HERE BE QUEERS
LGBT+ Representations in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*

Bachelor's thesis
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Seksuaali- ja sukupuolivähemmistöjen esitys valtavirran videopeleissä on hyvin marginaalista, ja aiheen tutkimus on ollut vastaavasti vähäistä.

Tämä tutkielma tarkastelee Dragon Age: Inquisition (2014) -toimintaroolipelissä esiintyviä seksuaali- ja sukupuolivähemmistöihin kuuluvia henkilöhahmoja multimodaalista ja kriittistä diskurssianalyysiä hyödyntäen. Tarkastelemalla hahmojen roolia, näkyvyyttä, ja minäkuvaa tutkielma pyrkii arvioimaan, miten hahmoesitykset voivat vaikuttaa yleisön asenteisiin.

Tutkielma huomaa, miten *Dragon Age: Inquisition* pyrkii edistämään yleisön suvaitsevuutta ja tietoisuutta seksuaali- ja sukupuolivähemmistöjä kohtaan. Tarkastelluista hahmoesityksistä selviää, miten sukupuoli- ja seksuaalivähemmistöjä voidaan esittää moniulotteisina henkilöhahmoina stereotyyppisistä piirteistä huolimatta. Tutkielma huomaa myös, miten monimuotoinen hahmokaarti auttaa rakentamaan fiktiivisiä maailmoja luomalla mahdollisuuksia laajentaa taustatarinaa.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In comparison to books and film, video games are a relatively new medium for storytelling. The technical limitations of early video games have disappeared over the past decades, allowing game designers and writers to create nearly any type of story imaginable. The interactive nature of the medium has enabled immersive, player-driven stories with branching paths to emerge. (Klug and Lebowitz 2011: 5, 37.) The immersiveness alters how the audience engages with the story, suggesting that video game narratives impact the audience more deeply than any other form of visual media (Friedberg 2015: 3).

According to the Entertainment Software Association (2015), customers spent a total of 22.41 billion US dollars on games industry in the United States alone in 2014. Video games have become an essential part of the entertainment industry, and recent years have seen growth for the international game research community, as research publications, books, seminars, conferences, journals, and associations have been created in the field. Yet, research on the representation of marginalised groups in games has remained limited. Even though video games have long featured lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) characters and storylines, they tend to showcase stereotypes and stale tropes, and positive examples have been few until recently.

BioWare, a Canadian video game developer, has a long history of inclusive depictions of sexual orientations and gender identities: In 2003, the studio released *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, introducing Juhani, the first known lesbian character in the *Star Wars* universe. *Mass Effect 3* (2012) was dubbed controversial for featuring a gay pilot named Steve Cortez and establishing a recurring male character, Kaidan Alenko, as bisexual. More recently, the release of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), the third instalment in BioWare's acclaimed Dragon Age series, set off a flurry of coverage and controversy over the new characters, namely the homosexual male character Dorian Pavus, and the transgender male character Cremisius "Krem" Aclassi. While these characters were met with nearly universal acclaim from video game journalists and critics, the online comments are full of criticism targeted at the characters. For instance, dissenters have accused BioWare of catering to certain audiences by forcing unnecessary diversity, while some LGBT+ advocates argue that these characters conform to negative stereotypes that have been historically used to oppress gender and sexual minorities. (Cain 2015; Karmali 2015.)

The goal of this thesis is to examine *Dragon Age: Inquisition* to infer the nature of these representations; by employing multimodality and Critical Discourse Analysis, I aim to determine whether the LGBT+ characters were included merely as an act of tokenism, if they are full-fledged characters that serve a purpose in enriching, expanding and exposing the game world, or if they fall somewhere in between the two extremes.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

George Gerbner (as cited in McQuail 2010: 495) famously argues that media content in the United States contributes to the audience's conception of marginalised groups by providing "a consistent and near-total symbolic environment that supplies norms for conduct and beliefs about a wide range of real-life situations". In similar vein, Richard Dyer (1993, as cited in Edwards 2010: 162) argues that the actual treatment of social groups is directly related to their treatment in cultural representation. Additionally, Gomillion and Giuliano (2011) argue that the increase of availability of lesbian, gay, and bisexual role models in the media can exert a positive influence over LGB individuals, by serving as a source of inspiration, pride, and comfort. They also argue that the absence of rich, positive representations of a particular group causes its members to question their individual value. Shaw (2014: 39) points out that it is important for LGBT+ individuals in particular to see themselves reflected in the media, because if they do not know other LGBT+ people, it is one of the only realms in which they may see others like them. In conclusion, representing LGBT+ individuals is not enough, as the nature of the representation also matters.

