway* structurally reshapes the game narrative with queer possibility [17]. While both takes on pronouns are important, one mechanic *leaves space* for queerness while the other *actively encourages queer interactions*. As Jack Halberstam has said, “rather than just hunting for LGBT characters in the worlds of gaming, we want to seek out queer forms, queer beings, and queer modes of play” [18]. In this way, I focus on how each game in this study reshapes play with queer and ‘disorienting’ [11] narrative possibility. While

any analysis of TRPG mechanics based on sourcebooks alone is likely to be reductive, analyzing how queer game structures are framed across multiple titles provides a more comprehensive glimpse of queer possibility in TRPGs.

1.3 A Brief History of the *Apocalypse*

Vincent and Meguey Baker’s *Apocalypse World* (*AW*, 2010) marked the beginning of a critical era in ‘fiction-first’ TRPG design. As Aaron Reed notes, *Apocalypse World*, as a collaborative storytelling system, “prioritizes Generation of ideas over simulationist Administration, flipping the dynamic present in traditional rules-heavy games” [19]. A violent, dystopian, wasteland-punk game, *AW* itself is less important to the legacy of independent TRPGs than the Bakers’ invitation to other designers: “If you’ve created a game inspired by *Apocalypse World*, and would like to publish it, please do” [20]. The *AW* website lists 89 games that designers have since self-designated with the genealogical marker “Powered by the Apocalypse” (PbtA) as of this writing. What designates a game as PbtA is complicated. As Vincent Baker writes, the label “isn’t the name of a kind of game, set of game elements, or even the core design thrust of a coherent movement. (Ha! This last, the least so.)” [20]. Instead, the label is an unpoliced ‘homage’—designers may choose to signal a relationship between their game and *AW* using the label and a logo. In other words, “PbtA” is not a branding or a mechanical linkage to *AW*’s system, but a mark of ludic etymology.

The three games in this study are all part of this distributed legacy of PbtA games and all share several mechanical influences from *AW* itself:

- Each game relies on “playbooks” that designate the different roles the characters take in the game (i.e. “The Beast” [*TSL*], “The Watcher” [*VS*], “The Fallen” [*AK*]).
- Gameplay is oriented around “moves.” Moves pause and shape the action of the fiction and generally involve dice-rolls and/or choices. Moves are activated by a narrative ‘trigger’ that happens during collective storytelling (i.e. in *AK*, if a character confides in another, they will trigger the ‘Reveal Your Heart’ move).
- Play and the fiction are structured as a ‘conversation’ between one MC (“Keeper of the Doors” in *AK*, “Gaymaster” in *TSL*, and “Architect” in *VS*) and the players: sharing what their characters (or NPCs and the world) are doing, saying, and thinking.

These games also draw from two influential PbtA titles: *Masks: A New Generation* by Brendan Conway and *Monsterhearts* (*MH*) by Avery Alder (who was part of development for both *TSL* and *AK*). *Masks* is a superhero game focused on teen drama and cartoon-violence—with a robust system for relationships and emotional defeat. Both *VS* and *TSL* note *Masks* as an inspiration, and Nedjadi has talked about his experiences running *Masks* as motivation for designing *AK*. Similarly, numerous scholars and designers point to Alder’s work (*MH* and *MH 2* in particular) as a turning point in the legacy of both PbtA games and queer TRPGs [1, 7, 19, 21, 22]. *MH*, a messy drama about monsters in high school, brought the queer potential of PbtA games to the fore. In this sense, *VS*, *TSL*, and *AK* are products of a complex ecology within the independent TRPG scene. While this study accounts for only a sample of PbtA games, I hope it illuminates

some of the ways that independent TRPG designers have developed a shared toolkit for supporting queer narrative play.

