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DESIGNING ROMANCE AND THE 'PLAYERSEXUALITY' DEBATE:
LOVE, ROMANCE, IDENTITY, AND PLAYER PERCEPTIONS OF *BALDUR'S GATE 3* AND *THE DRAGON AGE* SERIES

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Abstract

Players of role-playing games have become increasingly interested in romantic narratives as part of the play experience. These romantic possibilities with pre-programmed in-game characters can be an exciting part of play, giving games more depth and allowing players to feel more connected to game content. This qualitative project applies content analysis to the *Dragon Age* video game series and *Baldur's Gate 3* as well as online conversations among players of these games to investigate how players interpret, experience, and evaluate in-game romance. I find that players' relationship with romance in video games is complex. Romance is often also built around the idea of player agency, aiming to fulfill fantasies and emphasize player choice over representing sexualities as part of characters' identities. This has resulted in tensions as players seek out in-game romance, selecting in-game partners, exploring facets of identity, and often pursuing realistic stories when it comes to love. While some players appreciate playersexual models of in-game romance that make characters love them at the press of a button, the desire for realism – including the inclusion of characters with their own sexualities – often undercuts desires for control.

Keywords: *video games, narrative, romance, identity, representation*

Introduction

Contemporary video games have increasingly become cinematic, yet interactive experiences, with a growing attention granted to the agency that players can have in gameworlds (Muriel & Crawford, 2020; Stang, 2019). Specifically, players can provide input that influences the state of the gameworld (Murzyn & Valgaeren, 2016), shifting the narrative (Moser & Fang, 2015), making choices that shape the in-game political climate (Tomlinson, 2023), or selecting an in-game partner through romantic possibilities (Brierley-Beare, 2023; Chowanda et al., 2016; Song & Fox, 2016; Wu et al., 2023). These options and opportunities, however, are always set and defined by the parameters of the game, its design, and its rules (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012; Muriel & Crawford, 2020). Players are only able to do what the game allows them to do and can only shift the narrative in ways facilitated by the choices offered to them by the game. These games also often provide space for players to explore and interrogate aspects of identity, whether their own (Consalvo, 2013) or those of in-game characters (Chowanda et al., 2016). Video games can be a safer space for players to explore who they are, their desires, and their self-expressions, as well as potentially seeing representations of varied identities in game contexts, though diversity of represented identities (including gender, race/ethnicity, and sexualities) is often limited in game content (Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Srauy & Cheney-Lippold, 2019).

Role-playing games (RPGs) often emphasize player influence on their narratives and sometimes incorporate some element of in-game romance (Brierley-Beare, 2023;

Tomlinson, 2021). In this case, romance refers to the ability of players to select a character to explore a narrative offshoot with, incorporating the growth of a romantic and often sexual relationship between the player's character and (typically) one of their companions. This style of video game has become popular among players and has also often found itself at the center of academic study as a result (Brierley-Beare, 2023). These games expand well beyond the romantic elements, but having the opportunity to explore romantic relationships with in-game characters can enhance players' experiences with and connections to game content (Chowanda et al., 2016; Song & Fox, 2016; Tomlinson, 2021; Wu et al., 2023). These games have also been at the intersection of academic and player debate, however. This is, in part, due to a tendency for these games to boil romance – and as a result, sexuality – down to an on-demand system based on player discretion (Adams, 2015).

This qualitative project assesses the romantic element of video games, specifically within fantasy, narrative-based RPGs that emphasize player agency and input as part of molding the game's story and world. As a comparative case study, games with similar aesthetics that have been compared to one another by game outlets (Kaur, 2024; Morton, 2023) and fans are analyzed for their romantic content and player engagement with this content. This study explores both the *Dragon Age* (2009-2014) video game series and *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023) to assess how players interpret, engage with, and understand romantic content and options. In particular, the study highlights what players appreciate, seek out, and desire when it comes to narratives that allow for romantic engagement with in-game characters.

Ultimately, romance in these games is a play enhancement, but several elements can restrict or shape players' enjoyment. In particular, this study highlights that players have complicated relationships with agency and identity in these games. This also relates to how players view "realism" and whether or not this is important when it comes to how romance mechanics work. In the debate among players, romantic systems that privilege identity and those that emphasize player agency both have merits for the play experience, leaving the debate surrounding "playersexual" models of romance difficult to resolve.

