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On the Importance of Queer Romances – Role-play as Exploration and Performance of Sexuality

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RPG analog game digital game queer role-play role-playing games romance sexuality

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This article investigates various kinds of analog and digital role-playing games (RPG) from the perspective of queer romance. We are interested in finding out how 'queer' appears in the composition of role-playing games through analysing players' explorations and performances, as well as the options for romance in these games. We will look into a variety of role-playing games as research material in this study, from non-digital play – such as traditional tabletop role-playing games to live action role-play, or larp – to single-player digital RPGs. We ask how queerness affects the options for romance, whether localised in an event or in the composition of a single character, and what kind of exploration it serves. Is queerness to be found in the romance mechanic, or crunch, of RPGs, or is it part of the fluff: the setting and character descriptions? This article's orientation is theoretical, and the main reference material here comes from RPG studies as well as queer game studies.

Introduction

I didn't design my character to be gay, but then it's never really a choice, and when I realized this I actually felt as if he'd come out to me, his creator. I was excited. (Rougeau 2015)

In 2014, a non-player character called Dorian Pavus was introduced in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014). Although this companion mage was not the first homosexual in a digital role-playing game (RPG), his introduction sparked considerable controversy on social media (Giant Bomb 2015; Grill 2014; Makuch 2014). For many, his presence marked a turning point for openly and 'legitimately' gay digital game characters. For instance, Kate Gray (2015) explains what the heartbreak felt like when her female avatar's 'boyfriend' in the game, Dorian, came out to her. Similarly, Mike Rougeau's (2015) player character Herald of Andraste turned out to be gay when he met Dorian, 'Mr. Right' for him, in the gameworld. The introduction of Dorian Pavus was a landmark moment in the history of digital role-playing games in the sense that his unapologetic gayness is disclosed to the player only when certain interactions have – or indeed, have not – taken place in the game. In other words, Dorian Pavus has not been marked as queer through representation, but through his (and the game player's) actions.

The case of Dorian Pavus demonstrates that digital non-player characters (NPCs) can have lives of their own, lives that does not necessarily comply with the goals and ambitions of the player character and/or the player. Pavus has also been considered worthy of attention in games research (e.g. Østby 2017; Pelurson 2018). What lies at the heart of his case is a clash between players' expectations and the game's character design – a clash that opens up interesting viewpoints to the inner life of avatars, and the possibilities for role-playing them. Another crucial context for approaching this clash is an analysis through social interaction. It seems that confronting these kinds of deep, unexpected experiences in digital games requires a level of maturity from players that is not always a given in a mainstream gamer culture characterised by misogyny and homophobia (see Condis 2015). It is rarer for non-digital RPG player characters to act in ways that are surprising or discordant with player expectation, but such game mechanics do exist; in *Monsterhearts* (2012), for example, players are not in control of the infatuations of their characters (see Sihvonen & Stenros 2019).

Figure 1. A screenshot from a fan-made video celebrating a romance between the player's elf character and Dorian Pavus from *Dragon Age: Inquisitio*n (El Doriango 2015).

This article takes the perspective of queer social interaction as a starting point to analyse how players of various kinds of role-playing games utilise the 'magic circle' of the game to explore romantic and amorous interactions, as well as questions of gender identity and sexuality. We also discuss instances where the game confounds its unsuspecting players, such as in the example above, by confronting them with unforeseen content. In this text, we ask how queerness appears in role-playing games: How does it affect the options for romance, is it localised in an event or the composition of a single character, what kind of exploration does it serve? Is queer to be found in the romance mechanic, or crunch, of RPGs, or is it part of the fluff: the setting and character descriptions (see Care Boss 2012)?

This article's orientation is theoretical, and the main reference material here comes from RPG studies as well as queer game studies. We will look into a variety of role-playing games as research material in this study, from non-digital play – such as traditional tabletop role-playing games to live action role-play, or larp – to the multiplicity of digital RPGs. As part of our analytic framework and theory-building we have derived inspiration particularly from Stephen Greer's (2013) work on the possibilities of 'playing queer', as well as Todd Harper's (2017) reflection on the retroactively gay protagonist in the *Mass Effect* universe. This analysis is not based on a systematic review of all possible RPGs containing queer elements; rather, we aim to build theory through certain interesting game examples, such as *Monsterhearts*, *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975), *Mellan himmel och hav* (2003), and the *Dragon Age* and the *Mass Effect* series. Our hope is that these observations will

have relevance beyond specific genre conventions and lead to interesting insights regarding games, social interaction, and romance in general. This article is part of a larger ongoing research project that documents and makes sense of queer role-playing games, role-playing, and the culture around them.

