Potluck

Head over Heels Playlist

Though some might be cynical of their single status, you can't deny the rhythm of these romantic songs!

Exploring the Nature of Art
An Interview with Mojo.Jojo97

Derrick Jean-Baptiste
Staff Editor

   The philosophy of art has long been a significant area of philosophical inquiry, aiming to explore the nature of art, the appreciation of art, its value, its purpose, its relationship with reality, and other related topics. Art has been an integral part of human culture from ancient to modern civilizations. It has consistently raised philosophical questions about creativity, representation, beauty, intention, and many other concepts.

   Under the umbrella of the philosophy of aesthetics, philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Nietzsche have written extensively about art and its significance in human society. The concept of aesthetics, derived from the Greek word "aesthesis," meaning "sensation" or "perception," has its roots deeply planted in the history of philosophy. From the ancient Greeks, who pondered beauty and the sublime, to the Enlightenment thinkers who sought to categorize and dissect the nature of art, aesthetics has consistently been a subject of contemplation and debate.

   In the context of the philosophy of art, aesthetics examines the nature and appreciation of beauty. It delves into understanding the fundamental nature of art itself. Why does a piece of art resonate with one person and not another? What universal truths, if any, can be drawn from an

artwork?

The philosophy of art, at its core, grapples with a multitude of intricate questions, but one central query persistently emerges: "What is art?" This question propels us into a whirlwind of discussions about the nature of art, its purpose, its boundaries, and its distinction from non-art. As art forms have evolved and cultural perspectives have shifted throughout history, this question has never found a singular, definitive answer. Philosophers, artists, and critics have offered varied definitions and theories, from art as imitation to art as expression and from formalism to institutional theories. This ongoing debate highlights the dynamic and multifaceted nature of art. It underscores its profound significance in reflecting and shaping the human experience.

What constitutes "art"? Is there a universal definition, or is it culturally and historically contingent? Over time, various definitions have been proposed, including art as imitation (mimesis), art as expression, and art as a form of institutional practice.

Art is an endeavor to depict facets of reality, whether tangible or perceived, employing aesthetic theory and practice to express these concepts and present them to a broader audience.

For some, a work becomes art when the creator intends it to be art; for others, it's about how it's perceived by an audience. Institutional theories suggest a work is art when recognized and accepted by the art world. Meanwhile, the evolution of contemporary and avant-garde art forms continually challenges and expands traditional boundaries.

How does art represent reality, and what does it mean for an artwork to express emotion? Is the emotion from the creator, the observer, or inherent in the work itself?

Art's magic lies in its power to mirror reality and stir emotions. When art represents reality, it's like holding a unique mirror to the world that reflects not just what's seen but also the unseen, the feelings, thoughts, and nuances that shape our perception.

As for expression, art becomes a vessel for emotion, a bridge between the creator and the observer. But whose emotions are we talking about? Well, it's a bit of everything.

The creator pours their feelings into the artwork, but once it's out in the world, the observer brings their emotions, experiences, and interpretations to the table. In that dance between artist and observer, the artwork becomes alive with emotions, making it a living entity that holds and conveys feelings.
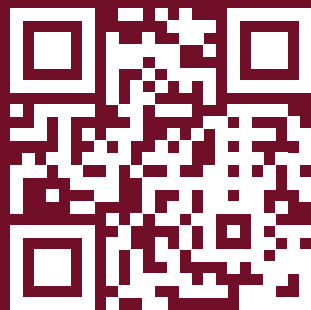
With this in mind, let's explore from the artist's perspective with our interview with Florida-based Artist Mojo.Jojo97.

Check out Mojo's Shop at the link on the QR Code.

Check out Mojo.Jojo97's thoughts about art on our Podcast 'Stirring the Pot'

New Episodes Every Monday

Back to Where it all Began
A Retrospective of Persona

Derrick Jean-Baptiste
Staff Editor

   The Persona franchise is a funny little beast. It's technically a subseries/spinoff in the very large Shin Megami Tensei series that spans dozens upon dozens of games all the way back to the first incarnation on the Famicom in 1987. Originally just one of many ways to branch out, Persona has by now become the most prolific incarnation of said franchise and the biggest money maker for Atlus.

   The original game was a try to market the doom and gloom of SMT to a younger audience. Hitting the original PlayStation in its earlier days, it went away from a post apocalyptic landscape infested by demons you had to talk into your team. Instead it

sports a group of high schoolers of (then) modern day Japan trying to save their hometown from an encroaching supernatural phenomena.

   The PSP remake keeps the plot settings of the original Japanese version, having a more accurate translation, containing fully voiced FMV cutscenes and cosmetically changes some of the UI interface from it's PS1 counterpart.

   Right out of the gate, Persona introduces that high-school setting the franchise is renowned for. But don't expect to be doing pop-quizzes or eating giant hamburgers in restaurants a la Persona 5.

   St. Hermelin High School is rather a hub for key story scenes to occur, and to catch up on all the gossip from other college students – all that 'real
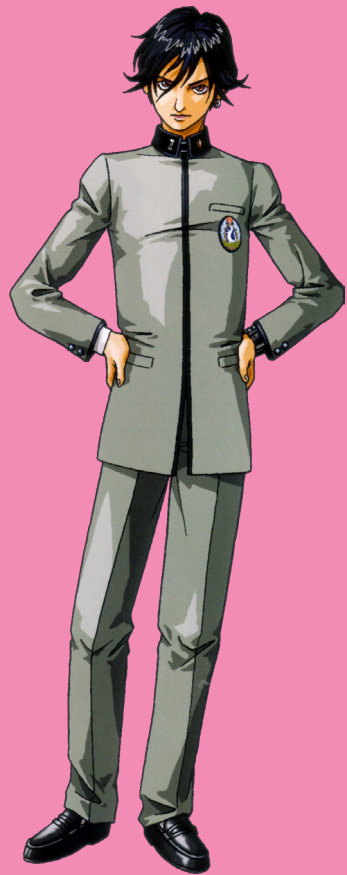
life simulator' and 'social links' stuff comes later in akin to classic Shin Megami Tensei games, going back to a first-person perspective from the later entries can be a little jarring. The controls do feel a touch over-responsive, as the protagonist (I titled him his 'canon' name, Naoya Toudou) zooms down hallways with the slightest twitch of directional input. There's even a run button which has Naoya careening down corridors at break-neck speed, with hilariously loud footsteps that sound like a muffled jack-hammer in motion.