Agency, Role-Playing, and Player Control

Agency is an element of video games that has become a focal point for understanding player experience. Due to the interactivity of video games, agency – or the ability to impact the game in some way – is also at the center of play (Muriel & Crawford, 2020). This has become increasingly true for new releases, with more AAA companies – the largest companies with the most well-known games – releasing games that emphasize player input (Bódi, 2023). The agency that players can express, however, is sometimes overemphasized (Stang, 2019) and is very much limited by the parameters set by the game (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012; Muriel & Crawford, 2020). A player cannot do whatever they want, but can explore a game and gameworld in a set of "bounded" options (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012, p. 401).

Due to these bounds, however, players also find ways to challenge the agency defined and outlined by a game's design. Agency can also be expressed and explored through "break[ing] the system," or creating new things based on game content through "wikis, cosplay, derivative works, mods, new games, fan fiction and art, walkthroughs, and so on" (Muriel & Crawford, 2020, p. 154). At the same time, the amount of influence players feel like they have is an important element of in-game agency (Thue et al., 2011). The impact that players believe they have in the game – and whether or not this seems meaningful in the grander scheme of the narrative – can be more important than the choices available through the game's mechanics (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012; Stang, 2019; Thue et al., 2011).

Romance and Sexuality in Video Games

Although not every game includes the possibility of romance, some games incorporate this, offering players a range of emotional experiences that can enhance their attachment to characters, create opportunities to explore romantic possibilities, and become more deeply invested in game narratives (Chowanda et al., 2016; Song & Fox, 2016; Tomlinson, 2021; Wu et al., 2023). Including romance – or options to engage in romantic content with pre-programmed game characters – is often used as a quick way to integrate and telegraph sexuality to players (Adams, 2015; Consalvo, 2013). These romantic opportunities are enjoyed by many players, allowing them to deepen their gameplay, their connection to their own avatar, and their investment in both the narrative and the characters featured within it (Tomlinson, 2021). Often, in keeping with the emphasis of video games on player agency, video games create romantic opportunities that are wholly steered by the player. This means that characters often do not have their own desires, but only react to what the player wants and initiates (Cooper, 2022; Howard, 2019), or a "playersexual" mechanic for romance.

Playersexuality is well-known among players, but has been largely undertheorized in terms of its applications and players' experiences (Cooper, 2022). Sexuality itself is frequently left out of video games, often being implied and heavily leaning on heterosexuality or heterosexism as part of how sexuality is conceptualized (Adams, 2015). In cases where video games do incorporate some diverse options for sexuality, they tend to use an approach that requires a "gay button" or a representation of sexuality that allows players to effectively opt in or out of seeing homosexuality represented in their games (Adams, 2015). Playersexuality in video games follows this opt-in model of sexuality, establishing characters whose sexuality is entirely dependent on whether or not the player chooses to engage with a character who is the same sex as their own avatar (Cooper, 2022; Howard, 2019). The frequency of this model is not surprising in the broader landscape of video games. Often, to achieve queer play or express queer identity in video games, players are left to their own devices to express and explore diverse sexualities and gender expressions (Greer, 2013; Krobová et al, 2015).

The games included in this analysis take different approaches to incorporating romance and identity into their narratives. Over time, *Dragon Age* has moved from a largely playersexual model toward incorporating sexuality as part of characters' identities, which has helped to make romance feel more realistic (Lucas, 2020). The newest *Baldur's Gate* release, however, has continued to emphasize playersexuality, although it has expanded possibilities in gender expression for players, allowing them to select any configuration of body type, pronouns, voice, and genitalia, although clothing is still locked to a binary body type. These approaches are discussed among players in terms of their evaluations of the games and of the romantic narrative and play elements.

Methods and data

This study uses qualitative methods to better understand romantic video game content, player engagement with in-game romance, and the impact of options related to in-game romance on players' experiences. Although this study is not intended as a close reading analysis (see, for example, Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, 2011) for these games, the analysis draws from both video game content for context and online discussions about this content among players. Specifically, comparisons are made between the *Dragon Age* video game series and *Baldur's Gate 3* based on both direct gameplay and online forum conversations about players' own reactions to and experiences with romance in these games. Online conversations are drawn from two spaces housed on Reddit, one dedicated to *Dragon Age* and one dedicated to *Baldur's Gate 3*. Although these discussion spaces are publicly available, the exact names are obscured and privacy of users is protected by removing usernames and slightly rewording conversations while maintaining meaning to avoid identifiability. It should be noted that while Reddit provides an opportunity to more closely compare the opinions and experiences of these players, this does limit the scope of the study to a specific group of players: those using Reddit. Previously, however, it has been found that players of similar games who did not use online spaces to discuss video games held the same opinions and had many of the same experiences as those who do discuss online (Tomlinson, 2021).