'Queer' in this article is used in a double meaning. It refers to subjects, mechanics, and representation inclusive of LGBTQ identities within games and game culture, and to ways of thinking that simultaneously destabilise and reimagine games and play. The former can be thought through queer as a noun or an adjective, and the latter through queer as a verb. In queer theory, 'queer' is mostly seen as a verb (Barker & Scheele 2016). It can serve as a building block for a framework through which it is possible to critically examine the infrastructure that channels the emergence of certain kinds of games, play styles, and players. A vital part of this framework is interrogating and challenging dichotomies that have for a long time structured how games are understood and interpreted (see Shaw & Ruberg 2017, ix–x). Games, play, and game studies can be imagined otherwise, and that process begins with investigations on how to 'queer' the structure of games.

Queering can be an act of, for instance, twisting, flipping, and undermining the conventions and normative boundaries that drive patterns of play (Clark 2017, 4). In our quest to study romances in role-playing games, we regard games as systems of pleasure, and play as activities that target between the lines, destabilising the conventions of social interaction. In this context, we define romance as amorous, erotic, or flirtatious interaction between game characters.

Queer theory is very much about interpretation and imagination. That is not enough for us. We cannot ignore 'queer' as a noun ("a bunch of queers") or an adjective ("queer community") either. We draw not only from queer theory, but also from game studies, a multidisciplinary field combining approaches from humanities, social sciences, and design research. We are interested in games, characters, mechanics, and narratives that have been identified as LGBTQ related. While queer theory is largely opposed to the permanence that 'identity' implies and prioritises acts of becoming, we cannot ignore play by and about characters and themes (self)identified as somehow queer. We think that this gap can be bridged if our work is thought of as merely a snapshot at a certain time. It is not only possible but also probable that what we have here identified as queer will be identified differently at a later time.

Therefore ‘queer romances’ can be understood as acts that question the heteronormative binary logic of game characters and the boundaries of their social interaction as well as the principles of role-play in many kinds of RPGs enabling queer play. We treat ‘queer’ as a method that is part of a scientific paradigm – queer game studies – that is necessarily intersectional and concerned with issues of access, visibility, subjecthood, agency, and voice (see Shaw & Ruberg 2017, xvii–xviii). Our ‘queer look’ at games is first cast at tabletop role-playing games, since this is the first context in which modern RPGs took form.

The slow rise of fluff in tabletop role-playing games

The origins of the contemporary genre of role-playing games can be traced to the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* in the US (TSR, 1974).[1] The early tabletop role-playing games had little room for romance of any kind. Indeed, the early role-playing games, *Dungeons & Dragons* certainly included, had very little of what would later be known as a *setting*: information about a fictional world, its inhabitants’ customs, practices, norms, and cultures in the first place (see Appelcline 2014, 19, 73). The published rulebooks, emerging from a tradition of miniature wargames, concentrated on rules, character classes, items such as weapons and magical artefacts, spells, and adversaries. These RPG rulebooks provided scarce resources for building relationships, interpersonal drama, or cultural exploration. However, while the rulebooks obviously give us some idea of the components and building blocks of tabletop games, they do not tell us how the actual play took place.

The kind of role-playing that was understood as exploration of a setting or a character, or a kind of dramatic slice-of-life play, was in the North American vernacular later referred to with the demeaning term *fluff*. It is the binary pair of *crunch*. Crunch refers to the rules and mechanics; fluff is the story-related atmospheric detail, background, setting, history, and culture. Designer Emily Care Boss (2012) has described how these terms are used: ‘One common approach to role-playing is to look at rules and mechanics as the skeleton of play, and “fluff” as the details occasionally handed out to keep the bones from sticking out. There is a dismissive quality to fluff.’ In her thesis on geek media and identity, Rachel Yung (2010, 77) defines fluff as ‘creative backstory of RPG characters’, although this definition is much too narrow for our purposes.

We consider the concept of fluff as a fruitful one, as it shifts focus from the structure of the game to the tapestry and atmosphere of play. Fluff is all those things that are unimportant to the system. This

is where we find in-character chats, the fashion worn, and any cultural colour that designers (and, in their praxis, the players) have chosen to include in their game. This is also where we often find gender, ethnicity, and appearance of the character – seemingly unimportant variations of the norm that is the basic character. It is tempting to describe this basic character as not infrequently a 'white able-bodied cisgender straight dude in his late 20s or early 30s', but in many games all this remains unspoken as even the categories and characteristics of characters are seen as fluff. However, our concept of fluff is not simply a restatement of the question of representation either. Fluff is not just about 'who is possible' in the game world, but, we argue, it is the difference between a procedural simulation on one hand, and a role-playing game where the fictional world comes alive on the other. Fluff is all those things that the system does not recognise as meaningful, but the players do. However, the fluff-crunch dichotomy is not a restatement of the friction between authorship and play either, since the designers create not only the crunch but the fluff as well.

In early tabletop role-playing games, cues for queer romance cannot be found in the rules or rulebooks – that is, the crunch of the game. Sexuality and romance of any kind were solidly situated in the realm of fluff. And since there was very little fluff, there was hardly any published LGBTQ content. Queer playing was certainly possible, but accounts of such play have not been found. Still, from Gary Alan Fine's (1983) account of play practices in the late 1970s we learn that, for example, sexual assault by player characters on non-player characters did happen, showing that players did move beyond the written rules and setting. Generally speaking, published tabletop role-play source books have a very heteronormative history, but subtle hints of queer play can be found. In the more recent editions of RPG source books, LGBTQ characters and themes are more visible and afforded, and the possibility of queer romance is present, although still often subdued.

