

How Romantic Partners Build “Sound Relationship Houses” through Shared Gaming

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We investigated shared gaming’s role in close relationship well-being through semi-structured interviews with a majority-heterosexual participant group of 13 co-located romantic couples ($N = 26$). We employ the Sound Relationship House, a Gottman Method Couple Therapy framework that describes seven characteristics of happy, stable romantic relationships, to analyze our participants’ perspectives on their joint gaming experiences. We conclude that shared gaming can support romantic couples in strengthening their relationships through contributing to the friendship and shared meaning systems of the Sound Relationship House. Gaming experiences that afforded these relationship-building aspects were characterized by congruence between couples’ joint needs, their play strategies, and game design. In contrast, when game designs failed to address couples’ joint needs or accommodate their play strategies, shared gaming could prompt frustration and relational challenges. Taken together, we suggest design provocations to enrich relationship-supportive opportunities in shared gaming through facilitating congruence between couples’ joint needs, their play strategies, and game design.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**; **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**; • **Applied computing** → **Computer games**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Video games, Romantic relationships, Game design, Qualitative analysis

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1 Introduction

Close relationships, distinguished from other social relationships by a sustained, high level of interdependence, play a substantial role in humans’ health and well-being [24, 25]. Although close relationships can form between friends and family members, many adults’ closest relationship is romantic [24, 33]. More than two-thirds of adults in the United States are in committed romantic relationships [10]. Most romantic partners spend the majority of their time together, particularly leisure time [71]. Shared leisure time between romantic partners influences relationship satisfaction, shared happiness, shared well-being, and shared identity formation [27, 32, 34]. Romantic partners have long engaged in shared media use, including TV, radio, and music [71]. With increased availability of video games, some romantic partnerships have adopted video games as a shared

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leisure activity. In 2026, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) reported that 32% of adults who played games with others played games with a spouse or significant other [2].

Given the popularity of shared gaming overall, researchers have examined video game play in several relational contexts. Researchers have examined video gaming in family [15, 52, 53, 73], friendship [21, 68], and intergenerational [70, 75] relationships. However, relatively little work examines shared gaming in romantic partnerships, despite the significance of shared leisure in romantic relationships. While romantic partnerships share many commonalities with other relationships, romantic relationships are associated with high levels of intimacy and interdependence and sociocultural norms govern romantic relationships differently from platonic relationships.

We build on a robust foundation of prior work that has examined gaming as a social practice and a meaningful dimension of people's leisure lives. Some findings in psychology suggest that video game use in romantic relationships is associated with conflict, aggression, and reduced marital satisfaction [1, 14]. Others have questioned this conclusion, finding no association [5] or identifying factors like passion that affect relationship conflict behaviors [41]. Devasia et al. [19] showed that long-distance romantic partners can leverage online gaming as a tool for staying connected across time and space. Other work has examined how intimacy is developed and enacted through shared gaming, finding that intimacy crosses physical-digital boundaries [51]. And still other work has distilled the fluid ways that household members drop in and out of games as a flexible way to enjoy time together [54]. Most relevant to our work, Swecker et al. [65] find that romantic partners can incorporate gaming to benefit their relationship through creating shared experiences, facilitating closeness, and building trust. We build on and contribute to this collection of findings by drawing together three threads: the influence of design on players' gaming experiences, a theoretical understanding of practices that are conducive to strengthening romantic relationships, and the specific needs and values that romantic partners express as relevant to their attempts to game together. These threads enable us to contribute a descriptive framework of how designers can make intentional decisions to support romantic partners in building and reinforcing their relationships.

Given video games' popularity as a shared leisure activity among romantic partnerships and the relative dearth of literature regarding romantic partners' shared gaming experiences in the home, it is valuable to understand how and why romantic partners engage in joint video gaming. To this end, we asked the following:

- **RQ1.** How does shared gaming influence, if at all, relational well-being in romantic partnerships?
- **RQ2.** What are the design needs of romantic partners for shared gaming?
- **RQ3.** How does game design influence shared gaming in romantic partnerships?

We investigated these questions through 30-minute, semi-structured interviews with a majority-heterosexual participant group of 13 co-located romantic couples ($N = 26$) about their joint gaming experiences. Importantly, relationships and associated expectations are socially and culturally situated [25]. As such, there are many possible interpretations of relational well-being. For the purposes of this study, we used the Sound Relationship House (SRH) [28, 31, 49] as a framework to conceptualize relational well-being. Gottman Method Couples Therapy describes seven floors of a *Sound Relationship House* which together characterize happy, stable romantic relationships. In turn, we conceptualize relational well-being as those characteristics of happy, stable romantic relationships which are described by SRH. With this framing, we employed reflexive thematic analysis [7, 8] to construct the following three themes:

- Gaming as a rich ground for relational well-being
- Individual, relationship and environment contexts shape couples' joint gaming needs

- Couples’ play strategies adapt game design to meet needs

Drawing on these themes, we developed a descriptive model of couples’ shared gaming experiences to illustrate the relationship between couples’ shifting needs for shared gaming, couples’ play strategies, and game design.

The contribution of this study is threefold. First, we contribute an empirical interpretation of how romantic partners use shared gaming to support their relationship, bolstering findings that suggest shared gaming can serve a relationally beneficial role in romantic relationships [19, 65]. Second, we contribute a theoretical model that describes shared gaming as a phenomenon shaped by the components of shared gaming needs, players’ spontaneous play strategies, and game design. We argue that congruence between components enables relationally beneficial shared gaming experiences while incongruence prompts frustration and tension. Finally, we contribute design guidance developed from our analysis, SRH, and our descriptive model.

2 Related Work

2.1 Close and Romantic Relationships

As summarized by Finkel et al. [25], close relationships are delineated from other social relationships by a high level of interdependence between the individuals in the relationship. According to interdependence theory, an individual is dependent on their relationship to the extent that an “individual’s personal well-being is influenced by involvement in the relationship” [57]. Although these characteristics can occur in non-romantic relationships, many adults’ closest relationship is romantic in nature, especially given predominant cultural expectations and practices in Western culture which emphasize romantic relationships [24].

The concepts of romance and love are subjective, culturally-situated and have changed substantially over time [64]. Reis and Aron [55] note that “experiences and behaviors of love vary across individual differences, cultures, and species.” Sternberg [63] describes *romantic love* as a combination of intimacy – “those feelings in a relationship that promote closeness, bondedness, and connectedness” – and passion. Although passion is often associated with sexual attraction, non-sexual needs may also inspire passion [63] and passionate love can be distinguished from sexual desire [55]. Indeed, some romantic partners do not engage in sexual behavior together at all [17]. Mollet et al. [48] advocate against situating “romantic relationships and platonic relationships as mutually exclusive.” While romantic and platonic relationships may not be inherently dichotomous [48], De Barros et al. [17] reported participant perspectives that romantic relationships were “more intimate, interdependent, and likely to involve sex” than non-romantic relationships and that “romantic love was qualitatively different than non-romantic love.”

Several theories aim to describe how romantic relationships are formed and maintained, including Rusbult et al. [56]’s Investment Model, Attachment Theory [33], and Self-Determination Theory’s Relationships Motivation Theory [40]. Although these approaches necessarily consider interaction between individuals, they are often focused on internal, individual evaluations of a relationship. For example, the Investment Model of romantic relationships suggests that individuals persist in romantic relationships according to their satisfaction in the relationship, whether there are high-quality alternatives available, and the extent to which individuals are invested in the relationship [57]. In contrast, SRH describes characteristic practices between romantic partners rather than their internal, cognitive models of the relationship. We have chosen to utilize SRH because we found its focus on day-to-day interactions between romantic partners to be well-suited to our focus on the everyday leisure activity of shared gaming. We felt that SRH offered a rich qualitative framework of characteristics that aligned well with our interpretive approach. SRH describes the characteristics of romantic relationships that are both “stable” and “happy” [31]. We adopt

this perspective by conceptualizing relational well-being as those characteristics of stability and happiness in a long-term, romantic relationship.

