‘Strangely Like a Person’: Cole and the Queering of Asexuality in Dragon Age: Inquisition

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Abstract

In this article we consider the representation of the character Cole in Bioware’s Dragon Age: Inquisition (Electronic Arts, San Mateo, 2014), focusing upon how his asexuality is treated by other characters and its significance within his narrative arc. As well as contributing to the discussion of the representation of sexualities and gender within games, we seek to add to the ‘representational archive of asexuality’ (Cerankowski and Milks, *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, Routledge, Abingdon, p 40, 2014), including games as media depicting and defining asexuality through fictional characterisation. We argue that it is particularly through humour that Cole is marked as being ambiguously set apart from the other characters in the game, and is infantilized as a ‘boy’ rather than a young man. Within a party of diverse genders, sexualities and indeed species, Cole’s absent interest in sex is treated as though it were something strange and in need of being overcome for Cole to become fully ‘human’. Beyond the scope of this game, this raises further questions for the representation of asexuality within media culture, and broader cultural discourses concerning whether asexuality is conceived of as being within the bounds of both masculinity and human normality.

Keywords Asexuality · Dragon Age: Inquisition · Cole · Queer · Masculinity

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Introduction

Within media studies there has been increased attention to representation in games as popular cultural texts, and such attention has run alongside increasing diversity within games, among which we might gesture to BioWare as a good (though continually debated) example. BioWare's *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) (henceforth DA:I) was praised for its diverse non-player characters (NPCs), with a wide scope of sexualities and non-binary genders represented (Holmes 2016; Perluson 2018). Other scholars have argued that DA:I renders non-heteronormative sexualities 'banal' (Kelly 2015), but it is within this context that we offer a reading of one of the characters, Cole, and his narrative arc, as a depiction of asexuality. In offering this analysis, we seek to add to the 'representational archive of asexuality' (Cerankowski and Milks 2014, p. 40), including games among media depicting and defining a/sexuality through fictional characterisation.

To be clear: Cole has not been described as 'asexual' by the creators, indeed lead writer Gaider (2015) has stated that he is unsure how to include asexuality within his games. We justify our reading since Cole explicitly expresses no sexual desire for others, and the apparent 'absence' of his sexuality is recurrently rendered significant both within the party banter—discussion between NPCs independent of the player's actions—as well as in his personal quest. Problematically, Cole's asexuality is depicted as something which needs to be overcome in order for him to become 'human'—the alternative being to remain a spirit within a human shell, a masquerade of a human being without full understanding of 'human experience'. If not a conscious depiction of asexuality, Cole nevertheless illustrates a wider social tension around the place of active sexuality as regards both masculinity and 'personhood'. Beyond the scope of this game, this reflects wider social presumptions about human sexuality, reinforcing the notion of asexuality as deficient, or at best a type of immaturity, perhaps particularly for men.¹

The narrative of DA:I takes place in a world called Thedas, the player character (PC) is called the Inquisitor, whose main quest is to close the Breach, a rupture in the sky through which demons are entering. In order to do so, a party of other characters must be assembled; each NPC has their own backstory, but also side quests through which the PC engages with the gameworld beyond the central plot. Cole is one potential member of the party. Cole is a 'quirky' character: his 'strangeness' is attributable to his being a spirit who has taken on the body of a deceased human, or to quote the NPC Varric: "A spirit who is strangely like a person". Unlike other NPCs, Cole's sexuality (as a category) was not confirmed by the creators, but numerous fans have interpreted him as asexual/aromantic (Kyra 2015). As a game, there is a high level of contingency and interactivity: for example, it is possible to play the game without choosing Cole to become a member of the group, and thus removing him from the ensuing narrative. What we offer is a reading that is therefore dependent upon gameplay which involves a player's choices to include

¹ Throughout this article we use 'men', 'women', 'masculinity', 'femininity' to refer to cis-gendered identity categories which are predominantly conceptual, rather than physical realities.

particular characters, engage with party banter, as well as to pursue Cole's personal quest. We thus engage with the gameworld as open to textual analysis despite the contingency of the story, rather than a ludological analysis (focusing on the rules of the game) or game-play (focusing on players) (Aarseth 2003). Despite being contingent on player choices, the narrative is nevertheless scripted and structured to depict characters in particular ways: here we focus on character dialogue, humour, and the repercussion of particular choices within the game. Offering a queer reading of Cole as a depiction of asexuality, we explore how his asexuality is othered, and rendered unintelligible both for adult masculinity, and 'human' 'personhood'.

'The Romances are for Everyone': Banal Sexuality in BioWare, and Situating Asexuality

Dragon Age is not a unique series under BioWare, with *Mass Effect* (2007) and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003) being some of the first to include queer characters. DA:I is the third game in a series—the first, *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) stirred controversy through inclusion of a homosexual implied sex scene (McGinn 2009). Other controversies around BioWare have also focused visual representations of intimacy—consider for example the one-day ban of *Mass Effect* in Singapore, or Fox News' misrepresentation of the same game (Holmes 2016, p. 126). Free both to take on different genders and sexualities in the construction of their player character (PC), but also through agential encounters with other characters in-game, the integration of LGBTQ+ plotlines means DA:I provides a space for players to 'play with' such identities in virtual reality (Pelurson 2018). We argue this renders it a 'playground for sexuality'—appropriating Bertozzi's description of *Grand Theft Auto* as a 'playground for masculinity', where GTA's virtual environment enables the player to enact a hyper-masculinity beyond the boundaries of real life (in Embrick 2012, p. 25). Though like other media in representing coherent narratives and characters, the playability of games means they offer a space not only for depiction but interaction, rendering 'who' and 'what' is brought into play particularly important.

