NPC Romance as a Safe Space: BioWare and Healthier Identity Tourism

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Introduction

The NPC Romance Project began as class project for a 100-level Communications course at Chatham University, for which the assignment was to "examine in depth an aspect of any medium of your choosing." My group chose to examine romantic relationships, and as a game designer at Schell Games whose focus is on narrative and content design, I chose to examine romantic relationships in video games. Understanding that much work has already been done about romances which take place virtually between players who meet in real time while playing massively multi-player online roleplaying games (MMORPGs), and having no relevant personal experience of that kind, I decided to examine my own behavior toward romance-able non-player characters (NPCs) in single-player roleplaying games.

I realized that over the years, while I as a straight woman had always played straight female characters and romanced nine male romance-able NPCs, eight of these male NPCs had personal characteristics (such as "emo," untrustworthy, non-monogamous, and violent) which would be completely impractical in real-life partners. In the ninth case, I was so obsessed with Alistair from BioWare's *Dragon Age: Origins* (a character resembling my real-life romantic partner both physically and in personality) that I re-played a 50-hour game completely through three different times, in order to get that romance to work out in a way that was most satisfying for me. Baffled by the disconnect between my real-life attractions and romantic behaviors and that I was displaying within games, I decided to survey other gamers to try to understand people's romantic behaviors toward

NPCs. I began with no clear hypothesis other than to identify patterns in player behavior.

With the help of industry mentors Jesse Schell and Sheri Graner Ray, a comprehensive survey was developed and administered online between the dates of March 1, 2012 and April 25, 2012. Jennifer Brandes Hepler, a mentor and senior writer at BioWare, indicated that BioWare does not collect and has not collected any data relating to NPC romance. Even if such metrics were in BioWare RPGs (they are not, according to Hepler), it would be impossible to truly know the real-life gender of the player. Hepler assisted in development of the survey, but this survey is otherwise independent of BioWare even though its results may be of benefit to that company.

The survey was publicized using social media, by bloggers, using cards distributed at the 2012 Game Developers' Conference in San Francisco, and through posts to threads for specific game forums on the BioWare Social Network; this publicity resulted in 525 total participants, all of whom are gamers or professional game developers (non-gamers were screened and disqualified). Using SurveyMonkey for this research had strengths and weaknesses. The strengths include ease of use and distribution, assistance with data interpretation, and anonymity (which encourages more honest answers in a survey that was called "uncomfortable" by some participants). The weaknesses include the fact that people could opt out of certain questions or stop the survey at any point; participants could also re-take the survey multiple times and thereby thwart the data. Richard LaPiere's 1934 study in behavior and attitude found that self-reporting in surveys can be a faulty method because respondents' actual behaviors may not match their stated attitudes. Anonymity is one way to combat this issue, which could still be a factor here. Absent actual game metrics, which again, BioWare reported they do not use for this purpose, it was determined that a self-reporting, anonymous survey was the best means of obtaining this data. Recognizing the strengths and weaknesses inherent to the process, and reporting honestly about them, it then became important to examine and interpret the findings.

85% of survey respondents were between the ages of 18 and 40 years old, with the 39.6% majority being between the ages of 18 and 25. 41 respondents were disqualified for being non-gamers; 88.2% of respondents identified as "gamers" while 17.5% identified as "professionals in the gaming industry." 64.1% of respondents identified as female, 33.8% identified as male, and 2.1% identified as other (allowing for transgendered or other alternatives outside the male/female binary). 57.2% of respondents were in a romantic relationship at the time they answered the survey, with 25.9% being married and 26.7% describing their attachment as a "long-term relationship." 71.8% of respondents identified as straight, 19% identified as bisexual, and 9.2% identified as gay, lesbian, or other. The composite survey respondent was a 21-year-old straight female gamer, in a relationship. 70% of the survey respondents completed the entire, comprehensive, 25-question survey.

