Is 2023 the year of video game romance? Why people like to fall in love in games like Baldur's Gate 3 and Starfield

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Credit: Larian Studios

When it comes to video games, romance might not be the first thing that comes to mind.

There's a reason video games are frequently, if falsely, conflated with violence by politicians. In the kinds of big budget games that sell millions of copies, violence—shooting, stabbing, punching or a combination of the three—is the way most people interact with these virtual worlds.

But in two of this years biggest games, love is in the air.

In Starfield, the new science fiction [game](#) from legendary developer Bethesda Game Studios, and Baldurs Gate 3, the latest entry in the Dungeons & Dragons inspired fantasy series, romance is as central as flying spaceships or killing goblins.

In both games, players can flirt with and enter into relationships with non-player characters, virtual companions that are integral to the story each game is trying to tell. This is not a new idea. Big budget roleplaying games have been offering romance options for more than a decade, and it even goes back to the early days of video games.

But in an industry where love and kindness are not often part of the emotional spectrum offered in major games, Fox Zarow, an assistant teaching professor of game design, says its no surprise people have flocked to Baldurs Gate 3 and Starfield.

"The reality is that even the escapist experience of love in a video game is deeply profound and special to us," Zarow says. "To experience and access love in the interactive medium of games is very different and almost more powerful than reading it or watching it on screen where it's a bit more passive."

Unlike in a romance novel or a rom-com, players get to choose what they say to their favorite characters and how far they want to take a relationship, whether its left in the friendzone or goes deeper than that.

In choice-driven games like Baldurs Gate 3 and Starfield, where crafting your character comes from what you choose to say or do in any given moment, romance adds another level of immersion and enjoyment.

"It's not something people necessarily get to access on a daily basis, even someone who is in a relationship," Zarow says. "This is a really gratifying way to access a good feeling, which is being loved and loving someone. … We're people, and to craft and nurture a relationship in a video game where we have that authorship to a degree is just a good feeling for us."

If poorly implemented in a game, romance can feel overly transactional. The player does something, like giving a character a gift, and that character's "approval meter" goes up. Increase the meter enough, and the player can enter into a relationship with that character. Zarow says this runs the risk of gamifying relationships and intimacy.

However, at its best, romance in video games can convey the depth of feeling and also the work that goes into maintaining relationships in the real world. Zarow points to the Mass Effect series from Bioware, where players craft their version of space general Commander Shepard over the course of three games.

The relationships players forge with the characters on Shepard's crew are the result of investing dozens of real hours spent talking with and learning their thoughts and feelings. Zarow calls out the relationship between Shepard and Garrus, a member of the crew that they chose to romance.

"By the time you get to "Mass Effect 3, both of these characters have come so far and the acknowledgement of their feelings for each other is so powerful and feels so real," Zarow says. "It's a slow burn, which is a trope that lots of people love, and it feels so natural and really dynamic."

Games like Mass Effect go beyond an experience in a virtual world to offer players a practice space where they can learn real lessons about relationships and themselves.

"It's a really safe simulation for experimenting with communication, especially around sex, intimacy and love," Zarow says. "I have a friend who was talking about asexuality and aromanticism and how a lot of times romance in games is still really appealing because of player control and the ability to slow down or just reload a scene because I did not expect it to go that way."

Baldurs Gate 3 takes things a step further, providing a depth to character relationships that has impressed Zarow. Characters have needs, wants and boundaries, and the game encourages players to listen to and empathize with these virtual companions if they want to forge a deeper bond.

"You can't really force them to do things," Zarow says. "They'll express their feelings back to you, and if you piss them off enough, they'll leave. The agency there is really great, for you as a player and for those characters. They're not just objects for us to access."

2023 might be a banner year for [video game](link) romance, but Zarow hopes it's not the last. It's not just because romance is engaging for players but because it's good for the industry to see that [players](link) want to do more than shoot their way through a virtual world.

"Let [romance](link) have its moment in the sun because we're people and we're pro-social and it's a special emotion that we want to access," Zarow says. "For me, it's one of the number one things I look for in games because it is such a way to grab me and pull me in and make me feel really connected to the story, the characters. That's what we want: We want to care about stories."