SRH is influenced by Gottman et al. [30]’s earlier predictive model of marital happiness and stability. Some scholars have suggested that these models do not generalize to broader populations [39]. However, SRH has been developed and revised over the last two decades through longitudinal studies and clinical practice [31]. SRH has been used to examine therapy outcomes in same-sex relationships [26], to develop interventions to support couples following the birth of a child [59], to support recovery from infidelity [38], to examine relationship satisfaction during infertility [9], and to examine pornography use in relationships [45]. Our goal for this work was not to evaluate or predict our participants’ relationship quality overall. Rather, we applied SRH as a framework to deepen our interpretation of relational well-being in participants’ perspectives of shared gaming experiences.

SRH [31], summarized in Table 1 and visualized in Figure 1, consists of seven hierarchical floors that characterize happy, stable romantic relationships. In addition, SRH also describes *trust* and *commitment* as walls of the house. It is clear from SRH that long-term, romantic relationships contain and build upon the components of friendship. The first three levels of the sound house build upon each other to comprise the friendship or intimacy of a relationship [28]: *build love maps*, *share fondness and affection*, and *turn towards instead of away*. *Build love maps* refers to the practice of creating an understanding of one’s partner’s inner world. Navarra and Gottman [49] describe a love map as “the road map you create in your mind of your partner’s inner world of thoughts, feelings, hopes, aspirations, dreams, values, and goals.” *Share fondness and admiration* is the regular expression of appreciation and affection for one’s partner. Gottman and Gottman [31] emphasize the importance to express admiration in “small, everyday moments.” *Turn towards instead of away* describes the process of attending to and responding to one’s partner’s bids for connection. Individuals may make bids for connection through silent physical actions (e.g., pointing), comments, and questions. In response, their partner may “turn toward” this bid by responding with neutral or positive affect. Driver and Gottman [20] found that humor and playfulness often characterized enthusiastic responses to bids. Gottman and Gottman [31] describe the value of shared humor in promoting positive everyday interactions as well as in lowering physiological arousal during conflict. Likewise, as summarized by Meunier and Baker [47], play and humor lend themselves to high degrees of intimacy, closeness, sexual desire and satisfaction. Bids and responses may also be negative, termed “turning against.” Alternatively, a partner may “turn away” from a bid by disregarding, interrupting, or not responding due to preoccupation [20].

According to SRH, when the system of friendship described by the first three levels is not working, romantic partners experience “negative sentiment override, in which even neutral acts are perceived as negative.” In contrast, the fourth level, *the positive perspective*, describes a state of positive sentiment override which avoids taking neutral or negative partner interactions negatively [31]. As summarized by Gottman and Gottman [31], when in positive sentiment override, partners are more likely to take negative partner interactions as situational whereas in negative sentiment override, partners struggle to identify positive interactions. While the other floors of SRH describe actions which couples can engage in together, *the positive perspective* describes a state of the relationship that depends on the earlier floors [29]. As such, there are no particular practices to build *the positive perspective* specifically. Rather, building the first three floors of SRH contributes to *the positive perspective* [29].

As one climbs the floors of the Sound Relationship House, the floors become more particular to long-term, close relationships due to the depth and breadth of interdependence sustained over a long period. The conflict management system of floors four and five [49] is especially relevant for individuals with highly interdependent needs, as high interdependence leads to interdependence

Table 1. Levels of The Sound Relationship House [31]

System	Level	Description
Friendship	Build Love Maps	Understand partner’s inner world
	Share Fondness and Admiration	Express appreciation for partner’s positive actions in everyday moments
	Turn Towards Instead of Away	Respond to partner’s bids for connection, avoid ignoring attempted bids (<i>turning away</i>) or responding destructively (<i>turning against</i>)
Conflict Management	The Positive Perspective	A state of positive sentiment override which supports partners in identifying positive interactions and not taking neutral or negative interactions personally
	Manage Conflict	Manage conflict constructively through dialogue, compromise, and physiological self-soothing
Shared Meaning	Make Life Dreams Come True	Support each other in achieving and living ideal lives
	Create Shared Meaning	Map out shared life and inner world through formal and informal shared rituals for connection

dilemmas. Interdependence dilemmas occur when individual desires are at odds while the need to maintain the relationship may supersede the impulse to pursue one’s individual interests [57]. SRH emphasizes that conflict is not indicative of dysfunctional relationships; rather, a key aspect of relationship well-being is to *manage conflict*, the fifth floor. Gottman and Gottman [31] emphasize the role of physiological arousal in conflict management, arguing that individuals cannot access constructive conflict management skills when they are physiologically flooded. As such, reducing negative affect and physiological self-soothing are key strategies to successfully manage conflict. Similarly, increasing positive affect in everyday moments supports the management of eventual conflicts. Research also suggests that romantic partners are more likely to engage in accommodative behavior – avoiding destructive responses in response to a destructive action – when given sufficient time to inhibit a potentially destructive response [57].

The top two levels of SRH relate to a partnership’s shared meaning system [31]. *Make life dreams come true* refers to supporting the goals and dreams in life of one’s partner including their career, values, and role in the family. This floor refers not just to concrete achievements but also

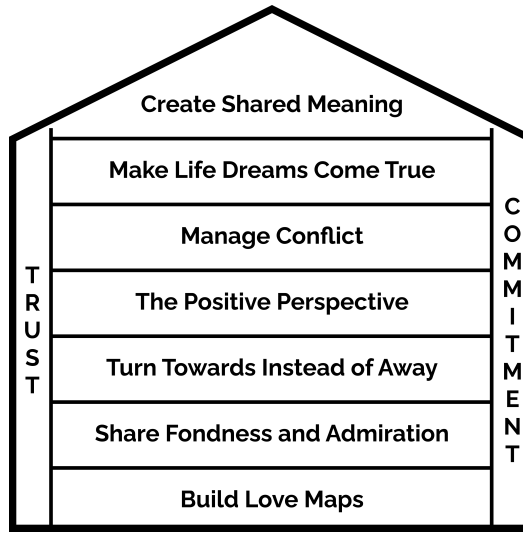


Fig. 1. The Sound Relationship House [31]

to feeling that one's relationship support one's convictions and values [49]. The top level, *create shared meaning*, builds closely on *make life dreams come true*. Making life dreams come true is one aspect of creating shared meaning. Romantic partners further build a shared meaning system through shared rituals. These rituals can be formal, like those surrounding holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries, and informal, everyday shared experiences. Through these rituals, couples build a shared life that "has a sense of shared purpose and meaning" [49]. The shared meaning system of levels five and six [49] are most relevant to long-term relationships during which partners build a life together. *Make life dreams come true* may not be necessary to maintain a friendship but is necessary for partners intending to pursue a shared life. Similarly, *create shared meaning* refers to repeated rituals that further entangle one's life, values, and beliefs with another.