There's even a strafe button you can use when you've mastered the navigation controls though, so you don't have to turn and face to begin moving every time.

Notice I used the words "hallways" and "corridors", as that's how this game is consistently presented. There's no large areas to walk around in, like the Shibuya crossing of Persona 5. Instead you'll traverse tight, narrow pathways that'll start to look a little samey on occasion, especially in the dungeons. It does eventually become easier to manage after a while, but what doesn't is the exceedingly high encounter rate.

As encounters are random, expect to be hearing the main battle theme being played over and over. Although, that's not actually a bad thing in this case.

Shoji Meguro, the SMT veteran returns and delivers us a remixed OST of the original, with an assortment of new tunes out and out replacing some of the darker ambiences with J-Pop sounding vocals.

I must say I'm a huge fan of the boss fight track, 'Bloody Destiny' for its electro-meets-punk vibe – I'd just sit there in battle listening to this epic tune for ages, no cares given.

There's been some mixed reactions from the Persona community about these new songs, but I think they suit the tone and settings of the game superbly.

I'll let you guys be the judge of that though.

Back to the encounters; battles

play out in a traditional turn-based affair, where you decide your party's moves ahead of time. You can scan enemy weaknesses, status effects etc. and plan accordingly, using a range of different options including: short-range weapons, firearms, your persona's skills and even negotiating with the enemy to leave you alone or grant you the opportunity to create new personas.

To help balance the excessive amount of random battles, an 'auto' function allows you to repeat past actions for your entire team, even from previous fights. Also permitting your party to exclusively use physical attacks, guns, auto-act or manually assign their auto-attacks for them.

It's a small, but much appreciated implementation; some engagements can require a tone of inputs and it'd honestly just drag out a lot longer than necessary to be constantly cycling through menus, merely for one trivial encounter.

With the multitude of different tactics available in combat, Atlus even incorporated a formation system which further necessitates thoughtful consideration. Each party member's abilities have a fixed radius to their reach. So for example, your team mate, Maki Sonomura utilizes archery to attack from long range. The dilemma is, the game won't allow you to target enemies in the front row, and thus keeping her in the back line will serve you most optimally.

Making sure your four custom formations are strategically set up are integral for random encounters especially, as enemy placement is different almost every, single time. You'll also find yourself being ambushed with certain encounters and this also reverses your formation, just so you're aware.

Now the game itself doesn't explain much about the battle system or how to persuade enemies for negotiation, and it can leave you scratching your head at a few of its mechanics. Hence, I'd strongly recommend playing along

with a guide as it can be a tad overwhelming at first glance.

I didn't find the hostilities to be particularly hard on normal difficulty, especially since you can heal up between battles with minimal magic cost. The best plan of action I found was to focus on enemy weaknesses and try to exploit them as much as possible.

Outside of combat, you'll be walking around a bunch and chatting with your friends and associates, with some catchy tunes playing in the background. There is some extracurricular action floating around in the casino, but don't expect anything near the level of Persona 5's variety of activities.

Like I said at the beginning, 'social links' or anything intricate like that isn't present in the original title, although you can find some extra hidden dialogue about the place if you're of the explorer type.

The story is firmly at the forefront and being worked toward steadily, so it doesn't branch out too much.

The story follows Naoya and his classmates who 'accidentally on purpose' awaken their personas (dark alter egos manifested) by playing a children's chant game, akin to repeating "Candy-man" three times over.

The following scenes thrust them into an alternate reality; demons are now on the loose and they must thwart the evil plans of Takahisa Kandori, who's taking advantage of the current situation to position himself as a deity.

The story is definitely not

Persona 1's strong suit, and it does start to become too 'JRPG-y' towards the end. The typical themes of friendship and not giving in are the leading subjects, but they don't really go beyond that.

It's the characters that carry the interest here, specifically the interplay between the trouble-maker with a heart of gold, Masao 'Mark' Inaba and his frenemy, Kei Nanjo, the intellectual, cold archetype. These guys provide the moments of laughter and conflict but aren't afraid to get their hands dirty for each other and their mates, whilst having clashing ideologies that erupt when major plot points occur. Their loyalty to each other, even when they perceive a moral choice differently is highly compelling to watch.

The other main characters are fine but don't particularly stand out as much. The protagonist, Naoya doesn't really have a solid connection with the main plot either, his plight being more ancillary to everything else that's going on. Chisato Kasai, Maki's best friend has a rather captivating scenario which did catch me off guard, as her character arc is played out with the graceful delivery of a Shakespearean-like tragedy – excellent writing there!

Shin Megami Tensei: Persona contains some exciting, turn-based JRPG combat, music and character dynamics that are highly entertaining to witness. The game-y aspects can come across as dated in certain parts, particularly the constant random encounters and old-school dungeon crawling approach. The overall story does feel a little by-the-numbers too. However, if you are a fan of the Persona series or are looking for another retro game to play, it may be worth your while in seeing how this flourishing franchise began.
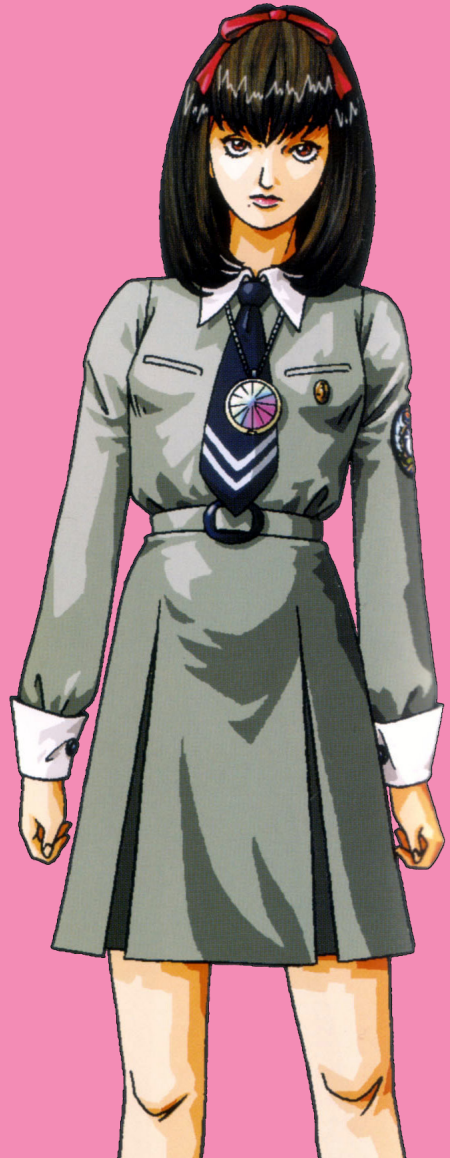
Finding Love in a Fictional Place
Love and TTRPG's

