

“I'm in love with someone that doesn't exist!!” Bleed in the context of a Computer Game

Annika Waern

Mobile Life @ Stockholm University

annikaw@dsv.su.se

ABSTRACT

It is not unusual for computer games to include romance, but most games treat romance as a narrative theme rather than as an integrated part of gameplay. In this article I investigate the gameplay experience in the game *Dragon Age*, a single-player game that allows players to actively engage in romance. Based on an investigation of blog and community comments, we argue that this sometimes will create an experience that is similar to the “bleed” effect in non-computerised role-play, and that the player to some extent shares emotions with his or her character.

Keywords

Role-play, bleed, role-playing game, romance

INTRODUCTION

Games invoke all sorts of emotions in players. The act of playing will in itself make us frustrated, happy, victorious, and exhausted [1], and different players look for different forms of emotional engagement in games [5]. But when it comes to more complex emotions, games tend to play on our emotional strings by introducing story lines that lie beyond the control of the player. Such stories create emotions in much the same way as movies do: the story takes us on an emotional ride where we empathize with characters but do not actively share their emotions. This is true for most computerized role-playing games: even though the player takes on the role as a character in the game world, he or she need not share the emotions of that character in order to play it.

This stands in strong contrast to non-computerized role-play, in which players must actively engage in acting out the emotions of the character. Role-play has the power of creating very strong bonds between the emotions of the player and those of the character: it is very difficult to act out an emotion without at least to some extent experiencing it oneself. But is this difference inherent to the medium, or can computerized gameplay generate similar experiences? In this article, I argue that it can, even when pre-scripted and in a single-player setting. The article focuses on love, an emotion that we seldom expect to experience as part of gameplay.

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ROMANCE IN COMPUTER GAMES

Dragon Age is not the first computer game to feature romance. Romance has featured in at least three ways in computer games: as part of a fixed storyline, as an optional (and sometimes branching) side story to the main story, and as a gameplay mechanism.

The first is by far the most common option. Even action games will sometimes briefly hint at an ongoing romance (such as when Alyx – the female companion - hugs the protagonist character in *Half Life 2*). Story-based games sometimes offer rich romantic story lines; examples are *Fahrenheit* and its successor *Heavy Rain*. In such games the romance is fixed, written into the main story of the game, and by and large independent of the players' actions in the game¹.

In contrast, the romantic storyline of *Mass Effect* is interactive, allows the player to choose which character to pursue, and can have multiple endings. This allows for a greater amount of player agency, as players can choose whether they want to engage in romance at all, which character to romance and, to some extent, how the romance will develop. *Baldur's Gate II*, an older game and the spiritual predecessor of *Dragon Age*, actually took this approach further than *Mass Effect* by offering many more romantic options with complex trajectories. However, whereas romance is part of the main storyline in games like *Fahrenheit*, it is more of a side-quest in *Mass Effect* and *Baldur's Gate*.

Romance can also be made into a game-play mechanism. This has been little used in story-oriented games (apart from that *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* will award achievements for pursuing successful romances), whereas it is a key element in *the Sims*, where characters can fall in love and have sex in order to produce children.

ROMANCE IN DRAGON AGE

As in *Baldur's Gate*, the main romantic options in *Dragon Age* play out between the players' character and some of the “party members” – the characters that join the protagonist in pursuit of the main quest, and that the player can control in battle. Similar to *Mass Effect* and *Baldur's Gate*, the romantic storylines also develop over time and can end in multiple ways. In addition, some of the *Dragon Age* storylines tie very closely into the main

¹ Although in both games, actual sex scenes need to be unlocked through skilled play.

storyline, up to and including the very end of the game. The romances develop through pre-scripted dialogue trees, and must be initiated by the player: if the player does not choose to flirt, the romance will not develop. Which options of romance that are open to the player depend on the race, societal status, and gender of the character the player has chosen to play, something that creates very interesting reactions with players. It is possible to briefly pursue several romances at once, but eventually the player is forced to choose one character to pursue.

Aside from the main romantic options, *Dragon Age* will sometimes hint at romance (or sex) with minor characters. These storylines are far less complex than the main romantic options and are left outside the scope of this article.

