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Communicating Love: Dialogue Icons, Control and Diminishing Social Complexity in Cyberpunk 2077

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Abstract

Romance is communicated in an unusual way in digital gaming. The systemisation of one of the most complex and nebulous social engagements, that of romantic love and relationships, often leads to stilted encounters and the prioritisation of sexual interactions. For AAA RPGs, dialogue acts as the primary arbiter of romantic relationships. But dialogue prompts often do not fully convey what will be said by the characters. To compensate for this communication shorthand, some developers have decided to include "dialogue icons". This is any picture, symbol or image representation that occurs next to a dialogue option. These icons are supplementary tools to aid communication and imply tone where it may have been vague. Dialogue icons have become more common in the RPG genre in recent years, but how they can affect a player's experience of a game has been critically overlooked in the scholarship. Through a close textual reading of CD Projekt Red's 2020 game *Cyberpunk 2077*, I analyse the impacts of these dialogue icons. Drawing on work from Domsch (2017), Rusch (2009) and Shaw (2014), I look at how these dialogue icons serve as a tool of clarity for players, and how this drastically alters the tone and control of in-game romantic subplots. I evaluate the effectiveness and power of this ludic communication, as well as the impact on the narrative and player experience. Ultimately, I find that while dialogue icons do give players the ability to curate their experience by clarifying if an encounter will be romantic in nature, they ultimately diminish the game's ability to represent social complexity and all but eradicate the possibility of unplanned queer in-game encounters. Communicating romance is not an altogether simple task for developers, and it is worth thinking about how these tools impact play.

Keywords

Digital Games, Communication, Dialogue Icons, Romance, Sexuality, *Cyberpunk 2077*

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Introduction

In CD Projekt Red's 2020 game *Cyberpunk 2077* players can form in-game romantic relationships with Non-Player Characters (NPCs). Like any romantic relationship, they are often filled with emotional nuance. Players will spend hours getting to know an NPC as "friends" – understanding their fears, struggles and goals. If a friendship is allowed to develop, players will have the option to begin a romantic relationship with them. Usually, this comes in the form of dialogue options – players need to make the right choices and say the correct things. But this choice is not always clear from just the dialogue options provided. Take this encounter with Judy – a romanceable NPC in *Cyberpunk 2077* – after going on an intimate diving excursion, Judy breaks down and appears upset. After relaying the disappointment and

worry she feels for her friends who have been attacked, she apologises to the player character (named V), explaining "I didn't want to tell you… Wanted this to be just our day". Judy moves her hand on the PC's (Player Character's) leg, and the player must select one of the following dialogue options:

PC-V (Option 1): [Touch] It is ours
PC-V (Option 2): [Lean Away] Bad idea
PC-V (Option 3): [Comfort] Why didn't you tell me?

The player now has the challenge of working out which answer will further the relationship. The second option of telling Judy that her affection is a "Bad idea" would most likely be read as rebuffing the advances, but is it possible to accurately know the difference between the first and third option? To combat this ambiguity, game developers have started to include "dialogue icons" – small pictures, symbols or image representation that acts as supplementary communication in aid of dialogue options. In the aforementioned example, there is a small image of lips placed next to Option 1 that identifies it as the romantic option to the player.

This article critically considers the impact that dialogue icons can have on a player's experience of romance in a AAA role-playing game (RPG). I use "AAA" to refer to games produced by major publishers with high development and marketing budgets. RPGs are games where players are allowed to take on a character to play as within a narrative. Often there is a large degree of choice in terms of who that character can be relative to other genres. RPGs offer choices that allow the player-character to assume different roles depending on their play style. *Cyberpunk 2077,* the case study I have chosen for this article, is one of the most high-profile examples of a recent AAA RPG. The player assumes the role of V, a mercenary living in the hyper commercialised Night City. The marketing of the game placed a particular emphasis on its romantic gameplay and hypersexualised game-world. It is a useful case study for this article because it is a rich textual site that offers insight into dominant cultural perspectives about relationships in digital gaming. This article considers the in-game impacts of dialogue icons and the broader implications they have for how romance is represented in *Cyberpunk 2077*. These impacts may manifest in other AAA games with romance experienced mainly through dialogue as a mechanic. I begin by arguing that dialogue icons give players information to curate their own social experience in the game. This may give a feeling of agency that Sebastian Domsch (2017, p. 261) argues is extremely appealing. Drawing from Rusch's (2009) idea of the experiential metaphor, I then argue that dialogue icons take away complexity from the game by wrenching players out of the experience rather than further immersing them. I then consider some of the broader implications these dialogue icons have for the representation of queer sexuality in games like *Cyberpunk 2077*. There is the possibility for dialogue icons to be used by players as a sort of "warning" for queer romances. Ultimately, I conclude that dialogue icons exert a sort of covert power over the player's potential for narrative exploration and engagement.

