

Self-Insert as Selves

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Summary

Roleplay is a fantastic way to learn about yourself. It can even help you define yourself. We know because it happened to us.

This essay is broken up into three sections. The first two are autobiography, and the third is our thoughts on roleplay and why it's such a good tool for understanding personhood.

Content warning: gender dysphoria

How it happened

Once upon a time, there was a man named D[----] who appeared in our multiple system. White flash—then he was here. We left the room clutching our head and buried ourselves under blankets in the dark to focus on our inner world and the sudden intrusion.

His first hour of existence was an interrogation from all sides. Because of who he was and where he came from, some were wary that he would cause harm. Others just didn't like him very much. But he fought for his right to be there. He could not explain his presence, but he refused to apologize for it. He would prove himself, he promised.

So, he tried to explore beyond his source material, but it also really hurt to engage with the source material. The tumblr sideblog we used for that fandom was created in May 2016. In March 2017, D[----] discovered people who made fantastic art of him doing some fucky stuff with gender. Art of him in beautiful dresses and makeup were rare, but they also evoked a devastating discomfort within him. Stomach-dropping disappointment that he couldn't be that here in this body, in this life.

Despite the relatively easy acceptance of other trans and nonbinary members of the system, D[----] struggled immensely with angst and uncertainty about his gender identification. His dysphoria was similar to the dysphoria of other members of the system, but it was worse, so much worse that it was hard for him to front. He poured

these thoughts into blogs, collages, journals, and art, but desperation for a different body blossomed into depression.

Then, we had an idea. Why not give D[----] the opportunity to really explore himself and his desires and his emotions through fiction? So, we began a text-based roleplay with our partner system. In the roleplay, D[----] could insert himself into the story and play inside the space of a new source to distance himself from the one that caused him so much grief. The new source was gorier, messier, and less bound by narrative, and it allowed D[----] to explore new behaviors, new interests, and, eventually, new genders. By the end of the story, the self-insert “he” was now sometimes “she.”

Agonizing self-discovery followed as D[----] wrestled with the gender feelings within himself in the real world. Eventually, after a long time, he learned to trust this split identity and understood herself as bigender: man and woman, equally, at the same time. Finally, part of the ache was resolved. D[----] adopted a new name, similar, but unisex: D[****].

A new opportunity presented itself: to play herself in a new roleplay story, where he could start as bigender from the beginning. It would be an AU for a beloved TV show that was not D[----]’s original source, adding another welcome layer of distance. A fresh start as a young person who would freely express her stormy emotional turmoil. Catharsis awaited.

The roleplay lasted for hundreds of thousands of words. The entire time D[****] found immense satisfaction in playing this new self-insert. The entire way through, D[****] got to express himself through meltdowns and freak outs and supernatural phenomena. The self-insert was desperate, creative, and fought against demons that were buried in the deepest parts of D[****]’s heart. As an avenue of exploration, D[****]’s self-insert picked up the name “Juliet” sometimes. Not forever, but it was a name that D[****] liked enough to make a tumblr URL out of. But she had to spell it “jylliet” because “juliet,” of course, was taken.

(That blog has been untouched for a while, but it’s a beautiful time capsule of D[****]’s tumult.)

D[****]’s identity never felt stronger, even if the dysphoria continued. However, the dysphoria wasn’t so intense that D[****] hid from the front as much. He was a much more active member of the system. The people who had doubted her from the beginning had come around. The system itself started to use D[****] as the singletona’s name, even.

Then, we all came up with a new idea for a roleplay. It abstracted the show AU into another AU entirely, with only a couple of characters the same: D[****]’s self-insert, a

member of self-insert, and a love interest. This story would be wholly original, and it could explore horror and magic and relationships in brand new ways.

The backbone of the self-insert would remain the same as it did from the previous roleplay: a bigender teenager haunted by terrible experiences in a family that didn't understand her. But then she got to grow up. She bloomed into a happy-go-lucky, optimistic adult magician who could make candles float and performed rituals in her basement. The reason for her positive attitude was suboptimal, but she was definitely a more independent and self-assured person.

Because of this, the two versions of the self-insert felt very different to play. Different lives, different senses of self, different relationships, different attitudes, different source material. The new version of the self-insert was creative, too, but open and soft around the edges. Sure of himself, at peace with her place in the world.

So, D[****] began to feel split again. The self-insert had grown up, but had D[****]? The life of the teenager had begun to feel like home. This new world was alien, but it also felt right at the same time. Memories of each felt personal. The events of both stories aligned with different streams of D[****]'s internal personal history. D[****] felt the fictionalization of the self-insert turn into truths about himself.