Even so, we still argue that queer romances have been not only possible, but present in role-playing games from the beginning (see also Ruberg 2019). While direct evidence from play practices is missing, we can find the first mention of a lesbian romance in an early pioneer of creating a vivid and livable world through focusing on fluff. Linguist and author M.A.R. Barker's *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975) was a trailblazer in setting design and the first fully realised RPG world, *Tékumel*. The rulebook argues for developing coherent complexes for players to explore, and one of the examples is "The Tomb of Mnekshétra, the Lesbian Mistress of Queen Nayári of the Silken Thighs" (Barker 1975, 102).

In our earlier study of the history of queer representation in the rulebooks of tabletop role-playing games, we argued that prior to the late 1980s 'early role-playing games silenced queer sexualities completely' (Stenros & Sihvonen 2015), but in light of the discovery of this passage in Tékumel, we now see this conclusion is no longer accurate. A more nuanced reading we are proposing in this article is that queerness has existed in RPG texts from the beginning, but it took a decade for setting information (and fluff) to gain importance – and another decade for queerness to gain prominence in the settings:

Queers are possible in the fiction [of tabletop role-playing game settings] if the reader pays close attention to the choice of words. There have also been blatant, agenda driven uses of queers, both arguing that queers are an abomination, and ones proclaiming inclusivity and alternativity. More recently, the inclusions of queer sexualities have been more matter-of-fact, described without underlining – unless queerness has somehow been a key theme in the game setting. (Stenros & Sihvonen 2015.)

While romance, and queer romance specifically, is usually part of the fluff, that does not mean that it cannot be part of the crunch. Role-play game systems have had game mechanics for operations such as seduction. Rendering acts of flirtation, romance, and hooking up into a simple check of character attributes and some dice throws may not be very, well, romantic, but it does model some aspects of amorous interactions for the system. Seduction skill can be used, for example, to charm a guard and thus escape a brig.

Tabletop role-playing games where attraction, romance, and relationships are at the core of mechanics also exist, although they are quite rare. Emily Care Boss has created a trilogy of romance games – *Breaking the Ice* (2005), *Shooting the Moon* (2007), and *Under My Skin* (2009) – that are explicitly inclusive of queer romance. They are also part of the indie RPG movement that emphasised the importance of bespoke rules for each game with the credo 'system does matter' (Edwards 2004). The already mentioned example of Avery Alder's *Monsterhearts* is a game where the player is not in control of who their character is attracted to. In *Monsterhearts*, the game mechanics, and thus the crunch, can be characterised as queering (Sihvonen & Stenros 2019, 115–116).

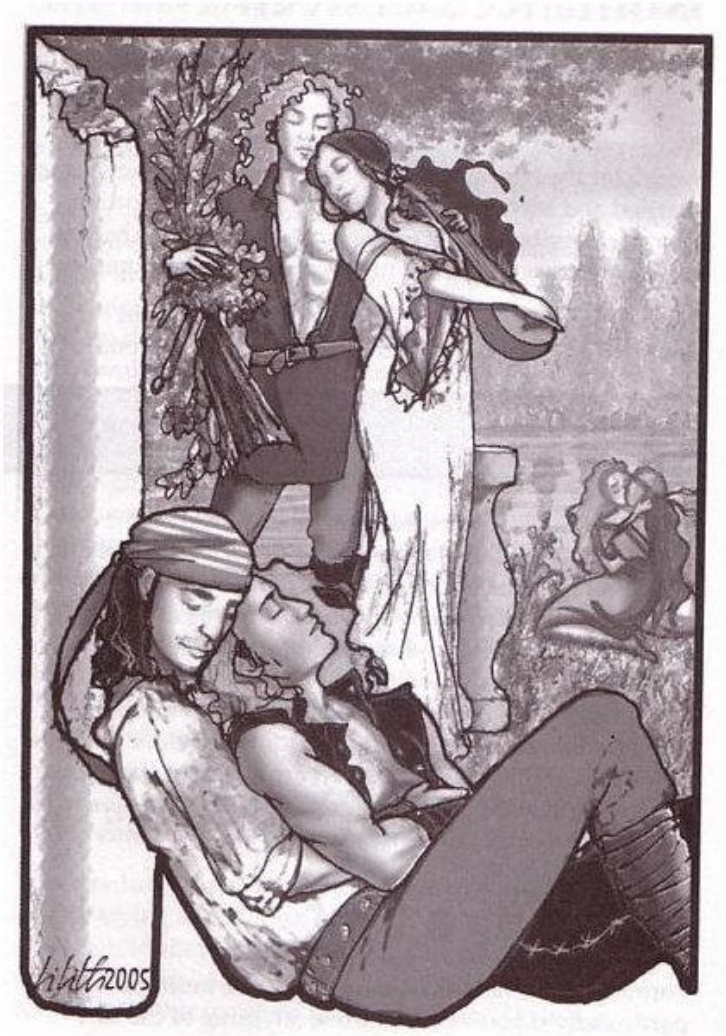

Figure 2. *Blue Rose* (2005) is a romantic fantasy tabletop role-playing game in which homosexual love was created before heterosexual love in the diegetic world.

