

*Routledge Advances in Popular Culture Studies*

# **ROMANCE IN THE DIGITAL GAME**

Amy Brierley-Beare



# Romance in the Digital Game

In the last decade, the popularity of ‘romance’ in the AAA game has exploded. It has become an expectation for major releases and a regular object of fan obsession. High-profile games such as *Baldur’s Gate III* (2023), *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) and *Starfield* (2023) prominently feature in-game romance in their multimillion-dollar promotional campaigns. Moreover, rampant speculation by gaming journalists and fans about who is ‘romanceable’ will regularly accompany the announcement of a new title. However, representations of romance have long been under-examined and vaguely defined by scholars. This leaves important questions unanswered. How does the digital game mediate cultural attitudes towards love and sex? How can we classify representations of romance in the digital game? Does romance simply replicate existing hegemonies surrounding gender and sexuality, or does it offer a space for transgressive play?

This book positions optional romance in the AAA game as a central object of analysis. Based on the close analysis of some of the most commercially and culturally significant games of the last 30 years like *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008), the *Mass Effect* series (2007–21) and the *Elder Scrolls* series (1994–2024), it is the first full-length monograph to effectively and comprehensively categorise how mainstream gaming asks its audience to engage with romance. It interrogates the idiosyncrasies of romance in the popular games to provide fresh insights into messaging surrounding normative social understandings of love, sex and intimacy.

By theorising four representational categories of romance—Limerent, Physical, Domestic and Ludic—Automatic Love introduces a new theoretical framework for scholars to understand romance, gender and sexuality in gaming.

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# I Introduction

## Is It Love?

As a child, I was intrigued by video games. When playing with dolls and figurines (as many children do), I imagined complex narratives, worlds, societal structures and relationships to elevate the experience. Once I saw a digital game, though, everything I envisioned with my toys was taken to a much grander scale. I was intrigued. My favourite thing to do was to wait for my dad to come home so I could sit and watch him play games. Unequivocally, my absolute favourite game to watch was BioWare's role-playing game (RPG) *Knights of the Old Republic* (KotOR) (2004). At the time, this game was the most fascinating thing I had ever seen. The ability to build a character, to be able to impact a narrative in such interesting ways, was all so intriguing. I always asked for KotOR because it was so intriguing to have such control over a character. Funnily enough, I did not know that this game had 'romances' in it, as neither my dad nor my brother had ever chosen to opt into this aspect of the experience. When I got a chance to play this game, though, I became even more enamoured with every element of this experience. You would go off and do adventurous, heroic things, all while developing (what felt like) deep relationships with your companions back at your 'home'. This was far more engaging and interesting to me than anything I had played or seen before. It was also where I first considered that games did not have to be exclusively about 'winning'.

As I got older, I sought out games that had role-playing elements, particularly experiences that let you customise your house, your character, your clothes, your companions and your outcomes. What I sought in gaming led me to many games with optional romance features. I would speed through in-game missions just to get back and see if the character I was trying to have a relationship with had anything else to say. I would create elaborate fantasies in my head using any scraps of information that I could glean from the game. I took this very seriously; I never treated my companions with anything other than respect. As a person, I am very cautious, and as a child, I hated to be in trouble; therefore, I used gaming spaces to explore the limits of these games, but only very tentatively. I distinctly remember moving a fork in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios 2006) and immediately being screamed at by an in-game guard for an attempted "theft." In much the same

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way, I was very careful and polite with characters whom I thought could hold me accountable. I was incredibly surprised when I started lurking in forums with people who did not feel the same way as I did. Some people would treat their paramours with derision, make lewd sexual comments or joke about murdering them. In fact, some people hated any romance features in games that were not ‘supposed’ to have them. I would always type the question “will X game have romance?” into a search engine, and among the genuine answers would always be something along the lines of ‘no, go play Sims’ or ‘I hope not, that would be so forced’. I would have been what Christine Tomlinson (2021) identifies a player who was trying to “predict” which character would be the romantic partner of my player in any upcoming game. Tomlinson writes that

[i]n the lead up to the release of a game where there is speculation or confirmation about romantic options, players start to plan their romance based on any available information. In cases where little information is available, players also display their hopes and interests.

