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# You can Be Anyone; but there are Limits. A Gendered Reading of Sexuality and Player Avatar Identification in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*

Mohamed S. Hassan

## Abstract

*Dragon Age: Inquisition's* (2014) release opened a new world of character creation for the single-player RPG genre. Upon release, it allowed the player an extensive amount of customization. In addition to the typical variety of choices associated with hairstyle and color, face structure, tattoos, eye color, scarring, etc. the game also provides in-game unique sexuality quest lines that highlight the spectrum of sexual choices, race-defined features, different class options, and body-positive representations, which the player could project onto their avatar. However, in a game heralded as groundbreaking for representation, the creators fail to acknowledge the non-binary gender expressions of their players, instead, forcing the player to choose between the traditional male and female characters. This paper seeks to explore the different ways in which *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (DAI) purports to incorporate modern notions of representation in the sphere of gender and sexuality but fail to do so, instead, reinforcing traditional binary representations of gender and sexuality informed by racial and religious assumptions.

**Keywords:** *Dragon Age Inquisition*; Gender; Sexuality; Race; Religion; Fantasy; Player Avatar Identification, gameenvironments

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## Introduction

The magic circle (Huizinga 1955) posits the separation of the digital or virtual video game world from the reality of the player engaged in play by removing the player





However, many of these game worlds continued to perpetuate the same assumption: that character could be only male or female, masculine or feminine. Further, *DAI* and other games in general fall into the trap of homogenizing sexuality and gender, and commodifying the lesbian, gay and bisexual non-playable characters based on stereotypes. This further alienates and marginalizes these demographic communities that turn to these games not only for player enjoyment but also because of targeted advertising that promises LGBTQIA+<sup>iv</sup> representation only to be disappointed.

## Video Game Avatar and Self-Creation

In this virtual medium, hundreds of millions of players engage with novel scripts, resulting in them participating in roles and narratives that they might not have direct and personal experiences with in their everyday real-world.<sup>v</sup> Video games thus continue to be fruitful arenas for academic discourses on the interactions of a number of identity creating vectors (Zagal and Bruckman 2008). These interactions are mediated in several ways. First, the player constructs and projects their avatar into the massive game world. As Zach Waggoner (2009) argues, the avatar acts as a digital experient, taking the place of the player who cannot physically experience the world of the video game. The avatar thus is an extension of the player in many ways. The creation of the avatar, a sometimes time-consuming task in and of itself, transgresses the boundary between reality and digital worlds. Because of the pivotal importance of avatar-player identification, "video game players usually spent months or even years to develop his/her avatar (Li, Liau and Khoo 2012, 261). For one, especially for games such as *Skyrim* (2011), *World of Warcraft* (2004), *Neverwinter Nights* (2002), etc., the player might devote hours to constructing the right appearance of their avatar, re-rolling stats, selecting skill trees, and writing a

character biography for all to witness in the game world creating and projecting the player's likeness into the virtual space helps facilitate a greater identification between the player and their avatar; the player becomes much more connected and invested in an avatar that they see themselves in than a generic, uncustomizable avatar. Secondly, the character's avatar does not disconnect from the player's real-world life. Rather, the player engages in continuous identity projection and formation within the game world. The player's gender, sexuality, religion, race, and class are but some of the few identity markers which influence their interaction with other real-world players in the game as well as determining the player's success in these hyper-social digital worlds (Waggoner 2009, Cohen 2001).

To succeed and even exist in these worlds, the player must often cultivate in-game relationships with other player avatars through roleplaying, becoming a part of close-knit communities of like-minded and skilled Player Characters (PCs). Players engage in the creation of rich content for their game worlds through such items as community-created modifications (mods) that add depth to multiple storylines, and allows players to demonstrate their real-world technical abilities, as well as dedicated forums that act as repositories of players' sometimes encyclopedic knowledge of the video game world, history, and lore. These kinds of extensions beyond and between the virtual and real allow for the players' real-world identities, skills and knowledges to shine through amongst their fellow gamers, which translates into a form of cultural capital that the player utilizes in the game world and in relation to other players to establish their place and expertise (Krzywinska 2006). Because most online game worlds and single player games which require avatars to function begin with requiring the creation of an avatar players draw from their personal identity in deploying their likeness into an interactive world. The player becomes invested not only in the game-delineated roles of the avatar (i.e. selecting the role of a paladin or

mage), but in their ability to select such roles that appropriate their real-world personalities. In the creation of avatars, Robert Dunn shows that, “people use avatars as a means of self-presentation in a virtual world” (2012, 105). Such presentation, however, is predicated upon players’ identification with their and society’s gender role constructs and personality types along the introvert and extrovert spectrums. In general, players tend to conform to the idealized reflection and presentation of themselves into the game world, to their gaming companions and to the scripts of the game. They continually present their true identities through these forums, establishing themselves as experts within the game worlds that they occupy.