The early depictions of LGBT+ individuals throughout the 20th century were often based on prevailing stereotypes. Blum (2004: 251) defines a stereotype as follows:

> Stereotypes are false or misleading generalizations about groups held in a manner that renders them largely, though not entirely, immune to counterevidence. In doing so, stereotypes powerfully shape the stereotyper's perception of stereotyped groups, seeing the stereotypic characteristics when they are not present, failing to see the contrary of those characteristics when they are, and generally homogenizing the group.

For example, the portrayals of gay men typically adhered to the "sissy" archetypes, while the lesbian archetypes emphasised the characters' sinister, masculine qualities. Additionally, LGB+ characters are typically depicted as "either victims or villains, both of whom frequently had tragic outcomes, such as suicide, violent death, or isolation". (Capusto 2000; Gross 2001; Russo 1987, as cited in Gomillion and Giuliano 2011: 340.) Gomillion and Giuliano argue that even acclaimed contemporary depictions of LGB+ characters still adhere to these conventions. There has been little research on transgender characters portrayed in the media. GLAAD (n.d.) has catalogued transgender-inclusive television episodes since 2002 and found that, in addition to being usually cast as either victims or villains, transgender characters were most commonly depicted as sex workers. Moreover, transphobic language was present in at least 61 % of the

catalogued episodes. While transgender women are generally assigned feminine gender roles, transgender men are believed to possess masculine and feminine personality traits and engage in traditionally masculine and feminine hobbies. Transgender individuals are also considered to be mentally ill, "highly noticeable", and social outcasts. (Gazzola and Morrison 2014.)

However, Dyer (2005, as cited in Shaw 2014: 19) argues that stereotypes in themselves are not necessarily negative nor false. Shaw adds that "the positive or negative qualities of portrayals exist not within texts themselves but rather within the social hierarchies, disparities, and power relation to which they refer and that they support". Thus, to say that a given portrayal reaffirms a negative stereotype of a group implies that the group "exists in the world in a singular way that is misrecognized". (Shaw 2014: 20.) According to Shaw (2009: 245), instead of talking about "whether stereotypes are true or offensive, it is better to ask what purpose they are serving in the text."

Clark (1969) establishes four chronological stages of media representation of minority groups: non-representation, ridicule, regulation, and respect. He defines the first stage of non-representation as an outright exclusion from the media. Once the group begins to be represented, its members are frequently presented as stereotypical objects of ridicule and laughter. During the third stage, the members of the group are represented in limited, socially acceptable roles. The final stage is respect; the group is presented in the vast variety of roles, both positive and negative, that the members of the group occupy in real life. Stereotypical characters may still appear during this stage, but scholars do not consider them to be as harmful as a part of a wide range of other characters from the same group. (Clark 1969, as cited in Raley and Lucas 2006: 19, 23.) Sociologist Li Yinhe (2008, as cited in Zhang 2014: 71–72) has established a similar model for the development of gay figures in cinema. First, gay characters are shown in stereotyped supporting roles as comic reliefs. Later, they are represented in supporting roles as regular people. During the third stage, gay characters have leading roles in films centred on homosexuality, and ultimately, leading roles in mainstream action, science fiction and mystery films.

Shaw (2014: 18) argues that marginalised groups are only represented when their inclusion is marketable and financially profitable. In like manner, Gerbner and Gross (1976) propose that the commercial structure of the mass media limits the opportunity for representing diverse characters. Shaw (2014: 21) reports that scholars and popular media critics believe that the lack

of representation of marginalised groups in video games is tied to the homogeneity of the game industry. Alternatively, film director Mike Buonaiuto (as cited in Ford 2015) argues that writers worry that the audience does not understand complicated fictional concepts and, for this reason, rely on the prevailing stereotypes to make characters recognisable.

Karmali (2014) reports in an article for IGN that in video games, gay male characters are significantly less common than lesbian characters. Karmali suggests that executives want to appear progressive, while simultaneously pandering for the male gaze, by exploiting lesbian sexuality. Karmali also argues that female sexuality is trivialised, and, thus, less threatening to the predominantly male audience.

Role-playing games have usually attempted to create more diversity for players, given the essentiality of player choice in the genre (Shaw 2014: 34). Lionhead Studios' action role-playing game *Fable* (2004) is famous for allowing the player character to have same-sex relationships with non-player characters. *Fable II* (2008) goes a bit further by allowing players to marry characters of the same gender. According to the creative director of *Fable*, Dene Carter (as cited in Ochalla 2006), including the option to "play gay" was not, originally at least, "an example of the developers' social consciousness"; in *Fable*, the non-player-controlled villagers each have been programmed to be attracted to the player character, and changing that for the characters of the same gender had seemed like "a ridiculous waste of time". In other words, depicting all characters as bisexual, or "player-sexual", requires the least amount of effort.

