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Parsing the Paramour—Part I: Player Perceptions of Sexualities in Western Role- Playing Games

Reed Devany , Reed Devany Writing Associates

Elizabeth Stringer , SMU Guildhall

This study considers how diverse sexualities were generally portrayed with players of five western role-playing games who participated in the romantic subplots of those games (n = 1001).

Role-playing games (RPGs) have offered generations of players engagement in strong storylines and character development.¹ From tabletop games like *Dungeons and Dragons* to modern playable

media and interactive technology, these outlets have offered players escape and self-discovery.² RPG videogames represent a massive market, which is projected to reach an estimated US\$98.72 billion in global annual revenue by 2027 (nearly 730% growth in market size since 2017).³ One of the many appealing features of these titles is the ability for the player character to “romance” nonplayer characters (NPCs).⁴ Romance in the context of video game RPGs involves mechanics through which the player character can sexually and/or emotionally engage with an NPC.⁴ Historically, romance options have skewed straight, leaving queer players desiring

more choices and improved representation in games.^{4,5} One obstacle to including more narrative content, and specifically, a more diverse pool of sexualities, is the high costs of video game narrative development.⁶ The practical application of this three-part article series is substantiation for broad sexuality narratives, reflecting expectations from both LGBTQ+ and heterosexual players.

Digital Object Identifier 10.1109/MC.2025.3643652
Date of current version: 27 March 2026

TABLE 1. Number of romanceable characters by game and sexuality, with count of characters aligned to the CNP in parentheses.

Game title	Heterosexual romances (CNP)	Homosexual romances (CNP)	Bi and/or pansexual romances (CNP)
<i>Mass Effect: Legendary Edition</i>	9 (7)	2 (0)	6 (2)
<i>Mass Effect: Andromeda</i>	3 (2)	2 (0)	5 (3)
<i>Dragon Age: Inquisition</i>	4 (3)	2 (2)	2 (1)
<i>Divinity: Original Sin II</i>	0 (0)	0 (0)	7 (6)
<i>Baldur's Gate 3</i>	0 (0)	0 (0)	9 (8)
Totals:	16 (12)	6 (2)	29 (20)

TABLE 2. Surveyed titles in this study broken down by the number of respondents who played them.

Game title	Number of respondents (n)	Confidence level	Margin of error (%)
<i>Dragon Age: Inquisition</i>	845	99%	5.69%
<i>Mass Effect: Legendary Edition</i>	771	99%	5.96%
<i>Mass Effect: Andromeda</i>	592	95%	5.17%
<i>Baldur's Gate 3</i>	495	95%	5.66%
<i>Divinity: Original Sin II</i>	367	90%	5.52%

This games user research (GUR) study investigated players' perceptions toward romantic subplot decisions (RSDs) in four western role-playing game (WRPG) franchises, *Mass Effect*, *Dragon Age*, *Divinity*, and *Baldur's Gate*. In the context of this research, "Western" is defined as having been developed in the United States or Europe (rather than Eastern regions, such as Japan, Korea, and China).⁷ Five WRPGs were chosen as the focal point for analysis: *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* (2021),^a *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) from BioWare and *Divinity: Original Sin II* (2017) and *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023) from Larian Studios. All these games

are AAA projects, meaning they are high-profile titles developed with a large budget and widely distributed.⁸ AAA games were chosen for this study over smaller titles due to their widespread player base and staying power in the pop culture zeitgeist.

The research presented here was influenced by critical analysis surrounding queer representation in games,^{5,9} "second self theory" from Sherry Turkle,¹⁰ and published findings into the changing perceptions of queer romances in RPGs,⁴ including work from Adams and Dym. Dym explores the burden of queer love outside the critical narrative path in BioWare games.⁵ While Adams uses the theories of compulsory sexuality from Rich¹¹ and charmed circles from Rubin¹² to expose the challenges of queer representation in RPGs.⁹ These findings were folded in with explorations into the

influence of computers on an individual's psychology and personal identity.¹⁰ Collectively, these works provided the groundwork for the study's investigation into players' perceptions of sexualities in WRPGs and the frequency with which individuals' sexualities influence their RSDs.

