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Comms 101

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The Dragon Age of Social Change

When analyzing the prominence of social issues in popular culture, few think of the vessel of a video game to offer any meaningful impact. While some might be mindless repetitions of glorified violence, not all of these media artifacts should be written off. In fact, some often contain overlooked ideas and stories that can be meaningful and applicable to modern day struggles. Many of these games fall under the broad term of an RPG (Role Playing Game), in which the player controls a character pivotal to the story, acting as a powerful, seemingly invulnerable protagonist. The story that the player experiences, while much more interactive than a film or book, can be written just as well if the game wishes to make an impact on their players. A poorly written story in a video game often feels as unsatisfactory as a poorly written book, sometimes even more so, as the player must drag themselves along a horrible narrative in order to proceed. Part of what makes a story great is a sense of realism added to it, so that even if the player finds themselves battling dragons or hurtling through space they have real issues to ground them and real characters to bond with.

One game in particular does a fantastic job of this: *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. The Dragon Age franchise has been a popular series for many years, and is produced by Bioware, a company especially known for its storytelling and worldbuilding prowess in this series and others. The game has garnered over 100 awards and nominations, including Game of the Year in 2014

(Gamesradar.com), for aspects from its design to story. Bioware has been constantly pushing boundaries in terms of what a video game can do. Inquisition in particular, used its story following the “Inquisitor” (a character that can be made either male or female and may be one of 4 different races: Dwarves, Elves, Qunari, and Human [who can portray real world ethnicities due to character creation]) and other characters, to beautifully address such issues as race, religion, gender, and sexuality very tactfully and carefully, allowing players to influence these discussions and actively participate in them. Many of these topics play parts in active adventures where the player can make choices regarding the establishment of new religions and or their falls, as well as deciding to treat those that differ from the Inquisitor racially, with kindness or cruelty. Alongside the main story and adventuring, the player can choose to form connections with characters of all genders races and sexualities. All of this is set in Thedas, where magic, swords, and dragons decide the fate of the people, allowing players to access these often heated topics with ease and levity. Dragon Age: Inquisition’s clever story and characters, along with its fantasy setting and player choice gives helps expand on key social issues of today, specifically sexuality, gender, and race.

Sexuality and Gender in *Dragon Age* games and the the video game industry at large has always been a deeply contested topic. The industry, since its real rise in the 1970s, has focused on male, cisgender, heteronormative characters. Games as early as *Pac Man* featured only one male hero. Similarly ageless game icons like *Mario by Nintendo* focus on a male protagonist going off to fight evil and saving the stereotypical princess Peach. Games made nowadays feature similar issues, with many focusing on straight, strong male characters with little option for other narratives even in the midst of protest by various LGBT and minority groups wanting

more diversity in video games. There are several explanations for this, first and foremost being that the industry is historically targeted toward young straight men, therefore many companies simply never felt the need to change that. Also to blame is the lack of diversity in the companies themselves, which up until recently were predominantly made up of straight males (“Putting the Gay in Games”). However many companies are becoming more diverse in their hiring, leading to increased recognition for underrepresented social groups like the LGBT community, thus resulting in more diverse and therefore, interesting games. Many games now feature the ability to follow narratives other than a straight white male, offering diversity in terms of minority representation, gender, and specifically, sexual orientation. RPG games are a particularly good vessel for these themes because they are expansive and driven by story and exploration, offering developers more opportunities to make these changes.

It is in this respect that *Dragon Age: Inquisition* has been particularly adept at creating narratives for voices of the LGBT and minority communities. The world of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is one of the largest produced by Bioware ever, falling short only of their expansive MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. While this may not seem to have a direct effect on diversity it is a building block. In games like these the story is driven by the player going on “quests,” which can be simplified to the player completing objectives. Each of these quests need areas to discover, explore, and complete the objective; in order for the game to feel less repetitive developers often choose to simply make the world larger. In other words the larger the world, the greater amount of possibly fulfilling quests to embark upon, in turn offering more story content. This aspect of RPG video games is what lends so heavily to storytelling and worldbuilding. Quests in video games can range from

“go to this cave and bring back 20 pieces of ore for money” to “how about we overthrow a country?” It is through quests that story and meaning are found, and Inquisition gives everything a hidden meaning. Instead of “find me 20 of something for money..” Dragon Age has “find me wool so I can make blankets for poor villagers in this war torn town”. In this way they weave importance throughout the most mundane of tasks. Another quest might be to raid an ancient ruin of the elves, a race that has fallen into poverty and marginalization at the hands of humans. And once you are there you can choose, alternatively, to share your findings with the elves instead of making a profit, showing respect. Quests essentially simulate choices about these ideas (like race in this instance) in video games and by actively making choices the player experiences benefits and repercussions. In addition, all of these socially relevant themes are accessible to any race, gender, or sexual orientation that the player chooses with the only difference being a few extra lines of dialogue unique to each of those decisions, making each playthrough that much more special than the last. This proves that no matter what kind of character the gamer creates to explore Thedas, everyone can feel like a hero. Yet, another great thing about Dragon Age is that many of the characters met by the Inquisitor, are *also* amazing in their own right.