To sum up, queer role-play has been possible since the beginning regardless of whether there were cues for it or not. LGBTQ fluff content has also existed in tabletop role-playing game source books since at least 1975. Fluff has been derided in the North American RPG culture, but over the years it has gained prominence in published source books – although the 'core books' usually concentrate more on crunch than fluff. Queer fluff, especially romantic queer fluff, is still relatively rare, but today some kinds of nods towards queer practices in RPGs are found in popular settings. Queer crunch exists but is rare. During the 1990s, queers and queer romances also started to become more commonplace in analog role-playing game settings. A culmination of this tendency was *Blue Rose* (2005), a romantic fantasy role-playing game where romances – gay, lesbian, and straight – took center stage (see Fig. 2).

Queer social interactions in live action role-play

Interpersonal relationships and social connections are a central element in larps. While physical surroundings and the actions they afford are undeniably important for larping, the presence of other players provides a particularly significant platform for meaningful actions. In certain larp traditions, such as the Nordic larp tradition on which we are focusing here, these social connections are seen as the most important part. They are valorised (e.g. Fatland & Wingård 1999), theorised (e.g. *inter-immersion*, see Pohjola 2004), and their creation is supported (e.g. Piancastelli 2019). Indeed, the characters and their personal connections receive much more attention than the creation of the setting, or elaborate rule systems in the design discourse around larp (e.g. Koljonen et al. 2019). While it is possible to view romance as a function of the setting, or as a result of mechanics, in larp it is most commonly seen as *interpersonal affordance*.

It is enlightening to reflect on this in relation to an early pioneer[2] of queer larp. *Mellan himmel och hav* (2003, transl. *Between Heaven and Sea*) was a queer feminist scifi utopia larp created by the Ars Amandi collective and inspired by the works of Ursula K. Le Guin. Through its fiction, the larp sought to make visible and question heteronormativity, expectations of monogamy, and the binary gender system. It was set in the far future on an alien planet and featured a human culture where there were two primary genders: morning people and evening people. Neither of these corresponded with contemporary ideas of masculinity or femininity, but were a new mixture created for the larp. New pronouns were also created for them. The core institution of the society was marriage, but a marriage was always between four people – two morning people and two evening people. From the point of view of players, they involved two male players and two female players, so that each player in a marriage would get to play a heterosexual relationship, a homosexual relationship, and a friendship. In addition, the society had a third gender. They would not marry, but acted as spiritual leaders for the community. (Gerge 2004; Tidbeck 2004; Stenros 2010.)

The narrative of this larp revolved around a marriage that would join together young adults from two neighbouring settlements. Sexuality, romance, and amorous interactions were at the core of the larp's theme, and its designers developed new gender-neutral sex mechanics to help players carry out amorous scenes in a meaningful and comfortable manner (see Wieslander 2004). This was revolutionary at the time. Previously, sex mechanics had not been a site of serious design, nor had there been attempts at infusing such interactions with meaning. The technique used in *Mellan himmel och hav* was called Ars Amandi, and it worked for straight and gay sex; it was agnostic towards the number of participants, it did not assume that one participant was active and the other one passive, and most importantly, it was not played for laughs (see Fig. 3) (see also Stenros 2013).

Figure 3. A demonstration of the Ars Amandi technique from the workshop that preceded the Danish larp Totem (2007). Photograph by Peter Munthe-Kaas.

In *Mellan himmel och hav*, both the mechanics and the setting – crunch and fluff – supported the portrayal of queer romances, foregrounding such themes as bisexuality and polygamy. However, the larp also went one step further and encouraged players to get comfortable with one another during two workshop weekends that preceded the actual larp play (multiple separate workshops were and are very uncommon). During the workshops, players participated in creating the world, developed their characters and the interpersonal relationships, and discussed the queer feminist ideology of the larp. Fostering interpersonal affordances was taken seriously; the participants thought of themselves as an ensemble, and other people in the larp scene half-jokingly called them a 'cult' (see Stenros 2010).

Mellan himmel och hav is a unique example of bespoke larp design, where queerness is embedded in the design and mechanics of play. It was exceptional at the time, and although there have been other larps that have followed in its footsteps and the sex mechanics developed for it have spread to other larps and larp traditions, such an inclusive approach to queer romances is still far from commonplace in live-action role-play.