Sex-Swapping in Single-Player RPGs

In "Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet," Lisa Nakamura coins a phrase called "identity tourism," meaning that people "use race and gender as amusing prostheses to be donned and shed without 'real life' consequences." Nakamura believes that such identity tourism, when adopted by gamers, is harmful because identity tourists often take their "virtual experiences as other-gendered and other-raced avatars as a kind of lived truth." Nakamura asserts that online role-playing games are primarily where identity tourism takes place.

In a related essay from the book, "World of Warcraft & Philosophy," Phill Alexander describes his experiences playing *World of Warcraft* as a female character. Alexander describes what it was like to play as a female character, when female members of his gaming guild began to confide in him about their personal lives, believing that he was female in real life. Alexander felt terrible remorse for his inadvertent dishonesty. Alexander supports Nakamura's theories. He cautions that identity tourism cannot happen without ethical cost when playing an online roleplaying game in real time with other human beings because

of the real-life connections and emotional attachments that develop in games.

It is not news that when playing single player RPGs, people play characters unlike who they are in life: this is an object of an RPG. However, when I searched for data suggesting the degree to which this happens, the way it happens, and why it happens, I could find none; this was a key motivation for the NPC Romance Project. The survey data suggests that sex-swapping and the exploration of alternative sexualities IS happening in single-player RPGs, and the research data suggests reason and degree. In consideration of sex-swapping and experimentation, my data also supports Nick Yee's work on behavior mapping and demographics in RPG games, though he primarily studies MMORPGs and my work is in single-player RPGs. Yee's findings about sex-swapping, however, could fall into Nakamura's definition of identity tourism.

When I began to consider my data and what it meant, I kept returning to the idea of identity tourism. People are experimenting with gender and sexuality in these games, to a large degree. Once the human-to-human component of an MMO is removed, it also removes the ethical cost described by Nakamura and Alexander. It occurred to me that perhaps in the case of the single player RPG, Nakamura's identity tourism could actually become a healthy and positive form of exploration, resulting in greater self-awareness and confidence in players, and greater tolerance for sexualities other than the player's own.

Apply Nakamura's concepts to single-player RPGs such as *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age: Origins*, and a different dynamic emerges. Nakamura's "identity tourism" occurs, but without the ethical cost warned by Alexander because you aren't misrepresenting yourself to real people. Data from The NPC Romance Project suggests that a much healthier version of identity tourism is taking place in single-player RPGs, and it can therefore be argued that important cultural work may be happening which creates more tolerance toward people of varied sexual orientations.

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When you are playing a role-playing game (RPG), which gender character do you prefer to play as?

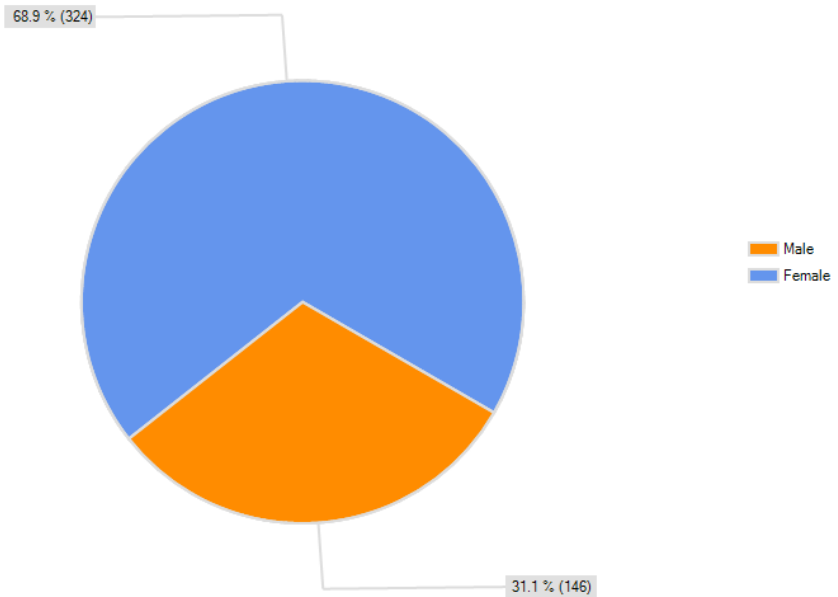68.9 % (324)

31.1 % (146)

Male
Female

Fig. 1. Preferred Gender Avatar While Playing Single-Player RPGs.