Rain Omega
Staff Writer

You'll often hear people talk about in-character romances in games as something that "Kills the game" or "Ruins the fun for everyone else." However, that does not have to be the case. At the point of writing this blog, I have been a player involved in two inter-PC romances and 1 PC/NPC romance. I have also been the GM for 1 inter PC romance and more PC/NPC romances than I can remember. Playing out a romance in-game can be fun and dramatic as long as it's done well. Unfortunately, many people have had bad experiences with players roleplaying romances in-game. I can understand why they might feel sore towards the subject matter. But there are ways in which a romance story between characters can be gratifying and not leave a sour taste for the rest of the players.

Why Romance? - So why do people want to play romances out in-game? Well, let's face it: romance stories are one of the most popular forms of narrative, no matter what media they are portrayed in. From Jane Austin novels to modern-day Rom-Coms, these stories have a vast audience, so it's only natural that some people would want to incorporate those elements into their games. It's also a very relatable genre. As humans, we have a desire to love and be loved. Almost all of us can relate to those feelings in one way or another, and it's only natural

to want to play those feelings out in-game.

What do people do wrong? - So where does this notion that Romance "Kills the game" come from? Well, there are a lot of reasons why certain people would be so against having romance in their games.

First of all, while romance is a subject that many people enjoy and would be happy to play out, it's also a deeply personal topic that many people are not comfortable talking about or engaging with. In these cases, by having romantic arcs for your characters, you alienate these players at the table and make them feel uncomfortable.

Another major issue that I have seen happen with character romances is that the players sometimes get so involved in that part of the story that it overshadows the rest of the g¹ame. When this aspect of the game becomes so prominent that the story never seems to move away from the romance, it denies any player who isn't involved in that romance the chance to be a part of it. Now, this is as much a note for GMs as it is for players, as the GM should push to wrap up any scene that is going on too long.

One of the biggest reasons I have heard from people on why they don't like romance in games seems to come almost exclusively, and understandably so, from female players. Sadly, there have been many cases of men, whom I would like to assume have never roleplayed with women before, using in-character romances to hit on a new female player. Whilst I would like to provide a solution to many of the issues people have with roleplaying romances, in this particular case, I can only say that under no circumstances should you ever do this, and if I find out someone is doing this in one of my games, then that is a quick way to get yourself kicked out of the game. Romances in game and in real life must be consensual!

How to make a character romance work? - Despite the issues that many people have with character romances, there are also those who love those kinds of stories, myself included. So, how do you introduce a romance story arch for your character without it upsetting the balance of the game?

Like many things in tabletop roleplaying, the key is communication. Make sure to discuss with the group, and in the cases of inter-PC romance, definitely make sure to check in with the other player before pursuing any kind of in-character romance. This is especially true if you are playing with a group that you haven't been with that long. Groups that have been together for a long time will already have a feel for what each other likes and doesn't like in a game. In groups that are very comfortable with each other, you might even feel confident enough to start a romance without consulting the rest of the group; however, this kind of group dynamic is rare, and you should still check in to make sure everyone is comfortable with what is going on.

Don't force it. I mean, this should go without saying, but if a romance is going to happen between two characters, then let it happen naturally. Don't make choices out of nowhere to try and push the issue, as this will make the other players at the table uncomfortable and, frankly, just won't feel right. Everyone I know has at least one movie that they complain had a romance storyline "shoehorned" in by Hollywood Executives… Don't be a Hollywood Executive!

Make sure the romance doesn't take up too much game time. Most games are centered around adventure and action. If we spend an entire session with two characters flirting with each other and no one else gets to do anything, then no one else has a good time. There are definitely different levels of this, and I have certainly had groups who all got invested in a romance story between two characters, even if they weren't a part of it, but you shouldn't rely on this happening. Let the campaign happen as it should, and during moments of downtime or after intense dramatic moments, you can try to steal the occasional moment with your character's partner to have those private, romantic scenes. These stories can be a nice reprieve during intense moments in the game, but the main focus should always be the group story as opposed to the individual story.

Quite often, a romance between a PC and an NPC can be safer than trying to pursue a romance between two PCs. When a PC tries to have a romance with another PC, if things go badly, the characters (and the players) are stuck with

each other for the rest of the campaign. This may or may not be an issue, depending on the players. Some players have no issue with roleplaying negative relationships with other PCs, but others don't do well with that kind of confrontation and conflict, even if it is fictional. On the other hand, if a PC and an NPC have a romance that goes poorly, then it is easy for the NPC to leave the picture before things get uncomfortable.

Love is beautiful! - I truly believe that playing out a romance storyline in a game can really be a great and rewarding experience. It creates a strong connection between the characters involved, heightens the drama, and is genuinely both fun and just plain nice to play out. If you find yourself in game moving in a direction that may lead to romance between characters, just make sure to be open and communicate with your party and make sure that they know that they can be open with you about it as well. Remember, it's only fun if everyone is having fun.