There is a vocal minority of gamers that actively resists any content not targeted to straight white male players (Ochalla 2006; Cain 2015). As seen with the releases of *Dragon Age II* (2011), *Mass Effect 3*, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, and *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), forums full of angry, white, straight male players have accused BioWare of ruining both series by pandering to women, people of colour, and LGBT+ people. The problems with *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, according to angry dissenters on online boards, include, but are not limited to: a large number LGBT+ characters, especially in positions of power; unattractive female characters; the lack of revealing clothing on female characters; and the lack of brothels and sexual violence. Cain (2015) argues that straight men are only against pandering when it is for someone else, as nearly every piece of media has been created with them in mind as its main audience; every piece of media featuring a female protagonist, gay romance, or anything that deviates from the "standard gruff white antihero-centric formula", is seen as a betrayal.

According to Cain, pandering to the white straight male audience greatly limits the creative potential of different media forms.

Østby (2017) has written a doctoral thesis on sexuality and gender in BioWare games, including *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.[1] Regrettably, I did not learn about the study until the final stage of my thesis.

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[1] Østby, K. J. (2017). *From Embracing Eternity to Riding the Bull: Representations of Homosexuality and Gender in the Video Game Series Mass Effect and Dragon Age*. Doctoral thesis. University of Oslo. Available at: https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/55261

3 METHODS AND MATERIALS

This section will cover the methodology and materials. First, I will introduce the employed theoretical frameworks and describe the coding of the data (Section 3.1). The following sections will include justification for selecting the source material and research questions (Section 3.2), and provide an overview of the game, including the story, setting and game mechanics (Section 3.3).

3.1 Methodology

Video games are, by definition, multimodal products (Gee 2015: 56). Therefore, understanding multimodality is necessary to successfully examine how video games represent gender and sexuality. According to Ventola et al. (2004: 1–2), multimodality is concerned with decoding the various 'modes' used for meaning-making, including, but not limited to, linguistic, aural, and visual resources. Ventola et al. argue that the analysis of language alone is not enough, as nowadays texts that allow 'language' to be excised as an independent unit are becoming rare due to the advances in communication technology. Similarly, Bateman et al. (2017: 8) argue that paying attention to individual forms of expression is insufficient, as these forms do not occur singly.

In addition to multimodality, I will utilise Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Van Dijk (1993: 254) asserts that CDA is an approach that concerns itself with the role that discourse plays in maintaining inequality in society. Machin and Mayr (2012: 9–10) argue that the integration of both CDA and multimodality is crucial in revealing "the kinds of ideas, absences and taken-for-granted assumptions in the images as well as the texts which will also serve the ends of revealing the kinds of power interests buried in them". For these reasons, the integration of both CDA and multimodality allows a better understanding of how gender and sexuality are represented in video games.

Drawing from these theoretical frameworks, my analysis of the source material concerns itself with linguistic, aural, and visual elements that are used to convey the narrative, setting, characters, and gameplay. The linguistic and aural elements appear in the characters' dialogue, quest objectives, letters, codex entries, etc., while the visual elements, such as images, animations, and gestures, are present in the cutscenes and gameplay. For the purpose of this

thesis, the game is played multiple times, while exhausting all possible key choices and dialogue options, and the aforementioned elements are recorded and interpreted.

3.2 Material and research questions

The source material consists of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and its downloadable content. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is the first game in the series to have exclusively gay and lesbian romance options in addition to the straight and bisexual ones featured in the previous instalments. Additionally, there are numerous non-player-controlled characters (NPCs) that add to the diverse representation of sexual orientations; these characters range from minor soldiers to plot-relevant key figures, such as national rulers and religious leaders. Furthermore, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* features two transgender characters. As there are dozens of LGBT+ characters in the game, I largely limited my examination to two characters: the homosexual male companion character Dorian Pavus, and the supporting transgender male NPC Cremisius "Krem" Aclassi. I chose these characters for several reasons. First, the game pays special attention to Dorian's sexual orientation and Krem's gender identity; Dorian's homosexuality plays an important role in one of his companion quests, and the player can discuss and react to Krem's transgender identity. For comparison, Josephine's bisexuality is not referenced in-game and becomes apparent only if the player pursues romance with her with both male and female Inquisitors across multiple playthroughs. Secondly, by originating from the nation of Tevinter Imperium, both Dorian and Krem serve an important role in establishing a sense of a larger universe existing outside of the areas the players visit in-game. Although Tevinter Imperium plays an important role in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the game does not visit it, making Dorian and Krem two of the key sources of information relating to the foreign nation. Finally, as I mentioned earlier, Dorian and Krem have garnered a significant amount of media attention in comparison to other characters and have sparked contradicting reactions from game journalists, players, and LGBT+ activists (Karmali 2014; mundanematt 2014; avariaum 2014; spiritbomb 2015).