In general, queer romances in larp have received very little scholarly attention. Our understanding of larp practices is largely based on player accounts and secondhand information sources, such as

post-play documentation, which presents challenges to research. For instance, cues for queer interaction can be detected in the source material of larps but there may be no evidence of such instances during play. On the other hand, as players are able to develop their characters relatively freely (at least in some traditions of larp), there may be queer aspects or attributes to the embodied characters that the persons organising or documenting the larp are not aware of. However, in the para-academic tradition surrounding Nordic larp, there are a few illuminating pieces we can draw from. Of particular interest in this regard is Eleanor Saitta and Sebastian F. K. Svegaard's (2019) chapter 'Designing for Queer and Trans Players':

While abuse and violence that recreate real-world oppression are often thought of first in this context [of challenges in designing for queer and trans players], romantic or erotic play is also of specific concern. It only occurs in relation to another player, and requires vulnerability from both players. When players can't find others to play with, or when there's an imbalance in the amount of vulnerability in the situation, play becomes less accessible. This happens for players who aren't conventionally pretty, for older women, and for minorities. Queer and trans players in particular often find themselves in a separate, disconnected larp, where they struggle to understand who is interested in play. (Saitta & Svegaard 2019, 175.)

In this text, Saitta & Svegaard discuss how queer experiences in fictional (or fictionalised historical) contexts are easily erased or rendered unintelligible, even by initiatives that are thought of as inclusive and queer-friendly by the designers. An example of such a tactic would be the removal of oppression, homophobia, and transphobia from the gameworld. While it is meant well, much of queer and trans history becomes nonsensical if such structures are removed during the design process. Similarly, gender-neutral casting, sometimes seen as a way to ensure that, for example, leadership positions do not default to male characters, or to introduce queer relationships organically (an existing relationship between two characters can be straight or queer based on the genders of the players cast in the roles) may seem inclusive at first glance, but it erases queer lived experience in the long run. Gender-neutral casting erases any specificity there can be in a queer (or straight) relationship on the level of the design. In such larps, every romance runs the risk of becoming interchangeable and non-specific, although obviously players can in practice queer any relationship.

Similarly, Saitta & Svegaard (2019) point out that difference is removed when straight players who portray queer relationships are not given support through the design. There are also asymmetric

power relations involved in players' choices of playing a queer relationship: A straight male player may be socially rewarded for his 'courage' to play a queer character, even if the portrayal is tone-deaf, whereas a queer player can be expected to tone down passion and desire in their performances so as not to elicit discomfort in non-queer players. Furthermore, since larp is embodied interaction between players, the body of the player cannot be ignored. Saitta & Svegaard write about trans bodies (see also Koski 2016), and how overt or subtle reactions of cisgender players' perceptions of such bodies influence romantic larp play:

The question of player reaction is complicated because the body of a trans player may not look like the body of their character. Creating a new history for a player's trans body within the fiction, often one that would carry its own violence, is both hard work and often painful. Because designers can rarely help here, many trans players choose to play cis characters. (Saitta & Svegaard 2019, 180.)

To conclude this section, larps with queer romance exist, but are often difficult to document. Sometimes such romances are initiated by players in accordance with the fictional world, or in a vacuum of no fictional support, or even in conflict with the fiction. Sometimes queer romances are a part of the intended design, supported by setting design, theme, character design, larp mechanics, workshops, and communication around larp. Examples of the latter, in the Nordic tradition following *Mellan himmel och hav*, include exploration of the coming of the HIV-AIDS epidemic to New York in *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011-, see Paisley 2016), and *Forbidden History* (2018, no written documentation exists yet), a stylised indulgence in the public, the private, and the occult in a privileged educational institution. Furthermore, in addition to these event-style larps, there is an emerging tradition of easy-to-set-up chamber larps. Larps touching on queer themes and romance can be found from collections such as *#Feminism* (Bushyager, Stark & Westerling, 2016), *Queer Gaymes* (Bryk & Granger, 2016), and *Prism: Larp Scenario Anthology Vol. 1: Queer* (Milewski & Wicher, 2018).

It is against this growing number of larps consciously created for queer and trans players that the importance of Saitta & Svegaard's piece (2019) becomes apparent. In a social form of expression, queer romance will emerge even if it is not encouraged, but if the further goal is to be inclusive of queer and trans players, conscious design work is required.

Daydreaming in single-player digital RPGs

In principle, role-play is a social activity where every player performing a role is seen to only make sense in the context of other players (a more general term for this is socio-dramatic play, see Burghardt 2005) and possibly a game master also engaged in the same activity. This is obvious in tabletop and larp, but also in digital role-playing such as massively multiplayer online role-playing games, play-by-post role-playing games, and other mediated social role-play events.

Research on multiplayer online games and play has dominated the field of game studies, and thus it is not surprising that also studies of queerness and games have largely focused on analyses of virtual worlds and mediated interactions between players (see Shaw & Ruberg 2017, xiv). On the other hand, play-by-post roleplaying, i.e. turn-based structured role-playing via an online platform, where the focus is on storytelling through prose (and possibly images), has only very recently garnered any scholarly attention (e.g. Dorey 2017; Stang 2017; Zalka 2019). Online multiplayer role-playing games have the most varied possibilities for queer romances, since they are able to bring together dispersed players with similar interests and have structures that enable the incorporation of player-created content. Among them, there is also a growing number of games that do provide cues for queer play.