Recognizing that there are some games such as Witcher that do not allow players a gender choice when selecting an avatar, the question was posed to respondents regarding which gender character they prefer to play when playing a single-player RPG. Keeping in mind that the real-life gender makeup of respondents was 64.1% female to 33.8% male, there is a discrepancy in this answer [Fig. 1], as some 68.9% of respondents prefer to play a female character. This result suggests that there is a degree of sex-swapping going on. Unclear here is whether specific female respondents prefer to play male-gendered characters, or whether specific male respondents prefer to play male-gendered characters, and as this research is currently in process and evolving, more attention will need to be paid to this factor in future study. To try to understand gender role preference in avatar a bit further, the question was posed a second time in a slightly different way:

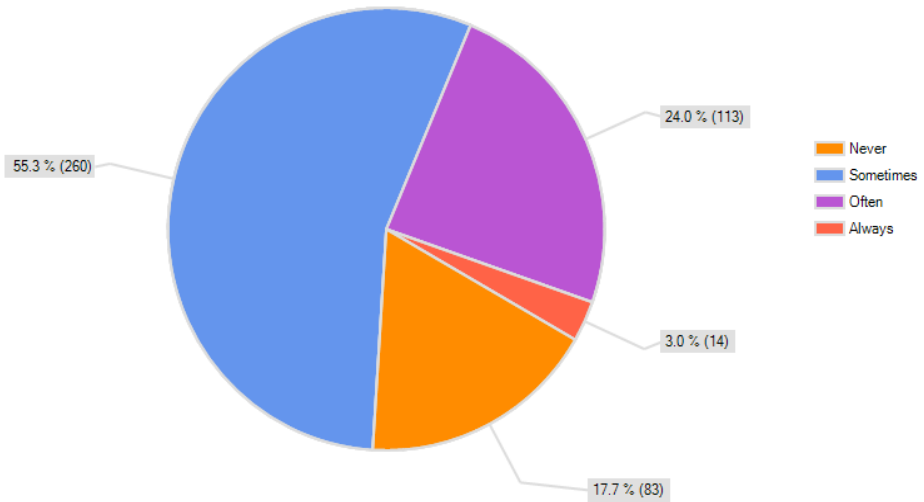**Do you play role-playing games as a character whose gender is different from your gender in real life?**

Fig. 2. Frequency of Sex-Swapping While Playing Single-Player RPGs.

Respondents were also asked about the frequency of any sex-swapping behavior they engage in when playing single-player RPGs. The result was that some 17.7% of players stated that they never sex-swap, while the remaining 82.3% of respondents stated that they either always do (3%), sometimes do (55.3%), or often do (24%). 82.3% of respondents appear to be sex-swapping in some way, at some times, yet the overlap in gender preference in the previous question was only about 6%. This suggests that 1) either the first question is correctly reflective of actual behavior and not the second, or 2) the second question is reflective of actual behavior and not the first. A compelling read of this data would be that 82.3% of players are sex-swapping, and that the 6% of players who demonstrated overlap in gendered avatar preferences are reflective of males, sex-swapping to female characters. This finding would support Yee, but again, Yee's work is in MMOs and therefore that result might be more

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representative of the type of identity tourism Nakamura and Alexander caution us about.