The inclusion of diversity in BioWare games might be summed up by lead writer David Gaider's response to an anonymous player's post, arguing that integrating LGBTQ+ plotlines neglected the 'core demographic' of the 'straight male gamer': "The romances in the game are not for 'the straight male gamer'. They're for everyone. We have a lot of fans, many of whom are neither straight nor male and they deserve no less attention." (in Holmes 2016, p. 118). While praiseworthy, this delimits representation as consumer appeal—that the reason to include queer characters is so games will appeal to LGBTQ+ players. It is worth noting that there have been direct appeals from asexual fans, asking for the inclusion of canonically asexual characters (Gaider 2015; Kyra 2015). There are however problems with framing representation in these terms, as Roberts and Brown (2018) identify this delimits the need for representation "within capitalist logic—if the market is ready for it, [prejudice] can be addressed." (p. 12). Furthermore, audiences gain pleasure and invest in texts that do not only represent 'people like them' however that is defined, and representation offers *collective*, not only *individual*, blueprints. Shaw (2015) argues

that representation is important because it is world-building: “[m]edia texts provide us with source material for what might be possible, how identities might be constructed, what worlds we might live in... Representation provides evidence for what forms of existence are possible.” (Shaw 2015, p. 3). It is in this context that we consider the ‘form of existence’ given to a/sexuality in DA:I.

A key point of Kelly’s (2015) argument is that the world of *Dragon Age* is one in which non-heteronormative sexuality is banal. This is something worth celebrating, as is the normalisation and nuanced exploration of diverse sexualities within any media texts (Pelurson 2018). We somewhat problematise the notion that non-heteronormativity is completely normalised in DA:I, identifying that at least for Cole heterosexuality is depicted as the referential point for what ‘sexuality’ is—we do however argue that sexuality generally *is* rendered banal. It is in the context of this ‘banality of sexuality’ that we offer a queer reading of Cole’s implicit asexuality. As previously mentioned, David Gaider (2015) has asserted that though open to doing so, he is unsure how to include asexuality within his games. Gaider is responding to a fan query about the difficulty of including asexuality “[s]ince asexuality is nothing the society would really notice (as loving the same sex would) but might be, depending on the character, a more internal struggle” (2015). Gaider’s response is first to assert that the DA:I writers are told that they don’t need to include sex in any of the characters’ narratives,² but the challenge of depicting sexualities is, for Gaider, one of language:

my difficulty with [including asexuality] remains the same as with other—shall we say more complicated?—forms of sexuality In that the only way to really include them is to allow for an in-game discussion of that sexuality. You can’t just show it, you have to talk about it, and that gets a bit more difficult in the quasi-medieval setting where the notions and terms aren’t the same as in our own modern society. (2015)

Of note here is the fact that Gaider situates asexuality as somehow ‘less complicated’ despite implying that unlike ‘more complicated’ sexualities ‘the notions and terms’ are/were wanting. Our analysis of Cole as asexual runs counter to Gaider’s assertion that asexuality is not present—or discussed—within the DA:I narrative—we do however argue that it is represented as ‘unintelligible’.

As Flore (2014) and Przybylo (2019) discuss, there are a variety of identity positions within ‘asexuality’, including a variety of categories regarding interest in ‘sex’/romance’, as well as differentiations along bi-, hetero-, or homo-sexual lines. We limit our discussion (and review) of these, largely because the representation of Cole does not lend itself to this nuance. Cole’s ‘asexuality’ is a depiction of a ‘simple’ ‘absence of sexual attraction’ (which is, however, framed

² There are of course numerous characters—within any media text—who are not depicted as clearly sexual or sexually active. In DA:I, for example, this enables NPC characters such as Josephine (who does not have a sex scene) to be interpreted by players as potentially ‘asexual’, at least within their own ‘head-canon’ (Kyra 2015). We do not focus on Josephine here since her a/sexuality is not rendered as clear in dialogue or problematised to the extent that Cole’s is within the narrative.

heteronormatively within the text). This absence is interpreted as 'strange' by the other characters, and it is due to this that we read it through the broader lens of queer theory. As queer theorist Michael Warner argues, 'queer' signifies "a resistance to regimes of the normal" (1995, p. 343); a definition which enables it to 'provide the tools' to think about asexuality despite 'queer's origins in studies of sexual identities (Cerankowski and Milks 2014, p. 10). Much of Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) sets out to explore just what it is that is disrupted by 'deviance'—bodies or sexualities 'out of place' or "living in an oblique world" (2006, p. 161). Ahmed is not alone in broadening the definition widely, for example Giffney and Hird (2008) expand 'queer' beyond the anthropocentric to explore the non/human. The latter is relevant to our analysis since we argue that the ambiguity of whether Cole *is* human is very much linked to the ways in which his a/sexuality is made un/intelligible. As noted by a number of other scholars (see Kim 2011, Sinwell 2014, Willey 2015, Barr 2019), there is a prevalent linking of asexuality and inhumanity in popular cultural discourses. Within our analysis it is less that Cole might not be human that is at issue, since within the fantasy genre of the gameworld being another species is not inherently negative—it is instead the fact that his absent sexuality is *made meaningful* for his 'humanity'.