1.4 The Table is Everywhere: The Games in Context

The TRPG scenes of today extend beyond physical tabletops—remote play, online distribution, and digital affordances are now commonplace parts of the medium. Virtual tabletops (VTTs) such as Roll20, Fantasy Grounds, rollwithme.xyz, Foundry VTT, and Tabletop Simulator provide means of playing mainstream and independent TRPGs online, often augmented through voice/video chat software such as Zoom or Discord. The material components of TRPGs (character sheets and playbooks, dice, cards, handouts, sourcebooks) have likewise adapted to iterations across apps, online generators and dice rollers, PDFs, and digital assets. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the ubiquity of online play has exploded: sites like Roll20—which allow players to advertise online games—were used by libraries, game stores, and friend groups to move game night online. The distribution of independent TRPGs likewise relies on digital platforms: games are funded and circulated through Kickstarter and Backerkit, itchfunding, and other pledge-based programs. Digital game marketplaces like itch.io and DriveThruRPG are central hubs for selling indie content. The games analyzed here are, as modern TRPGs, enmeshed in this complex digital ecology [23]. The networked backdrop of independent TRPGs is not only an important reality, but key context for queer play—where the conservative legacy of TRPGs has often excluded marginalized players, digital tabletops have changed the game for queer community. Not everyone has access to, or is comfortable, joining public tables at the local game store, but queer TRPG communities are thriving online. The table is everywhere—the games examined here operate between their analog roots and the new affordances of digitality.

Thirsty Sword Lesbians, written by April Kit Walsh (she/her, gay/ghem), was published by Evil Hat and supported by a Kickstarter campaign that raised just shy of \$300k USD (15 times the game’s funding goal). *TSL* is the most genre-flexible game in this study, as the opening paragraph states: characters “may be fantasy heroes, or may inhabit a galaxy of laser swords and starships. Anywhere that swords cross and hearts race, thirsty sword lesbians are there” [24]. Rather than focus on a singular game genre (stealth-action, mystery, etc.) *TSL* pulls its ‘genre’ inspiration from queer-coded lesbian media (direct examples are discussed in Sect. 2.6 as media inspirations). Characters fight and flirt with villains, and playbooks use sword-lesbian archetypes such as The Nature Witch (“Oblivious Horse Girl,” “Plant Geek Babygay”) and The Infamous (“Former Villain,” “Escaped Henchperson”). As of this study, *TSL* is the most commercially known—with an established publisher (Evil Hat), its own third-party license (“Powered By Lesbians”), and official assets and modules for Roll20’s online marketplace.

Written by Minerva McJanda (she/her) and published through UFO Press, *Voidheart Symphony* was also funded via Kickstarter and distributed through itch.io with physical books and card decks shipped to backers. *VS* builds on McJanda’s previous work with PbtA design (*Legacy: Life Among the Ruins* [25], among others). *VS* is heavily inspired by the videogame *Persona 5* and imitates its core gameplay loop. In *VS*, characters are rebels: mundane people in a modern city with the power to enter demonic, otherworldly labyrinths called Castles. Castles contain the reflections of a Vassal—powerful, evil

figures—and by infiltrating them and defeating their Vassals, the rebels change the state of the real world. Rebels must also manage a host of relationships (called Covenants) represented by tarot cards. Rebel playbooks (The Authority, The Icon, The Heretic) note characters' civilian strengths and otherworldly powers.

Currently in development by Jamila R. Nedjadi (they/he), *Apocalypse Keys* was originally distributed through itch.io during its beta releases, but is now being produced by Evil Hat (also the publisher of *TSL*). This study used official playtest materials for the game; content quoted here is subject to change. In *AK*, players are monstrous agents working for a secretive, occult government branch called the DIVISION. Inspired by storyworlds such as *Hellboy*, the players are monsters investigating monsters: stopping Harbingers of the apocalypse from opening Doom's Door. Yet each monstrous agent's playbook (The Last, The Surge, etc.) foretells a doomed future: as characters embrace their Powers of Darkness, they risk becoming harbingers themselves.

2 Finding Queer Structures

2.1 Overview

Despite their disparate genres (lesbians, heist-action, mystery), the three sourcebooks adopt shared structures that encourage queer narrative possibility: 1) safety tools 2) Conditions 3) personal doom 4) Bonds and 5) drawing from extant media. These structures, though uniquely framed, all anticipate queer play and interactions. Notably, these structures are not *exclusively* queer, but support both queer narrative possibility and marginalized play across identities. Below, I characterize these structures and examine how they are presented across each title:

2.2 Safety Tools: Beginning with Boundaries

All these games foreground the importance of safety tools—used to manage boundaries, scope, and tone for play. Each game either links to or references tools from the TTRPG Safety Toolkit (curated and maintained by Kienna Shaw and Lauren Bryant-Monk), which is prevalent in independent TRPGs [26]. These include the use of:

- *The X-Card* (by John Stavropoulos), which gives players a card (digital or material) that signals a need to pause the game in response to player discomfort or trauma.
- *Script Change Tools* (by Beau Jágr Sheldon) that allow players to signal (via cards, gesture, or chat) a request to rewind, fast-forward, or pause the narrative.
- *The CATS sheet* (by Tomer Gurantz, adapted from Patrick O'Leary) that helps the MC describe the Concept, Aim, Tone, and Subject Matter of the game.
- A system for sharing *Lines* (topics players don't want to exist in the story) and *Veils* (things they don't want to see 'onscreen'), developed by Ron Edwards.

