

# The BookTok to Player Pipeline: TikTok and the *Baldur's Gate 3* Fandom

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

At the beginning of November 2023, a curious post emerged in the *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios 2023) Subreddit which accrued over two thousand upvotes. The post contains two photos of a library display: the first image shows a placard with photos of companion characters from *Baldur's Gate 3* (BG3) which reads, "book recommendations based on your romance choices," and the second shows a table full of romance fiction books which have nothing to do with the game (loracarol 2023). While there are plenty of examples of crossovers between videogames and books (c.f. *Halo* book series or *Call of Duty* comics), this Reddit post is notable as it represents a crossover of audiences in its interpolation of players who have romanced one or more of the game's companions with recommendations for romance fiction. The library display did not contain stories written *about* the video game, but rather stories the curator felt would resonate with the video game's players based on their romance choices. Indeed, the recommendations in the display are mostly romantasy (hybrid genre fiction which exists between romance and fantasy). While an interesting example of the reach of video game culture into aspects of civic life, this Reddit post is emblematic of a deeper phenomenon. Social media posts using the *Baldur's Gate 3* hashtag show an overlap between the game's audience and fans of romantasy books. This overlap is particularly notable as it represents a potential pipeline which can bring marginalized and underrepresented populations into mainstream gaming as romance novels tend to be popular with women, non-binary, and queer people (Braidwood 2022; Harris 2023).

This extended abstract presents preliminary findings from a study on TikTok fan communities, namely Booktok. Booktok, a portmanteau of the words 'book' and the social media application 'TikTok', is a community of authors and readers of all genres who use the platform to analyze, discuss, recommend, promote and make memes about books using videos shorter than 3 minutes (Hart 2022). While Booktok content exists covering a variety of genres, romance and erotica books tend to attract a large following, providing an unexpected overlap with gaming culture (c.f. Ask and Sihvonen 2023). Rather than aim for a representative sample, this study employed a purposive sampling strategy to curate TikToks using both *#baldursgate3* and *#booktok*. Initial

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data collection, completed on 14 November 2023, identified 100 videos for inclusion in the study. While there are more than 100 videos using the combined hashtags on TikTok, previous research has established that 100 TikToks are an appropriate number for initial exploratory analysis as thematic saturation is achieved at this threshold (Minadeo and Pope 2022). The videos ranged in engagement metrics, with the most popular liked by 191,400 accounts. In these videos, content creators encourage their viewers to play and experience *BG3* for its romantic themes and tropes.

Content analysis was employed to analyze the sampled TikToks. Content analysis “is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use (Krippendorff 2004 [1983], p.18)” and has been previously employed to study communities of romance novel readers (Gregson and Lois 2020) and TikTok video content (Minadeo and Pope 2022). This study takes an ontological position that TikToks “...are meaningful constituents of the social world in themselves” and that they “...act as some form of expression or representation of relevant elements of the social world (Mason 2002, p.106).” Thus, the TikToks included in this study represent an opportunity to explore a crossover of fandoms as well as a pipeline to introduce new and underrepresented communities to gaming. After viewing the TikToks selected for inclusion, emergent themes were coded using a grounded approach (Corbin and Strauss 1990). Based on preliminary analysis, we have generated several early themes emerging from the sampled TikToks.

Theme	Description
Thirst	Videos which proclaim or discuss sexual attraction to a <i>BG3</i> companion character.
Book recommendations	Recommendations for books to read based on who the player romanced in game.
Recommendations to play <i>BG3</i>	Users who give reasons Booktokkers would want to play <i>BG3</i> .
Tech support	Video tutorials which show how to set up and run the game on different machines, advice on how to install mods, or otherwise provide tech support for new players.

Table 1. Preliminary emergent themes.

From the initial themes emerging from this exploratory study, we can understand ongoing discourses in the intersections of *Baldur's Gate 3* and Booktok fandoms. Content creators are leveraging TikTok to encourage fellow romantasy enthusiasts to play *BG3* to experience romantic narratives with the game's companions. Conversely, Booktokers are promoting romantasy books with thematic resonance to *BG3* players who may be novices to romantasy fiction. The crossover in fandoms represents a potential pipeline to encourage underrepresented communities to play games. Finally, the inclusion of tech support videos shows creativity in overcoming equipment barriers to play with tutorials demonstrating how to run *BG3*, a hardware intensive game, on non-gaming computers using cloud servers. Together, these themes suggest

an ongoing dialogue among the Booktok and *BG3* communities, providing novel insight into motivations to play and engage in the fandom.

This extended abstract is of interest to DiGRA audiences for two reasons. First, exploration of a previously unstudied phenomena as it relates to games and fan culture has cultural and historical value for game studies as a discipline. Second, this study presents new opportunities to better understand player motivations beyond traditional gameplay drivers such as ‘challenge’ and ‘competition’ (c.f. Yee and Ducheneaut 2023). Through *BG3* content creators leveraging their Booktok audiences, we observe a trend where romantasy readers are seeking out *BG3* for its romantic narrative. And while *BG3* is critically-acclaimed for a number of reasons (Metacritic 2023), understanding its virality on Booktok raises interesting questions for games scholars seeking to understand underserved audiences in mainstream gaming and the themes that may encourage them to engage with games.

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