My analysis aims to answer to following questions: (1) Does the game represent LGBT+ people in a way that helps the audience to get an accurate and sympathetic impression of LGBT+ people? (2) Are romantic, emotional, and sexual relationships that include LGBT+ characters developed with the same degree of explicitness as non-LGBT+ relationships? (3) Do these characters serve a purpose in the game, or have they been included as mere tokenism, that is a

symbolic effort made to give an appearance of diversity (Oxford Dictionaries) that the players cannot identify with (Shaw 2014: 226).

3.3 The Dragon Age series

Dragon Age: Inquisition is the third major game in the Dragon Age franchise, the sequel to *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) and *Dragon Age II* (2011). The game was released in November 2014 for various platforms, namely Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, and Xbox One, marking BioWare's most successful launch in history, with 1.14 million units sold worldwide during the first week (D'Angelo 2014). The positive reviews highlighted the story, engaging combat, detailed environments, soundtrack, and voice acting. The game has won several awards, including Game of the Year and Best Role-playing awards from several gaming publications.

As the Dragon Age series is incredibly complex, it important to briefly elucidate the key themes, characters and plotlines present to avoid confusion: The series is set in Thedas, a medieval continent inhabited by humans and fantastical species and creatures. In the first game, *Dragon Age: Origins*, the player controls a legendary warrior called the Grey Warden on their quest to restore piece in the kingdom of Ferelden that is caught up in civil wars and an outbreak of darkspawn called the Blight. *Dragon Age II* takes place in the neighbouring city state of Kirkwall, where the second protagonist, Hawke, a survivor of the Blight, tries to rebuild their life. The events of these games lead to a war between the templars and the mages, the religious and the magical. In the beginning of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the religious leader of Thedas attempts negotiations and summons both factions to the Temple of Sacred Ashes. Before a peace can be reached, an explosion destroys the temple and opens a tear in the veil, the magical barrier between the real world and the realm of spirits. The player takes control of the sole survivor, who ultimately becomes the Inquisitor, the leader of an ancient order revived to restore peace in Thedas.

The gameplay of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is similar to its predecessors, mostly consisting of elements typically found in action role-playing games. The player controls their customised player character called the Inquisitor and nine "companion" characters. The player can battle enemies with swords, arrows, and magic, interact with NPCs, gather resources, build influence,

complete side quests, proceed through the main story, and pursue romantic/sexual relationships with "romanceable" characters.

In 2000, BioWare released *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn*, representing the first time BioWare would utilise the concept of romanceable characters, which has since become a defining feature of their games. As its predecessors, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* features these "romance routes" – highly popular, optional romantic subplots, which usually involve quests and dialogue, leading to a confession of love, a sex scene, and in some cases, marriage. Since *Dragon Age: Origins*, the series has offered several same-sex romance options, but until *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, all romanceable LGB+ companions, as in characters the player can recruit and use in battle, have been bisexual. In *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Dragon Age II*, the dialogue options that trigger a romance were removed from conversations with characters who could not be romanced with the player character of that gender. For example, the female player character cannot flirt with the female companion Morrigan, because her romance triggers will appear only for male characters. In *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the players are left to discover the characters' sexual orientations for themselves. For example, the male Inquisitor can flirt with the lesbian companion, Sera, but she will reject him. In *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, there are eight romantically/sexually available companions and advisers. Each character has their own preference in the terms of sexuality, and five of them have been confirmed as either gay, lesbian, bisexual, or pansexual.

The characters have gathered differing amounts of media attention; Dorian has been deemed as the "gaming's breakout gay character" by various gaming publications, and Krem Aclassi has been called one of the only positive portrayals of transgender identities in AAA video games. On the other hand, some have criticised Dorian's storyline for being stereotypical and primarily defined by his sexual orientation, and the dialogue options centred around Krem has been deemed transphobic; they argue that these characters were included only to create a false sense of inclusivity and that they do not hold any other purpose than to "tick a box".

4 ANALYSIS

First, I will examine the homosexual male character Dorian Pavus. The remainder of the section will focus on Cremisius "Krem" Aclassi, addressing the issue of transgender male representation. I will also examine the role these characters play in expanding the game universe.

4.1 Dorian Pavus

As mentioned earlier, Dorian Pavus is the first gay male companion character in the Dragon Age series. The character was written by the lead writer David Gaider, who himself is a gay man. Gaider confirmed Dorian's sexual orientation during an introductory interview prior to the release of the game. First, he offers insight into Dorian's past and personality; Gaider describes him as a highly skilled mage with "a streak of idealism hidden beneath his sarcasm" and talks about the conflicted relationship Dorian has with his corrupted homeland, the Tevinter Imperium. Finally, Gaider confirms that Dorian will be a romance option exclusively available for the male player character and "the first fully gay character [he]'s had the opportunity to write". (Dragon Age: Inquisition Official Site 2017.) The interview sparked a heated online debate, which Gaider later addressed in an interview for IGN (2015):

> The post's purpose was to announce Dorian's existence, not to announce that he was gay, and yet it felt awkward to talk around that fact when it made up an important part – if not the only important – of who he is. […] I also knew that mentioning it would, for many, eclipse everything else I said about him. And that's exactly what happened.

