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Lover's (Dis)comfort: Considering the Feminist Potentials of Romance in the Digital Game

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Abstract

Romance in mainstream gaming has rapidly increased in visibility over the last decade. Recent titles like *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023), *Starfield* (2023) and *Dragon Age: The Veilguard* (2024) have included optional romance features as selling points in promotional campaigns. Despite this rise in popularity, discursively romance is still a confused and contested term amongst scholars, players, developers, and games journalists. It is used as a catch-all term to refer to a diverse range of social interactions and gameplay mechanics. Some scholars have argued that romance has been a gateway for transgressive, feminine, and pro-social play. As Anastasia Salter states, the decision to feature romance in play can be viewed as an act of "feminist game design" (2020). However, without a discerning understanding of the different presentations of romance within gaming it is challenging to recognise where feminisms are happening and where they are distinctly not. Through an exploration of how romance mechanics navigate issues of consent, objectification, and 'pick-up' ideologies, I argue romance in the digital game is not inherently feminist, though still maintains transgressive potentials. Recognising where feminism is potentially happening is especially important as 'romance' is becoming increasingly visible as a feature of the AAA game. Without recognising the potentially harmful and troubling mechanics baked into prominent examples (some of which are considered templates for their development teams) there is a risk that damaging presentations will continue to be normalised and expected within these styles of romantic representation.

Introduction

As optional romantic content becomes more prominent in digital gaming, the purpose and value of interactive intimacy as a feminist object has become more contested. Some scholars discuss 'romance' in digital gaming as a broader tool used to reinforce heteronormative hegemonies (Greer 2013; Ruberg & Shaw 2017). Others have considered romance as a something of a gateway for transgressive play and feminine exploration (Salter 2020; Tomlinson 2019; 2021)—particularly in relation to normative understandings of the 'gamer' as an exclusively male figure (Butt, Cote, Hammar, Mejeur 2022). In popular online discourses, we can see romance regularly attached to the somewhat blunt pop-cultural understanding that feminism is anything that doesn't cater to an exclusively male audience. R/Girlgamers, a reddit subreddit that offers a "community space for ladies to hang out, talk about gaming, and game together", maintains an up-to-date running list of games that are considered to be "feminist." Often, romance is cited in community discussions as something that contributes to feminisms occurring within a text (Reddit 2025). If a game offers a more diverse range of cultures, sexualities, and gender in the characters who are potential romance partners, the feminist credentials of the game are seen to be stronger.

However, what is so often missing from these discussions—both popular and scholarly—is the way in which the design, and mechanical contexts of a game *invite* us to understand romance differently (Brierley-Beare 2025). For example, a game like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* does include a large, and diverse cast of characters for the player to have a relationship with. But, as discussed by Amy Brierley-Beare (2025), the "domestic" representations and mechanics of romance in the game encourage players to objectify and discard (even murder) these NPC partners if they ever get in the way of the player's goals. In this sense, it is the presentation and style of romantic representation that makes *Skyrim* difficult to square with feminist sensibilities. Indeed, without a discerning understanding of

the different presentations and mechanics of romance within gaming, it is challenging to recognise where feminisms are and are not happening.

Using Brierley-Beare's (2025) framework of limerent, ludic, and domestic romance styles this paper provides a close analysis of 7 high-profile mainstream games. It explores how romance mechanics navigate issues such as consent, objectification, and 'pick-up' ideologies and refutes a binary understanding of romance in gaming as wholly feminist or un-feminist. Instead, it posits that romance in digital game design is radical and does have clear and consistent feminist potentials that both build from and transgress individual styles of romantic representation in digital games.

Romance, Gaming, and Feminism

The language and debates of historic feminist analyses of romance often inform current discussions of romance in gaming. Simone De Beauvoir (1949) recognises love and romance as tools that have been historically used to cajole women into their submission to men. In relation to romance novels, she claimed that any women who read romance would "lose herself, body and soul, in him who is represented as her absolute" and that "love will become her religion." Teresa L. Ebert (1988) argues that the (then) contemporary surge in romance novels published by Harlequinn Romance and Candlelight Romance instructed their female readers to be submissive and complementary to a dominant man. However, other scholars have been less dismissive and taken a more nuanced approach to the feminist potentials of romance literature. Janice Radway (1984), Tania Modleski (1980), Lynne Pearce (2011), and Catherine Roach (2010) have all critically considered the pleasures and complicated relationship that romance, and romance readers might have with feminism. Likewise, Jenni Simon (2017), Michele Schreiber (2014) and Jean Radford (1986) all suggest that romance can be agentic. In the context of male-dominated mass media and cultural texts,

romance novels can be a site where women negotiate their understanding of romance. While such scholarship still acknowledges the problematic nature of the romance novel's focus on heteronormative relations and gender roles, Kathryn R. King (2000) concludes that romance literature has an "emphasis on recovery of female political agency [that] reflects a shift in feminist interpretive models that is a striking feature of much" (p. 62). In this sense feminist understandings of romance are multifaceted—they are simultaneously places where the boundaries of gender and sexuality can be firmed up and can be transgressed.