BioWare and the Representation of Romance

In Eastern culture, it is culturally accepted to actively market Otome games, which are games exclusively devoted to NPC romance. In Western culture, however, there is controversy sometimes surrounding romance-able NPC content. This can be attributed to theories discussed by Dr. Marty Klein in his 2006 article in the *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality*. Klein believes that sexuality in America is a war between two types of people, "erotophobes" and "erotophiles." Writes Klein, "The goal of this war is to control sexual expression, colonize sexual imagination, and restrict sexual choices." (Klein, 2006) The erotophobes are people associated with the fundamentalist Christian right, whom Klein describes as threatened by sexuality, sexually repressed, and wanting to control not just their own sexual behaviors but those of everyone else. The erotophiles are those who are more open to sexual expression, sexual exploration, sexual arrangements, sexual privacy, sexual choice, sexual entertainment, sexual health, sexual imagination, and sexual pleasure. Klein argues that in recent years, the erotophobes have been winning.

One recent example of erotophobe involvement in the gaming industry surrounding NPC romances is the criticism of BioWare Entertainment by the Family Research Council, for having same-sex relationships available to explore in the company's most recent release, *Star Wars: The Old Republic* MMORPG (Deloria, 2012). This story, widely circulated in gamer blogs and electronic news sites, shows how a conservative group is attempting to control the gaming experiences of players according to their own religious codes. It has been BioWare's policy for some time to write their romance-able characters in both male and female directions.

This is not the first time BioWare has endured such criticism, as lead writer David Gaider received widespread internet coverage for a statement he released in response to a straight white male who had complained on the BioWare forums that *Dragon Age II* should not

contain homosexual romance options, because he is offended by them, and because he represents the majority demographic of gamers. Gaider responded:

> *"The romances in the game are not for 'the straight male gamer.' They're for everyone. We have a lot of fans, many of whom are neither straight nor male, and they deserve no less attention. We have good numbers, after all, on the number of people who actually used similar sorts of content in (Dragon Age: Origins) and thus don't need to resort to anecdotal evidence to support our idea that their numbers are not insignificant… and that's ignoring the idea that they don't have just as much right to play the kind of game they wish as anyone else. The 'rights' of anyone with regards to a game are murky at best, but anyone who takes that stance must 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."* (Gaider, 2011)

BioWare deserves scrutiny on the topic of games with romance-able NPCs in them, because they are the largest and most successful company producing games of this nature. Gaider's stating of his personal policy (and by extension, BioWare's policy) was partially responsible for inspiring me to study more about player behavior in video games with romance-able NPC's. BioWare, I found, deserves a place in any intellectual conversation about NPC romance in single-player RPGs because of the prevalence of their titles in my survey data.

Dragon Age	73.2%
The Sims	66.8%
Elder Scrolls	66.6%
Mass Effect	64.5%
Fable	57.1%
Final Fantasy	50.4%
Knights of the Old Republic	46.7%
Baldur's Gate	45.6%
Neverwinter Nights	42.4%
Harvest Moon	32.5%
Witcher	29.3%
Jade Empire	26.1%
The Old Republic MMO	24.4%
Vampire	19.0%
Planescape	18.4%
Star Ocean	15.3%
Alpha Protocol	14.2%
Katawa Shoujo	4.3%

**Fig. 3. Games Played Containing NPC Romance.
(Yellow highlighting indicates a title by BioWare.)**

Respondents in a preliminary interview of 37 respondents, which helped with developing my survey, were asked what roleplaying games they had played that contain some form of NPC romance in them. Of the 18 titles most popularly cited, 6 of them – one third – are BioWare titles. The top response was the *Dragon Age* series, and two BioWare titles have been played by over 50% of respondents. (The popularity of these titles in my preliminary interviews was what inspired me to post links to the survey on the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* forums on the BioWare Social Network, to get respondents.)

Upon establishing the importance of BioWare to a conversation about NPC romance, and given BioWare's policies toward making their romance-able NPCs romance-able by both genders, it follows that I sought to collect survey data about the importance of sexual exploration to the audience. What the data found is that players definitely play homosexual and bisexual romance content, when it is offered. The piece that is less clear, however, is whether players are

playing that content because it's there, or experimenting for experimentation's sake, in an effort to add depth to the game. Further study can unpack this a little more.

