Reality Dating Show Game Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper shows that reality dating shows can be games, and that when they are studied as such, they provide novel takeaways for the design of digital games. Using Consalvo and Dutton's (2006) game analysis, the paper examines object inventories, interface studies, interaction maps, and gameplay logs of 10 top-ranked dating reality shows. The results of this study are of relevance and interest to DiGRA's audience as they provide insight into new approaches to game design practice which is useful for practitioners and educators alike. Specifically, the research results in recommendations for: competitive multiplayer design; use of strategic and informative user interfaces; player choice in asymmetric game design; and allowing exceptions for rule breaks when cohesive with the ludonarrative. With the rise of streaming and online competitive gaming, these design tips may be helpful in creating games which are as interesting to watch as they are to play.

INTRODUCTION

A camera slow pans across a white sand beach before zooming out to a sparkling blue pool surrounded by palm trees. A narrator's voice begins explaining the rules of the game as buckets of champagne bottles glisten in tropical humidity. The beach, the pool, and the beverages are all a part of a game inventory- objects to be used to play a game effectively. The game about to be played features a group of attractive young adults looking for love, and sometimes, a cash prize. While the setting and materials needed to play may be outside game developers' usual repertoire, many reality dating shows have more in common with *7 Days to Die* (TellTale Games 2013*)*, *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios 2023) and *Warcraft 3* (Blizzard 2002) than *The Real Housewives* (NBCUniversal 2006). Although presented as reality television, each of the dating shows included in this study are underpinned by game design which dictates who is invited to play, the rules they must play by, and how they might win.

While the design of the reality dating games themselves remain a proprietary secret, similar to game design documents locked away under non-disclosure agreements, we can study the shows' design from the outside by using a methodological framework. This study employs Consalvo and Dutton's (2006) game analysis methodological tool kit to uncover the underlying design. The intent in doing so is to examine the design of reality dating shows and any applicable takeaways this design provides for video games.

The results of this study culminate in recommendations for: competitive multiplayer design; use of strategic and informative user interfaces; player choice in asymmetric game design; and allowing exceptions for rule breaks when cohesive with the ludonarrative. These takeaways are of particular interest as the rise of streaming and online competitive gaming means that video games are not just played, but watched, and viewership is something reality tv shows have in abundance (Smith 2019; Ward; Grower; and Reed 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dating shows have been a part of popular television consumption at least since 1965's *The Dating Game* (Lewis 2017). Although they have been on the air for a significant amount of time, the theming of these shows has evolved from being about awkward singles sitting on a soundstage at major network studio to focusing on self-improvement in contestants' daily lives as a means of attracting a partner (Smith 2019). Indeed, past scholarship on reality television has categorized dating shows into the subgenre of 'gamedocs,' or a blend of documentaries and gameshows (Nabi 2007; Couldry 2004). While past research on dating games has highlighted their unquestioning support of hegemonic values concerning romance, marriage and intimacy (McKenzie and Dales 2017; Papp, Ward, and Marshall 2022; Ward et al 2021; Barraclough 2020), none have studied the shows through the lens of game design.

Indeed, the more pernicious aspects of contemporary reality dating programs lie within their promise and premise that dating in 'real life' presents unique challenges to finding love that a gameshow may alleviate through providing resources such as time away from daily routines in an idyllic setting. A common introduction to all the shows included in this study includes the claim that technology, work stress, and finances present significant barriers for contemporary singles to find a spouse. The notion that games can provide solutions to romantic problems is interesting from a design standpoint as so often games have been critiqued for using reductionist algorithms which over simplify love and romance (Kelly 2015; Khandaker-Kokoris 2015; Navarro-Remesal 2018). At the same time, many academics have pointed out the strong, often romantic, attachments players form to video game characters (Waern 2015; Tomlinson 2021; Ask and Sihvonen 2023). Similar to communities of gamers, role players, and LARPers, there is a strong internet presence of reality dating game show fans who create original fanworks and express strong opinions and desires relating to the series (Ngcongo 2022). While obvious thematic overlaps exist between video game players and reality television viewers within fan studies, this research is firmly positioned within game studies. From the methods employed to the results and analysis, this research concerns itself with the analysis of games, ultimately resulting in recommendations for designing games which are enjoyable to both watch and play.

METHODS

Sampling

To ensure a representative sample of contemporary dating game shows, the researcher used the Internet Movie Database's top 50 romance reality show list (IMDB 2023). The list was accessed on 8 May 2023 which is significant as the top shows change weekly according to popularity. Shows were selected via contemporary IMDB rank to ensure the data which informs this paper is timely and relevant. IMDB determines show popularity based on the votes of users registered to the IMDB website.