Gaider argues that even though Dorian's homosexuality makes for an important part of the character, it does not define him entirely. Yet, some people reduced the character to his sexual orientation even before the game was released. Although Dorian has been deemed "the gaming's breakout gay character" by several gaming publications, some players criticise Dorian and his storyline for relying too heavily on stereotypes and for being there only to create a false sense of inclusivity. The following sections aim to determine whether the overall portrayal is positive or negative. I will examine the character's role in the game, stereotypes present, and the ways in which the character is treated in comparison to straight characters.

According to Russo (1987, as cited in Gomillion and Giuliano 2011: 340), gay male characters are typically depicted as "an asexual, effeminate, and often ridiculous or ineffectual foil to a

story's hero". The previous sections have established that a positive portrayal does not necessarily show the character performing heroic acts but depicts them as human with both positive and negative traits. In other words, Dorian is shown in a positive light as long as the game does not encourage the players to detest him.

The Dragon Age series deals heavily with grey morality and the players face numerous moral dilemmas throughout the games; the players must resolve conflicts, where neither side is totally good nor completely evil, and the companions will generally either approve or disapprove of the player's actions. Depending on the player's actions throughout the game, Dorian will either begin to respect or loathe the Inquisitor. He may also remain neutral. In other words, the players' experiences with Dorian vary depending on their decisions throughout the game; Dorian may become the Inquisitor's closest friend, or he may leave the Inquisition in the middle of the game. Generally, Dorian approves of showing kindness, witty banter, and standing up for victims of oppression. If the player is continuously unnecessarily violent, cruel, or abuses their power, Dorian calls the Inquisitor a "cancerous growth" spreading across Thedas and leaves the Inquisition. In conclusion, Dorian's friendship is moderately easy to gain.

The player can first meet Dorian while he is trying to unravel a conspiracy against the Inquisition, or alternatively, when Dorian risks his life to warn the Inquisition of an upcoming attack. Even though he is shown performing a noble act, his background as a Tevinter mage is intended to invite suspicion. If the player later asks Dorian to tell more about himself, he answers: "I am Dorian Pavus, scion of House Pavus, a product of generations of careful breeding, and the repository of its hopes and dreams. Naturally, I despised it all: the lies, the scheming, the illusions of supremacy. That's Tevinter in a nutshell, isn't it?" Initially, Dorian comes off as charming and idealistic, but also arrogant and boastful. During the same conversation, the player learns that Dorian holds a rather controversial opinion on the slavery in his homeland; he argues that being a slave is better than dying on the streets. Dorian changes his outlook during the course of the game and approves whenever the Inquisitor speaks against slavery. He also tends to "drink himself into a stupor" after a rough day and sneaks wine from the Inquisition's wine cellar, suggesting that he may be a highly functioning alcoholic. As seen, Dorian starts out as a flawed character, but he grows and learns over the course of the game.

Dorian has a few traditionally feminine characteristics, notably his appreciation for fashion. He puts effort into his appearance; he grooms himself and maintains his notorious moustache. He

demonstrates his keen eye for fashion by dressing in asymmetric clothing and critiquing others' fashion choices. However, Dorian's interest in fashion likely stems from his background as a member of a noble family, as other noble-born characters share similar interests. While other upper-class characters praise Dorian's sense of fashion, some lower-class characters consider him vain. In other words, while Dorian's stylishness may be a characteristic that, whether intentionally or not, emphasises his homosexuality, it can be read as an upper-class interest that highlights his higher social status.

As mentioned earlier, what gay characters do for a living can enforce stereotypes. Gay men are often equated with jobs related to beauty and fashion, and in fan content, Dorian is often depicted as a stylist or hairdresser due to his interest in fashion. In the game, however, Dorian is a multitalented scholar, historian, politician and inventor. His revolutionary inventions make him one of the brightest characters in-game. For example, he helps to develop magic that allows time travel and invents a magical "phone" just to communicate with the Inquisitor. In the epilogue, Dorian is named ambassador and he forms a political party together with the openly transgender female character Maevaris Tilani to reform their homeland and fight corruption. As a companion character, Dorian will accompany the Inquisitor on their adventures; Dorian enjoys exploring ancient ruins and he is an asset on the battlefield due to his magical talent.

Dorian comes out to the Inquisitor as gay during his companion quest *Last Resort of Good Men* that has the Inquisitor accompany Dorian to a meeting with his father, Halward, who is hoping to reconcile with his estranged son. To start the quest, the Inquisitor must have a warm relationship with Dorian. As always, the player's dialogue choices shape how the conversation unfolds. If the female Inquisitor has flirted with Dorian in the past, she can accuse him of leading her on, but otherwise, the player cannot react negatively to Dorian's homosexuality. In the following example, the Inquisitor expresses surprise after asking Dorian to elaborate:

Dorian: I prefer the company of men. My father disapproves.