This project is based on approximately 657 hours of gameplay in total of *Dragon Age: Origins* ([*DAO*] 2009), *Dragon Age II* ([*DA2*] 2011), and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* ([*DAI*] 2014), and 217 hours of gameplay of *Baldur's Gate 3* ([*BG3*] 2023). Online conversations for this project were observed for approximately 24 months for the *Dragon Age* forum and 8 months for the *BG3* forum, just before its full release in August 2023 until May 2024. These comparisons were drawn because of the frequency with which players compare these games to one another in their discussions, particularly regarding romance. As such, the games selected were chosen based on these player interactions and conversations. Although there are other titles in the *Baldur's Gate* game series, the recency of *Baldur's Gate 3*, its inclusion of romance as a potential major story point, and its similarity to the *Dragon Age* series have caused comparisons among players and fans.

The study did not begin with specific hypotheses or questions to test, rather applying a grounded theory approach to guide the analysis based on an iterative process of investigating conversations between players directly and revisiting the literature (Charmaz, 2006). Notes were taken both during and after observation of online conversations to allow for an open coding scheme (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to be applied to each conversation (e.g., online posts and users' comments) and thus refinement of categorical patterns in conversation, which produced the themes discussed below. To achieve this, topic themes were highlighted in player conversations, including discussions of specific character romances and their attractive traits, comparisons that appeared between *Dragon Age* and *Baldur's Gate 3*, senses of what is desirable or not in video game romance, and how these games feel for players based on their online exchanges. In each conversation observed that discussed elements of romance in-game, notes were applied to each concept of romance that players discussed both during and after data collection to identify specific themes and patterns in areas of focus and emphasized interests.

Because this is a qualitative study – and due to the nature of forum observation – there is no quantification of players who express specific interests or desires, but rather an analysis of the most prominent topics related to romance as they occurred in everyday conversation for players. Specifically, conversations revealed patterns and player emphases related to selecting specific digital partners, experiences with and elements of in-game agency, and player desires for "realism" in video game romance. These conversations highlight comparisons between *Dragon Age* and *Baldur's Gate 3* based on players' own experiences and perceptions of the benefits and drawbacks in the design of each game series or game. Below is a discussion of the most common and prominent themes analyzed among players regarding romantic and character-related dynamics, suggesting that the debate about the merits of playersexuality in video games is alive and well among players.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS
Dragon Age, Baldur's Gate, and a Romantic Crossroads

It is useful to better understand the worlds in which these players find love. Due to the extensive lores and narratives of these games, this section will provide just a brief overview.

For all of these games, the primary purpose of play is not romance, but it has become an interest and sometimes focal point for many players. In online conversations, one of the first pieces of discussion is often, "Who did you romance?" Despite not being the center of the game, romantic possibilities provide players with other layers of play and can make narratives feel more realistic and impactful (Tomlinson, 2021). In *Dragon Age*, players explore the world of Thedas, taking on the persona of the Warden, Hawke, and the Inquisitor to fight ever-increasing existential threats across the three current releases. As implied by the name, this high fantasy setting involves fantastical creatures like dragons, but monsters and magic also inhabit this world. The main goal of the player in each of these games is to fight looming threats as their avatar alongside a cast of companions who have different backgrounds, experience, and skillsets. Some of these companions, sometimes based on who the player chooses to be, can also be engaged with romantically, adding another layer to gameplay for players who choose this option.

In *Baldur's Gate 3*, we see many of the same elements in terms of Medieval European aesthetics, the inclusion of magic, banding together with a cast of characters set to save the world, and the possibility to extensively engage in romance with companion characters (sometimes even more than one at a time), regardless of who the player decides to be. The game is a departure from *Dragon Age* in that it takes its lore and mechanics from *Dungeons and Dragons* directly, providing a play experience that reflects a tabletop game – down to narration from a character standing in for the Dungeon Master – through the cinematic and narrative approach of a video game. Like *Dragon Age II*, the game takes place over three acts, allowing the player to face increasing threats as they continue through the story and explore areas including the Sword Coast in western Faerûn and the area known as Baldur's Gate.

Among the differences between these games is how they handle romance. *Dragon Age* has been somewhat ambivalent about who can be romanced and how in each of the games currently available. In *Dragon Age: Origins*, some characters are effectively bisexual, while others are gender-locked in terms of the player characters that can romance them. In *Dragon Age II*, players can romance any character they choose without limitation, applying a playersexual approach to romance. *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, however, returned to the original formula while highlighting sexuality as an integral part of some characters' identities (particularly Dorian, whose identity as a gay man is a central part of his story [Pelurson, 2018]). *Baldur's Gate 3* favors the playersexual approach to romance, as seen in *Dragon Age II*, where the player can engage in romance with any of the companion characters who can be romanced and in some cases can pursue more than one character at once.

