

Published by :



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# EXISTENTIAL LOVE: ROMANCE IN SINGLE-PLAYER RPGS

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## Abstract

The impact of romantic interactions within the game world varies significantly, especially in RPGs due to their intricately detailed worlds. Unlike linear games where romance unfolds passively through cutscenes, exerting minimal influence within game world, RPGs that offer high player agency create an immersive virtual environment that resonates with existential tenets. The choices made by players in terms of romance can have significant repercussions, haunting the player throughout the game. These games often feature complex and realistic love mechanics, offering a diverse range of experiences akin to real life, including inclusivity and infidelity. Many modern RPGs offer path-specific romance options, acknowledging that not all characters will be equally charismatic to every player as individuals have varied dispositions. Video games with high agency allow players to exercise authenticity and make decisions that align with their individuality. This article explores how these variables manifest in the context of romance in single-player RPGs.

**Keywords** - In-game Romance, Choices and Consequences, Existentialism, Game-mechanics of Love, Authenticity.

## Introduction

Interactivity is a key aspect which differentiates new media from traditional ones. Video games, being new media, do offer the users (players) the option to exercise such features to a large extent depending on the freedom (of choice) the game provides. The option to experience love (or romance) is a part of the journey the player embarks on while accessing the game. The love an individual experiences through interacting with the game as a medium, can be quite complicated, just like the games themselves. A person can find video games of different attributes, like - single-player, multiplayer, action, role-playing, and much more. Each game is diverse in itself while belonging to certain categories, which makes the player's experience diverse indeed (or at least provides the option to exercise it).

Explaining the ways video games differ from traditional media; Mark J.P. Wolf asserts that events in a video game will differ greatly from one playthrough to the next, in contrast to works in traditional media, which consist of set, linear sequences of text, image, or sound (or combinations of these) that remain unaltered when studied repeatedly (aside from wear and tear effects). While audiences can watch a film through to the end and feel as though they have seen it in its entirety, video game players frequently need to possess a certain level of skill to progress through the game's higher levels, and even after playing a game multiple times, there are frequently action sequences and areas that remain unexplored (2001, p. 7).

He further elaborates how being "active" differs as in case of video games and other medium like films. Wolf's comments on the time-based and interactive nature of video games do signify the evolution of games as new media, which is quite evident from the romance in RPGs like *The Witcher 3*. It is your (the player/avatar) story after all and you are provided agency (varying with the game itself) to complete (or not) your (love) story. This interactive element specific to new media, undoubtedly adds to the immersion which the user can not find within the traditional media.

As RPGs have matured, they have increasingly embraced complex narratives that include diverse romantic interactions, allowing players to explore relationships in ways that resonate with contemporary societal values regarding love and identity. The notability of romance in single-player RPGs stems from its capacity to provide immersive experiences that challenge players' emotional intelligence and agency. Considering the novelty and research gap, this article specifies the romance elements in video games, with an emphasis on the elements of existential philosophy.

## What is Love?

Video games, like any other medium, can also be considered an art. "In fact, the main goal of a work of art is to create a bond (emotional or intellectual) with the interacting person" (Díaz & Tungtjitcharoen, 2015, p. 5). Video games, as interactive art, do allow the player to exercise the option of love.

The degree to which one can exercise or experience it, depends on other variables which are both dependent on the player (intent, mind-set) and the game (like agency, immersion), providing optimal experience upon convergence. Before proceeding to the details of implementations of love in video games, let us define it for the context.

According to Oxford English Dictionary, the term “love” is defined as - a feeling or disposition of deep affection or fondness for someone. However, love encompasses broad meaning(s) as it can even be familial or friendly. The kind of love this article scrutinizes is romantic love, which is commonly termed as “Romance” in context of video games. Romantic elements can be incorporated into both single-player and multiplayer video games, but the experiences they offer can be quite different.

As evident from the title of this article, one can easily relate to the idea that the article focuses on the concept of romance in single-player games. Additionally, it is important to get briefed about the same concept in case of multiplayer games for comparing and contrasting to understand the similarities and differences.