Inquisitor: I'll need you to explain that.

Dorian: Did I stutter? Men, and the company thereof. As in sex. Surely you've heard of it.

Inquisitor: I just… didn't expect that.

Dorian: Well, it's not as if introduce myself that way. "Hello, my name is

Dorian. I like men." Maybe I should start. Some days it seems that's all anyone cares about.

Additionally, Dorian confirms that although women are "great", they are "not for him". Besides the lesbian companion Sera, Dorian is the only romanceable companion that offers verbal confirmation about their sexual orientation in-game.

Past research has shown that the mainstream media presents homosexual characters with an excessive focus on their sexual orientation (Fouts and Inch 2008). Overall, the plot trajectory of *Last Resort of Good Men* follows the stereotypical coming out narrative. However, it would be an overstatement to say that Dorian's entire narrative arc is defined by his homosexuality, when most of it centres around his desire to redeem his homeland. The above piece of dialogue suggests that Gaider is aware of the trend of equating homosexual characters with their sexual orientation. Additionally, Clark (1969) points out that stereotypical tropes are not as harmful as a part of a wide range of characters from the same social group. Thus, it is important to note that out of the ten LGB+ companions and advisors across all three games, Dorian is the only one to have a companion quest that deals explicitly with the character's sexual orientation. For comparison, Sera's companion quest has the Inquisitor resolve a conflict between her mysterious organization and some nobles, while Josephine needs the Inquisitor's help to recover her family's lost fortune.

Scenes that show characters enjoying sex provide the audience with emotional contact (Zhang 2014: 38–39). Despite usually being depicted as preoccupied with their sexual orientation, gay characters have few actual sexual encounters compared to heterosexual characters. In other words, gay characters emphasise their sexual orientation through verbal comments rather than actions. (Fouts and Inch 2008: 41–42.) As with BioWare's other titles, the romance routes usually build up to a brief sex scene. However, Dorian's sex scene is not more or less explicit than the heterosexual sex scenes. After the player has completed *Last Resort of Good Men* and the romance specific quest *The Magister's Birthright*, Dorian initiates sex with the Inquisitor. The player is given the choice to (a) break off the relationship, (b) proceed to have sex with Dorian, or (c) decline, for now, if the Inquisitor feels like the relationship is moving too fast. If the Inquisitor complies, Dorian will kiss him and the screen fades to black as they stumble towards the bed. In the following scene, Dorian and the Inquisitor are lying on the bed naked, having a conversation about the future of their relationship. Depending on the player choice,

the Inquisitor and Dorian will enter a serious romantic relationship, keep the relationship casual, or call it off. At the end of the scene, Dorian asks the Inquisitor to "inquisite" him again and they start kissing off-screen. For comparison, Cullen's heterosexual sex scene consists of Cullen and the female Inquisitor kissing in his office and then skips to Cullen lying in the bed naked, while the Inquisitor is getting dressed.

Past research stresses that when evaluating LGBT+ portrayals, it is important to examine how the characters feel about themselves (Herek 1998; Zhang 2014). In general, the LGB+ characters prior to Dorian do not hide their sexual orientation from the public. To understand why Dorian's experiences are vastly different to other characters, the player must consider Dorian's background and the codex, a collection of lore that the player can build in their journal during the campaign. One such codex entry, *Sexuality in Thedas*, describes how different countries view homosexuality:

> The view on indulging lusts with a member of the same gender varies from land to land. In Orlais, it is considered a quirk of character and nothing more. In Ferelden, it is a matter of scandal if done indiscreetly but otherwise nothing noteworthy. In Tevinter, it is considered selfish and deviant behaviour among nobles, but actively encouraged with favoured slaves. Nowhere is it forbidden, and sex of any kind is only considered worthy of judgement when taken to awful excess or performed in the public eye.

Considering the above passage, it becomes clear why a Fereldan character like Sera is not hesitant about openly expressing her attraction towards women, while Dorian is more private. Dorian explains that in Tevinter "every perceived flaw, every aberration is deviant and shameful". As a society that values the heritable magical talent, Tevinter society holds a stigma towards homosexuality because it is often expected to not produce children. During the sex scene, Dorian explains that in his homeland, anything between two men is physical; it is "accepted but taken no further". If the Inquisitor wishes to have something more than a casual sexual relationship, Dorian responds: "You say that like it's simple thing, easily imagined. I have no examples with which to compare." The Inquisitor helps romanced Dorian let go of the internalised shame; not shying away from public displays of affection, Dorian initiates kisses in public and proclaims his affections to other characters. If the player establishes a friendship with Dorian without romancing him, Dorian does not go through the same kind of character development. Even if he values their friendship and is content in the end, the game does not show Dorian reaching the same level of happiness and self-acceptance.