Focusing on the 'directionality' of sexual desire, Ahmed notes "If sexual orientation is understood as something one 'has'... then what one 'is' becomes defined in terms of the direction of one's desire, as an attraction that pulls one to others." (2006, p. 70). Though reading 'queer desires' as diverging from heterosexuality as the "compulsory orientation" (2006, p. 71), asexuality is also conceivable in these terms—and as being queer in not being 'oriented towards others' in the first place. As Cerankowski and Milks (2010) ask: "How do we begin to analyse and contextualize a sexuality that by its very definition undermines perhaps the most fundamental assumption about human sexuality: that all people experience, or should experience, sexual desire?" (Cerankowski and Milks 2010, p. 650). This underlies the concept of 'compulsory sexuality'—"the assumption that all people are sexual..." (Gupta 2015, p. 132), or "the belief that sex and sexuality are core components of being human" (Przybylo 2019 p. 4). This 'fundamental assumption' also underlies definitions of asexuality as a 'lack of sexual attraction' with many arguing that asexuality should be reframed beyond notions of deficiency (Flore 2014, p. 52). There is also a need to trouble asexuality as 'absence', and the 'hinging' of sexuality on 'sexual attraction' (Przybylo 2019: 5). While keeping this in mind, in our analysis we use 'absence', because on one hand it implies neither that something has been 'lost' nor that it is 'wanting' (see LaCapra 1999, for conceptual differentiation between 'absence', 'loss' and 'lack'), but also because we feel that 'absence' is how Cole's asexuality is depicted within the game. That is, the focus is upon his 'absence of sexual attraction', not upon other, more nuanced, ways of exploring how Cole might engage with others intimately.

Cerankowski and Milks (2010) frame the question of asexuality's standing in queer communities: "How might asexuality fit into a community where sexual culture is at the center?" (2010, p. 661). This question is brought up by Bogaert (2012), paraphrasing Dan Savage's criticism of a need to assert an asexual identity:

it is clear why gays and lesbians, for example, need to assert their identity in a public sphere ... [But if] you are not engaging in potentially prohibited behaviour (e.g. fellatio among men) and thus do not need public acceptance (or at least tolerance) of it, why go out and make public displays of your identity[...]? After all, no one cares that you are *not* having sex. (2012, p. 67 emphasis in original)

There is a parallel here to the anonymous player's question to David Gaider, which characterises asexuality as invisible because not perceived to be a social concern: "asexuality is *nothing the society would really notice* (as loving the same sex would) but might be, depending on the character, *a more internal struggle*" (2015, emphasis added). This is an individualising of asexuality (as an 'internal struggle' which 'no one else cares about') which circumscribes asexuality as an isolated experience; it furthermore elides women's historical economic imperative to marry, as well as historical and contemporary realities of arranged marriages for both genders, and within our own time it ignores general social pressure for people to have sexual relationships and children (see Rich 2018, discussing this from the slant of women's compulsory heterosexuality; see also Brown 2005 for a discussion of lesbianism as 'invisible' but not 'criminalised'). This statement (that 'society might not notice') also ignores the extent to which asexuality has been medically pathologized as a disorder. A distinction between asexuality and hypoactive sexual disorder has only recently been acknowledged in the *American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013), and the relationship between asexuality and disorder continues to be a matter of discussion (see Kim 2011; Bogaert 2012; Fedtke 2014). While not denying disorders such as hyposexuality, the need to prove that the absence of sexual attraction might not constitute a disorder is worth keeping in mind in response to the statement that it is only transgressions of legal prohibitions that might need social acceptance. As Bogaert acknowledges, articulating a particular identity is not about whether such an identity has been 'prohibited': "It also has to do with expressing oneself and seeking some level of acceptance from others for one's existence" (2012, p. 67). Media representations can be part of such acceptance, and normalise it.

Despite the more limited, though growing, scholarly attention to asexuality, depictions of implicit asexuality are not lacking in mainstream popular culture. Depictions of Asperger's or prodigious intelligence are often connected with asexuality, for example Sheldon from *The Big Bang Theory*, Sherlock Holmes (in various manifestations, BBC's *Sherlock* being the most recent), as well as Dexter Morgan from *Dexter*. As noted by Sinwell (2014), Fedtke (2014), Miller (2017) and Barr (2019), media texts and pop culture representations have often drawn correlations between asexuality and abnormality, pathology and 'inhumanity'. This association between asexuality and 'weirdness' is present in the characterisation of Cole. We might note that in many of these, as in DA:I, a disinterest in (or inhibition towards) sex is treated as something for characters to overcome.³ Bogaert (2012) identifies

³ Conan Doyle's original depictions of Sherlock Holmes perhaps being an early example providing a character whose asexuality is not narratively depicted as a problem, though numerous screen adaptations

Gilligan from *Gilligan's Island*, and Jughead Jones from *Archie* as asexual, as well as discussing the asexuality of the feminine trope of the 'iconic virgin'. He identifies that many of these representations conform to particular types: firstly, the sexual fantasy that an asexual—prejudged as someone without sexual experience—may yet become sexually available (asexuality-as-virginity-as-being-in-waiting), and secondly playing the narrative role of comedic foils. Both of these types relate to Cole. We might even consider the temporally-limited sexualities of Spock/Vulcans in *Star Trek* here, to cast our net into popular science fiction. What a number of these illustrate is also an implicit linking of intellect/rationality and asexuality, an older legacy of differentiating body and mind. Cole does not exactly fit this trope—he is not particularly 'rational', he does however have special abilities to read minds/memories, and the fact that he is (at least in part) a 'spirit' maps onto a binary which emphasizes 'the body' as sexual.

There is also significance in the gendering⁴ of asexuality in popular culture: many of these individual characters are male, whereas the 'iconic virgin' trope is female. This gendering is partly due to the social tropes of male/female sexuality as active/passive, implicitly rendering female asexual characters less 'visible' in fictional media because already inscribed within traditional notions of femininity, and ones that are given an (albeit-problematically) positive valence [virgin/whore]. This renders traditional femininity an ambivalent site: 'ideally' asexual-yet-sexually-available (for particular men). Conversely, male asexuality becomes more marked because it appears to constitute a clearer break with the presumption of a 'normally' 'active' sexuality ascribed to adult masculinity. Consider for example an interview host's comment regarding David Jay (founder of Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN): "I don't get this. *A guy. I could see for a woman.* But you?" (Przybylo 2014, p. 442, emphasis added). Analyses of representations of asexuality thus necessarily entail a negotiation with gendered norms, not only sexual ones (see Gupta 2019 for further discussions of asexuality and gender).