### **Romance in Multiplayer Games**

The advent of technology has ushered new avenues for human interaction and relationships. Virtual agents in romantic video games can provide a sense of companionship and emotional connection for some people. These virtual relationships can have a significant impact on a person’s mental and physical well-being, similar to real-life romantic relationships.

However, it is important to note that while these virtual relationships can offer certain benefits, they are not a substitute for real human interaction. The complexity and depth of human emotions and experiences in a real-world relationship are hard to fully replicate in a virtual setting; but for those who find comfort and enjoyment in these virtual relationships, they can certainly have a positive aspect of such relationships within their lives.

Multiplayer games, due to involvement of more than one player, offer opportunities beyond the machine-human interaction. They allow real life interpersonal interactions to permeate the play world, transforming themselves from a site of pure play to a site for romantic relationship formation and maintenance. For the players, these multiplayer games can even transcend the boundaries of the magic circle, based on the player’s differentiated construal of the play/life boundary permeability in the course of their game-originated romantic relationships (Huynh, Lim, & Skoric, 2013, p. 255).

The players themselves can date in real life after the initial online interaction. Simultaneously, multiplayer games like MMORPGs, do provide players a ground for dating or marrying virtually through their avatar(s). Such practices of cyber marriage are not uncommon within MMORPGs’ communities. However, getting married online does not always implies falling in love.

Providing examples from Chinese MMORPGs’ communities, Wu, et al. remark that such stories rarely transpire in real life. Usually, love is regarded as the framework of marriage and is invariably linked to jealousy and exclusivity. Such kindness

and friendship have no place here. In-game marriage, on the other hand, fosters a friendship kingdom that is “pleasurable, emotional, and affective” and helps players overcome feelings of exclusivity and jealousy (2007, pp. 83-84).

Nevertheless, they do acknowledge that “most online couples get to know each other first through the game and then meet personally in real life”. Thus, in-game marriage serves as a way of connecting the computer-mediated relationships with real life, although the directions of extension of the relationship are different, the former being a material social relationship that extends into game space, whereas the latter is a social relationship in a game that extends to real life”.

### **Romance in Single-player Games**

In single-player games, the romance is ordinarily a part of the game’s narrative. The player may have the opportunity to develop a romantic relationship with a non-player character (NPC). These relationships are usually guided by the game’s storyline and the player’s choices within that storyline. The romance in single-player games is often quite immersive and story-driven. However, some players find that romance is often a throwaway part of the game that is poorly implemented and represented as a mini-game where the player brings gifts or makes “correct” dialogue choices. Additionally, some individuals prefer not to deal with romances in games, as they play games to take a break from reality, including their love interest(s). On the contrary, others believe that having romance in single-player RPGs is important and can provide a soothing escape where the player

can immerse themselves in a world where they can engage in romance and relationships. Nonetheless, it is widely accepted notion that single-player RPGs represent romance and relationships in an unrealistic manner, potentially leading players to have unrealistic expectations of real-life romantic interests (Galacian, 2004). So, it is important to note that maintaining a real-life relationship requires effort, work, commitment, mutual understanding, and compassion, which cannot be replicated through single-player RPGs.

The incorporation of romance options in single-player role-playing video games has been a topic of discussion among gamers and game developers alike. While some players consider romance to be a superficial aspect of the game, others believe that it adds a deeper level of connection between the player character and their companions. The success of a romantic storyline in a video game depends on how well it is written and how it complements the overall story. Several games have been able to execute romance well, such as “The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt” and “The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim”, making players feel more immersed and invested in the game’s story. A crucial aspect of successful romance implementation is NPCs’ responsivity, particularly in romantic relationships. Being in an in-game character relationship can elicit deep emotional responses from the players, making romance a potent tool for game developers to utilize. However, it should be noted that the effectiveness of romance in video games ultimately depends on the game’s format and the individual player’s preferences. As such, there is still much room for further exploration and refinement in the realm of romantic storylines in single-player RPGs.