### **Religion, Gender, Sexuality and the Player Avatar**

After spending hours crafting the perfect avatar manifestation of the player, the player then immerses themselves, vis-a-vie their avatar, into the world of Dragon Age. They know that the game offers options for romances that they can pursue and that every game determined narrative responses to another character could alter the options of quest-lines, eventually altering the game in a number of ways. How the player relates to or identifies with their avatar remains a contested topic of research. Some scholars declare that the time spent on creating and cultivating an avatar demonstrates that the player must identify to a high degree with the experience of the avatar in the game. For instance, in “My Avatar, My Self,” Zach Waggoner (2009) suggests that for the gamers who participated in his study, “real-world identities heavily and consciously influenced the decisions made for their avatars both during the initial creation of the avatar and throughout their gameplay.” He continues, emphasizing the player’s identity as a hardcore gamer: “neither of these hardcore gamers saw their avatar as a distinct, separate identity, instead, Vishnu and Shiva [participants in his study] admitted that the predilections of their real-world identities



often determined the diegetic choices of their avatar,” (Waggoner 2009, 158). One such category of association, observable from how BioWare’s *DAI*’s fan base responded to their romance options announcements, most certainly involves sexual interests.

At the same time, one must consider that the player autonomously engages with the avatar on their screen, free of external influences of social pressures, other’s perceptions of them and thus, are allowed to present their true or ideal internal longings and interests. The question, returns to Huizinga’s assertion of the separateness of what the player is engaging in, play, and their real-world experiences. In their engagement with the virtual world, the play-world of Thedas in *DAI*, it appears that the player’s projection of their identities onto their avatars subjectively experience their character’s realities, breaking the notion of separation that Huizinga argues for in “Homo Ludens” (1955). Rather, with the advances in gameplay, immersion and customization, the virtual world and the players’ real world collapse into each other with the player projecting their image through the screen, onto the avatar, resulting in a mirroring of their identities through the choices enacted in the game world. Eugene Fink, Ute Saine, and Thomas Saine argues that “playing is a real mode of behavior, which contains, so to speak, a mirror image derived from behavior in the real world” (Fink, Saine and Saine 1968, 27). The avatar acts as the virtual embodiment of the player, the mirror image of the player through which the player experiences the consequences of their choices in the game world. For many, the online avatar might even be the purest projection of the individual’s self-identity, allowing the individual to express aspects of their identity that they might not be able to express openly to their real-world interactions (Barg, McKenna and Fitzsimons 2002, 33-35).<sup>vi</sup>



The religions in video games do not exist in the video game world for solely aesthetic reasons or fantastical elements. Religions in video games function to engage and render visible and familiar the digitally crafted world in respect to the textual and symbolic religious capital already possessed by its players. Whether the player is a religious adherent, spiritualist or atheist, the video game world and developers appropriates and deploys common intertextual links to the real world that the player will find, either immediately or after some reflection, familiar and even personally relevant (Fatu-Tutoveanu and Pintilescu 2012, 190). Thus, to understand better the role of religion as deployed within the game world and manifests in the sexuality options made available to the player’s avatar, I posit that the magic circle remains extremely porous. The player might not worship the gods of Skyrim or Thedas, or the Sword Coast as their personal religion (though their avatars might), but, the player can find familiar reverberations with their real-world religions. Fink, Saine and Saine (1968, 27) would label the linkage, “a real reflection,” describing the deities that they player knows in their own historical milieu from which they draw connections between the social, political, and religious landscapes of the game world. Furthermore, with the influence of religion, it is evident that the romanceable characters with whom the player’s avatar can spark a love story depends on the character’s religious affiliations, tied to the real-world religious definitions of gender. Cameron Mark Love argues that “when a game depicts religious aspects that are similar to real-life religions by the use of catchphrases, iconography, ideology, beliefs and/or practices, and intertextual dialogue is opened that invites the gamer to consider what is being stated or implied by the existing religious practice, whether the story of the game is directly related to the intertexts or not” (Love 2010, 196). In the form of gender and sexual limitations, a clear connection manifests. BioWare’s announcement of romance options evidences just how religion limits their character’s sexual partner options. For instance, Cassandra’s devotion to the Divine



As a member of the hegemonic group, Cullen embodies the idealized and dominant definitions of manhood of Thedas, a powerful, military manhood. The game, as I will show, through such successive missteps, reinforces many notions of gender which feminist and queer theorists long fought to undo in promoting a more egalitarian view of gender and sexuality.