The characters of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* are incredibly diverse in every way. Some hail from distant lands, others have horns or pointed ears, and even more range from wanting to love no one to wanting to sleep with everyone but you. *Dragon Age Inquisition* offers dozens of complex personalities to interact with. Bioware is highly reputed for creating amazing characters to accompany their players or simply influence them in passing. The care and depth put into each character means that even a character that shows up for five minutes can make an impact on a player. For instance there is a character named Witty Ritts (an elven scout for the player’s

faction, the Inquisition) which the player can encounter early in the game in an area called the Hinterlands. The player finds Ritts in a secluded area in the midst of an attack by the wrathful templar order who are fighting guerilla war with magic wielders in the area. If the Inquisitor chooses to save her, they find out that she was having a secret picnic with a female mage, which drove the templars to ambush them. Though she claims it was in order to get information she admits it was also for pleasure. The player can further choose to involve one of their companions, Varric, to convince Ritts to become an agent, due to his knowledge of spying, and she agrees. From then on the inquisitor can frequently receive reports from her often comic exploits throughout the game and, in addition, the organization becomes stronger because of it. This is an example of how small characters can have a big impact on not just the story but the mechanics of the game itself. Furthermore, Ritt's sexuality *and* her race, while facets of her character, are not the *only* parts that the character focuses on, which is refreshing. A pitfall of any media be it a video game, TV show, and everything in between, is when trying to be diverse or inclusive, the writers or developers make characters that only have one trait: what makes them different. People have such beautiful complexity to them yet all too often characters appear flat or unfulfilling because they are only gay or female or a minority. These aspects inherently matter to a person but they are not the only thing that drives a real character.

Also worthy of notice is another less known character named Crem. Cremisius Aclassi formally served under the tyrants of the Tevinter Imperium, a place filled with slaves and injustice in the country's oligarchic government. Crem was originally a woman, but finding that he felt uncomfortable as a female decided to go into the army as male, and for years kept that identity hidden until a military doctor discovered his secret. Faced with either death or slavery,

Crem fled and joined up with the mercenary band called the Bull's Chargers. When the player acquires Iron Bull as a playable companion, the rest of the band, which Crem is the lieutenant of comes along, readily available to talk to at any point afterward. The inquisitor can choose to learn Crem's story and may to share a variety of opinions on the topic. This is an example of a player's choice helps them understand the social issues like transgender identity. While most freely accept Crem and his choices, the player can express disgust, prompting a severe rebuttal from Iron Bull, who is in fact an 8 foot tall dragon man, much to the player's chagrin. Bull staunchly defends Crem on both religious and moral bases, because their shared experiences eliminate any fear or hate. Crem is a strong character and chooses to fight when he wants and not care about whether others accept his decisions as ultimately they are his alone. This great, albeit small, facet of Dragon Age: Inquisition was a great method to expose players to new ideas.

Among the most developed characters are the companions of the inquisitor, who follow the player's lead and help them fight and tackle various situations. They are referred to as the "inner circle" of the inquisitor, and in Inquisition they always have something to say. As the main character, the player can choose to talk, at any point of the game, to these characters about their personal story or about the adventures that the player has shared with them. Each character is fully voiced and has opinions to lend at every juncture based on their own stories and personalities and as such some might not react the same way as others. One may oppose a decision on moral grounds while another thinks of it as a waste of resources or people and maybe another differs entirely because they thought it was great fun. These characters grow along side of the inquisitor as the story progresses, lending them even more depth and realism. These qualities are highlighted as the inquisitor interacts through dialogue and specific quests that

advance the storylines of the companions. This can lead to some odd flirting and eventually romances.

The term “romances” refers to the in-game romances between the inquisitor and the nine companions, as well as the 3 advisors and several side characters. Through these romances the player can see the care the developers took to add sexual diversity to their game because the inquisitor has several options for romances based on gender and race, allowing for players choices to be validating and offering fresh experiences. This game truly lets the inquisitor to feel like a version of the player which is rare in the straight, white, male dominated enterprise of video games. Female inquisitors have three romance options available for all races, four if the player is human, and five if the player is an elf. The male inquisitor has four romances for all races. Of all of these romances, four are heterosexual (two of which are race specific), two are gay/lesbian, and two are bisexual/pansexual. All of these relationships have depth and flair and fun to them because of all of the character building that Bioware did and the story they create. Also it is important to note that regardless of gender or race the Inquisitor does have the option to flirt with *everyone*. This also shows that there is a relative balance and representation in the game that is very hard to find in most others.