The impact of romance on the plot and gameplay is a critical aspect that developers need to consider. While shoehorned romance (e.g. *Indigo Prophecy*, *Sonic*, *Duke Nukem 3D*) can make a game feel unnecessary and awkward, a well-woven romantic tale (see - *Final Fantasy X*, *Max Payne 2*) can make players feel more immersed and committed to the game, leading to memorable and emotionally satisfying experiences for players. Romance can have an impact on the plot and story moments in these games, adding an extra layer to the character development within the game. Developers need to ensure that the addition of romance is impactful to the story, as the absence of any romantic element can make a character feel incomplete. The addition of romance can deepen characters by making them more complex, allowing them to have hidden motives and conflicts. When integrated well into the main storyline, romance in RPGs can work, such as the romance progression in "*Dragon Age: Origins*" which felt natural and thrilling with different stages and unique dialogue. In some games, relationship status can impact abilities or alliances (Bioware games) incentivizing players to choose the most useful love interest. However, poorly written and limited romance options, that are limited to one path where the player character indulges in meaningless sexual activities, are not impactful and can be detrimental to the overall gameplay experience. Developers need to ensure that the addition of a romantic plotline works effectively in the game as they face challenges in inserting romances due to the potential for errors and the intensive work required. The refinement and better implementation of romance options in single-player RPGs can add excitement and depth to the gameplay experience.

## Agency

Upon playfulness of interactive art, Ri Pierce-Grove remarks - Interactive art can make players out of visitors as well as artists. It gives visitors an opportunity to use free, voluntary, and enjoyable action (2014, p. 469). Being an interactive medium, video games certainly do provide the freedom of utilizing the ability to interact. One such interactivity in video games manifests itself as "agency". Agency in games is a crucial aspect of player experience, where players feel that the actions presented to them in the context of the game reflect their intentions, desires, and goals. Agency is not a new concept in game studies, but its interpretation has evolved from mere actions by the player to a holistic approach with significant meaning allocation through the action (Murray, 1997; Mason, 2013; Tanenbaum & Tanenbaum, 2010; Wardrip-Fruin, et al., 2009). Considering previous studies on agency, Bodi infers that in avatar-based games (note - most of RPGs have avatar as a quintessential feature of the game), "player agency" can be conceptualised as the possibility space for meaningful choice expressed via player action that translates into avatar action, afforded, and constrained by a game's design (2023, p. 22).

Using agency grid, Cole and Gillies (2019, pp. 10-14) mention four "not mutually exclusive" categories - Actual Mechanical Agency (mechanical outcome), Actual Fictional Agency (course of story), Interpretative Mechanical Agency (player's self-reflection), and Interpretative Fictional Agency (perception of story related to the fictional world). Romance in most of single-player RPGs fall under the category of "Actual Fictional

Agency" as player's actions affect the story and the game-world. Such games allow players the option to live authentically in the (game) world.

By exercising creative agency over a game character's growth and development, players become part of them. Dynamic game characters may be playable characters, like a player character, or characters over whom the player has no direct control like NPCs. As long as the player's agency in the game has consequences for their growth and outcome as quasi-persons, they shall be considered as dynamic game characters (Blom, 2023, p. 179). Players respond emotionally to fictional characters, whether they can interact with them (e.g., game characters, embodied agents, avatars, robots) or not (e.g., in novels, movies, soap series, reality shows, or theatre play) (Hoorn, 2012, p. 155).

Considering Blom and Hoorn's examples, it is discernible that video games do exhibit existential characteristics, although the forms may vary whether it be – gameplay agency, character, or something else. In video games that incorporate romantic relationships, developers face the challenge of balancing player agency with an engaging story. The challenge for developers is to provide sufficient choices for the players to feel the agency while ensuring that those choices remain meaningful and lead to a satisfying conclusion. In role-playing games, romance options are often available, but players may not pursue them due to concerns about their impact on the story, which is central to RPGs. The concept of agency in video games is critical indeed, and players need to feel that they have choices in the game to enjoy the experience.

## Avatar and Channelling the Agency

Role-play is a form of performance. We take on roles, speak and use body language to represent our characters - our own or through avatars. We engage in verbal storytelling, and we take actions in the characters' worlds (Hoover, et al., 2018, p. 213). This definition of role-playing holds true not only in performance studies, but also in game studies, as video games incorporate all the three factors mentioned above. Players engage in an (interactive) storytelling, utilizing agency within the game world. Through the Shakespearean perspective in case of single-player RPGs, the virtual world is a stage, where actively engaging with it determines the entry and the exit.