However, in this article we concentrate on the kind of digital role-play that is distinct and restricted in order to get a grasp of how these games can be used for the players' explorative and performative purposes. Although there are some other forms of organised solo role-play, single-player digital role-playing games are the most widespread and successful form. Since they are private, small-scale, and customisable (up to a point), they are likely to act as safer environments for the kind of personal and intimate role-play that queer romance necessitates. Socio-dramatic play, and social play in general, is inherently limiting because every player needs to take other players into account, and adjust their character's behaviour and their own play style accordingly – some of the problems associated with these limitations were discussed in the previous chapter. Obviously, the player does not leave behind their cultural assumptions (see Ludic Hermeneutic Circle in Sicart 2009, 117–119) as they begin playing, but the experience can be solitary and as private as any digitally technology enabled activity can be today.

It is therefore important to note that single-player role-playing is a substantially different sub-category of role-play where the player performs the role only to themself and possibly a computer system. In single-player digital role-playing games, or SPDRPGs, the player usually has a player character that can be modified to the player's liking and that the player finds themself bonding with.

Encountering or gradually developing a romantic relationship between the player character and an AI-controlled non-player character in the gameworld can be an eye-opening performative experience, and an essential narrative path in the experiment of playing certain single-player RPGs.

BioWare is a Canadian game studio that has gained a reputation for creating single-player RPGs that allow for romantic and sexual same-sex situations to emerge within these complex artificial worlds. With its focus on exploring the possibilities of complex character design, non-normative sexual orientations, meaningful relationships, and other emotionally charged topics, it is not surprising that BioWare's games have been researched extensively over the past years (e.g. Dutton, Consalvo & Harper 2011; Hassan 2017; Jørgensen 2010; Voorhees et al. 2012). We regard especially its serial *Mass Effect* (*ME*) and *Dragon Age* (*DA*) franchises among the most interesting high-profile games that feature LGBTQ interaction options. In this section, we are going to use them as examples in our analysis of the conditions in which queer romances are possible in SPDRPGs.

Even though both romance (Kelly 2015; Waern 2011) and queerness (Condis 2015; Krobová et al. 2015) have been studied in relation to BioWare titles, the role-playing aspects of queer romances for a single player have not yet been fully investigated, in spite of their importance in these games. Both *ME* and *DA* have powerful romantic options that have garnered exceptional enthusiasm among game scholars (Greer 2013; Reiss 2014; Østby 2016; Schröder 2008). Romantic narratives in these games are fundamentally based on player agency, as every player can choose whether they want to engage in romance, which NPC to approach, and also, to some extent, how the romance will develop and end. In these games romance is an essential part of the gameplay mechanic (Waern 2011, 240) and thus the crunch for the player. In all of BioWare's games, queer content is primarily offered and activated through optional romantic relationships that the player character can pursue with non-player characters (Østby 2016; Krobová et al. 2015). According to David Gaider (2013), former lead writer at the studio, around a quarter of BioWare game players invoke same-sex romance options.

Dragon Age is situated in the magical world of Thedas, where the player gets involved in solving cultural and political issues in addition to fighting off evil and saving the world. Thedas is largely populated by human-resembling races, and their attitudes towards sexuality and gender are generally more liberal and experimental than in many other games, including *Mass Effect* (Østby 2016, 257–258). In *Dragon Age*, the romance options are presented to the player via their party

members, and they depend on the race, social status, and gender of the player character as well as the gender and orientation of the romanceable non-player character.

In *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009), there are four possible romantic interests for the player character, of which two allow for heterosexual relationships to emerge, and two result in bisexual relationships (Waern 2011). In *Dragon Age II* (BioWare, 2011), out of the four possible ones, the primary romantic option for a gay male player character is the mage Anders, with whom the romance is integral to the main narrative of the game (Krobová et al. 2015). In *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, romance options have doubled, and the associated narrative paths have been considerably redefined – as the element of surprise connected to its earlier described character Dorian Pavus demonstrates (Østby 2016, 255–256). Romance in each of these instalments can develop in complex and unpredictable ways.

Mass Effect consists of (so far) four single-player, sci-fi themed role-playing games that are also third-person shooters. Its central narrative, set in year 2183, revolves around the discovery of ancient alien technology that has enabled interstellar travel and the encountering of alien races. The customisable but pre-fixed player character of the game is Commander Shepard, who discovers a machine race called Reapers who could doom the entire galaxy into mass extinction. In the world of ME, the way the personal narrative path turns out for Shepard alters the player's game experience in considerable ways. This configuration begins with the player choosing some basic elements of Shepard's socio-cultural background and service history as well as his or her gender (Voorhees 2012, 265).