In game studies, romance in often linked to the sexualisation of NPCs for the benefit of a (presumed) heterosexual-male player base. Researchers are concerned with identifying and critiquing how romance centres heterosexist desire and perpetuates patriarchy (Stermer & Berkey 2012; Behm-Morawitz & Mastro 2009). Indeed, Mia Consalvo (2013), Downs and Smith (2009) make it clear that the hyper-sexualisation of feminine characters has contributed greatly to romance as it operates more broadly in gaming. Michelle Clough furthers this critique to argue that many video games assume a straight-male gaze. While some characters may be allowed to play as characters with different expressions of gender, there will still be an inherent assumption that the player will be male, and they will be romantically interested in a female NPC (Clough 2017, p. 10). However, researchers like Stephanie Harkin express the promise of transgression in game design explaining,

> There is hence a subversive potential at play when romance and melodrama—so deeply entrenched in feminine culture—are infused onto technologies like gamemaking engines; technologies so historically bound to masculinity. (Harkin 2025, p. 1276)

Similarly, other scholars (Fraser 2018; Kondrat 2015; Krobová et.al. 2015; Osborne 2012; Sundén,& Elm 2012; Whitehouse et.al. 2023) argue that romance is a space for queer play and explorations of gender. Indeed, much like with previous research on romance in broader

media, the role of romance in digital gaming has been a site of debate and disagreement among feminist media scholars.

These tensions surrounding feminist understandings of romance are clearly pronounced in research regarding otome games —a story-based style of romance game often designed for and by women. Otome exists in a unique position of feminine centred development intertwined with increasing commercialised expansion as well as government censorship relating to erotica. Zishan Lai and Tingting Liu (2024) untangle the protected 'female gaze' that negotiates existence in these spaces, explaining that,

> …contemporary Chinese women have entwined their leisure activities, intimate connections of gaming and sexual experience with negotiations with game developers and the state's censorship, where gamers' relational autonomy are prominent (but understudied). (p.17)

Intimacy and eroticism can be understood as both a capital tool and dismantler when it comes to otome. Other scholars (Chen 2025; Ge, Hu, & Ouyang 2025; Hu & Ge 2025) have also recognised the fraught complexities that lie with the commodification of intimacy. Hu and Ge (2025) note that, for interactive entertainment, datafication "reconfigures intimacy as both deeply personal and industrially standardized, emancipatory and extractive". This negotiation is echoed when it comes to discussion of the taboo of romance play in otome games. Ganzon (2017) posits that otome, despite including (at times) masculine domination actively recontextualises these norms in the space—so much so that these texts subvert understandings of gender and patriarchy. These post-feminist understandings of otome (and indeed more broadly romance as it exists in media) recognise the very contested position of digital intimacy in gaming. Across genres, romance and intimacy are inexorably intwined

with the pressures that exist in their creation as well as the ideological frameworks underpinning them.

Brierley-Beare (2025), has further cautioned that we should not treat romance with a broad brush or as a monolithic object of study. Rather, she proposes four distinct styles of representation in mainstream gaming—limerent, ludic, domestic, and physical. Limerent styles are all-encompassing epic love stories that tell an extensive and intensive romantic story—games like *Mass Effect, The Witcher, Dragon Age* etc. These often include long, branching dialogue trees focused heavily on the development and character of one potential paramour. Contrastingly, ludic romances are dalliances, flirtations and flings—they are supposed to be fun (for one partner if not both). These are playful and often presented as something frivolous that can be engaged with multiple partners—romance in games like *Grand Theft Auto San Andreas, Persona 5, Yakuza*. Domestic representations of romance focus on the mechanisation of social structures like marriage, family and capital. They tend to encourage players to see their partner as a part of a completed domestic scene. Physical romances are a discursive oddity, where just an act of physical affection is understood as 'romance' in gaming culture.