(2021, p. 728)

However, there were some forums I found—especially early BioWare forums—where users were in raptures about their paramours and romance as a concept. Forums and places to discuss romance positively were relatively few and far between. Most spaces that popped up to discuss upcoming games decried any potential inclusion of romance. Looking back, I realise how many of these forums were masculine-dominant spaces that offered diametrically opposed reactions about romance to mine. Despite some very vocal protests online, optional romance kept being included in mainstream gaming, particularly RPGs. Romance has become so common in video games that it has been taken to the point of parody—take *Saints Row: IV* (Deep Silver 2013) and its satire of the burgeoning romantic expectations included in RPGs. *Saints Row: IV* included an infamous romance ‘button’ as a comment on the state of romantic subplots. This started to really shape my vision of how romance was perceived in gaming cultures. There was a distinct tone in which developers, journalists and the texts themselves engaged with romance.

There have always been discrepancies as to what is considered ‘romance’ in digital gaming. Some call it ‘dating’, while others simply use it to refer to getting ‘close’ with an NPC. Yet everyone (developers, players, journalists) seems to know and recognise what they are talking about. In-game romance seems to have its own logic—one that is both intertwined within the game and can also contain its own impact and messaging within itself. As it is understood in gaming contexts, ‘romance’ can be a noun and a verb. Players can experience ‘romance’, be it a subplot or a mechanic, and potential paramours are usually considered to be ‘romances’. ‘Romance’ is also something that players can do—for example, ‘I romanced this character’. It is this that raises the core questions of this book: what does it mean to ‘romance’ someone when you’re in control? Why was this experience so different from the game it was encased

in? How do different mechanics and structures of romance change the meaning of a text? How do gender and sexuality operate in these prisms?

The study of romance in digital gaming is an area that is severely lacking in research and classification. Therefore, the purpose of this book is to provide some much-needed clarity—a thorough examination of the roles, possibilities and challenges presented by optional romance. It explores key ideas and themes around the mechanics of romance, gendered play, emergent narrative and behaviour, sexuality, complexity and social gameplay. In doing so, this book presents an original taxonomy that introduces four new analytical categories for optional romance in the AAA game—‘limerent’, ‘domestic’, ‘ludic’, and ‘physical’.

### The Corpus

This book takes a game-immanent and actor-centred approach to provide a close analysis of a curated corpus of games. While there are many intriguing and analytically significant examples of romance in indie games, AA games and mods (see *The Mask of the Rose*, *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* and *Enderal: Forgotten Realms*), this book is focused on mainstream, AAA games. AAA can be understood as games with large budgets, massive development teams and financial expectations (Freedman 2018). Big-budget games have wide-ranging appeal and considerable popularity among audiences. AAA development is extremely time-consuming and costly, meaning that decisions around love and sexuality tend to emulate what is safe and known. This makes steps beyond what was known notable but also means most structures and design philosophies remain for years despite changing social and cultural norms. AAA games are also the most widely played, meaning their messaging and any potential impacts from this are most widely felt.

This corpus is comprised of a selection of AAA games (that include optional romance) that are widely considered to be some of the most commercially and culturally impactful releases of the last 25 years. This includes a diverse range of games such as *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008), *Mass Effect 1–3* (2007–12), *Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) and *Baldur’s Gate III* (2023). These texts clearly illustrate the specific and consistent representations expressed in mainstream gaming. They also provide an overview of a significant period in gaming history in which representations of romance were pushed to the fore. The full corpus can be found in Table 1.1.

### ‘Romance’ in Games . . .

‘Romance’ is an idea with unclear boundaries and thus is dependent on context. Many definitions of the term would include some allusion to the even more nebulous concept of love, but this is at times misleading for the purposes of this book. The term ‘romance’ in literature and early media scholarship acts

