

INTERSECTIONAL REPRESENTATION:
LGBTQ+ AND NEURODIVERSE
VOICES IN TRANSMEDIA FICTION

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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BY

TYNAN DRAKE

DR. KEVIN MOLONEY – ADVISOR

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
MUNCIE, INDIANA

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Abstract

Diversity representation in fictional stories is a growing concern for many minority communities, as these representations have a significant impact on how members of these communities are treated by society. Cultural stigmatization of LGBTQ+ and neurodiverse communities has led to repeated misrepresentation in media which harms members of these communities and denies them the agency to define their own experiences. Though fictional narratives written by these communities are beginning to emerge, very few represent the intersectional experiences that common occur between these communities. This paper uses design thinking methods to explore the intersectional experiences of neurodiverse (plural and autistic), queer, and gender nonconforming identities and to prototype a fictional transmedia experience that presents these intersectional experiences in ways that are empowering and return agency to the communities it represents.

Keywords: intersectionality, diversity representation, neurodiversity, LGBTQ+, queer, autism, plural identities, transgender, gender nonconforming, Dissociative Identity Disorder, gaslighting, transmedia, fantasy, storytelling

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A Narrative of Our Personal Experience

When we were a very small child, sometime before the age of 4, we had a dog named Misty. She was an American Eskimo, a type of working dog, which are known to be energetic, intelligent, and often have high predatory drives. Without proper training and an ideal environment to work out all that inborn energy they can become destructive, anxious, even aggressive.

We only have two clear memories of Misty. The first is watching her chase down the neighbor kid like a coyote chases a rabbit. The second involves an out-of-body experience where one of us watched our body standing on the kitchen table and scream as Misty ran through the room. It was a strange moment, mostly because it was the first time one aspect of our consciousness could actually make eye contact with the other. It brought our awareness to a reality we had never questioned before that moment. Now we look back on it and laugh thinking this was probably one of our earliest experiences with existential dread, but at the time it truly was terrifying for so many reasons. It was a moment that defined so much of how our life would play out for the rest of our childhood and into our young adult years.

Clinical psychology tends to lean towards early childhood trauma as an explanation for the development of plurality, but many members of the plurality community report experiencing a multiplicity of selves before, or even completely in the absence of, trauma. Some members of the community report having mixed origins (both trauma and non-trauma based) for different system members, while others consider their experiences a part of spiritual phenomenon or a natural part of their in-born neurodiversity (More Than One). While the logistics of these various origins infinitely fascinate us (consciousness and how the mind works being one of our special interests), we aren't convinced it really matters one way or another. As far back as we can

remember, we have always experienced life through a plurality of consciousnesses, an experience that has brought immense joy into our life through the support of our inner family, who often challenge one another to view the world anew and let go of that which no longer brings any benefit to our experience of life.

While we do not ascribe to the notion that trauma defines our experience, we do acknowledge the major part it played in our life, as repeated traumatic experiences led to the development of dissociative barriers that made it increasingly harder for members of our mindspace to communicate with one another. This is the point where our natural experience of plurality dipped into the state currently known in modern medicine as Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID).

Imagine living in the same house with someone. It's pretty easy to talk to them, even if you have to shout from the other room from time to time. Then life throws something in your path and now instead of living together you're neighbors. Each successive trauma was like moving one house away, then one street away. Pretty soon there's no way for them to hear you, no matter how loud you shout, but that doesn't mean they stop existing just because you can't see or hear them anymore. It just means you've lost touch. The only way to get in contact with them is to bridge that distance.

In many ways, the dissociative barriers we developed helped us to survive the persistent feeling of peril we experienced much of our life, and for this reason, we have some qualms with the perception of DID and plurality as innately dysfunctional or disordered. As an adult, yes it would be problematic to have little memory of your day to day life, but as a child growing up in an oppressive and manipulative environment, dissociation was the most valuable skill we could learn. Dissociations allowed us to maintain some semblance of agency in our life. We might not

have been allowed to flee the classroom or tell the high school principal he was a prejudice (insert choice curse word here) for his persecution of minority students, but we could always disappear into our own mind where our inner family would validate our pains and help us blow off steam. We traded off stewardship of the body, consciously and unconsciously, as a means to adjust to distressing environments, both sensory and social, and this continues to be a valuable skill we use to this day. Only now we engage with the process of switching more consciously and with careful consideration if we are actually providing for our needs in that moment, or if we are falling back into the mindset of conformity that was a cause for so much of that trauma that caused the divides in the first place.

We look back on our childhood now, and for many reasons, are grateful that we were already on our way off to college before we learned we were autistic or transgender or that we had developed DID. Very few teachers or medical professionals have even a basic understanding of any of these conditions, let alone the complex ways they intertwine to create a unique, intersectional experience. We worry what worse traumas (social, environmental, educational, medical) we would have been subjected to if we had received these diagnoses at an earlier age. Since so much of medical history has focused on each of these conditions as disordered states rather than natural variation, there has been very little study on how to support healthy growth. There is much more focus on harmful and traumatic ‘treatments’ where the goal is to minimize behaviors deemed inconvenient, problematic, or simply annoying from the perspective of authority figures.

