

Videogames and Relationships: An introduction

WIGS 2014 Presentation Script

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Today, I am going to talk about a variety of ways in which video games can play a role in romantic relationships- and why it is that they contribute to, and even facilitate strong emotions that can lead to romantic feelings. When I say “video games can play a role in our relationships,” I am not only referring to the stories we’ve all heard about the girlfriend whose boyfriend will not stop playing *World of Warcraft*. I am also referring to the couple whose relationship is enriched by a mutual love for a game, the person who has developed romantic feelings for another player in an MMO, and more.

Why bother talking about video games and relationships? What makes video games different? Certainly, there are a variety of interests and hobbies that can be shared by those in a relationship, can bring people together, and can keep people apart. Even the idea of falling in love with someone through the use of technology is not new- in fact the novel *Wired Love: A Romance of Dots and Dashes*, published in 1880, depicts the romance between two telegraph operators. I believe that it is the intense, immersive nature of video games that makes them particularly susceptible to triggering romantic feelings in players.

I’m certainly not the first person to think about this. In their article, “Technology and emotion: Playing for the love of the game,” authors Ferdig and Pytash proposed a specific framework in which to examine some of the ways that video games can play a role in romantic relationships.

To begin, let’s explore these categories:

One: Video games can “allow for the creation or maintenance of relationships outside of the game world.” (Figure 1)

Two: Video games can “allow for the creation or maintenance of relationships in [the game] world.” Figure 2

Three: Video games can “afford relationships with technology.” That is, we can develop romantic relationships with non-player characters within a game. Figure 3

Four: Video games can “impact a player outside of the game” by interfering with out of world relationships. Figure 4

So, now that I’ve shared these categories, I’d like to share some theories that may explain why video games can trigger these feelings.

Video games are designed to make us feel:

Video games are often designed to elicit an emotional response, a concept sometimes referred to as emotioneering (Dormann, Whitson, and Neuvians 217). One way is through the carefully crafted facial emotional responses in non-player characters. Many game developers are using motion capture technology with real actors to get more accurate and genuine facial expressions.

This can trigger a phenomenon called emotional contagion (Tronstad 251). This occurs when a person feels the emotions of another by seeing the other person's physical emotional response. For example, smiling during a particularly sappy commercial. Imagine how this phenomenon is multiplied when you not only see a character reacting to an emotional scene, but when your actions in the game effected that emotion or can change it.

The trend in some games to allow the player to choose from multiple narrative options is another way that games are designed to create an emotional connection between the player and the character. Through the interaction within the game world, and choices made by the player, she can develop a feeling of embodied experience through co-construction and having created something new and unique in the game world (Gee 108, Buchanan and Vanden Elzen 23). While immersed in the game, the sense of creation can feel as real as outside of the game world.

Highly interactive and immersive experiences

The simultaneous cognitive, emotional, and tactile input experienced during game play can play a powerful role in affecting a player's mood or emotional state. Intense interactions with gameplay experiences can even lead a player to feel what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi named flow. Flow is defined by Jane McGonigal in her book, *Reality is Broken* as, "the satisfying, exhilarating feeling of creative accomplishment and heightened functioning" (252). She continues to explain that "an abundance of flow can be found in video games where we regularly achieve ... intense, optimistic engagement with the world around us" (252).

Misattribution of arousal

So, video games can elicit emotional responses and are highly immersive experiences. How does this lead to romantic feelings? Studies have shown that when people meet in high arousal situations, they are more likely to develop romantic feelings toward one another. This concept is referred to as misattribution of arousal (Ferdig and Pytash 9). Video games often heighten a player's emotions- fear, angst, aggression, romance, and lust- to list a few.

Players experience a feeling of palpable immediacy, where the "nuances of choices and consequences are instantly and closely felt" (Buchanan and Vanden Elzen 22) These intense experiences can lead a player to connect these feelings with a partner who has experienced the same gameplay and story, or whom they play cooperatively, another player in an online game, or even a non-player character- leading to feelings of love and romance.

That wraps up my brief presentation about video games and romantic relationships. For discussion, I'd like us to share any stories we've heard, or experienced, relating to video games and romantic relationships.

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