I Was a Teenage Exocolonist
The Metagame of Visual Novels

Derrick Jean-Baptiste
Staff Editor

In the real world, we only get one life to live. And try as we might to live that life to our fullest, it is inevitable that along the path there will be moments we wish we could redo. Mistakes we make, circumstances we could never have anticipated, the way we spent our time – we never get a redo of life where we take everything we learned from the first time and apply it to round two. But in the world of video games, the end of a life or even the end of a game does not have to be a definitive conclusion. You can play again and bring across the knowledge you've gained to make different choices. Some games reward this type of play – some

go so far as to build it into the core mechanics of how they work. Like many visual novels, I Was a Teenage Exocolonist is a game with a number of different possibilities based on your choices. Living one life doesn't mean beating the game; your first ending is simply a springboard into a universe of new possibilities.

In this game you play as a child on a ship called the Stratospheric, a colony ship from Earth bound for the planet of Vertumna. At the age of ten, the ship lands and you begin your life in the Strato colony. You play through the entire teenage life of your character month by month, choosing activities that build your skills and friendships as well as making choices that impact the state of the colony and the lives of your fellow

colonists. Mechanically, the game is a deck builder. Each memory you make is solidified as a card in your deck, and when doing activities or overcoming challenges you play your cards in specific ways by color, value, and order to try and achieve the target number for the challenge. Successful challenges not only reward you with skill points, friendship, and currency, but can also change the material conditions of the colony.

The game makes it clear early on that there is some weird business taking place with your character. You can see flashes of future events before they take place, down to the exact lines of dialogue that other characters will say or objects they may share with you. It seems almost as if your character is having visions of other realities, but with no clear understanding of

how to act on those visions, much of your first run will be focused on witnessing the tragedies you will seek to undo in the future. Living in a space colony on an alien planet is a tough life; unexpected death, starvation, inner conflict, disease, and threats from the alien life forms native to the planet all loom ominously over your head and in your dreams. To stop it and discover your "perfect" life as a teenage exocolonist, you'll have to engage the metagame.

Let's talk first about the mechanics that contribute to the results of any given run. Some of these factors are clearly shown to you as part of your character sheet. Your character's stats are the abilities you can use and they serve essentially as keys to unlock particular outcomes. If you don't have good enough bravery

during an attack on the colony, you may not be able to go out and defend the life of someone who is destined to die. The game advises you to focus on a few key skills during your run because you won't have time develop all of them. In each of my runs I think by the very end of the game I had mastered 6 out of 12 skills, but some of those masteries came too late to significantly influence my playthrough. So my first run was primarily defined by a focus in the four mental skills but particularly by engineering, biology, and reasoning; my second run started with the intent of mastering the social skills like empathy and bravery but ended up having some physical emphasis as

well by including perception and animals.

Another known factor in the conclusion of a particular playthrough is your relationships with other characters. You earn friendship points with other people by doing activities with them, giving them gifts, and making choices consistent with their values. Cal, for example, is an animal-loving pacifist who you'll befriend more easily if you stand up against people who want to hurt the natural world outside of the colony walls. During my first run I spent the majority of my time with the aspiring scientist Tangent, to the point where we ended up in a dating relationship. Our connection significantly

impacted how my first run turned out, as Tangent played a key role in the disastrous consequences I experienced. I don't want to spoil anything, but let's just say my terminal case of "I can fix her" disease led to its natural conclusion.

This points to a more mysterious factor in the outcomes of a particular playthrough: hidden stats. There are some values that you can't see on a character sheet or by going to the notice board at the depot center. These are stats like "Tammy's Confidence" or "Helped Tangent" that have a question mark icon which appear after making certain dialogue choices. You don't really know what they're going to do until the game reveals its hand. This can lead to some fun plot twists, and by fun I mean "moments that rip your heart out and stomp it into smithereens." But making note of when these moments take place and learning how to bend them in the right direction is key to making future playthroughs avoid the tragedies of the past. For example, each time I play the game I am trying to keep my eyes open for events that give me +1 to "Shimmer Cure" in order to prevent the deadly effects of a sickness native to the planet.

That's where the metagaming really comes in. Each playthrough is partly about getting information you're going to need in a subsequent one, learning what events you do and don't want to contribute to in order to have the best possible outcomes. In my first playthrough I barely ever left the colony – in my second I spent the majority of my time outside the walls, which introduced me to new characters as well as getting me information that I know will now influence my actions in subsequent runs. Whenever the choices you made in a previous life become relevant to a new one, it unlocks additional options in your dialogue menu marked with a wormhole that represents knowledge from a past life. Each run contributes new material to this list, expanding what's possible for you in the future. Or past. Parallel timeline. Whatever.

I enjoy this approach to the game's narrative. It brings to mind other games that have impacted me over the years like Zero Escape or Disco Elysium. From the former, the ability to carry information between playthroughs in pursuit of a true ending; from the latter, a significant difference in the experience of an individual playthrough based on the skills you use to interact with the world. I'm having so much fun with the game that I've absolutely devastated my sleep schedule out of an inability to put it down, and I've let a couple other hobbies drift by the wayside as well. So naturally I am excited to dive into my third playthrough and see what all I can do with my latest revelations and a new set of abilities.

Featured Recipe:
Love Potion Chocolate Cake

Cholocate was made for the month of Love. Enjoy this recipe for the most decadent chocolate cake you could ever have. A classic recipe that is often shared throughout many meetings and recordings at the Estewdio. Hope you're able to make this with joy this month.