This leads many individuals to internalize and hide their distress to minimize their exposure to further traumatic treatment, a term that has been dubbed ‘masking’ by the autistic community. Pathologizing plurality (and trauma related adaptations), autism, transgender, and

queer identities is incredibly damaging, especially for children who are growing up in controlling and manipulative environments where they are routinely denied self-agency and the right to define their own experiences.

Our curiosity about the intersectional experiences of people like us, who experience life in a cross-section of autistic, queer, transgender, non-binary, and plural identities dove us down a Wonderland rabbit hole (as special interests tend to do) of research and self-exploration. In doing so we have regained some of that lost sense of self-agency. We're slowly unraveling the misrepresentative and harmful narratives we internalized through the years, due to pathologizing, due to stigma, due to media misrepresentation, and we have come to a place where we are not only proud to be who we are, but wouldn't honestly want it any other way.

In the spirit of self-agency, this project will not be explaining or trying to justify our experiences, or really any narrative about it having to be any one way. We approach this from the perspective that if we want things to change, we need to tell a different story. Not one that focuses on preventable horror and pain, as is so commonly told about people like us, but one that represents the experiences of acceptance, support, and understanding that helped us become who we are today. We want to write stories like the ones that helped us, because we truly believe that a good story has the power to help us realize that the greatest compassion any of us will ever know is just living joyously as ourselves.

This transmedia story experience will follow the fictional lives of many queer, gender nonconforming, and neurodiverse characters as they explore their own identities, find ways to give back to their communities, and in general just live in ways they find meaningful. The fictional storyworld will unfold gradually across multiple media forms and channels so that the experiences of each character can be explored through a natural progression of time. It is a story

that will be told through the fantasy genre, which we have often found captures the feel of our experiences better than any attempt to replicate reality as others perceive it.

Literature Review

Definitions

Neurodiversity is defined by the online Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “1: individual differences in brain functioning regarded as normal variations within the human population” and “2: the concept that differences in brain functioning within the human population are normal and that brain functioning that is not neurotypical should not be stigmatized” (“Neurodiversity”, n.d.) It was popularized within the autistic community as a way to combat the pathologization and harmful practices often employed against the autistic community. They have contributed to many autistic persons’ development of trauma related conditions such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). Though it is most commonly used within autistic communities, the term also includes a wide variety of other neurological differences such as ADHD, Tourette’s Syndrome, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and many other neurological variations that have been misunderstood by medical professionals and misrepresented within media and popular culture (Tougaw, 2020).

Gender nonconforming is defined as “exhibiting behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits that do not correspond with the traits typically associated with one’s sex: having a gender expression that does not conform to gender norms,” (“Gender nonconforming,” n.d.) transgender as “relating to, or being a person whose gender identity differs from the sex the person had or was identified as having at birth,” (“transgender,” n.d.) and gender non-binary as “relating to or being a person who identifies with or expresses a gender identity that is neither entirely male nor entirely female” (“non-binary,” n.d.). For the context of this project gender nonconforming is used as a collective term which encompasses all gender identities and expressions that exist outside the concept of a normative cis-gendered binary.

In a Change.org petition requesting the removal of horror movie *Split* from Netflix, members of the plurality community defined DID as “a coping mechanism developed in response to intense, repetitive childhood trauma. This disorder is characterized by the presence of two or more personality states, or alters. The disruption in identity involves marked discontinuity in sense of self and sense of agency, accompanied by related alterations in affect, behavior, consciousness, memory, perception, cognition, and/or sensory-motor functioning” (Swift, 2020, para. 2). Since many members of the plurality community (including those who experience trauma related dissociation) have reservations with the idea that plurality cannot exist outside the context of traumatic experience, it should be understood that the term ‘plurality’ itself does not imply the presence of traumatic experience. Still, DID and similar dissociative conditions can be helpful frameworks in understanding how trauma leads to the development of dissociative barriers and the ways dissociation can impact a plural person’s life regardless of whether or not the plurality existed before the trauma. Other definitions relating to the plural community (system, fronting, inner worlds, etc) can be found in Appendix A.

Intersectionality is defined as “the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups” (“intersectionality,” n.d.), and will provide the framework for exploring the interwoven experiences of neurodiverse (autistic & plural), queer, and gender non-conforming communities. Each of these unique identities have been commonly misrepresented in the wider white-heterosexual-cisgendered-male-dominated culture, which has significant negative impacts on how members of these communities are treated in all major aspects of society. Research into autism spectrum (Freed, 2020; Gravitz, 2018; Russo, 2018; Seventh Voice, 2014; Tougaw,

2020), non-binary and transgender identities (Freed, 2020; Turban, 2018; Winkle, 2017), and trauma related disorders (such as PTSD and DID) (Jessica, 2019; Matulewicz, 2016; Swift, 2020) shows that these diversities are marginalized, misrepresented, and treated as an undesirable ‘other’ by dominant social groups, which exposes them to significant and repeated social abuses.

Link Between Trauma and Neurodiversities

In a study on the possible connections between autism and transgender identities, it was found that many transgender youths and adults experience high rates of anxiety and depression due to social abuses, with “Up to 80% of transgender youth report being victims of bullying,” “44% ... report a history of family rejection due to being transgender,” and “10% report being victims of violence from their families after they disclosed their gender identities” which puts transgender youths at a higher risk of developing trauma in the absence of healthy and supportive familial and communal interactions (Turban, 2018, p. 4008).