All floors of the SRH are situated between two walls labeled *trust* and *commitment*. These walls were introduced in a revision of SRH to better capture long-term aspects of relationships. Gottman and Gottman [28] define *trust* as "whether one's partner is acting (behaving, not just thinking) for the partner's welfare." If so, an individual can build trust that their partner will be there for them in the future. *Commitment* is described by Gottman and Gottman [28] as building loyalty and cherishing one's own partnership rather than diminishing the value of the relationship and seeking alternatives. Both conceptions of trust and commitment build upon Rusbult's Investment Model [56] by considering the relative trade-offs between two individuals via game theory, as in Interdependence Theory [28, 29]. As such, SRH conceptions of trust and commitment are consistent with those presented by the Investment Model. In turn, SRH is compatible with Investment Model, albeit with a greater focus on the characteristics of interactions between romantic partners compared to their internal evaluation of a relationship. As we were interested in the interactions between romantic partners during shared gaming, we opted to use SRH. We contribute to the body of literature examining romantic relationships by applying SRH to examine the role of a specific shared leisure activity, shared gaming, in co-located romantic relationships.

2.2 Gaming in Groups

Video games’ popularity has made their shared use a subject of interest across several populations. Shared video game use has been studied in the context of friends, families, households, and strangers. Eklund [21] found from a large survey of Swedes that social gaming with family, friends, and strangers varied significantly with age, gender, and geography. Shared gaming is recognized as a social practice that is influenced not only by the game design [22, 58] but also by the space in which gaming occurs [18, 69] and existing relationship dynamics [13, 69]. Players interact socially both within the game and in reference to the game by sharing information, developing strategies, guiding or helping, and joking and laughing together [13, 37, 58]. Social gaming may involve not just multiplayer games but single-player games by handing off a single controller or spectating the player [12, 13].

Prior work suggests that shared household gaming can support family relationships. Pearce et al. [53] found in an interview study with families that families gamed together in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* to cope with stress from the Covid-19 pandemic. Similarly, parents playing *Pokémon GO* with their children found that the co-use of the game led to moments of family bonding [61]. Studies examining associations between family gaming and family relationship quality found shared gaming was associated with higher family closeness, satisfaction, and connectedness [52, 73]. Rautalahti et al. [54]’s model of the dynamics of household gaming interactions shows the fluid process of how gaming is co-mediated in households. Creating time to game together can be “intentionally cultivated within a household by prioritising shared time together”, and these sessions “provided a space for addressing sensitive topics and fostering deeper, reciprocal communication.” Broadly, studies on joint media engagement (JME) between parents and children indicate that engaging in television, technology use, and gaming together supports parent-child relationships [66].

In several relational contexts, video games have been found to have an influence on behavior and satisfaction of relationships, which suggests that video games may also influence behavior and satisfaction in the context of romantic relationships. However, romantic relationships differ from other interpersonal relationships in key ways. Romantic partners must coordinate shared commitment and life plans in addition to navigating the challenges of everyday life together, which creates communication challenges unique to romantic relationships [60]. Indeed, despite convergences in cultural norms around relationships in recent years, De Barros et al. [17]’s findings show that couples still report qualitative differences in intimacy and societal expectations in romantic versus platonic relationships. Therefore, we cannot necessarily generalize findings from video game usage in the context of family and friends to how they might be used in romantic relationships. Additionally, relationship dynamics vary by whether couples are co-located or long distance [16, 43, 62]. While recent work by Devasia et al. [19] shows how games function as a relatedness technology in long distance romantic relationships, geography affords co-located couples a wider range of games to play together, and different dynamics for researchers to investigate.

2.3 Gaming in Romantic Relationships

Much of the research regarding video game use in romantic relationships has focused on gaming as an individual habit of one partner. While some work has established a relationship between video game use and reduced relationship satisfaction (e.g., [1, 14]), Bradford et al. [5] found no evidence of a connection between gaming and relationship satisfaction. Norton et al. [50] further complicate this relationship, finding that partner acceptance of video game use positively influenced the association between frequency of gaming and relationship satisfaction. Importantly, these works do not examine joint gaming between couples. Rather, they examine the influence of individual gaming on relationship satisfaction or conflict. Notably, while Ahlstrom et al. [1] reported decreased

marital satisfaction in marriages where only one partner gamed, there was also indication that shared gaming between couples who were both gamers increased marital satisfaction.

As per Huynh et al. [36], massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) (particularly *World of Warcraft* [3, 51]) “have evolved into places for people to meet up, find romantic partners and maintain relationships.” Indeed, MMOs have been commonly studied in the context of computer-mediated romance and intimacy. However, it is notable that much of the work on couples playing MMOs together focuses on how it affects relationships in which the male partner frequently games and the female partner does not [1, 14]. This is likely a symptom of the broader “cultural inaccessibility” [72] of gaming to women, which has been well-documented in the research [11, 42, 44].

In the current day, a much wider range of genres beyond MMOs are available to couples. More recently, Evans et al. [23] document how joint play in the communicative contexts of Multiplayer Online Battle Arenas (MOBAs) like *League of Legends* can be a venue for both supportive and frustrating interactions for romantic partners. Devasia et al. [19] documented the wide range of multiplayer games that couples enjoy playing together, extending beyond MMOs and MOBAs to include cozy games like *Stardew Valley* and couch co-op games such as *Overcooked* and *Splatoon*.

Recent studies examine how shared gaming impacts romantic relationships, shifting focus from negative conflict to relational benefits and intimacy [65]. While obsessive gaming passion can reduce satisfaction and foster destructive conflict, harmonious passion correlates with constructive conflict management and relationship satisfaction [41]. Games can be especially valuable in long-distance relationships, where opportunities for meaningful shared time are limited by material constraints [19]. Of particular note, Swecker et al. [65] employed a phenomenological approach to investigate video gaming behaviors with a focus on romantic partners in polyamorous and LGBTQIA+ relationships. The authors report the themes *Making and Revisiting Memories* and *Building and Maintaining the Relationship* which point to how romantic partners leveraged shared gaming to build and reinforce their relationships. Like Swecker et al. [65], we aim to consider how romantic partners use shared gaming in their relationship and how it contributes to relational well-being.

We contribute to the small but growing body of literature examining romantic partners’ joint gaming by examining the role of shared gaming in romantic couples’ relationships, focusing specifically on co-located partnerships who game together in the home. Further, we expand on prior design literature which examines the role of design in the use of technology, specifically in the domain of video games.

3 Method

3.1 Participants

We interviewed 13 romantic couples ($N = 26$), recruited through convenience sampling by advertising with flyers and online posts in closed Slack and Discord communities associated with our institution, sharing with personal networks, and snowball sampling. The recruitment material described the study as a paid research interview about “relationships and video games” and solicited participants who played video games together with one or more significant others.

This study was submitted to our institutional review board and determined to be exempt from review. Interested participants completed a 5-minute interest survey consisting of questions about their romantic relationship and basic demographic information. Once an interested participant completed the survey, they were automatically emailed a link to share with their romantic partner which linked the two participants together via a unique identifier. We included participants who each completed the screening survey and indicated they were in a “committed, romantic relationship.”

Since we were interested in how romantic partners play games together in their everyday lives, we did not require a minimum frequency of individual or joint gaming. Rather, we asked participants during the interview about their individual and shared gaming habits, which varied over time, ranging from daily to monthly shared play.

Participants were between the ages of 28 and 42 and self-described as White ($N = 17$) and Asian ($N = 6$). Three participants self-described as Latino or Hispanic in addition to White. An additional three participants elected not to disclose their race or ethnicity. A total of 13 (50%) reported being women, a total of 11 (42.3%) reported being men, one reported their gender as a genderfluid man, and one participant opted not to disclose. No participants specified that they were transgender or cisgender through self-description. All couples consisted of two partners, each of whom was a different gender from their partner.