### **The Realness of Fantasy: Fantasy and Reality Collide**

How then does the player participate in this world, and more so, why? What mediates this feedback relationship between the virtual and the real world mediated? I look to T. W. Malone and Mark R. Lepper's (1987) and Michele Dickey's (2007) deployment of fantasy as a component of interactivity and one of the most important aspects of video games, whether learning software of immersive adventures such as the MMOs and RPGs that players are all familiar with. For Malone and Lepper (1987), fantasy functions endogenously, developers construct fantasy in relation to a skill held or learned by the player. To take this reasoning a step further, "in fantasy, each of us can vicariously experience the satisfactions of power, success, fame, and/or fortune and can master situations that would baffle or be unbelievable to us in real life" (Malone and Lepper 1987, 241). In this case, BioWare meditates on the fantasy of sexual romances which, Fink, Saine and Saine (1968) argue exists ontically between the player and the avatar, providing an alternate route for experiential connection between the in-game occurrences and the real-world. The player has the ability to play through various romance options with a diverse set of romance interests who possess different qualities of masculinity, femininity, gender expression and sexual drives. What happens when fantasy and real-life collides or deploy real life symbolisms in the process of reconstructing narratives around them as video games so often do? Fantasy might "fulfill emotional needs when they

provide imaginary characters with whom the individual can identify,” and most often, “people’s enjoyment of particular fantasies will differ as a function of their own characteristics and values” (Malone and Lepper 1987, 241). This contention becomes even more prominent if the player strongly identifies with a religion such as Catholicism and draws a direct emotional connection to the aims of the Chantry (*Dragon Age’s* monotheistic branch of religion mimicking the structure and authority of the Catholic Church). It could also be problematic for those who are opposed to consenting homosexual relationships or gender queerness as embodied by some characters in *Dragon Age*; they might have a hard time accepting some plot narratives/quest lines. The cognitive dimension of fantasy foregrounds Fink, Saine and Saine’s assertion of the necessity of the play world’s “illusions” grounding in real world naturally occurring components (Fink, Saine and Saine 1968, 28). The game offers and draws on forms of metaphor that entice the player towards their own self-reflexive utilization of common knowledge of information that is pertinent to their current quest line or dialogue so as to further propel the importance of shared semiotics between the real and digital worlds. Therefore, the player, knowing Cassandra’s religious affiliations, will outright know that she would never be interested in a homosexual relationship, thus, limiting the possibilities of romances within the game.

For some, “fantasy in gaming can be understood as the individualized psychological state, which is satisfied with certain gaming situations and/or events being evoked by identifying in the game world” (Choi and Baek, 2013, 83). Choi and Baek (2013, 91) identify many aspects of fantasy that contribute to the cross-identification between player and avatar: “fantasy plays a critical factor in enhancing intrinsic motivation, the proposed components of fantasy such as identification, imagination, analogy and satisfaction,” all contribute to the cultivation of cross-world representation of the

player and avatar. As one such stimulus that facilitates the gamer’s immersion and continued ‘return’ to the fantasy world, religion, enables the creation of rich fantasy lore which develops certain character themes that the player begins to identify with over time. It is through this construction of fantasy that the player becomes invested in the creation, development, progression, and consequences of their choices in the game world. They continuously return to it in order to verify whether their moral choices line up with their self-invested moral compass, which may or may not be informed by religious adherence. Religiously driven plots and quest lines help to motivate the user to immerse themselves in the game world to a far greater degree than would games that do not engage the user in these rich environments of divinity, religious devotion, and lore. Nathaniel Hobbes, quoted by Mark C. Love, in discussions about role-playing games suggests that the divide between real-world religions and those of the digital game world is very thin. For many playing most types of video games, it is “obvious that the game creators are parodying, criticizing, or supporting real-world religions” (Hobbes, cited in Love 2010, 196). The ways in which developers approach gender and sexuality and subsequently, possible romance lines, demonstrates just how thoroughly these real-world ideologies influence the game world. Often this parody might be meaningless, and offer no tangible or obvious contribution to the game other than ‘being there,’ but in most cases, the parody offers extensive integrity to the game world and thus, player experience.