Table 1.1 Corpus of games

Corpus of Games							
Title	Year	Publisher	Developer	Number of Romance options	Customisable protagonist	Dating or Courtship mechanic	In Game rewards from relationship
<i>Baldur's Gate: Siege of Dragonspear</i>	2000	Black Isle Studios and Interplay Entertainment	BioWare	4	Yes	No	No
<i>Star Wars: Knights of the old Republic</i>	2003	Lucas Arts	BioWare	2	Yes	No	No
<i>Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas</i>	2004	Rockstar Games	Rockstar North	6	No	Yes	Yes, perks and EXP
<i>Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords</i>	2004	LucasArts	Obsidian Entertainment	4	Yes	No	No
<i>Fable: The Lost Chapters</i>	2005	Microsoft Game Studio	Lionhead Studios	20+	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Jade Empire</i>	2005	Microsoft Game Studios	BioWare	4	Yes	No	No
<i>Persona 3</i>	2006	THQ	Atlus	11	No	Yes	Yes
<i>Bully</i>	2006	Rockstar Games	Rockstar Vancouver	10+	No	No	Yes
<i>The Witcher</i>	2007	CD Projekt Red	CD Projekt Red	26	No	No	Yes, Collectables
<i>Mass Effect</i>	2007	Microsoft Game Studios	BioWare	3	Yes	No	Yes, Achievement
<i>Fable 2</i>	2008	Microsoft Game Studios	Lionhead Studios	20+	Yes	Yes	Yes, Gifts and EXP Bonuses
<i>Grand Theft Auto IV</i>	2008	Rockstar Games	Rockstar North	5	No	Yes	Yes, Achievement
<i>Dragon Age: Origins</i>	2009	Electronic Arts	BioWare	4	Yes	No	Yes, Gifts
<i>Fable 3</i>	2010	Microsoft Game Studios	Lionhead Studios	20+	Yes	Yes	Yes, Gifts and EXP Bonuses
<i>Mass Effect 2</i>	2010	Electronic Arts	BioWare	12	Yes	No	Yes, Achievement

<i>Dragon Age 2</i>	2011	Electronic Arts Bethesda	BioWare	5	Yes	No	Yes, Gifts
<i>Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim</i>	2011	Bethesda Softworks	Bethesda Game Studios	67	Yes	Yes	Yes, Gifts and EXP Bonuses
<i>Mass Effect 3</i>	2012	Electronic Arts	BioWare	17	Yes	No	Yes, Achievement
<i>Kingdoms of Amalur: Reckoning</i>	2012	38 Studios; Electronic Arts	Big Huge Games	3 (1 DLC)	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Dragon's Dogma</i>	2012	Capcom	Capcom	7	Yes	No	Yes, Achievement
<i>Saints Row: IV</i>	2013	Deep Silver	Volition	9	Yes	No	No
<i>Dragon Age: Inquisition</i>	2014	Electronic Arts	BioWare	8	Yes	No	Yes, Gifts
<i>Fallout 4</i>	2015	Bethesda Softworks	Bethesda Game Studios	10	Yes	No	Yes, Gifts and EXP bonuses
<i>The Witcher III: Wild Hunt</i>	2015	CD Projekt Red	CD Projekt Red	7	No	No	No
<i>Persona 5</i>	2016	JP: Atlus	P-Studio	8	No	Yes	Yes, Achievement
<i>Mass Effect Andromeda</i>	2017	Electronic Arts	BioWare	10	Yes	No	Yes, Achievement
<i>Fallout 76 (2020 Update)</i>	2018	Bethesda Softworks	Bethesda Game Studios	2	Yes	No	Yes, Gifts and EXP Bonuses
<i>Assassin's Creed Odyssey</i>	2018	Ubisoft	Ubisoft Quebec	15	Yes	No	Yes, Achievements
<i>Kingdom Come: Deliverance</i>	2018	Deep Silver	Warhorse Studios	3	No	No	Yes, Gifts and EXP Bonus
<i>Assassin's Creed Valhalla</i>	2019	Focus Home Entertainment	Spiders	4	Yes	No	Yes, Achievement
<i>Assassin's Creed Valhalla</i>	2020	Ubisoft	Ubisoft Montreal	12	No	No	Yes, Achievement
<i>Yakuza: Like a Dragon</i>	2020	Sega	Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio	6	No	Yes	Yes, Perks and EXP Bonus
<i>Cyberpunk 2077</i>	2020	CD Projekt Red	CD Projekt Red	5	Yes	No	Yes, Achievements
<i>Lost Judgment</i>	2021	Sega	Ryu Gotoku Studio	1 (3 DLC)	No	Yes	Yes, Traits
<i>Starfield</i>	2023	Bethesda Softworks	Bethesda Game Studios	4	Yes	No	Yes, Gifts and EXP Bonuses
<i>Baldur's Gate 3</i>	2023	Larian Studios	Larian Studios	8	Yes	No	Yes, Achievement

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as the label of a kind of story or subplot, at times, a genre (Griffin 1923) or a reference to a period of literary or artistic history. It will also quite commonly be used to refer to the more modern boom of pulp books centred entirely on love stories (Fuchs 2004). But romance in these spaces tends to operate merely as a classification or as a descriptor of things that might happen in a story or work.