It should be noted that identity can still be a prominent part of these stories, however, with a romantic relationship in *BG3* between the characters Isobel and Dame Aylin being directly included in the narrative, despite its effective "push-button" approach to romance (Adams, 2015) for players' characters. The possibilities for in-game love have become part of the comparison point for players between these games as they work to understand their play experiences, what makes a romantic game story enjoyable or fulfilling, and what they want out of this kind of experience.

Identity, Desire, and Agency

While there are many shared attributes in the conversations about both the *Dragon Age* series and *Baldur's Gate 3*, there is a major departure in terms of how agency is experienced for players. Much of this relates directly to issues of identity, partly due to *Dragon Age: Inquisition*'s handling of romance and inclusion of gay characters versus the emphasis on heterosexuality or playersexuality in *Dragon Age: Origins* and the playersexual approaches of *Dragon Age II* and *Baldur's Gate 3*. For the latter three games included in this study, many or all characters are essentially bisexual, though this identity is not salient as part of the narrative or play experience. Rather than truly being bisexual, they are motivated by the choices that the player makes as an initiator of romantic or sexual encounters. This playersexual approach is common in many RPGs (Cooper, 2022; Howard, 2019), allowing for the player's fantasy — and therefore agency — to take precedence. Instead of sexuality being a facet of characters' identities, it is, instead, based solely on players' engagement with these characters. This creates a circumstance where characters engage in romance and sex based on the player's choices, rather than their own preferences, interests, and identities.

Despite this separation from expressions of identity for these characters, players sometimes try to grapple with what the romance mechanics in these games *mean* for the characters they encounter. Among players in these discussions, there is some drive to understand characters' personalities and receptiveness to romantic advances in the context of identity, despite the absence of emphasis on their identity in the game itself. As one example of a common attempt to understand

identity in the context of sexuality for these characters, an exchange between players highlights player "reads" on Astarion's (an elf vampire character) personality:

> User 1: Is Astarion…gay? I'm sorry to the Astarion fans for this post. I just want to lay this out and as the title says, is he gay? It's been on my mind for a while. I'm not judging him for who he is but he's so elegant and classy and has a whiff of nobility. Who is Astarion to you?
>
> User 2: I think he's bisexual! I enjoy him because he mixes gender roles and I think it's refreshing! As a woman I love being able to interact with men who are not afraid of being themselves. Astarion is a great example.

Astarion is of particular interest in discussions of *BG3* because many players interpret him as being gay coded, with his personality and mannerisms being read as stereotypically gay, similarly to the gay character Dorian in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Pelurson, 2018). For some, this coding in the context of a playersexual character makes the character feel less impactful, while others view this as freeing, separating the character from stereotyping of personalities or behaviors associated with particular sexualities (Pelurson, 2018).

For players who had hoped to romance a character like Dorian but were unable to due to their character's gender, having the opportunity to romance a character like Astarion feels freeing and more aligned with the experience they hope for while playing video games: to live out a fantasy. On the other hand, players who yearn for representation — one of the central

arguments against playersexual approaches to romantic design (Adams, 2015) – characters like Dorian offer representation that is too often lacking in video games (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). For queer players in particular, seeing characters like Dorian can make a difference in the play experience, allowing them to see, engage with, and potentially romance a character who is explicitly in the LGBTQ community.

These discussions reveal tensions between players when it comes to the playersexual model. At the intersection of identity and agency, keeping players happy with approaches to romance mechanics becomes difficult. For some players, the concept of playersexuality in these games is identified as a potentially inclusive method of design as it allows players to explore options without limitations and presents narratives that can effectively be queered easily. For others, however, this approach makes the romances feel flat and less fleshed out, due to the lack of depth given to characters and their own desires. As one in-game example of this, players pursuing Dorian's personal quest see his struggles and experience with his sexuality, including being rejected from his family for who he is, without needing to begin a romance with him to discover his identity.

In one exchange on the topic of sexualities in these games, players make direct comparisons between *BG3* and the *Dragon Age* game series, highlighting the debates surrounding these approaches:

> User 1: …As someone who's bisexual, this happened in [another game from the same studio as **BG3**]. Every romanceable character is bisexual. I like to have the representation, but it isn't reasonable…..I like Dragon Age's system where some characters are LGBTQ and some aren't. It makes the game and romances feel better. They seem more real. I loved Dorian and Sera in DAI because their romances were [locked based on their orientation]….I do love [BG3], but I want legitimate romances.
>
> User 2: I understand what you're saying, but I appreciate that there isn't a gender preference for the romanceable companions. With DAO, I liked Morrigan and the only one I really liked in DAI was [Dorian], but I couldn't romance them because I was female. It's nice not to have that problem, at least in a video game.