Instead of providing opportunities to follow autonomous characters' actions, playing video games simulates the circumstances of being a media character (or holding a social role), for instance, of being a war hero or a police officer. Video games thus seem to facilitate a nondyadic or monadic user-character relationship in the sense that players do not perceive the game (main) character as a social entity distinct from themselves but experience a merging of their own self and the game protagonist. This understanding of a monadic user-character relationship converges with the concept of identification (Klimmt, et al., 2004, p. 354). Avatar acts as the identification of the player within the game-world. It is through the avatar that the player is able to make use of agency and bring forth a meaning to the play.

Subjectivity is essential to how we develop our sense of self, but in video games subjectivity also helps us form



identification with avatars. While not all games require identification with avatars, many games have been successful in doing so. Necessarily, video games require some kind of identification with the avatar to be successful and engender a certain degree of immersion (Chess, 2014, p. 421). Subjectivity through avatar is what provides actions a particular meaning within the game world. In the realm of virtual reality, tangible dragons do not exist; however, there is a presence of virtual dragons. Similarly, in the physical world, one does not encounter real dragons (large creatures that breathe actual fire), yet there are myriad virtual dragons (digital entities that reside within computer systems). Upon acknowledging this distinction, it becomes evident that the conclusion does not logically follow from the premises. The virtual realm, inclusive of its virtual dragons, is an integral part of the physical world by virtue of its existence on real computers (Chalmers, 2017, p. 320).

Channelling the agency through the avatar, the player is able to experience subjectivity. This interaction of the real and the virtual adds to the existential aspects of video games as a medium. Chalmers' views indicate the existential aspects of video games. Moreover, they thematically touch other related concepts like the elements on the Reality-virtuality continuum, and the magic circle.

In the discourse surrounding "romance in video games", McDonald explores the concept of romance subplots as interactive components within the gaming experience. She asserts that players develop unique relationships with companions and other characters within the game's narrative universe. This process nurtures emotions such as affection, emotional

bonds, and various forms of intimacy. These sentiments may be expressed through the player's in-game character (avatar) or may extend to experiences beyond the confines of the game system itself (2017, pp. 186-187).

These interactions bear greater significance when the agency exercised by player through the avatar leads to meaningful outcomes in the game world. If the player has more freedom to exercise this agency, the likelihood to assign the meaningfulness to the interaction is higher, adding to subjectivity and immersion.

### **Avatar as an Existential Project and Being in the World**

Virtual worlds are enabling experiences that were not previously available through other media. One such experience is the potential to have a sense of inhabiting the simulated spaces they offer through presence and immersion (Calleja, 2014, p. 222). Avatar is an important element of the virtual worlds (more so in case of RPGs), which makes the players realise their presence in the world. It is the medium through which game communicates with the player to utilize whatever agency at hand to make that world immersive. The concept of avatar fulfils the purpose of designing identity in games and is often tied to choices players make (Martey, 2023, p. 478). Discussing Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre, Gualeni and Vella (2020, pp. 1-5) argue that a project is a necessary component of how individual subjects shape and attribute meaning to their existence. The in-game avatar is the medium through which player experiences the existence or being in the game-world. Exercising avatar-related agency,

the player interacts with the world and shapes the story or provides a meaning to it. Thus, avatar can be considered as an existential (fundamental) project, which lets the player live authentically. All avatar's endeavours which are parts of the meaningful play, like the quests, can be considered individual projects, including romance.

### **Player Agency and Authenticity**

Video games are interactive media which tells stories to the user (player) by virtue of Interactive Storytelling (IS). IS technology is envisioned to offer unique entertainment experiences to users by enabling them to actively engage in a meaningful storyline, to shape it according to individual decisions and preferences, and to interact with computer-controlled characters in a human-like, authentic way (Klimmt, Roth, Vorderer, & Roth, 2012, p. 188).