Butler's seminal argument in *Gender Trouble* (2007) is that having a binary gender [male/female] is a marker of "personhood" (p. 13), but also that one is gendered through various categories and acts, including sexuality. In effect, gender is something which is 'done'. We explore these themes in the case of Cole since his 'personhood' is rendered explicitly uncertain (consider even his friend Varric's description of him as "strangely like a person") and is perceived as contingent upon what Cole does/not do. He is also often emasculated in being recurrently situated as a 'boy', rather than a young 'man' due to his appearance, despite the fact that the characters realise that Cole could be hundreds of years old at the point they meet. In this,

Footnote 3 (continued)

have often problematised his a/sexuality more, some by reading closeted homosexuality (also an interesting reading, but returns us to a presumed compulsory sexuality).

⁴ It is beyond our scope to examine asexuality and race, though as Hawkins Owen (2014) identifies there is a complex and somewhat problematic correlation between asexuality and 'whiteness' (in part a mirroring of a projection of sexuality/eroticism onto other races). In terms of media representations, most of these named characters are white, as indeed is Cole in appearance (keeping in mind the otherworldly setting of *Dragon Age*).

Cole's personhood is represented as performative, not inherent. In the following analysis we first explore the ways in which asexuality is 'queered' within the game as something either 'confusing' or in need of 'fixing'. Secondly, we explore Cole as a figure of the comic uncanny: simultaneously amusing/incongruous/unsettling. Humour is used to emphasize Cole's asexuality through his misunderstanding of double-entendres, and his inability to master joke-telling is a further feature of being 'human' where he is implied to be 'lacking'. We then focus upon the explicit articulation of becoming-sexual with becoming-human, a plot device which ultimately precludes asexuality as a form of human personhood by making active sexuality a signifier of humanity, rather than irrelevant to its categorisation.

"He's Not Like Us. That's Pretty Much Cole.": Asexual Intelligibility

A sneak preview in *PC Gamer UK* described Cole as: "Cole is different. He sees everything differently. He's not like us. That's pretty much Cole." (Hawkins 2014). This summation of Cole simply being 'different' from 'us' raises the question of what collective 'us' is being referred to. This is particularly ambiguous since other characters include elves, dwarves, qunari and other non-human characters—also identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and pansexual—confusing what makes other NPCs 'like *us*' enough to mark *Cole* as fundamentally different. Considering the mechanics of the game, Cole is 'unromancible' while relationships can be sought with other party member NPCs, and his sexual category is unnamed by the game creators. The absence of explicitly identified asexuality in the presence of LGBTQ+ characters brings up the question of where asexuality fits into a queer community vis-à-vis Cerankowski and Milks (2010). The answer that DA:I seems to suggest is that it is not part of a spectrum of possibility. Science fiction and fantasy genres are often lauded as providing space to explore queer identities. As articulated by Roberts and McCallum-Stewart, a "secondary world is one in which literally *anything* could happen. ...[therefore] producers of fantasy worlds must acknowledge a degree of responsibility for their world beyond that of other creators." (2016, p. 2). But this also includes the responsibility for reinforcing social norms within a secondary world where norms could have been rewritten—something Gaider disavows in characterising DA:I as limited, rather than liberated, by its "quasi-medieval setting where the notions and terms aren't the same as in our own modern society" (2015). This is also challenged by the fact that fantasy novels are one medium which has increasingly featured explicitly asexual characters (Simelane 2018).

There is conceptual convergence between the 'queer', the 'comic' and the 'uncanny': all three refer to something situated as incongruous, out of place, provoking affective responses. As several studies show, 'queer sexualities' have historically often been depicted as alternately threatening or amusing (Pearson 1999), a pattern which extends to asexuality (Bogaert 2012). Theoretical discussions also demonstrate fluidity between these different ways of being 'funny' (strange/haha). Bergson (2008) argues "we laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing." (2008, p. 16), correlating comic figures to "automatons" (p. 10). We might recognise here key features from Freud's (2003)

description of the uncanny. The similarity is also evident in their respective uses of Mark Twain: Freud (2003) uses Twain's description of bumbling around a dark room, Bergson (2008), a story in which the speaker muses upon whether or not it is he or his twin brother who was drowned and buried. Both these literary examples depict a liminal space between the comic, and the uncanny—the unsettling presented humorously. This liminal space is explored by Carroll (1999) arguing for fundamental overlap between the genres of comedy and horror. We argue the use of 'strangeness' and 'humour' within fictional narratives are ways that the 'queer' can be marked. Halberstam (1995) critiques correlating 'queer' with 'uncanny' on the grounds it compares non-heteronormativity with the 'monstrous', but it is precisely such a correlation which is useful for us, since: "Human monsters ... provide a tangible site for exploring the problem of what constitutes acceptable human identity." (Wright 2013, p. 2). The queer, the uncanny, and the comic thus serve as a means of naming that which exists at the edge of coherence. As Butler argues, 'intelligible' identities are those which maintain 'coherence and continuity' between the categories which are meaningful to them (2007, p. 23). Our argument is that within DA:I, Cole is situated in this liminal space: a loaded figure whose 'strangeness'—in actions, speech, appearance, and sexuality—is continually marked.

