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Love Bites and the Dangers of Dating Vampires

Section 1 – Conceptualization and Inspiration

If I am going to be honest (and I am nothing if not honest), I was hesitant to continue this class when I learned that I had to make a video game for my final project. I have already talked about this before, but coding and I do not “get along” for lack of better terms, and the fact that I already signed up for a class where I had to make a video game for its final project made me nervous. Could I have dropped that class for something easier? Maybe, but it was a bit too late for that by the time I was considering it. Regardless of the challenges and stress it would later cause me, that other class did give me a bit of inspiration. It was a class about the evolution of vampires from their origins in Slavic folklore to their multiple different portrayals in popular culture with video games as a focus. Combine that with the fact that some friends had been getting me into the *Castlevania* series of games before the semester, and I knew that, whatever my project was going to be, it was going to have a vampire.

My second problem came with my lack of skill in programming (as mentioned before). I had a lot of difficulty with learning coding languages. I find them to be very rigid and unintuitive to figure out, and this doesn’t mention my artistic troubles. I have taken a couple classes where I learned how to draw things by hand, but I have since fallen out of practice, and that does not

compare to 3D-modeling or pixel art. I am no programmer and have only rudimentary artistic skills, but I do pride myself on my writing. Sure, I mostly write reviews and academic papers, but I have dabbled in writing fiction before. That desire to hone my skills is what made me decide to go with Inky for my project. I will admit that I have never dabbled that much with text-based choose-your-own adventure games and visual novels, but I felt like that was easier to wrap my head around in the span of a semester than a more “traditional game.”

Still, I was struggling to come up with something I was interested in working on. I thought about making it a pure horror game, but that prospect didn’t hold my attention for long. I wanted to do something more tongue-in-cheek. Inspiration finally struck me when I looked through my Steam library. I am not sure if you’ve ever heard of the *Sucker for Love* game series, but the games are a mix of puzzle games, dating sims, and horror visual novels where the player attempts to survive dating eldritch horrors. They are funny, scary, and excellent sources of inspiration. I knew that I wanted to try my hand at a vampire dating simulator where you attempted to survive the experience. Names were tricky (every good name for a game like this has been taken), but I eventually decided to bite the bullet and steal the name “Love Bites” for my project. By then, I had a name and an idea. All that was left to build was an actual game.

Section 2: Thinking about Endings

I am going to ask you a question: what is the “win condition” of a dating simulator? It should be obvious to you: you manage to win the affections of your chosen digital love interest. That was something I partly used to guide the ways “Love Bites” was going to end. It was obvious that one of these endings was going to end with the player character entering a romantic relationship with Irina (my game’s vampire), but I also wanted my game to have a “failure” ending. I think that the concept of “failure” is important for a game to be a “game.” The way I

see it, failure is part of what makes a game a “game.” Games are the exercise in giving yourself a set of rules to follow and a challenge to overcome, and that challenge can either be another person or obstacles presented by the game itself. Games are an exercise in learning and displaying mastery over these rules and challenges, and players are drawn to them because, “games are defined by the uncertain meaning of failure. We therefore have a way to save face, whenever we fail” (Juul 44). Gamers invite the challenge presented by games because they provide an easy way to experience challenge in a low-stress environment.

So, I ask you another question: what is the “fail state” of a dating simulator? Where does the challenge come from with this type of game? For most games in this genre, the failure state is your failure to enter a romantic relationship with the chosen love interest. When I was still drafting ideas for the game, I knew that I did not want that to be the “bad” ending. Despite my choice of game genre, I have never been that interested in dating simulators. Part of it is a general disinterest in all things romantic, but it was mainly because I always felt odd about rejection being the “bad end” of a dating simulator. It always felt a bit too entitled for me, the game presenting another character (a woman, most usually) as a prize to be won by the player by saying the right things or by doing the right actions. I never found a way to get around that in the limited time I had, so I had plans to draft two “good” endings where the player can either pursue a relationship with Irina or go their separate ways with her. I could not implement those endings in the submitted game, but I had them planned. Still, I needed a failure state for my game to build itself around. Otherwise, I imagine that it would be dull to trudge through.

That was when Irina’s vampirism really came into play. The initial idea was for the player to go on a single date with Irina and, at the end of the night, she would either fall in love with the player (leading to the two “good” endings) or suck their blood and leave them for

dead as vampires are known to do. I decided to focus on that second ending and make it a recurring threat. Instead of one date that the player would go through, I envisioned that the full version of *Love Bites* would have the player go on multiple successive dates with the goal of surviving each night and getting closer to Irina in the process. I think that this structure would have both eased off on the complexity of the project had I made a larger version of *Love Bites* while also giving the player a larger set of smaller challenges that they could play through.

Section 3 – Choices, Choices, Choices

Earlier, I expressed an issue I had with most dating simulators being a series of prompts where the player had to pick the right button prompts to win the digital love interest. I still stand by that, but I do not think *Love Bites* is any better in that regard than your average dating simulator. Still, as I bemoan this aspect of my project, I am not sure how I would have done it differently had I another go at the project. Inky, though great for a beginner like me, is not so complex as to let me play around with the more complex aspects of a video game like, for example, non-player-character AI. Part of me wonders if I could have done something with Irina's AI in Godot that would have made her a more dynamic character and love interest, but I know that I do not have the skills necessary to make an AI complex enough to fit my self-imposed standards. So, I was stuck with Inky and the choices I had once derided.