Interactivity of the medium, is a crucial element of the new media, which makes video games appealing. With traditional media, limited virtue of interaction brings forth a passive outlook. This interactivity of video games signifies the philosophical aspect of this medium as an existential one.

Action is precursor to authenticity, as the subjectivity of action will determine how authentic it is with congruence to the thought. In existentialism, authenticity is the degree to which a person's actions are congruent with his or her values and desires, despite external pressures to social conformity. Sartre acknowledges that all values are generated by human interactions in situations, so that value is a human construct with no extra-human existence in things.

We constitute the world through our freedom to the extent that our ways of taking things determine how reality will be sorted out and matter to us. Sartre's notion of freedom is absolute to the extent that each person decides the significance of the constraints in his or her facticity. Sartre views facticity not as a brute fact but a projective reconstruction. For Sartre, only our choices and their projected ends define our situations as meaningful, as threatening or favourable, as affording certain actions etc. The resistances and obstacles that one encounters in a situation acquire meaning only in and through the free choice. Thus, individuals are responsible not only for their identities, but for the way the world presents itself in their experiences (Sartre, 1943; Guignon & Pereboom, 2001; Zalta & Nodelman, 2020).

Salen and Zimmerman's "meaningful play" also demonstrates the existential nature of romance in single-player RPGs. The concept of meaningful play is fundamentally intertwined with the element of uncertainty. While uncertainty is typically perceived as a factor that diminishes players' sense of choice and agency, it paradoxically serves as a critical component that enables players to perceive their decisions as impactful. The unpredictable nature of game outcomes is what imparts a sense of significance to players' choices, thereby fostering an environment where meaningful play can emerge (2004, p. 174). This phenomenon highlights the intricate relationship between decision-making processes and their resultant outcomes, underscoring the importance of uncertainty in creating engaging and meaningful gaming experiences.

Karen and Theresa J. Tanenbaum (2009) discuss that Agency is not about selecting between options, instead it about

expressing intent, and receiving a satisfying response to that intent. Using agency authentically (by the player) and providing opportunities to utilize agency competently (by the developers), compounds to the potential of creating play experiences that are emotionally powerful and deeply immersive. Just like the real world, when the virtual world reciprocates uncertainty, it enhances immersion. If all the cards (outcomes) are revealed, the chance a player will choose something less beneficial to the context, is scarce. Even the thought given by the player to utilize agency will be petty or trivial, hence providing little chance to practice authenticity. Modern RPGs with non-linear approach offer the players to utilize the agency with authenticity to get a meaningful play.

Discussing the title of his book “Virtual Worlds as Philosophical Tools: How to Philosophize with a Digital Hammer” Gualeni (2015) states, the digital hammer represents the ways in which our perceptions and our cognitive and operational capabilities are extended by the experience of interactive virtual worlds. The virtual worlds of simulations and videogames are recognized as worlds precisely because they can be accessed and returned to at will, and because they emerge in ways that are repeatable and relatively stable in their mechanical and aesthetic aspects (p. 6). The stability is akin to the real world which operates on certain laws and principles. Game-worlds can be associated as (artificial) extensions of human beings, which allow subjectivity to turn into projectivity (p. 68) through self-discovery which the player goes through while practicing authenticity. Briefing Nick Yee’s research, Gualeni (p. 117) acknowledges that “there is experimental evidence that psychological biases and dispositions originally developed in relation

to the actual world are carried over to virtual worlds in terms of behaviours and superstitions”. In this manner, if the player utilizes agency in agreement with one’s usual behaviour and dispositions, it will engender “authenticity” in that scenario. Further, discussing Dario Compagno (Gualeni, pp. 124-125), it becomes evident that the modern virtual worlds, especially in case of role-playing games are much more immersive than before with realistic choices-and-consequences mechanics. Most of the modern single-player RPGs do come with quite realistic romance choices which affects the romance story which is like side-quest for a game and ultimately blends with the overarching story (or main quest). Indeed, limitations do exist in the virtual world(s), but one can overcome those nuances with tweaking some psychological and philosophical variables regarding the individual’s perception and attitude towards that particular world.