For the sake of time, originally only the top 10 shows were looked at. However, on initial examination, not every show in the top 10 list could be classified as a game show with many focusing on celebrity matchmakers setting up couples (i.e., *Indian Matchmaking* (Intellectual Property Corporation 2023)) or documentary storytelling about individuals on a quest for romance in unique circumstances (i.e. *90 Day Fiancé* (Sharp Entertainment 2023); *Love on the Spectrum* (Northern Pictures 2021*); Love After Lockup* (Sharp Entertainment 2023)). As a result, inclusion criteria were based on whether a show could be classified as a game and applied to the top 20 shows in the IMDB list. The inclusion criteria looked at whether a show had rules and variable outcomes (Juul 2011; Stenros and Montola 2024). Additionally, shows which allow the players to make 'a series of interesting decisions' (the definition of a game according to *Civilization* (MicroProse 1991) designer Sid Meier qtd in Alexander 2012) which lead to variable outcomes were also included. Put plainly, there must be a way to 'win' or 'lose' the show, and the contestants (rather than a matchmaker or production team) must be able to make choices for the show to be included in this study. Of the top 20 shows, 10 passed the initial inclusion criteria: *Love is Blind* (Kinetic Content 2023); *Too Hot to Handle* (Talkback Thames 2023); *Naked and Afraid of Love* (Entertainment One 2021); *Love Island* (ITV Entertainment 2023); *Perfect Match* (Kinetic Content 2023); *Love Village* (Netflix Studios 2023); *FBoy Island* (STXalternative 2023); *The Bachelor* (NZK Productions 2014); *Farmer Wants a Wife* (Eureka Productions 2023); *Are You the One?* (MTV Entertainment Studios 2019). A table with the list of shows, their IMDB rank, as well as a brief description of their game design, can be found in the appendix of the paper.

Game Analysis

The 10 shows matching inclusion criteria were watched and analyzed following Consalvo and Dutton's game analysis (2006). Game analysis is a methodological toolkit which provides ways to breakdown and study games according to their ludic elements using an object inventory, interface study, interaction map, and gameplay log. First, an object inventory was conducted which aims to "…understand the role that objects can play in a game…" and "…catalogues all known objects that can be found, bought, stolen, or created (Consalvo and Dutton 2006, p.4)." For this study, routine objects related to daily functionality, for example chairs and tables, were excluded. However, other mundane objects were included if they had significant impact on the game. For example, the champagne buckets described in the opening of this abstract become a game object when they are strategically used to lower other contestants' inhibitions in *Too Hot to Handle* (Talkback Thames 2023) and *Love Island* (ITV Entertainment 2023) or to 'buy' women's time to talk in *FBoy Island* (STXalternative 2023).

Next, an interface study was conducted which examined "…any on-screen information that provides the player with information concerning the life, health, location or status of the character(s) (Consalvo and Dutton 2006, p.5)." While contestants of the shows studied were not hooked up to biometric equipment to determine their life or health, shows such as *Perfect Match* (Kinect Content 2023), *Are You the One?* (MTV Entertainment Studios 2019) and *Love Village* (Netflix 2023) did employ digital user interfaces to convey information to contestants and viewers about the status of relationships on the show. Then an interaction map was conducted which "…examines the choices that the player is offered in regards to interaction- not with objects, but with other player characters, and/ or with Non-Player Characters (NPCs) (Consalvo and Dutton 2006, p.6). To conduct an interaction map on the 10 dating game shows in this

study, first the decision-maker (or player) had to be identified. Once identified, the choices available to the player were recorded.

Lastly, the study used a gameplay log to examine emergent behavior or situations which occur outside of the game's rules. For Consalvo and Dutton (2006), emergent player behavior is indicative of how 'open' the game is to player choice. When done well, games and reality television both give the illusion of being unscripted experiences wherein players are able to do whatever they feel compelled to in the moment (Nabi 2007). In actuality, both games and reality television are subject to rules or contracts which stipulate behavior parameters that, when broken, illustrate how bounded by rules the experience truly is.

