

Bury and Unbury Your Gays in *The Adventure Zone*

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Abstract

In contemporary mainstream media there is a tendency to represent LGBTQ+ characters stereotypically, or even kill them off. This trope is called ‘bury your gays’ and it has done much to discredit and delegitimise representation. Even though the percentage of queer representation in mainstream media has improved, a viewer could be forgiven for thinking that, overall, popular culture does not think highly of the LGBTQ+ community for continuing to perpetuate these narrative arcs. The McElroy family’s popular actual-play podcast *The Adventure Zone (TAZ)* initially portrayed queer characters in the ‘bury your gays’ trope by killing off a canon lesbian couple in their first season. As four self-proclaimed ‘straight, cis, white dudes’, the family initially performed their characters by reflecting what they had seen in mainstream fiction. After engaging with their audience and learning why this was upsetting, they changed the story to reverse the trope; *unburying* their gays by bringing the characters back to life. Since then, they have consistently introduced more queer characters and, in their latest season, have also introduced nonbinary characters. By tracking the introduction and development of queer representation in *TAZ* podcast episodes – both the game episodes and the meta-episodes bookending each season – the McElroys’ education and integration of this new information into narratives is demonstrable. The representation of queer characters in *TAZ* shows that podcasts are not just a platform for LGBTQ+ creators to educate their audience; they can also act as a participatory storytelling medium in which *creators* can be educated in gender and sexuality by their audience.

Introduction

1 Contemporary mainstream Western media has begun to reflect a stronger awareness of the LGBTQ+ community, and steps have been taken to develop characters and stories that include diverse characters in canon. GLAAD’s ‘Where We Are On TV’ report found that during the 2016-2017 TV season, 43 characters identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer. There were eight-hundred-and-ninety-five main characters on scripted primetime broadcast shows, meaning that LGBTQ+ characters made up about 4.8 per cent. This is the highest percentage of LGBTQ+ characters in mainstream Western media recorded and the percentage in non-mainstream media – such as podcasts, YouTube series, and comics – could be much higher.

2 Despite this uptake in LGBTQ+ representation, viewers have begun to question whether the representation that LGBTQ+ people receive in mainstream Western media is *good* representation. There is a trend, for example, to kill off LGBTQ+ characters in mainstream media. Consider, for example, ‘Seeing Red’ in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which introduced a lesbian couple only to kill one of the pair to trigger the emotional breakdown of the other. Or, *The 100*, in which an eagerly-anticipated lesbian pairing became canon, only to have one of the women die within ten episodes of showrunners making the relationship official. Or,

Brokeback Mountain (2005), a film about gay men in which one of the pair is murdered in a hate crime. Even though the number of LGBTQ+ representative characters has improved, and there are a few counter examples where LGBTQ+ characters survive their series, a viewer could be forgiven for thinking that, overall, mainstream Western media is not in favour of long, happy lives for LGBTQ+ characters.

3 It is arguable that the genre of these texts – fantasy, science fiction, drama – makes death or harm likely. If there were no danger for the characters, then there may be no suspense for the audience. But LGBTQ+ characters are less common and therefore disproportionately killed in these texts.

4 Podcasts, as a user-driven medium, are an important space for LGBTQ+ people to explore issues related to their experience, as well as potentially educate outside of the community. The ‘bury your gays’ trope has received its share of examination and criticism in the podcast space, from recent podcasts such as: *Lez Hangout* (Brigida and Holmes), *Strap Chat* (Smith), *Gay as in Stupid* (Aaron and Isaac), *Deep Down Underground in the Closet* (Juarez), and *Stuff Mom Never Told You* (Reese and McVey). These podcasts that explore and critique media are not, however, the only way that the LGBTQ+ community can educate the audience on more inclusive media-representation.