The NPC Solas identifies Cole as a spirit of compassion, drawn to a young man (Cole refers to him as "the real Cole") dying of starvation in prison and ultimately taking on his bodily form. As a spirit which has become (or is becoming, or is partly) human, Cole's asexuality is grounded in the wider mythology of the game. Within *Dragon Age* there are numerous spirits and demons. Similar to Christian theology, the difference between them is not origin but valence: demons are vicious, untrustworthy, dangerous amplifications of negative emotions (despair, fear, pride, rage, among others). Conversely, spirits manifest faith, justice, valour, wisdom, among other positive emotions and virtues. This binary is sexualised (hypersexuality vs. hypo/a-sexuality), with demons being associated with the former. The mythology of *Dragon Age* thus provides a narrative explanation for Cole's asexuality, which could render it *natural* (though not-human) within this virtual world. There are several ways of reading this. Firstly, as an implicit 'dehumanising' of asexuality, present beyond the gameworld (Kim 2011; Willey 2015). MacInnis and Hodson (2012) found that asexuals were, by outside groups, most often mechanically dehumanised, perceived as cold and machine-like, or were animalistically dehumanised, seen as somehow less sophisticated (p. 738). Yet within the narrative, the asexuality of spirits is a *naturalized* explanation which should render Cole's indifference to sex 'intelligible', and not as pathology. For Butler: "'Intelligible' genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire." (2007, p. 23). Likewise, sexuality is also contingent on particular categories, and within the gameworld 'species' is clearly one. What is then of significance within DA:I is that despite having potential intelligibility, Cole's asexuality nevertheless serves as a point of comment and curiosity for the other characters, implying it to be *unintelligible*, particularly if he actually is human.

It is through party banter that Cole is revealed to have no interest in sex:

Cole: [referring to spirits possessing human bodies] It makes sense. It holds them as they die. But then it's a man, and he wants a woman. Why?

Solas: When they possess people, they often indulge in feelings they have never before experienced.... Have you felt no interest in women since you came through the Veil?

Cole: No.

The revelation here is that Cole does not experience sexual desire despite taking on human form. Solas expresses this in a heteronormative manner, inquiring after his 'interest in women'. This turn of phrase is euphemistic, something Cole usually does not understand. A more characteristic response would be Cole saying that 'women can be interesting'—a misinterpretation of the question by taking it at face value. The fact that 'even Cole' understands this euphemism naturalises heterosexuality as a point of reference for what sexuality is: implicitly a natural—and male—attraction to women. But there are further implications in this dialogue: inside human bodies spirits feel human 'feelings', grounding sexuality physically within the human body as *'bodily desires'*. This circumscribes the possibility of asexuality as a human bodily experience, and within the dialogue also emphasizes (hetero)sexuality as a natural, 'physical' part of being a 'man'.

'Weird, Squirrely, Kid': Infantilising Asexuality

Varric and Iron Bull both refer to Cole as 'kid', a friendly moniker linked to their active attempts to befriend and protect him—as Iron Bull says: "Listen... You might be a weird, squirrely kid, but you're *my* weird, squirrely kid" (emphasis in original). The moniker 'kid' is affectionate, but it also nominates Cole as childlike, and introduces a hierarchy into the friendships with those who use it. He is often called 'boy' or 'lad' (differentiating him from 'men'), despite the fact he could easily be the oldest in the party (being originally a spirit with possible immortality), and like all of them is a skilled fighter—that is, after all, the ludological reason why he is with the party on a perilous quest. Cole's 'juvinilisation' is aided by his physical appearance—his body is that of a young man, and his slender build physically differentiates him from the muscularity of some of the other NPCs. The NPCs largely conflate 'Cole' and 'his body'—it is the main way through which he is gendered and aged as a 'boy', though it is not clear how experienced the 'real Cole' may have been. As noted by Chess (2018), asexuality is often framed as natural for children, positioning asexuality also as a juvenile state. The juvenilisation/infantilisation of Cole is one of the ways in which the NPCs interpret his lack of sexual experience, and the various things he does not know or understand. In some ways this is an attempt at normalisation, reframing him as a 'child' rather than an adult who is different from them.

Cole: What's an Orlesian Tickler? [implied to be a sex toy]

Iron Bull: I'll tell you when you're older.

...

Cole: How do you get the hair on your face?

Blackwall: Look, ask Varric. He seems to have adopted you.

Cole: Is it a mask?

Blackwall: No, it's a beard. Look, if you were any other lad your age I'd tell that one day you'll probably grow one too. Except I don't know if spirits that become boys get beards.

Cole's lack of knowledge is discursively framed here as 'youthful innocence' (rather than his being a spirit with limited experience of the 'human realm'). Rather than answering his questions, such knowledge is situated as something that he will 'grow' to know, when he is 'older'. This is symbolically linked with changing from lad/boy to a man in the dialogue with Blackwall, despite his uncertainty whether Cole can/will grow a beard. Blackwall's description of Varric's friendship as 'adoption' makes it a parental (not only pastoral) relationship. Linked also to sex ('what's an Orlesian Tickler?'), the framing of Cole as a 'boy' situates his asexuality as an immature state—childhood as a time not only where people are presumed to be asexual but also whose absence of sexual knowledge is routinely preserved as 'innocence' ('I'll tell you when you're older').

Cole's apparent lack of prior sexual experience provokes other characters to intervene, situating asexuality as something which 'needs fixing'. This fits with other media tropes of asexuality as "requiring intervention (asexuality-as-reparable)" (Hawkins Owen 2014, p. 264).

Iron Bull: So Cole, you're polite, you're good in a fight, and your heart is in the right place.

Cole: It is? Good.

Iron Bull: I've got a plan. I think this could get you sorted out, get both feet on the ground.

Cole: I have to lift my feet, or the rocks make noise when I walk.

Iron Bull: Yes.... When we get back, you're going to spend an evening with a nice lady named Candy.

Cole: Can I lift my feet?

Iron Bull: She's gonna lift a lot more than that.

...

Iron Bull: So how was Candy? You two have a good time?

Cole: Yes. She danced. Then I untangled the hurt that made her angry at her mother. I helped her write a letter to send back home. She said I could call her Marguerite, the name didn't hurt anymore.

Iron Bull: Well, that was five royals well-spent.