### **Dragon Age: A Case Study**

I now turn to a more focused discussion of the romance options presented in Dragon Age. I look first at the initial moves to implement representation of same-sex marginalized communities and the responses to it in *Dragon Age 2* (2011) and then





the game companions responses to the avatar due to dialogue choices involving demonstrating romantic interest, religious adherences, racial leanings, or gendered presentations.

In order to assuage author bias, I scoured BioWare’s official fan-forums, New BioWare Social Network Fan Forum and The BioWare Forum, for a qualitative sample of gamers who relate experiences with and thoughts about religion, gender, sexuality and race in the game world. In scouring the forums, I utilized generic search terms to find players whose posts involved discussions of “gender,” “sexuality,” “sex,” “romances,” “race,” “religion,” “monotheism,” and “polytheism,” thus avoiding the possibility of self-selecting out posts that did not speak to more specific identity markers within each category (i.e. Christian or pagan, or Gay or Lesbian). While the author did not cherry-pick the user responses on the forums, he did select those which best provided a thorough opinion about the categories above. With this in mind, I now turn to a case study of *DAI*’s romance options.

### **BioWare, Diversity, and Demographic responses to Romances**

The game developers of the Dragon Age series continually push the boundaries of what their target demographics might be comfortable with. BioWare upset their player base in 2011 with the release of *Dragon Age 2*, which for the first time in the game’s history provided for a same-sex love scene where, if the player’s avatar were male, he could pursue a same-sex relationship with Anders, the game’s troubled mage character.<sup>vii</sup> This inclusivity garnered much ire from the game’s traditional base of straight male gamers in a post on BioWare’s forum by user Bastal (2011) entitled, “BioWare Neglected their Main Demographic: The Straight Male Gamer.”<sup>viii</sup> The post elicited many positive posts from supporters of BioWare’s move to be more inclusive but also revealed that many more of its traditional player base appeared dissatisfied

with the developer’s choice. In the post, Bastal bemoans BioWare’s move to include more diverse characters in their games:

“In every previous BioWare game, I always felt that almost every companion in the game was designed for the male gamer in mind. Every female love interest was always written as a male friend type support character. In Dragon Age 2, I felt like most of the companions were designed to appeal to other groups foremost, Anders and Fenris for gays and Aveline for women given the lack of strong women in games, and that for the straight male gamer, a secondary concern. It makes things very awkward when your male companions keep making passes at you. The fact that a “No Homosexuality” option, which could have been easily implemented, is omitted just proves my point. I know there are some straight male gamers out there who did not mind it at and I respect that.” (Bastal 2011)

The “no homosexuality” option that Bastal so longs for assumes that homosexuality presents the option to begin with – a switch to be flipped on and off. Implementing a ‘no homosexuality’ switch transgresses on the developers hope to facilitate more realistic representations between the real world and the virtual world of Thedas. To implement such a switch would provide a distorted image of the real world, a projection wholly devoid of any realistic grounding. This would also alienate a number of players who feel that to provide such switch would suggest that sexual orientation was a choice subject to erasure. It also highlights Bastal’s dismissive privilege, which amount to similar responses that LGBTQ+ individuals face at some point, where Bastal states, “I can accept it as long as it’s not in my face.” This type of logic most likely mirrors Basalt’s real-world identity in which he is probably not exposed to LGBT+ individuals with whom he might engage with on a daily basis. However, even if he does not know any, homosexuals would still exist.

BioWare’s response amounted to a dismissal and repudiation of Bastal’s blatant

homophobia, eventually chastising Bastal for speaking from this position of privilege, a privilege that, up until now found reinforcement in video games that continued to perpetuate a heteronormative game worldview. BioWare developer David Galder states in response to the post made by BioWare forum user Bastal:

“And if there is any doubt why such an option might be met with hostility, it has to do with privilege. You can write it off as ‘political correctness’ if you wish, but the truth is that privilege always lies with the majority. They’re so used to being catered to that they see the lack of catering as an imbalance. They don’t see anything wrong with having things set up to suit them, what’s everyone’s fuss all about? That’s the way it should be, and anyone else should be used to not getting what they want.” (Bastal 2011)