Single-Player RPGs as Safe Spaces for Sexual Experimentation

Recently in the United States, there has been an unfortunate trend concerning children's suicides where the child was either identifying as gay, or was perceived by others to be gay (Miller, 2011). One of the inherent issues with this unfortunate string of events is the notion that these children who do identify as occupying a non-heteronormative space on the continuum of human sexuality don't feel they have a safe space in which they can be themselves without a social cost. Perhaps BioWare's policy on gender and NPC romance, coupled with the notion of Identity Tourism used in a way that's without ethical cost, can provide a safe space in which people can experiment with sexuality. This could be one aspect in which, as Jane McGonigal noted, "gaming can make a better world."

Over 70% of the survey respondents identified as straight, yet the majority of players do engage in some sort of experimentation with homosexual NPC romances while playing single-player RPGs. They are doing this primarily to add dimension to their gaming experience, and to see where the game's meta-narrative goes based on the romance they are playing. Most reasons players gave for what appeals to them about NPC romance had to do with narrative and story, and physical/visual aspects registered in a comparatively minor way.

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When playing a role-playing video game with romance-able NPC's, do you romance the same gender NPC you would in real life?

34.3 % (161)

27.2 % (128)

6.2 % (29)

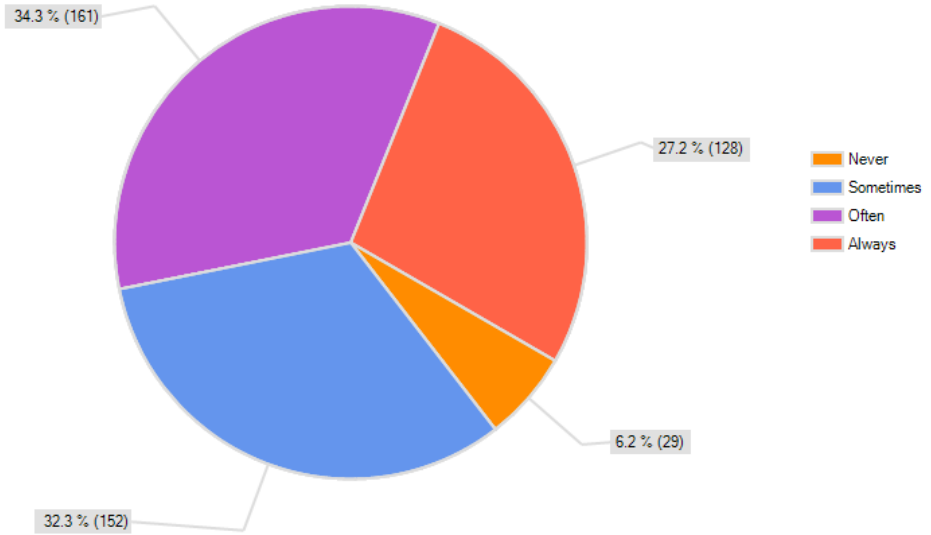32.3 % (152)

Never
Sometimes
Often
Always

Fig. 4. Differences in Gender Romance Between Real Life and RPG.

While 27.2% of players indicated that they always romance the same gender they would in real life, 72.8% responded that they do romance a different gender than they would in real life, either sometimes, often, or even never. This means that a majority of players are experimenting with an NPC romance option different than one they would pursue in real life.