The main component of role-play in both *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* is a dialogue wheel, a menu-based system that the player uses to interact with her environment and NPCs and steer the progression of the game's narrative. Player choices also indirectly shape the gameworld, the player character, and the relationships between her/him and the NPCs. Out of these relationships, the options for romance are the most significant in terms of the gameplay and consecutive narrative content, and they are also essential in managing the chosen role and character of Shepard, thus allowing romance to become an essential part of crunch as well as fluff in these games. The weight of the decision on relationships is accentuated as the player can only be romantically involved with one NPC in each of the series' instalments (in a single play-through). Furthermore, the romantic options are structurally different as they feature varying lifecycles, and some are more tightly

woven into the narrative than others. In this way, the options for (queer) romance are also part of the crunch, or the game structure and rules, in both *DA* and *ME*.

Romantic partnerships may also extend beyond one instalment of the game to the next, if the player so wishes. For example, in *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare, 2010), none of the romantic partner options from the first game are in the spaceship's crew, so the player can choose to romance another character in the game, or to remain faithful to the first partner. In *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012), the player can revive either of these romances through a string of decisions, or (as a male Shepard) approach the male soldier Kaidan Alenko and have a homosexual relationship with him (see Krobová et al. 2015). In this way, the 'standard' straight white cisgender male John Shepard is also employed in queer play.

Figure 4. A screenshot from a fan-made video portraying the love story between Shepard and Kaidan Alenko (Hydronami 2012).

Todd Harper (2017) reports playing *ClosetShep*, a player interpretation where the male Shepard is a closeted gay man, who is finally able to open up romantically in the third game; for him, this was a plausible explanation as to why Shepard could only have a gay romance in the third installment of the series. His love interest, Kaidan Alenko, can also be read as a closeted gay character, since he had appeared in all previous *ME* games without being positioned as homosexual. Harper (2017, 127) explains: "I was retroactively explaining, in narrative form, a primarily mechanical innovation that only manifested in the final game of the series". The first two *Mass Effects* game were not built to examine what it feels like to be a closeted gay man and how losing oneself in one's work is a

way to cope with the feelings of isolation and loneliness that it entails. Yet this is what Harper found in his pretend play with the *Mass Effect* artefacts. The absence of romance in the first two parts became meaningful with the possibility of a romance later.

It is likely that the narrative decision-making as an RPG strategy engages the player emotionally in the game and in its characters' destinies, since it creates a sense of the player being responsible for their own gameworld. This increased emotional engagement can be achieved by featuring in-game decisions that have obvious and lasting consequences in a game or throughout the whole series (Waern 2011). In addition to focusing on the crunch that allows for queer play, there are many ways for the player to alter the fluff in these games in order to achieve queer romantic options. While *ClosetShep* is an example of post-play narrative modding (see Layne & Blackmon 2013), many single-player games also encourage the production and distribution of user-created modifications through which queer romance can be attainable in surprising and interesting ways.

For instance, Shepard's gender can be changed without touching any of the other attributes in the save game mode using the simplest save game editing, thus making it possible for the player character to initiate a romance with another crew member outside of their available options. Save game editing has apparently been quite popular with players wanting to experience romantic relationships normally excluded from their player character's gender (see Okogawa 2011, sections [10–11]). Fan forums and modding sites on the internet abound with aesthetic fluff mods that alter the appearances and textures of game characters as well as change the settings and levels of play. Another interesting way of modding single-player digital RPGs is the creation and maintenance of NPCs and their narrative paths that differ from the original game. Changing the characters and their surroundings in SPDRPGs is part of modifying the fluff of these games, whereas reconfiguring game code to allow for queer romances that actually have an effect on the gameplay itself is part of the crunch and thus, in many ways, more difficult (see Sihvonen 2019).

As we have seen in this brief overview, both of these modification styles can be an important part of the experience of playing single-player digital RPGs. Single-playing role-playing, when played without a digital game artefact, is akin to daydreaming or solitary play with toys. The digital single-player game provides a narrative context, a responsive system, and the kind of curated focus that can be absent in the more baroque and digressive social role-playing games. This brings about meaningful structure to the daydreaming, but also limits play, thus creating a demand for modding. In social role-playing, we negotiate with other people. In digital single-player role-playing games

we cannot negotiate, but need to stick within the possibilities afforded by the game artefact – or tamper with the artefact directly. Single-player digital games are thus private, focused, and restrictive while also providing the player with possibilities for experimentation, innovation, and self-discovery.

Conclusions

We can find queer romance in all kinds of role-playing games, be they digital or non-digital, social or solitary. The earliest cues for queer romance in a commercial role-playing game can be found in the mid-1970s. Player-initiated queer romances are harder to find than cues created by designers, since play is ephemeral, and role-playing game documentation is scarce. While evidence of queer romance in role-playing games is plentiful, the systemic game artefact, be it digital or non-digital, can be limiting by its very nature. The worlds of *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* are places where the players can, within strict but expanding boundaries, 'do' gender in the sense Judith Butler (1990) has talked about performance. Yet, while the BioWare games offer possibilities for playing gay, lesbian, and bisexual romances, it is obvious that there is not much proprietary queer content available to play with – and even modding the system is unable to transcend it.