Defining the "Dialogue Icon"

As there is little scholarship that provides close analyses of dialogue options in games, and almost nothing looking at dialogue icons specifically, it is worth drawing from adjacent fields in digital communication. More specifically, the study of emoticons and emojis provides a useful base for this research. According to Jospeh Walther and Kyle P. D'Addario (2001), emoticons can be described as "graphic representations of facial expression" (p.324). These were initially created using the QWERTY keyboard and may include a wink, a smile, or a sad face. These have been used in Computer Mediated Conversation (CMC), like instant messages and emails. Emoticons are considered to work as substitutes for the "nonverbal cues that are missing from CMC in comparison to face-to-face communication" (Walther and D' Addario, 2001, p.324). Different studies have indicated the effectiveness of being able to "fill in the blanks" of CMC when it comes to these icons and emotions (Oleszkiewicz et. al., 2017; Brito et al., 2020; Cherbonnier and

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Michinov, 2021). The degree to which emoticons accurately illustrate emotions in digitally mediated conversation is debated, but what is generally agreed upon is that their initial purpose to convey or supplement an emotion that the author feels is not fully illustrated through text alone (Cherbonnier and Michinov, 2021). Emoticons are similar but distinct from the emoji, which arguably builds from the initial goals of the emoticon. In their 2016 work, *The Semiotics of Emoji: the rise of visual language in the age of the Internet*, Marcel Danesi explores the function of the pictogram and what it offers discourse. Danesi (2016) describes the purpose of an emoji as falling into one of two functions: the Phatic function, and the Emotive function (p. 21). The Phatic function is a form of small talk, something to buffer communication and fill silences, while the emotive function is to illustrate a feeling or emotion, in a way that is negotiated differently in online spaces. As Danesi (2016) claims:

> Conveying one's state of mind (opinion, judgement, attitude, outlook, sentiments, etc.) is a basic need in discourse exchanges. To use another of Jakobson's (1960) terms, emoji usage entails emotivity (consciously or unconsciously in addition to the phatic function). This is defined as the use of discourse structures (words, intonations, phrasings, etc.) to portray one's state of mind. (p. 22)

Danesi notes that face-to-face communication has many more prosodic tools that allow for subtle tonal clues to direct and inform discourse. While the Phatic function of emojis is worth understanding, the emotive function is what is most relevant to the analysis of dialogue icons in digital games. It provides a useful framework to uncover the underlying emotive connotations that are attached specific dialogue icons. Different games will often use slightly different dialogue icons for the same type of response. For example, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) uses a "heart" to indicate a possible NPC romance while *Cyberpunk 2077* uses "lips". Placing emphasis on the emotive function of specific dialogue icons is useful to identify how these icons can set distinct player expectations for a romantic questline. Danesi's work provides a solid foundation for understanding the function of icons as they are expressed in digital games, but there are also differences in how these emojis operate, and it is valuable to engage fully in what icons mean in video games.

As RPGs shifted away from voice-less protagonists during the mid-2010s and included fully voiced main characters, they would often cut down the dialogue options shown on screen. The player could be prompted with a text option that could simply say something like, "I'll help", but the actual, audible dialogue that the player character might speak is, "I've got some time, when I pass by that way I'll go and help". This dialogue shorthand meant that at times players felt they were misunderstanding the tone of what might be said (Walker, 2015). Some developers tried to compensate for this by offering icons next to dialogue options to indicate tone. Some games, like *Dragon Age Inquisition*, had a whole range of icons that indicated multiple different emotions including sad, mad, confused, anxious, and scared. This is the more involved option when it comes to the use of emotive symbols, and not every RPG during this period would offer this. The one symbol that AAA RPGs that engaged with romance tended to always include was a love heart, indicating this was the dialogue option that would start a relationship with an NPC.

There is no agreed-upon system of discussing these dialogue icons. Both scholars and developers use different words to articulate similar ideas. *Assassins Creed Odyssey* (2018) uses the term "icons in dialogues" to refer to the pictures next to their dialogue and includes a short tutorial text bubble explaining what the images refer to. *Cyberpunk 2077* uses the term "dialogue symbols" for its icons. *Mass Effect Andromeda* (2017) uses the term "conversation symbols" to refer to the icons next to its dialogue. This game went for an explicit "tone" system, removing ambiguity for players who want to know the outcome of their dialogue choice. Some games use icons but do not acknowledge their existence, like *Witcher III: The Wild Hunt*

(2015). Notably, they are considered something inherent that the player presumably will understand without explanation. As a result of these inconsistencies from game to game, scholarship on this specific facet of ludic communication also varies. In their work looking at the *Dragon Age II* (2011) courting system, Peter Kelly (2015) describes the heart symbol next to its dialogue option as an "icon" but not specifically a dialogue icon (p. 63). Other scholars will discuss the dialogue options but with scant reference to the icons next to the options (McDonald, 2015; Sliwinski, 2017; Tomlinson, 2021).

For the purposes of my discussion and research, I will refer to these as dialogue icons. This term encompasses what I will look at when it comes to these symbols, and I would argue is the most fleshed out in terms of in-game explanations. I am taking this term from *Dragon Age II*, as I believe this game was the first AAA RPG to use these icons consistently, and the game names them as dialogue icons. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, I will define a dialogue icon as any picture, symbol or image representation that acts as supplementary communication in aid of dialogue. These icons are not wholly responsible for illustrating the communication taking place. But what they do achieve is articulating tone and emotionality where the dialogue included may come across as vague. dialogue icons should not be confused with action instructions that tend to come in brackets and describe what actions will take place. Icons that indicate action instructions in dialogue are closer in line with stage directions, in that they will explain the particular action a character will take if you select this option, and I will refer to them as such from now on.