Gameplay effects of romance

Romance in *Dragon Age* has a gameplay function, as it is tightly tied into the game's "approval" system. Throughout the game, the player can boost the player characters' relationship with the party members. This is done through various means: giving them gifts and performing actions that they approve of are the main methods. High approval ratings strengthen the party members' battle skills.

In order to pursue a romance, the player must first raise the approval rating for the character he or she wishes to pursue. At a certain approval level (varying for the different characters), the player gets access to dialogue options that allow the character to flirt with the party member. Romancing party members will lead to huge boosts in approval. Since high approval rates strengthen the party members, there is a gameplay incentive for players to initiate one or several romances. From a pure gameplay perspective, it seems to be optimal to sequentially pursue most of the available romances in the same play-through.

METHOD

The romance options in *Dragon Age* are interesting from multiple perspectives: they are not gender-neutral (as they depend on the gender of the player's selected avatar), they offer gameplay rewards, and they develop in unpredictable ways. Consequently, discussions on *Dragon Age* romance feature frequently in forum and blog discussions devoted to the game. What makes these discussions so interesting is that they often feature strong affect – players express strong emotional attachment to the storylines and the game characters. I personally experienced this during my first play-through with the game, when I initiated a romance but failed to develop it fully. I was deeply moved by and dissatisfied with the way Alistair broke off with me – and so, it turned out when I started to search online forums, were many other players. When examining this phenomenon deeper, I uncovered a host of interesting and varied reactions to the game romances.

The discussion in this article is based on material collected through such web searches. There is no good way to deal with this material quantitatively. For example, the simple search term "Dragon Age Romance" yields 1 140 000 hits (April 2010), but most of the hits concern the gameplay mechanics of *Dragon Age* romance and provide little insight into player engagement. Moreover, a quantitative analysis based on such search terms alone will miss many forum entries that respond to previous posts. Thus, one must manually scan thousands of comments and blog posts to retrieve relevant comments.

I selected to inductively collect and classify comments until reaching saturation - in other words, until comments no longer revealed new kinds of attachments. I started by scanning the 100-300 first hits for search terms combining 'romance' with the names of the four major romanceable characters in the game. This would sometimes lead to refined searches (e.g. scanning a full forum thread found through a single hit). In all, I ended up with 62 entries that to some extent reflect the broader variety of players' emotional responses to the game romances. The material is not stochastically representative due to the inductive retrieval method, why no statistics is presented in this article.

I have selected to use only material from forum discussions, blogs, and published articles that relate the authors' personal game experience. Official and unofficial game guide sites and WIKIs, reviews, fan fiction, and interviews with the game designers and developers were all excluded. Guides, reviews and interviews were excluded since these do not describe personal game experiences but aim to describe the game in a more generic manner. Fan fiction, on the other hand, provides excellent documentation on personal emphatic reactions to a game, but departs too far from the original play experience to be useful in the context of this article.

The citations included in the article are stripped of all context information. The age and gender is omitted since community members seldom disclose this information in forum discussions (and when they do, we cannot be sure that participants volunteer their true age or gender). It would also be a privacy violation to disclose the identity of the authors (even if it is an online identity), why source information has been omitted throughout. When quoting signed articles in online magazines, full citation information is provided in footnotes. Unless otherwise stated, all citations were retrieved in April 2010.

THE DRAGON AGE ROMANCE OPTIONS

In this section, we will present each of the romantic options in detail, and discuss the most apparent community reactions to each of them.

Romancing Alistair

The "Alistair" romance is the most elaborated option in the game. Alistair is an (human) illegitimate son of the dead king and, as it turns out during the game, with strong claims to the throne. The character is romanceable for

female characters only, and the romance develops somewhat differently depending on the race of the player character. The romance starts out as a sweet storybook romance, but almost invariably ends badly: Alistair may break off the romance, he may sacrifice himself for the player character, or the player character may sacrifice herself in his place. The ‘good’ ending, where both Alistair and the player character survive, marry and ascend the throne together, is only available if the player makes a morally very questionable choice.

The search term “romance Alistair” yields 448 000 hits in a Google search (April 2010). Several blog posts and forum threads deal with strong emotional reactions to the character or the storyline.

Some themes emerge. Commenting on the lovable character of Alistair is perhaps the most common theme.