The GUR operationally considered the LGBTQ+ audience within the games space. In 2023, 7.2% of U.S. adults identified as LGBTQ+ (up from 3.5% in 2012), including 11.2% of millennials (birth years 1981–1996) and 19.7% of adult Gen-Z'ers (birth years 1997–2004).¹³ Seventeen percent of gamers identified as LGBTQ+ in 2024,¹⁴ and in 2020, research demonstrated that LGBTQ+ gamers are 25% more likely to own a video game console and 90% more likely to purchase a new video game console compared to straight gamers.¹⁵ These data support the idea that including the interests of the LGBTQ+ community market share represents a strategic business decision.

This study investigated whether LGBTQ+ players feel their sexuality lies on the "critical narrative path" (CNP) of gameplay. In the context of this research, CNP is measured by considering the amount of time spent between the player character and the romanceable NPC along each game's primary narrative (for example, does a romanceable character accompany the player character on gameplay missions?). Using this definition, the romanceable characters for the games studied were broken down by whether they were a CNP romance and what sexuality they were hardcoded to have (see Table 1).

In late August through September 2023, an 85-question survey (an anonymous Qualtrics XM link) was distributed across select online gaming communities (for example, Discord and subreddits). No personally identifiable information was collected from the 1,001 participants who completed the survey from start to finish, all of whom were at least 18 years old. A breakdown of participants by title played is displayed in Table 2, and a

^aThe "*Mass Effect: Legendary Edition*" is a re-release of the original trilogy of *Mass Effect* games released from 2007 to 2012. It and the trilogy are used interchangeably in this column.

breakdown of participants by reported sexuality is displayed in Table 3.

The survey's opening question on participant sexuality incorporated language from Stanford University and the Pride Study.¹⁶ Of the various question phrasings recommended by the Pride Study, the authors of this column used "How do you currently identify your sexual orientation" as it acknowledges the fluidity of sexuality at the time a participant takes the survey.¹⁶ The survey also made a minor addition to the question, including an additional option—"unlabeled." This was done to account for individuals who choose not to label their sexuality due to its changing nature and/or unwillingness to categorize themselves.¹⁷

Most questions in the title-specific sections were scored on a five-point Likert scale. The only two exceptions were multiple-choice questions asking the participants which games they played, and which romances they considered canon. Canon was defined for the participants as "I consider certain in-game choices as the 'official'/primary ones, regardless of alternating types of play"—an interpretation of a definition for "head!canon" [sic].¹⁸ If players did not select "strongly disagree" or "disagree" on this question, they were subsequently asked if their canon choices reflected their own sexuality and which romances they considered canon. The latter question was asked to determine how frequently participants deemed hard-coded homosexual relationships canon to study potential data patterns.

The two central hypotheses on the representation of diverse sexualities were 1) nonstraight players are more likely to believe their sexuality is not well represented in WRPGs, and 2) nonstraight players are more likely to believe their sexuality does not fit within the critical gameplay path of WRPGs.

Regression analysis of the data from the survey supported the first hypothesis across players of all five of the studied games (see Table 4), indicating the results are very statistically

significant. For the independent variable, the participant data was split between those who answered "straight" on the self-identifying sexual orientation question and those who did not. The dependent variable, representation of sexuality, was interval data from the five-point Likert scale questions that asked players how strongly they agreed or disagreed that their sexuality was well represented in the selected title they had played (strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, neither agree nor disagree = 3, agree = 4, strongly agree = 5). Since the coefficients were negative, on the dichotomous scale of straight to nonstraight, identifying as "nonstraight" was associated with believing one's sexuality was less well represented in WRPGs, thus supporting the hypothesis across all five games.