Tabletop role-playing games and larps are more co-creative, and thus incorporating queer romance is easier – provided that fellow players are open to such ideas. However, since these games are social, playing a romance requires more than one person who is willing to commit to the performance. As Saitta and Svegaard (2019) argue relating to larp, existing social structures and norms may prevent queer romances from emerging in practice, even if the design does provide a space for it, if such choices are not actively encouraged and supported by the design.

In this article we have woven together ideas and insights from different kinds of role-playing games. While these games are different, and indeed the methods in which we have interrogated them are also necessarily different, it is our hope that with the duals connecting threads of role-play and queer romance enable us to say something about perfoming amorous interactions as fictional selves and acting 'as if' someone else in shared storyworlds.

Players seeking to queer role-playing games are operating within the local social norms that are constructed knowingly and unknowingly with co-players. They operate within the socially upheld game rules that usually draw from an explicit rule set, and in digital games they also operate within the laws of the code in their software (which can be modded). Tabletop, larp, and single-player

digital RPGs all have different configurations of these aspects. Traditionally, tabletop role-playing games are most bound by the published source books that lay the foundation for the shared world. Larps are often not based on published rule systems, but can have bespoke systems. Yet larps usually feature a larger player base, which means that the social norms are harder to negotiate. In single-player digital RPGs there are no co-players, but the digital artefact comes with hard limits.

Queer practices, or even identities, do not boil down to just romance. The queer is in the gap between the cues provided by the artefact and the player's response (see Sihvonen & Stenros 2018). It is in the invitations to play, to extrapolate, and to engage in transgressive readings. In the fluff of various kinds of RPGs, we find both explicit cues for queering and vague hints that can encourage queer readings and practices. While a queer reading certainly can be constructed with very little support in the text, having such support can be extremely meaningful as the opening quote of this article shows. Furthermore, if we consider the fact that 24 percent of the players of BioWare's games have chosen to engage same-sex romance options (Gaider 2013), we can conclude that it is not only the queer-identified players looking for LGBTQ representation that are significant – it is also the implicit and explicit affordances of these single-player RPGs that allow for all kinds of queer deeds and performances to emerge in real life, on private screens, and in various online contexts.

Even if there are no cues for queer romance, queer play is obviously still possible. However, cues for queer play make it not just possible, but likely and practical. And here we need to return to our dual meaning of 'queer'. In a sense, queering role-playing games is best when there are few or no cues present. That is when we can truly twist, flip, and undermine the conventions and norms. Can any mechanic already included in a game ever be 'queer' in this sense? Even if it is in the doing of these mechanics that queering happens, is the player only reconstructing something that is already in the text (i.e. the rule system)? However, whereas queer readings go against the grain of the text, in queer social play the queering can happen either in relation to larger norms and conventions, or against the local conventions of the (sometimes very) small group of co-players. Queer (adjective) content is still transgressive in many game cultures at the time of writing, even if it is only re-presenting something someone else imagined.

In *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*, queer romances are avoidable, as the player needs to opt in to participate in them. Queer, or LGBTQ, play is not thrust upon all players. Yet, when queer romance is in the crunch, in the system of the game, it becomes unavoidable, like in *Monsterhearts* or *Mellan*

himmel och hav. The history of tabletop role-playing game source books and the slowness in starting to discuss setting and culture show that romance of any kind has been considered peripheral. Thus, it is hardly surprising that moving not only romance, but queer romance into the centre of a game is a rare act, and an act we argue is queer, at least at the time of writing. Games with queer crunch are queer in the sense that they disrupt norms, make alternatives visible, and confront players' expectations. Games with opt-in queer fluff tend to have heteronormative and sexist baselines, but they are queer in the sense that they are fluid, offering the player the possibility to decide how they want to do or perform their gender and sexuality on that day. We need queering to see and imagine the romantic possibilities that lie beyond the horizon or in the shadows. Even so, in systems of shared storytelling it is not enough to do those acts alone; they need to be visible and legible enough for others to recognise them. And for this we need both crunch and fluff to include cues for queer play.

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Notes

[1]‘Role-playing game’ (or RPG) as a term has multiple meanings. The term is used to refer to commercial game types (such as tabletop role-playing games) and to genres of digital games (single player digital role-playing games). While these types have similarities, such as certain game mechanics, an importance of game characters, as well as historical similarities, they are nonetheless often treated as separate. Our use of ’role-playing game’ aligns with its use in game studies (e.g. Zagal & Deterding 2018), where the term is seen as an umbrella for games and playing styles that have been called role-playing games at some time, tracing the genealogy of the term in various historical and cultural contexts, and trying to take its variations and specifications into account regardless whether they are digital or non-digital, or commercial or non-commercial.

[2] With clearly productised role-playing games, be they tabletop RPG handbooks or published single player digital RPGs, it is possible to track down starting-points and ‘firsts’. With larps that are ephemeral by nature and rarely published in any form, such claims would be much more contested.