

DRAGON GAY-GE?

SAME-SEX ROMANCE OPTIONS IN BIOWARE GAMES

Todd Harper – GAMBIT Game Lab – PCA 2012

Bioware is for lovers



- Edmonton-based game software developer
- Known for their RPG titles
 - ▣ *KOTOR, Baldur's Gate, Jade Empire, Dragon Age, Mass Effect*
- Hallmarks of the Bioware style
 - ▣ Morality systems
 - ▣ Highly developed/interesting NPCs
 - ▣ Romance options
 - ▣ Genre fiction

It's gayer in Canada™



- Many Bioware titles have included same-sex romance options, though they've been inconsistently supported
 - ▣ Go back to relatively early titles compared to many industry contemporaries
- Probable interference from outside when it comes to some IP limits this (see: licensed *Star Wars* titles)
 - ▣ <http://kotaku.com/5230325/there-are-no-gays-in-star-wars> – the URL speaks for itself

Flirting with disaster



- Same-sex romance fiasco #1: *Mass Effect* (2007)
- One character (Liara T'soni) with many female-coded traits was romance option for Shepards of either gender
- Conservative blogs caught hold of this fact and blew it massively out of proportion:

Flirting with disaster



Flirting with disaster



- Fox News proceeds to catch hold, airs factually incorrect story with poor choice in guest comments, sending fans into an internet-powered revenge fury (Dutton, Consalvo, & Harper, 2011)
- Bioware relatively quiet in their defense of the entire affair

Love is a battlefield



- Same-sex romance fiasco #2: *Dragon Age 2* (2011)
- A number of NPCs could be romanced by either gender of main character, a move lauded by many
- However, not everyone was happy, culminating in a famous complaint about neglecting their “main demographic: the straight male gamer”
- <http://social.bioware.com/forum/1/topic/304/index/6661775&lf=8>

Love is a battlefield



- Some choice arguments from the complaint:
 - ▣ Most RPG gamers are straight males. Women play the Sims.
 - ▣ “The straight male gamer cannot be just lumped into a single category”
 - ▣ It’s awkward when your male party members hit on you (presumably: if you’re male)
 - ▣ Isabela and Merrill are too “exotic”
 - ▣ You’ve only got so many resources and you can’t please anyone, so be sure to please straight males

Love is a battlefield

- Bioware writer David Gaider responded in a well-publicized reply in which he told the complaining fan point blank:
 - ▣ “The romances in the game are not for ‘the straight male gamer.’ They’re for everyone.”
- Interestingly, despite support for his position, Gaider took flak for “stereotyping gays”:
 - ▣ <http://www.petitionspot.com/petitions/FireDavidGaider/>

The Lit Slide

- Almost no lit on romance options/plots at all
 - ▣ Annika Waern on player relationships with the romanced NPC
 - Does have some discussion of the diff. between *DA*-style romance and *ME*-style romance
 - ▣ Kristine Jørgensen on relationship between main character and NPCs as part of narrative
- Neither really discusses mechanics very strongly (hence the focus of this study on mechanics)