In addition, these games provide discussions of consent-based gaming and storytelling. *VS* encourages players to preemptively discuss how they feel about antagonism between characters and what kinds of enemies they are comfortable going up against

[27]. *TSL* includes re-flavored versions of many of these tools (a check-in card, lines and veils, and the X-card) and also a discussion about “The Palette” of the game, where players share what story elements they wish to focus on [24]. *AK* refers players to the toolkit, includes a digital CATS sheet, and a Greed/Red/Yellow system for describing content players want to see and avoid (an adaptation of Lines and Veils) [28]. In every case, these safety tools are frontloaded as the first and most crucial part of setup.

As community game designer Elizabeth Sampat wrote about her game *Deadbolt*, “If *Deadbolt* is queer, it’s because it’s a safe space to be queer” [29]. Safety tools allow players to establish boundaries for play and fiction—defining the narrative playground through shared, consent-based rulebuilding. As Ashwell notes, these mechanics are not framed as an attempt to limit content, rather “the stress is... that it makes a greater range of content *possible*” [22]. Notably, safety tools also serve as a queer cue in that they clarify audience and signal to marginalized players that safety is valued. *TSL* even includes a clear statement “No Fascists or Bigots Allowed” (a strategy developed by *iHunt* designer Olivia Hill [30]) along with a detailed list of the game’s expectations for players’ social awareness and political values. Clark has noted the importance of designing space for consent in tabletop games [12]. While the power dynamics of TRPGs can fall into toxic tropes (relying on, say, antagonism between the facilitator and players), these safety tools are rooted in trust. Rather than asking players to agree to ‘terms’ or relying on implied consent, these tools are based around shared boundary-setting (through the “palette,” lines, and veils), active consent (revoked at any time via the X-card or “Pause” tools), and shared satisfaction.

2.3 Conditions: Pain and Possibility

Conway’s *Masks* developed a system called ‘Conditions,’ which reimagined the mechanics for harm and physical violence used in *AW*. *Masks*, a game about adolescent superheroes, notes “how much physical harm can an invulnerable space alien take before they go out?... *Masks* isn’t about that—in *Masks*, [characters’] responses to getting punched are far more important.” [31]. *Masks*’ Conditions system tracks the emotional fallout of conflict as characters become emotionally embroiled (“The alien gets Angry”). Each game in this study adapts the Conditions system to emphasize emotional consequences over physical harm. As players amass Conditions, they are expected to roleplay the responses of their thwarted characters.

VS uses variations of the same Conditions as *Masks*: characters might become Angry, Callous, Cowed, Overwhelmed, or Scared—each leading to a mechanical penalty for certain rolls. If characters accrue too many Conditions, they are removed from the scene and receive a complication in the mundane world. This is a motivation for players to use emotional support moves and to manage the mental health of characters. *VS* links this back to player safety: on the page delineating Conditions, there’s a highlighted note that only *characters*, not players, should be dealing with unwanted feelings. *TSL* likewise uses five conditions: Angry, Frightened, Guilty, Hopeless, and Insecure. If all are marked, characters are Defeated, and the player momentarily loses narrative control of the character. Like *VS*, players can clear Conditions through support moves, but also by taking destructive actions such as lashing out (Angry), running away (Frightened), or confronting an object of jealousy (Insecure) [24]. *AK* takes a different approach:

each Playbook has its own four Conditions, and players can earn Darkness Tokens (a crucial resource spent on moves) by roleplaying a Condition that affects them. Because Conditions are unique to each Playbook, they build on that Playbook's theme: The Last (a grief-stricken survivor) might become Distant, Merciless, or Despairing. The proud Fallen, on the other hand, turns Lustful, Raging, Forlorn, or Obsessed.

By choosing not to focus on physical harm, the Conditions system lingers on the emotional aftermath of conflict. Unlike physical wounds, where characters might sleep or drink a healing potion to 'reset' bodily harm, Conditions can't be cleared by time. Instead, they haunt the characters, and can only be resolved through care and support by companions (at best) or by lashing out (at worst). Rather than framing Conditions as a *consequence* (emphasizing the infliction as punishment), the focus is on *the character's response*—an opening of possibility for hurt and healing in the fiction.