The debate about playersexuality illuminates the difficulty with addressing the gap between representation and player agency. For some, reading bisexuality into playersexual mechanics feels like LGBTQ representation. For others, this approach falls short because sexuality is not part of characters' identity and, instead, essentially offers a "button press" (Adams, 2015) or "opt-in" experience of sexuality where LGBTQ identities are included or excluded at the discretion of the player. Another player group, with some overlap with the former type of player, points out that set sexualities – as with the example of the witch character Morrigan in *Origins* and with Dorian in *Inquisition*, who can only be romanced by male characters – limits their own opportunity to explore these games in ways that feel organic to them. To a degree, for these players, this may mean their own identity, potentially as an LGBTQ player, is undercut by limiting who they can select in an in-game romance.

In the case of *Baldur's Gate 3*, however, this approach may make more sense due to a wider range of options when it comes to representation through the player's character. While the current *Dragon Age* games limit gender selection to binary options – male and female, without the ability to mix attributes and characteristics – *Baldur's Gate 3* opens more possibilities for players to express diverse gender identities. In the character creator, players can select any combination of pronouns (from he, she, and they), body types and shapes, and from an array of genitalia options.

Players may also role-play and select romance options based solely on their interpretation of their player character. While some players, particularly in RPGs, may feel constrained into specific moral choices based on who they perceive their character to be (Domínguez et al., 2016), some players also determine what romantic path their character should be on in the context of role-playing. As one exchange between players reveals, the difference between approaches is highlighted clearly when it comes to characters with established sexualities:

> User 1: When I choose romances, it's based more on which characters I think are interesting and whether they seem like they jive with my character. Then I want to see the content, so I might make a character for a romance if they have specific preferences (like [Cassandra in DAI]) only romancing men.
> User 2: I don't really have criteria. I'm a heterosexual and cis guy but I don't make myself in games because I wanna be someone else in RPGs. I don't think about what I would do, more what the character would do. If I'm playing a badass human noble woman in Origins, she would romance Alistair. If I'm playing a [gay] mage dude in DA2, he's romancing Anders. If I'm a sensitive female mage in Inquisition, she'll romance Cullen for the full on sappy romance novel.

While some players do play as some version of themselves or a character they feel relates to their physical world identities, many play with their character guiding their decisions, which includes romantic entanglements. To some degree, this can frustrate players who feel that their character connects with a romance option whose sexuality does not align with their character's gender. In many of these cases, however, having set sexualities that link to a character's identity in-game can bolster a sense of role-play and deepen the story for players, increasing the "realism" discussed below. At the same time, however, playersexuality also avoids limitations discussed by players who felt disappointed in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* due to constraints on their romance options in comparison to *BG3* or the other *DA2* titles.

The debate surrounding playersexuality is a complicated one and heavily intertwined with both issues of player agency and narrative experience. There is further not a clearcut answer among players justifying one approach over the other. Instead, players are frequently at an impasse with one another, interpreting playersexuality as better for their play experience, representative of bisexuality, or as limiting representation due to its lack of engagement with set identities. At the heart of this debate among fans is determining what makes a better play experience – having more control and agency as a player or having a narrative that may present obstacles that, as discussed below, can ultimately feel more realistic.

What Makes Video Game Romance "Real"

One thing that players focus on in the debate surrounding these games – and, in particular, *Inquisition* versus *BG3* – is what makes a romance feel "realistic." While some players appreciate the emphasis on agency offered by playersexual mechanics, others feel that this approach and other elements of design that limit characters having or expressing their own identities leave something to be desired. Despite the fantasy settings in worlds that resemble the physical world's Middle Ages, but with the inclusion of magic and fantasy creatures, players want to feel like there is a level of realism in these romances. In this regard, characters can feel more fleshed out when their sexuality is part of who they are and when the characters themselves have a degree of agency – or the ability to choose for themselves – when it comes to romance.

