

What Players Want (Romantically)

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Abstract

This paper presents new findings from a research study which looks at which characters from popular fantasy media are romantically appealing and why. The data informing this study comes from a participant observation at a romantasy themed ball in June 2024 and interviews with 20 participants who are self-identified fans of fantasy books, television shows, and video games. While the Video Game Cultures conference is clearly centred on video games, this paper will show how defining video game fandoms is a complicated endeavour when it comes to marginalized populations. Through an innovative sampling and recruitment procedure, the voices of those who may otherwise be excluded from studies of gamers are featured here. The ultimate takeaway of this paper is that although players are often thought of as a type of subculture with their own values and beliefs, the qualities participants described being attracted to reflect hegemonic gender-based expectations, and thus have more in common with dominant culture than subcultures.

Keywords

Sexuality and games, subcultures, player studies, interview methods

Introduction

Think about the last fantasy book, film, television show, or game you played. Now think about the characters in that media. Did any of them seem romantically appealing?

This question is an abridged version of one I asked 20 participants in a recent study on the role romantasy media consumption plays in how people think about their lives and relationships. Despite Video Game Cultures conference having an obviously strong emphasis on games, romantasy media takes many forms and each form will be discussed in this paper. Although not exclusively about games, this paper holds value for Video Game Culture's audience in that it discusses a larger phenomenon which impacts, well, video game culture.

There is a strong relationship between romantic themes and fantasy genres of media. As the grandson in the 1987 film *The Princess Bride* (Reiner) cautiously asks, "Is this a kissing book?," many classic adventure stories set in non-specific-medieval-Europe rely on romance to drive their narrative. This connection has been well documented elsewhere (c.f. Kamblé, Selinger, and Teo, 2020) but is evoked here to think through a larger question about video game players and desire. This paper asks the question what do video game players want romantically, and in doing so explores the desirable characteristics certain video game characters possess.

To answer what players want, this paper draws on participant observation and individual interview data from 20 English-speaking participants from the United States, Canada, and the UK. Participants who had attended a romantasyⁱ event in the past year were invited to an hour-long interview about their media consumption habits in exchange for a \$25 USD gift card to a fantasy media retailer of their choice. Event attendance was used as inclusion criteria because it is benchmark of fandom sincerity. As we shall see later in this paper, romantasy events require a great deal of time, dedication, and effort to prepare for, so using event attendance as an indicator for fandom engagement makes sense. While this paper will discuss a romantasy themed ball, which has a high economic cost, balls were not the only mode of event attendance. Book clubs, trivia nights, and even online romantasy social events 'count' for participation. This is to say, I was interested in finding participants for whom romantasy media makes up the primary media they consume, however which

media counts as romantasy is debatable. By interviewing romantasy event attendees, I ensured I had the widest net to capture dedicated fans of the genre.

The research presented here is limited in its generalizability to entire populations of readers, viewers, or gamers. Despite the limited power of the data, the findings presented illustrate that what players want may not be entirely different from mainstream consumer culture. While this study cannot generalise about all gamers, it does trouble the notion that gamer identity may be a subculture and indicates that there is merit to interrogating such identities as separate from popular culture.

Review of Literature

In order to talk about what players want romantically, we must first do some work to describe who players are. Popular Western culture has long depicted gamers as masculine, socially awkward, shy, and sexless (Shaw, 2012; Kowert et al, 2014; Massanari & Lind, 2017). This is despite research which shows that around 46% of gamers identify as women, and as women age, they tend to play more games than do men (ESA, 2024). Data sets, like the United States-based Entertainment Software Association's, also show that gaming is not the niche hobby it once was with 61% of the United States' population playing videogames for at least an hour a week (2024).

When over half of a country's population engages in a hobby, it is safe to say that hobby is mainstream. Gamer identity, however, is one which has been contested along gendered lines (Harrison, Drenten and Pendarvis, 2017; Cote, 2018). Exclusionary practices which have sought to keep women, girls, and non-binary people from full participation in the hobby have occasionally been read as indications that gaming is a subculture which stands in opposition to mainstream cultural efforts to increase diversity, access, and inclusion in media. There is an additional performance aspect to gamer identity wherein members develop unique slang, styles of dress, and values outside of the mainstream (c.f. Hebdige, 1991). Of course contemporary scholars have pointed out that digital subcultures have a complex relationship with mass media, "... since they are involved in the construction of subcultures, showing and presenting them as unitary phenomena, in their diffusion, making them visible in the eyes of a wider public, but also in their destruction, either labelling them as "folk devils" and creating moral panic, or reabsorbing them as acceptable variations of mainstream culture, destroying their authenticity (Hoskins, K., Genova, C., and Crowe, N., 2022, p.6)." Mainstream media, including video games, plays a role in defining who gamers are, what values they have, and question pernicious practices. The data from this paper provides evidence that gaming, at least in 2024, is a part of mainstream culture when it comes to the values respondents find attractive in a potential romantic partner.