Dry Ingredients:
- 1/2 Cup Flour
- 1 Cup Cocoa Powder
- 1 TSP Baking Soda
- 1/2 TSP Baking Powder

Dry Ingredients:
- 1 1/4 Cups of Milk
- 1/4 Cup of Coffee (Black Espresso
- 1/2 TBSP Vanilla Extract

Other Ingredients:
-
- 1 Cup Softened Stick of Butter
- 1 1/2 Cups of Sugar
- 3 Eggs
- 1/2 Cup of Mayo
- 4oz Milk and/or Dark Chocolate Bar

Directions:
- Grease two 9" round cake tins. Then, place parchment paper on the bottom of the tins
- Preheat oven to 325°F
- Sift the dry Ingredients into a bowl
- Combine wet ingredients into a separate bowl
- Cream butter and sugar using a hand mixer at the lowest or second to lowest speed. Once creamed, work

quickly enough so that butter does not melt.
- Mix eggs in 1 at a time then add Mayo
- Gently Mix in the Wet and Dry Ingredients. Alternate with each.
- Chop your chocolate into piece no larger than half an inch or so. You can have 4oz Milk Chocolate or Dark chocolate, or 2oz of each. Entirely your preference to how much of each chocolate you add.
- Pour batter into prepared Cake tins.
- Gently add your chopped chocolate to the top of the batter of each cake tin. They will sink and melt as they bake.
- Bake for 35 minutes
- Cool before adding frosting

Video Games and their Problem with Romance

Mia Paul
Staff Editor

Well, February is finally here. For some, this month is a big deal: the scent of romance permeates the atmosphere, and the looming threat of Valentine's Day brings stress to singles and couples alike. For others, it's greeted with the same indifference they give it every passing year. Whether you can't get enough of that love business, or have been single for the better part of your life, let's start this month with a quick digression on how romantic interactions have come along in video games; read: how poorly they've been handled.

With the game industry's move towards all-encompassing, player-driven narratives, the ability to pursue romantic relationships in video games has seen a fairly substantial spike. From games that center around it (like visual novels) to games that offer it as just another distraction in a world full of possibilities (Dragon Age, Mass Effect) and to its inclusion in classic franchises (Shin Megami Tensei Persona), romance in video games is more prevalent than ever. Despite that, I feel like the idea has yet to be truly fleshed out in a way that feels like a genuine relationship is being built between player and character. Games that attempt this just can't seem to separate from the binary fail state way of thinking that makes romance options feel unnatural.

Video games being the interactive medium they are, you'd think something like cultivating romantic relationships with

characters would be right at home in the digital gaming world. Player input allows you to alter the main character's choices in a way that's distinct from how interaction plays out in movies or novels. In many cases, it feels like you are the character and many games go to great pains to emphasize that feeling. And honestly – by looking at the number of long, immersive titles these days – it's obvious that games have come a long way in that regard. So the promise feeling attached to a character in a game's narrative seems a perfect fit. But suppose there's one thing in particular that can make the discordance between player input and the game's narrative vividly realized. In that case, it is poorly implemented relationship building. Pinning the exact cause of this is difficult though: is it by bad design? Is it the poor writing that most games seem to be plagued with? Or is it simply not possible for players to divorce themselves from the fact that they're essentially communicating with a program? First, I'd like to dispel that last question.

Frankly, I think it's an absolute cop-out to blame where we are technologically for this schism. There's no doubt that building immersive player-character relationships will become easier once it becomes possible to have an AI that interprets, learns, and reacts to your inputs in a way that seems human. That's a thing we'll just have to let the scientists of Japan work out, but for now, romance in games need to rely on being properly designed in a way that doesn't make it feel as if it is a game. And this is entirely possible. One look at the recent push indie game have been making (ignoring the dreck that is the outpour of Minecraft clones) tells that the medium has been driving towards convention-shattering ideas that don't seem like games in the generic sense of the word. Gone Home is a video game about exploring an empty house, and Journey is about walking around

a desert or something. And that's fine! There Are no guns. No fail states. No discordance. So, you can see how a video game doesn't need to feel like a video game in the traditional sense. With that in mind, let's look at how the industry has fumbled relationships with the romance mechanics that exist (progressive as they are).

As mentioned earlier, most of the issues regarding romance in games comes not from the fact that it is a game but the fact the mechanics are treated with the same conventionality that other gameplay decisions are, which makes for a very robotic way of going about relationships. Take the Harvest Moon series as an example. With its focus on cultivating crops and relationships, the series is often lumped into the "not-really-a-game" genre. But how does romance work in Harvest Moon games? Find someone you're into, discover what sort of physical object they like most, farm up a big batch, and present the vegetable to your love interest once a day. After that, marriage. Boom. Love. Romance.

The unfortunate thing? A lot of games employ this hidden point scale (in some Harvest Moon games, love points are a measurable attribute!) to measure how close your character is to a relationship with another character. Not the worst idea and reductionists could make an argument for it if you want to go ahead and boil relationships down to thought patterns and chemicals in the brain. Sure. But it runs deeper than that. People's feelings toward one another don't operate on a point scale that only goes upwards.

Thankfully, some modern games found a way around this problem. In the Mass Effect or Persona series – both series follow a story progression and have relationship mechanics. It is entirely possible to select the wrong option in a dialogue tree during a critical moment, completely ruining a potential romantic relationship you had with a character. This is more similar to how it is in the real world: you can say something that makes someone never, ever want to speak with you again. Try it, kids. However, having

branching dialogue opens up an entirely new can of gross, smelly worms.

First off, the answer that is going to be most liked by the character you're talking to in the game is usually apparent. Even putting aside the fact that games like Mass Effect clearly spell it out by always putting the "good" answer on top, there's one major problem woven into the system: the fact that there is a "correct" thing to say and that it's written plainly in front of you. Sure, it may be mixed with other options, but it becomes evident the moment you read it, and it is not at all similar to how real conversation works. When talking to a real human being, what you should or shouldn't say isn't always clear. But in most games, you get a set of neatly laid-out responses. You don't have to come up with them on your own. So, more often than not, it doesn't feel like you're having a conversation but like you're watching one unfurl, occasionally giving your character a nudge in the right direction. Genuine relationships take more effort than that. And you're no doubt thinking that fighting in a war takes more effort than playing Call of Duty does and that nobody takes issue with that. And you're right; it's just that there's an apparent distinction between having full control of the character and scrolling through lines of dialogue before clicking "I think you have nice hair, Senpai."