The current study



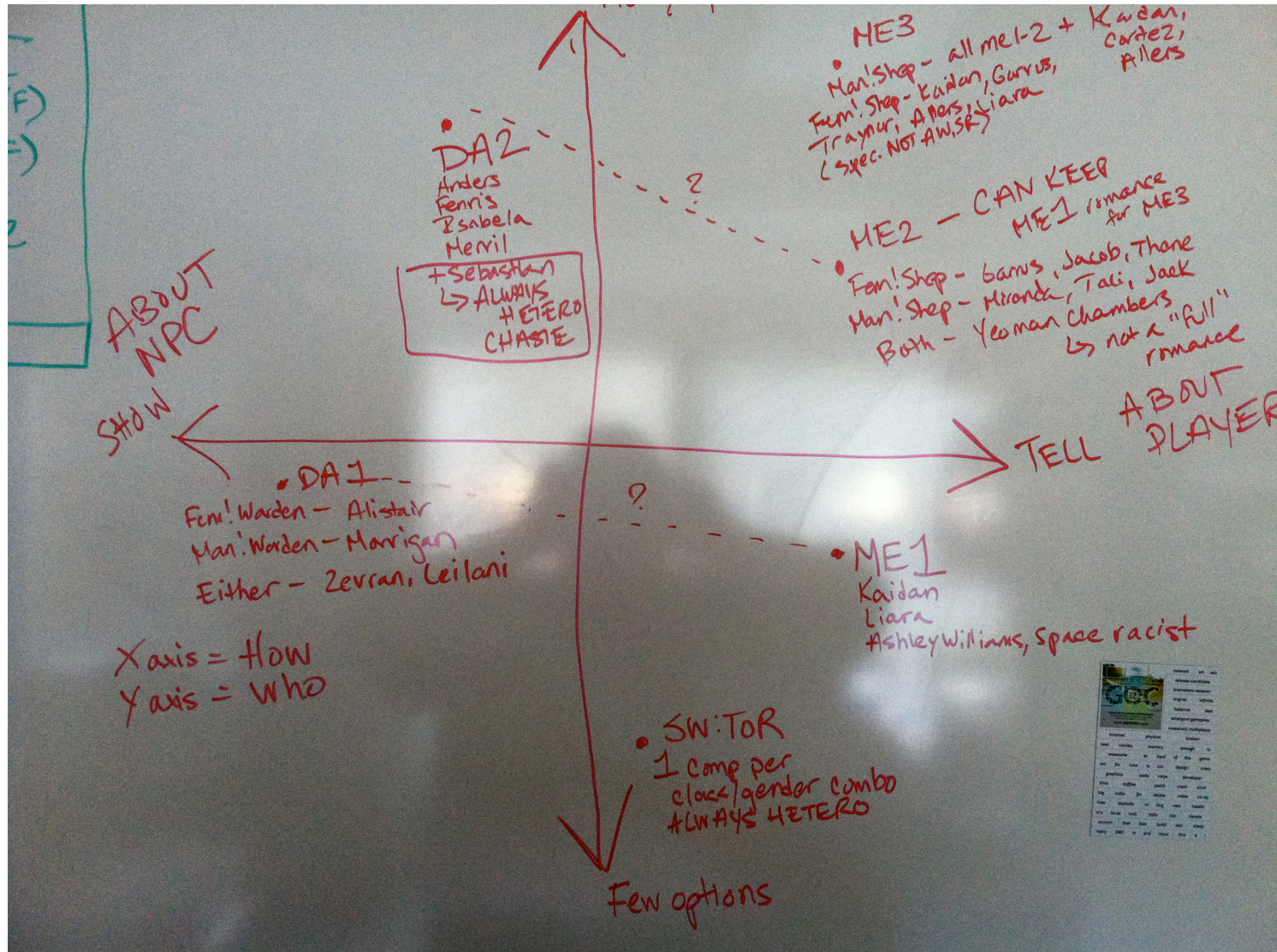
- Over time, two things increase:
 - ▣ Number of same-sex pairings
 - ▣ Bioware's apparent comfort defending them
- Question that remains: what are the ways in which Bioware RPGs do or don't support Gaider's "they're for everyone" philosophy?
- Study analyzes the mechanics and fiction elements behind romances
 - ▣ Primary focus: *Dragon Age 2*, the game about which Gaider spoke
 - ▣ Secondary focus: *Dragon Age 1* and the *Mass Effect* series, as comparisons for Bioware titles

What do romance options get you





- Sex scene
 - ▣ Usually, also a related achievement
- Basically it
- No mechanical influence on game
 - ▣ DA2 – friendship/rivalry independent of romance
- Romances exist in a cinematic mold

What is love?



What is love?

- Romance options in Bioware games appear to work along two axes:
- How is the romance accomplished? e.g. what does the player do to establish/maintain a romance with an NPC?
 - “Show” side  “Tell” side
- With whom can romances be forged? e.g. what are the potential romance options among the entire cast of characters in the game?
 - “Many” options  “Few” options