Finally, past research has shown that LGBT+ characters are usually depicted in separation from other LGBT+ characters. Dorian, however, is surrounded by gay, bisexual, pansexual, and transgender characters. While Dorian is shunned for his homosexuality in his home country, the people outside of Tevinter initially disapprove of him because of the past deeds of his countrymen. Various characters are suspect of Dorian's motivations, but he is eventually able to gain their friendship. For example, Sera is extremely distrustful of Dorian in the beginning, but they become fast friends over the course of the game. Depending on the player's choices, Dorian may even enter a relationship with Iron Bull, another male companion.

Overall, Dorian is sympathetic character, who encompasses both positive and negative qualities. His self-image has been shaped by the heteronormative values of his home country, and *Last Resort of Good Men* is likely to resonate with players with similar experiences, while providing new information about the game universe.

4.2 Krem Aclassi

Krem Aclassi seems to have emerged as a direct consequence of the fans' critiques of the lack of positive transgender representation in the series. *Dragon Age: Origins* features a prostitute male dwarf in a dress as a transmisogynistic joke. *Dragon Age II* has a female elf prostitute with a deep masculine voice called Serendipity; according to Gaider (2015), the character was intended to be a drag queen, but she too comes off as a joke at the expense of transgender women. While Krem is often considered a universally praised character, some players argue that he was only included to create a false sense of inclusivity, and that the in-game dialogue centring on Krem is transphobic.

According to writer Patrick Weekes (2014), every single department wanted to ensure that Krem was "created with respect". It is important to note that instead of using a transgender voice talent for Krem, BioWare hired an acclaimed cisgender actress, Jennifer Hale, to voice him. According to Weekes (ibid.), the voice-over producer and director Caroline Livingstone and Hale "found a great voice for a trans man in a world without access to transitional procedures". In the recent years, several Hollywood films have been criticised for casting cisgender, i.e., non-transgender, actors for transgender roles: recent examples include Eddie Redmayne being nominated for the Academy Award for Best Actor for playing a transgender woman in the film *The Danish Girl* (2015). Casting cisgender actors not only limits the job

opportunities for transgender actors but reinforces the aforementioned assumption that transgender people are extremely noticeable.

While Krem is not a companion character, like Dorian, he has a bigger role than many other supporting characters. The player first meets Krem during Iron Bull's companion quest *The Captain of the Chargers*, when Krem comes to offer aid for the young Inquisition and invites the player to appraise the Bull's Chargers mercenary group in action. The player finds the Chargers, including Krem, who is wielding a huge maul, in the midst of a battle.

According to Weekes (2014), "[BioWare does] not have the budget for someone who is just there to tick off a box", implying that Krem serves at least one other purpose in the game. Weekes writes that the players needed to be reminded that Iron Bull has "a history of command", but the developers did not have the memory budget to have his entire mercenary company to accompany him all the time. For this reason, Weekes had to give Iron Bull a lieutenant, Krem, to represents the rest of the company. After Iron Bull and the Chargers are recruited, the player can talk to Krem any time for quests, more information about the company, and humorous tales.

Krem's gender is first mentioned when Iron Bull invites the Inquisitor to meet the Chargers over drinks and Krem offers to help bind Iron Bull's "pillowy man-bosoms". Krem is the first to bring up his gender, indicating that he is comfortable discussing the subject. Here, the player can ask Krem various questions, most of which are ignorant and insensitive. For instance, the player can ask Krem if he is really a woman or why he has chosen to pass as a man. Krem and Iron Bull will react accordingly, and the player is left with an idea of how to be respectful to transgender people. These dialogue options serve as a learning experience for cisgender players who are ignorant on the subject. Additionally, the conversation starts a discussion of Qunari gender roles, providing new information about the horned species.

Afterwards, Krem feels comfortable enough with the Inquisitor to answer more questions about his past. While the player is introduced to the ruling class of Tevinter through Dorian, Krem offers a new perspective as a member of the lower class. Krem tells that his mother wanted to throw him out for refusing to marry a son of a wealthy merchant to save the family from slavery.

Instead, he joined the Tevinter army as a man. When faced with the threat of execution or slavery for falsifying a military document, he fled and joined Iron Bull's company. According to past research (Gazzola and Morrison 2014), transgender men are believed to desire a traditionally masculine occupation but to be unable to practise it due to physical limitations and discrimination. Although Krem had enough skill and physical strength to qualify for the army, Tevinter does not recognise his male identity and forbids him from serving.