So, how do we get around this? Short answer: I don't really know. And it doesn't seem like anyone does yet, given the way romance is approached in the medium. Indeed, it would involve the use of spidering dialogue with permanent repercussions, but with a different take on how the player communicates with other characters. As an example, Façade would probably be the best: though rather than building your own relationship, you are tasked with helping a couple, the game asks you to communicate by typing out sentences with the keyboard. Though this runs into the previously discussed technological barrier, it's an excellent experimental game and probably a step in the right direction. Anything that crafts real, believable interaction (and it has to feel like interaction) would probably be welcomed with open arms by most people due to the shortage we seem to have.

And as a side, there's nothing all that wrong with the way we've been doing things for the last few decades. Romance in games is still fun. The slim interaction in a well-crated visual novel can make you feel more attached to a character than you would be reading a book, and romance as a side element in other games can make it feel that much more inclusive. There's just so much more potential in a medium that puts as much emphasis as it does on drawing players into the world by way of the choices they make.

A Critical Look at Scott Pilgrim vs. the World (2011)

UncleVT
Staff Editor

The movie adaptation Scott Pilgrim vs. the World came out in 2010. In re-watching it (yet) again, this time employing a critical viewpoint, I was reminded of why I have loved it for nearly a decade. I was also reminded of all of the reasons why it is important to view the things you love with a critical lens.

Suppose you have not yet indulged in the comic book movie adventure, with visual onomatopoeia and commentary and a (WHITE) cast composed of now extremely well-known actors that is Scott Pilgrim vs. the World. In that case, I will warn you there will be spoilers throughout the remnants of this essay (all for contextual purposes). Scott Pilgrim follows Scott, an awkward 22-year-old trying to navigate this awkwardness within his love life. Scott then goes on to battle the seven evil exes of his new object of desire, Ramona, so he can win her as his girlfriend; he must defeat them if he is to date her.

Through a critical viewpoint I will be utilziing Laura Mulvey's essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", I will highlight how Scott Pilgrim vs. the World trivialized the dangerousness of an abusive relationship by using a woman as an object of gaze and desire for man and placing her in a position of off-limits so that male viewers can resonate with Scott as he fights to win her for himself.

I have yet to mention a critical dynamic of this film: that of

Knives Chao. While not the direct focus of this thesis, I still feel it's important to recognize her role in this film and how she further develops active looks and protagonist identification in male viewers.

Not only is she the only non-white character (besides her briefly shown best friend and one of Ramona's exes (whose role is also brief)), she is the 17-year-old Scott is dating at the movie's open. The film itself acknowledges the stereotypical trope Knives portrays of a young, innocent, Asian school uniform girl, unknowledgeable about the world. She falls hard for Scott, who ultimately ends up cheating on her with Ramona. Knives' role as an object varies throughout the movie. Significantly, she is the object of Scott's sexual desire until another woman becomes the new one. We watch how Knives' actions, once adored by Scott, quickly turn to perceptions of annoyance and uncomfortableness, though only after having found his new desire for Romana. Knives' presence in the film, as Mulvey explains, a woman's visual presence in the film "...tends to work against the development of a storyline, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation." Knives' heartbreak spurs her desire to win Scott back and gain vengeance on Ramona, but she does this by slowly transforming herself to look more and more like Ramona as she schemes, as

Ramona is clearly the object of Scott's desire. Knives freeze Scott's and the male viewer's storyline of triumph in winning Ramona with her presence once her "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey) in the film was transferred to a white woman.

In continuing with a more direct focus on my initial thought, some more context is required to understand what exactly Scott must do to win Ramona. After beginning to fall for each other the first battle begins, without even Scott really understanding what's happening. Matthew (our other non-white character) arrives and proclaims his position as Ramona's first evil ex before their battle ensues. Upon clarification, Ramona explains this is true with little detail as to why.

Skip ahead to five battles later (one of which super problematically addresses the above quote, when Scott's forced to fight Ramona's ex-girlfriend, a relationship she promptly dismisses as being just a "bi-curious" phase). We learn why Scott is forced to fight all of these exes to obtain Ramona as his girlfriend: Gideon.

Gideon is number seven of the evil exes. Early in the movie, Gideon comes up, and we learn that leaving him behind was the reason Ramona came to town in the first place, but not much else. When we finally meet Gideon, it is right after a slight riff between Ramona and Scott that we see Gideon talking with Ramona. To Scott and male viewers for whom she is the object of desire, this scene being the first unveiling of her brand new green hairstyle, she appears to be receptive and just slightly reciprocal of his flirtation/

to see that Ramona is trapped within her own. It's then learned that Gideon formed the league of seven evil exes. This indicates an abusive power dynamic between Gideon and Ramona, making him a subtle enemy to Ramona, and all women, while to Scott and male viewers, this makes him an enemy competing for their object of desire. By employing more of Mulvey's psychoanalytic feminist perspectives, it's possible to observe how the male unconscious tries to escape castration anxiety in this situation by "the devaluation, punishment, or saving of the guilty object" (Mulvey). Ramona still serves as an object to Gideon as he devalues and punishes her for being the source of both his desire and anxiety, forcing her close, and still serves as an object to Scott, who believes he can still win her for his own. This is significant in seeing how the abusive relationship

questions; in other words, how will the protagonist they've been identifying with, Scott, end up?

I will now focus on Scott's final battle against Gideon and how Ramona isn't able to play a part nor have a say in her own liberation from an abusive relationship save for one physical action. This last battle, which focuses on Scott finding his sense of confidence and utilizing it to obtain his intense desire for possession, gives him endless dramatic fight shots. After one dramatic blow, Ramona softens her expression and puts her arms around Gideon. He says arrogantly, "Yeah. Still my girl," with a smirk" before Ramona says, "Let's both be girls," and kicks him in what he cares about most, only before, of course, he slaps her, and she falls again, this time literally to his feet at the bottom of the stairs. Even when a woman's desire in film is to be liberated from abuse and fear,

as Mulvey states, "women's desire is subjected to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound, she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it" (Mulvey). In the end it is Scott of course who defeats Gideon, meaning finally he has reached the top of the hill he has been climbing to reach his object of desire (even though she's still laying on the ground below them).