The styles and mechanics of romantic presentation identified by Brierley-Beare (2025), represent some of the most standardised approaches to romance in the digital gaming industry over the last 20 years. This article builds on Brierley-Beare's work by arguing that the mechanical conventions bring with them harmful implications concerning consent, agency, and objectification which make them impossible to consider as wholly feminist objects. In contrast, this paper then discusses new styles of romantic representation in games such as *Baldur's Gate 3*, *Hades I-II,* and *Date Everything* that fall outside Brierley-Beare's original taxonomy. These games offer distinct and deliberate feminist potentials and represent new approaches to romantic representation.

Methods

This research applied qualitative methods to analyse a curated selection of digital gaming texts and their associated user generated paratexts. The games analysed in this article were drawn from a larger corpus that was developed as part of a separate, on-going research project. This original corpus catalogued the different styles of romantic representation across 50 of the most commercially successful games released after the year 2000 that featured optional romantic representation. 6 games were selected for closer textual analysis from this original sample. The 6 games chosen (as seen in Table 1) were all selected due to their; exemplification of a specific style of romantic representation, commercial significance and large development budget, and active player communities.

Game	Year	Developer	Romantic representation style	platform
Yakuza: Like a Dragon	2020	Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio	Ludic	PC
Kingdom Come Deliverance	2018	Warhorse Studios	Limerent/Physical	PC
Fallout 76	2018	Bethesda Game Studios	Domestic	PC
Baldur's Gate 3	2023	Larian Studios	Limerent	PC
Hades	2020	Supergiant games	Ludic	PC

Date Everything	2025	Sassy Chap Games	Ludic	PC

While many small-budget, independent, and otome games feature transgressive styles of romantic representation, this project places a particular emphasis on mainstream games in which romance is embedded as an optional feature. These types of games represent the most prominent and discussed representations of romantic representation in the digital gaming space. Mainstream games are accessible and marketed to a large player base and are regularly discussed in forums and on social media. While there is certainly a need for scholars to investigate independent and smaller budget games, this research is focused on how romance has been embedded into hegemonic genres with large scale appeal.

To analyse the corpus of games, this research took a fragmented approach as outlined by Diane Carr (2017). Carr suggests fragmentation as way to analyse gaming texts that are dense and narratively complicated. This involves researchers using initial playthroughs to identify specific elements or segments of a game "through a structural lens (a key, an object of exchange, or armour) and through a textual lens (e.g., its connotations as previous, gendered, alien sentimental or ritualistic). (2017, p. 710). In this research, I segmented specific elements of games that involved some kind of romantic representation (such as player-NPC-conversations, questlines, in-game objects, or cut-scenes) and returned to later for deeper, textual analysis. To compliment this approach, I also drew from Consalvo and Nathan Dutton's (2006) method of interaction mapping. Interaction mapping is a way to organize the large amounts of data generated through various playthroughs of the chosen gaming texts. Using interaction mapping, I re-recorded player conversations with romanceable NPCs and mapped all the possible NPC dialogue reactions to all possible player prompts.

This research included a brief, supplementary analysis of user-generated paratexts associated with the games in the corpus. This includes Steam forums, reddit threads, and wikis. Online observation of these paratexts were refined over time through open-coding methods using NVIVO software to highlight trends patterns and general themes (Corbin & Strauss 1990). I understood these user-generated paratexts as sites that contributed to the production and reproduction of social norms within gaming communities (Fairclough and Wodak (1997).

Pickup Artist Players: Neoliberal and Manosphere Ideology

In many games, romance and intimacy are presented as something the player can 'win' through the technical mastery of gameplay mechanics. These types of games—that encourage players to see romance as something to 'complete' or to 'best'—are what Brierley-Beare (2025) characterises as 'ludic';

> …Ludic love is a game, and the ludic lover is not concerned that anyone else but themselves are having fun. The playful nature of the relationship can include playful and interesting activities, pranks, flirtations, and teasing.

Ludic styles stand in direct contrast to other styles of romance found in mainstream gaming and often position players to emulate a 'pick-up' style of play—seeking out what their paramour likes and improving their in-game abilities only for the presupposed exchange of sexual activity and intimacy.

Ludic representations of romance include mechanics and story structures that are common to dating-simulators—predicated on players 'improving' themselves for their paramour—that tap into broader neoliberal gamified approaches to romance and gaming. This can come in the form of social 'stats', like those found in the *Persona* (1996-present) series, appropriately selected material capital like in the *Grand Theft Auto* (1997-present) series, or an upgraded 'personality' found in the *Yakuza* (2005-present) series. Players are

expected to enjoy the frivolous 'fun' of keeping partners happy that comes with this mechanised dating. However, the positioning and framing of the player is that they are the only actor with agency to change or approve their romantic situation.