### ... and Love for All

The problems of underrepresentation and discrimination in video games is by no means limited to sexual identities and romantic orientations. Various bases of marginalization have existed throughout the timeline, implying the hegemony of play. However, the current circumstances imply an improvement against these issue as developers, scholars and players are focusing on inclusivity.

Bonnie Ruberg (2020, pp. 5-6) points out that even after 50 years of the release of first commercial video games, the representation of the marginalized has been relatively scarce. Nonetheless, modern AAA mainstream RPGs are providing

the players an opportunity to explore and indulge in those scantily available options.

Although inclusive romance options have been portrayed in mainstream video games but mostly at thematic level. Considering the agency, inclusive romance options do offer the player an opportunity to practice authenticity. One important factor for player action in that virtual world is the lack of conformity, peer pressure or societal obligations.

In order to evaluate how video games can effectively simulate love and romantic relationships, it is imperative to first dissect our fundamental understanding of love itself. Our perceptions of love are deeply subjective and are significantly influenced by the diverse relationships we have formed, the extensive media we have been exposed to, and the myriad successes and failures we have encountered throughout our lives. Consequently, love manifests uniquely for each individual, making it an exceptionally personal and nuanced concept. This intrinsic diversity of love, with its myriad manifestations, is so vast that it can be overwhelming to encapsulate within a single framework. Thus, any attempt to replicate or simulate love in a gaming context must account for its inherently multifaceted and individualized nature (Khandaker-Kokoris, 2015, p. 111).

The diversity or "love for all" has gained prominence with advancement of civilization and technology. Again, pointing the influence of magic circle, the virtual worlds somehow do represent or at least are influenced by the real world as these games are made by actual people, for actual people. If romantic diversity exists in the society, it will likely manifest itself in the virtual world also.

## Analysis

After getting the readers familiar with conceptual aspects, this section provides examples of implementation of all these themes/variables. The discussions are mostly related to how these romances function within the game-context resonating the themes discussed earlier.

BioWare games are well-recognized titles within RPGs' communities. A standout feature of many BioWare games is the inclusivity of romance in their game worlds. All their modern RPGs include options of queer romances as well. The inclusivity only increased with recent releases. Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (2003) offered only one queer romance (Juhani), and the number doubled in BioWare's next release - Jade Empire (2005). Subsequent game releases made BioWare only more popular amongst the gamers - with "Mass Effect" and its medieval sibling "Dragon Age" as long-running and well received franchises.

Romance is an optional mechanic in the Mass Effect franchise. Based on availability, the characters have their own predispositions to romance. In the Mass Effect original trilogy, the player can choose the gender of the avatar (Commander Shepard) and indulge in (optional) romances with authenticity as these games offer plenty of diversity. These optional romances can be pursued by conversing repeatedly with the prospects and answering favourably regarding the topic. Even after tying bonds in a romance, Shepard can still express an interest in other crew members. However, the new romance interest will challenge Shepard's love-triangle and force Shepard to get out of the current relationship in order

to be with them, as there can be only one “true” relationship. Once a potential relation is at the challenge stage, there is no way to express disinterest in them no matter what Shepard (the player) chooses. However, if Shepard gets of his/her previous romantic bond, the rejected romance option will never be available again. This kind of mechanics brings existential effects on player for that virtual world as the melodrama is quite akin to the real-world relationship behaviours. Another remarkable aspect to this series is the ability of the player to carry over their previous choices (facticity in virtual world) in the form of “profile” for the subsequent games in the trilogy, further enhancing immersion through choices-and-consequences mechanics and the agency associated with it.

*Dragon Age Series*, just like the *Mass Effect* games, feature realistic approach to sexuality. The characters have their own specific preferences (sex and/or race). These BioWare games are one of the most popular and esteemed single-player RPGs in academia, industry, and gamer base, with the diversity and inclusivity they offer and the (virtual) freedom to practice it.

CD Projekt is the new single-player RPGs’ giant in the video game industry. Just like BioWare, this company has also developed video games with sci-fi and medieval settings.