I will not explicitly state what occurs finally between Scott and Ramona. However, I will state that the male viewers taking active pleasure in looking throughout this film, for whom Ramona too was their object of desire for 113 minutes (minus the few where Knives was object) likely left the theater feeling triumphant, not because Ramona was finally safe, not even because there was success in the physical battles, but because the object of their sexual desire was finally obtained.

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The Courting of the Bat and the Cat

Josander Ramos
Staff Editor

Batman is one of my favorite Comic Book heroes. He transcends time with his timeless stories for every generation of superhero fan. For this reason I have decided to re-read "Batman: Hush" and some of Tom King's run on "Batman."

In my opinion, these are two of the quintessential Batman stories for comic fans to read. That is a bit of a controversial statement, considering they have to compete with classic books such as "The Killing Joke," "The Dark Knight Returns," "The Long Halloween," and "Batman Year One," along with more recent seminal works by Scott Snyder and Grant Morrison.

For the most part, I firmly believe that "Hush" and King's run firmly stand alongside these quintessential stories, because they comment a lot on Batman as a character and his psyche, which isn't something that's deeply explored in a lot of his classic stories. That's not necessarily a bad thing, as stories like "Year One" and "The Long Halloween" place Gotham more as the main character rather than Batman, but these two stories do a lot to place the reader into the tortured mind of Bruce Wayne.

We all know the origin of Batman, but a lot of people don't know the extent to which the death of his parents affected him. We know it was enough to drive him to dress up as a bat and fight crime, but rarely do we see how he felt as a child after that night. Bruce grew up as

a disturbed child. He grappled with debilitating depression and suicidal thoughts throughout his childhood and into his early adult years.

Because of this, he closed himself off to almost any human connections outside of Bruce's butler and father figure, Alfred, and the occasional friend such as (fun fact) childhood friend, Zatanna, who becomes a fellow superhero and leader of the magical counterpart of the Justice League, Justice League Dark (original name, I know).

In his early years as Batman, Bruce was an angry and vengeful recluse who was distrusting of others. Many view this as the way Batman should

be and dislike him building an enormous supporting cast of Bat-Family members and joining the Justice League. In my opinion, this is a massive misread of the character. The purpose of introducing the Justice League and his battalion of sidekicks and allies, including Catwoman, is to slowly break down the walls and preconceptions Bruce had built up since his childhood.

It's a way of showing how Bruce is overcoming the trauma of his past and not only to love and trust others, but also to be happy. This is shown most prevalently (ironically) when he is faced with the death of one of his friends or allies.

When Damian Wayne, Bruce's biological son, died, Bruce became more violent and brutal than ever and started using the mantle as a way to vent his sadness and anger for the loss of his son, and even fought his way through one of the most dangerous places in the universe and fought Darkseid single-handedly to get his son back. Batman isn't just a way for Bruce to overcome the guilt of his parents' deaths, but is also what eventually connects Bruce to the rest of humanity. The reason I love these books is that the central conflict isn't necessarily Batman having to defeat the villain.

The conflict is much more personal and internal to Bruce Wayne. In both "Hush" and King's run, the relationship between Batman and Catwoman is central

to each story. Personally, this is my favorite fictional romance, because I feel like this speaks to the fundamental core of each character. It serves a deeper purpose than just two star-crossed lovers who couldn't imagine their lives without each other and more so two people overcoming the emotional damage and trauma they endured in their childhoods.

Catwoman's origin is a little more niche and not well-known.

Most people would refer to the origin of Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman in the 1992 movie "Batman Returns" but that origin couldn't be farther from her true origin, which is a lot more emotional and tragic. At a young age when Selina came back from school, she found her mom dead in the bathtub from suicide.

This drove her father to become a depressed alcoholic who would abuse and mistreat Selina because of how much she looked like her mother. Eventually, he too died by drinking himself to death, which left Selina and her sister, Maggie Kyle, orphans.

This is where some origins start to differ because in the 1993 Catwoman run by Jim Balent, she gets sent to an orphanage, eventually escapes, and becomes a cat burglar, who eventually accrues enough wealth to become a part of high society.

Conversely, Frank Miller's "Batman Year One" takes a much darker turn for the character, as she starts as a sex worker on the East End district in Gotham. Nevertheless, she ends up as Catwoman after coming into contact with Batman, but more on that later. Because of the traumatic events of her past, Selina also becomes detached in a similar way to Bruce.

She becomes selfish and distrusting with only a few meaningful human connections, with those being Maggie and her friend Holly Robinson. Selina at first uses Catwoman as a way to keep the world at arm's length because of the repeated trauma and abuse in her past, but eventually, like Batman, uses her persona more for good and becomes almost like a Robin Hood
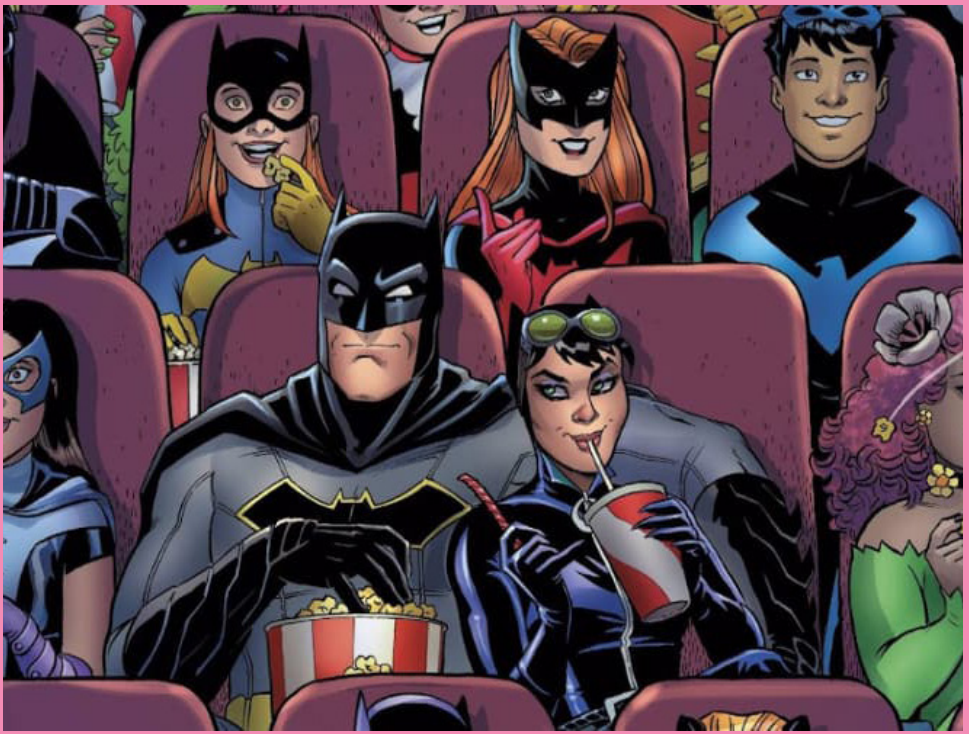
figure for the East End.