In many ways, ludic representations of romance are intertwined with neoliberal ideologies of individual agency and responsibility. It is the player's merits and skill alone that determine whether they will be successful in their pursuit of romance with an NPC. If the player is 'good' enough, the NPC will *always* be compelled to say yes. Neoliberal ideology and logic is something that has been deeply embedded in many aspects of game design (Mejia & Blunt 2019)—be that quest design, levelling systems, or even cover design (Pérez-Latorre & Oliva 2017; Oliva, Pérez-Latorre & Besalú 2018). However, the enthusiastic application of neoliberal logic to ludic representation of romance—whether intended or not—presents meaningful (and troubling) textual familiarities with the rising type of relationship 'advice' found in pockets of the online "manosphere".

The "manosphere" can be understood as digital spaces where men join to discuss, among other things, masculinity, men's rights and feminism—often expressing derision at the latter concept (Bujalka, Rich & Bender 2022). Within the manosphere are a plethora of self-help 'aficionados' who encourage men to take control of their fitness, business, and personal lives. In fact, much of the continued prevalence and success of the manosphere is attributed to the "ontological security and insecurity" that initially draws young men in with relatively reasonable platitudes around self-care (Bujalka, Rich & Bender 2022, p. 1). Pick-up artists, who act in the manosphere as 'guides' on dating and romance also stress a focus on self-improvement (Banet-Weiser & Bratich 2019). As Eve Bujalka, Ben Rich and Bender explore,

> In this way, it is perhaps unsurprising that Manosphere content producers spruik neoliberal capitalist solutions to the insecurities this same system produces,

> where, in response to the perceived loss of 'traditional' male identities and 'qualities,' the breakdown of routines (say, through a divorce), men are instructed on how to improve their entrepreneurialism and excellence; their individualist, Alpha/Sigma-mindset; their financial or physical or romantic successes (be it through exercise regimens or 'pick-up' advice); their acquisition of material goods like cars or properties. (2022, p. 11)

The cultural meanings that ludic representations of romance attach to acquiring material possessions and personal successes, present an eerie similarity. This gamification of real-world relationships echoes how ludic experiences encourage players to engage. If we look at some of the techniques used to pick up women in manosphere forums, they include "ideas such as 'peacocking'(wearing an unusual item of clothing to attract interest)" and "looking for IOIs (indicators of interest, such as playing with one's hair)" (Banet-Weiser & Bratich 2019, p. 2). These techniques are not far off the changing of clothes to impress a date in *GTA IV* or noting the disposition meter of a potential paramour in *Persona 5*. What is concerning are the 'rewards' that these actions have and how they reveal so much about the messaging of the text.

When games include ludic representations of romance that are playful and frivolous, players are encouraged to look for a purpose in engaging in these mechanics. Players in dedicated Yakuza forums discuss the value of playing with romance in *Yakuza: Like a Dragon.* Many users suggested there was little 'benefit' to romancing one partner, as they claimed a player only received a statistical advantage after developing relationships with all available paramours. One user argued that there was no difference if you romance one or five women, and there was only 'value' in dating all of them. Collectively this thread carries the sentiment that there is no benefit to romancing less than six women. The reward of an

engaging romantic storyline for its own sake is not considered. Instead, these ludic representations of romance encourage this line of thinking.

Yakuza itself blatantly encourages this mentality—the mechanics and structures of the game only reward the ethos of a pickup artist. There is absolutely no consideration of the Non-Player Character (NPC), who they are and why the romance might be meaningful. This is part of real-world, ludic romantic styles as well. Sometimes the women involved are literal game pieces, to be used in combat as distractions, healers, or attackers of enemies. In this sense, romance is presented as a simple means to player/self-improvement with paramours treated as in-game rewards or useful tools. While I would not go as far to argue that these design choices were deliberate in reinforcing these ideologies, the uncritical ways these structures have been broadly repeated demonstrate a perpetuation of the underpinning logics—at times games are replicating these structures more so because of others that came before.