The research presented here also contributes to a growing body of knowledge on player relationships with love and romance in videogames. We know that players fall in love with characters in the games they play (Waern, 2015), consume 'thirst traps' of favourite videogame protagonists on social media (Ask & Sihvonen, 2023), and indeed create thirst traps themselves (Tompkins & Guajardo, 2024). The data here adds to this established knowledge by showing both the types of characters respondents wanted to date and the characteristics that created romantic desire.

Methods

There are two methods employed in this study. The first is participant observation. I attended a romantasy ball in Summer 2024 wherein I took notes on the event and my experiences. A romantasy ball is a formal dance event open to anyone who can afford the ticket price and dress code. The theming of the event takes direction from romantic, fantasy media and has a posh, anachronistic Renaissance flair. There are many entertainment event companies across the globe which host these balls, and it is unusual to find one which is officially sponsored by a media publisher. For example, Bloomsbury, the publisher of the popular *A Court of Thorns and Roses* book series by Sarah J Maas does not host or financially support romantasy balls even though many have theming which reference the books.

Romantasy balls happen across Western Europe and North America and often take place in rented historic buildings or expensive hotels. The venue architecture and décor are made to give the illusion of a royal palace, just as the dress code intends to create the illusion that guests are members of nobility. The dress code for fairy balls varies by location, season, and specific theme. For example, a winter ball may encourage suits and gowns adorned with (faux) fur or accessories which reference seasonal colours. More than just formal attire, attendees are also encouraged to add an element of fantasy to their costume with pointed ear prosthetics, animal tails, wings, horns, or elaborate face paintⁱⁱ.

In addition to conducting participant observations, the ball was also a location in which participants were recruited. The event organizers were paid \$200 USD to include study flyers at check in and in a follow up marketing email to attendees. Participants were recruited to one-on-one interviews which lasted one hour. Inclusion criteria for the interviews were that participants had to be over the age of 18 years old, and had to have attended at least one romantasy event in the past year. The inclusion criteria reflect a desire to interview fans of the romantasy genre of books, films and games without risking excluding anyone who may not identify with terms like ‘gamer’ or ‘reader’. Interview questions concerned the role romantasy fandom plays in the life of respondents, including how the media they consume influences (or not) their attraction. Specifically for the data presented here, participants were asked to name a romantasy book, film, and game that they would recommend. Then they were asked if there was a character from that book, film, or game they would like to date and why.

Demographic Category	Participants
Gender	1 M, 3NB, 16 W
Race	3BR, 17W
Homeowner?	6/20, 30%
Relationship?	15/20, 75%

Table 1: Participant demographic breakdown.

The above chart provides a breakdown of study participants’ demographics. Most participants were women, with three non-binary participants, and one man. The overwhelming majority of participants were white with three biracial participants. Efforts were made to recruit diverse participants by posting study recruitment flyers, with permission, at independent, queer bookstores in downtown Salt Lake City. A confluence of geographic and cultural factors is likely responsible for this study’s participant demographics. Romantasy balls, due to their theming or otherwise, tend to be events attended by white women, which isn’t to suggest that people of colour, men, and gender queer people are absent in the fandom. The interview asked about participants’ homeowner and relationship status to ascertain stability in socio-economic life aspects and the role that status might have in seeking out romantasy media. Only 30% of respondents were homeowners, which is perhaps reflective of the age of the participants and contemporary difficulties in buying a home in the United States, Canada, and United Kingdom. Most participants, 75%, were in a committed long-term relationship with one or more partners.

What Players Want

Attending a romantasy ball as a participant observer provided some insight into the values, norms and beliefs that romantasy fans hold. The evening before the ball took place, I received a formal, in-character invitation written from the perspective of a fictional King and Queen who were holding the ball at their court. As I had purchased a ticket, I was automatically considered a member of the nobility of this fictional realm who were invited to dine and dance that evening. The invitation informed me of the strict formal-fantasy dress code and provided out-of-character practical information on the venue location, hours of operation, and parking.

The invitation alone provides insight into some of the values of this community of fans. The fact the invitation was written partially in-character, as one might expect in a live action role play or tabletop RPG, hints at an undercurrent of playfulness and whimsy. By writing the invitation partially in-character and partially out-of-character, the hosts seem to say, “yes, this is a formal event, but also we welcome you to be fanciful.” And thankfully the ball wasn’t entirely serious, as upon entering the ball I failed to read social cues and bow before the King and Queen as they greeted guests on their dais. An offense which surely would be reprimanded in an actual royal court, but one which was awkwardly laughed off at the romantasy ball.

The presence of a King and Queen on both the invitation and at the event also carries with it values as represented by presumed heteronormativity and monarchic politics. Play and whimsy are invited, but not without a framework reminiscent of fairytales and very much centred in patriarchal structures. The event’s lore centred around a made-up fantasy kingdom with fairy rulers who dressed in expensive fabrics, wore crowns befitting monarchs, and had prosthetic pointy ears. An amalgamation of characters from many fantasy books, films, and games, the King and Queen of the Ball represent narrative fiction, but they also represent an anachronistic take on a European past. In a world where fairies and mythic forest creatures abound, the limits to imagination are evident in the absence of queer courtiers and parliamentary democracy.