 Emphases on characters' personalities are common, discussing how disposition and character growth can contribute to feelings of affinity, closeness, and interest in these characters. For some players, character growth can become a major consideration in romance, allowing players to feel like characters are more fleshed out and fully realized, existing within the narrative as their own people. Characters like the lizard-like alien Lae'zel in *BG3*, for example, go through an evolution of player interpretation. This character is a warrior who is drawn to combat to solve even the most mundane of issues and is highly active in pursuing the player if they have made choices that she approves of. Her character growth through the narrative and particularly through her romance has contributed to the affectionate nickname players who romance her have adopted for her: "Bae'zel." In

these accounts, players note that the character is initially abrasive, yet they warmed up to her as the narrative and her personality progressed. As one player posts:

> In the beginning [of the game], she isn't totally pleasant. She's intolerant toward anyone who isn't githyanki [her in-game alien species] and is offensive…. At the start of the romance, it's purely physical for her…. But later, if she finds out the truth about [her queen], she starts to become a stronger person. She really grows in Act 2. She softens toward you…. She realizes you mean too much to her [to hurt you], and…she wants to protect you…. By Act 3, it all culminates with a scene where she wakes you up to watch the sunrise. She explains she came to [this place] with the goal of [dealing with the main story point] and leaving. But since traveling with you, she's grown to love the people and the lands. She wants to stay with you when everything is done. They took one of the most unlikeable characters and made her loyal, independent, and loving toward you. Amazing character development. Bae'zel forever.

Sexuality is, therefore, only part of what can make characters and their romances feel real and fulfilling for players. The ways that characters change over time in the narrative can make players feel more endeared to them, causing a romance that was previously unthinkable to become highly enticing. The opposite, however, is also true. While character personalities can influence general feelings toward characters (Chowanda et al., 2016), as in the above case, it can also create circumstances where romance feels less reasonable or alluring.

As with other elements of in-game romance, this is also highly individualized and players point out different pet peeves, turn-offs, and catalysts for changes in feelings toward characters. For many, persistence and perceived "thirst" from characters in *BG3*, which extends agency to pursue the player to its characters, had the effect of steering many players away from characters entirely because they felt too aggressive. While some fell for Lae'zel through her growth, others found her direct and highly sexualized approach to propositioning them early in the game if their approval with the character was high enough uncomfortable. A similar experience is expressed in discussions of the wizard character Gale, who either earned the hearts of players through his mostly gentle demeanor or felt to be too pushy when it came to expressing interest in the player in similar circumstances. In each of these cases, the characters approach the player's character, express their interest, and become distressed to varying degrees if they are rejected.

Character depth is a major factor in making romances feel real, worth it, and deep for players, but has its limitations when taken together with other narrative dynamics and game mechanics. At the same time, character growth, as discussed by players of both *BG3* and the *Dragon Age* series, also contributes to more emotionally fulfilling narrative experiences discussed by many of these players.

These emotional narrative aspects do not always clash with player agency, but other elements of realism directly limit the amount of input a player has. While many players appreciate the opportunity to control more of their play experience, other players note that having characters with set sexualities that are part of who they are can feel more realistic, despite meaning that they cannot always romance a character of their choosing. Realism is something that players are drawn to when it comes to narrative-heavy games, and often romance can be part of this sense of realism in gameplay (Tomlinson, 2021), but these insights provide more information about how granular this appreciation of realistic portrayals becomes. This is a common way that players discuss the limitations and issues associated with playersexual approaches to design; increasing players' input and ability to play their fantasy does not contribute to a satisfying feeling of realism. As one player suggests:

> i like when you have gay, straight, bisexual, etc. characters. i like characters who have a sexual orientation and it seems like it informs who they are as people. i will add that, for me, bioware has included a lot of bisexual romances, but they don't have bisexuality (or pansexuality) in the same way as straight and gay characters at this point.

This user points out an interesting element of the shift toward incorporating at least some set sexualities into romance mechanics. Although many players note that this — while, in some ways, limiting the player's agency — makes characters and romance feel more realistic, some also highlight the ways that mixing this approach with some playersexual characters still falls short in terms of actual representation. Sexuality in these cases is not handled in a way that incorporates bisexuality as part of a character's identity. Instead, this leaves some playersexual options in place where bisexuality is not conveyed as part of who the character is or as part of identity more broadly, but as a response to the player.

Players sometimes must also react to and account for limits on agency introduced by characters with set sexualities. In comparing these games and discussing the approach of *Inquisition*, players mention that locked romances can sometimes force them to play differently. Players' reactions to this are mixed, with some appreciating that it puts them in a position to push themselves to try something new, while others lament having to play as a character that may not align with their physical world identity (most often their gender identity) to engage in a romance that they are most drawn to. In these latter cases, players' own agency and identity are at odds with character identity, agency, and possibilities for representation. It is interesting to note as well that this can drive different modes of play. Reminiscent of players who make decisions with their romantic interest in mind (Tomlinson, 2021), this also implies that at least some players are aiming to shape overall play experiences around their romantic ingame interest.

