

Love and Other Terrors: Intimacy and Vulnerability in English-Language Dating Simulators and Romance Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

A dating simulator is a story-based video game genre where the central goal is to develop, partake in, or sustain a romantic relationship with another character. The genre originated in Japan and, although there is a growing collection of well-received English-language romantic games, dating sims remains relatively less prominent in English-language media coverage and scholarly works. The presence of romance (and romantic choice) as a gameplay and narrative device in major English-language video game franchises, however, such as *Assassin's Creed* and *Mass Effect*, and prominent independent games, including *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2019) and *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios 2023) suggests that this romantic genre of play has substantial influence in the works of English-language developers.

In this presentation we discuss qualities of design and experience common across a selection of English-language dating simulators and romance games: primarily the *Monster Prom* series (Beautiful Glitch 2018; 2020), *Boyfriend Dungeon* (Kitfox Games 2021), *Florence* (Mountains 2020), *Doki Doki Literature Club!* (Team Salvato 2017) and *Dream Daddy* (Game Grumps 2017). While far from a conclusive overview of the genre, these games represent a cross-section of design techniques and themes that showcase the complexity and playfulness of English-language dating sims. We consider how gameplay and narrative work in these romantic games to inscribe and play with experiences of intimacy. While acknowledging intimacy is a complex subject, in this presentation we build from McGlotten's definition of intimacy; an immanent experience that is a precondition to various forms of affect, has a relation to proximity and distance, and is "composed largely of feelings, feeling more or less connected, as if one belongs or doesn't" (McGlotten 2013, 9). Acknowledging the relationship

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intimacy has with fantasy, longing, and aspiration, McGlotten’s definition encapsulates realised intimacy as well as the vital relationship intimacy has to failure and vulnerability (2013, 18).

In our presentation we focus on three primary affects we notice emergent from intimacy in the English-language romantic genre—feelings of adoration, vulnerability, and uncanniness. First, intimacy and adoration seem to emerge at the intersection of three qualities; the choices the player is given to express themselves in the game; the recognition of a familiar, or somewhat familiar character archetype; and, crucially, the disruption or subversion of that archetype. Second, emotional vulnerability is a frequent theme in the romantic games that we discuss, which often explore the more challenging aspects of romantic entanglements, such as awkward communication, unwanted advances, break-ups, and lack of emotional availability or transparency. Emotional vulnerability in these games is often represented by altering the player’s relationship to agency and action in the game world, through gameplay mechanics that interrupt or invert narrative and play. Third, many popular English-language romantic games have featured dark or uncanny themes; such as the uncertain presence of a monstrous figure, restricting or challenging the player’s sense of control during gameplay, or a general unresolved sense that something is not quite ‘right’ in the games’ environment. Our discussion considers and builds upon earlier studies of the uncanny in English-speaking romance games (Pan 2020); transitions between the adorable and the eerie (Lamerichs 2015) and dating simulations that inscribe agency to communicate an experience of vulnerability (Armitage 2020; Özdal and Çatak 2022; van den Oudenalder 2020; Nguyen 2020). We conclude with some wider conjectures on the significance of romance and dating elements to the experiences that video games can facilitate; considering their increasing prominence and acceptance in “mainstream” cultures and an increasing body of scholarship on the kinds of intimacy virtual experiences can facilitate.

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