All participants ($N = 26$) selected that they were in a committed, romantic relationship with a single partner. Couples’ length of relationship ranged from 5 months to 13.5 years. Two couples had previously maintained their relationship over distance but at the time of interviewing, all couples were co-located in the same area. The majority of couples ($N = 11$, 84.6%) lived together in the same home. The remaining two couples did not live together but were co-located in the same area and gamed together in-person. Table 2 displays a list of the participant couples.

To further characterize our participant group, we contacted participants with a follow-up demographics survey requesting information about their sexual orientation. Participants could select more than one response, opt to self-describe, or choose not to disclose, per guidance by Hughes et al. [35]. A total of 13 (50.0%) participants reported their sexual orientation as heterosexual and 5 (19.2%) reported their sexual orientation as bisexual ($N = 3$, 11.5%), pansexual ($N = 2$, 7.7%), queer ($N = 1$, 3.8%), or demisexual ($N = 1$, 3.8%). Thus, our participant group was composed primarily of heterosexual individuals and did not include any same-gender or polyamorous couples, despite our attempt to recruit broadly. However, it does include some data from members of the LGBTQ+ community. Although research has found that same-gender partnerships generally initiate and maintain their relationships through the same processes as heterosexual partnerships, their lived experiences differ. For example, individuals in same-gender partnerships may experience stress incurred through stigmatization and intolerance [24]. As such, while this participant group includes LGBTQ+ participants, it does not richly reflect LGBTQ+ voices. Rather, this study reflects on the perspectives of primarily heterosexual romantic partners in monogamous relationships who utilize video games as a shared leisure activity.

3.2 Data Generation

The first author conducted all interviews and partners were interviewed together. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. We recorded audio, video, and auto-generated transcriptions of the interview via Zoom which were then cleaned by the first author. Video and audio recordings were utilized to disambiguate speakers during transcript cleaning but were not used for analysis. Before beginning the interview, the first author introduced the study, gave participants an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and then asked for verbal assent to participate in the study and record audio and video. Participants were also provided with a written information sheet through email prior to the interview date.

Interviews were semi-structured and consisted of seven core questions that were posed to all couples. These were complemented by ad-hoc follow-up questions as needed to explore participants’ specific contexts. We developed the questions in line with the “good interview question” characteristics put forth by Tracy [67]. Likewise, we ordered the interview guide so that we asked factual questions (e.g., questions 1 and 2), followed by generative questions (e.g., question 5) while leaving

Table 2. Interview Participants

Participant ID	Age	Relationship Length	Cohabitate	Married
C1A	36	11 years	Y	Y
C1B	33			
C2A	29	1 year, 9 months	N	N
C2B	28			
C4A	27	3 years, 8 months	Y	N
C4B	35			
C5A	29	8 years	Y	Y
C5B	34			
C6A	33	2 years, 6 months	Y	N
C6B	35			
C7A	29	4 years	Y	N
C7B	42			
C8A	42	13 years, 6 months	Y	N
C8B	38			
C10A	29	6 years, 7 months	Y	Y
C10B	29			
C11A	30	12 years, 8 months	Y	Y
C11B	30			
C14A	35	10 years, 6 months	Y	N
C14B	35			
C15A	39	5 months	N	N
C15B	41			
C18A	32	4 years, 6 months	Y	N
C18B	28			
C20A	34	8 years, 6 months	Y	Y
C20B	32			

potentially threatening questions until the end (e.g., questions 6 and 7) [67]. The full interview guide is available in Appendix A.

The interview guide was revised through discussion between the first and senior authors and through a pilot with two couples. The first author also repeatedly refined the interview guide and potential follow-up questions as interviews were conducted by considering which questions generated rich data and prompted reflection from both partners. For example, the initial interview guide included questions about the participants' life circumstances and physical space, which yielded short and uninvolved responses during pilot interviews compared to questions which encouraged participant storytelling about broader aspects of gaming together. Through this storytelling, participants spontaneously included information about their life circumstances and physical spaces.

Rather than establish these seven questions as core questions ahead of time, they were identified over the course of interviews as the questions that most effectively prompted participant conversation.

The following questions were asked in all interviews unless the participants had already addressed the topic at length:

- (1) For each of you, could you tell me a little about your individual gaming habits? Do you play on your own? How often and what kinds of games?
- (2) What are your shared gaming habits? How often do you play together and what types of games do you like to play together?
- (3) Tell me about a time you really enjoyed gaming together.
- (4) Has there ever been a time when you picked a game to play together and it didn’t give you what you wanted from it?
- (5) If you could wave a magic wand and have the perfect game to play together, what would that game be like?
- (6) How, if at all, does gaming together affect your relationship negatively?
- (7) How, if at all, does gaming together affect your relationship positively?

At the interview’s conclusion, the interviewer gave participants another opportunity to ask questions about the study and thanked the participants for their time. Each participant within a dyad received compensation.

3.3 Analysis

We used reflexive thematic analysis [7, 8] to develop themes by engaging with the transcripts through inductive and deductive coding. In contrast to other forms of thematic analysis, reflexive thematic analysis emphasizes that analysis “is a situated interpretative reflexive process” [8]. Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis practices, we embrace a “Big-Q” approach which recognizes researchers’ subjectivity as essential to rigorous analysis [7].

Our analysis consisted of both inductive and deductive approaches. The first author conducted analysis initially through inductive, open coding, supplemented by analytic memos [4] and weekly meetings with the third author to reflect on the first author’s interpretation. The first author used memoing as a reflexive practice after completing a coding pass, after interviews or whenever something came to mind that the author wanted to consider further. The other two authors made rough notes on two transcripts selected for the breadth of topics that were covered and all authors met to discuss their interpretation. During this discussion, we concluded that our interpretation would benefit from the guidance of a theory which conceptualized relational well-being in romantic partnerships.

After additional literature review of SRH [31], the first author deductively coded transcripts using the lens of SRH. By incorporating SRH, we moved from our intuitive assumptions about behaviors that facilitated relational well-being to more richly considering the many ways participants built their relationships together. For example, *partner appreciation* was an initial code that the first author applied when participants discussed an aspect of their partner they valued during gaming. SRH allowed us to reconsider these and other instances from the additional angles of *build love maps*, *express fondness and admiration*, and *create shared meaning*.

Finally, the first author repeatedly revised and reconstructed the interpretation through writing the manuscript. This process involved selecting illustrative quotes, making additional notes, revisiting interpretations of the transcripts, revisiting analytic memos and situating quotes within themes. Braun and Clarke [6] describe “producing the report” as “the final opportunity for analysis.” Through manuscript development, we moved from topic clusters of rough codes (e.g., *positive*

gaming experiences, mixed gaming skills, handing off controller) to developing three analytical themes:

- Gaming as a rich ground for relational well-being
- Individual, relationship and environment contexts shape couples' joint gaming needs
- Couples' play strategies adapt game design to meet needs

Concurrently with theme development, the first author developed and revised a model of shared gaming and relational well-being that was informed by her experience interviewing the participants, analytic memos, and coding transcripts. Iterating on the construction of the model was a reflexive practice for the first author to continuously reflect and revise her interpretation of the data.

4 Results

In response to RQ1, we found that shared gaming influences relational well-being in romantic relationships by offering a rich ground for building the friendship and shared meaning systems of the Sound Relationship House. In response to RQ2, we found that romantic partners' design needs shift over time and in response to individual, relational, and environmental contexts, reflecting the interdependence of their shared lives. In response to RQ3, we found that game design influences shared gaming by meeting romantic partners' needs or failing to meet romantic partners' needs for shared gaming. Further, game design shaped what play strategies were possible either by constraining play strategies or by flexibly affording diverse play strategies.