However, ludic romances do have the potential to be powerful and transgressive. *Hades* and its sequel *Hades II* encourage explorative and playful romances. These storylines examine light-hearted eroticism and consent alongside intense emotional desire. Players are not expected to only have one partner and the game allows for multiple developed relationships. While players develop relationships with 'gifts' (McDonald 2017) there is a concerted attempt to consider the romanced character value beyond than what they offer emotionally for a player-character. Rather than rewarding the player for romance, the characters in *Hades* and *Hades II* become more robust combatants that the player can call on, evoking a feeling of closeness fostering growth, rather than simply the player extracting the value from a character. Without considering what certain romance structures encourage it is difficult to understand where radical potentials can occur. If discourse decrees all these experiences are 'romance' then unpacking a transgressive and radical use of tools becomes

that much trickier. In this sense, romance can reveal a game's broader messaging surrounding intimacy, love and femineity.

Partner Objectification in the Digital Game

The monolithic understanding of romance is not only an incomplete picture when considering dating-sims or playful examples of romance—many texts that offer romance as part of broader social systems also position players to view love as a pathway to dominance. Not only are partners a currency as in the case of the ludic examples, in some cases they are explicitly objects for players to control and dominate in a domestic space. Domestic representations (Brierley-Beare 2025) are romances that focus and centre around paramours within the home and will often position players to consider their lover as another material object or 'loot' in their play. Martha Nussbaum (1995) writes about objectification in relationships and outlines seven "notions" involved with treating someone as an object (p. 257) including fungibility and instrumentality.

Fungibility, instrumentality, and objectification is common in games that exhibit domestic understandings of romance. *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Game Studios 2018) is an action-RPG that was Bethesda Game Studio's first attempt at including multiplayer elements in one of their titles. Set in Appalachia in the year 2102, *Fallout 76* is a post-apocalyptic game where players take on the role of a citizen attempting to recreate society post-nuclear destruction. In the 2020 *Wastelanders* update players were provided with the ability to tie "allies" to their in-game home space. Allies are humans who will act as "roommates" after they have become close to the player character. Players can only have one 'ally' at their home space at a time however, and to signal which character they would like to reside with them, PCs must construct an object specific to the potential 'ally'. For example, Beckett, a potential

paramour, requires there to be a bar before he lives with the player. Bethesda's official website describes this 'ally' system in following way,

> There's nothing quite like returning home to a friendly face after an action-packed day of looting, shooting, and exploring. While an Ally will not tag along as you traverse the Wasteland, you can always expect them to be waiting for you at your C.A.M.P., so long as their unique object is constructed. So, kick off your shoes, get comfortable, and have a chat with your new roommate. The better you get to know them, the friendlier they will become toward you. Who knows? Maybe your budding friendship will lead to a post-apocalyptic romance. (2020)

Players materialise their captured roommates (and potential lovers) through a representational object. This object is constructed and acts as an apt metaphor for the role of a romantic partner in domestic representations of romance. As Nussbaum would contend, they are fungible and instrumental (1995). *Fallout 76* romances are particularly objectified in that they are inert—lacking in agency and activity. Partners go where their 'object' is constructed, which means they go where their lover tells them to go. Sofia and Beckett were two individuals with stories and goals before they meet the player. Sofia was a veteran commander in the fictionalised, futuristic United States' Space program who wanted to discover the fate of soldiers under her post-Armageddon purview. Beckett was a reformed gang member who wished to make amends for past transgressions. Once they have become close enough to the player however, they are simply absorbed into the PC's life, unable to offer any resistance and being interchangeable with any other character. Objectification in domestic representations is so common it becomes mechanised through in-game economies in these experiences.

Domestic representations encourage players not only to see potential partners as objects but also as tools that allow for trade and capital growth. Returning to the 'ally' system quote from Bethesda, there is a distinct underlying utility to the function of these characters. The Bethesda website does not explore this, but there was a time when ally and romantic partner were one and the same, in that players could only be allies if they had effectively engaged in a romantic relationship with the player and therefore functionally interchangeable. In the romantic subplots for Beckett and Sofia there are three nearly identical stages of 'courtship' (i.e. completing personal quests and choosing 'flirty' dialogue options) which culminates in a 'romantic relationship'. This relationship includes implied sex with the "Lover's Comfort" perk (granting experience boosts to players) and unique romantic dialogue. Other than this, their main function and notable utility lies in their potential to act as "vendors"—valuable NPCs who can offer goods in exchange for capital in *Fallout 76*. Beckett in particular offers players value as a trader that gives a sizable amount of in-game currency (bottle caps) in exchange for goods, a nigh on invaluable ally for players to have in the world of *Fallout 76*. In this way, players look to their partners as tools to increase their wealth and increase their production of goods to further capitalise on gains within the game. Players have commented in the r/fo76 subreddit why this makes Becket the 'best romance' in the game, not for his character or history—his utility. This encouragement of extraction of utility, production, and capital from a spouse or partner is mirrored in economist Robert A. Pollak (2005)'s cold understanding of the power in marriage. Pollak contends that power and bargaining in marriage are inherently tied to earnings, wages, and household production. He argues that,