These discussions also extend beyond sexualities represented as part of characters' identities, however, and there are other avenues for realistic romance that players discuss in these regards. Contrary to the seeming importance of player agency in these circumstances, realism can result from characters having their own agency and lives outside of what the player dictates. Characters having their own agency and own ability to forge relationships and seeming to have their own lives and interests can make a game and its internal realities feel more realistic and full. This is one of the major comparison points of players between *DA:I* and *BG3*. As one player mentions:

There are a lot of things to like about BG3's romances, [like the way that] characters take charge themselves sometimes [to pursue the player's character]…but I wish there was a more varied approach [when it comes to sexuality].… I think overall DA's interactions between characters are better.… The romance in DA feels like friendship [and more], which makes for more sensible content. BG3 tried to say the relationships would be more than just resulting in sex, but it didn't feel like that with how sparse and spaced out the content was. DA is better with emotional angles and pacing. The DA companions feel like they interact with each other a lot more, too. That was jarring to me [in BG3] because it felt like you picked someone in Act 2 and then there wasn't a lot of interaction with other characters or between characters. It felt lonely.

Many of these discussions point to a sense that characters in *Baldur's Gate 3* appear to, effectively, have no interactions with one another outside of the players' input and influence. Characters interact a great deal with the player's character, and can allude to having experiences with or interests in one another, but players perceive this as less robust than in *DA:I*. In one example of party banter as the player explores Act 3 of *BG3*, Gale and Lae'zel have an exchange about a firework factory:

Lae'zel: Fireworks. A particularly gnomish field of art, no?
Gale: Indeed. More than simple craft. It's a way of life for some of them.

Lae'zel: That may explain why most gnomes have such short fuses.
Gale: Lae'zel! Was that a joke?
Lae'zel: Only if you found it funny.

Such exchanges are most often available when exploring the world with one's selected party in-game, consisting of the player and up to three companion characters, the same number allowed the *Dragon Age* games. The limitations on party members also mean that players may not experience all interactions or pieces of banter in any of the studied games, but also may not experience more extensive relationship building that can happen in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* depending on how the player structures their party. Specifically, there is an opportunity for two characters to become romantically involved with one another if they are regularly brought with the player on missions.

Aside from regular banter on the field, two characters — Dorian and a large, humanoid, grey male being with horns known as a qunari named The Iron Bull — can begin a relationship with one another if neither is being pursued by the player. This lends to the sense that characters feel more fleshed out and realistic for players. In one banter exchange while exploring if the player has chosen Iron Bull, Dorian, and Cassandra (a human warrior character) in their party, the characters can have the following exchange:

Cassandra: So, Bull, about Dorian...
Iron Bull: Yes, it's true.
Dorian: By all means let us discuss this together.
Cassandra: If... you're both pleased...

Dorian: I'm happy, he's happy, everyone's happy.
Iron Bull: Awww, you're happy.
Dorian: (Sighs.)
Cassandra: (Laughs)

The examples of banter between characters may seem similar at first brush, with characters inquiring about each other's lives or making jokes, but the games are experienced and discussed by players differently. While characters can have short conversations with one another or comment on each other's attractiveness in *BG3*, much of the socialization in the game is centered on the player's character. In *DA:I*, players feel that the banter between characters happens more frequently, is more centered on the characters as individual people, and allows for them to grow along with one another as the game progresses, lending to a feeling of a world that seems more "full."

Comparatively, characters in *BG3* do not pursue deeper bonds with one another or anyone else, aside from potential trysts mentioned in passing and seemingly happening once, leaving the player's central position feeling hollow for some. Enhanced character agency that can infringe upon player agency does present challenges as well. Characters pursuing and interacting with one another, as in *Inquisition*, can enhance realism, but characters trying to initiate sexual or romantic scenes on their own with the player, as in *BG3*, can be uncomfortable.

This becomes a crux of the intersection between romance and agency in the context of an engaging narrative or a realistic romance. Character agency that does not influence or

undercut the player's agency is welcome, particularly when this comes to characters expressing their own identities. Character agency in regard to pursuing players who may not be interested, however, is an uncomfortable – if still realistic – experience.

Conclusions

This study has sought to explore the debate among players about what makes a satisfying romantic experience in video games. Although the sample is limited to two online spaces to discuss these games, these conversations among players provide a starting point for understanding how players feel about playersexuality in romantic game design and mechanics. Scholarly work has previously pointed out the problems associated with playersexual models of in-game romance, namely that it allows players to skirt potential representation in video games if they choose not to pursue romances that can be read as queer (Adams, 2015), but this project begins to shed light on how these games are experienced by players themselves.

The games studied clearly offer players unique characters that they feel attached to, to the degree that in some cases, they wish the characters appeared to have more of their own identities, personalities, and experiences outside of the player's character. Some players point out that without this, the game can feel more empty and less realistic. This, for some players, does extend to romance as well.

There is, unfortunately, no clear answer here to what players want and these communities themselves are often split

in terms of their assessment of these romantic mechanics. Based on players' online conversations, playersexuality can be a complicated way to explore romance with in-game characters. Based on online discussions between players of the *Dragon Age* series and *Baldur's Gate 3*, there are numerous considerations when it comes to engaging in these romantic possibilities. Romance itself in these video games can be an enticing play factor (Brierley-Beare, 2023) and can add to the overall narrative experience, but it can also contribute to a sense of community with players beginning these conversations early and continuing them after a game's release and even through multiple playthroughs. Conversations about in-game romance options and content in these games have become a well-known part of these communities, with players excited to share their experiences, opinions, and in-game desires with one another.

The in-game romantic experiences that players discuss are often highly emotional, sometimes to the surprise of the players themselves. In-game romances can help to make a game's narrative feel more impactful (Tomlinson, 2021) and while it can be a fulfilling experience for players in games that solely focus on romance (Song & Fox, 2016; Wu et al., 2023), this study provides further evidence that this also extends to games where romance is not the primary purpose. Romance also exists at a complicated crossroads for players. The playersexual approach of RPGs is common (Cooper, 2022; Howard, 2019), likely due to a desire to allow players to explore fantasies and to increase the limited agency players are granted in games (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012; Muriel & Crawford, 2020).

The diversity of players, however, also means a diversity of desires. For some players, having the option to pursue any character romantically means being able to express themselves without limitation, whether this means engaging in an effectively straight romance with gay-coded characters or a queer romance with any character they would like. For some players, however, characters with set sexualities can also prevent them from pursuing romances that they are interested in and align with their own sexualities and gender identities, as with women who wished to romance Morrigan in *Dragon Age: Origins* or Cassandra in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

This project has extended recent work on romance in RPGs, providing a foundation for better understanding how players perceive, engage with, and explore romance in narrative-based RPGs. These highly emotional experiences are tied not only to the role-playing elements of play (Domínguez et al., 2016; Mäyrä, 2019; Tomlinson, 2021), but also to personal attachments and investments in these characters. Players become invested enough in these romance options that they take to online forums to discuss what they liked or disliked, ask for romance recommendations, or even metagame for love. Sometimes, players take these romances to a deeper level of play, allowing their perceptions of who their character is (Domínguez et al., 2016; Tomlinson, 2021) to decide which character they want to pursue. In other cases, players use these games to explore their own interests and fantasies.

There are also tensions that arise for players between desires to have full control or feel a sense of agency during play (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012; Bódi, 2023; Muriel & Crawford, 2020) and hopes for realistic in-game experiences with romance. At the intersection of identity and agency, players debate what is more important and what open-ended or closed romance options mean for their experience. As part of these debates, representation comes up as a consideration, with some players suggesting that playersexuality counts as LGBTQ representation and others acknowledging that playersexual approaches tend to be more shallow and less well-defined compared to characters whose sexualities are telegraphed clearly.

Part of this debate also has to do with players' desires, however. For some players, being forced to play in different ways to pursue a locked romance is refreshing and challenges them. For others, not being able to romance any character of their choosing is upsetting and frustrating. In general, most players desire romance that feels real and realistic and having characters with set sexualities can enhance this experience. Despite some of these interpretations, romance is often used in game design as a quick way to include representation of sexualities and playersexuality in these cases does allow players to essentially pick and choose what representation they see (Adams, 2015). If simply discussing representation, *BG3* has addressed this in a fairly elegant way: romances with companions are playersexual, but there is also a prominent romantic relationship between two women characters in the game to ensure both player agency and representation.

Player agency has become a more deeply explored element of video game play (Muriel & Crawford, 2020; Stang, 2019), though to some extent its impact may be overemphasized (Stang, 2019). Players do enjoy influencing video games through play and being able to define their experience while

shifting the narrative, at least when these choices feel meaningful (Stang, 2019; Thue et al., 2011). When it comes to romance, however, agency becomes more complicated. While players enjoy control and having a say, limitations on players' agency imposed by granting more personality, identity, and agency to characters themselves can create a richer narrative experience for players. Players can often not agree on what is best when it comes to video game romance, due to their own interests, desires, and identities. Playersexuality is appealing to players for the choices it gives them, but set character sexualities provide realism and representation that can be important for players as well. Perhaps the solution to these issues lies in moving away from using romance as the primary method of inclusion, representing more identities in broader game content as seen in *Baldur's Gate 3*. In this model, players can see diverse identities while having a fuller range of expressions for themselves, potentially appeasing the desire for realism while giving players a chance to play their fantasy.

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