Conditions are a queer reimagining of damage and pain. Importantly, these systems do not *demand* that players or characters be messy or vulnerable, but instead encourage experimentation with what Ruberg has called for in video games: a "rich array of emotions... that can in fact shape a game's message as much as (if not more than) its content and mechanics" [32]. Characters get vicious and fearful—rejecting an expectation of happiness, victory, and heroism. Conditions drive players to consider context: a character who reacts to something by becoming Lustful (*AK*) must now think about how that desire might shape the fiction. By confronting context through consensual pain [33], these games invite players to "feel what we aren't supposed to feel" [32] and engage with emotional volatility and messy possibility.

2.4 Personal Doom: Power and Ruin

Given that the Conditions system doesn't allow characters to be killed, the stakes of these games are defined elsewhere: in characters' personal transformations. Rather than focusing on whether a character will survive physically, these games focus on what personal values characters will compromise to continue surviving. They structurally highlight personal doom, as players make hard choices about where their characters will draw their power from. For example, in *AK*, players accrue points of Ruin whenever they are tempted by their dark future or choose to push their Powers of Darkness. When players reach five Ruin, they take a Ruin Advance, which unlocks new, devastating moves (e.g. the ability to instantly kill a vulnerable NPC or a pathway to godhood). But there is a catch: once characters take their ninth Ruin Advance, the player 'retires' the character, makes a new one, and the original character emerges as the antagonist of the next investigation. In this way, players (and characters) are tempted by the power of Ruin—but because these abilities often require players to mark additional Ruin whenever they are used, characters who over-rely on Ruin moves will find themselves in a rapid descent into doom. This is reflected in the move, Torn Between, where a character must decide to "Let [their] monstrous nature show" or "Describe how [they] diminish [their] power to conform to what society demands." While the player's characters can't 'die,' there is a threat of personal failure that is put in conflict with the characters' values. Rather than "will my character survive?" the question becomes: "Will my character resort to their ruinous powers? How will this change them?"

In *TSL*, the structure for balancing personal doom is unique to each playbook. For example, The Beast playbook has a “Feral” meter and a warning: “You may walk in civilized circles, but sooner or later your feral truth will come to the fore” [24]. Depending on the action The Beast takes in the fiction, they will increase or decrease their Feral score: if their meter reaches zero, they lose access to all their Beast playbook moves. If their meter reaches four, they Transform into their monstrous self and gain powerful moves but expose themselves and allies to danger. Other playbooks in the game feature a similar balancing act. The Chosen has a ‘Destiny’ that they must embrace or reject, while The Trickster must balance their ‘Feelings’ meter. Each of *TSL*’s Playbooks feature self-conflict and a precarious balance between the characters’ want for power/freedom and cultural expectation. This also emerges in a special move, “Call on a Toxic Power” which triggers when characters parlay with an evil entity: “You can approach them and you may even find them helpful at times, but only those with strong Spirit can engage with them and emerge unscathed” [24].

VS takes a similar approach through its use of the modified tarot. As characters make choices, they build attunement with two cards: The World (“World is ‘you matter,’ a hand reaching down to pull others back up to their feet.”) and The Void (“Void is ‘I matter,’ fists raised up in defiance against a hostile universe.”) [27]. Like the other games, characters balance these two sources of power hand-in-hand: community obligations, relationships, and the everyday vs. an internal, isolating, devastating power and “taking your enemy’s strengths for yourself” [27]. When characters go too far and reach three ranks in either attunement, they trigger one of two moves:

- **Overwhelmed by the World:** One of the character’s Covenants charges recklessly into danger, the character becomes unable to help an ally and loses their commitment, or the character gives up life as a rebel and can only help in mundane ways.
- **Overwhelmed by the Void:** The character loses a Covenant (“they just don’t mean anything to you anymore”), the character’s own darkness manifests new demons, or the character becomes a monster themselves in the Castle otherworld [27].

This structure reshapes narrative with possibilities for queer—and especially transgender—tension: between helping your community and protecting yourself, between hiding from and standing up to the world. As game designer Kara Stone has said, “hardness goes with softness... the decision between whether you are going to heal or destroy. Sometimes it’s not the right answer to put your healing energy towards something that doesn’t love you back” [34]. As tensions escalate, players must make choices about whether their characters are willing to grow closer to ruin, transform into beasts, or channel dark powers from the Void to survive.