Regression analysis of the data from the survey partially supported the second hypothesis for some players of the five games (see Table 5), indicating the results are only statistically significant for one, *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* (see Figure 1). This dependent variable, a player's belief that their sexuality fits on the critical gameplay path, was interval data taken from the five-point Likert scale questions that asked players how strongly they agreed or disagreed that pursuing a romance option of their sexuality fit within the critical gameplay paths of the games they played (strongly disagree = 1, disagree = 2, neither agree nor disagree = 3, agree = 4, strongly

agree = 5). The coefficient for linear regression analysis on data from participants who had played *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* is negative. This supports the correlation in the hypothesis for "nonstraight" players of *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* believing their sexuality was less represented on the CNP.

However, in further post-hoc analysis, the chi-square analysis revealed statistically significant relationships between "nonstraight" players and the belief that their sexuality does not fit within the CNP for *Mass Effect: Andromeda* ($p = 0.036$) and *Baldur's Gate 3* ($p = 0.033$). The analysis also revealed a weaker statistically significant relationship for *Dragon Age: Inquisition*

TABLE 3. Self-identified sexual orientation of survey participants.

Sexual orientation	Total (n)
Straight or heterosexual	453
Gay, lesbian, or homosexual	117
Bisexual	220
Queer	47
Pansexual	50
Asexual	54
Question/unsure	30
Unlabeled	8
Other: [free-text field]	22
	1,001

TABLE 4. Linear regression across all titles comparing nonstraight and straight participants' feelings toward the representation of their sexuality in each game title.

Game title	β Coefficient	p-Value	Sample Size (n)
<i>Mass Effect: Legendary Edition</i>	-1.356986	0.0000*	771
<i>Mass Effect: Andromeda</i>	-0.5917775	0.0000*	592
<i>Dragon Age: Inquisition</i>	-0.5645514	0.0000*	854
<i>Divinity: Original Sin II</i>	-0.549997	0.0000*	367
<i>Baldur's Gate 3</i>	-0.1864599	0.0000*	495

* $p < 0.0001$.

TABLE 5. Linear regression across all titles comparing nonstraight and straight participants' beliefs that their sexuality exists on the CNP of gameplay in each game title.

Game title	β Coefficient	p-Value	Sample Size (n)
<i>Mass Effect: Legendary Edition</i>	-0.359633	0.0000*	771
<i>Mass Effect: Andromeda</i>		0.1153	592
<i>Dragon Age: Inquisition</i>		0.2253	854
<i>Divinity: Original Sin II</i>		0.7580	367
<i>Baldur's Gate 3</i>		0.2772	495

* $p < 0.0001$.



Figure 1. Squad of the SSV Normandy, *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* (2021). (Source: Electronic Arts.)



Figure 2. *Divinity: Original Sin II* splash screen with companion characters (2017). (Source: Larian Studios.)

($p = 0.064, p < 0.1$), but no statistically significant relationship for *Divinity: Original Sin II* ($p = 0.298$) (see [Figure 2](#)).

The findings that nonstraight players did not feel their sexuality was well represented across all five studied titles could be described as consistent with the previously outlined grounded critical analysis of romance in WRPGs,^{4,5,9} The data in this study could therefore demonstrate that the perception of sexual representation previously studied in BioWare games^{4,5,6} is also relevant to *Baldur's Gate 3*, the newest title included, where sexual expression and originality are more prevalent and celebrated.¹⁹ Some limitations in how this study's data was categorized, however, may have hidden deeper fissures across the titles and differing participant sexualities. For example, to find actionable data from the larger participant pool, asexual players are categorized as nonstraight alongside bisexual and homosexual players and may have felt stronger about the lack of representation than bisexual and homosexual players in the nonstraight category. [Table 6](#) demonstrates a post-hoc analysis that compares the lower averaged representation scores of asexual players compared to the greater nonstraight player population and the total study population. Finally, the authors acknowledge that this act of binary classification (straight and nonstraight), while done for statistical analysis purposes, strongly oversimplifies the complexity of the sexuality spectrum.