4.1 Gaming as a Rich Ground for Relational Well-Being

Shared gaming provided opportunities for couples to engage in behaviors which shared characteristics with the floors of SRH across a diversity of game designs and approaches. In particular, shared gaming excelled at building friendship and creating shared meaning. By gaming together, couples enhanced the friendship system of the first three SRH floors. Shared gaming supported couples in *building love maps* by revealing aspects of partners' personalities and problem-solving, *expressing fondness and admiration* by showcasing growth and success, and *turning towards* by requiring joint, responsive interactions as well as playful interactions and humor. Gaming's status as a flexible, everyday shared activity enabled couples to use shared gaming as an informal ritual to *create shared meaning*, creating meaningful shared memories and intermingling their shared lives.

While shared gaming offered notable opportunities to build relational well-being through building friendship and shared meaning, shared gaming supported couples to a lesser extent in *the positive perspective* and *making life dreams come true*. Shared gaming also disrupted couples' relational well-being when game design conflicted with relational needs for *managing conflict*.

4.1.1 Build Love Maps. Couples described shared gaming as particularly revealing of how their partner reasons, their personality, and their interests. C2A suggested that shared gaming offered insights unavailable in other aspects of their relationship, "[gaming] *sheds a light or highlights certain aspects of your partner's personalities in ways that you're probably not getting in day-to-day life*." Likewise, C8B suggested that gaming provided novel opportunities to problem-solve, "*You're solving problems that you're not encountering everyday life. It's not about the laundry, or getting the car repaired, or what are we gonna do about the roof.*"

C4A shared that they identified their different interests and approaches to gaming through playing *Stardew Valley*,

one thing we realized about each other when we were gaming is that I just like to go, like, adventure through things [...] there's a cave, there's a wizard, like, I'm on it. [C4B is] more like, we need to farm, we need to organize, we need to have chests that do all this

Those couples with substantial differences in their gaming experience suggested that they gained insight about their partner by sharing a hobby they are passionate about. C6A shared that she began gaming with C6B to, “*try to relate or [...] see what he sees*”

4.1.2 Share Fondness and Admiration. Couples described sharing fondness and admiration during their shared gameplay by identifying their partner’s positive characteristics, recognizing strengths and growth, and sharing success. Rather than simply mapping out each other’s inner world, players described these aspects as positive characteristics of their partners. Puzzle games like *Blue Prince* or even casual mobile games like the New York Times’ *Connections* provided opportunities for partners to showcase their unique approaches to problem-solving. C14A expressed satisfaction from solving problems together, “*when we do figure it out with our two big brains combined, that is also satisfying, in the same way that maybe playing, doing a crossword together can be as well.*”

Likewise, C1A appreciated the breadth of puzzles in *Lorelei and the Laser Eyes* because “*the two of us together, I think, could have a better time with the game, because some of us were better at different types of puzzles.*” C6B also shared that he appreciated his partner’s input in *The Case of the Golden Idol*, telling C6A, “*I don’t know if I would have been able to do it without your help, at least not as quickly, because I didn’t see things, I didn’t notice everything.*” Couples described feelings of shared achievement and accomplishment, like C2A, “*You’re helping each other solve a puzzle, or beat a level, or destroy a boss, even though you’ve tried 13 times, but you get there eventually, and then you’re like, we got there*” and C1, “*You get to share in the victories.*” C20B highlighted that shared gaming was an opportunity to see a partner’s success, “*you don’t normally connect, like, with career in, like, real time, see them thrive. But, in a game you’re seeing them, like, figure something out, and then succeed.*”

Couples also set up their gaming environments to aid them in expressing fondness and affection through physical affection during gaming sessions. C4 shared that they had purchased a new couch “*that’s much deeper, so we can snuggle up*” while they game together. Similarly, C20A described the importance of shared space when gaming together, “*it’s mostly important that we’re in the same physical space, because [the games are] single player, and we have to kind of, like, hand it off, but also we can, like, snuggle.*” Partners who were more familiar with games expressed pride and satisfaction to their less-familiar partner as their gaming skills improved. C6B expressed pride in seeing C6A’s growth when they played games together, telling her, “*I was proud of you when you did A Short Hike. I didn’t even play that game with you for most of it. You did that completely by yourself.*”

While couples expressed appreciation for each other’s positive aspects during the interviews, it was unclear the extent to which partners voice this feedback in the moment during shared gaming.

4.1.3 Turn Towards Instead of Away. Shared gaming provided opportunities to *turn towards instead of away* because both players attended to the same environment and participated in a shared activity. However, couples also described turning away or turning against bids for connection during high-intensity gameplay or under time pressure.

Gaming prompted bids for connection and responses by requiring each player’s physical or mental input for success. C1A shared that *Lorelei and the Laser Eyes* required both partners’ shared attention, “*the note-taking is actually, like, I think integral to solving the puzzle, so even the person who doesn’t have the controller [...] is serving, like, a necessary rather than just, like, a bonus function.*” C1 also shared that they felt there was a greater focus on each other during shared gaming compared to shared television-watching,

C1A: [while watching TV] because your hands are free, it’s, like, easier to be tempted towards, like, a second device.

C1B: Totally.

C1A: [...] doing actions in concert [while gaming] means that there’s a stronger degree

of, like, focus on the other person, that I think is [...] less present for, like, that passive entertainment.

C1B: Yeah, I feel like having the controller sort of grounds you.

Games also supported turning towards by offering opportunities for shared humor and playful interactions. C18 recounted their experience laughing together while playing *Nobody Saves the World*,

C18A: he would be the bodybuilder, and I would be the slug [...] I would be, like, kind of dying, and he'd be like, stay away from my slug girlfriend!

C18B: I'd beat him with a barbell.

C18A: Yeah, and there were so many different characters that there were, like, many iterations of that, like, same joke.

Similarly, C10A described their shared excitement during gaming, "*we're building off of each other's, like, excitement and enjoyment.*"

Game designs also worked against this opportunity when high-intensity gameplay or time pressure caused interruptions or turning against bids. C18A described that playing *Overcooked* required tense communication,

you're both like, get the pizza, get the pizza! Where's the thing! Give me the thing!

Like, get this, get this [...] you're kind of, like, demanding of the other [...] a bunch

For C15, one partner experienced strong competitive feelings during collaborative, goal-oriented gameplay at a high difficulty level. C15A no longer wanted to continue playing this type of game, sharing to C15B, "*we stopped [...] because I don't want to treat you that way.*" Time pressure contributed to C15A's frustration, "*Some of those levels had a time limit [...] those are the ones that really just made me, like, overly serious about it.*"

Couples also described attending to each other's play during competitive play of *Mario Kart* and responding to requests for support or playful teasing. Both C4 and C2 described that they enjoyed competing against each other because it felt "*spicy.*" Players sometimes turned against each other in these instances when playful teasing crossed the line into contempt. C2B reflected on this dynamic, "*I say something maybe a little too sassy of, like, 'get better', or 'get good' [...] and I think that could sometimes add a little stress to the relationship.*"

Turning against bids for connection was not isolated to competitive play. Instead, couples also described instances of frustration and negative responses during collaborative play when the difficulty level exceeded their skill. C2B described temporary frustration with differing skill levels during play of *Split Fiction*, "*I know [...] my gaming acumen could, like, knock that out really easily, but I'm kind of stuck. And [...] I was kind of getting frustrated with her [...] and I think that wasn't probably super healthy.*"

In summary, shared gaming fostered opportunities for both turning towards bids for connection and turning against bids for connection. Couples perceived shared gaming as an activity that uniquely required attention from both partners and felt this joint attention fostered connection. However, game design could also prompt negative interactions of turning against bids when it introduced high intensity or time pressure.