It is important to distinguish dialogue icons and action instruction in-game dialogue, as they are different and will sometimes be used concurrently. These dialogue supplements are ultimately accomplishing different things. Dialogue icons are conveying tone in an ambiguous and subjective way that may lead players to expect varying responses. Action instructions are telling players explicitly what will occur, like this example mentioned earlier from *Cyberpunk 2077* while talking to Judy Alvarez:

> **JUDY:** I didn't want to tell you...Wanted this to be just our day...
> **PC-V (Option 1):** [Touch] It is ours
> **PC-V (Option 2):** [Lean Away] Bad idea
> **PC-V (Option 3):** [Comfort] Why didn't you tell me?

The brackets above indicate the action a player will act out if the dialogue is selected. The character will move or react in the scene, and the developers are signalling this to the player. Unlike the dialogue icon, there is no ambiguity with these stage directions – the player will know what is written is what will happen. Interestingly, there are also dialogue icons in this scene. They are lips, a chair, and a pointing finger. In terms of what a player might interpret from these icons, there is a lot less opportunity for explicit inference. Instead, these carry with them connotations – reminiscent of Danesi's discussion of emotive functions – developers are hoping players will pick up on. In the example above, there is an image of lips next to Option 1, but this dialogue selection will not result in an immediate kiss. The chair is connected to Option 2, but this will not result in the characters leaving a chair or resume sitting in a chair. The pointing finger is connected to Option 3, but again this will not result in the character V literally pointing a finger at Judy. Instead, a player is supposed to infer meaning, something that is not clarified in-game.

Lips in *Cyberpunk 2077* seem to denote kissing and by extension are saved for an interaction that will lead to romance. The chair is likely supposed to indicate an empty chair, therefore metaphorically leaving someone or pushing away from them, which is why this is usually an icon saved for players functionally saying "no" to an option. The pointing finger seems to indicate a platonic touch will occur. Crucially, these icons are left up to the player's discretion when it comes to interpretation, as the direct consequences are not made clear. Instead, they are an attempt to imply tone and add another layer to the interaction for the player. Dialogue icons and stage directions are trying to achieve subtly different things and for these

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reasons should be separated when discussed. However, I contend that they both act as dialogue aids that seek to clarify tone and physicality respectively.

Dialogue Icons in Cyberpunk 2077

Interestingly, *Cyberpunk 2077*'s romance dialogue icon is not a heart, as is the case with most other AAA RPGs. In game studies, the heart acts as a contentious symbol that is constantly being negotiated. Shira Chess (2015) describes the heart as a "sublime tool of digital play" (p.217). They outline five different hearts players will encounter in games include the regenerative hearts, emotive hearts, consumptive hearts, narrative hearts and decorative hearts (Chess, 2015, p. 232). For the purpose of this discussion, dialogue icons that are hearts would fall into the emotive heart category. The emotive heart, according to Chess (2015), "implies game love – most commonly the love that non-player characters have for the avatar" (p.234). Essentially, the heart is a representation of romantic love here. When used as a dialogue icon it denotes a romantic pathway is being chosen and clues the player character that they will most likely not be having a platonic relationship with this NPC.

There has been a relatively clear attempt to steer away from the heart as a dialogue icon in *Cyberpunk 2077*. Lips are not unheard of as a representation of romance. There are often different connotations that come from lips that Cyberpunk was trying to evoke. As Alison Bartlett (1993) writes:

> Lip-sticked lips are often (lip)read as carrying unseemly sexual messages. (Even lip-reading carries negative, second-rate connotations of reading lips rather than hearing what's being said through the primary medium.) Painted lips metonymically stand for painted woman. Not for nice girls. Tarts paint their lips red (red tarts) – red is read as advertising. (p. 51)

Lips then are likely to be read as more sexual than the heart is. Danesi's (2016) work on emotive functions is quite useful to unpack the distinct connotations that "lips" have. In this case, we can understand the emotive function of lips as enabling a more sexual understanding of a possible romantic response. For the most part, these lips emphasise the hypersexualised world of the Cyberpunk genre. This style tends to bleed into most aspects of the design. The icon may have also been selected as purposefully more vague and less consistent with most other games of the genre. As this icon is used for selected sexual encounters with the "Joytoys" (*Cyberpunk's* sex workers) it may have been intended as a catch-all symbol for the initiation of a sexual encounter, however, this symbol is not always a direct precursor to sexual encounters. As such, there is often a sort of a tension between the emotive function of "lips" as dialogue icons and the actual encounter within the game. Either way, the lips are distinct from most other games that offer romance, but their function is the same as the heart.

Cyberpunk 2077's dialogue icons are not limited to those mentioned earlier. Two separate classifications work in tandem and sometimes overlap. There are dialogue symbols that relate to a character's personality and are directly tied to their upgradable traits such as reflexes, cool, intelligence, body, and technical ability. These symbols are guarded by the level you are at in that particular trait; for instance, the player may need to have even points in the "cool" category to select a dialogue option that calms someone down.

The other classification is relationship symbols. There is the previously mentioned romance or sexual symbol (indicated by lips), and a friendship symbol (indicated by interlinked hands). These occur for either a romantic dialogue option or to indicate that the character will be about to engage in a sex scene. Usually, during the climax of a romantic side quest, both these symbols will be attached to dialogue options that will either continue or discontinue the relationship. Much like the character trait symbols, the romance

symbol is guarded by the gender selections that are chosen during *Cyberpunk 2077*'s character creator screen. However, this is made significantly less clear to the player and can only be deduced through repeated playthroughs. Notably, these kinds of symbols are used more sparingly in other parts of the game. Many times, during other side-quests it would make sense for a friendship symbol to occur, but in their absence, the player is left to decide whether the dialogue option will cement a friendship. It seems that when it comes to romance, there is something different going on that must be more explicit than other interactions.