“My choice is always Alistair. He’s such a great character - sweet, funny, and innocent almost to a fault. Every cute little Alistair moment that I stumble across always makes the hopeless romantic in me swoon. XD Earlier today, he confessed his feelings to my Human Warrior.”

Some players even express that their emotions for Alistair makes it difficult for them to try out other romance options:

“I have to confess my elf slept with Zev while with Alistair, I had trouble sleeping that night! Since then it has been Alistair all the way!!! Lol”

“... I positively love Alistair and feel bad everytime I romance someone else [I’m a total video game nerd :))”

Some players express the mirror emotion: they do not wish Alistair to romance more than one of their characters:

”Alistair was my romantic interest the first time around so this time, I have committed myself to dallying with someone else. At first, this was merely motivated by my desire to get another achievement, but as I started playing, I realized the decision was influenced by deeper emotions.

Whenever a dialogue sequence begins between my new character and Alistair, I feel like I have to be quite careful not to suggest anything inappropriate. It is as if this new character is a friend of my old character and cannot flirt with her friend’s boyfriend. Complicated and seemingly irrational, I imagine you’re thinking. How can I even think such things when it is obviously an entirely separate timeline? Alistair has never known my first character nor has my present character known any of my others. She is



Figure 1. Let me die, Alistair! Fan fiction doodle by Kuurankuiskaus² (pseudonym), reprinted with permission.

free to do whatever and whomever she likes. For some reason though, it doesn’t feel that way to me.³”

“I had to do a male play-through eventually...because I wanted to romance Zev, but I couldn't bring myself to hurt Alistair's feelings.”

Concerning the story line, two main themes emerge. Players discuss how to avoid the ending where Alistair sacrifices himself (see figure 1), and players react strongly to Alistair breaking off the relationship.

“I got myself worked up over the idea of my character sacrificing herself, went to work, came home and finished the game to have him do THAT [sacrifice himself]. /cry”

“Developing a boyfriend-baffling crush on Alistair is pretty much an integral part of gameplay for a lot of us. So is pitching an even more boyfriend-baffling fit if/when he...

... uh, spoiler alert, I guess...
... dumps you.”

Several blog discussions complain about the fact that the Alistair romance is only available for female characters. There exist game ‘mod’ projects focused on making the Alistair romance option available also to male characters. This is an example of the goals of such a project:

“... have created a set of goals for which all of the project’s development must adhere to:

- Allow male players the opportunity to explore romance with Alistair
- Expand on central themes of camaraderie and passion

² <http://kuurankuiskaus.deviantart.com>

³ Bembeneck, Emily. (2010) Alistair and infidelity. Greywardens.com <http://greywardens.com/2010/04/alistair-and-infidelity/>

- Provide alternatives within the main campaign
- Provide fresh and engaging gameplay
- Polish it all for the highest quality⁴

Gender swapping creates one more type of reaction to the Alistair romance. This male blogger reports sympathizing with Alistair rather than with his player character:

”I took him under my wing... I noticed that every time we got to chatting at camp, he’d make this sweet puppy dog face. And when Morrigan jibed him about whether it was cool for Grey Wardens to ‘fraternise’ with each other, he got all flustered and blushed. You know where this was going. Alistair had a crush on me. And so, secure in my own sexuality, I went for him

....

Somewhere along the line, I started to realise that my mage didn’t remind me of me: the character I related to was Alistair. ... growing up, I was always plenty awkward. I tried to be funny because I couldn’t be cool, and even when a girl talked to me, all she got was stammers. More than ever before, I had to acknowledge the problem with swapping genders in games: I might’ve tried to role-play as a woman – but the character I really understood was the guy.⁵”

ROMANCING MORRIGAN

Morrigan is the heterosexual romance option for male characters and an ‘evil’-oriented character. The player character can flirt with her, and at a certain level of approval she will agree to share his bed. At maximum level of approval, she will confess that she is in love. The romance with Morrigan offers a dramatic turn towards the ending of the game, when she discloses her own objectives with joining the party. If the player character refuses to do as she wishes, she leaves the party immediately, and if he agrees she stays over the final battle only to leave immediately afterwards.