ANALYSIS

Object Inventory

Through an analysis of the object inventories of 10 popular reality dating shows, the game objects can be placed into 3 categories: consumables, locations, and bodies. Items in the category of consumables include the aforementioned alcoholic drinks used to 'buy time' with contestants, sunscreen used as a type of massage lotion, and food and drinks used during minigames like beer-pong and a chili pepper eating contest. In an example of how consumables are used, in survival dating game show *Naked and Afraid of Love* (Entertainment One 2021) contestants are left on an uninhabited island with only a satchel, map and few tools to help them survive. In the first episode of the first season, contestant Candice chews and spits a coconut onto contestant Bennett's skin as a makeshift sunscreen when he starts to get a sunburn. While the erotic application of sunscreen appears in other dating shows as well (c.f. *Too Hot to Handle*), in *Naked and Afraid of Love* there is a crafting component which mirrors survival video games. Rather than applying sunscreen from a bottle, Candice first had to find a coconut, then extract the flesh and convert it into a spreadable pulp.

Other shows rely on the production team to provide food and drinks which are then used as gameplay objects in minigames. In *Love Island* (ITV Entertainment 2023), contestants are plied with beer and cups to play beer pong but with a romantic twist. Split by gender, contestants take turns attempting to get a ping pong ball into a cup of beer. When successful, the opposing team must quickly drink the cup of beer and then perform the action written on the bottom of the cup, for example kissing other players they are attracted to. Similarly, in *Perfect Match* (Kinetic Content 2023), couples had to guess how many chilies their partners could eat in one sitting, with the closest guesser winning a private date. In these examples, consumable objects are used in minigames to encourage competition between couples or individuals.

The category of location is strange as at first it would appear to not be an object at all, but rather a place. However, in the analysis of gameplay objects, their location held special significance. For example, in *Too Hot to Handle* (Talkback Thames 2023) ordinary beds and bedrooms are core to the show's gameplay. There are only five beds for 10 contestants meaning that the romantic hopefuls must share a bed. In addition to the awkwardness of sharing an intimate space with a stranger, the beds present temptation to break the game's rules of no sexual touch. *Perfect Match* (Kinetic Content 2023) and *Are You the One?* (MTV Entertainment 2019) similarly feature game objects whose location is significant to gameplay. A secluded gameboard (*Perfect Match*) and the 'truthbooth' (*Are You the One?*) allow couples who are performing well in minigames

or the show's challenges to escape the group and privately discuss and discover information about their and others' relationships. On a show where every waking minute is shared with up to two dozen other individuals and a camera crew, the privacy and strategic information offered by these objects and their location is highly valued. In a way, these objects can be thought of as existing outside of the 'magic circle' (Huizinga 2014 [1938]). Earning the right to use them allows players to step outside the bounds of the game and avoid rules temporarily.

Lastly, these reality dating shows objectify bodies in ways which are integral to gameplay. In some of the shows human beings are used as a 'twist' when half way through the season, or once couples have begun to form attachments to each other, new contestants are introduced to 'test' the fledgling relationships. Rather than be considered contestants in their own right, these bodies are treated as objects of the games' inventory to be used by strategic players to break up existing couples by playing on jealousies and insecurities. The prime example of this is in *Perfect Match* where couples use the previously described secluded gameboard to select new contestants to enter the game. In discussion of strategy surrounding the board, couples discuss potential new contestants as game pieces and rationalize which would be most helpful to sabotaging other couples. *Love is Blind* (Kinetic Content 2023), a show in which contestants date and fall in love in 'pods' where they can only hear, but not see, each other, has a variation on this object inventory. As the title of the show alludes, contestants only see their potential partner and meet face-to-face once a marriage proposal has been given and accepted. Within 24 hours of the proposal and their first time seeing the person they have agreed to marry, the couple travels to a tropical resort whose only guests are the other couples on the show. This means that contestants may see and interact with people they dated and even considered marrying when they were in the 'pods.' Drama and tension ensue when contestants' physical attraction to people other than their fiancé result in jealousies and doubts of whether they selected the correct partner. In this case, it is not the show's contestants accessing and using new contestants as strategic gameplay objects, but rather the show's producers. By staging a grand reveal where contestants are able to meet, mingle, and ogle the matches they could have made, the producers increase the difficulty of the race to the altar by using the pool of contestants as game objects to break up couples.

Interface Study

An analysis of the user interfaces of the 10 television shows included in this study found that user interfaces serve informative and strategic functions akin to overlays used in traditional sports and esports broadcasts. While all 10 shows had viewer-facing interfaces by way of a bar and text to list contestant information when they first appeared on the show, only three shows included interfaces to show information relevant to, or assist in, gameplay.