Not every game in this genre feels the need to broadcast so clearly what the consequences of a player's dialogue choice would be. *Persona 5* includes multiple romance options with unique dialogue encounters that do not have an icon system. *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* also doesn't have a symbol next to its dialogue. However, if there is no symbol used, there is often some kind of indicator that implies the result a dialogue option will bring or a kind of numbered system. For example, *Persona 5* includes a ranking system that has a "lovers" level, to tell the player they are engaged in a romance with this character. *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* uses brackets to indicate what action a player would take.

The question of why developers feel the need to so clearly flag the resulting actions or reactions of the dialogue option is worth considering. Michele Dickey (2005) argues that video games can establish "emotional depth through the use of symbols" (p. 76). This builds on Chess's idea of "emotive hearts" as icons to elicit or demonstrate an emotional connection between character and NPC. While this cannot be discounted, there may be other motivations for these icons, especially when it comes to icons that directly relate to romance. Developers may be using dialogue icons to strengthen emotional connections with characters, but it is very clear that players are not only concerned with deepening these relationships. They are also concerned with who these relationships are with, and in particular who their character is having a romantic connection with.

Players of RPGs will often have preferences for their character's romantic partner. Entire articles on gaming news sites are devoted to who are the supposed "best" and "worst" romance options in games (Stalberg, 2021). Players are fond of their player characters and their chosen relationship and will develop deep emotional attachments (Chess, 2015). However, I argue that players are not only concerned with who they do connect with romantically – they are also concerned with who they do not.

A critical example of this is in *Cyberpunk 2077* is the update file, Patch 1.3, which contains, among many other gameplay tweaks and bug fixes, a longer-lasting image of two characters during a quest that they were prominently featured in. These two characters, Skye and Angel, are "dolls" that, within the game world, are functionally used as sex workers and companions. The protagonist eventually finds themselves in need of extracting information from them to find the whereabouts of another key character. V and either Skye or Angel can also engage in an intimate exchange where V's insecurities and fears are discussed while lying down on a bed.

The choice of either Skye or Angel is up to the player. In order to show which character is which, the game offers you images of the two on an in-game computer screen. But when it comes time to choose between them via dialogue option these images disappear, and the player is left with just two names. Many players found the names gender-neutral, and there were some who were unhappy with their selection (Gach, 2021). Some players jokingly titled the choice the "hardest in the game" and many agreed, which led to headlines about male players "accidentally boning guys" (Gach, 2021). Videos of players (almost exclusively heterosexual men) reacting in horror to selecting what they considered to be "wrong" character were getting thousands of views. This got so much traction that Patch 1.3 explicitly addressed this with a note saying: "Automatic Love-screen with pictures of Skye and Angel will be displayed substantially longer, making it easier to choose between the two".

Here we see an actual reaction from the developers to stop any chance of players engaging in "accidental" queerness. This is the context I would include before further exploring how dialogue icons affect the narrative and player interaction, as I do not think these tools are only used to endear players to

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the characters. They are also used to curate an experience, one that at times makes strange barriers depending on who is the focus of a romantic pursuit.

"Customer's Always Right": Curating Romantic Gameplay with Dialogue Icons

I contend that dialogue icons several key purposes from a gameplay perspective. The most straightforward is that they are a mechanism for players to curate their experience. They allow for players to truly develop and foster the relationship they want without misunderstanding or missing out on a romance with a particular character. This is perhaps the most common use for the dialogue icon. The second purpose is that it is a way to streamline the romance side-quests and allow players to move through them faster. This builds on the idea that the dialogue-heavy RPGs of the 2010s became more focused on signifying their romances rather than challenging the player to navigate these social systems and cues for themselves. This approach can simplify romance subplots, remove agency from NPCs and nuance from interactions. This simplification of romance brings with it concerning consequences. Dialogue icons can steer players away from potentially engaging with queer relationships. As mentioned earlier, there are players deeply concerned with their character's relationships and especially appalled at the prospect of queer encounters. I do not suggest the reasons these dialogue icons are in the game are due to just one of these purposes. Rather, I contend that in *Cyberpunk 2077,* dialogue icons have a significant impact on the player's experience.

I will first explain how these dialogue icons change a player's experience by allowing them to curate their character's romantic relationships. Drawing from Sebastian Domsch's (2007) work on understanding dialogue in video games, I argue these mechanics allow for choice and a sense of control. As Domsch (2017) explores, "the appeal of branching dialogue structures is the feeling of agency it gives to the player" (p. 261). Players derive pleasure from being offered options to curate their experience, and dialogue icons provide clarity about the consequences of these dialogue options. This process is often slightly different depending on which game you are focusing on, but the same principle usually applies. A player will talk to a character and get to know them, usually participating in the friendship/affection mechanics to grow closer to an NPC and dialogue icons will appear next to the dialogue options. In games this icon is often a heart, but it can be other icons (in *Cyberpunk 2077* this icon is lips). This icon lets players know that this dialogue tree will result in an intimate relationship with the character. These icons may show up from the player's first interaction with a character or before specific physically intimate moments, like a kiss or a sexual encounter.