I tried to do some things differently, though. I found that many dating sims I looked at (*Sucker for Love* included) had a visual indicator of how far you had gone into a love interest's storyline or route. These indicators would usually appear in the form of a set of hearts or a meter that the player would have to fill up to get with the love interest of their choice. For standard dating simulators, these visual indicators work to better incentivize the player to keep playing the game. It is a source of positive reinforcement for the player to see the progress they have made. I

did not want to make something similar for my game because I did not want to make my game a standard dating simulator. I wanted *Love Bites* to have that element of danger to the player, and I wanted to keep many elements of the game a secret. I decided to use an invisible “affection” system to dictate whether a player would win or lose. Certain choices a player would make during each date would affect Irina’s opinion of them, either adding or subtracting a set number of affection points from the player’s overall total. If the player reached a certain threshold by the end of the date, they would survive the date and be able to move on to the next one. If they failed to reach that affection threshold, then the player would be eaten by Irina and the game would be over. By hiding the affection gained or lost by each choice made, I hoped that I had conceptualized a gameplay mechanic in which the player, on a first playthrough, was not aware of the danger presented by this dating simulator love interest or how to avoid it. Upon their first death, the point at which they learn that Irina is a vampire, they would be intrigued enough to go back and try different choices to see what choices would be able to let them survive the date and what choices would end in failure.

Ultimately, I wanted to mess with a player’s mindset in a dating simulator. Something I find interesting about games as a medium is that they, “constitute a library of agencies, in which we may discover and familiarize ourselves with new modes of agency” (Nguyen 76), with “agencies” being the mindset with which a person approaches a situation. In the realm of video games, for example, the agency a player would take on when playing a dating simulator would be that of the romantic, and they make choices befitting that mode of agency. The mode of agency a horror game requires of the player, by contrast, is that of the survivor. The gamer who adopts the mode of the survivor makes choices that either help their chances of or guarantee their survival. With *Love Bites*, I wanted to blur the lines between these two agential modes of play. I

wanted to know what kind of agential mode would result from the conflicting desires to survive against a monster while also wanting to romantically pursue this monster. I wanted to keep this conflict in mind when I was drafting the choices that I would present to the player, and I also wanted to keep the mystery of Irina's vampiric nature in mind. It was a tight-rope act of not giving too much away while also making choices that played on the danger and romance of the situation once the player knew. If I am being honest, I do not think I accomplished that with the level I submitted. I think I played it too safe with the choices I presented, but I want to take that and revise my work on the project if I return to *Love Bites* going forward.

Section 4 – Behind the Bloodsucker

Something else I want to better revise going forward is my cast of characters (or lack thereof). To start, I had difficulty with conceptualizing Irina as a character. Part of that was my inexperience in writing romance and my own desire to stray away from conventional “dating simulator” norms. I wanted Irina to have a dual role as both antagonist and love interest, and I wanted the player's choices throughout the game to sway Irina from one role to the other. I had difficulty finding the right balance in her writing. The version I presented in the submitted version leaned more towards the “love interest” side of the scale, and it did not portray the monster side of the character enough for my liking. Currently, Irina is reserved, and the player gains the most affection from her by making choices that help Irina get out of her shell. She is a very private character that does not seem to want to eat the player character but is forced to. I think this aspect of her character was handled well on my part, and I admit that my dissatisfaction with her is probably due to my own perfectionism. Still, I wonder if there was more that I could have done to enhance her unsettling nature as a vampire and play more on the

horror elements. I had the idea that Irina's monstrous side would emerge in later levels of the game, but those are obviously not present within the current build.

One thing I had fun with was Irina's characterization and how the choices played into that. I thought it was an interesting idea to have the choices and the amount of affection they granted give a bit of insight into Irina's deeper characterization. The affection counter is meant to act as Irina's opinion of the player, so the choices that granted more affection meant that those choices played more into Irina's preferences. In the submitted level, I wanted to use those choices to portray Irina's goofier side. She appreciates the player more if they tell a bad joke, and that means that Irina is the type of person that appreciates bad jokes. Irina is content to sit down with someone over a pizza and casually talk with them, and she is more uncomfortable when she has to perform that fancy air that is more traditionally befitting of a vampire.

I also attempted to play around with a narrator being a character in this version of the game. I thought about adding more comedy to the game as the things I write tend to have a more comedic bent to them. To tell you the truth, I am not entirely happy with the narrator in this version of *Love Bites*. I do not think the narrator's more comedic demeanor, as it is right now, adds much to the game both in tone and in story. If I have the inclination to go back to this project, I will make changes to his characterization.

Section 5 – Final Thoughts

Despite my own conflicting feelings about the project, I am still proud of my work on *Love Bites*. It made me think more critically about why some mechanics are the way they are in games, and I enjoyed the process of thinking through the reasoning behind the choices I made. If this were to become an actual release, I am not sure how critics would receive it. Still, I think

that I would love to revisit this game in the future once I have had time to hone my skills as a writer, artist, and game developer. I want to further expand on *Love Bites* both as a game and as a means for players to merge different ways of playing a game, utilizing the skills necessary to both survive a horror and romance a character. If they fail that, then I hope that I have at least created a game where the process of failure leads them to discover new pathways and choices to explore.

Works Cited

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