> a spouse who has low productivity in household production (e.g., because he or she lacks the requisite human capital) will be disadvantaged in bargaining within marriage unless (a) the goods market offers satisfactory substitutes for the outputs

> of household production or (b) the economic and psychological costs of divorce are small, and remarriage offers the prospect of readily finding a new spouse whose household production skills replace those of the previous spouse. (Pollak 2005, p. 22)

Players in games such as *Fallout 76* are encouraged to consider their choice of romantic partner, housemate, and companion from a utilitarian perspective, rather than looking at factors of compatibility. They are positioned to view romance more like a social economist than a romantic novelist. In this way, players are repeatedly asked to consider their partner as an object, only of value relative to their utility. Domestic representations of romance therefore urge players to view their partner as a means of accruing capital and as an object in their home, rather than an equal member of their household.

While domestic representations of romance are difficult to separate from their enmeshment with the masculine dominance of habitus, there are texts that have repositioned how one can view an intimate relationship. In these cases, different mechanics might allow for transgression rather than normativity and dominance. *Date Everything,* for example, offers a satirical lens through which to view digital romance. Structured like a traditional dating-simulator, the game takes place entirely in a home where the player character can engage in a romantic relationship with objects and even abstract concepts. The player uses a pair of glasses that allow a player to D.A.T.E (Directly Acknowledge a Thing's Existence)—which can turn something like a toolbox or a piano into a person who the player can get to know over the course of a week. While on the surface there is a facetiousness to these romantic subplots, there is a significant effort here to separate the plethora of potential partners—they are individuals with specific desires, specific wants and interests and importantly they offer more value than merely a utility. Edwards (2012) discusses feminist artist Martha Rosler's work 'Semiotics of the Kitchen' where she names common kitchen

utensils in an increasingly aggressive manner as a subversive piece designed to strip bare the constraints of food production and domestic labour. As Edwards argues the focus of the production, a woman, is turned "into a sign in a system of signs that represent a system of food production, in a system of harnessed subjectivity" and thus the stark nature of the production reveals the oppressive structure of the cooking show. In the same vein *Date Everything* strips back the domestic sphere and dating simulator to reveal a renegotiation of the metaphorical 'objectified' partner in gaming. However, while some texts offer new lenses to engage with digital intimacy, many still perpetuate the same structures that can lead to a lack of critical engagement with what it means to be a 'romance'.

No Opt Out? Assumed Player Consent

In some cases, the confused labelling and discursive understanding of romance by both audiences and developers creates issues around consent and player agency. While players often hold power over physicality and sexuality, there are examples of player disempowerment that showcase a troubling reflection of gaming culture. Certain structures of romance in gaming have the built-in assumption that a player is always sexually available, even if that player communicates otherwise. Popular contemporary games with romance have even caused player complaints surrounding how sexually forward NPCs are, regardless of player interest (Brierley-Beare 2024). The assumption that the player is always interested in sex is especially problematic in titles that appear to offer romance as something you opt-into.

In some cases, this confused understanding of consent seeps into fan discourses and communities. Action-RPG *Kingdom Come Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios 2018) showcases the distorted nature of discursive romance in gaming. *Playing with the Devil*, a side-quest in *Kingdom Come Deliverance*, tasks the player-character (Henry) with sorting out a dispute between a priest and a local herbalist. The priest believes that the herbalist is encouraging

three widows, Vera, Zlata, and Khuta, to engage in witchcraft. The herbalist claims that she only gave the women a 'magical', psychedelic ointment that can induce wondrous and/or horrifying visions but confesses that she is worried about the women. The PC is tasked with following the widows into a clearing, where they have set up an elaborate bonfire and ritual. When players interrupt the ritual, the widows (who have taken the psychedelic ointment) see Henry as a "prince of darkness" and offer to "pleasure" (have sex with) the player-character (Warhorse Studios 2018). Players are offered a choice of giving the women "anything" they ask for or declaring that they "shan't be fulfilling" their wishes. The implication here is that players can choose to have sex with these women or not. However, no matter what the player selects, Henry will begin to feel dizzy and disorientated as the women smear ointment on him. Henry passes out as the widows are stroking and caressing his body. As the PC awakens, Vera, Zlata, and Khuta have turned into a mare, sow, and a hen respectively. The player is asked to "pick" one to "serve" Henry's desires who the player will "lock-pick" the backside of—the implication being Henry is engaging in anal sex with one or all of the women. Henry is then told he successfully "cavort[ed] with the women" and players are then unable to achieve the "Virgin" achievement that asks players to "stay celibate and complete the entire game as a virgin" (PSN 2023). The game is communicating that the player-character had sex when in actuality they were drugged and sexually assaulted. This is presented as humorous in the game and the player is given no opportunity to be critical of the exchange they were involved in. Players potentially did not consent to their player-character, who they often see as an extension of themselves (Salen & Zimmerman 2004), having a sexual encounter, yet they have to endure this disempowerment.

This is particularly troubling when we consider the player's lack of agency of their avatar's sexual experience in relation to notions of avatar identification, embodiment, and forced narrative choices related to sexuality. As explored by Lolansen et al (2025), avatar

customization is a unique mechanism for "exploring, expressing, and affirming gender identity for transgender and gender diverse individuals" in role-playing and narrative-driven games. However, it also brings with it the possibility of very real harm in the form of virtual assault. While research from authors such as Danaher (2022) and Belini (2024) outline the severe harms of avatar to avatar virtual assault, the heightened level of player-avatar identification in a game like *Kingdom Come Deliverence* raises similar concerns about digital games forcing non-consensual acts on player avatars.

Labelling specific acts as 'romance' demonstrates problematic cultural ideas around social intimacy—particularly, as noted, with consent. Not only does *Kingdom Come Deliverance* subtly affirm that Henry's assault was an act of consensual sex, but self-identified fans also perpetuate this perspective. On the fan wiki for *Kingdom Come Deliverance* Henry's encounter with the witches can be found under the subheading "Sex and Romance" which explains the various dalliances available in the game (Kingdom Come: Deliverance Fan Wiki 2023). This wiki is maintained by several fans who collectively moderate the content portrayed. These fans describe the meeting with the witches as an event where,

> ...the women will offer themselves to Henry, who can play along or attempt to stop to their advances. Either way, they will inadvertently drug him, and Henry will have a debauched night of hallucinations. Whether he has sex with the women is unclear (what exactly is Henry doing when he's lockpicking farm-animals?), but that is clearly the women's intent. (2023)

Despite referencing the drugging, Henry's evening is described as 'debauched' and 'sex' and there is no section that is particularly critical of the lack of choice given to the player. Some representations of romance have such low barriers to be considered discursively as

‘romance’, that even the assault of Henry is categorised as such. It is revealing and troubling how the label of romance is steadfast in gaming cultures. What games and fan discourses label as ’romance’ can perpetuate and proliferate troubling ideas around consent and sexual assault in gaming culture. There is an assumption here that the player is always ‘up’ for sex and romance, even if they have attempted to express otherwise. Some representations of romances can position players to see consent as an optional element of a ‘romance’ encounter, further showcasing the precarious and powerful position the label of romance has in gaming cultures.

However, there are clear recent examples where consent and agency in romantic relationships have been prioritised in design. Though I noted earlier that *Baldur’s Gate III* has been criticised for pushy NPCs, the structures, patterns and mechanics that are staples of limerent romances (Brierley 2025) encourage more nuanced understandings of romantic agency. Dialogue trees (including hurdles, affection, and failures) carry with them implicit coded consent from player as well as non-player characters. *Baldur’s Gate III’s* Lae’zel romance includes two ‘checks’ (yes/no) options for players. Lae’zel will admit their attraction to the player character noting “[their] scent alone is enough to make my neck sweat and my hairs stand on end”. Players can respond with:

1. If you respect me so much why are you such a prickly grouch
2. Hold on. Are you coming on to me?
3. The attractions mutual Lae’zel. You know how to set my heart racing.
4. I have just one word. Yuck.

The last option ends the courtship. The first three lead to a second interaction with Lae’zel discussing how they want to “…taste [the PC]. Perhaps tonight. Perhaps later. But I want it all the same. Do you?” to which players can respond with:

1. Yes. I want to share my body with you.

2. Sure thing. I've always wanted a hot githyanki girlfriend.
3. I'm flattered, but the answer is no.

Once again, the last option ends with a rejection and no more developing relationship. The first two lead to a sexual encounter and further courtship. Two clear chances to say no for the player are offered. Dialogue options are blunt and have been criticized for a streamlining and lack of nuance. However, in this case they at the very least present players with a clear opportunity to say no—something not always offered in other texts.