It is important to mention though the problematic creation of the character. For many years Catwoman was solely just eye candy for male audiences and it wasn't until Frank Miller's "Batman Year One" and Ed Brubaker's "Catwoman of East End" that she became a truly fleshed-out character with her own goals and motivations.

"I felt that women were feline creatures and men were more like dogs," said Batman and Catwoman co-creator Bob Kane. "While dogs are faithful and friendly, cats are cool, detached, and unreliable. I felt much warmer with dogs around me, cats are as hard to understand as women are. Men feel more sure of themselves with a male friend than a woman. You always need to keep women at arm's length. We don't want anyone taking over our souls, and women have a habit of doing that. So there's a love-resentment thing with women. I guess women will feel that I'm being chauvinistic to speak this way, but I do feel that I've had better relationships with male friends than women. With women, once the romance is over, somehow they never remain my friends."

Her creation was that from a sexist and chauvinistic view, but thankfully modern comics give her proper depth and character that she lacked before. Sadly, this doesn't go to all adaptations because most of the time she's reverted to the same misogynistic

tropes of the past, outside of the comics such as in "Batman Returns," "The Dark Knight Rises," "Batman Arkham City," and "Injustice."

In what's considered the definitive Batman origin story, "Batman Year One", Bruce and Selina indirectly lead each other to become both Batman and Catwoman. Because of Selina's intervention when Bruce gets into a fight on the East End, he gets mortally wounded, which leads to the iconic scene where Bruce says, "Yes, Father, I shall become a bat." Bruce's public notoriety subsequently inspires Selina to leave sex work and to become Catwoman.

Despite interacting only once throughout the entire book and not having a single line of dialogue together, both characters have a profound effect on each other. It's a cool detail to have each character be essential to each other's origin establishing how important they are to each other without any emotional bond formed yet.

Ok, so now that I've explained the roots of both characters, why do I find their relationship so engaging? Why is it better than any other superhero relationship?

It's because it has become integral to the core of both characters and something that reflects their growth across the decades.

Both characters have had other love interests across the years, with some major ones for Bruce being Kathy Kane, Silver Saint Cloud, Andrea Beaumont, Jezebel Jet, and most famously Talia al Ghul. It's not like Bruce has had a lack of love in his life, but what makes his relationship with Selina click more than the others is that she is the only one that truly grasps and understands the vigilante lifestyle he lives.

The only person who comes close is Talia al Ghul, but since Grant Morrison wrote the character, she has become more of a villain/antihero role for Bruce, along with her conflicts with Bruce about his moral code souring their relationship. Selina actually knows and understands his life because it's one she also lives just under different circumstances. Even when the two are separated and in different relationships the two still matter a lot to each other. In "Heart of Hush," Bruce, despite currently dating Jezebel Jet, admits to what he thought was an unconscious Catwoman that he never stopped loving her, following their split at the end of the "Hush" storyline.

Despite what edgelords and sometimes even DC might say, the story of Batman, and by extension Catwoman, isn't one of vengeance, justice, or tragedy. Rather, it's the story of this sad and lonely child that is Bruce Wayne learning to fix the hole that was left by the death of his parents.

As I said before, a lot of people prefer Batman to be more of a lone wolf with a list of

allies you can count on one hand, but this is a fundamental misread of the character. From the very first issue of "Batman" in 1940, he's had Robin, Selina Kyle, and Jim Gordon as a core part of his mythos. Both characters famously have an on and off again relationship, which may upset some readers or fans reading them for the first time, but when it's done well, it has a really powerful effect.

The reason it works is because that on and off-again relationship is a result of one of them being afraid or unable to let the other in, so their being able to be in a committed relationship signifies how much they've grown over their careers. All these issues with trust and abandonment are a result of their childhood trauma, so their being able to finally move past it together is a powerful commentary on if they can truly be happy despite being vigilantes with horrible childhood trauma.

While Batman is often listed as a tragic character because of the copious amount of horrible things he endures, his whole character is seeing past the dark. At its core, the story of Batman is about him finding humanity in those around him. It's why he joins the Justice League, builds the Bat-Family, starts numerous superhero teams, and loves Catwoman. "I believe Master Bruce is almost as obsessive about family as he is about preventing crime," said Alfred Pennyworth in the story "A Lonely Place of Dying."

Batman and Catwoman are two characters that perfectly bounce off each other. Both characters inspired the other to take up the respective mantles, and after years of development starting in 1940, their relationship has become one of the most engaging in comics. They are characters that had horrible traumatizing experiences but despite that, they learn to live and love.

They overcome their respective trauma with the help of others and each other and that is something that I find to be more powerful than almost any other relationship.

Megacon 2024 Photo Essay

Megacon 2024 was a success for Entertainment Stew, with multiple panels across the 4-day weekend and an appearance at the Creators Stage. This weekend was one for the history books.

Look at this photo gallery that chronicles our appearance at Megacon 2024. From the panels to the cosplays to meeting so many of you at our booth, we can't wait to see you all again.

Rick James B*h**

A Line of Spider-Men

Officer Jenny

One Piece Meet Up

Just a Normal Saturday

Warhammer Cosplayer

Live from the Creator Stage

El Chacal

Sauron & Thor

Gaara of the Sand