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Brierley-Beare, Amy (2024) Romance as the “real challenge”?: The implications of absent dialogue icons in Baldur’s Gate 3. In: DiGRA Australia, 2 February 2024, University of Melbourne.

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Romance as the "real challenge"?: The implications of absent dialogue icons in *Baldur's Gate 3*

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Keywords
Romance, game studies, dialogue icons, queer studies, Baldur's Gate 3

INTRODUCTION

The full release of role-playing sequel *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios 2023) has sparked discussion surrounding how optional romance is implemented in mainstream gaming. Bucking recent trends in the roleplaying genre, *Baldur's Gate 3* does not utilise supportive communication tools—dialogue icons—to further clarify emotions and tones of potential dialogue options. Dialogue icons are "any picture, symbol or image representation that acts as a supplementary communication in aid of dialogue (Brierley 2022, 40). By electing instead to not include dialogue icons next to dialogue options, *Baldur's Gate 3* players are having to navigate dialogue that does not clearly signal how to develop romantic relationships. This paper considers how textual features like dialogue icons have led players to become comfortable with segmented understandings of social relationships—romantic and non-romantic—and the implications this brings for representations of queer romance in role playing games.

In *Baldur's Gate 3* players can have a relationship with any potential paramours, no matter their sexuality or gender. Some gaming news sites have labelled these choices as "diverse" and "complex" (Josi 2023) whereas others have questioned the design philosophy of attributing no sexual preference to potential paramours (Zak 2023; Petit 2023). Drawing from Stephan Greer (2013, 16) I explore and recontextualize their understanding of "sexuality blind" approaches to game design. Greer initially argued that this approach to design "articulates a preference for models of inclusivity that preserve and privilege the status quo" (16). Likewise, Shallegger (2014) and Adams (2015) have suggested that this type of representation is simply ignored by players as it is fully optional, and sign posted. However, I argue that, in the case of *BG3*, a sexuality blind approach can offer more queer visibility when unshackled from genre mainstays like the dialogue icon. With the absence of dialogue icons, players are forced to navigate dialogue that does not clearly signal how to develop romantic relationships. In this sense, *BG3*–at least partially–resists further highlighting it's "gay button" (Shaw 2015, 34) and allows for players to experience queer love that is less overtly signalled. In this paper, I critically examine how textual features like dialogue icons have led players to

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2024

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become comfortable with what Shaw understands as a segmented understanding of social relationships–both romantic and non-romantic. I harvested data from player comments and posts on gaming forums from Steam, Reddit and Larion Studios discussing *Baldur's Gate 3*. I then analysed them through Greer's framework to consider the extent to which player's engagement with *Baldur's Gate 3*'s sexuality blind approach was mediated by dialogue icons. By studying player forums, we can observe how players are struck by the subtleties of the romance with potential partners–particularly men anxious to have 'accidentally' romanced Gale (a Male companion in *Baldur's Gate 3*). Before engaging in an intimate sex scene, Gale merely asks players if they would like to learn more about magic. I contend that the absence of any dialogue has led to a renegotiation of what romance is and has "irritated the masculine anxieties" (Vanderhoaf 2013, 17) of players seeking to ignore queer romantic expression. Despite resistance from some, there are far more forums that praise how liberating the unknown of romance in *BG3* is. Players discuss openly how they have come to stumble into a relationship they may not have looked for if the signalling was more overt. Ultimately, *Baldur's Gate 3* forces us to reconsider the usefulness of 'sexuality blind' character design in terms of progressing LGBTQIA+ representation in digital gaming.

BIO

Dr Amy Brierley-Beare is a games researcher from the University of Adelaide. Her work looks at the trends and patterns in representations of romance in mainstream gaming. Brierley-Beare's research interests include productive play, emergent narrative, and audience studies.

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