In *Love Village* (Netflix Studios 2023), the only show to feature commentators, an infographic is shown to viewers with portraits of contestants and arrows indicating which have shown romantic interest and whether that interest is reciprocated. *Love Village* takes place in a bucolic and dilapidated cabin in rural Japan. The show's premise asks eight older, divorced, or single-parent contestants to renovate the cabin by day and play minigames by night to hopefully find love. The infographic, as well as the commentator style of the show, is reminiscent of televised sports matches- wherein pundits point out key plays and predict future team performances based on how the team has fared this season. Like in sports and esports, the infographic is not shown to

contestants, but rather exists to assist viewers in their ability to follow the action. In the case of *Love Village*, the action involves forming new relationships and confessing attraction at the risk of rejection.

Image 1- Screenshot from *Love Village* showing a user interface visible to viewers and show commentators mapping relationships between contestants.

While the interface for *Love Village* was visible only to commentators and audiences, two other shows used a user interface as a part of gameplay. In season eight of *Are You the One?* (MTV Entertainment Studios 2019) a matchmaking algorithm pairs 16 bisexual singles who are tasked with discovering their perfect match through a series of minigames and dates. Once contestants think they have found their match, they may enter the 'truthbooth' once per episode which will tell them if their pairing is correct. If correct, they stop going on dates and remain coupled with their perfect match for the remainder of the show. If incorrect, they keep dating until a perfect match is found. The 'truthbooth' consists of a 'scanner' (a green light which passes over the couple's body for dramatic effect) and a television screen. Once the couple is scanned, the television screen shows each contestant's headshot, name, and discloses 'match' or 'no match'. This interface informs contestants and the audience whether a couple has successfully met the game's win condition. The interface only interacts with players in the sense that it 'scans' them and reports their game status. No other actions are available.
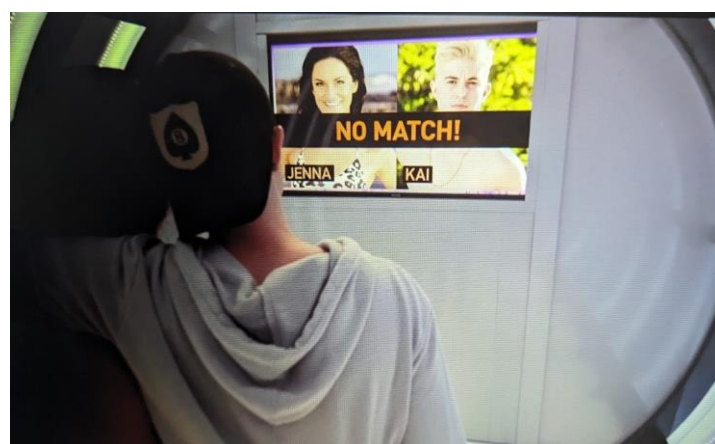

Image 2- Screenshot from *Are You the One?* showing a user interface visible to contestants in the 'truthbooth' and viewers.

The last interface comes from already discussed *Perfect Match* (Kinetic Content 2023). Similar in plot and premise to *Are You the One?,* unsuccessful contestants from other reality dating game shows are taken to a beachside resort where they must find their titular perfect match. There is no relationship algorithm predetermining who should be paired with whom, rather the contestants are encouraged to date each other as much as possible to find a genuine connection. Contestants pair for challenges and those who demonstrate knowledge or passion for their partner are rewarded with private dates and the opportunity to match other couples via an interactive gameboard. The gameboard interface contains the headshots and names of all current contestants as well as additional contestants they can invite to join the game. The couple controlling the gameboard have the power to invite new contestants strategically- either because they would like to date them or because they can attempt to break up an existing couple thus diminishing their competition. The gameboard not only provides the show's current couplings, but additionally allows the audience insight into a couple's strategy for winning the game.

Image 3- Screenshot from *Perfect Match* showing two contestants interacting with the gameboard to 'match' current contestants with new contestants.

Interaction Map

Interaction maps answer two questions: who is the player character and what choices can they make? To answer the question of who is the player, the shows in this study were analyzed to discover who is capable of making Meier's 'interesting decisions' (qtd in Alexander 2012). For the majority of the shows, the contestants are players capable of making decisions for themselves on how best to play the game and find a romantic partner. However, one show allowed viewers to make choices which impacted the game and three shows featured a specific player-role. It is important to note that this examination of who is the player troubles the use of the terms 'player' and 'contestant.' The term 'player' and 'contestant' can be used interchangeably for shows on this list which invite a group of singles to date each other (e.g. *Naked and Afraid of Love*).