“Romance Morrigan” yields 152 000 hits on Google (April 2010). Of the comments not dealing with gameplay, most focus on the nature of her character and compare her to the other female romance option, Leliana. Morrigan is sexy, “*she’s a manipulative bitch who uses sex to make people stupid*” as one writer puts it. The same blogger ponders on her character in a positive way:

“And then, of course, there’s Morrigan. In my fortyplus hours with the game, I was never quite sure how to feel about her -- and I mean that in the best way possible. She’s extremely useful in combat, but she’s also the most unrepentantly amoral character in

the entire game. Her sarcasm and occasional (and very, very brief) moments of goodness makes her strangely likable, yet I never, for a second, trusted her.⁶”

I was only able to find one blog post in which a player explicitly admits to falling in love with Morrigan, but this post is exaggerated and possibly faked⁷. Some comments express emotions towards Morrigan in a more covert way:

“Morrigan is really a diamond inside a coal. Just the coal is pretty thick :/ But I have a weakness for complicated girls. I liked Leliana more than I thought I would, but she’s no Morrigan.”

In line with the comments about Alistair, there are also complaints that Morrigan cannot be romanced by a female player character, although not as vocal as the corresponding discussions about Alistair.

“:P Try being a lesbian on this site with all the Alistair fanfiction. Though I can see why all the girls liked him. I wanted romance Morrigan. _ Leliana was cool but Morrigan was awesome.”

“Wish I could romance Morrigan as a woman. She and my blood mage would get along famously.”

The storyline arch stirs strong emotions with some players. Losing one of the companions right before the end battle is for some unthinkable, leading to an acute conflict between optimizing gameplay and selecting the narratively more ethical path.

“... she picked the exact moment when I needed her. She knew that I had to give in to her, and so did I. There was just no other way. I fucking needed that bitch, relied on her and she played me like a pawn for her own selfish needs. ... Reluctantly, I agreed. I felt dirty, betrayed and angry. Also guilty as hell. During the end game celebration I could not stop from thinking how fucked up this whole thing was. Everyone was congratulating me on my heroic deed, and thanked me for saving them. If they only knew what I did. I didn’t save them. I actually doomed them all.”

ROMANCING LELIANA AND ZEVRAN

Leliana (female) and Zevran (male) are the two last romanceable characters. Both are bisexual, and available romance options to player characters independent of gender. The fact that Dragon Age offers same-sex romance receives a lot of attention in news clips, as well as in forum and blog discussions. It is also in this light we should read the complaints that Alistair and Morrigan

⁴ “Bond of blood”, <http://social.bioware.com/project/657/>

⁵ Dahlen, Chris (2009) Chasing Alistair. Edge online, <http://www.edge-online.com/blogs/chasing-alistair>

⁶ Burch, Anthony. (2009) Blood sugar sex magik: examining Dragon Age’s Morrigan. Destructoid. <http://www.destructoid.com/blood-sugar-sex-magik-examining-dragon-age-s-morrigan-157617.phtml>

⁷ It is considered out of place and accused of ‘trolling’ in the forum.

only are available for heterosexual romance⁸. However, the Leliana and Zevran romances do not tie into the main storyline in the same way as the Alistair and Morrigan romances do, but are more of side-plots akin to the *Mass Effect* romances.

The Zevran romance is possibly the more interesting option, as Leliana falls in love easily and equally easily maintains her feelings for the player character throughout the game. Zevran is a more complex character that first looks only for sex, and will confess deeper feelings only at a high level of approval (and is, in this way, similar to Morrigan).

“Romancing Leliana” yields 22 300 hits on Google whereas “romancing Zevran” yields 147 000 hits (April 2010). Judging by statistics alone, Leliana seems to be the least desirable romance option in *Dragon Age*. It is still possible to find several confessions of love for Leliana; who must be considered the ‘safest’ romance option in the game.

“Whoever on the writing team wrote Leliana's lines: I think I love you. Even if you're a 50 year old bloke. I love you.

Every time I try to play a bastard or a mercenary or a b****, I talk to Leliana and am converted. Even in her bad Bard mode, she makes me want my character to be with her.

Third run through now and the same thing has happened. Again.”

However, some players find her a bit dreary:

“... I chose Leliana for the time being. Now Leliana is starting to get really annoying, but when I ended it with her I didn't have an option of starting anything with Morrigan.”

One blog post about Zevran hints at jealousy, just as some Alistair posts do.

“Oh my God, Zevran's seeing someone else.