The *Witcher* trilogy puts the player in the boots of the avatar - Geralt of Rivia. The avatar in this game is not customizable like BioWare games, however, that won’t affect the in-game romance as the mechanics are different. The romance and the agency in trilogy develop with each entry in the series. In *The Witcher* (2007), Geralt can romance anyone, but the choices have barely any impact on the story and the

game-world. Doing favours and collecting romance cards is the way the mechanics work for the “dispassionate” witcher. In the game, certain romance cards can be obtained only by forfeiting the chance to get another (e.g., second romance card - Triss/Shani). As a result, the player will have to indulge with the game more than once to collect these “trophy”s.

“*The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*” implements a non-linear (branching paths) story. The branching paths of Iorveth and Roche, allow Geralt (and the player) to experience path-exclusive romances, however, there is some common romance, like the bath scene with Triss, which can be experienced in any playthrough. Since *The Witcher 2* offers story-intensive paths, it still makes the game immersive through whatever limited choice it offers, just like real life where possibilities are infinite but a person in his/her lifetime actually goes through little. In life, “actual” choices (subjective) diminish, but video games, with the evolution of technology are only showing improvements in making the (virtual) worlds more immersive with quite “real” choices-and-consequences mechanics.

“*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*” lets the players immerse themselves in an open world structure before providing closure to Geralt’s story. Due to its open world structure and higher agency than previous instalments in the series, *The Witcher 3* makes the player experience not only several romance options but also intricately woven story, which unfolds as player interacts with its world. This game offers - primary, secondary and tertiary romances in congruence with the overarching plot. Romance can be experienced by the player through the quest-based agency. Triss and Yennefer are primary romance

options, with Shani (DLC), Keira Metz and other options as secondary romances. For tertiary romance, the witcher Geralt (avatar) can toss a coin (or many) and visit in-game establishments like brothels. If Geralt (by player's agency) is found "unfaithful", choosing to romance both Yennefer and Triss, the outcome certainly turns out not in his favour. The choice-and-consequences mechanics has improved with each iteration in the trilogy, not just in case of the world and the story, but also the romance.

Unlike *The Witcher* games, CD Projekt's sci-fi RPG *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), lets the player customize the avatar (V), and that matters in romance due to different game mechanics and agency from the *Witcher* games. In order to romance someone, V must meet specific requirements as the romanceable NPCs have their own preferences and interests based on the body-type and voice of the avatar. Doing side quests for romance options will unlock their apartments for V to access. Just like *The Witcher 3*, choosing the primary romance options will impact the ending(s). The details provided by the interactive world of *Cyberpunk 2077*, like the ability to engage in small romance activities with the partner (e.g., massage, dance, shower) certainly enhance the immersion.

Bethesda's modern RPGs like - *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (medieval), and *Fallout 4* (sci-fi) also provide numerous romance options to engage in by the player's avatar. In *Skyrim*, many male and female NPCs can be courted. For marriage, a special item is required. After obtaining "Amulet of Mara", Dragonborn (avatar) has the option to engage in marriage with an eligible character. Some races' characters e.g. Khajit cannot be romanced in this way. Just like real world (varies

place to place), *Skyrim* does offer marriage benefits like - house, gold, and food. Sleeping in the same house with your partner does bring other benefits for the player in that virtual world e.g., enhanced XP (virtual experience) rate and follower's skill and inventory benefits. For exercising divorce in the game, use of console commands (like a lawyer) is necessary. In *Fallout 4*, Charisma attribute plays the role to charm the NPC while building rapport through the mechanics. After relevant quests for rapport, romance options will pop out in the dialogue tree (e.g., flirt) which works if the character has enough charisma. The player's preferred playstyle and actions can have consequences on these characters' perception of them. Most of these romanceable partners can also serve as companions (like *Skyrim*'s followers) to help in missions and combat. These characters also react differently to in-game events based on their personality.