Much of the humour in this dialogue originates from Cole misunderstanding euphemism, and what 'Candy' was hired for. Iron Bull thinks that "an evening with a nice lady" will "sort out" Cole—implying that he needs 'sorting', that an absence of sexual experience signifies something lacking. It is striking that Iron Bull (identified as pansexual, and in some gameplay in a homosexual relationship during the game) takes it for granted that Cole is heterosexual. As with the conversation with Solas this reiterates heterosexuality as referential for what sexuality is. Following Przybylo (2019), we can see in this dialogue the positioning of asexuality as 'absence' which

obscures the importance of non-sexual intimacy. Implicitly, what Cole actually does with Marguerite is disregarded because it is not sexual—‘untangling the hurt’, helping her with the letter, and indeed the fact that she gives him her real name, are not framed as acts of trust, both intimate and mature.

There is an implicit emasculation through infantilization or ‘juvenilisation’ at play here. Cole’s recurring infantilization is illustrative of the extent to which presumptions about adult masculinity are demarcated by what is excluded; as Lorentzen identifies “a study of unmanliness brings perspectives on the limits, borders and risks of masculinities” (in Flood et al. 2007, p. 171). Here, Cole is discursively situated in a liminal zone between boyhood and manhood, with loss of virginity implied as the mode of transit through a presumed ‘awakening’ of desire. However, asexuality is not simply an absence of sexual experience (see Przybylo 2014), challenging the characterisation of male sexuality as, “once activated... an unstoppable biological force” (Mooney-Somers in Flood et al. 2007, pp. 473–474). In one side-quest, Cole is explicitly referred to as a ‘virgin’ by Imshael: “I should stop offering virgins, everyone always chooses them and I can never find any. Oh wait, there’s one [referring to Cole]. Eem, you probably don’t want him.” This dialogue reinforces Cole as ‘virginal’ (legitimizing this as a way of understanding ‘what’ he is), but also implies that virginity is something physical because perceptible. Farramond notes that the fantasy genre often ascribes a physicality to virginity even when dealing with male protagonists, and argues “a language for describing men’s virginity and its hidden complexities does not exist. Virginity, at least linguistically, is feminine” (Farramond 2016, p. 160). This dialogue is also significant to the banal sexuality of the game: ‘virgins’ are implicitly desirable (everyone wants them), but also implied to be ‘rare’—indeed, of any of those present, Cole is differentiated as the *only one* without sexual experience. Though done for comedic purposes, despite objectifying virgins as inherently ‘desirable’, Imshael also devalues Cole through ascribing a lack-of-desirability to him (‘you probably don’t want him’). In this, Cole’s ‘virginity’ is re-framed like “prudery ... used to mark a subject as backwards, repressed, insufficiently eroticized, and lacking.” (Przybylo 2019: 2). What is of import both here and in other instances is that in provoking laughter, or needing ‘sorting’, Cole’s absent interest in sex is queered by being perceived as strange by the other characters. In a virtual world where sexuality is banal, Cole is queer by virtue of not aligning to the other characters’ expectations that most people—or men—should and would want to be sexually active.

‘And Now You’ve Made it Awkward’: The Comic Uncanny

Holmes (2016) shows that humour in games reveals much about the gameworld presuppositions of what is normal, and presumptions about what players will find funny. In his discussion of BioWare’s *Baldur’s Gate II: Shadows of Amn*, Holmes (2016) analyses how the character Edwin’s subjection to a magical curse which turns him into a woman (Edwina) is treated as comic relief. Being treated comically is a problematic form of representation—the comic butt is included within the narrative of the game but is framed as a figure to be laughed at rather than empathized with.

This example also reveals much about gender: the fixed options the player is given are either to suggest that Edwina no longer has a place within the group, or make a joke about Edwina's 'rack'. The latter is presented as the 'friendly' option, despite the fact that it mocks Edwin's transformation and sexually objectifies Edwina's new body via sexist comment. The use of humour thus maps out what is situated apart as 'funny'—a man turning into a woman, for example. Holmes identifies that BioWare's treatment of LGBTQ+ characters has developed from the comic into more sympathetic characterisation (2016, p. 117).

It is important to note here that Cole is certainly treated empathetically alongside being rendered comic, and the PC is encouraged to care about him, and his fate. A number of the characters—such as Solas and Varric—do not mock Cole, and are actively protective of him. However: humour is used to emphasise Cole as 'different' from the other characters—a difference which, while partly about situating him as a 'spirit', becomes more significant when sexualised, and linked to the question of whether Cole is 'human'.

Despite understanding Solas' euphemistic 'interest in women', Cole's literal interpretation of turns-of-phrase is an ongoing source of comic relief:

Dorian: Cole, the wooden duck I found on my bed... was that you?

Cole: No. I'm not a wooden duck.

Dorian: I mean did you *put* it there?

...

Blackwall: Hey, Cole. Say something interesting.

Cole: "Something interesting"?

Blackwall: Yes, I deserved that one.

The humour at play here is deceptive in its simplicity. On one hand, Cole's literal interpretations draws attention to linguistic ambiguities, but it is Cole who is laughed at for misunderstanding. Theories of the dynamics of humour reveal different issues in DA:I—that it normalises sexual banter, but also others Cole both within and beyond the gameworld in its interpellation of players to laugh at him. His inability to understand or master humour is also presented as a further signifier of his 'strangeness'.

Freud's (2002) short work on jokes understands humour as circumnavigating social taboos prohibiting blunt expression of sexuality. 'Tendentious' jokes are those which, regardless of the 'jokework' (e.g. wordplay), derive their underlying 'funniness' from being about sex or the body. A significant amount of the party banter is tendentious:

[Coming across ice-covered statues]

Sera: (Laughs) Up there. Giant icicle tits! Ice... tittles?

Blackwall: You're looking for 'titsicles'.