That was my reaction when I first read the *New York Times* article yesterday about the controversy surrounding the gay romance option in the popular new video game *Dragon Age Origins*.

The article included a screenshot from the game, a beefcake shot of a shirtless elf named Zevran. I've spent many hours in recent weeks living in the virtual world of *Dragon Age Origins*, and opening the paper to see an image from the game there was startling, like finding my high school photos on the world news page. The lovemaking is all in PG-13 mode, of course, but seeing Zevran with another man for the

world to see was enough to bring up a glimmer of jealousy.”⁹

For women players, it seems common to pursue Zevran only in a second or third play-through. This may be the reason why it is so much easier to find comments on falling in love with Alistair than with Zevran:

“Is Zevran worth it?”

I have a small dilemma on my hands.

So I made a city elf and at first I really wanted her to romance Zevran. Until she came to Ostagar and there was our favorite subject [Alistair] and some comments about him in a dress and dancing and I had a serious case of relapse... Does anyone have first hand experience [sic] with the naughty elf and how fleshed out is his romance in comparison with Alistair? (we all know that he's got pretty big shoes to fill, don't we?)”

CHARACTER IDENTIFICATION IN ROLE-PLAY

Role-playing games [3] are games where players adopt roles: a character that is different from their real-life identities. In non-computerised forms, role-play tends to encourage deep identification with this character, as the player must to some level be able to identify with the character in order to play out the characters' reaction to events. Pohjola [8] describes this beautifully as the player “pretending to pretend to be the character”, and by so identifying with his/her beliefs and emotions:

“The longer the player pretends to believe, the more she starts to really believe. To more she pretends to remember, the more she starts to really remember.”

In the live role-playing community, the prevailing design ideal is that the player should be able to maintain a clear distinction between player and character. Larp designers and players alike create various mechanisms to keep the distinction clear: clear entry and exit rituals are one example. Consequently, there is also a counter reaction among designers, who sometimes deliberately design for *bleed*¹⁰ [7]. Such scenarios either blur the boundary between player and character [9], or invoke so strong emotions in players that players cannot fully distance themselves from their characters. It is possible to distinguish between a *bleed-in* effect, when the player's character and identity affects the role, and a *bleed-out* effect when the player shares the emotions of the character.

Also in computer-based role-playing games, players tend to associate themselves to their character in various ways.

⁸ David Gaider from Bioware has posted an interesting and detailed explanation of the design of homo-, bi- and hetero-sexual romance options in *Dragon Age* at gamer.net.

⁹Shrefer, Eliot. (2009) Despite reports, gay cheating elves haven't quite rocked the video gaming world. The Huffington post. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eliot-schrefer/despite-reports-gay-cheat_b_383369.html

¹⁰ The ‘jeepform’ roleplaying community is perhaps the most extreme example, see <http://jeepen.org/>.

This is perhaps the most important reason why role-playing games offer players a choice of gender and character traits. There is an element of bleed-in already in character creation, as players tend to create projected characters that resemble them. This might be particularly important for women. Turky and Adinolf [10] report that character customization is more important for women than for men (in MMORPG). Yee¹¹ reports that in World of Warcraft, ‘gender-swapping’, playing an avatar of the opposite sex, is 7-8 times more common among men than women.

Waggoner [11] argues that, rather than identifying directly with the game character, the player identifies with a “projected identity” – a theoretical identity that the player wishes to be in the context of the game world. The projected identity creates some ground for bleed, and some of the examples brought up by Waggoner can be understood as bleed effects. Note that this identity projection is *not* the same as avatar attachment in virtual worlds [12]. In single-player games, the avatar primarily projects the player into a fictional context, whereas in virtual worlds, the avatar is also a representation of the player towards other players.

Most single-player computer games go no further than this, though. Eladhari and Lindley [2] argue that by and large, computer games fail to create deep immersion into the player character, and that a deeper representation of the role-played character would be necessary in order to achieve it.

BLEED IN DRAGON AGE

From the citations presented earlier, it seems clear that some kind of bleed happens in *Dragon Age*. The game features several design choices that encourage bleed-in, creating fertile ground for a bleed-out effect in which players experience the emotions of their characters.