This direct rejection of Bastal’s complaints provided hope and possible insight into BioWare’s move towards more gender egalitarian views on his demographics and a critique of Bastal’s apparent clinging to hegemonic masculinity and his place within the majority. For instance, Galder begins his response to Bastal by pointing out that Bastal’s claim that he has a right to play without the game’s sexual inclusion not infringe on his rights as a gamer should also be equally applied to everyone:

“the ‘right’ of anyone with regards to a game are murky at best, but anyone who takes that stance should apply it equally to both the minority as well as the majority. The majority has no inherent ‘right’ to get more options than anyone else.”<sup>ix</sup>

In addition, while the move (in addition to many other logistical issues of development) might have hampered sales figures (1.67 million copies sold globally for *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) compared to 0.83 million copies sold globally for the sequel *Dragon Age 2*). Highlighting Bastal’s privilege and refusing to reinforce it amounts to a first step towards recognizing the sources of patriarchy, hegemony and

gender and sexual inequalities (McIntosh 1988) and dismantling it. This project extends well beyond the screen and the real-world as developers aim to adopt a universal egalitarian principle into their game worlds.

While other factors mitigated the below-average performance of the anticipated sequel, many see the decrease in sales figures as at least somewhat mitigated by the choice of BioWare developers to move towards LGB inclusion and representation. By alienating many of their traditional bases of heteronormative white males who demanded that these heteronormative masculine spaces of video games remain untainted by diversity, though, BioWare opened up a space for greater inclusivity and representation that did not simply pander to minority groups (Shaw 2011). The few representative and inclusive romance options of *DA2* soon multiplied with the release of *Dragon Age Inquisition*. Instead of cultivating a world that simply provides token representatives for 'lesbians,' 'bisexuals,' or 'gays' and advertising to these niche markets, the game developers constructed worlds in which the companion's sexual orientation included real-world narratives with extensive life histories and tangible emotional struggles. The player, looking for representation would certainly connect with one of the many romance options.

### **Romancing the Inquisition: BioWare Increases LGB Visibility**

*Dragon Age Inquisition* drastically increased the available sexual, religious, gender and religious storylines available to the player's avatar. Instead of only one LGB love option, the companions of the player's hero-avatar of the game presented a plethora of sexual options for the player to pursue. Their avatar could choose from bi-sexual female characters such as the astute bureaucrat, Josephine Montilyet or to a hyper-masculine bisexual Qunari (a race option), Iron Bull. From homosexual to bisexual to heterosexual, the game allowed for multiple options between the sexual object

spectrums. BioWare’s announcement allowed players to construct their characters ahead of time if they wanted to ensure that their avatar would end up with a particular companion. The announcement on BioWare’s official forum, posted by Mike Laidlaw in 2014 read:

“Here are our “core” romance options. They are available to players of any race, and fulfill our first design goal of providing multiple options to everyone:

- Cassandra is interested in male characters.
- Blackwall is interested in female characters.
- Josephine is interested in both male and female characters
- Iron Bull is interested in both male and female characters.
- Sera is interested in female characters.
- Dorian is interested in male characters.

Two “additional” romance options were added to the game as a result of the extra development time *DA: I* received. They are more limited in scope, largely for reasons directly related to their story arcs, but are otherwise the equal of the other options:

- Cullen is interested in female elves and female humans.
- Solas is interested in female elves only.

This means that of our core cast, Varric, Vivienne, Cole and Leliana are not romance options. While we know this may disappoint some fans who were interested in them, we don’t believe that they lose out, as each character engages in their own meaningful story.

We can’t wait for November, when you can finally meet these characters, help them tell their stories, and explore this enormous game with us. Mike...” (Mike Laidlaw 2014)<sup>x</sup>

Here, the full spectrum of romances evidences a number of moves on BioWare’s part. Firstly, BioWare does try to be as inclusive as possible, at least from their perspective in that they are providing multiple options to everyone. Secondly, once the player familiarizes themselves with the romanceable options it becomes apparent that they are highly race, religion, and class specific. Thirdly, the player can choose from multiple gender presentations. Lastly, the sexual object choice of the player finds its limits in the companions’ gender presentations dictated by the game’s world, limited

by real-world treatments of gender, religion, and sexuality.