5 *The Adventure Zone (TAZ)* is an actual-play Dungeons & Dragons podcast hosted by four members of the McElroy family: Justin, Travis, Griffin (brothers), and Clint (father). Actual play podcasts are podcasts that record the audio of roleplaying games and present them as whole narratives. In Dungeons & Dragons, players collaborate with a dungeon master (DM) to roleplay a series of adventures, usually referred to as a ‘campaign’. A campaign ends when the players defeat the final ‘boss’, or most powerful enemy, and the DM concludes the story. Players are generally expected to play the same character for the duration of a campaign, though they can create a new one if their character is killed or chooses to leave the party. There are two types of character in Dungeons & Dragons: PCs (player-characters), which the players control, and NPCs, which are side characters played by the DM.

6 In *TAZ*, each season is one campaign; the family plays different characters in each campaign, and the campaigns are set in different environments/genres. The campaigns are divided into mini-arcs where the players work towards defeating a minor villain, taking damage and earning experience points that they can use to increase their characters’ power or proficiency. At the end of each mini-arc, there is a level-up episode where the family roleplays their characters interacting with NPCs and buying new items to use in their adventures. As of writing, there have been two complete seasons – ‘Balance’ (epic fantasy/scifi) and ‘Amnesty’

(contemporary/paranormal) – with Griffin as DM. The latest campaign, ‘Graduation’ (fantasy/boarding school) is currently running with Travis as DM.

7 The McElroy family’s popular show initially fell into the ‘bury your gays’ trope by killing off a canon lesbian couple in its first season, ‘Balance’. Hurley and Sloane, or the Ram and the Raven, are killed during a high-fantasy battle at the end of the ‘Petals to the Metal’ mini-arc. Griffin, the campaign’s dungeon master and main writer, said during a reflective meta-episode prior to the final arc in the season, “Oh, it’s the first, like, romance in the show, and I’ll give it a tragic ending... that’s how most, uh, like, gay and lesbian relationships in media end, is with tragic endings, which I didn’t realize” (The The Adventure Zone Zone: Balance Finale Edition). As four self-proclaimed ‘straight, cis, white dudes’, the McElroys were unaware of how their apparent adherence to fantasy/drama narrative tropes (the tragic lovers’ ending) could negatively affect their LGBTQ+ audience. After receiving criticism from their audience, the Griffin McElroy incorporated his new awareness into the rest of the narrative by *unburying* Hurley and Sloan in the final arc (*TAZ: Balance* 68).

8 Since then, the McElroys have consistently introduced more queer characters in active and meaningful roles. The increase in LGBTQ+ characters, and the more thoughtful approach to narrative tropes and traditions, has demonstrated their own gradual education in LGBTQ+ issues and identities – from the ‘standard’ lesbian and gay characters, to bisexuality, to nonbinary representation and pronoun-use. The gradual improvement in *TAZ*’s representation of queer characters demonstrates that podcasts are not just a platform to *educate* others; podcasts creators can be educated in gender and sexuality by their audience and then model their new storytelling behaviours for others.

9 This paper will employ a close analysis of *TAZ* story-telling and meta-episodes in the official seasons of ‘Balance’, ‘Amnesty’, and ‘Graduation’. The McElroys have uploaded several ‘Pilot’ seasons where they audition different dungeon masters, characters, and genres, but these pilots have been excluded from this paper’s dataset because there is not as much space to expand on the LGBTQ+ representation that may have been hinted at but not explored. Full seasons allow characters to complete arcs and therefore gives the creators more space to explore sexuality and gender in a meaningful and ‘organic’ way. Meta-episodes are included because these episodes are uploaded to the main channel and act as reflections on the preceding arcs, allowing an insight into the motivations behind key character choices. Interactions on social media (twitter, Instagram, tumblr, etc) have been excluded because this article is only focused on how the *podcast* demonstrates learning; other social media is outside of the scope of the article.

10 Before beginning the analysis, a note on representation. This article takes as a given that positive representation of LGBTQ+ characters is important and impactful. Although some may make the argument that the representation of alternative identities is unnecessary or pandering, Stuart Hall notes that:

precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices. (Hall 4)

11 Television is one discourse in which identity can be explored and addressed; podcasts are another. Seeing these discourses play out allows audiences to explore and understand their own identities through the vicarious experience (Waggoner 2). A lack of representation can make viewers feel isolated and leave them without a discourse to contextualise their experience or, when the representation is poorly executed, may contribute to negative self-perception (Chassitty and Heather). Savvy audiences who understand their identities and how representation *should* be in these discourses can hold creators accountable in these cases.