Higher rates of gender non-conforming and queer identities do tend to be more common in the autistic community. This has been accredited to the tendencies for autistic individuals “to be less influenced by or responsive to societal expectations or constraints” and that “This natural inclination to be oneself and not follow the crowd or societal norms, seems to correlate with higher than average incidence of individuals on the spectrum having greater variance and flexibility in the areas of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression” (Freed, 2020). Though many members of the autistic community do express less concern for conforming to social norms, studies show that autistic people are prone to developing trauma as a result of

repeated social abuses, especially when combined with sensory distress or the loss of social attachments (Gravitz, 2018).

The most common way social traumas manifest in autistic individuals who were assigned a female gender marker at birth is through masking (also called camouflaging), which is the conscious and unconscious hiding of stigmatized behaviors, such as stimming to avoid social harassment. Stimming is any behavior that helps an autistic person in “controlling or reframing sensory input in ways the ‘regulate’ what’s painful so that it may become pleasurable, or at least tolerable” (Tougaw, 2020). Stimming not only helps autistic people cope with distressing circumstances but is also a naturalized way many autistics express a full range of emotions and develop social bonds.

Masking is often a survival mechanism that shuts down natural and healthy behaviors in order to navigate oppressive social structures, both of which put a high toll on the mental, emotional, physical, and social health of neurodiverse people (Russo, 2018).

In recent years studies have found that transgender youths, particularly those assigned a female gender marker at birth, are also “twice as likely to have clinically significant scores” when tested for autistic traits (Anglia Ruskin University, 2019), which has led researchers to believe women on the spectrum have been historically underdiagnosed due to biases in autistic screening criteria which favors stereotypical behaviors more commonly expressed by cisgendered men on the spectrum as a result of the gender narratives that are deeply rooted in Western culture. Women on the spectrum are more likely to receive misdiagnosis such as bipolar disorder, generalized anxiety, depression, or borderline personality disorder. This denies autistic women and non-conforming individuals the critical frameworks to understand and accommodate for the unique ways their mind processes information and makes sense of the world, which can

lead to frequent experiences of invalidation, gas-lighting, and the internalization of shame that often starts at a painfully young age (Seventh Voice, 2014).

The common thread that ties together the traumatic experiences of each of these communities is gas-lighting, a manipulative and repetitive form of psychological abuse that causes the victim to doubt their own experiences of reality (Freed, 2020; Matulewicz, 2016; Seventh Voice, 2014). Autistics, plurals, and gender nonconforming individuals are all stigmatized as not being capable of understanding their own experiences and are repeatedly attacked with narratives intended to make them doubt their own emotions, memories, and sense of self. Since autistic minds often excel in pattern recognition (Chan, 2013), the gas-lighting experienced by plural, queer, and gender nonconforming autistics in all aspects of life (medical, social, educational, interpersonal relationships, media, etc) has an exponentially damaging effect on their mental, emotional, physical, and social well-being. Essentially, doubting that we are capable of understanding our own experiences and denying us agency to make decisions for our own well-being are some of the most damaging and violent actions that can be inflicted upon plural, autistic, and gender nonconforming persons. They continue to be a major root cause for the intersectional experiences of trauma within these communities.

State of the Art

So far, we have been unable to find any narratives that represent the mixed origin experiences of neurodiverse plurality in combination with the dissociative divides created by traumatic experiences that limit the ability for members within a plural system to communicate with one another. Most narratives misrepresent DID plurality as a horrific experience akin to demonic possession that is marked by manipulative and violent actions (Jessica, 2019). The most

recent perpetuation of this dangerous stigmatization was seen with the movie *Split* which has been widely protested by the plurality community with petitions circulating to have it removed from Netflix listings worldwide because its portrayal of people with DID as predators and villains (Swift, 2020).

There is one key example which presents plurality in a more positive light: In the children's show *Steven Universe* (Buscarino & Sugar, 2013-2020) the beings known as Gems have the ability to fuse their forms together and form a combined consciousness that expresses a unique blend of each. One of the main characters Garnet is revealed towards the end of the first season to be a fusion of two Gems, Sapphire and Ruby, who have a close bond and prefer to stay fused rather than live separately. The narrative presents Gem fusion as a bond that requires a deep intimate connection to be maintained. The Gems themselves can unfuse anytime they like and feel comfortable shifting between both individual and plural experiences of self. *Steven Universe* is also an amazing example of queer and gender non-conforming narratives. Since the Gem race reproduces asexually there isn't any form of sexual dimorphism, though they do all use she/her pronouns. Queer romantic attraction is normalized in the narrative as are non-conforming, non-binary, and fluid expressions of gender identity through characters such as Pearl and Stevoni.

While none of the characters in *Steven Universe* were intentionally written as autistic, many fans on the spectrum find Peridot's behavior and experiences relatable to their own. In response to the fan theories the show's writer, Rebecca Sugar commented, "I don't consider Peridot or any of the Gems on the show for that matter, to be neurotypical – that is to say, most Gems don't think, perceive or behave in ways considered to be 'normal' by the general population, so I think it makes perfect sense that Peridot would be relatable to neurodiverse and

autistic members of our audience” (Galanis, 2020, para. 2). For these reasons and more, Steven Universe, is quite literally, a gem among diversity narratives.