4.1.4 The Positive Perspective and Trust. We did not find that shared gaming as an activity directly supported *the positive perspective*, as it describes a state in the relationship reflecting the function of the SRH friendship system. Although we did not interpret gaming to specifically contribute to *the positive perspective*, participants nevertheless described positive sentiment override during shared gaming. Couples engaged in the positive perspective by attributing their partners' negative actions

during shared gaming to situational factors like time pressure or stress, thus not taking negative actions personally. C4A emphasized situational factors when she described a hypothetical response to conflict in *Overcooked*, “*it would have been a little bit like, hey, I didn’t like how you talked to me like that during the game, like, I know we’re in a rush, and [...] I know there’s fire in the kitchen*”

Trust is considered a “weight-bearing wall” of the Sound Relationship House, applying across every level [28]. However, we noted that positive reflections of one partner’s behavior were paired with building trust in future positive behavior. Even in moments of tension, C5B felt that gaming together demonstrated positive aspects of her partner that built trust in his future behavior,

I’m not worried that if I get married with him, that he’ll eventually be violent with me physically. Like, I know how he is. I’ve seen him in stress, I’ve seen him in, like, when we’re losing already, and he’s not, you know, he’s not really violent, so I like that.

Participants also identified positive traits of their partner through shared gaming that they felt gave insight into future positive behavior in their relationship. C4A described how shared gaming demonstrated her partner’s patience,

one of the reasons I was like, oh, like, we could really be in a relationship when we were first [dating], he was so nice through all of [our shared gaming] [...] that patience kind of made me feel like, oh, like, this is someone I could kind of, like, trust

4.1.5 Manage Conflict. Couples reported experiencing conflict during shared gaming; however, games varied in the extent to which they supported constructive conflict management. We noted that game designs with time pressure or high intensity posed conflict management challenges.

Overcooked, in particular, prompted relational challenges. For example, C6A shared that “*it did get [...] not heated, you know, but [...] you [...] start to get frustrated with each other.*” C18A attributed the limited time of *Overcooked* to a negative experience playing it, sharing that “*the time aspect was [...] too strenuous [...] it was, like, stressful. It felt like anxiety.*” While both partners in C18 felt they succeeded in *Overcooked* and had the skill to progress, they felt that it was “*just not that fun*” and “*too exhausting.*” C4A described *Overcooked* as “one of the games that made people break up the most” but found that together they “actually really love that game [...] no fights, we really had a lot of fun.”

Similarly, C15B recounted how high-intensity gameplay in *Resident Evil: Revelations 2* caused conflict, “*the entire time, it’s competitive, because you have to beat, you know, the machine. And there were many times when we had disagreements because he became too competitive and a little bit aggressive.*”

In contrast, user-paced games that provided opportunities for partners to diverge in their gameplay provided a context for players to engage constructively in low-stakes conflict. When games facilitated players in selecting divergent goals, couples compromised to accommodate each of their preferences. C4A shared managing conflict over differing preferences in *Stardew Valley*, “*at first, I think he got a little upset that I just kept on doing all the fun stuff, and he’s like, farming [...] So [...] we also compromised on, like, doing [...] organizing days. So we’ve kind of set a routine*”

Shared gaming prompted conflict between romantic partners when game designs offered competing goals, under time pressure, or high intensity. Game designs with time pressure or high intensity gameplay prompted frustration, stress, and aggression while user-paced designs offered opportunities to manage conflict constructively.

4.1.6 Make Life Dreams Come True. The shared meaning system SRH consists of the *make life dreams come true* and *create shared meaning* floors. While participants robustly described the ways shared gaming created shared meaning, they did not report similar experiences for *making life dreams come true*. Perhaps our conception of *making life dreams come true* is too narrow. However,

participants rarely described using gaming as a ground to discuss their own life dreams, beyond broader values and shared community which we describe in Section 4.1.7. While C4A described enjoying *It Takes Two*'s narrative about marriage and parenting, finding it "heartwarming," the narrative did not seem to prompt shared discussion of C4's relationship or beliefs about marriage and parenting. C2A also noted a desire to resonate with a game's narrative but, likewise, did not describe that relatable stories would prompt shared disclosure of life dreams. Instead, she suggested that an in-depth narrative was important because "*you wanna go on a journey, man. You want to feel like you accomplished something at the end of it.*"

4.1.7 Create Shared Meaning. Shared gaming operated for couples as a shared, informal ritual they regularly engaged in for connection. Couples interwove their individual and shared values, environments, perspectives, and skills to create their own unique ritual of shared gaming. C10 shared a holiday memory of playing *Animal Crossing* together,

C10B: we actually spent New Year's Eve [...] in 2020, [in my] childhood bedroom playing, *Animal Crossing*

C10A: Because you could count down [with the] animal neighbors, that was so cute!

C20A expressed feeling connection that C20B had shared a meaningful game with her, "*I feel like I got closer to you with Last of Us, because, like, you showed it to me [...] you had played it, and it was [...] an experience that you gave to me and I appreciated that.*"

Participants described building shared homes and communities in their joint gaming. C4A shared that she valued their joint play of *Stardew Valley*, because "*we're growing our, like, community and, like, our land and shape there.*" Couples used past shared gaming experiences to construct what they wanted their future gaming to be like. C7B shared how after gaming more with C7A he would "*have a much better idea of how to approach [Overcooked]. And knowing [...] when she's done with a level, then we're done with the level, and we just go do something else.*"

C6B described shared gaming as an opportunity to grow together,

it gives us, you know, one more thing to do together, and then one more thing we can kind of grow in together, because [...] I've gotten to experience new things because of it, so I think I've also even grown in this hobby of mine by getting to experience it with [C6A].

Similarly, C7A expressed how their shared gaming makes her feel included, "he likes playing games in general, and so getting to play games together, it makes me feel included in his life."

Couples described how gaming together involved collective coordination even if the game design was not explicitly cooperation. C20A described that working together to find a way to enjoy playing single-player games was, "*meta-cooperation [...] we're not cooperating in the context of the game, we're, like, cooperating with each other to play the game.*" C20B added that it was, "*a way of, like, strengthening communication.*"

Participants also created shared meaning by aligning on shared values, like recognition of gaming as a meaningful pastime. For partners who were very passionate about gaming, their partners supported their passions and interests by engaging with a hobby that held deep meaning for their partner. C6A described that C6B "*lights up*" when discussing games. C6B shared with C6A his appreciation for her exploring this hobby, "*I get a lot out of [...] watching you [...] learn this medium.*" C4B shared how meaningful C4A's embrace of gaming was to him, "*When [C4A] asks me, let's play the game, that's when I find joy [...] for me, her accepting gaming as one of her interests is, something I find, like, joy in as well.*"

Couples used gaming to support the other activities they felt were important in their lives and relationships. C8 used gaming together to develop and maintain a shared community. Per C8A, "I

think gives us a sense of community that we might not have otherwise [...] the communities we play with become our third space.” C4 used gaming as a time to recharge between work and other shared activities, “we play a game in the between to kind of give us that energy [...] then we go out, we like to go on walks, so then we go out to walk and eat afterwards”.

Joint gaming presented opportunities for couples to create shared meaning through shared memories, stories, creation, growth, and community. Couples revised their shared gaming over many instances to shape their everyday ritual of gaming together.