Money can't buys you love

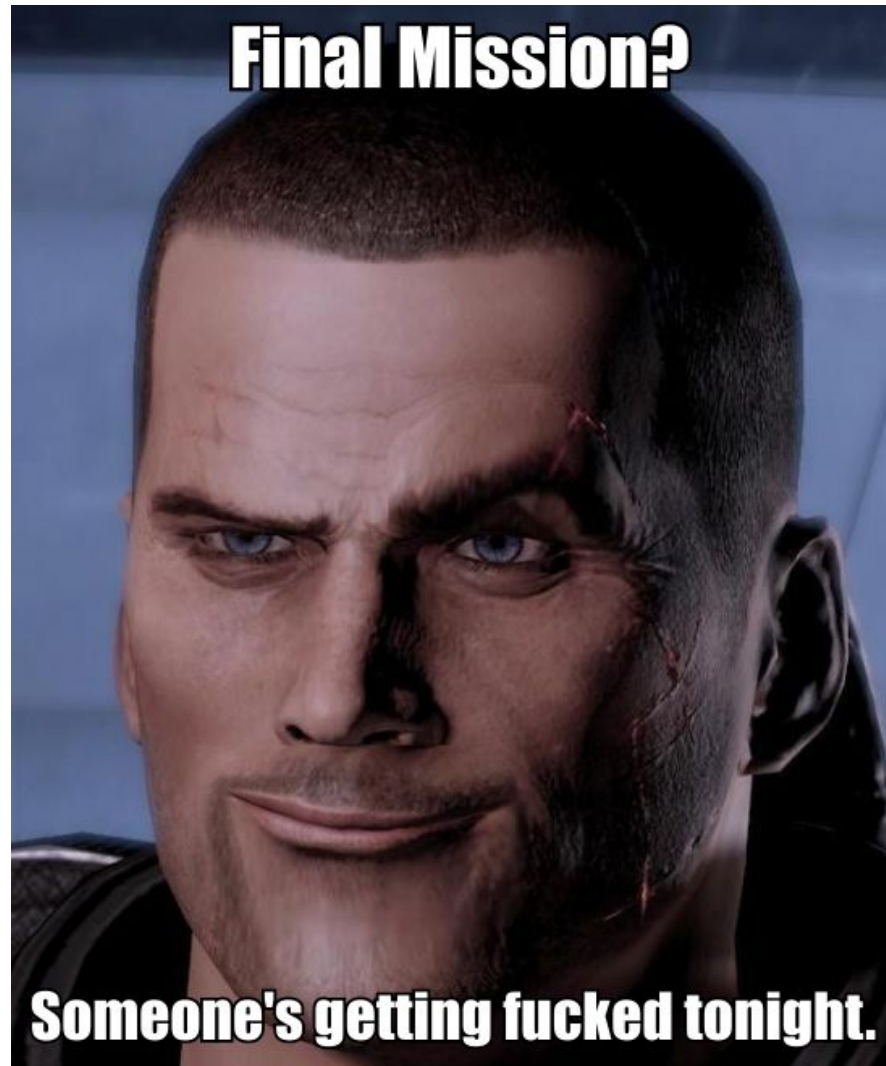


Money can't buy you love



- Example game 1: *Dragon Age*
- “Show” side of the axis
 - ▣ NPCs must be wooed – the Warden has to consistently make choices that please/align with the possible romance
 - ▣ However, physical “gifts” to keep affection high are critical
- Medium number of available options
 - ▣ 2 gender-locked options, 2 “bisexual” options
- Polyamory impossible

Commander “Mack” Shepard



Commander “Mack” Shepard

- Example game 2: *Mass Effect 1*
- “Tell” side of the axis
 - ▣ Shepard doesn’t have to be particularly nice to an NPC to woo them; s/he merely has to show interest
 - ▣ Paragon/Renegade actions have little impact on romances
- Relatively low number of options
 - ▣ 1 gender-locked option for Fem!Shep and Man!Shep
 - ▣ 1 bisexual option, sorta (“Is it gay if it’s an alien?”)
 - ▣ Options become exponentially greater in *ME2* and *ME3*

But what about the gay stuff?