Another positive representation of queer and non-binary identities comes from the Netflix reboot of *She-Ra: Princesses of Power* (Austen & Stevenson, 2018-2020), which boasts several queer couples, including the reveal in its final season that Adora, the protagonist, and Catra, her long-time friend (and for most of the series arch rival) had held a romantic attraction towards one another for a very long time. The finale where they come together is an empowering moment that saves them, their friends, and the entire world they live in. It is presented as an empowering move that will give them the strength to continue to help others who have suffered under oppressive forces. It was a move that honestly shocked us to tears in wonderful and agonizing ways. It was a pain born of realizing what we had been denied for so long and desperately needed to see in the stories we loved, the queer couple who actually gets a happy ending.

While *She-Ra* exceeded our expectations with representation of queer romance, it fell rather flat when it came to the non-binary identifying character Double Trouble, who is presented as a shapeshifting double agent who will quickly switch sides if the other is able to offer a better deal. Though Double Trouble was only intended to be non-binary and not explicitly transgender, their use of shapeshifting for deceptive and manipulative acts mirrors accusations often used to attack transgender people (Winkle, 2017). Though it certainly doesn't make up for the harm caused by this representation, Double Trouble is given a redemption arch of sorts when they are shown fighting on the side of the protagonist when everyone bands together in the season finale to fight off the oppressive control of Horde Prime. One of the creators, Noelle Stevenson, commented that they wanted to present Double Trouble as “a character who was really dimensional and not 100% good or nice all the time. We want to have

those compelling characters who aren't so squeaky clean. We want the messy characters. We want the antiheroes. We want the villains" (Brown, 2019, para. 25). While we still have concerns over the particular choices of *Double Trouble*'s 'messy characterization', we do agree that there is immense value in presenting the reality that people are never 100% good or bad and that minorities shouldn't have to achieve an impossible 'angelic standard' (Coates, 2014) to be treated with compassion and respect.

Though *She-Ra*'s villanization of the sole non-binary character was a little bit disappointing, it was heartening that not one single character throughout the entire show batted an eye at respecting *Double Trouble*'s they/them pronouns. Not once was there a scene where someone had to be corrected or look confused or any of the common tropes that indicate an assumption was made based on the character's appearance. All of the characters (and we really do mean all, even the most villainous of villains Horde Prime who is the only villain who doesn't get a redemption arc at the end) respects every character's pronouns without question (Brown, 2019).

We were, however, impressed with the creative team's neurodiversity representation in the autistic character Entrapta, whose character development and story were shaped with significant input from crewmember Sam Szymanski, a board artist who is also autistic (Hermann, 2020). Entrapta's character, as an intelligent and deeply empathetic woman, combats the misperceptions that autism is primarily an experience of men whose experiences are likewise misrepresented with damaging stereotypes (Chappell, 2020). Autistic men in fiction are often represented as either being unintelligent man-children or in the rare case they are depicted as intelligent adults are presented as completely lacking the capacity for empathy, as is seen with the character Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory*. Though Entrapta does sometimes struggle with

understanding her impact on others, it is presented as difficulty reading expressions and not a lack of empathy itself. This shifts the narrative from the stigma that autism causes a lack of compassion to the reality that it is simply a difference in methods of communication that sometimes leads to misunderstandings.

Project Design

It is difficult to break down our creative or research process into distinct stages or steps, mostly because we are never not contemplating the complex network that surrounds so much of the research we engage with and how we might be able to bring it alive in the storyworlds we share. It is less of an intentional work practice and more a way of life in which we are almost constantly immersed. We also sometimes have to remind ourselves to step away from rather than make time to go back to it. That being said, we will do the best we can to break it down to the key aspects of our creative and research processes.

Driving Questions & Empathy Research

We started with a question: Why did we know so many people who were autistic, gender nonconforming, and plural with trauma-associated dissociation? It was a trend we began to see everywhere once we became aware of the signs within ourselves and began to engage with each of these communities. From our reflections on our own experiences, we felt certain that there was a common thread in the kinds of trauma experienced by each of these communities.

We began our process by seeking out research about any possible links between autism, gender nonconforming, and plural identities. Upon establishing that this trend had been noticed by others, we dove into trauma research related to each of these communities to see what root causes were contributing to the development of trauma-related conditions like DID. Since most of the research from the academic side of things can be wildly misrepresentative of these communities' actual experiences, we focused our research more heavily on the voices of the communities.

Finding a root cause has been one of the most beneficial techniques in our own healing process, and we find it often helps us understand a problem not as a single point on a timeline, but like a spider web spanning out from a central point. This helps us craft narratives that dig beyond the surface and into the unconscious misperceptions that perpetuate internalized modes of thinking ingrained through trauma.

Empathy research was conducted as observational field studies of the daily struggles, complaints, and concerns of the community through online platforms such as social media (Discord and Twitter primarily), YouTube channels, individual blogs, as well as through in-person conversation with our own social circle. Due to the sensitive nature of this research we did not record any conversations or interactions to protect the privacy of the community. This research not only allowed us to find the common frustrations and challenges the communities face, but also to observe what makes a community feel welcoming and supportive to those individuals who live in the intersections of autistic, gender nonconforming, and plural identities.