While useful, these understandings of romance are not fully applicable to the unique place this term has in gaming culture. Game studies scholars use (Tomlinson 2019; McDonald 2017; Grace 2020; Chess 2015; Ruberg 2019) ‘romance’ when discussing digital interactive love, but will frequently use the term interchangeably with ‘paramours’, ‘partners’ and ‘love interests’. Romance is usually more carefully nuanced as a word by gaming scholars, as, unlike with advertising, players or journalists, it is rarely conflated with sexuality or physical affection.

The marketing and advertising of digital video games mediates discursive understandings of romance in the games themselves. Typically, romance systems are positioned as evidence of the technological sophistication of an upcoming AAA game’s social system. Developers and marketers tend to focus on one specific element of a game to grab viewers’ attention, like Peter Molyneux, the head of Lionhead Studios, promoting *Fable II* by almost exclusively talking about the pet dog you can have in-game (Corliss 2011). Romance is no exception, and marketing teams for games will focus heavily on any aspects of gameplay that include flirting, sex, dating and relationships.

Advertising for romance in games follows the unique conventions players have adopted for discussing virtual relationships. Each upcoming RPG, for instance, will usually have at least one promotional article or review written about it dedicated to any romantic content included in the game. If an RPG does not have optional romantic content, there will be an article speculating why this is the case (Branagan 2023). In some cases where there is no romantic content in an upcoming AAA RPG, like Obsidian’s *Outer Worlds* (2019), developers are forced to “explain” their decisions to players to offer “clarification” on why there are no optional romance quests (Cooper 2019). The expectation of some form of romance play in this genre is so ingrained that the absence of romance in these spaces must also be commented on. It is part of the understanding that certain genres with certain budgets *will* have optional romantic content. The ‘codes’ of the gaming genre and advertising are upheld in these spaces, with romance operating in a distinct space in advertising.

Not only are the vernacular and rules surrounding romance enforced in advertising, but the importance placed on romance in advertising implies that it is a valued and highly sought-after commodity. Advertising for AAA games focuses heavily on romance, no matter how small a role it plays in the overall experience. How romance and romantic gameplay are framed illustrates how publishers position romance within their text. Advance trailers (Rockstar 2006) for early 2000s games like *Bully* (Rockstar Vancouver 2006) highlight kissing and casual dalliances as they are intercut with other activities like cycling, pulling

pranks and fighting. As the focus of the marketing material emphasises zany gameplay set at an eclectic high-school, romantic play, and physical affection aids in establishing a sense of freedom within the game's environment. Direct promotional material also positions romance as part of a wider epic narrative. *Assassin's Creed Odyssey's* (Ubisoft Quebec 2018a) official E3 trailer includes a narration that discusses the player character's "pathway built by friendship and family, love and loss," cutting to a scene of characters kissing on a beach and intercut with images of violence and tragic melancholy. The opportunities for romance then are a reprieve from the violent environment of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*. Here, there is a strategy to imply that part of the experience of this game is developing romantic relationships, not just the fighting and exploration that is also showcased in the trailer. Romance in this sense is implied to be intertwined with the broader narrative and experience of the game.

Images of romantic content can be used to imply a fully realised, mature world—one filled with not only violence but also sexuality and social intimacy. Interspersed between high-speed car chases, gun fights, parkour, and explosions, *Cyberpunk 2077's* (CD Projekt Red 2020) official launch trailer includes shots of potential paramours. One shot pans from a companion's face to their chest, implying a romantic and sexually intimate experience. The hyperfocus on sex and the sexualised body of one of its characters is particularly revealing of the assumed cisgendered heterosexual male audience. The trailer initially focuses on a male player character, but the shots are from a romantic subplot that can only be explored if the player character is female. In this sense, these trailers imply a reaffirmed understanding of sexuality initially found in the masculine-focused, hypersexual nature of early gaming, as well as a romance as part of a wider tapestry of action and thrill.