While recounting his childhood, Krem describes how he would pretend to shave with his father. If the player asks Krem why he "decided to live as a man", he answers, "I didn't decide anything. I've been like this my whole life. […] Every day, I'd put on a dress, look into my father's shaving mirror, and just… hate myself." Nowadays, transgender people are often expected to physically transition. Some transgender people do, some do not. Like many transgender people living in the modern world, Krem cannot safely transition. The game stresses that his body does not make his gender any less valid. The player can ask Krem if he would use potentially dangerous magic to "change all the way" given the opportunity. He answers as follows:

> I don't want any magic like that within ten yards of my body. When I was younger… I don't know. Everyone has silly dreams. In Tevinter, dreams like that get you killed. Bull helped me make a good life. Nice armor and a well-placed sock, and I'm happy.

Krem assures that he is content, despite being unable to physically transition. A passage of dialogue between Iron Bull and another companion provides further information about how Krem feels about himself:

Cole:	You and Krem say words that hurt, but they aren't real, The Iron Bull.
Iron Bull:	Yes. We give each other grief. It's a soldier thing. Doesn't mean anything.
Cole:	It means friendship. And that you're soldiers. Krem likes it, it makes him proud.
Iron Bull:	I guess I can see that. Him, huh?
Cole:	Is that wrong?
Iron Bull:	No, no. I just thought, since you do that thing where you see into people's heads… Actually, you're good, kid. Keep it up.

Cole: The armor is right. The body isn't, but it doesn't hurt him anymore. You make it better.

Although Krem's character consists of mostly traditionally masculine qualities, a small exchange between Iron Bull and another companion reveals that Krem sews, namely stuffed toys. This indicates that Krem can openly enjoy a traditionally feminine hobby without people questioning his gender identity.

As mentioned earlier, LGBT+ characters are often killed off and rarely have happy endings. Death is a common occurrence in the Dragon Age series; the player's choices can lead to characters dying either intently or accidentally. For example, the player characters from the previous games can both be dead by the end of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Although Dorian cannot be killed at any point, Krem may die as a direct consequence of the player's choice. During Iron Bull's companion quest, *Demands of the Qun*, the player needs to choose between securing a powerful alliance with the Qun and saving Krem and the rest of the Chargers. If the player rescues the Charges, Iron Bull begins to value his loyalty to his family and friends. If the player chooses to sacrifice Iron Bull's company to secure the alliance, Krem is killed off-screen, and Bull will follow the Inquisitor's example and prioritise his loyalty to the Qun. The latter option will lead to Bull betraying the Inquisition in the epilogue *Trespasser*; he will attack the Inquisitor and potentially Dorian, even if a romance has been established between either of them.

The player character cannot pursue a romance with Krem, but if Krem survives the main game, he may enter a romantic relationship with the female bard and spy Maryden in *Trespasser*. Krem is seen awkwardly flirting with her, but outside of this brief scene Krem is not presented in any romantic or sexual situations.

In short, Krem exists to support Iron Bull's character and to offer an alternative perspective to Tevinter. It is important to note that despite having no surgery or hormonal treatment, Krem is content with his life and other characters accept him as well; this sends an important message to both transgender audiences as well as ignorant or biased players.

5 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

There is a dearth of video games bold enough to feature major LGBT+ characters. The commercial success of BioWare's *Dragon Age: Inquisition* challenges the common presumption that video games that have prominent LGBT+ characters will automatically fail. However, players have accused some of these characters of being harmful stereotypes, namely the playable homosexual male companion Dorian Pavus, and the transgender male NPC Krem Aclassi. The purpose of this thesis was to critically examine these characters.

Both Dorian and Krem reinforce prevailing stereotypes to an extent, but ultimately, they are both sympathetic characters that embody a combination of strengths and weaknesses. Dorian comes off as flamboyant, and his companion quest, *Last Resort of Good Men*, deals heavily with the process and consequences of coming out. However, Dorian's sassiness and stylishness do not negate his bravery, righteousness, or brilliance; with Dorian, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* shows that a gay character does not need to be eschewed of all stereotypical characteristics to be considered as a positive representation. Meanwhile, with Krem, BioWare created a transgender male character, whose male identity deserves respect despite having no surgery or hormonal treatment. The player has an opportunity to ask questions about Krem's gender, including some insensitive and ignorant questions; by having the characters respond accordingly, the game serves as a learning opportunity.

Both Dorian and Krem serve a role in expanding the game universe; *Last Resort of Good Men* introduces the player to the Tevinter politics and values, while the matter of Krem's gender initiates a conversation about Qunari gender roles as well as the class struggle in Tevinter. In other words, the inclusion of LGBT+ characters enabled the game developers to tell a richer story.

My analysis was limited to two characters and only includes sexuality and gender. Future studies should examine these identity categories, as well as others, more in depth. Additionally, the examination should be extended to other characters in the Dragon Age series, such as the lesbian elf Sera. A future analysis of the series could include female characters, social class, and race. Additionally, future studies could explore the ways in which gamification and playfulness can be utilised to promote tolerance and awareness towards marginalised groups.

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