

Dating in Video Games: The Role of Game Features

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INTRODUCTION

From the arcades of the 1970s to the rise of online gaming in the 21st century (Hadzinsky 2014), the role of video games in fueling playful behavior is an enduring one. In times of the COVID-19 pandemic, video games have emerged as one of the most popular leisure activities (Clement 2021), providing an enjoyable means for players to engage in stress relief and maintain their well-being (Barr & Copeland-Stewart 2021).

However, this playfulness has also taken on new meaning, best exemplified by the shift of real-life activities into the game world. Games such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (Nintendo 2020) and *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013) have been used as platforms for marketing campaigns (Deighton 2020) and work meetings (Segal 2020), revealing an evolution of video games towards more functional use.

This study focused on one such functional use - dating. With worldwide movement and travel restrictions due to the pandemic, intimate couples are venturing into virtual game environments to meetup and interact (Beaney 2020; Hernandez 2020; Paul 2020). Video games assumed the role of a social lifeline (Barr & Copeland-Stewart 2021), serving as the sweet spot between physical contact and other technologically mediated channels of communication.

Although previous literature into the use of video games for dating does exist (see Boellstorff 2008; Liu 2019; Pace et al., 2010), they focused on one single game. This study focused on players who date in games instead of the game itself. We were interested in the following research questions: What are the game features that are being

utilized by couples for dating purposes, and how are they being used? What are the opportunities that arise from these features?

This study draws upon the notion of social affordances, conceptualized as “the relationship between the properties of an object and the social characteristics of a given group that enable particular kinds of interaction among members of that group” (Bradner 2001, 68). Within the video game context, social affordances emerge as a combination of game features and the possible social interaction it affords. As dating is inherently social, this is an appropriate approach to identify the prominent and common game features being used by couples and explore how gaming is integrated into one’s dating life.

METHODS

Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted via Zoom to collect first-person narrative accounts from participants who used video games to virtually date or meet with their significant others. 47 adult participants were recruited through convenience sampling. Participants included 24 males and 22 females between the ages of 21-39 years old ($M=25.36$). The average length of participants’ relationship was 2.9 years. They went on both virtual and real-life dates. The average time spent playing games for romantic purposes was 7.97 hours per week. The overall average gaming time was 14.2 hours per week. As there was no restriction on the games that participants could talk about, accounts from a wide range of games were collected, including *Terraria* (Re-Logic 2011), *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment 2016), *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe 2016) and *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011).

FINDINGS

The analysis found that there were a few features that afforded important social aspects in participants’ dating practices in video games. They were: acts of service, in-game rituals/events, and external voice software.

Features that revolved around acts of service were the more prominent type of feature mentioned by participants. Through resource-sharing mechanics such as shared chests in *Stardew Valley*, or the ability to transfer items such as crafting materials and weapons from one avatar to the other in *Minecraft* and *Terraria*, participants cited being able to help each other complete in-game tasks ($n=21$) and share in-game items ($n=17$) that may have been less accessible to their partner. For example, one participant, aware of their partner’s goal to tame cats in *Minecraft*, would hunt for the required fish before giving it to their partner, especially since they knew that their partner did not enjoy fishing. These features improved the gameplay experience; as described by one participant, value was added through having “small but special” direct impacts on their partner’s gameplay.

Similarly mentioned in the interview were features that allowed participants to display commitment to their partners ($n=6$). In-game marriage rituals and procedures such as crafting a wedding ring in *Stardew Valley* or arranging for a wedding in *Maplestory* (Wizet 2003) were adapted into memorable “proposal story” narratives woven by couples. These rituals served as a reflection of their commitment to one another, and often necessitated effort on the part of the couple, as noted by a participant who described making “your own wedding ring in *Maple[story]*” as “not easy”. Another ritual by couples was gift-giving ($n=11$). In games such as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, the act of gift-giving became an event in itself, where some participants would discreetly select a gift from the items on their in-game island and wrap it up as

a present before engaging in a gift exchange (n=2). Others practiced gift-giving through giving their partner scarce or rare in-game items (n=4). This was seen as a way to showcase their generosity to their partner (n=3), especially if they were playing in the company of other friends (n=1).

Interestingly, external applications such as Discord and Zoom afforded voice chat features (n=33) that were regularly used by couples. This allowed for greater awareness of their partner's presence. Some cited that they were able to feel physically close to their partner upon hearing their partner's voice via these applications (n=12).

Another finding was about the couples' gaming behavior itself. For some couples, tensions existed between play and functional purpose. Playful behavior in excess overshadowed the purpose of using video games to maintain the intimate relationship – some participants cited that an overplaying of the game led to rising frustrations that time was not being spent on other non-gaming intimate activities (n=11). In addition, the social affordances of video games were regarded as inadequate to fulfil dating purposes, as participants described the lacking emotional and physical closeness of in-game interactions, and the perception of virtual gifts or acts as falling short of the value or effort of their real-life counterparts (n=18).

This study investigated an increasingly popular functional use of video games within the dating context. Preliminary findings showed game features were linked closely to how players utilize them to maintain their romantic life.

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