Love Island (ITV Entertainment 2023) gathers contestants on a tropical villa and tasks them with coupling up for a cash prize of £50,000. Initial couple formation occurs according to first impressions, however in later episodes viewers can vote off contestants, thus forcing the remaining partner to re-couple. In this example, the

viewers can impact the game by impacting player choice in a way similar to how Twitch integration functions in some streaming games. For example, viewers of survival horror game *7 Days to Die* can spend bits or channel points to spawn zombies to hinder players or buff players with power-ups (7 Days to Die Blog 2021). In both examples, viewers are not themselves playing the game, rather they have input on the game's difficulty- either by way of contestant pool size or number of zombie spawns, respectively. Viewer impact on the game is clearly intended to drive viewership, but has additional impacts on design by considering the spectator as capable of increasing or decreasing game difficulty to lead to *more* interesting decisions for the contestants.

In *The Bachelor* (NZK Productions 2014), there is not one 'player' of the game. Rather the titular bachelor, as well as the contestants, are both active participants in gameplay although they are playing different games. The bachelor chooses who to date and when and where to date with the ultimate goal of finding a wife. The single women on the show strategize their self-presentation and interactions with other contestants to secure the most time with the bachelor. For example, in episode two of season 18, a contestant named Lucy went topless in a hot tub which caught the ire and condemnation of the other contestants who felt the act of disrobing was an attempt to unfairly grab the attention of that season's bachelor, Juan Pablo. In this example, the bachelor and contestants are engaging in asymmetric gameplay with different goals for each. The term asymmetric gameplay references the use of game design elements to craft distinct experiences for different players playing the same game (Neto, Cardoso, and Carvalhais 2022). The bachelor's goal is to create dates and situations to reveal contestants' true character and then assess their compatibility. The contestants play a cloak and dagger competitive game of strategy to catch the bachelor's attention.

The Bachelor introduces us to the idea of asymmetric gameplay in reality dating games, and the final two shows provide further examples of this design. In *Fboy Island* (STXalternative 2023) the players are three women who struggle with always choosing 'fboys' over 'nice guys' in their past relationships. The term 'fboys', short for fuck boys, is defined by the show as a man who behaves as a Lothario, or an unscrupulous seducer of women. The three women are presented with 24 eligible men, half of whom are self-identified 'fboys' and half 'nice guys'. The women choose who to speak to, who to date, and who to eliminate at the end of each episode with the goal of leaving the show with a 'nice guy' romantic partner. Much like the women on *The Bachelor*, the 24 eligible men strategize on how best to present themselves to secure additional time with the women. The twist is that they can choose to be duplicitous, claiming to be a 'nice guy' when in reality they are 'fboys' which creates additional asymmetry in gameplay. If the women choose a 'nice guy' during the final reveal episode, the couple is granted $100,000 to be split between the two of them. However, if the woman chooses an 'fboy', the 'fboy' takes the full $100,000 for himself, leaving the woman single and without any prize money. While the women of the show are playing a puzzle game to figure out which of the male contestants have their best interests at heart, the 'nice guys' strategize for time and attention with the goal of winning love and money, and the 'fboys' play a game of deception with the goal of taking the full cash prize for themselves.

Similar to both *The Bachelor* and *Fboy Island*, *Farmer Wants a Wife* follows three farmers and 18 potential wives who explore whether or not they are compatible. The three farmers play a puzzle game of creating dates and ranch-hand challenges for the women contestants in order to find a wife who not only shares their interests and values, but who also has the skills necessary to run a farm (Eureka Productions 2023).

Like in *The Bachelor*, the women contestants choose which farmer to pursue and how to comport themselves around the farmer and each other in a way which maximizes their chances at getting a proposal. *Farmer Wants a Wife* is particularly interesting as the 2023 USA reboot has significant changes over the 2008 Australian original series. The original series had competitive minigames for the contestants, like changing a flat pickup truck tire. These minigames were introduced as skill tests meant to illustrate which of the contestants possessed the abilities needed to run a farm. The winner of the challenge would get a prize, such as a private dinner with the farmer, and the losers would occasionally get a penalty, like having to cook the dinner for the winner's date. In the 2008 original, contestants had interesting decisions to make about how they showed off their farming skills. The 2023 version is missing the competitive element and treats farm chores, like building a corral fence, as a task with no specific winner or loser.