Promotional material will also showcase the opportunities romance affords as a central motivator for player characters. The *Fallout 4* (Bethesda 2015) first-look trailer cuts between shots of a house set 200 years apart, before and after a nuclear apocalypse. In one frame, there is an empty bassinet in an abandoned baby's room. The next frame cuts to a husband and wife in that same room, though now it is clean and warm, and they are looking over their child.

The trailer positions audiences to feel as though this is a romanticised memory that will later act as motivation for characters to return to this equilibrium. Rather than a sexual representation of romance, *Fallout 4's* trailer emphasises a romantic closeness that implies that players will be able to feel out a sense of domestic intimacy in the game. In this sense, the pleasures of romance are not so universally conveyed by these trailers; instead, romance reflects the themes of the game. One uniting theme of all these trailers is that, while romance is secondary to violence in terms of promotional prominence, it is still a critically important and featured focus from an advertising perspective. These games are violent, combative and focused on victory found in play, and yet, they are offering players new perspectives on what their game could be about. These trailers communicate diverse implications of what romance will mean for their individual texts, but they no less proclaim the importance of romance for these experiences.

Games with hundreds of hours of content will also have online promotional articles devoted to relatively small romantic elements. Promotional material also heavily prioritises the ‘amount’ of romance and supposed ‘depth’ of the experience. Game marketing seems to signal to audiences that an experience will be including more diverse representations of love. *Fallout 4* advertising, for example, was largely fixated on the romance options available, with promotional gaming online articles that focused on players being able to romance any human “regardless of gender” (Batchelor 2015). Online articles about *Cyberpunk 2077* were also heavily focused on romance options available, with developers promising more “diverse” representations. Forbes journalist Paul Tassi writes about how *Cyberpunk 2077* will allow players freedom and encourage “making your own character, where you can choose their gender and also their sexual orientation, deciding who to romance” (2019). *Cyberpunk 2077*’s advertising also centred on the complexity and intensity of relationships in the game compared to previous titles from CD Projekt Red. As Sheridan promises, *Cyberpunk 2077* “romance options will be as deep as *The Witcher 3* and much more broad” (2019). Many upcoming titles promise a new understanding or representation of romance, but this is rarely fulfilled in practice. *Mass Effect Andromeda* (2017) had directors speaking about how the development “team wants romances to feel legitimate, not like an artificial game mechanic” and how they were working hard to deliver a more complex experience.

‘Romance’ is colloquially used as a catch-all term by gamers and journalists to include anything from a player’s or NPC’s kiss or sexual encounter to an in-depth love subplot branching across multiple games. Sometimes, the word ‘romance’ is applied to the characters who a player can develop a relationship with—they are in this way “romances” or “romanceable NPCs” (Osten 2019). Note the onus here with the word ‘romanceable’—someone is romanceable; there is a layer of conquering and completion embedded into this word. The NPC can also be referred to as a ‘romance’, but then there are times where the relationship between the PC and NPC is referred to as *the* ‘romance’, as when Shepard (2023) refers to “Iron Bull’s romance.” In Margaret David’s (2023) article ‘Why the Best RPGs Let You Romance Your Companions’ for *Den of Geek*, readers are encouraged to “compare *Mass Effect*’s approach to love and sex with the romance options seen in a game like Lionhead Studios’ (2004)’s *Fable*.” Despite arguing that *Fable*’s more shallow approach to the actual development of a relationship left some players wanting more, they still do declare these representations as “romance.” In gaming vernacular, a form of romance does not have to be in-depth or even taken particularly seriously by the text to classify as the discursive ‘romance’.

This nebulous terminology has been common in gaming journalism for well over a decade (Dumitrescu 2009), and there is evidence of the use of the term ‘romance’ being the norm for players even earlier (RPG.net Forums 2005). In this context, romance is a verb, but most importantly, it is an outcome for players—a state of being for another character. They can carry out