The humour relies both on wordplay and the visualization of a sexualised female body. Much of the party banter has sexual undertones, which likewise encompasses much of the humour. As mentioned earlier the active incorporation of sexual narratives enables DA:I to be a 'playground for sexuality'—the use of

tendentious humour is a playful part of this. But it also emphasizes characters as sexual beings and interpolates the player as the same, most subtly in the presumed sharing of a sexual sense of humour. Cole serves largely as a contrast, as someone who fails to see the sexual in wordplay:

Cole: Your knife is big.

Blackwall: (Laughing) It's a sword.

Cole: It's bigger than mine.

Blackwall: And now you've made it awkward.

Cole does not understand euphemism, and it is particularly through double-entendres that this is emphasised (this is one example among numerous). It is Cole himself who is rendered 'out of place' here, being the only one to consistently not 'get' it. We might also read into the exchange with Blackwall a sexual image which adds to Cole's infantilization/emasculatation. The recurring use of tendentious humour to emphasize Cole's grappling with turns-of-phrase implies that it is not just *semantics* but *sex* that Cole does not 'get' (despite his conversation with Solas illustrating familiarity with, though no experience of, 'men's interest in women').

When not tendentious, humour is a perception of "incongruity ... something unexpected, out of context, inappropriate, unreasonable, illogical..." (McGhee 1979, p. 10). Cole's 'strangeness' is accentuated by his tendency to speak in stream-of-consciousness snippets of other people's memories, as well as cryptic references to our 'real world' beyond the game, something which disconcerts the other characters and yet is appropriated to comic effect.

Blackwall: You know, Cole, you're not so bad. But I'll never get used to the things that come out of your mouth.

Cole: There was once a man who had bees coming out of his mouth?

Blackwall: A perfect example.

The cumulative effect of this banter is to render Cole 'funny': in both senses of the word. Henri Bergson situates humour as a "social corrective" (2008), enforcing social norms through ridicule. Laughter is also 'social' in its 'complicity': "However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry...with other laughers, real or imaginary." (Bergson 2008, 12). Bergson's conceptualisation of the comic intertwines social norms with the delimitation of what it means to be 'human' in a particular context, and situates humour as a "social gesture" through which the not-properly-human "eccentric" (at the edge) is indicated (2008, p. 12). Situating Cole as a comic figure emphasises him as 'abnormal'. As Howitt and Owusu-Bempah (2005) argue, "Jokes do more than merely reflect prejudices. They are active in the process of the construction of the meaning of 'otherness' and inferiority" (p. 59). But the humour within the gameworld is extensively for the benefit of the player. In this the player is invited to complicity in situating Cole as Bergson's 'eccentric'. Cole is characterised as struggling with euphemism generally, but also formulaic jokes—he neither understands them nor can master telling them. This is itself dealt with humorously with Varric's largely unsuccessful attempts to teach Cole 'knock-knock' jokes.

Cole: I think I have it. Let me try again.
 Varric: Alright, Kid, let's see what you've got.
 Cole: Knock, knock.
 Varric: Who's there?
 Cole: Cole.
 Varric: Cole who?
 Cole: It's me, Cole. That is my name.
 Varric: No, no. You're still not getting it. Sorry, Kid.
 ...
 Varric: Okay, try it again, you'll get it.
 Cole: Knock, knock.
 Varric: Who's there?
 Cole: Me.
 Varric: (Sighs.) Me who?
 Cole: Me, and I'm telling a knock knock joke.
 Varric: Uh... that was... closer. Keep trying.

This inability to master joketelling functions as further evidence of Cole's strangeness, but also infantilises him, making humour, like sexuality, something else he fails to understand. There has been much philosophical debate about the human-ness of humour, as Critchley identifies: "...if laughter is proper to the human being then the human being who does not laugh invites the charge of inhumanity, or at least makes us somewhat suspicious." (2002, p. 25). Though distinct from Iron Bull's attempt to 'sort out' Cole, it is another way in which he is situated as having 'much to learn' about 'being human'. As Cole himself identifies: "Varric is quiet inside. He pulls me more to here. Makes me a person. Calls me 'kid'. A friend." This is significant in that while Varric treats Cole as a person, this is described as making Cole 'more' human, rendering being human or spirit polar aspects which he must choose between (rather than, for example, reconcile or balance them). This is reinforced in Cole himself saying Varric "makes me a person", implying otherwise he is not. The question of whether or not Cole is, or can become 'more human' is central to his personal quest, one which problematically links sexuality with being human.

Becoming Cole: Being Non/Human a/Sexual

Ahmed correlates queerness to states of liminality: "a matter of how things appear, how they perform, to create the edges of spaces and worlds." (2006, p. 167). Ahmed (2006) refers to 'queering' as an 'uncanny effect': "a familiar form becoming strange" (2006, p. 162). Ahmed (2006) is not alone in making a connection between the queer and the uncanny (Palmer 2012). *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) recurrently uses metaphors of disorienting spaces—a dark room, or angled mirrors in which everything is slanting (2006, p. 66). Cole is liminal in several ways: seen as childlike but possibly the eldest, human and spirit, dangerous but vulnerable, between the Fade and the 'real world' of the game. Cole also moves between the gameworld and our 'real world' by breaking the fourth wall:

his cryptic comments make intertextual references to previous BioWare games, and popular culture (e.g. Star Wars). His liminality is also implied visually: he first appears behind the main characters, stepping into view yet obscured by them at the same time. In some gameplay, the Inquisitor (PC) first meets Cole in an in-between space also: in their (the Inquisitor's) own mind, facing a demon of envy. When he first speaks to the PC, Cole is revealed standing on the ceiling, and throughout the ensuing conversation he moves around a disorienting room (furniture on the walls and ceiling make it impossible to tell which way is 'up'), disregarding the normal use of furniture by walking across tables and a bed. The scene visually invites comparison to the 'strange rooms' mentioned by Ahmed (2006). Such scenes visually reinforce Cole's characterisation—a person askance in the world.