Show Title	Who is/are the player/s?	What choices can they make?
Love is Blind (Kinetic Content 2023)	Contestants	Contestants can choose to propose marriage in the pods, and then at the end of the series they can choose to go through with the marriage. Each contestant has an equal say in the decisions being made and the same goal.
Too Hot to Handle (Talkback Thames 2023)	Contestants	Contestants choose who to share a bed with as there are more people than beds. Contestants can risk getting caught/losing the group's cash pool by sexually touching each other. They can also choose to genuinely work on self-development during the show's workshops.
Naked and Afraid of Love (Entertainment One 2021)	Contestants	Like the original *Naked and Afraid* series, contestants can choose which tool to take to the deserted island to aide in their survival. Subsequent choices focus on survival decisions- should we look for food or build a shelter? Should we set off for the rendezvous point now or later?
Love Island (ITV Entertainment 2023)	Contestants AND viewers	Contestants choose who to initially couple with based on their attraction, but throughout the series they can re-couple and swap partners strategically as singles are kicked off the island.
Perfect Match (Kinetic Content 2023)	Contestants	Similar to *Love Island*. Contestants choose who to couple with based on initial attraction and can re-couple at will. Any remaining singles at the end of the night are kicked off the show. Contestants can choose which new contestants to bring in.

Love Village (Netflix Studios 2023)	Contestants	Contestants choose who to spend time with when renovating the old mountain house. By the end of the series, they will choose who to confess their love to/ who to try and leave the village with.
FBoy Island (STXalternative 2023)	Three 'bachelorettes', 'nice guys', 'fboys'	Three women choose which of the 24 men they think are fboys for nightly eliminations. The men choose which woman to romance and whether or not they're honest about their status (fboy or nice guy). Asymmetric gameplay.
The Bachelor (NZK Productions 2014)	A bachelor, contestants	The end of each episode involves a 'rose ceremony' wherein the bachelor chooses which women stay. The bachelor can also choose which women to ask on one-on-one dates and which are eliminated. The women strategize how gain more time with the bachelor. Asymmetric gameplay.
Farmer Wants a Wife (Eureka Productions 2023)	Three farmers, contestants	Similar to *The Bachelor*, three farmers choose which women they want to romantically pursue. The women go to the farmer's ranch and take part in farmhand tasks. Asymmetric gameplay.
Are You the One? (MTV Entertainment Studios 2019)	Contestants	Contestants chose who they want to go on dates with, choose to learn if their choice in date is a correct match. They also compete in challenges to win dates.

Table 1- A breakdown of each show's players and choices afforded to the player.

Gameplay Log

The gameplay log's purpose is to locate emergent gameplay, or unexpected player behavior, as a way to illustrate the rules of the game and potential exceptions to those rules. Like reality TV, the shows in this study are 'unscripted' (Biressi and Nuun 2005; Nabi 2007). So, while these shows may not have writers scripting each episode, they do have a team of editors compiling footage and producers deciding when and where to film. This means that it is difficult to assess whether emergent gameplay could be edited in or out to make the show more interesting to watch.

Three shows in this list had unanticipated player behavior: *The Bachelor, Farmer Wants a Wife, and Are You the One?* In each show, the unanticipated behavior was not severe enough to break a contract with the network or production team and get a contestant or player removed from the show. In *The Bachelor*, the season finale usually involves the bachelor proposing to the final contestant. However, in season 18, Juan Pablo Galavis chose not to propose to winner Nikki Ferrell, but instead asked to keep dating her. This break with the game's format was controversial amongst audiences and the show's host, Chris Harrison. In the final episode, Chris Harrison asks pressing questions

about Juan Pablo's choice to not propose and is met with curt answers. Fans and the live audience were disappointed in the bachelor's choice and his defense of his choice. Previous literature has commented on the first time a bachelor refused to choose a mate and the ensuing fan backlash. In season 11 of *The Bachelor*, the season's bachelor Brad Womack refused to pick a winner from the contestant pool which 'broke the romantic essence' of the reality show for viewers who took to forums and discussion boards to complain (Cloud 2010). While previous research has documented the backlash of fans to this rule break, a game analytical stance reads the outcome differently. Rather than view this limitation as a bug or a flaw in the game's design, it is an important reminder of both the nature of play and the importance of ludonarrative cohesion. Gameplay by its definition must be entered into voluntarily (Huizinga 2014 [1938]; Juul 2005), and no one can be forced to marry even if it makes for excellent TV. Similarly, gameplay must match the narrative of the show otherwise audiences experience a disconnect between the gameplay and the story being told.

In a similar twist, but on a smaller and less controversial scale, Farmers Ryan and Hunter broke with tradition in the 2023 reboot of *Farmer Wants a Wife*. Like other shows on this list, the farmers are asked to eliminate one contestant per week they no longer wish to date. During the first elimination in episode two, both farmers refused to eliminate anyone stating that they really appreciated getting to know all six contestants. This refusal to follow the elimination rules was met with little, if any, resistance from the production team and was cheered by both fans and contestants, presumably because the rule break fit within the overall romantic narrative of the show. From a design standpoint, it is interesting that a rule so fundamental to the play of the game was broken with impunity. This situation is similar to the 'rule of cool' unofficially played by dungeon masters in many *Dungeons & Dragons* campaigns (Wizards of the Coast 2023). The 'rule of cool' is an informal, 'house' rule for the tabletop roleplaying game which states that if a player suggests doing something disallowed by the rules as written, dungeon masters may make an exception if the suggested action is particularly cool. In this case, expressing appreciation for all contestants was deemed 'cool,' or rather cohesive within the game's romantic ludonarrative, by the show's production team and thus the rules-as-written were ignored.

In the last example*, Are You the One?* has a rule which stipulates that after a couple has been deemed to not be a match by the 'truthbooth,' they may no longer date. The spirit of the rule is to encourage contestants to date outside of who they are normally attracted to, to break old behavior patterns which have not served them well in the past, and to win the game by process of elimination. This rule is broken in season eight, episode five when Jenna and Kai find out they are not a match even though they have been coupled since the first episode. Publicly, they decide to see other people in the house, but privately they continue to steal kisses and share physical affection with each other. Their flirtatious behavior culminates in sex in a private bedroom of the house. Three other contestants investigate strange noises only to find Jenna and Kai in bed together. Rather than chastise them for a rule break, the three join the couple and have group sexual intercourse. The following morning, a rumor that a fivesome occurred the night before makes its way through the house, but no details are provided and none of the contestants seem perturbed by the information. A few contestants express displeasure at not being invited to join in. Jenna and Kai suffer no formal or informal penalties for breaking the rules, seemingly also benefiting from the 'rule of cool.'

FINDINGS AND RELEVANCE

This study of the 10 most popular reality dating game shows has revealed several takeaway points for designing video games. Using Consalvo and Dutton's (2006) game analysis, the research looked at object inventories, interface studies, interaction maps and gameplay logs. The analysis results in recommendations for: competitive multiplayer design; use of strategic and informative user interfaces; player choice in asymmetric game design; and allowing exceptions for rule breaks when cohesive with the ludonarrative.

The object inventories uncovered the importance of consumables, locations and people to dating show gameplay. Of particular interest for game designers is the use of other contestants as a difficulty modifier. In the shows in this study, for example *Perfect Match*, fresh contestants were introduced to test the relationships which had begun to form on the show. Moral questionability of this practice aside, there is potential for this design to be employed in professional online competitive games wherein fresh players may be introduced as existing players are voted off to increase difficulty, competition, and viewership. While this gameplay design is likely inappropriate for average matches, as it has potential to create toxicity within play, there may be select use cases in professional competitive matches wherein such a roster change may present new opportunities for interesting choices when play becomes too predictable. A common complaint amongst players and spectators alike is that competitive games effectively remove choice from players once they become popular enough (Folding Ideas 2022). This is because competitive games incentivize using optimal weapons, talents, and strategies because wins and losses impact player statistics and the game's matchmaking algorithms. By only using optimal strategies, player creativity and choice are limited and matches can become predictable. By switching players mid-match, a new and exciting mechanic is introduced which, depending on game genre, could lead to interesting decisions in how to build a team which could counter an unknown enemy team composition.

The interface studies revealed that some of the shows presented viewers and players with infographics summarizing relationship connections and successes. While the use of interfaces to present players with information is not new in design, viewers of competitive games could benefit from strategic informational overlays which in turn could benefit the design and reception of streamable games. For novice viewers, competitive esports or convoluted strategy games have a high barrier of entry with unique terminology and complicated rules. A periodic overlay ala *Love Village* would render the games more intelligible to the average viewer, thus increasing the game's potential audience. Interaction maps help interrogate who is the player and the types of interactions afforded to them by the game. By framing all contestants as players, this paper has shown how many reality dating shows have an asymmetric design in which different players make different choices to reach different goals. Outside of social commentary, there are interesting implications for narrative design when thinking about the impact of asymmetric design on player choice.