For example, while Cassandra, a masculine-presenting warrior, might be breaking the binary assumptions of the masculine-feminine gender systems, which suggests that this is a role best suited for a man; she remains limited by her religious adherence to the heterosexual expectation of the Church, which she serves. This certainly presents several foils with the real-world movements to dismantle patriarchy and its assumptions of woman's role in society while also instantiating religious ideologies limited by the male-female binaries assumed in traditional gender theories. Likewise, Dorian, a romanceable male character from a well-respected noble family undergoes many personal identity struggles, fearing what "coming-out" would do to him and more importantly, his family's reputation. In constructing Dorian, the first human cis-gender gay male available exclusively as a homosexual love interest, BioWare mirrors the real-life experiences of many affluent gay males in our society, for whom 'coming-out' likens to what many often refer to as 'social, cultural and political suicide.' For Dorian, this would mean giving up the wealth, privilege and comforts afforded to him by his aristocratic privilege, here challenged by his sexual politics. In the last leg of the questline leading to the romance option with Dorian and the avatar, "Last Resort of Good Men," Dorian reveals that his strained relationship with his estranged father comes after a long history of his father attempting to manipulate Dorian's sexual orientation using forbidden and dark blood magic to 'correct' his homosexuality. The connection to so-called conversion therapies that families force their children into to reshape them is all too familiar. Dorian's association with the player's avatar incites fear that gossiping about both their sexualities might hurt the player's reputation but the player must decide whether to ensure him that he can find safety and acceptance by his side. The support of the player's avatar however allows Dorian to fully commit himself to the player's avatar, if

the player will have him for more than sex, but, a more 'emotional engagement.'

### **The Limits of Diversity in Dragon Age Inquisition**

In considering race and sexual romances, the developers limited the sexual dimensions of Cullen and Sola's interests to racial biases energized by both companion's dislike and distrust of other races. Cullen, the embodiment of hyper-masculine traits as a general that advises the avatar/player and Solas, the timid, yet powerful magic-wielding xenophobic and racist pagan elf, both present a conundrum when dealing with how to approach the game as a player. Were the player to simply pick up *DAI*, create a character and begin playing the massive adventure that awaits them, they might just miss the potential to romance either Cullen or Solas. Thus, to pursue a relationship with these foundational characters within the *Dragon Age* series, the player might very well have to look up the information/post announcing the romanceable options and, if already into their game may very well scrap it and restart if/when they realize that they are unable to romance either Cullen or Solas due to the racial limitations. This highlights many connections between real world dating, especially through technology today. For instance, in right out limiting Solas and Cullen's love interests to only female elves, the developers 1) establish them as normatively heterosexual and 2) promote xenophobia and racism under the guise of 'sexual preference.' Dating via dating apps today for instance enacts much of the same terminology of preference. According to Robinson (2008), often men and women using dating apps such as *Grindr*, or *Tinder*, will list in their user biographies their preferences with qualifiers letting would be romantic interests that they would never consider dating someone full-bodied ("no fats"), someone feminine ("no femes") or someone from a specific racial category ("no blacks," or "no Asians"). The digital biography automatically segregates the community and enacts a digital racist filtration of those who would contact them

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(Robinson, 2008, 76). By limiting Solas and Cullen’s love interests to female elves, the player, if interested in pursuing love interests with either must know ahead of time and curate their character to fit this preference. If not, the player, in flirting with Cullen throughout only to end up being rejected after 30-40 hours of gameplay because of racial preference. This can be both emotionally and physically triggering for the player in the real-world who might have experienced some of this racism directed at them through the above-mentioned mediums.

While the announcement did provide a list of many romance options, it did also preclude the possibility of others. Companion characters who follow the avatar around, Vivienne, Varric and Cole and trusted espionage adviser Leiliana, do not present romance options for the player. Many fans voiced their upset and dismay at this. For instance, user Karim\_A (2014) states, “I’m really disappointed tbh [to be honest] ... neither Cassandra nor Josephine really do anything for me. Vivienne was actually the character I was most looking forward to [romancing].” As for the non-romanceable characters, Vivienne, Varric, Cole, and Leiliana, many fans other fans might also feel alienated. Varric, the dwarf who acts as a rogue-bard presents the only representation of dwarfs in the game. In excluding him from romance options, the game’s inclusivity and representation platforms suffer. Likewise, Cole, Leiliana and Vivienne present unique cases of representational missteps on BioWare’s part. Vivienne, the only companion character of color, though presented as sex-positive through various dialogues with the avatar, is not available for romance. Here the game developers miss yet another opportunity to demonstrate their true commitment to inclusivity.