4.2 Individual, Relationship and Environment Contexts Shape Couples’ Joint Gaming Needs

Couples’ shared gaming needs varied considerably among participants. These needs were influenced by three contexts: individual, relationship, and environment. Further, these needs shifted over time. We illustrate these contexts in Figure 2. As needs shifted over time, the same game designs no longer suited couples’ needs, or, a game design that was previously ill-suited became a better fit. The changing relationship between couples’ shared gaming needs and game design over time is illustrated in Figure 3.

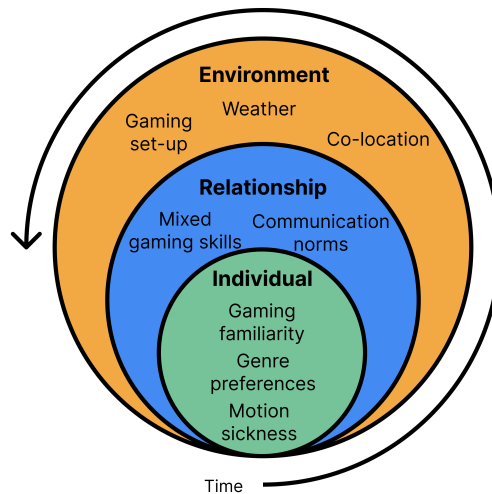


Fig. 2. Couples’ shared gaming needs were influenced by individual, relationship, and environment contexts and shifted over time.

4.2.1 Individual Needs Shape Joint Gaming Needs. Each romantic partner expressed individual needs and preferences. Available games were constrained to the subset of games that fit both players preferences. For example, options were limited by an individual’s avoidance of particular genres. C18 described finding games to play together by first searching for games which matched their shared preference to play local multiplayer, cooperative games and then filtered out games which did not meet one partner’s preferences,

C18B: I just search, like, couch co-op release this year [...]

C18A: Yeah, and he’ll filter it [...] in his own head of, like, he knows not to ask me if I want to play first-person shooters

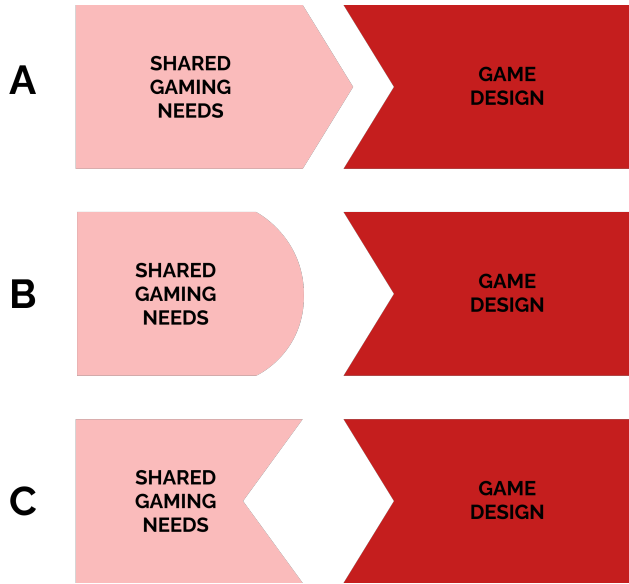


Fig. 3. As time passes, couples' shared gaming needs change. A game design may suit couples' shared gaming needs at time A. As time passes, the same game design may no longer suit couples' shared gaming needs as in times B and C.

In this case, C18A had an individual preference to avoid first-person shooters. This preference did not conflict with C18B's needs because he was willing to play other genres of games besides first-person shooters. Both individuals in the partnership had aligned preferences to play cooperative games, which was informed by their relationship dynamics. Further, the shared environment of their home and their gaming setup meant they were able to play local multiplayer games together.

Individuals did not always have direct insight into their needs, they sometimes needed to try multiple games together to determine what fulfilled individual needs. C6 determined they could not play first-person action games together because it triggered C6A's motion sickness, *"through a lot of trial and error, you know, we found out that the action games are not great, first-person games don't really work because of, like, motion sickness."*

Individual needs could also develop during gameplay over time. For example, C2 described that one partner may develop eye strain or tire more quickly than the other. When they wanted to continue playing together, they developed play strategies to accommodate this need.

4.2.2 Couples' Relationship Context Shape Joint Gaming Needs. Couples' needs were more complex than the simple intersection of their individual needs. Rather, couples' needs were also shaped by their relational needs. One such aspect was the need to navigate mixed skill and experience in video game playing. Romantic partners varied in their level of experience and skill in video games. Four couples (C1, C4, C6, C15) consisted of one partner who gamed frequently and had gamed in childhood and one partner who was newer to gaming and gamed less often than their partner. Five other couples (C2, C7, C10, C14, C18) consisted of partners who both gamed independently; however, one individual in each couple gamed less frequently than their partner and referred to a perceived gap in skill or experience. For all nine of these couples, the partners who described a real or perceived gap in experience were women.

For those couples with mixed experience or skill levels, more-experienced gaming partners described guiding their less-experienced partner to learn gaming controls and mechanics. These couples noted constraints on games they were able to play together based on reduced familiarity with game controls and mechanics. less-experienced partners faced challenges learning to move game characters and control the camera angle. C1B summed up the difference in experience, “*I haven’t played video games for as long as [C1A], or as intense as [C1A], so we go different speeds, so some of the things that are more about [...] fast reaction [...] probably wouldn’t be as fun for me.*” Likewise, C6B shared that C6A did not share his familiarity with dual analog controls, “*I think one thing that is particularly challenging [has been] moving your character with the left stick, and moving the camera with the right stick, and doing both those at once.*” When a game required quick actions using dual analog controls, “*it just became too much.*” C6A noted that this could introduce fatigue, “*I need to focus really hard [...] after, like, an hour or two, like, it just wipes me out, because, yeah, I’m thinking about it a lot to, like, be able to keep up with him.*” Similarly, despite C10A’s experience playing games independently, she described how the complex controls of *NBA 2K* created greater cognitive burden, “*the controls are very complex, there’s a lot of [...] decision-making that, like, is [...] required.*”

Beyond being accessible for newer gamers, more-experienced gamers also wanted games to provide challenge. C14A described that games have to, “*hit that perfect middle, where it’s, like, not so hard that it’s like, what is the point of us doing this together? We’re not gonna make any progress, and so easy that it’s not fun anymore.*” C7B expressed a desire for games to better accommodate one player’s desire for challenge, suggesting,

C7B: maybe [...] there’s a difficult path and an easy path [...] [C7A] can go do the easy path, and I can go do the difficult path [...] so that, like, I have my challenge and she has her easier thing? [...]

C7A: With the same reward!

C7B: Yeah, with the same reward. Like, like, we’re supposed to then meet up at the end after these two paths.

Couples’ existing relationship dynamics also shaped their joint gaming needs. C20A described that divergent approaches would not disrupt their independent gaming but could be a challenge to accommodate when gaming together,

I can play a game and be that way on my own, and it’s, like, not a problem, and [C20B] can play a game on his own, do things his way, and that’s not a problem, but like, cooperating with those competing approaches [can be difficult].