Which romance options have you played before (or might consider playing) in a role-playing video game?
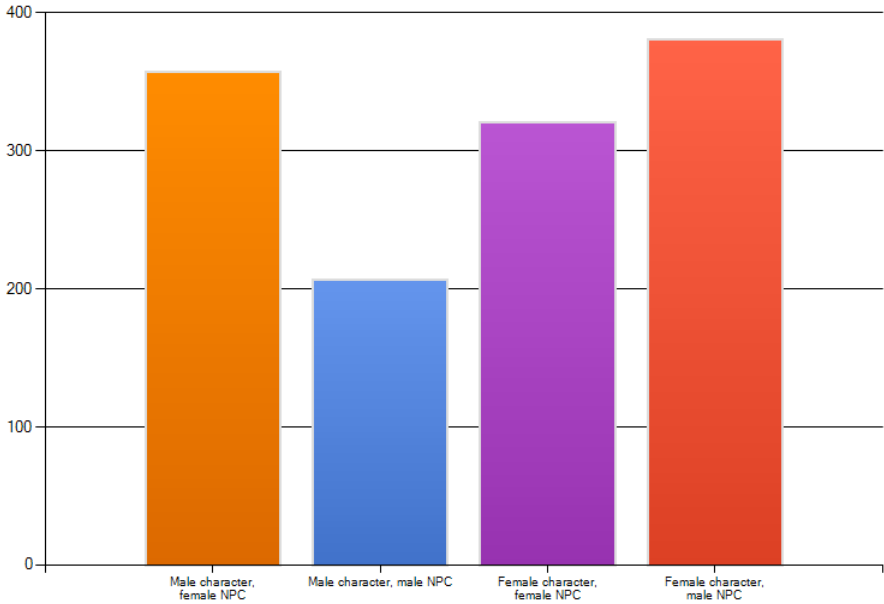
Fig. 5. NPC Romance Combinations Played.

While heterosexual NPC romances (male character with female NPC and/or female character with male NPC) appear to be the combination played most often, male character with male NPC appears to occur at least half as often, and female character with female NPC appears to occur slightly more than ¾ as often. It is certainly possible that the high percentage of female/female experimentation includes male players with a lesbian fetish. However, the fact that the percentage of players experimenting is over 70% should be enough to compensate for experimentation of that nature as a number that large is suggestive of a more widespread bent toward experimentation.

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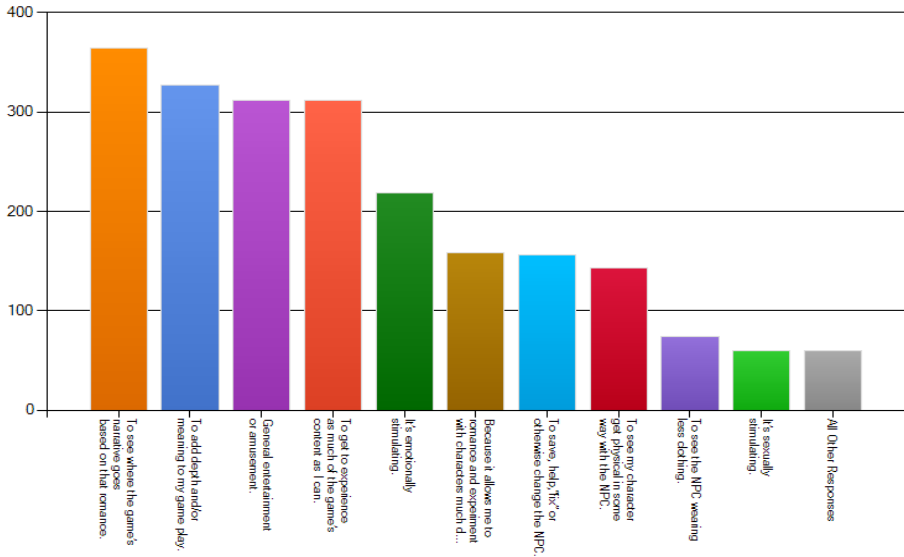**Why might you pursue an NPC romance in a role-playing game? (Check all that apply.)**

Fig. 6. Reasons Behind NPC Romance.

The main reasons players are engaging in NPC romances while playing RPGs mostly have to do with narrative. Physical factors such as seeing the NPC with less clothing, or seeing one's character get physical with a certain NPC, are a lot less important to players than the overall story. Players are using NPC romance to drive the narrative and add depth to their play. For more than half of respondents, NPC romance is emotionally stimulating, while a small group of respondents admits that it can also be sexually stimulating. Some 158 of 408 respondents who answered this question did say that they enjoy experimenting romantically with characters much different than they would pursue in real life. This could mean different genders, or could mean different personalities as well; we still need to unpack the degree to which players are experimenting for its own sake.

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How important are romance-able NPC's to your overall gaming experience in a role-playing game?

28.2 % (115)

38.5 % (157)

Legend:
- Very important!
- Somewhat important.
- Could take it or leave it.
- Not that important.
- Completely unimportant.
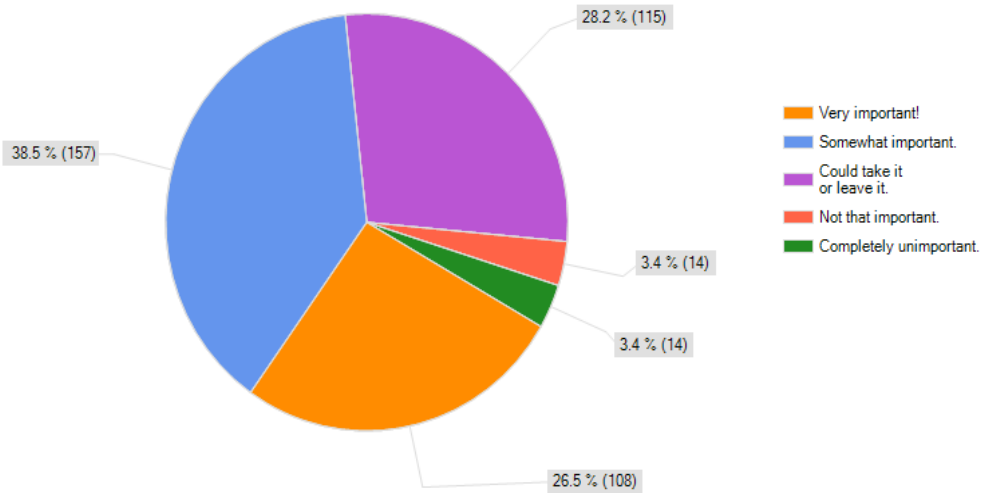
3.4 % (14)

3.4 % (14)

26.5 % (108)

Fig. 7. The Importance of NPC Romance to RPG Gameplay

This set of data is particularly interesting because it reveals that NPC romance is an important component of the RPG experience for many players. While only 6.8% of players said that NPC romance is either "not that important" or "completely unimportant," and 28.2% said they "could take it or leave it," 65% of respondents found NPC romance to be either a "somewhat important" or "very important" component of their RPG experience.

Essentially, players are experimenting regularly with sexuality in NPC romance. The majority feels that NPC romance holds at least some degree of importance to their gaming experience. By extension it follows that such experimentation is also important to players. Most players cite narrative as the reasons behind their pursuit of NPC romance. Perhaps players are both asking for this kind of content, *as*

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well as playing the content because it's there, and the two may not be mutually exclusive. Again, further study may shed more light on this.

Conclusion

BioWare, shown by this survey as important to any conversation about NPC romance, seems to have a relevant policy relating to NPC romance and gender. BioWare's policy and their NPC romances can be improved upon by expanding beyond typical binaries and archetypes, and by providing more and more varied options for those interested in NPC romance. While there is room for improvement, more realism and more inclusivity, BioWare does appear to be providing what the majority of players want to see, despite criticism stating the contrary. Players want NPC romances which contribute to the larger narrative and allow for player experimentation.

In a single-player RPG where there are no live players situated behind the other characters, the ethical cost of Identity Tourism as defined by Lisa Nakamura disappears. Experimentation with sex-swapping and NPC romance in different sexualities could be a safe opportunity – without social cost -- for people who have no other way to explore issues of gender and sexuality. Such exploration could, conceivably, lead to greater self-awareness and tolerance for sexualities different than one's own. This could be very important in light of our society's increasing polarization over issues of sexuality, and specifically in light of recent children's suicides related to issues of sexuality where safe spaces for exploration, without social cost, were clearly lacking. To think that games might be inadvertently performing important cultural work in this regard is an exciting prospect.

Acknowledgments

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