Sloan and Hurley – the Gays Are Buried

12 Earlier, this article briefly mentioned *The 100* as a source of much anger and disappointment after a character was killed off after beginning a queer relationship. This episode popularised the ‘bury your gays’ trope as a hashtag on twitter, where fans initially congregated to protest the show (Waggoner 10; Cameron 2), though this was by no means the first instance of a queer character dying to serve a narrative. Hulan identifies the trope as a *literary* trope “which originated in the late 19th century, gained traction in the early 20th century, and which persists in modern media” (Hulan 17). Although it began as a literary trope, it is applicable to other media.

13 The trope has several key features, including: buried characters must be among the only LGBTQ+ representation in the piece of media; buried characters must be LGBTQ+ in canon (though they can often die within moments of their relationship being confirmed); buried characters’ death must motivate the surviving characters (Hulan 17). Other features can include: the buried character’s surviving lover entering a heterosexual relationship after an appropriate grieving period; the buried character’s death follows a ‘queerbaiting’ campaign (creators implying or celebrating LGBTQ+ relationships/characters in order to draw a larger audience); the buried character’s death has limited plot relevance, or dies in a way that could have been avoided in-world (Cameron; Bridges).

14 In *TAZ* ‘Balance’, during the third mini-arc “Petals to the Metal”, Griffin introduced a lesbian couple: Sloane and Hurley, a pair of battlewagon racers. Sloane is under the thrall of a powerful magical relic, and the PCs’ goal for the arc was to save her and retrieve the relic. Ultimately, however, Hurley sacrifices herself to break the relic’s hold on Sloane. The grieving Sloane then uses the relic to transform the pair of them into a cherry blossom tree. It is a tragic ending for the first canon LGBTQ+ couple in the series

15 The important thing to note here is that a Dungeons & Dragons campaign is usually predicated on the PCs altering the outcome of a story. But Griffin, the DM, was responsible for Hurley’s death. In the scenes preceding her sacrifice, Griffin demonstrates that she will be going to save Sloane and gives the PCs an opportunity to abandon her:

Griffin: She climbs into the driver’s seat and straps herself in.

Travis (as Magnus): Woah!

Griffin: And she leans out the window and says:

Griffin (as Hurley): I’ve asked you boys for too much already, I can’t- I can’t ask you to risk your lives again, but . . . (*TAZ: Balance* 27)

16 The listener can infer that Hurley would have tried to save Sloane regardless of whether the PCs helped her. Later, Griffin shows Hurley making the active decision to sacrifice herself by removing the PCs from the scene entirely:

Griffin: And as she backs up, you see that she’s no longer wearing her safety harness. In fact, you are. And she claps her hands together and points them at the three of you. And you are blasted backwards by a wave of force. (*TAZ: Balance* 27)

17 Technically – according to the rules of Dungeons & Dragons – the PCs should have had an opportunity to resist Hurley’s attack. By narrating Hurley’s action as a given, Griffin limited how his PCs could influence the intended outcome.

18 Finally, when Justin’s character Taako tries to find a way to heal Hurley, speaking to his fellow PCs in-character, Griffin steers the narrative away:

Justin (as Taako): Don’t you have any magics, you’re a cleric for cryin’ out loud!

Clint (as Merle): Me?!

Griffin: Sloane looks sadly at you and says:

Griffin (as Sloane): This is- The venom of silverpoint is... there’s nothing we can do for her.

Justin (as Taako): Horseshit!

Griffin (as Sloane): Well, there’s-

Justin (as Taako): HOOOORSSEEEE SHIT!

Griffin (Sloane): There’s one thing I can do for her. (*TAZ: Balance* 27)

19 This dialogue immediately precedes Sloane transforming herself and Hurley into a cherry tree. Griffin describes their bodies as completely joining the tree, “at its base, you see

these roots and knots that are forming two vaguely humanoid shapes. One is a sort-of a shorter figure lying in the embrace of a taller figure” (*TAZ: Balance* 27). Their romance, then, is solidified in their final moments. The implication is that they will remain this way for as long as the tree stands.