Ideation & Finding the Root Cause

As we have already addressed in our literature review, the major cause of a lot of trauma within these communities is the frequent gaslighting and pathologization of diversity that denies us agency in many aspects of society, particularly medical, educational, and social environments. In our experience, agency is never given back by the same authoritarian system that denied it in the first place. We have to give ourselves permission to trust our own experiences, validate ourselves, and live life with the way that makes sense to us—not in the way we were told we must live—before we can change the systems that hold us in stagnation.

Finding this root cause was a major turning point in how we approached our project design, because it greatly impacted the way we crafted the fictional narrative from that point. Much of the writing we storyboarded and prototyped up to that point turned out rather disappointing. We knew we were unconsciously replicating something we had internalized, and not representing our own authentic experience. We meditated a lot during this time on how interwoven the denial of agency and the representation of trauma as the defining narrative told about most of these communities were, and how it was impacting the story we thought we had to tell.

We asked ‘why do we feel this is what we are supposed to tell?’ and realized a lot of the drive was rooted in the fear we would be misunderstood or fake-claimed (in other words, gaslit) if we didn’t spill in graphic detail the causes of trauma. This is an incredibly common (and violating) experience for members of the plurality community, who are often expected to expose their trauma even before they’ve been able to process or heal from it. To move our own mindset away from this damaging cycle, we began studying the communities where this was not the norm and focused on the behaviors of support and validation that was actually helping members of the community heal.

Due to the deeply personal nature of this narrative our process of ideation after research consisted mostly of personal reflection and interpersonal communication with close friends and family. We were not trying to write anyone else’s story but our own. Our research into the experiences of other members of our community was to gain new perspectives on experiences we had lived through ourselves. For this reason, the crafting of the storyworld had to come from a place that felt authentic to the voices of our own system, and not a representation of the community as a whole. We are not speaking for anyone but ourselves.

Reframing the Narrative

We realized the narrative needed to be completely reframed in order to get away from the stigmatizing cycle. Instead of writing about autistic, gender nonconforming, and plural individuals trying to cope with trauma within a neurotypical, cis-het, singlet society, why not frame the entire narrative from the perspective and setting of a community where autism, gender nonconforming, and plurality is the norm? Why not flip the narrative and immerse our intended audience within their own community, and not the one they are likely seeking reprieve from when engaging with a fantasy story? Our daily mantras became “You don’t owe anyone your origin story” and “Stop writing for a neurotypical audience, we all autistic here.”

Prototyping

Our writing process when crafting fictional stories involves a lot of switching back and forth between ideation and prototyping stages as we gradually course correct each time we feel something just isn’t quite landing the way we want it to in the narrative.

We explored the storyworld through daily questions, contemplations, storyboards, possible scenes, character development moments, songs, poems, random lines, snapshot moments, memories, and immersive meditation practices much of which was recorded through audio, video, or written formats.

By far though, the most valuable technique we used on a daily basis, multiple times a day, was the meditative practices that allow us to strengthen communication within our inner system. Regular communication with system members can be its own kind of focus group, with many voices being able to weigh-in on perspectives the current frontier(s) were not aware of,

making it an essential part of the creative process. After all, the best way to write about an experience is to observe it closely, and so we spent a lot of time doing our own field study within our inner mindspace.

Transmedia Design

Since we did not have access to the resources necessary to create many of the transmedia extensions we hope to later delve into with this storyworld, we decided to focus the narrative on the written portion, which could be published in novel format or through an online platform. The portion we've submitted is an extraction from a larger piece that will continue to be expanded upon after the completion of the project.

Other media forms we intend to venture into includes fictional podcasts, short animations, music, graphic novels, webcomics, and illustrated journals, with the potential for the storyworld to be continually expanded upon for as long we have interest in doing so.

A few of the extension we intend to explore further include:

Worldbuilders LLC – Podcast

Worldbuilders is a fantasy company that provides immersive inner world journeys as an entertainment and self-discovery service. It provides an opportunity to explore what a supportive workplace environment might look like for autistic, queer, gender nonconforming, and plural members of the community. While this podcast will aim at advocating for fair and equitable treatment in the workplace by representing Worldbuilders LLC as a company that invests in employee wellbeing, the narrative is not intended to be a serious exploration of workplace inequality issues. The main focus of the narrative will be about the experiences of inner world

journeys that strengthen communication and understanding of the inner community within neurodiverse systems.

Webcomic

A ‘slice of life’ style comic that will have no distinct or linear narrative, but instead evolve naturally as the daily lives of various characters are unveiled through snapshot moments. The main focus will be on destigmatizing naturalized and beneficial behaviors, such as stimming, healthy communication, and communal support practices that are often not seen in public spaces, but instead take place in the safety and comfort of home. This narrative format allows for a wider range of experiences to be expressed, as it doesn’t rely on language processing to communicate brief (though still significant) experiences of acceptance and support.

Fabricated Artifacts

Our goal with this storyworld is to create a deeply immersive experience. Fabricated artifacts are creative pieces designed to look like they were extracted directly from the storyworld. Some examples of how we intend to do this include:

- Illustrated research journals – These will provide historical, cultural, and ecological background information and visual reference for many of the fantastical elements of the storyworld. These journals will be referenced in the larger stories as works the characters themselves created. These will be especially helpful in explaining some of the symbolic representations of the fantasy world by grounding the audience in how the characters of that world make sense of their own environment.
- Music – Music plays an integral role in the cultural and spiritual practices of many of the characters. We intend to eventually produce music that tells its own stories about the cultures and communities of the storyworld. The music will combine historical cultural songs and

contemporary voices to show how perspectives change over time and the narratives different communities found empowerment in as they reclaimed their own voices, particularly during civil rights movements.

- Inner Worlds – A cross-genre literary magazine that publishes works about or inspired by inner world explorations.

Project Representation

Core Elements of the Storyworld

Since this project focuses on ways to represent neurodiverse (autistic & plural) and gender nonconforming (queer, transgender, and non-binary) experiences, the scenes submitted for the creative portion focus on moments that emphasize these aspects of the characters' identities and lives. These scenes, however, should not be read as representative of the main narrative. Consider these scenes the same way you might any day of your own life. The struggles of the moment do not define your entire existence. The following core elements describe the larger story beyond the presented scenes and provide some background on the focus community which the main narrative will follow.

Celebrating Diversity & Destigmatizing Natural Behaviors

All forms of diversity are normalized within the focus community. Even if other communities in the world may still stigmatize them, these communities are only vaguely referenced through character interactions as the community members show support for one another. All pronouns are respected, which includes respecting the individual identities of each member within a plural system. No one is expected to have a static identity. Changing and fluid identities are viewed as signs of positive self-exploration.

The focus community fosters an environment of open and frequent communication to help each other develop a better understanding for their own and each other's needs. Behaviors such as stimming are not simply tolerated or accepted but are often a bonding and communal experience enjoyed as a group. In this way community members learn from one another and normalize behaviors that many have experienced stigmatization over in other communities in

their world. This encourages new members of the community to open up about their own experiences and feel comfortable talking about their own needs as it quickly becomes apparent that this community is very different from the ones they've been in before. For many, it becomes the first place they truly feel safe taking off the mask they've unconsciously been wearing most of their life.

Self-Agency & Communal Support

Characters are supported by their community as they explore their own identities. The community respects their agency in defining their own experiences and encourages self-exploration. The community respects all modes of understanding one's own experiences. Some members of the community find value in the medical frameworks that help them adjust their lives and environments to accommodate for potentially disabling experiences (such as overstimulation), while others find more meaning in spiritual understandings of their experiences. Regardless of how the community members make sense of their own experiences, all views are respected. The community exists to support one another as they grow, and never to police each other's identities or behavior.

Trauma is not the central narrative

For that matter, the central narrative isn't about the characters' identities at all. While their identities impact a lot about how characters support one another and interact with their world, the story itself isn't about their identities as neurodiverse or gender nonconforming individuals. For this story to be more than just an educational narrative, the characters must be allowed to have lives beyond their identities.

Explorations of identity and self-expression function as sub-plots within a story that has absolutely nothing to do with the character's identities or past traumatic experiences. Within this framework, communal support and respect for self-agency become the normalized backdrop for transformative experiences as characters pursue their passions and carve their own paths in life. Their identities do not define who they are or the lives they are capable of living, nor is the narrative about them having to discover this. They are not saviors, victims, heroes, or villains in the traditional sense. This is a story not about epic, world ending scenarios as is common with the fantasy genre, but a celebration of the strange and wonderful experiences of family, community, and what awaits beyond the common perceptions of 'everyday life.'

While some transmedia extensions may build upon the references to social activism movements and historical events to further worldbuilding, the direct traumas and social injustices suffered by the characters will never take center stage as a part of the immediate action nor be revisited in flashback. We felt this was important to avoid causing distress to our own community, many of whom are at a heightened risk of retraumatization if exposed to triggering content. Many in our community have already experienced those forms of violence first hand and do not need a reminder, or an education, on how horrible it can be to live through abuse, which is often the purpose of immersive scenes and flashbacks of traumatic experiences.

Worldbuilding

For an in-depth description of the fantasy & worldbuilding terms found in this section see: Appendix B: Worldbuilding

The fabulist/surrealist multiverse where the story takes place is home to many fantasy creatures and spirits, and as a result many different cultural and spiritual tradition. The focus

community was founded by veterans of the Incarnae Liberation Movement, an intersectional spiritual revival and civil rights movement that fought for the repeal of oppressive laws that criminalized natural behaviors and stigmatized neurodiverse, queer, and gender nonconforming identities.

In the realm where the Incarnae Liberation Movement took place, shapeshifting was one of the natural behaviors that was subjected to criminalization. Shapeshifting is an important part of many spirits' cultures and religious traditions and is beneficial to their health as it helps them in sensory processing and energy regulation. Shapeshifting allows them to adjust to new environments or social situations in ways that help them remain comfortable, create or strengthen social bonds, and experience their surroundings in a more fulfilling manner. Shapeshifting can be a way to stim and bond with others but also can be a tool for masking, depending on whether or not the individual feels it is safe to be themselves.

Plural and gender nonconforming identities were once celebrated in Ania culture and were openly expressed through shapeshifting. Violent cultural oppression led many Ania communities to internalize aggressions towards plural and gender nonconforming individuals and to use shame and other abuses to police members of their own community.