While smaller in scale and from a different genre, *Dream Daddy* also utilises discussion trees to offer players agency when it comes to their romantic choices, stressing continuous affirmative consent in dialogue and story-sense. Westecott (2018) encourages feminist players to play strategically, but also acknowledges the foundational need for tools, choices, and mechanics that allow for this play. There is a deliberate choice on the part of games that include these options to push against domineering and conquering perspectives encouraged in the single-player game. A limerent structure affords romantic players options; the feeling of a choice that the more crudely discursively constructed physical 'romance' found in Kingdom Come Deliverance simply can not offer and arguably has no interest in fostering.

Conclusion

When discussing what it means to "play like a feminist", Chess (2020) suggests that feminist play is rooted in "breaking down the societal and patriarchal set of rules, and redefining things" as both a disruptive and inclusive practise. There is not justone way to play like a feminist—there are many that include: retooling the pleasures of play, applying intersectional approaches to leisure, as a genre of protest and,

> *...as I argue later in this book, we play like a feminist when we transform video game culture, forging a space within it for new kinds of games and gamers. We play like a*

> *feminist when we weave all these measures together to engage in radical play.* (Chess 2020, p. 41).

Feminist play is not one single element or act—it is a collective that can offer new paradigms and structures to view these interactive experiences. Therefore, simply the act of engaging in feminine play does not mean something is necessarily engaging with feminisms. In the context of optional romance in digital gaming, this rings particularly true.

The decision to include optional romance in a digital game is distinctly fraught and intensely scrutinised by players, journalists and scholars alike. Despite romance and intimacy becoming increasingly popular, it continues to be understood in scholarship and more broader discourses as a homogenised, flattened concept in gaming. While the decision to include romance can be seen as feminist design in gaming there are problematic patterns that need to be recognised as a function of specific mechanics and user-interface design that encode meaning in these interactive experiences. The pleasure of developing a relationship is often situated in how the player can manipulate in-game mechanics and their NPC partner. Ultimately, this encourages players to see their NPC partner as nothing more than a tool—something to be adjusted to their style of play. Removing character development after marriage and reducing all potential partners to objects in the home designed to 'complete' the space further reinforces the notion that romance is there to give something to the player. The misidentification of romance showcases as particularly problematic when considering player sexual responsiveness. Romance, it seems to some developers and player-bases, has become so ubiquitous that the consideration that a player wouldn't want sex or romantic intimacy is thrown out entirely. These are unfortunately continuous and repeated patterns that popular representations of digital intimacy perpetuate to this day.

However, there are popular examples of romance in gaming have been making strides to move beyond regressive representations of romance. More and more discussions surrounding digital intimacy (particularly those who create these experiences) have been focused on offering diversity, complexity, and a recognition of consent. *Baldur's Gate III* (Larian 2023) offers dynamic paramours who require different understanding of relationship boundaries as well as more autonomy for beginning a relationship. *Dream Daddy* places a great emphasis on enthusiastic consent, giving players chances to clearly opt out of relationships if they so desire. While games such as *Date Everything!* and *Hades* provide a nuanced consideration of the wants and needs of both player and non-player characters.

However, so often the nuances and feminist implications of romantic game design are ignored as the presence of any type of 'romance' is so often described as nominally 'feminist'. It is not as simple as romance *is* feminist but rather that romance in these spaces has the potential to be radical—the real question is the degree. The only viable way to continue to explore how romance operates and what it tacitly endorses and/or transgresses against is to unpack the many continued and evolving forms of its expression. The findings of this article illustrate that there needs to be a *mechanical* consideration to how we understand the feminist potentials of romance in games.

In their critical discussion of feminism and games studies, Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin and Maude Bonenfant argue that while game culture could certainly be "condemned as a sexist playground" it is also "important to stress that feminist theories could also be mobilized to highlight the innovative or critical potential of some female game characters" (2017). Indeed, it is similarly not my intention to dismiss representations of romance as inherently un-feminist or manosphere adjacent. There does exist innovative and critical potential within the representations of romance that I have outlined. It is the intervention of this article that in

addition to feminist theory, we also need to a deeper *mechanical* understanding of romance to better contextualise and identify a critical feminist potential.

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