Couples described that shared gaming prompted moments of conversation and reflection about their interactions during the game. C15A described his individual need to avoid games which prompted strong competitive feelings and that he changed his gaming habits because “*it’s a video game [...] it’s not that serious. And so that’s why I made an adjustment to play much more casually.*” When C15 played such games together, this individual need became a joint need for the couple because they felt it resulted in unacceptable communication. In turn, C15’s shared gaming experience became a ground for discussions about their communication norms, “*I had to learn how to set boundaries and whatnot, because there are things that were done and said that I didn’t enjoy.*”

Couples expressed that their relationship dynamics could act as a protective factor against negative outcomes from gaming. In the above example, C15B felt that, “*if people are not very good communicators, it could have created chaos and broken up couples [...] but we did not, and we learned how to communicate better*” Likewise, C4A suggested that time in a relationship supported them in avoiding negative interactions during play of *Overcooked*, “*by the time we started Overcooked, we*

were dating for quite some time [...] so a lot of things that could go wrong for [...] first-year couples, we've already been through, so we already have patience for each other."

Participants' shared communication norms also shaped how they approached joint gaming. C4B described trash-talking while gaming with friends but communicated differently with C4A to *"make sure she feels welcomed enough to continue playing the game."* C4A elaborated on her communication expectations in the relationship, *"I don't like calling people 'bro' [...] like, 'bro, you suck.' Like, that's not really my language, so [...] I don't date someone who would call me a bro."* Couples also expressed that their goals when gaming differed between gaming with friends and gaming with a partner. C20B felt that gaming with friends was *"very, very different"* because with friends *"we're there to compete."* In contrast, he felt that *"with [C20A], it's the exact opposite [...] we're here to, like, build each other up, not tear each other down."*

4.2.3 Gaming Environments Shape Joint Gaming Needs. Couples described played games together on a shared gaming system in a shared living space, usually on the couch. Those couples who gamed on PCs together typically sat together at one partner's desk with their gaming setup. C8 and C11 used setups where each partner had an independent computer. C8A described how they share space despite having separate set-ups, *"we each have our own desktop and everything, but we're right next to each other. Like, I can look over and look at my partner."* Similarly, C11 either gamed together on the couch or at a large shared desk with independent desktop computers. Couples' game options could be limited by the availability of consoles, hardware, or controllers in their home. C14 shared the technical constraints of their gaming setup, *"we have two Xbox controllers, I think one of them doesn't work, but maybe if there was a game where it's one Xbox controller, one...keyboard?"* A shared environment also expanded options available to couples because they were able to play games which did not support online multiplayer or were able to physically hand off a single controller to play single-player games.

C20B emphasized that a shared environment was key to navigating possible tension during shared gaming, *"a lot of it comes down to, like, body language, and, like, are we cuddling?"* C18A explained that a shared environment helped dissipate tension after playing *Overcooked*, *"without [...] body language, I think it would stress me out [...] and without [being able to] stop and go back to, like, normal life in person together, then [...] it wouldn't feel resolved"*

4.2.4 Joint Gaming Needs Transform Over Time. Couples' joint gaming needs were not static over the course of their gaming but varied in response to weather, daily stressors and changes in gaming skill and familiarity. C4 described that shifting responsibilities may reduce their shared gaming, *"work stuff, family stuff [...] if we find the space and time, this feels right, then we'll ask each other [to game]."* C4 and C11 described how inclement weather or seasonal changes may increase their shared gaming because outside activities were not available or appealing. For couples with different levels of gaming familiarity, growth of skill and comfort with gaming influenced their needs over time. C6A described initial frustration and tension during play of *Overcooked* as one of the first games C6 played together, *"it was stressful, because [...] I was not doing a very good job as a line cook, dropping a lot of ingredients."* However, C6 reflected together that C6A has become more familiar with gaming so they may revisit the game and have a different experience.

4.3 Couples' Play Strategies Adapt Game Design to Meet Needs

Couples successfully adapted different game designs to suit their needs. Games that supported local cooperative play – specifically, *It Takes Two*, *Stardew Valley*, and *Overcooked* – were the most commonly discussed games by couples. However, shared play was not limited to multiplayer games and participants played a wide range of genres. All told, couples described experiences with 80 distinct games, 29 (36%) of which were single-player games. Further, some couples primarily played

single-player games together. Almost one-third of couples (4 of 13, 30.7%) primarily discussed single-player games and most couples (8 of 13, 61.5%) described playing at least one single-player game together. Game designs may directly meet participants’ needs by supporting input from two or more controllers and providing their desired gameplay experiences, illustrated in Figure 4A¹. However, participants played many more games together than those that were explicitly designed as multiplayer games. In these cases, couples spontaneously employed a wide variety of play strategies to adapt game designs to meet their needs, illustrated in Figure 4B. We developed a taxonomy of eight distinct shared gaming styles, presented in Table 3, described by the couples in our interviews.

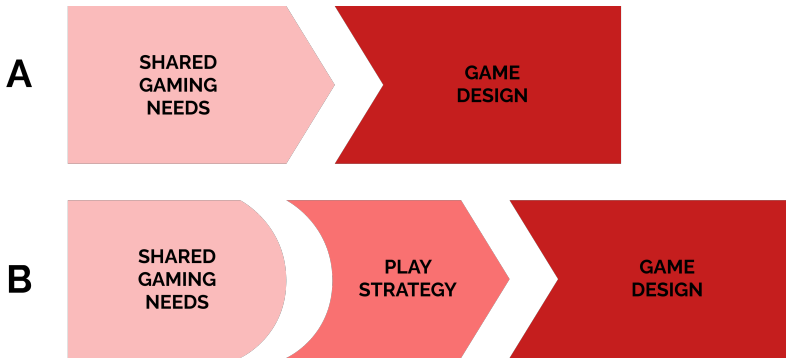


Fig. 4. Couples’ play strategies adapted game designs to meet their shared gaming needs. A) Game design meets shared gaming needs. B) Game design does not meet shared gaming needs.

4.3.1 Collaborators, Teammates and Rivals: Couples Mix Competitive and Collaborative Play. When playing multi-player games, couples played as *Collaborators*, *Teammates*, and *Rivals*. In the *Collaborators* play strategy, each partner worked together to accomplish a shared goal, like solving a platforming puzzle in *It Takes Two* or earning money to build a farm in *Stardew Valley*. When acting as *Teammates*, couples similarly worked together but as a team competing against other players, like in 2-player teams against friends in *Super Smash Bros.* or as part of a larger team in MOBAs like *League of Legends*. Partners would also compete head to head as *Rivals* either with other opponents like races in *Mario Kart* or 1v1 in *Mario Tennis*.

Partners did not limit their collaborative play to games designed for cooperative play. C10B described moments of collaboration during competitive play in *Mario Party*, “sometimes we even collaborate, like, *Mario Party*, like, we’ll be 1v1v1, but, like, we might be like, [...] help me out, or, [...] I’ll help you out.” Multi-player competitive games where couples played against others online or against NPCs did not necessarily prescribe mixed-competitive and collaborative play but the presence of other competitors implicitly allowed for spontaneous collaboration. Couples also shared experiences of spontaneous competition in collaborative games. C2A described that they compete during the collaborative game *Split Fiction*, “racing to [...] the checkpoints, [...] even if you’re on the same team, there’s always gonna be a certain sense of, like, well, I gotta get there first.”

The games described by participants rarely supported this mixed-orientation style of play. Notably, *It Takes Two*, is primarily collaborative but provides moments of competition in optional mini-games. Some participants expressed a desire for this approach to be incorporated into games’ designs. C4B shared a wish for collaborative game *Stardew Valley* to provide more moments of

¹We were inspired by Wobbrock et al. [74] for our shape-based metaphor.

Table 3. Taxonomy of Play Strategies

Play Strategy	Description	Illustrative Quotes	Reference Games
Collaborators	Players work together to accomplish shared goals or tasks.	“I tried to go for something that we can build together... solve a puzzle like It Takes Two” (C4B)	<i>It Takes Two, Stardew Valley, