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PROGRAMMED TO LOVE: CHOICE, INCLUSIVITY, AND CONNECTION

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As games evolve, they have become platforms for facilitating deep emotional experiences, love included. From romance narratives in games such as the *Dragon Age* series and *Baldur's Gate 3* to the ways games represent diverse identities and relationships, the role of love is central in shaping player experience. This extends beyond in-game spaces to how we analyse, design, and also teach games. In this special issue of International Journal of Games and Social Impact, we explore the intersections of love and games showing how the emotional experiences shaped by design can be transformative and resonating.

The first article, *Designing Romance and the 'Playersexuality' Debate: Love, Romance, Identity, and Player Perceptions of Baldur's Gate 3 and the Dragon Age Series*, examines how the opportunity for players to pursue love and intimacy with richly developed characters offers more than a plot twist — it deepens the player's connection to the game. While many players enjoy the ability to choose their romantic partners freely, there is an emerging desire for more realistic, character-driven relationships that reflect the diversity of sexual identities. As the author notes, this tension between fantasy and realism speaks to a deeper desire: the wish to experience love not as a controlled, idealised fantasy but as something complex and meaningful that mirrors the unpredictable, nuanced nature of real-world relationships.

The idea of the player as a co-creator in shaping their own emotional experience is further explored in the second article, *Beyond the Screen: Exploring the Player's Role and Its*

Impact on Emotional Experiences in Video Games, where the player's role in the narrative is framed as an active participant in the creation of love stories within the game. By making choices that affect romantic relationships, friendships, and familial bonds, players weave their own love stories into the fabric of the game world. The emotional connections formed through these relationships can carry lasting weight, affecting how players view love in their own lives.

The third article, *I'd Rather Have Cake: Asexual Representation and Queer Designing of Games*, pushes the boundaries of love experience in games even more by highlighting the underrepresentation of asexual identities. The asexual experience, often sidelined in both mainstream and indie games, calls for more nuanced design approaches that go beyond the canon. By applying affect theory to game design, the authors invite developers to move beyond a limited framework of dramatic elements for representation and create games that allow players to experience love and emotional connection in ways that feel authentic to their lived experiences.

In a different context, the fourth article, *Gameful Pedagogy: Towards a Students' Bill of Rights*, extends this exploration of love into the realm of education, where design is used as a framework for the emotional well-being of students. By applying principles from game design, such as agency and emotional involvement, to the design of classrooms, the article suggests that education should be centered on the emotional needs of students. Here, love is not just a

metaphorical concept but a concrete aspect of the design process — one that fosters respect, empathy, and a sense of belonging.

Ultimately, love is the thread that ties these diverse fields together. Whether in the romantic relationships players forge in games, the representation of diverse identities, or the emotional care embedded in educational design, love remains at the heart of human, and player, experience.