The dance lessons which took place after dinner assumed, but did not enforce, heteronormative couplings consisting of a male leader and a female follower. Contextually, none of the ball’s activities felt maliciously constrained by gender roles or gender presentation, rather the event just operated unquestioningly within hegemonic frameworks which are pervasive throughout society. So, while the ball did not prevent same-sex couples from twirling on the dance floor, they also did not challenge the status quo with events, activities, or representations of queer romance.

While the participant observation was limited to an event in Utah, the interviews were not geographically constrained. However, interviews likewise show a reflection of hegemonically ‘safe’ responses to which characters from romantasy media are dateable and why. Just as this paper opened, interview participants were asked who they would like to date after reflecting on romantasy books, films, and videogames. Below is a word cloud which shows all 20 participants’ responsesⁱⁱⁱ.



Image 1: A word cloud of fictional characters participants cite as wanting to date. The larger the name, the more frequently that character is cited as dateable.

Just as the romantasy ball reflected heteronormative values in its presentation of monarchs and dance partners, so too does the list of fictional romantic partners reflect that the majority of feminine participants discussed masculine characters as ideal partners. Only 5 of the 29 listed characters are women (excluding *D&D* NPCs because there is no way to ascertain for certain the genders of multiple characters given the current data set). This does not imply that queerness was absent from the data set, but rather that most participants were women who experience attraction to men.

Of the characters in the word cloud, the following are specific to videogames: Ethan Winters (*Resident Evil 8*), Sadie Adler (*Red Dead Redemption 2*), Karlach (*Baldur's Gate 3*), Geralt (*The Witcher* series), and Astarion (*Baldur's Gate 3*). An honourable mention goes to *Dungeons & Dragons* non-player characters who a participant described being her 'favourite fake men'. During our interview, participant Queen described wanting to date non-player characters her dungeon master had created for her character and campaign. She says, "although they're catered towards my character, not me, but even so like, probably some of those [NPCs are my favourite] just because it's so much more immersive actually having conversations with them and stuff."

Unsurprisingly, the ability to interact with video game characters in general was seen as an appeal over their bookish counterparts. Another participant, Gandalf, similarly talks about the joys of romancing D&D characters. They say, "My character has walls, but there is a gnome that I think is going to turn from enemies to friends to lovers. Oh, I'm just waiting on our next game." For both Queen and Gandalf, romancing D&D characters is described as fun within the context of creative expression and discovery. Queen says that romancing certain characters is "...like trying to kind of peck away at that eggshell of like, who are you?"

Ink, a non-binary participant who experiences attraction to multiple genders, cited both Ethan Winters (*Resident Evil 8*) and Sadie Adler (*Red Dead Redemption 2*) as characters they would like to date. In their description of why, they say:

I like that he's [Ethan Winters's] pathetic. Um, my friends joke that I have a type. And the type is pathetic men who are a little sad, a little rugged and significantly older than me with slutty little waists... Which, sure, maybe I have daddy issues, maybe that's why I like all the weird old men fictional characters. But if it's not like a pathetic little guy, I like very competent women in media. Like Sadie Adler, oh my God, from Red Dead Redemption 2, Sadie Adler. I would do anything for that woman. I don't care that she would shoot me like six ways to Sunday if I looked at her wrong, she's allowed to.

Ink's response expresses unabashed sexual desire and a duality in description of attractive qualities. On the one hand, they express their 'type' in terms of physical characteristics; Ethan Winters is: rugged, older, and has a slutty little waist. On the other, he is described as pathetic, weird, and a little sad. Sadie Adler, on the other hand, is only described as competent. Ink's responses to who they find attractive and why are like what other respondents reported. Below is a word cloud with all interview participants' responses concerning the physical and emotional characteristics which make for ideal fictional partners. Specifically, interview respondents were asked why they wanted to date the fictional characters they mentioned.

interactivity and narrative in games like *Resident Evil 8* and *Red Dead Redemption 2* present weird old men and competent women to fall in love with. When looking at the data set as a whole, participants reported liking hegemonically masculine qualities, like protectiveness, which is aligned with many participants being heterosexual women.

The study data presented here leaves us with interesting questions which merit further investigation. Particularly, it is unclear from the data whether the qualities participants found attractive come from their own internalization of hegemony, or from the pervasiveness of these qualities in the media they consume. Future studies should explore the relationship between media themes and participant values, as well as whether players find stereotypically feminine traits attractive.

Notes

ⁱ Romantasy is a portmanteau of the words ‘romance’ and ‘fantasy’ and indicates a melding of the two genres. The term is popular on social media websites like Instagram and TikTok.

ⁱⁱ In agreement with the romantasy ball’s organizer, participant observation details about the Ball’s location, theme, or what participants wore are anonymized in this paper.

ⁱⁱⁱ Participants were welcomed to name as many characters as they wanted, which is why there are more entries than participants.

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