20 In retrospect, Griffin noted during “The The Adventure Zone Zone 2017” meta-episode that he mishandled Sloane and Hurley’s deaths: “I definitely fucked up... that’s how most, uh, like, gay and lesbian relationships in media end, is with tragic endings, which I didn’t realize.”

Roswell – They/Them Pronouns

21 As the *TAZ* series has progressed, the development of LGBTQ+ representation has improved. Importantly, it was not limited to sexuality representation; nonbinary characters were introduced, notably Roswell, the earth elemental in the ‘Eleventh Hour’ arc. Although Roswell was initially referred to with he/him pronouns, Griffin explicitly states that Roswell uses they/them pronouns during narration in the third episode of the arc: “Roswell walks in and sits down on their chair, which kind of creaks and moans under their weight. I’m trying to stick with the “they” pronoun for Roswell” (*TAZ: Balance* 43).

22 When Griffin introduced Roswell, the initial conversation was not whether Roswell identified as male or female, but whether the earth elemental identified as an armour-clad body or as the bird that seemed to ride the body and speak to the PCs.

Griffin (as the Bird): Uh, I’m called Roswell.

Justin (as Taako): Ooh, great. Roswell, are you— is Roswell the name of you, the bird, or the big fella that you’re riding on?

Griffin (as Roswell): I don’t see why it’s important that you distinguish between the two.

Justin (as Taako): Okay, well, that’s fine, I’m not into labels either. (*TAZ: Balance* 43)

23 This tongue-in-cheek discussion about labels is the furthest that the characters go to question Roswell’s gender identity in-game. For the characters, Roswell’s gender identity is not something to be questioned. This normalising of non-binary identity proves to be quite powerful in the sense that it establishes the expectation for this behaviour going forward.

24 The Western conception of gender imagines it as a spectrum of behaviours and attributes that usually fall between ‘male’ and ‘female’, which is where the subsequent conception of the binary comes from. Binary gender, however, fails to represent the wide range of human experiences of gender. Tracey Yeadon-Lee writes that:

The term non-binary gender operates as an umbrella term to refer to a range of identities and expressions of gender that do not within the sex/gender binary, and which typically

involve identifying as either a blend of both genders or as neither. Non-binary gender identities thus vary in experience and kind. (Yeadon-Lee 4)

25 While identities and identifications vary, there are some that are widely known and often used as stepping points for non-binary identifying individuals to explore themselves. Jessica Clarke explores this in some detail:

Examples of gender hybridity - combining gender roles into non-traditional configurations - might include bigender, pangender, and androgynous identities... Examples of gender rejection - refusal to adopt traditional gender categories - might include agender, genderless, gender neutral, or uni-sex identities. (Clarke 906)

26 Importantly, Clarke also notes that genders beyond the male/female dichotomy have existed outside of western culture. These might include Two-Spirit (First-Nations) or Mahuwahine (Hawaiian) (Clarke 907). Other gender identities beyond the dichotomy include the Hijaras (South Asian) (Agrawal), the Mahu Vahine (Tahitian), and the Whakawahine (Maori) (New Zealand Aids Foundation). While the concept of nonbinary gender is certainly nothing new, it is typically considered out of the norm in mainstream Western society.

27 There is little explicit representation of non-binary identity in Western popular media. Attempts to portray non-binary characters have been hit and miss. In 2016, *Zoolander* cast Benedict Cumberbatch to play the non-binary identifying All, and received criticism from critics for the portrayal (Child). One critic argued: “Giggling like schoolboys over whether a non-gender-conforming character has a penis or a vagina... is exhaustingly retrograde” (Fallon).

28 While the non-binary identity is occasionally offered up as an opportunity for jokes, popular culture does take it seriously in some cases. The 2017 American film *They* explores the experience of a young non-binary person trying to negotiate the medical system. In the film, 13-year-old J must choose a gender in order to stop taking the puberty blockers which are damaging J’s bone health. The film’s conclusion is left ambiguous, so the audience is left unable to determine if this representation is ideal.