The question of 'what' Cole is recurs throughout the game. Some of the NPCs are suspicious of him, most evident in their othering of Cole through the use of 'it' even when he is present, highlighting his non/humanness through not attributing him a gender, but also by not addressing him directly. By talking about him to others, he is excluded from the dialogue, marginalised: "Why does it keep talking at me?" (Sera); "...your pet is speaking again. Do silence it." (Vivienne). This verbal circumnavigation of Cole serves to highlight the extent to which these particular characters exclude him from the group and position him as a thing. Cole is hardly unique as a figure of the 'strange' within the fantasy genre—but it is problematic that the attention drawn to his asexuality as part of that strangeness articulates the two.

Giffney and Hird (2008) use the term non/human to refer to beings who confound clear boundaries between the human and not-human (from intestinal bacteria, to werewolves). The non/human is indeterminate: in particular the figure of the non/human questions what is included or excluded from our notion of the human. They situate the non/human as 'queer', taking it as a verb meaning to "unpick binaries and reread gaps, silences, and in-between spaces." (2008, p. 5). Cole confounds the clear separation between human and spirit in managing to be both simultaneously; what is of import to his narrative is that his interstitiality is read by the other characters, and ludologically built into the game, as something to overcome—that is, fix, much like his absent interest in sex. If pursued, his personal quest involves seeking out the Templar who was responsible for the death of the "real Cole" who starved to death in prison, the former inhabitant of his body. When the Templar is found, the PC is given governance over Cole's future in the form of two choices: "Cole must forgive this. (Cole becomes more like a spirit)." or "Cole needs to grow. (Cole becomes more human)." They both involve letting the murderer go free, but choosing to become 'more human' has particular repercussions for Cole's asexuality. Becoming 'more human' is described as a type of 'growth', which could be read as another example of infantilization, but it also emphasizes the non-humanness of his current state. This 'becoming human' is presented as an imagined path not only towards 'real personhood', but also towards 'heteronormative manhood':

Blackwall: So now that you've dealt with the Templar, you're a real boy?

Cole: Realer.

Blackwall: Good enough. I suppose you'll stop looking into people's heads soon? ... Soon you'll be eating properly. Then drinking. Then drinking for real. Then girls.

The future-oriented masculinity reinforces reading his current masculinity as ambiguous, or lacking certain masculine capital (alcohol and sexual conquests). Blackwall's prediction of Cole's future not only includes him becoming less spirit-like (not reading memories), but also 'drinking for real' and 'girls'—his path from 'real boy' to 'real man' is laid out as part of what it fundamentally means to become human. This path is later fulfilled in DA:I *Trespasser* DLC (BioWare 2015):

Dorian: You have a lady friend?

Cole: Well, I am human now.

Cole's becoming-sexual (if that is what this relationship is) is here explicitly represented as a signifier of his becoming-human, inversely situating asexuality as signifying the non-human. What Cole's relationship entails is not further explored (is it even, in fact, 'sexual')—his 'having' of a 'lady-friend' is treated as a fact for his humanity which does not need further exploration. That these are Cole's own words also means that it is harder to read such 'hetero-sexual-humanity' as only projected onto him by other characters—he implicitly legitimates this as a sign of his own becoming-human.

Sinwell's (2014) analysis of *Dexter* emphasizes the titular character's preoccupation with appearing normal through engaging in sexual activity; it is noteworthy that Dexter recurrently muses upon his "humanity" and "monstrosity", and yet as a narrative set within the ostensible 'real world' this is never rendered a 'real' 'biological' question. Within the fantasy genre, the 'actual human-ness' of characters is uncertain from the outset: Solas is an elf, Varric a dwarf, Iron Bull qunari. In DA:I then the linkage between 'humanity' and active sexuality threatens to depict it as an actual, biological, fact—rendering it meaningful of what it takes to be human, rather than it being irrelevant to the question in the first place.

Final Thoughts

"Queering has the job of undoing 'normal' categories, and none is more critical than the human/nonhuman sorting operation. That is crucial work and play." (Haraway 2008, p. xxiv).

Within the DA:I narrative, Cole's narrative arc articulates 'becoming human' and 'becoming sexual' in a way that situates active sexuality as a natural baseline for 'being human' in the DA:I world. While *Dragon Age* has been praised for its representation of different sexualities, the characterisation of Cole renders asexuality both 'unnatural' for humans, and also the crux of much of the humour in the gameplay, situating it as something 'funny'. As mentioned previously, while it is laudable that the *Dragon Age* world could be a 'playground for sexuality', DA:I seems to preclude asexuality as part of what is at play, a way-of-being which could be explored.

It would be problematic to generalize from one game or character, but our discussion does aim to consider the significance of representation given “[m]edia texts provide us with source material ... for what forms of existence are possible.” (Shaw 2015, p. 3). Cole is not unique within pop-culture representations of asexuality which correlate it with ‘weirdness’, with the non/human, or with virginity (as a ‘fixable’ state). Nor is he unique as a representation of asexuality as a more heated issue for masculinity. What is revealed by such texts are social presumptions—and pressures—for what it means to be a ‘normal’ person, delimiting normality in these terms. What would be more provocative would be to have characters whose humanity is less questioned within the narrative where this questioning is legitimated. Or characters whose sexuality is not presented as one of the categories for a coherent, intelligible ‘personhood’ or ‘being human’. Or indeed, having characters whose ambiguities—sexual, or gendered, or otherwise—are not something which must be overcome, or ‘sorted out’. The greater possibilities within a secondary world highlights the need to question just what is discursively situated as queer within and beyond virtual worlds, as Iron Bull states: “Look, I’ve got horns. You’ve got pointy ears and those freaky, big elf eyes. We’re probably not the best people to go around deciding what’s normal.”

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