After a certain number of interactions with an NPC, eventually there will be a moment where the player is presented with a dialogue option that will achieve two things. The first is that it will cement the relationship in the game story, which is important for the ending of the main narrative. Secondly, it will allow the player to back out of what will be a sexual encounter. Take for example the scene depicted in Figure 1. This scene is between the player character and River Ward – who is male and only interested in a heterosexual relationship – who has just implied they are romantically interested in V. The options provided clearly allow a player to choose what the state of the relationship is. The "lips" symbol will initiate a kiss and eventually a sexual encounter which will cement the relationship. Selecting the second option will lead to the end of the romantic relationship with no opportunity to rekindle it.

Figure 1. Player options to either kiss River Ward or decline his advances in *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020). (© CD Projekt Red and CD Projekt)

As mentioned earlier, *Cyberpunk 2077,* like other games of the genre, are giving players the chance to curate their experience and make sure the outcomes are as desired. This is not the only option available to developers to demonstrate that players are entering into a romantic relationship, but it is one of the more overt choices as there is a precedent for players who "might skip the story or cutscenes when they feel that those get in the way of gameplay" (Tondello et al., 2019, p. 390). Having a symbol that stands out relative to the displayed text means that a player who is "skipping" or missing content will still be able to shape their experience.

This could be framed as developers allowing players to have as much information as possible before making choices, but the impact on the experience and narrative is worth considering further. Aside from the fact that these icons are not always consistent, dialogue icons can have the impact of removing the mystery from an NPC interaction. There is a simplification of mechanics that occurs here, arguably so that more players can experience the romance they want without having to reload a save file. Though the goal may be simplification, what actually occurs is a removal of romantic nuance, something that is critical when dealing with interpersonal relationships and establishing connections between player and characters.

Creating meaningful and engaging interactive romantic storylines in games has many potential pitfalls. Codifying certain aspects of romantic interaction can feel cold and stiff as it will reduce relationship-building to a few choices and buttons. But if there are no options it will feel as though the player is not involved with the interactions. Toeing this line between interactivity and passivity is not a simple task, and different games use different communication tools to make players feel like their choices have consequences.

To understand how dialogue icons influence a player's engagement with romantic sub-plots as well as lessening the emotional impact of decisions made, I will consider the structure of a possible player romance with Panam Palmer – a female character that is only interested in heterosexual relationships. As far as *Cyberpunk 2077* goes, the romance with Panam Palmer is one of the more involved when it comes to meeting certain objectives within her quests. There are several interactions that must be chosen to continue the romance. Additionally, a quest must be done within a certain time limit. What is notable about Panam's storyline is that the player will have to initiate the romance and be rebuffed once. This occurs during the quest "Riders on the Storm", after the player character and Panam are stuck at an old motel to escape a dust storm. Panam and V are bantering about the state of the hotel as well as if their

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"stay" has been enjoyable, with V momentarily taking on the character of a hotel concierge. V will then ask her to take if she has everything she needs, and she replies in the affirmative while extending her legs onto V's lap:

PC-V: Pleased with your stay ma'am?
PANAM: Mmhmm… I couldn't ask for more

V can then respond with three options:

PC-V (Option 1): You'd be more comfortable with your shoes off, ma'am.
PC-V (Option 2): Think I'm getting ready to turn in for the night.
PC-V (Option 3): Maybe getting a bit too comfortable.

The second two end the interaction, and a relationship cannot be pursued later. The third leads to Panam declining to take off her shoes. V then responds that she deserves to take a break and Panam questions what this might entail,

PC-V: Nonsense, with a day as full as today, you deserve to kick back.
PANAM: Oh? And what did you have in mind?
PC-V (Option 1): [Touch Panam's thigh] You'd be more comfortable with your shoes off, ma'am.
PC-V (Option 2): You choose. Customer's always right.
PC-V (Option 3): A good, long sleep.

Again, the third option here will result in the scene ending, and both characters going to separate beds, unable to pursue the romance any further. This is especially interesting considering what the other options lead to. Even though only Option 1 has stage directions, both will result in touching Panam's thigh. This is because, as Figure 2 shows, there are "touch" dialogue icons. If the first or second dialogue option is selected, Panam will still rebuff the player's advances asking V not to "spoil" the evening (see Figure 3).

Figure 2. V's initial attempt at starting a romantic relationship with Panam in *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020).

(© CD Projekt Red and CD Projekt)

Figure 3. Panam rejects V's advances in *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020).
(© CD Projekt Red and CD Projekt)

It's worth noting that, while there are dialogue icons (especially the "touch" icon in this case), there is no "lips" icon, because it has a slightly different meaning. The conclusion of this scene includes no overt romantic interest that is requited, but this scene is still critical in continuing to pursue a relationship with Panam. The player must essentially select either dialogue option that leads them to be rebuffed. However, they do not know this at this point. In the mind of a player, it may seem as though they have made a wrong choice – that they have potentially misread either the situation or Panam's attitude.

The next playable scene is the morning after, where the player has the option to question Panam about last night and apologise. This option can be missed but does not end the romance. If the player selects this, Panam will explain how she is "not like that", to which V will ask what she "is like". Panam will then grab the player by the collar and kiss them, leaving quickly afterwards.

Later in the game, there is another moment where V and Panam discuss their budding romance. Panam acknowledges that she is used to not getting too involved when it comes to romantic partners, and would rather protect the friendship V and her have:

> **PC-V:** [Stand by window] Missed you, pretty bad.
> **PANAM:** Oh… this means…
> Wait, just-just wait. This is not how we usually talk.