The focus community arose after the Incarnae Liberation Movement as a place of rest and spiritual retreat for anyone who wanted to step away from the oppressions of their home realms. All are welcome to come and stay for as long as they desire. Many members of the community remain active in social movements, academia, creative endeavors, spiritual development, and more, though some have retired to the community fulltime.

The community is located very near a young Tree of Life that is growing on the borders of a Shadow Realm, making it a place of fluctuating energy where past, present, and future blur and the inner and outer worlds can physically meet.

Discussion

In the fight for social change, the focus is too often on swaying minds, but the people who refuse to see us as capable of self-agency will not listen to our voices, and crafting narratives to educate the people who want to learn can be exhausting. It takes an immense emotional toll on those who are expected to educate the world as to why they are deserving of compassionate treatment, particularly when putting themselves out there can be incredibly dangerous.

Many members of our community have spent most of our lives fighting to be heard. We ourselves are tired. That is the simple truth. We don't have the energy to keep fighting on the frontlines, and we are among the few who have been fortunate enough to have a safe place to come home too, in our inner and outer worlds. We don't want future generations to grow up with such a complete absence of stories to give them any hope that things can or will change that they become as perpetually tired as we are today. There are others in our community who still have the energy and motivation to keep fighting those battles, but veterans need a safe place to retreat too when they become injured in battle.

We might not have the energy anymore to fight on the frontlines, but we can support from the back. This is why our writing is not focused on educating people outside our community, but instead on providing supportive narratives for our own community. We deserve stories that immerse us in supportive families, loving relationships, and communities of acceptance. We deserve stories that put us and our community at the forefront, not as the side character or the villain. We deserve stories that show us as a part of a larger, more diverse community, where there are many others who share our experiences of life. We deserve stories that show we are not alone, and that there is a whole community waiting to welcome us.

We hope these stories will serve as an introduction to the communities ready to support them in the outer world and as validation in keeping open the gateway to the inner world and the community of support there, which too often is shut down and hidden away due to stigmatization and internalized shame. Before we can make change, we have to believe we have the right to speak for ourselves and to define our own experiences. We need to know that when we risk sharing our experiences, our community will be there to support us.

Walking away from everything you've ever been taught to believe about your own existence can be terrifying, especially for those who have been told that deviating from the pathologized perceptions of their experience will lead only to horror movie worthy endings. It helps to know that there are others who have come before who walked away from the narratives of pathologization and lived joyously without shame.

Our narrative is just a drop in a bucket. Our community needs more voices to tell stories in their own ways. We need all of the stories, the hope, the joy, and yes, the pain, because our community deserves a broader picture of what it means to live in the intersections of these many, diverse communities. In the end, each of us in this world have to decide for ourselves what our experiences mean to us, and how we want to live as a result. Our narrative should not define anyone else's experience of life, but hopefully, it will show others that they have the right to reclaim agency over their voices and define their experiences in their own ways.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Plurality Definitions

- Dissociative barrier- the inability to communicate with other system members, which often includes limited access to memories or even the complete unawareness of other headmates' existence.
- Fronting/Driving- the act of having physical control over the shared body or being consciously present within the mindspace. Co-fronting may occur when system mates are communicating within the mindspace and actively observing or commenting on the outer world. With co-fronting, typically only one headmate at a time functions as the 'main fronter' who does the majority of physical driving of the body, though switching main fronters in this state comes easily, without thought, and can be instantaneous, like someone reaching over from the side-seat of a car to take hold of the wheel for a moment.
- Headmate/System member/Alter/etc- refers to individuals who live within a plural system; unique consciousnesses that share a body and mindspace and which interact with one another's experiences of inner & outer worlds
- Inner world- Describes the world(s) headmates live in within a plural system that are not the world the physical body lives in. Inner worlds may be seen as spiritual realms, reflections of the subconscious, or just imaginative wonderlands that provide the inner family with a more satisfying environment to interact with when not fronting. It is an in-between space where the different lives and realms each system member has lived in can be seen, explored, and relived to process different memories.
- Little- Headmates who express themselves as children in visual appearance or behavior. Littles are commonly the oldest and most knowledgeable members of the system. Some Littles

may be the holders of early childhood traumas as they were the ones who experienced them directly. Others may have developed or awoken later in life as systems regain that sense of child-like wonder as they grow, heal, and discover what brings them joy. Littles may not always look like children or noticeably behave like children. They may be able to verbally communicate or not, and can have the same access to vocabulary, knowledge, and intelligence as any other system member, though their ability to process, explain, or make sense of their experiences may be limited to younger states of neurological development if traumatic experiences stagnated their development.

- Mindspace- a sort of in-between space that exists within the mind of a plural system where the current fronter(s)/co-fronters can easily communicate and interact with other members of the system. Not all who are present in the mindspace will be co-fronting, and rarely is the entire system present within the mindspace all together, especially larger system with many members. Mindspace can be accessed from both the inner and outer worlds by any system member who is not restricted by dissociative barriers which limit or entirely block their ability to communicate with specific headmates or the system as a whole depending on how isolated they have become.

- Outer world- The world the physical body inhabits.

- Protector- Headmates who developed a sense of identity around protecting the other headmates / system as a whole. Protectors front during abuses or traumatic experiences which can lead to feelings of isolation, resentment, and the development of dissociative barriers.