2.5 Bonds: Featuring Relationships

These games use systems for relationships based on Bonds (developed in *Masks* and *MH*). *AK* uses the most direct adaptation of this system: when players create characters, they mark Bonds with other agents, NPCs, and with “What the Darkness Demands of You.” During play, players can spend Bonds to change the outcomes of rolls by narrating a short flashback or detail about how that character has shaped the outcome.

Bonds can also be nurtured when characters trigger the “Reveal Your Heart” move and can be destroyed by activating some Ruin abilities. Bonds represent opportunities to put mechanical teamwork into the fiction, but *AK* clarifies that Bonds aren’t always positive: rivalries and tense relationships can also grow as Bonds. While *Bonds* suggests a two-way relationship, *TSL*’s Strings (as in ‘heartstrings’) allow players to “Influence With a String” and tempt a character or alter a roll. Strings give characters subtle (but incomplete) power over one another, allowing players to boost their own experience and grow closer in a short scene. In *TSL*, players also share Strings when a character becomes Smitten with someone, foregrounding romantic possibility. Finally, *VS* adopts this structure through its use of Minor Covenants and Major Covenants. Covenants are defined by their role in the tarot deck and a brief description that states how a Covenant will help a character and what help they require themselves. Characters may struggle to protect and nurture their Covenants, or even betray them—making *VS*’s social system a complex cycle of managing character’s needs and the needs of their Covenants.

These games continue the project that Alder has described with *MH*—which famously includes a move to ‘turn on’ other monsters [35], prompting players “to contend with what that desire means for their characters” [4]. Like structures for personal doom, these mechanics support a queer world of social bonds filled with mutual empowerment, grief, needs, and desire [36]. Bonds reshape characters’ influences over one another—opening possibility for queer play amidst rivalry, love, and friendship.

2.6 (Re)drawing from Queer Media

These games draw from established media and in doing so, reimagine the queer potential of extant genres—building on a long legacy of queer readings and queer remixing of media [8, 10, 37, 38]. For example, *VS* pulls extensively from the *Persona* franchise—a videogame series about adolescents who can transform from ordinary civilians into powerful, costumed heroes who wield inner-demons. Yet, as Jordan Youngblood has pointed out, this franchise is riddled with homophobic and transphobic messaging and reinforces heteronormative values [39]. *VS* rebuilds *Persona*’s ludic premise (and queer potential), opening narrative possibility for trans-empowerment narratives of transformation and queer stories about navigating identities under crisis. Similarly, while the *Hellboy* franchise (an inspiration for *AK*) rarely explores queerness directly, the potential of the themes of ‘dual-monstrosity’ [4] demands queer remix: as *AK* characters encounter alienation, transformation, and reject self-narratives. *TSL* is overtly queer in its messaging, and its sample adventures reference established queer media (like “Monster Queers of Castle Gayskull,” which parodies *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*). Yet *TSL* also references media with queer baggage. One adventure, “Sword Lesbians of the Three Houses,” reimagines Nintendo’s *Fire Emblem: Three Houses*—a game popular in queer shipper fandoms but which included queerbaiting [40]. By opening space for reinterpretations of established media, these games prompt queer remix and subversive play against normative genres.

3 Queer Narrative Possibility

3.1 Shared Outcomes

In imagining the playground, play is not determined by rules but by player interaction. These structures can be revised, ignored, and even misused. Independent TRPG designers have pointed out that safety tools (such as the X card) can be abused by bad actors to manipulate other players [41]. Likewise, game structures themselves do not necessarily create, demand, or imply queer play. The structures explored here are queer because they *open possibilities* for players to safely “bring-your-own-queerness” to the table [12]. When put in conjunction with one another, we can see what interactions these structures anticipate and the shared outcomes they proliferate in game narratives:

Encouraging emotions: Giving players agency over the content of the game through safety tools opens possibilities for emotional narrative. *TSL* encourages players to “Feel Deeply and Often,” which it links to safety and consent, noting that groups should aim to “foster an environment where your fellow players feel safe exploring intense feelings and potentially difficult topics.” [24]. Likewise, *AK* encourages players to embrace entanglements, and “fight, fall in love, succumb to your emotions, be vulnerable” [28]. As Ruberg writes: “Let us play anger. Let us play what hurts. Let us play in ways that are just as different and just as queer as we are as players” [32]. By redefining the narrative playground, these games support a counter-normative range of feelings.