V can then continue the conversation and question where the relationship is heading:

> **PANAM:** Listen V, I believe I know where this is going.
> **PC-V:** And, not to your liking?
> **PANAM:** No it's not that. I also wanted to talk about it, just… not so openly. My plan was to tiptoe around, test the waters, then retreat back into my shell.

Compared to other romantic subplots in the genre, getting to know Panam in an intimate sense is one of the more in-depth experiences the game has to offer. While this is helped by the fact that Panam and

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her Nomadic group are central to the overall plot (unlike the other four romance NPC options) this is not the only reason. There are real moments of pause and clarity, as well as discussions that acknowledge uncertain feelings and the difficulties that relationships contain when there has been trust broken previously. However, all of this nuance builds to the "climax" of the relationship, which is broken by the choice for the player being a binary "yes" or "no" – the yes identifiable by "lips".

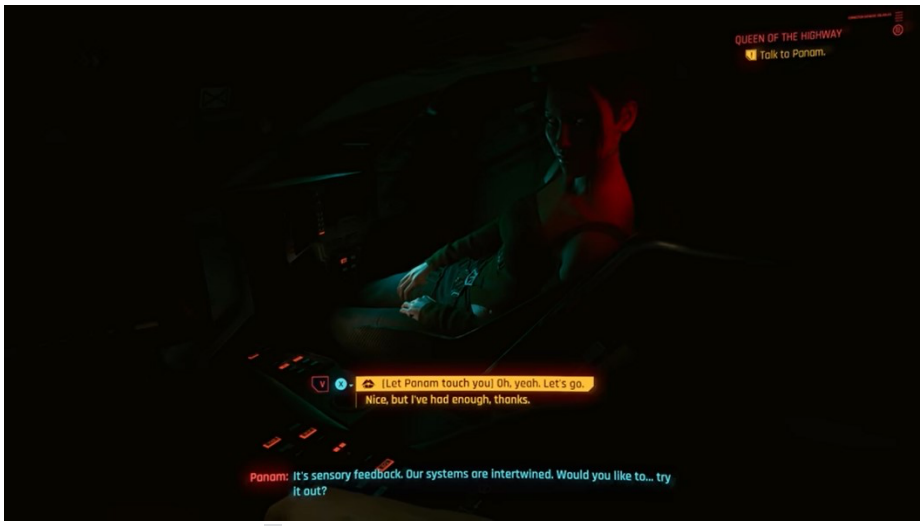

Figure 4. Panam Palmer's romantic "climax" in *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020).
(© CD Projekt Red and CD Projekt)

The "lips" dialogue icon almost always indicates that a sexual encounter will occur, meaning that despite attempts at offering nuance, the player can know with certainty the consequences of their choice. The other option here is a declining of the sexual activity, which does end the romantic interactions with Panam, but notably does not have another icon connected. Again, the focus is on the lips and the continued undermining of the social complexity of romance. When discussing what this relationship means to Panam, she and V have this exchange:

PC-V:	Sounds like a plan. What went wrong?
PANAM:	It seems you saw right through me.
PC-V:	Didn't have a clue how you would react. You're not the only one shooting around in the dark.

The irony here is that Panam is the only one shooting around in the dark. The player may not have realised it yet, but they have been given tools to know exactly when romantic overtures are going to be reciprocated. The dialogue icons, specifically the lips, will almost always result in a successful sexual encounter. The "touch" icon will result in physical contact and is usually an option at some point in a romantic subplot that will indicate interest. "Shaking hands" is used to denote a friendly exchange or the possibility of becoming friends. The player may not know exactly what will come out of selecting "lips", but they can reasonably assume that something romantic may occur. Doris Rusch's idea of the experiential metaphor of games is apt here. The experiential metaphor is the "phenomenon of understanding a gameplay experience as a physical visualisation of abstract ideas such as emotional processes or mental states" (Rusch, 2009, p. 6). Essentially, they reflect real-life experiences in games that players will recognise, and this can help to understand the experience of the game further. Rusch uses this as an example of how games can be more complex in nature than often attributed, and I would argue this is true for the early stages of the Panam relationship. But once the "lips" icon appears, this

exchange feels more like pressing a button for sex; a transaction, rather than an in-depth relationship. Rusch argues that if a game "feels like a relationship … it might be about relationship" and in this moment, using these icons, the game feels transactional. This is where romance in video games tends to take a separate approach. While audiences for other mediums like television, literature or film should be understood as active, these mediums do not offer the same capacity for ergodic engagement with characters and romantic plotlines as digital games do. Once a player has the option to impact narrative and engage in romance, there is a strange codification of the process of romance. This is where tools like "dialogue icons" start to crop up. There is a removal of the unknown that comes with social interaction between people, particularly one like romance. As Laura Hatch (2021) writes:

> Romance is the genre of uncertainty. But it is also the genre of trust. Romance, in my understanding, is a narrative form that tests human relationships over time within settings defined by both exposure to the extremes of chance and a sense of underlying intentionality or order … romance extends beyond genre to encapsulate a mode of being in the world that combines heightened embodiment and passionate excitation with a sense of proximity to a sublime realm of ideas that take unexpected shape in the implements and attitudes of everyday life. (p. 5)