Whether considering gender, sexuality, religion or race, each identity marker fails to promote true inclusive and representational diversity as promised by the game





consequences actively affects physical, and emotional/mental distress or comforts in the player. The player for instance, finding their sexuality and gender, and even their life narratives reflected in characters within their game world derive comfort and calm from the acceptance and openness perpetrated within the game world. The mirroring of what many in the past dismissed as 'illusion,' means a greater level of reflection and existence for the player. The player can access different compartments of personality and find them referenced and even manifested in the game world. The players engage through these tactic connections between their avatar and real-world selves on a greater level than previously imagined. The player not only maneuvers their avatar through a remote controller, but, controls, by extension their own responses to the avatar's experiences. To argue, as Fink, Saine and Saine (1968) do, the projection and interaction between the two is as tangible as our interaction with our mirrored selves as we move across a room and catch a reflection of ourselves in reflective surface.

In *DAI*, the player must decide whether to support one of two competing forces: the avatar chooses either the Chantry – *Dragon Age's* monotheistic brand of religion akin to the real-world Catholic religion, or the Mages – the pagan equivalent who wield powerful magic, able to level cities, but are susceptible to demon possession and thus, must be controlled and often pacified, according to the Chantry. This intertextual link clearly highlight the influences between real-world institutions and the game world being constructed. How the player related to this sacred space within the game remains unclear: how do players conceive of this complex relationship between 'real-life events' and 'virtual ones?' More specifically here, how does the player's options for expansive sexual partner choice affect the individual and their identification with their avatar? Is the sacred space of the video game world more accompanying to the players' identity, thus effectively making it worthwhile for

them to spend 60-80 hours in single-player worlds pursuing love interests with virtual characters that represent the idealized forms of characters that they would want to pursue partnerships with in real life? Do the players consider religious devotion, sexual politics, gender diversity and body positivity in their choice to play these games? And what are the player's thoughts on transgressing the naturalness of gameplay to ensure that representational love interests reciprocate the feeling of the player – for instance, ensuring that he player can pursue a relationship with Cullen even before entering the plot.

A brief scanning of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* forums reveal quite a struggle between the players' real-world identity and the in-game choices that one must make. One player, Forgetmenot, after playing through a critical moment in the plotline, arrives at a conflict where the player must declare to Cassandra whether they believes in the Maker or not. Choosing to declare that they do would result in the fortification of the PC an adherent of the Chantry religion while declaring otherwise would suggest that the player is polytheistic and thus, render their relationship with Cassandra, the divine shield, and sword of the Chantry, mute. For Malone and Lepper (1987) and Love (2010), these intertextual links to the real-world foil of Catholicism exists to help the player immersivity engage with the game environment and make it a richer experience; finding mirrors and nods to the real-world equivalents enhances the player's identification with their avatar (Li, Liau and Khoo 2013). But, in making this declaration without forethought, Forgetmenot (2016) must deal with the consequences of their character becoming a follower of Andraste. In future conversations and plotlines, Forgetmenot (2016) declares,

"I can't enjoy it because it bugs me too much. No amount of roleplaying in my head is helping... I'm having to do too much mental acrobatics for it to fit."

Playing an elf, Forgetmenot cannot reconcile the imposition of monotheism onto her polytheist elf PC. Moreover, this progression in the game causes immense upset for the player in the real world, taxing both their ethical as well as religious beliefs. For Forgetmenot, it contradicts too much with her anti-establishment stance on religion and sickens her real-world body to the point of inducing exhausting from all the mental acrobatics that they have to go through while playing the game and adhering as close to the personality of their avatar as possible. While the inclusion and intertextual nod to Catholicism certainly adds to the rich fantasy of *DAI*, it also requires understanding the ways in which different segments of one's identity interact at any given time to direct the overall experience of the player. Religion might not be the primary consideration for many players, but for others, it might invoke feelings of repression or for others, spirituality.

Forgetmenot is not the only example of this transgression across the 'magic circle.' Other players reveal ire, even animosity towards players who try to reach to resources outside of the game world to ensure that their choices have the desired effect(s) in the game. A player wanting to play a homosexual plotline must cultivate the correct relationship with Dorian, a Tevinter Magister and powerful mage companion of the PC, to have access to dialogue to pursue a romantic relationship with him (you must be playing a male character to pursue any kind of relationship with Dorian as he is exclusively a man who has sex with men). For players such as Walter Black (2016), players who look up the plot lines ahead of time to know how to construct their characters, exhibit too much 'realness' in their playing of characters online. Walter Black's issue directly stems from positioning the player outside of the natural progression of the game, where choices are made immediately instead of pausing, referencing a wiki or walkthrough, and then making the choice that would

best reflect themselves in the game world. Walter Black (2016) sees this as a transgression and instead, the player should aim for “playing the game organically.”

What can be concluded from the above anecdotes and a multitude of others is that the separation between the game world, the player, the player’s identity, and the players’ concept of morality and ethics, as guided by religion inside and outside of the game, cannot be so easily separated. Rather, the anecdotes from Forgetmenot and Walter Black point to the ways in which players effect their identities through their avatars in the game and how the choices made in the game affect the character in the real world.

## Conclusion

My aim in this piece resides solely in highlighting the multifaceted ways in which BioWare and game developers in general utilize their demographic’s identities to construct game worlds and environments targeted at multiple aims. First, they seek to construct their game world as open and variable, giving players access to different narratives and lives that they may not directly experience in their real worlds. Second, and more importantly, the game developers construct worlds that allow for the projection and replication of a player in the game, as an avatar that acts almost as a replicate of the player, their identity traits, religious adherences, sexual leanings, racial ideologies and gender demonstrations. These vectors of religion, sexuality, race and gender deployed by BioWare developers contribute to the further blurring of the boundaries between real and game worlds and player and avatar. Much like Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons argue about internet interactions between real-life individuals and the potential for implementation in understanding young adults and the formation of personalities and connections between individuals and their friends,





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*Dragon Age: Inquisition*, 2014. [video game] (PS3, PS4, Xbox One, Xbox 360, Microsoft Windows) BioWare, Electronic Arts.

*Dragon Age: Origins*, 2009. [video game] (Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360) Bioware, Electronic Arts.

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*Neverwinter Nights*, 2002. [video game] (Microsoft Windows) BioWare, Infogrames.

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<sup>i</sup> Though, *Dragon Age* (DA) is not the first game to explore game developer deployment of gender and sexuality, see Shaw (2014, 13-54). *Fable* (2004) for instance allows action-determined sexualization of the player's avatar. Though the player was male, their sexuality remained fluid determined by the sex of the partner they chose to marry in game. By marrying a woman, the player (male-only) would then be listed as heterosexual, but subsequently marrying a man, will be listed as Bisexual.

<sup>ii</sup> For more on player identification with their avatars, see Shaw (2014, 97-146).

<sup>iii</sup> Many times these took on the form of models you would find in the pages of a *Maxim*, *GQ*, or *Men's Health* magazine promoting the idealized version societally conditioned versions of masculinity and femininity that were expected of men and women.

<sup>iv</sup> The LGBTQIA+ acronym refers specifically to a broadened acronym which attempts to include many more gender and sexual identities that are traditionally excluded from the LGBT acronym. LGBTQIA refers to, in order, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and other identities. Which the game does not specifically directly reference or include all on the spectrum, it does market itself to these communities as more inclusive than most other game environments. However, in this paper, I use LGB to respectively outline *only* those sexualities that appear in the game.

<sup>v</sup> Entertainment Software Association (ESA) 2015. The 2017 version is available at <http://essentialfacts.theesa.com/mobile/>, accessed 10 May 2017.

<sup>vi</sup> Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons (2002, 34) define the "true self" as the "alternative inner conception of self" or "those identity-important and phenomenally real aspects of self not often easily expressed to others".

<sup>vii</sup> Released 8 March 2011.

<sup>viii</sup> The BioWare Forum has since been taken offline; the contents have been transcribed via Queerty.com.

<sup>ix</sup> For a discussion disproving the association of the title 'gamer' with the white, heterosexual, male, and rather, more LGBT+ gamers coming to the medium, see Ochalla, B. (2009).

<sup>x</sup> As of August 2016, BioWare's official forum, the BioWare Social Network (BSN) and its forums on *Dragon Age Inquisition* were copied to FExtraLife at <http://fextralife.com/forums/f102/>. The post in question by Mike Laidlaw appeared on the official BSN forums on Wed., Sep 03, 2014 at 5:19 pm. It has been archived and is available for access at the following link: <http://fextralife.com/forums/t189297/romances-in-dragon-age-inquisition/?sid=b34ad13c6c634d0ae85ccf8addb08bdf>.