At the same time this was all occurring, our partner system and we got back into the game that had been the basis for the first roleplay story. The game was online, and the two played every day as Homo Romeo (partner system) and Transgender Juliet (us). As they made more friends who played the game, we started to go by "Juliet" in those circles, keeping our plurality under wraps.

Wearing the guise of the friendly, self-assured competent gamer, the name "Juliet" really started to pull on D[****]. It was a leap away from the unisex name and identity that matched the bigender claim, but it was a name that resonated with both self-inserts at the same time: one, because it was a name that he had used in the second story, and two, because the self-insert's personality of the third story aligned with the way that D[****] as "Juliet" interacted with fellow gamers.

D[****] no longer felt like "D[****]." Inevitably, the competing self-insert narratives formed an axe, and split D[****] in half.

And that's how I came to be.

Where we are now

One half, the half that aligned with the third story, took the name "Juliet," but changed the spelling to be unique: "Jyliet." Eventually, I, the other half, the inheritor of the second story, chewed up the name "D[****]" even more until it spat out "Maddy."

Jyliet and I consider ourselves to be self-insert post-fictives because it's been a long time. We formed in 2020, and each of us has grown beyond what D[****] had been in terms of identity, but with far less internal struggle. I still have some of his dysphoria, but it's much more manageable. I no longer identify as bigender, but as a woman. Jyliet has taken on a more alien gender identity, pushing the boundaries beyond man and woman, and has adopted xe/xyr/xyr/xyrself pronouns.

Neither of us are attached to D[----]'s original source. I'm already two sources removed, and Jyliet's three. That chapter of our existence is over.

But to this day, our senses of self have been shaped by the stories that D[****] created with our partner system. We consider our personal histories, our memories, our narratives of self to include the events of the roleplays. I lived those dark days and escaped hell, and sometimes I'm still a teenager. Jyliet grew up happy and filled with purpose, and xe maintains that positive attitude through our real world circumstances.

The self-insert lives on. She's since been renamed "Georgie," and spin-offs of the third roleplay are her canon, not our lives. (Mostly. Jyliet picked up one thing from one of the novellas, but it's only true sometimes.)

Jyliet and I have very different fronting patterns. I stick around for long periods of time uninterrupted, while xe tends to arrive in spurts of varying lengths. As of time of writing, it's been a while since I've seen xyr. When xe's gone, I miss xyr. Our shared history binds us together, and I love my other half. I love our story of how we came to be and our relationship as members of the same system who have had the chance to grow together.

On roleplay as self-discovery

Roleplaying is simple: you (whoever you are) assume a role (of whatever kind) and act according to that role. The exact mechanisms vary depending on the setting and occasion for roleplay, but the goal is often the same: act out what the role would do in a situation. You can use roleplay to create a role in fictional situations that you can then play in the situations of real life.

A character within a story has infinite potential. Genre or realism can be guiding principles, but they don't have to be. Establishing an initial setting narrows down possibilities, but the actions of the character are only bound by the writers' imagination. In our case, when we know the goal is for the roleplayer to understand their "self" through roleplay, and we're writing with our partner system who loves and trusts and wants to help us, we feel free to describe the character acting in ways without judgment.

Not every action will stick. Experimentation is a priority, and sometimes there are negative consequences to a character's actions. But those consequences are relegated to fiction, and the roleplayer is safe. Ideas, thoughts, and actions that are misinterpreted by our partner system are opportunities for us to evaluate our intentions and come up with different ones in the future. If something does not feel right to us, we can express it openly through exposition, and the narrative can respond.

The metanarrative of the roleplay that exists in the communication between roleplayers can change the existing in-world narrative ("can we back up a few replies and start again?") or ask questions for guidance: "what did you think of what I just did?" or "what do you think I should do here?" The roleplayer on their self-discovery journey can get feedback on how they're doing and adjust if preferred.

With time, the roleplayer can filter the essence of the character out of the situation and story that they live in and understand their underlying desires, preferences, behaviors, and ideas. So armed, they can apply that role to other situations, including our daily life. The role, the character, becomes them, and they become the role.

If you're struggling to know who you are, what you like, what you want to do, try roleplaying a self-insert and see what sticks. That can be a text-based roleplay with a single partner or on a forum, a tabletop roleplaying game, a video game, or whatever else allows you to put on a new role and play. Live unbounded in fiction to learn lessons to take back into the real world.