First of all, it seems like the romance options have been designed to fit the *player* rather than the character. The design is based on the assumption that the players’ projected identity typically will share the players’ gender. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that the most elaborate romance story line (and the only one that affects the ending of the game in a fundamental way) involves romancing Alistair, the heterosexual romance option for female characters. It is possible to read Alistair and Morrigan as stereotypes for female versus male appeal, something that this blogger reacts strongly against:

“What fascinates me at the moment is this: Alistair is bashful and silly. Morrigan is sexy and cruel. Why have Alistair and Morrigan been written this way?”

It stands to reason Alistair was written for maximum straight lady appeal, and Morrigan for maximum straight man appeal. So what does the writing say about straight women and men?”

¹¹ <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001369.php>

The bleed-in concerns more than the gender of the player however: there is also the question of sexual preference. It is easier to engage in the character’s romance if your character shares both your gender and your sexual preferences. The gay and lesbian reactions are of course the most obvious example of this, such as when the gay mod project has as its main goal to “enable male *players* (my emphasis) to experience romance with Alistair”. But so is the example of the male heterosexual player who, when playing a female character, ends up sympathizing with Alistair rather than sharing the emotions of his character.

Player projection is further supported by the rather vaguely sketched player characters in *Dragon Age*. Most of the time, the player character is only peripherally visible on screen and has no voice of its own; even though non-player characters have voices, the player character only communicates through written dialogue options. As discussed by McCloud [6] it is easier to identify with a character that is only vaguely sketched, than one that is fleshed out in every detail. An additional benefit of the written dialogue is that there can be very many dialogue options. Many of the dialogue options have exactly the same effects, thus supporting players in role-playing a consistent character rather than to optimize their gameplay. Thus, the design of the player character perspective and dialogue facilitates players in creating a projected identity.

There is also a bleed-in effect created by the fact that players must choose which character to romance. Flirting is easy in *Dragon Age*, and thus players very easily find themselves involved in several romances at an early stage of the game. Later on, they are forced to choose. As the non-player characters are well written, complex, and evolve over time this is not necessarily an easy choice. In the community discussions, we find players reflecting on and comparing the relative merits of the different characters. In these discussions, players also tend to emphasize or ascribe character traits to a character in order to make it more attractive to them (see e.g. the discussions on the characters of Morrigan and Leliana). By reflecting and embroidering the characters in this manner, players actively engage in the kind of make-believe that Pohjola [8] discusses, which encourages bleed.

The effect is that the storyline romance can bleed out: some players do “fall in love” with their romance of choice. From the comments about Alistair, we can see that many do so willingly and consciously: it is in fact a major source of entertainment value. The concept of ‘pixel crush’¹² is not unheard of in computer games before.

¹² Pixel crush: to be physically attracted to an animated character, usually a video game character or avatar. <http://www.urbandictionary.com>

“My husband has a severe pixel crush on Leliana, and I just can't blame him. She's dreamy.”

The bleed effect seems in this case a bit similar to that of female teenagers idolizing male idols [4]: it offers a relatively safe form of romance in situations where you are not prepared to engage in a real one.

Whether or not this is ‘love’ in any psychological meaning of the word, players are still baffled by the strength of their emotions. When you feel that Alistair is cheating on your first character if you play the same romance twice, or sense a pang of jealousy for seeing Zevran with another man in a newspaper article, you are experiencing bleed. The citations show how the bleed effect can “sneak up” even on the experienced player, who believes him or her to be beyond emotional engagement in a mere computer game.

“I am in love with Alistair... with a fictional person in a made up story about something that never happened...yes, I feel your pain lol. I regularly dream about him and think about him far too much to be considered healthy. I'm in love with someone that doesn't exist!! pixel crush doesn't even begin to explain it!!! You are not alone...this character is so amazing we're going to need a support group.”

CONCLUSIONS

The romantic gameplay in *Dragon Age* illustrate that even a single-player game can offer strong role-playing experiences for players, to the level where the emotions of character and player get blurred. I have analysed this as a result of carefully designed bleed-in, relying on the player's desire to project his or her identity into the game, and on an equally careful design of the romanceable characters and their storylines, causing players to project their own romantic preferences into the game.

Some players – perhaps in particular women players? – enjoy this tremendously. Just as many computer games offer us the option of being heroes for a while, the romantic options in *Dragon Age* allow us to fall in love, safely and just a little.

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