Essentially what Hatch is articulating here is the unknown that characterises romance. Romance as a genre and socially governed state of being includes a high degree of unknowns. Part of the pleasure of the genre is that, despite being formulaic, there is still a hint of mystery with each scene. When it comes to romance in the everyday, the unknown and uncertain elements are what make it recognisable and often complex. These "dialogue icons" found in *Cyberpunk 2077* may help to indicate emotional tone, but they potentially simplify interactions down to "correct" and "incorrect", which makes developing meaningful connections with characters more challenging. The dialogue in the scene with Panam is therefore incongruous with the mechanics of the dialogue system, and the "experiential metaphor" is a muddled and strange one. Panam heartfully expressing her previous hesitation and lack of certainty with intimate relationships rings hollow while the player is being iconographically told exactly what the responses they select will lead to. If the purpose of the "dialogue icons" is to simplify the process so players feel accomplished, the impact of this loses the nuance of social interaction when it comes to portraying romance.

Dialogue Icons as a Barrier to Queer Romance

I contend dialogue options have implications for how queer sexuality is engaged with in digital games. As mentioned earlier, the "lips" dialogue icons usually indicate that the interaction will result in a romantic and or sexual encounter between the player character and the NPC. The only time this will not occur, is if V does not meet the prerequisite gender preferences for a partner the NPC may have.

There also should be some consideration that in *Cyberpunk 2077, "*dialogue icons" show up at different times depending on which character whose romantic side-quest you are looking at. The critical point-of-no-return icon signifying a romantic relationship occurring according to the game is arguably the "lips" which show up for all fully fleshed out romances with Judy, River, Panam and Kerry. If we look at the images of occasions where the "lips" show up in the game side by side, they are functionally similar with a few minor differences.

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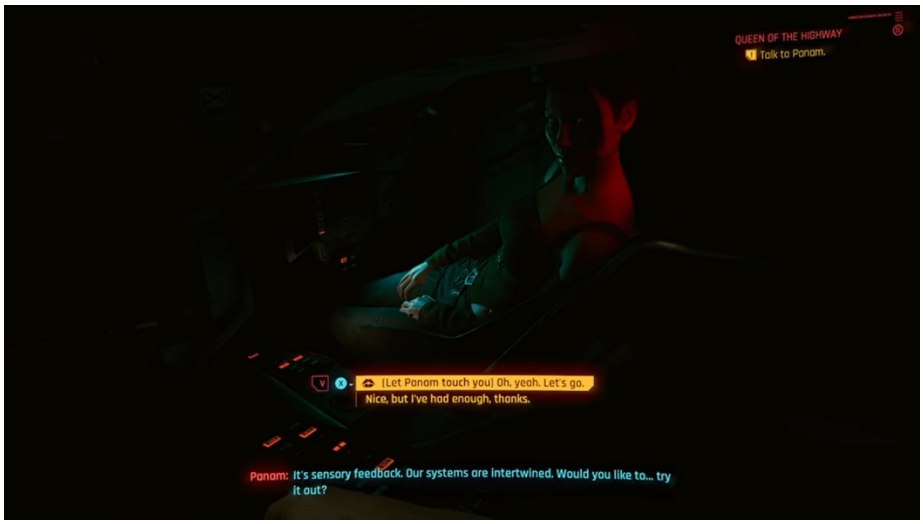

Figure 5. "Lips" in Panam's romance in *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020).
(© CD Projekt Red and CD Projekt)

Figure 6. "Lips" in River's romance in *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020).
(© CD Projekt Red and CD Projekt)

Figure 7. "Lips" in Kerry"s romance in *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020).
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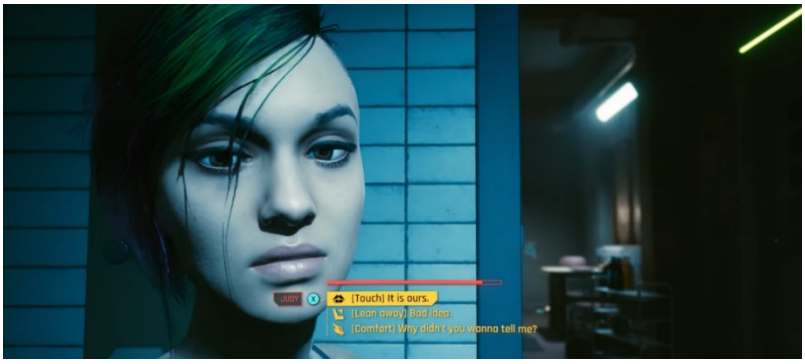

Figure 8. "Lips" in Judy's romance in *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020).
(© CD Projekt Red and CD Projekt)