The male inquisitor has merely one heterosexual romance option while the rest are either gay or bisexual. The gay romance option for males is the ever flamboyant Dorian Pavus, a mage from a place named Tevinter, a country in Thedas based off of ancient Rome. He is one of the last companions you can acquire, but that doesn't affect his friendliness and flirting. One key aspect that shows Inquisition's respect is immediate: Dorian does not flirt with the character outright (although his commentary is playful). If he had, then he would be labeled immediately

by the player as “Dorian, the gay companion”. In fact the Inquisitor actually has the choice to flirt first, and only upon pursuing that option or by asking him directly does he tell the player of his attraction or lack thereof. This is actually true for all romances, none of them start unless the inquisitor acts first, showing that player choice is a major factor in exposing the social issues tackled in this game. Upon investigating, Dorian can reveal his motivations for leaving his homeland. His home of Tevinter is a corrupt and dark place that is built upon the back of slavery and using dangerous magic to gain power. However Dorian knows that not everyone there sacrifices children and laughs maniacally in dark towers like stereotypical villains, so he joined the Inquisition in order to show that Tevinter can do good. Going deeper and flirting with Dorian also reveals that he is considered a pariah because of his sexuality, for in Tevinter, mages rule. Therefore bloodlines are important as magic grows stronger in the subsequent generation when two mages procreate. This is part of a greater and tragic narrative all too prevalent in today’s society, where people can be shunned by their loved one’s and their community because of who they love.

As for the lesbian romance in the game, Sera presents as a unique character among romances. As a female inquisitor the player is able to initiate a romance with her immediately, but she doesn’t fully trust them at first. In order to build up trust, the player must show Sera that they can have fun *and* lead an army. Sera’s character is hilarious and outrageous, and she specifically, can give the player access to more missions than any other. Her brave face gives way to a hard childhood in the slums and orphanages in her youth where she grew up fending for herself and caring for those with no voice. In this way, she gets dangerously close to the stereotype of tomboy lesbians and thus gets taken less seriously. But that also sets her apart from

the other females in the game and in fact all romances. Sera walks the thin line between serious vigilante to the nobles in Dragon Age's world of Thedas and prolific comedic sidekick and that is reflected in her relationship with the player. Regardless of the Inquisitor's gender or race Sera will call out decisions she thinks are wrong and praise other just as quickly. Dragon Age: Inquisition used Sera to create an utterly unique and ultimately empowering narrative about how women and in particular lesbians, are perceived, precisely by the fact that her personality is like no other.

The two bisexual/pansexual relationship options for the player are very interesting, with one male and one female option. One important note about the lack of distinction about pan versus bi-sexual, is that the game doesn't distinguish between the two, it simply states that they are options for both genders (Dragon Age Wikia). The female romance option is one of the inquisitor's advisors, Josephine Montilyet, who is the political juggernaut that leads the player down less violent routes in the game. The player must first get to know Josephine well before romancing her becomes an option as initial attempts make her skeptical, their intentions, ever the politician. Once the player breaks down the facade of ambassador Montilyet, the real Josephine comes out and they learn that her past is shrouded in adversity and hardship. This makes her a very endearing and caring romance option, as she constantly checks on the player after missions to make sure they are alright.

The male bisexual romance option comes from the opposite end of the spectrum. Iron Bull will both attack and romance everything, which has a lot to do with his backstory. Upon meeting the player, Iron Bull is in charge of the Bull's Chargers, but before he served his people, the Qunari, as a secret agent. The Qunari are a race of giant men and women with menacing

horns sprouting from their heads, and follow the Qun, which is a very strict social and religious code. All races are accepted under the Qun but the Qunari tend to be very aggressive with its spread, giving all its people the reputation of unstoppable and dangerous zealots. But despite this, Iron Bull demonstrates a surprising duality. At times he acts with cunning and intellect whereas at others he is prone to fits of frenzy and passion, making him somewhat of an enigma romance-wise. However Iron Bull's romance is not a lost cause. The inquisitor can romance Bull by appealing to his honor and his love of battle, while also not getting bloodthirsty, making him the most complex companion to romance but culminating in a string of hilarious and *mature* scenes in the game. It is in this respect that Iron Bull demonstrates another aspect of Inquisition's social commentary: that love and romance are blurred and not everyone *needs* to understand each other and yet they can still live in harmony.

Romances often require the player go through dialogue and quest options, which is important to note because it shows that not all romances are there fully at the leisure of the player, and often require time learning what each character's ideals and stances are, as many choices big and small can affect your relationship with them. There are many opportunities for the player to flirt with characters and NPCs (Non Player Characters), in fact the Inquisitor can literally flirt with most of Thedas. However most of this flirtation is unrequited, such as the case of another companion Vivienne (whom you can flirt with but may never romance).

Bioware has always been known for pushing boundaries and taking risks in their games, whether with new technology/mechanics, or through new story options. This results in games like Dragon Age: Inquisition that can maturely address topics such as sexuality and other social issues. The story and characters of Inquisition are the key to creating narratives for gamers to

follow and see topics like homosexuality and transgender issues in new ways. *Inquisition* proves that it and videogames with similar storytelling elements can be a legitimate media vessels where people may be enlightened about social issues relevant today, even while battling demons and dragons with swords and magic.

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