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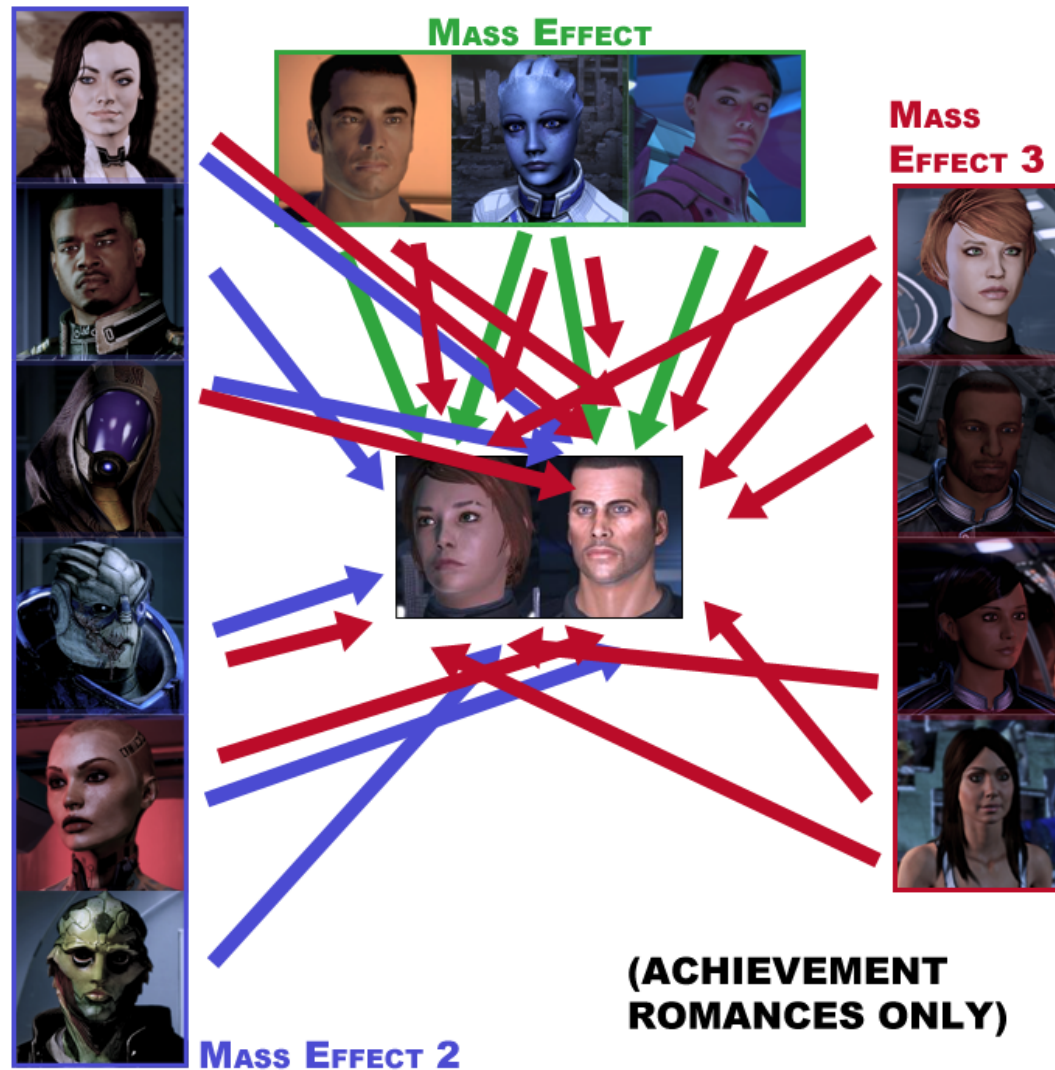


- Interestingly, however, the mechanics of romance seem to function more or less independently of if the option is a same-sex option or not.
- The primary “mechanic” of same-sex romances is effectively a dipswitch: if it’s “on,” you can romance them. If it’s not, the option never appears in the first place.

There's this...



...and then there's this



A small note on *ME3*



- Male Shepard has 9 romance options
 - ▣ 2 are same-sex (Kaidan, Cortez)
 - ▣ 7 are opposite-sex
 - ▣ Kaidan can go gay for man!Shep
- Female Shepard has 6 romance options
 - ▣ 2 are opposite-sex
 - ▣ 4 are same-sex (Traynor, Liara, Allers, Kelly)
 - ▣ 2 previous *ME2* options become “unavailable”

Conclusions



- Clear progression to making the possibility of same-sex relationships available in Bioware games:
 - ▣ *DA1*: 2 specific options, *DA2*: 6 options that are everyone
 - ▣ *ME1*: Just Liara, *ME2*: No new same-sex options, *ME3*: 1 new bisexual option, 2 new queer options (one for men, one for women), 1 option to “make canon” the queering of an existing character (Kaidan)

Conclusions

- Same-sex relationships in Bioware games function *mechanically* in exactly the same way; the only thing that changes is the level at which the fiction presents a defined sexual identity for NPCs
- *DA1, ME1-3* choose a “specific” model: characters are almost entirely straight or gay
 - ▣ Note: no verbalized/”explicit” bisexuals, but “implied” ones in Kelly Chambers (*ME2*) and Diana Allers (*ME3*)
- *DA2* chose an “open” model: characters who can be romanced don’t have a defined sexuality
 - ▣ Or if they do, it’s implied to be open/pan/bisexual (e.g. Isabela)

Takeaways



- Discussion of “types” of same-sex romance options worth doing
 - ▣ Consider Adrienne Shaw’s discussion of the representation conundrum – is it better to be represented poorly than not at all?
- What are the benefits/drawbacks of the approaches?
 - ▣ *DA2* approach – lots of agency, deeper relationships, but queer identity only ever implied
 - ▣ *ME* approach – queer identities more explicit, characters can have a more full/explicit queer identity, but this comes with “dipswitch” problem of locked options
- Romances are for everyone but onus often on the player to make them so

Thank you!



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