Immediately it is obvious that all the "main" romance storylines include the "lips" symbol. However, there are some clear similarities and differences. In Figures 5 and 6 we can see that, when it comes to the heteronormative characters (Panam and River), players have only one other option other than to engage in sexual activity, and that is a statement that does not have a "dialogue icon" attached. Players are therefore left to speculate on what that means for the two characters' relationship going forward. When it comes to non-heteronormative characters, (Kerry and Judy) however, there are other "dialogue icons" helping to clearly evoke tone and meaning, leaving less room for speculation and interpretation on behalf of the player. Kerry even has the "shaking hands" icon used to denote friendship. V has the "sitting" icon next to her romantic rejection interaction with Judy, implying physical distance will be put between the two women. This begs the question of why the developers are being so careful to make it explicit which answer will lead to which outcome with these characters. It is worth drawing from Anna Anthropy's idea of a "gay button" (as cited in Adrienne Shaw, 2014, p. 34) as to why these options are different for non-normative representations of sexuality and romance. Adrienne Shaw builds on the analogy of the "gay button" in gaming as a means of including representation. This metaphorical button is something the audience must "press" in order to see characters whose sexuality is anything other than heterosexual. By "press", Anthropy and Shaw (2014) mean there are tasks the player must do in order to see characters of other sexual orientations. Shaw (2014) argues the presence of gay characters is often hidden unless certain dialogue options are selected, hence the "gay button". They note this means the "burden of representation is on players themselves" (Shaw, 2014, p. 35). Extending this further, I would argue dialogue icons only serve to aid a player to potentially omit queer representation from their experience. Players are not left with the possibility here that, though the relationship may not turn sexual, it may still be romantic or retain the possibility for later intimacy – like that which the lack of icons for River and Panam implies. This begs the question why Judy and Kerry merit having this extra emotive tool. The only notable difference between the two characters that sets them apart from Panam and River is that Judy and Kerry are queer characters that V can engage in a non-heteronormative relationship with. In this way emotive tools like "dialogue icons" and stage directions are being used to indicate to the player that they will be picking the "queer" option, thus potentially eliminating it from some player's experience altogether.

Further illustrating the perceived intention of developers for players to avoid queerness, Kerry and Judy are also the only two out of the four romances to have a timed interaction. In Figures 7 and 8 there is a red bar above the dialogue options that indicates how much time a player has before the interaction will either be selected for them, or the game will assume no interaction is chosen, thus losing the chance at having a sexual encounter. Here we have "dialogue icons" that make sure the player is fully informed of the consequences of the choice they are making, as well as giving them less time to act on it compared to their heteronormative counterparts. In this way, I argue "dialogue icons" serve to flag to the player when their character might become intimate with a queer character, as well as gatekeep who is likely to engage with the romance. These icons are subtle, but the way they are framed should not be ignored.

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Shaw's idea of the "gay button" is still prevalent, albeit morphed and harder to detect. Queer relationships are given subtle barriers in the form of dialogue icons and are heavily signposted to make sure no one stumbles into anything non-heteronormative (Shaw, 2014). As the reaction Skye and Angel's gender-neutral names demonstrated, creators of *Cyberpunk 2077* may still be using covert tools to pander to a queer-averse player base.

Conclusion

Dialogue options in *Cyberpunk 2077* make things clearer for players and allow them to make more "informed" decisions about character relationships. I argue their impact is more complex than it might first appear. Dialogue is presented as mechanic. But with the addition of icons, it appears more like a tool to frame a scene with sexual content, rather than have an intimate, revealing moment with a character that brings complexity to a narrative. There is an argument to be made about informing the player how their actions might affect the narrative and impact their idea of who their character is. As demonstrated, knowing the difference between whether an interaction will have a specific outcome can affect a player's immersion and enjoyment. If a player sees their protagonist having a particular relationship with a character, something as simple as a kiss can dramatically alter how they view their PC and other NPCs. It is worth questioning whether these icons are truly effective representations of the consequences of their corresponding dialogue option. "Lips" almost always lead to a sexual encounter, but the inclusion of an icon of lips does not mean a player can assume further physical intimacy will occur. Clarification is difficult to achieve even with the help of these emotive tools. I would argue that this supposed clarification outweighs the removal of subtle, meaningful, and intimate interactions. As exemplified by the Panam romance, there is an overriding of emotional nuance and intimacy as these dialogue icons fill in the blanks where romance occurs. As Hatch (2015) explains, "… representing love through icons or by rolling die is a problematic way to synthesise something that is traditionally seen as spontaneous or unpredictable" (p. 21).

While there is a lack of clarity regarding the specificities of an in-game romance, these dialogue icons are still clear indicators of broader, upcoming romantic or sexual content. From this perspective, we can see the possibility for them to remove the complexity of a player's interaction with an in-game romance system. In addition, they could even serve as a subtle dog whistle that gives players with reservations about queer relationships the tools to avoid them entirely. I do not dispute that players should be informed of what the result of an interaction might be, but it may be worth considering alternative options to dialogue icons alone. Telling through interaction and gameplay is imperative, but it may be worth including options to turn these icons off. It is again worth considering Hatch's (p. 5) words: "I believe romance is a type of education, an education that happens through experience, and experience is the keyword in this: how do we conceptualize the human experience within a world both governed by necessity and chance?" (p. 5).

Romance certainly acts as a form of education in games, but these icons potentially make the education a strange, if straightforward, one. Without changes, RPGs with romance included may continue to take a more simplified approach to social interaction that is famously complex, subtle, and unpredictable. In essence, the use of dialogue icons to communicate love in digital games can have some problematic implications. I have demonstrated that, while no relationship in a digital game can be truly "organic", dialogue icons diminish a game's ability to represent social complexity and all but eradicate the possibility of unplanned queer in-game encounters that are not actively sought out by the player. While outside of the scope of this paper, future studies might investigate how players themselves use dialogue icons as a tool to circumvent digital games representation of queer characters, even in non-romantic settings. Though on the surface clarifying dialogue options and codifying romance could be argued to empower players with greater information to draw from, it is at the expense of complex

demands of a satisfying romance narrative and the potential for unplanned and educative player experiences.

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