29 Some representation eschews the need to identify non-binary individuals at all. They simply exist, and their existence is not questioned. The Adjudicator in *John Wick: Chapter 3 – Parabellum* is played by non-binary actor Asia Kate Dillon, and their gender is not mentioned in the film. Similarly, the *Good Omens* (YEAR) mini-series portrays one of the main characters, Crowley, as male and female presenting, with no explanation or apparent confusion from other characters.

30 Although explicit representation is certainly favourable, since it allows for more explicit identification among audience members, there is something to be said for representation that takes non-binary identity as a matter of course, which is what we see in *The Adventure Zone*.

Taako and Lup – The Twins’ Gender and Sexual Identity

31 There are two main ways that a creator can approach introducing LGBTQ+ characters: they either state at the outset that the characters are LGBTQ+, or they introduce the characters first and confirm their identities later.

32 In the first instance, establishing the character’s sexual/gender identity early can help to confirm the representation for audiences. Explicit representation, as discussed previously, is important for the audience to recognise and engage with the character critically. But establishing the character’s sexual identity early could also make the character *only* about their identity, which can limit the dimensionality of the character and frustrate audiences who want their representation to be more nuanced.

33 In the second instance, confirming the character’s identity later in their arc can make certain that the character’s personality and characteristics are separate from their sexuality/gender. Audiences learn about characters in the beginning of their arc, and when the character’s LGBTQ+ identity is confirmed it adds an additional layer. This was the case when Roza Diaz from *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* came out as bisexual in ‘99’, and when Cyrus Goodman from *Andi Mack* came out as gay in ‘Hey, Who Wants Pizza?’. The negative side of this is that, sometimes, conservative audiences will react harshly when they realise that the character they like identifies in a way that they do not approve of.

34 The McElroys used both methods when they performed the twin half-elves, Taako (gay, male-identifying) and Lup (transgender).

35 Taako was not *introduced* as a gay character (though Justin has said in interviews that he intended Taako to be gay from the beginning (Cléa) his sexuality was confirmed during episode 50 when he went on a date with Kraavitz, the Grim Reaper (*TAZ: Balance* 50). When questioned about his performance, Justin (the eldest brother) was quite open about his reasoning:

Justin: Can I be honest? Uh, a lot of it deals with the fact that in, uh, almost all character creation generators, um, I can’t make an overweight character. And I don’t feel like, if I’m gonna try to represent mys-- if I’m gonna try to recreate myself-- [crosstalk] on the screen, I don’t wanna create like an idealized fake-ass version of myself... So I’d rather

just like, play a beautiful black woman, who, like, who's great at shooting guns at people-- like that sounds amazing too. (The The Adventure Zone Zone)

36 From this response, we can infer that he chose to play a gay man because he is not a gay man himself. It was not, as far as we can tell, the result of a desire to increase LGBTQ+ representation. Taako's sexuality was confirmed *after* the audience learned about his character and personality. His sexual identity was not the core of Justin's portrayal, which led to a much more interesting and nuanced character, and he was able to learn about portraying LGBTQ+ characters after seeing Griffin handle the 'Petals to the Metal' arc.

37 To contrast, when Griffin introduced Taako's sister Lup (whom he had forgotten) at the beginning of the 'Stolen Century' arc, Griffin openly confirmed her identity as a trans woman: "Lup was assigned male at birth, but at, like, a fairly young age she transitioned, and identified as a female elf" (*TAZ: Balance* 60). This is, in fact, the only time during the series when Lup's identity is mentioned. She is not referred to as trans at any other point; she is treated as a woman by the other characters, referred to with she/her pronouns at all times, and she begins a relationship with a cis man who does not, at any point, seem to care about the gender she was assigned at birth.

38 During the meta-episode that followed, Griffin laid out the steps that he took to try and make the character as respectfully as possible.

Griffin: As— as for Lup being a trans woman, I knew pretty early on, um, I kind of struggled with it because I wanted to— it was really important to me that I tried to do a good job of that. And because I know that that particular form of representation uh, is— there have been a lot of examples of that sort of not— not being so great, and I did not want to be just another sort of bullet point on a very long list of— of you know bad trans representation in fiction... so Travis actually put out a tweet saying like we wanna have you know, trans characters on the show uh, will you please message us and tell us like, what is important to you in how we handle that... I read a few uh, things uh, online from uh some trans authors who were talking about like, here's how to have a good trans character on the show, here's like a bunch of shitty pitfalls to avoid. Um, and so I tried to be like, really, really, really, thoughtful about that stuff in, uh creating Lup. (The The Adventure Zone Zone: Balance Finale Edition).

39 Griffin's handling of Lup shows a growth from his initial attempt to introduce LGBTQ+ characters back in 'Petals to the Metal'; first, he polled (via Travis) real-world transgender people to see what was important to the audience, and second, he read about transgender representation in story to see what problematic tropes he ought to avoid. By including LGBTQ+ people in the development of the character, Griffin's portrayal of Lup was significantly more sensitive and nuanced.

40 What is particularly interesting about Lup's portrayal was the fact that, if her creator had not explicitly stated her trans identity at the outset, there would be very little evidence for the audience to confirm her identity on their own. Introducing her as explicitly trans, only to continue without reminders or affirmations, reinforces the narrative's story world as one of acceptance. Similarly, to Roswell in 'The Eleventh Hour' arc, Lup's identity is not questioned. She exists, she is transgender, but that is not the most interesting thing about her.

Sloan and Hurley – The Gays Are Resurrected

41 From this author's perspective, the culmination of the McElroy's LGBTQ+ education, and DM Griffin's coup de gras, was Sloan and Hurley's resurrection during the three-part series finale.

Griffin: Mavis had read about dryads, but she never expected to meet one in her lifetime. Now she could say she had met two. And Hurley leans down, her smiling face beaming beneath a canopy of cherry blossoms, and she says,

Griffin (as Hurley): You're safe now.

Griffin: And then she looks at Sloane, and she says,

Griffin (as Hurley): We're all safe now. (*TAZ: Balance* 68)

42 Dryads, in the *Dungeons & Dragons* lore, are fey protectors of forests and trees. Turning Sloane and Hurley into dryads justifies their 'death' at the end of 'Petals to the Metal', when they turned into a cherry blossom tree together, and demonstrates that their respective stories did not end on that day. This resurrection is a final subversion of the 'bury your gays' trope; they were *unburied*, brought back to life as protectors of other young women.

Amnesty & Graduation – LGBTQ+ as a Matter of Course

43 Over the next several seasons, the McElroys consistently demonstrate a strong willingness to introduce LGBTQ+ representation. In *The Adventure Zone's* second season, 'Amnesty', the players rolled new characters and Griffin remained the DM. Travis's character, Aubrey Little, is initially introduced as an awkward, bisexual magician with fire powers. Travis states during a meta-episode that followed her introduction that Aubrey's sexuality is based not in an explicit desire to develop LGBTQ+ representation, but in the fact that the real-life people she was based on were bisexual.

'I based Aubrey on four people, right? She's named after Aubrey Plaza, and she is pierced and tattooed like my friends Verona, Tybee and Kate, right, and so all four of those people are bisexual. And so it was just kind of in my head when I— it wasn't even really a decision that I made, but as I was picturing Aubrey and basing her off of these four people, that she just was bisexual.' (*The The Adventure Zone Zone: Experiments Post-Mortem*).

44 So Travis's awareness of bisexual people was a deciding factor in his decision to design and play a bisexual character. While they are playing, the first indication of Aubrey's sexuality comes when she meets NPC Dani, a vampire, and has to perform a fire trick in front of her.

Travis: This is very important, and I know you're gonna try to dismiss it at first. Is Dani cute?

Griffin: Uh, yeah? Yeah, I think, I mean does Aubrey find her cute? I feel like that would be, I don't know what—

Travis: Yes, she does, that's why I asked. 'Cause I want to know if Aubrey's nervous or not performing in front of Dani.

Griffin: Okay, then yes, absolutely... I think that's really rad. I also think if we make that canon that your emotional state sort of affects your magic, you can use that in some cool ways, and I'm also gonna use that in some cool, maybe bad for you, ways.

Travis: [crosstalk] Oh, absolutely. That's why I picked Fire and Blast and all of that, cuz I think Aubrey is very emotional, very reactive, and I want that to be part of it, you know what I mean? (*TAZ: Amnesty 2*)

45 By establishing that Aubrey's sexuality could potentially affect her spellcasting, Griffin and Travis are working together to introduce a narrative reason why her sexuality is plot relevant. They continue the strategy of introducing her sexual preferences in an understated manner, but by making it plot relevant they are also demonstrating their growing ability to effectively incorporate LGBTQ+ characters into their narratives.

46 'Amnesty's' LGBTQ+ representation is comparatively less developed than 'Balance's' representation. This is likely to do with the fact that 'Amnesty' only ran for twenty-eight episodes, while 'Balance' ran for 69, so 'Amnesty' did not have as much narrative space to develop characters' sexual and gender identities. That being said, important characters like Aubrey and Hollis (non-binary, they/them pronouns) are included and narratively significant. Finally, 'Graduation' – the third season of *The Adventure Zone* – is the first season in which Griffin is a PC and Travis is the DM. The season is not complete yet, but Travis's DM style has already demonstrated an awareness of the lessons learned from Griffin and the lessons that the McElroys learned during the 'Balance' arc.

47 In particular, Travis uses implicit introductions by mentioning clues to a character's sexual or gender identity in passing. For example, he establishes that NPCs Jimson and Crushman are married by showing Crushman refer to Jimson as his husband. Similarly, Travis does not state at the outset when characters are nonbinary – instead, he assumes that the audience will understand when he introduces characters as nonbinary during narration by using they/them pronouns when he describes their actions:

Travis: And uh, Mimi says...

Travis (as Mimi): Oh, no, hold on! Wait, let me show ya!

Travis: And uh, they reach into their hat. Y'know, it's like a standard gnome affair. And they reach far deeper in than you would've expected. Uh, and they pull out a, like, four foot long pair of mechanical arms.

[...]

Travis: And they say...

Travis (as Festo): [high pitched and silly] Hellooo! Me'a Festooo! (*TAZ: Graduation* 2, my emphasis)

48 Travis certainly 'hit the ground running' with *Graduation*. He begins introducing the LGBTQ+ characters within the first two episodes, and has since continued to maintain the pronoun-usage and implicit introductions that imply normalisation of LGBTQ+ identities in-world. It will be interesting to see how he continues to DM the season and how this representation will continue to grow.

Conclusion

49 In contemporary mainstream media, LGBTQ+ identifying characters have had a long and fraught history. The 'bury your gays' trope remains a harmful element of storytelling that can be used to discredit and delegitimise representation. Podcasts, as a user-driven medium, can be a useful space for LGBTQ+ people to explore their experiences, as well as the ways in which traditional media handle (or mishandle) representations of that experience.

50 As four self-proclaimed 'straight, cis, white dudes', the McElroy family's actual-play D&D podcast could have been a space where harmful representation would be perpetuated. They could have ignored the audience's criticisms of their initial missteps; they could have continued to make the podcast with canonically straight cis characters that represented them. Instead, the McElroys demonstrated a willingness to listen to their audience that ultimately shaped how they approached storytelling. They learned to introduce more nonbinary gender representation in the pronouns that they used for narration, and they consistently demonstrate a willingness to portray LGBTQ+ characters either as PCs or as NPCs.

51 The McElroys' education and informed storytelling style demonstrates a willingness to listen to marginalised audiences, and this has led to a much stronger approach to representation. The representation of queer characters in *TAZ* shows that podcasts are not just a platform for LGBTQ+ creators to educate their audience; they can also act as a participatory storytelling medium in which *creators* can be educated in gender and sexuality by their audience.

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