Showcasing messy characters: These games draw from media that highlights nuanced characters, from disaster lesbians to monster agents. As *TSL* states: “even friends can hurt each other’s feelings, and no one is perfect, particularly not the complex, conflicted PCs in [*TSL*]” [24]. These structures grant permission to player characters and enemies to embrace messiness. Rather than ‘soldiering on’ and ignoring the Conditions that affect their characters, players are mechanically rewarded for embodying Conditions. *AK* grants crucial Darkness Tokens for roleplaying doom in the fiction, and *TSL* lets players clear Conditions by lashing out in destructive ways. These allow players to explore both the messiness of identity [3] and emotions beyond ‘fun’ and ‘victory’ [32].

Clarifying the power (and danger) of fiction: By noting the need for boundaries, these sourcebooks affirm the affective power of shared storytelling. *VS* clarifies that the story “can easily go very dark, and it’s important to respect the comfort of the actual people in your group over the desires of fictional characters” [27]. *VS* includes an invocation to players: “if we want a better world we’ll need group solidarity, community accountability, individual empowerment, and a dream of a better way, just like this game’s rebels” [27]. These messages not only welcome marginalized players and validate players’ lived experiences, but invite (rather than ignore) real political context.

Recognizing tension between community and self: Each of these games structurally present queer tension between a destructive, powerful force rooted in the self and a healing, yet demanding force located in community. Characters must narratively balance their need to “let your monstrous nature show” and “conform to what society demands” [28]. In *AK*, marking Ruin means that an agent can accrue new devastating powers, but that they also slowly descend into their “darkest” self as a harbinger. Yet *AK* does not frame this descent as a bad thing, only a new direction of the fiction. Likewise, *TSL* foregrounds characters’ dual-needs to remain secretive and find power in transformation.

This is loudest in *VS*: turning to the self (Void) gives characters destructive power that can only be calmed with community support (World). At the same time, characters who overcommit to the needs of their Covenants struggle to maintain their edge against the Vassal. These are struggles of queer energy: between supporting the community around you and fighting against larger, external systems of oppression.

Reframing violence: Conditions shape how these games frame physical violence. In combat-focused TRPGs, a character's ability to physically destroy and dominate an enemy is paramount. Yet Conditions open possibilities for modes of conflict and recognize that being *defeated* is different from being *killed*. In these games, violence is only one avenue to defeating a potential enemy; players are prompted to rethink the impact of their actions on an opponent. *TSL* especially drives this point: "Bear in mind that inflicting Conditions is emotionally violent, and sometimes physically violent... that said, some things are worth fighting for and conflict is often necessary before oppression and toxic behavior can be halted" [24]. This is reinforced by the way these games approach power: characters who take the 'strongest' moves are also prone to experience Ruin (*AK*), struggle against the Void (*VS*), or expose themselves to danger (*TSL*). In this way, they resist optimization and elevate character story over domination.

Building support between players: These games meaningfully underscore support with other characters and the need to blow off steam. *VS*'s "Check In" move, *AK*'s "Reveal Your Heart" move, and *TSL*'s "Emotional Support" move are triggered when characters open up to others, clearing Conditions and gaining Bonds. These games encourage scenes where characters support one another—driving roleplay that focuses on teamwork and tension, healing and community, relationships and reciprocity.

3.2 Conclusion: Beyond Cues

The games in this study mark a transition from TRPGs that include cues that "queer play is tolerated, encouraged, or expected" [1]. Notably, these games do include such cues—*AK* features gender diversity in the characters of its mysteries and many of the example Vassals in *VS* are described as posing a danger to queer communities. *TSL* has so many overtly queer references that it actually includes a cue to *non-queer* players, in its section "What If... Not Lesbians?" [24]. But while cues are important because they welcome queer audiences—queer audiences are already here. Thanks to the new hybrid ecology of TRPGs, queer players and designers are now a permanent force in the tabletop roleplaying scene. Queer folks are playing, making (podcasts, actual plays, hacks, fan art, games), and telling new, subversive stories through roleplaying games.

The examples presented here represent a distillation of the tools being used by independent TRPG designers of PbtA games—but they are not the whole picture. Queer TRPG designers are working in every subgenre, from old-school dungeon crawlers to lyric games [21]. It's my hope that this case study can not only draw greater attention to the important work of queer, independent TRPGs, but provide a chance for game scholars and designers to learn from these structures and imagine new modes of play, new playgrounds, and new possibilities for queer interactive storytelling.

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