Examining JRPGs like - *Fire Emblem: Three Houses* (2019), *Persona 5* (2016), and *Yakuza: Like a Dragon* (2020) provide more insight to how the conceptual variables operate in game-specific scenarios, simultaneously adding to the diversity of samples. In *Three Houses*, both opposite sex and same sex romance options are available. By building bonds/rapport with characters, the player's avatar can get in relationship and even marriage with the characters. The gameplay benefits the characters offer (combat, support) is similar to the Bethesda games. With plenty of romance options available for both the sexes, the romances do provide different endings with minor tweaks like the aforementioned CD Projekt games. *Persona 5*, through its avatar (Joker), lets the player bond with all the female characters as the romance is this game is exclusive to the opposite sex. Just like real-world, if

Joker (by the player's choice) engages in infidelity by having multiple partners, he gets confronted by them which does not end nicely, just like the case with Geralt from *The Witcher*. Providing six romance options with unique personalities, "Yakuza" lets the player explore the mechanics of bonding and rewards while utilizing the agency accordingly.

Taking CRPGs into consideration, *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023) lets the player use the agency to engage in romance (short/long term) as an optional feature which varies in degree, just like actual relationships. Characters can show interest in the player regardless of race and gender. Most important relationships will occur only with companions NPCs. The characters react differently to flings and infidelity. To romance a companion or NPC, you need to gain their approval by talking to them often, helping them with their personal quests, and making choices that align with their personality and preferences. Approval is a measure of how much the character likes and trusts the avatar. The players can check their approval level with each companion or NPC by opening the journal and clicking on their portrait. In *Divinity: Original Sin II* (2017), the romanced characters have slightly altered conversation options or just different expressions towards the player's avatar. Although such minute details, do not have any significant impact on the gameplay or plot, they add to the immersion within that virtual world.

RPGs with strategic elements like *Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord* (2022), where the objectives are to conquer, expand or establish with gameplay elements of warfare and politics, romance exists predominantly as the choice of marriage. It serves as a medium to expand influence and gain favour. In

such games, the players can choose to court any NPC that is not already tied down to someone else in the game world.

RPGs, undoubtedly, provide the players a profound sense of immersion with even greater extent of exercising agency. All the RPGs with developed romance mechanics and diverse options offer the players a well-built interactive medium which can (willingly) let them experience the mechanics and philosophies of the real world in a virtually mediated domain.

## Conclusion

Videogames are interactive experiences which allow the players to exercise control and agency over their narratives. Both single-player and multiplayer games offer unique romantic experiences, each with their own strengths and appeal. Discussing romance in video games, Tomlinson (2021) states that video games are not immediately synonymous with romance, nonetheless, role-playing games can present players with opportunities to flirt, establish digital relationships, and even experience intimacy with the characters. Although romance might not be the primary motivation for many players, with subtle implementation, it can become an important element that builds on and interacts with broader narrative considerations while providing more context and content to the gaming experience. These deep emotional experiences can also enhance the sense of immersion. The opportunity to build romantic attachments with in-game characters can make the game world feel real. Even if the players are not in complete control of the outcome, video game romance can feel authentic and impactful.

Being able to approach characters, despite being approved or rejected, adds emotional grounding for video game stories and its inclusion can become thoroughly engaging for players. Accurate portrayal of romance, makes the narrative feel realistic, makes players feel closer to and invested in the game world as in case of single-player video games; while for multiplayer games, it additionally provides players new opportunities to bond with one another outside the virtual world.

However, there are certain disadvantages as well. Sparrow, et al., found that multiplayer games can lead to unwanted sexual interactions such as virtually groping another player (2020, p. 7,15). These interactions do affect the players, so the consequences of the virtual world are very real depending on the perception of the individual.

Immersion is a subjective experience. Several individual characteristics influence the magnitude by which immersion influences gameplay experience (Örtqvist & Liljedahl, 2010). Making use of AI and interactive storytelling, modern video games offer the player a unique, personalized experience, which is more sophisticated in terms of user agency and plot flexibility. Single-player RPGs which let the player use agency with authenticity, are also able to provide beautiful immersive experiences with less dangers due to lack of external intervention.

The evolution of romance in single-player RPGs reflects broader cultural narratives and societal shifts, inviting players to engage with themes of love and relationships in innovative ways. As the genre continues to evolve, the integration of romance elements serves not only as a source of player

enjoyment but also as a lens through which to explore significant social and philosophical issues, making it an enduring and impactful feature of modern gaming.

## Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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