Protectors often develop strong control over switching and can force other headmates out of the driver's seat (also referred to as Gatekeepers when this ability is developed). In systems that have experienced trauma, protectors commonly front/co-front when other headmates experience

trigger events, and may not realize they have overshadowed the other in their attempt to protect them as their past survival depended on them not grasping at a sense of self-identity.

- Switching- the conscious or unconscious trading off of who is fronting
- System- A system is a collective of individual identities or consciousnesses that share a common body or form. A system may refer to themselves by the name of their shared body or may have a unique system name to describe the experience of the inner community as different from their physical body. A system name can be akin to a communal identity, while the name of a body may simply imply the physical form the community inhabits.
- System/Inner Family/Inner Community- refers to the entire network of plural identities held within a single body

Appendix B: Worldbuilding

- Ania- refers to a specific cultural identity of people descendent from a primordial spirit called Myroka. Ania are shapeshifters capable of adapting their form to the common appearance of the community they live in, but many Ania who live in realms where they are not the majority population have been subjected to violent oppression, which has led to cultural stigmas against shapeshifting away from the assimilated form of the majority population. This is used in the narrative as a symbolic representation of autistic masking and is used to comment on the shame and trauma associated with being denied the right to express one's own identity (whether it be gender identity/expression, sexual orientation, neurodiversity, or other diverse experiences) particularly in regards to systems of social, cultural, and political powers. Traditionally, Ania took forms similar in appearance to anthropomorphic animal spirits commonly seen in Japanese mythology, such as kitsune.

- Aur'ai- refers to a different cultural identity also descendent from Myroka, originating from a spiritual tradition that arose after a time of devastating warfare and ecological disaster. The tradition focuses on communal support, self-expression, meditative practices for the discovery and healing of the inner world, shamanic trips into Shadow Lands and Decay Realms, and the healing of traumatized spirits as a path for healing the wounds of the self & the realm as a whole. Symbols sacred to this tradition are the moon (as the Eye of Aurourna who founded the practices the tradition grew from), the Tree of Life & Mother Tree, and the Aurouran Red-wing (a type of corvid which was considered sacred to Aurourna and is considered a messenger & guide in journeys of healing and self-discovery). In the Aur'ai tradition, plurality (a common and natural experience for many descendants of the Myroka) was considered sacred. The Aur'ai tradition fell out of common practice in many of the realms during the rise of modern Ania culture and was revived in a counterculture movement known as the Incarnae Liberation Movement.
 - o Alt. The term may also be used to refer to a specific form practitioners of this tradition learn to shapeshift into, which appears as a large quadrupedal cat with saberfangs. This is a form Aurourna themselves preferred when navigating the Shadow and Decay Realms.
- Decay Realm- any layer of reality within a multiverse where the energy of the world has begun to break down. These areas no longer have the capability to sustain physically formed life and are often haunted by lost and deeply traumatized spirits. Eventually, the Decay Realm itself loses physical form as its energy is reabsorbed back into a Tree of Life.
- Incarnae Liberation Movement- represents a fictional merging of the interrelated movements of neurodiversity, new age spirituality & hippy movements, and various civil rights activism movements (disability, mental health, LGBTQ+, race, etc). The movement focused on

the rights of the individuals to have agency over their own identity, to define their own experiences, and to express themselves in the ways that feel right to them. It was an intersectional movement that impacted many species, spirits, and cultures across many realms. Many young Ania were drawn to the movement to protest oppressive cultural and political practices that enforced masking by presenting shapeshifting (and associated behaviors) as shameful, dangerous, or a sign of ill-health.

- Living Realm- Any realm that is well supported by a Tree of Life with ample energy to sustain all that resides within. The energy of Living Realms is relatively stable and will not slip easily into Decay.
- Shadow Realms- in-between spaces that tie together the Living and Decay Realms and are often in a state of flux, transition, or stagnation. Considered places that exist outside of conventional/linear experiences of space & time and thus can allow those who know how to navigate them to physically (or spiritually) travel to any place, time, or experience of reality, including entering the inner worlds of others or even their own inner worlds as experienced by members of a plural system.
- Syt'ka- a term of endearment that means 'little loved one.' Most commonly used for young children, but is also used between close family members for comfort and support, a reminder that it is ok to let go of control and be taken care of by loved ones.
- Tree of Life/Mother Tree- A Tree of Life is the primordial ancestor to all life and the entity that holds the physical and spiritual realms in her roots. Trees of Life use a process of chaos energy (the energy of change or transformation) to recycle decayed energy back into living energy. In this way, Trees of Life keeps the many realms in balance for as long as their energy can be sustained. If a Tree of Life dies, the worlds held within its roots may begin to decay if not

supported by another. A Mother Tree is a very ancient Tree of Life that has lived long enough to produce viable seeds that can grow into other Trees of Life. Mother Trees support their younger offspring and the worlds they hold. When a Mother Tree dies, entire Tree of Life forests fall into decay.

- Wyndog- a type of elemental spirit, often aligned with storm elements (lightning, wind, water), most commonly appearing as a serpentine feathered dragon (no legs, only wings).

Wyndogs can be sporadic and high energy, especially young ones who have all the excitable energy of a puppy.