Since the game-specific findings were inconsistent when it came to the relationship between player sexuality and the perception of whether it lay on the CNP, the finding that nonstraight *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* players felt their sexuality did not exist on the CNP could be described as consistent with existing academic discourse around the subject in terms of the poor representation of queer romances in the original *Mass Effect* trilogy.^{5,9} *Mass Effect: Legendary*

TABLE 6. Average ratings for representation of sexuality in studied games, stratified by sexuality groups (asexual, nonstraight, all).

Game title	Asexual players	All nonstraight players	All players
<i>Mass Effect Legendary Edition</i>	2.28 (n = 45)	3.25 (n = 398)	3.90 (n = 771)
<i>Mass Effect: Andromeda</i>	2.61 (n = 28)	3.71 (n = 306)	3.99 (n = 592)
<i>Divinity: Original Sin</i>	2.53 (n = 15)	3.67 (n = 193)	3.93 (n = 367)
<i>Dragon Age: Origins</i>	2.72 (n = 50)	3.83 (n = 478)	4.06 (n = 845)
<i>Baldur's Gate 3</i>	2.44 (n = 27)	4.24 (n = 302)	4.31 (n = 495)

Edition comprises three games, only one of which has hardcoded homosexual characters (Samantha Traynor and Steve Cortez in *Mass Effect 3*), and both of these queer characters exist outside this GUR's measurement of CNP.

The further post-hoc findings for *Baldur's Gate 3*, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* identified a CNP relationship that cannot be fully described with the data collected. This may be due to the survey's definition of "critical path" and how study participants may have interpreted it for the game on their own, without being presented with the GUR measurement breakdowns used in the analysis of the data. Moreover, the difference in findings may also be the result of title-by-title variance in how romance is treated in each game. In *Baldur's Gate 3*, for instance, sex is effectively a critical gameplay mechanic, offering a diverse array of options and scenarios to the player, regardless of sexuality.²⁰ In *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, bisexual characters (many of whom are explicitly written that way) make up the plurality of available romances in a far more intimate setting than the *Mass Effect* original trilogy. And in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, Sera, the game's lone romanceable lesbian, is an active squad member compared to *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition*'s Samantha Traynor, who never leaves the ship for a significant period. Regardless of the unique reasons, while linear relationships in those three games were

not found, the presence of some significant relationships when analyzing noncategorized sexualities could imply that unforeseen associations exist. Furthermore, how romance was treated as a gameplay mechanic also provides perspective to how CNP in *Divinity: Original Sin II* became the outlier in this study. The romance scenes in the game are far less cinematic and detailed than in the other titles, and the lack of comparative immersive moments may affect players' perception. *Divinity* also has a unique mechanic where players can have as few as none or as many as three of the six potential companions in any given playthrough, distorting the value of each romanceable character on a playthrough-by-playthrough basis.

In this GUR, the analyses of games released over time showed that as discourse grew beyond the sexual binary of straight and "gay" with fluidity in the sexuality spectrum, game consumers expected to see their media reflect the same. Also seen in these findings, even as games continued to include additional representation of diverse sexualities, players acknowledged discrepancies. In this study, the majority of the 1,001 survey participants did not identify as straight, and this result is consistent with comparative findings that a higher percentage of gamers are LGBTQ+ when compared to the general population.^{13,14,15} Thus, game developers have an opportunity

to involve a substantial part of their audience when their identities are well-represented and fitted into the gameplay mechanics. **□**

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REED DEVANY is with Reed Devany Writing Associates. Contact him at reeddevany@gmail.com.

ELIZABETH STRINGER is a clinical professor and director of academics at SMU Guildhall, Dallas, TX 75275 USA. Contact her at estringer@mail.smu.edu.



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