Lastly, the gameplay logs illustrated examples in which the rules and boundaries of the dating shows were broken by contestants. The ways in which the television production team and audiences reacted to those rule breaks are indicative of the importance of ludonarrative cohesion. Audiences reacted unfavorably when the romantic theming of *The Bachelor* was betrayed by a refusal of marriage, however they reacted positively when Farmers Ryan and Hunter refused to eliminate any contestants on *Farmer Wants*

a Wife or when the contestants of *Are You the One?* had a fivesome. In this example, the 'rule of cool' seems to apply to dating shows as well as tabletop *Dungeons & Dragons* games. In terms of design takeaways, actions which are disallowed by the games' rules but are consistent with narrative theming are favorably received by players, contestants, and audiences. While contemporary games may be practically limited by technological boundaries which restrict how much player autonomy is feasible, this should not restrict our design thinking. Already games like *Baldur's Gate 3* are allowing for the illusion of infinite possibility in player choice and rewarding the player for creative problem solving with game progression. The 'rule of cool' is a useful design exercise in thinking about alternative solutions to puzzles and challenges in gameplay.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite what the announcer claims in the opening monologues of the shows studied here, they aren't truly about bringing lonely singles together but rather creating interesting television to watch. With the rise of streaming and online competitive gaming, making games which are as interesting to watch as they are to play presents new opportunities for growing audiences. This paper has shown both a novel application of Consalvo and Dutton's research toolkit (2006), and additionally how reality dating shows can be considered games according to a set of conditions. Through describing the findings and relevance, lessons are learned about designing for social interaction, competition, and strife in gameplay. Additionally, the paper considers how what makes for interesting viewing may additionally make for novel and interesting gameplay. Whether or not games made following the design recommendations of this paper present new opportunities for finding love remains to be examined by future research.

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APPENDIX

Show name	IMDB rank	Description
Love is Blind (Kinetic Content 2023)	2	For 10 days, 15 men and 15 women date each other in 'pods' where they can speak and hear each other but not see what the other looks like. They only meet face-to-face after a marriage proposal.
Too Hot to Handle (Talkback Thames 2023)	4	A group of 10 adults are put on an island and forbidden from touching each other in order to build 'real' relationships. $200,000 prize to be split among contestants. Each touch is a cash deduction.
Naked and Afraid of Love (Entertainment One 2021)	5	Physically and emotionally naked, 16 singles meet as pairs, spread out on different beaches on a remote island free of technology and society. During the show they have the opportunity to go on dates, but must also survive the wilderness.
Love Island (ITV Entertainment 2023)	9	Contestants have to couple up for a chance at £50,000 based on initial attraction, but over the duration of the series they are forced to "re-couple". There are minigames like beer pong and truth or dare.
Perfect Match (Kinetic Content 2023)	10	A collection unsuccessful dating show contestants try and find their 'perfect match'. The couples who win compatibility challenges get the ability to choose two new singles to bring into the game. At the end of each night, anyone without a match must leave the show.
Love Village (Netflix Studios 2023)	13	16 singles who are above the age of 35, have children and/or are divorced meet in a dilapidated mountain house and restore it. During the day, they renovate and at night they play minigames to connect. They can declare they wish to leave with one person and if that other person agrees, they leave together. If the other person does not, they leave alone.
FBoy Island (STXalternative 2023)	14	Three women sort through 24 men. 12 of the men are 'Fboys', 12 are 'nice guys'. This is a game of deception. The women need to find a 'nice guy' in order to win

		$100,000 and a relationship. If the women pick an Fboy, the Fboy walks away with $100,000 USD.
The Bachelor (NZK Productions 2014)	18	27 women arrive via limo to a mansion house to try and date the eponymous Bachelor. A series of dates ensue with contestants eliminated episode-by-episode until one woman is left. Ultimately, the game should end with a proposal but as this show has 27 seasons, there are variations year to year.
Farmer Wants a Wife (Eureka Productions 2023)	19	Similar to The Bachelor, women apply to date one of three of the eponymous farmers. The dates take place over a series of weeks on the farmers' ranches with the women completing ranch hand chores like building corral fencing. This is an American spinoff of a 2008 Australian show.
Are You the One? (MTV Entertainment Studios 2019)	20	Singles are paired into couples based on an unknown matchmaking algorithm. The goal of the game is to try and guess your 'one' person out of the group. If successful, the group shares a prize of $1,000,000 USD.

Table 2- Shows included in the study, IMDB rank, and their description.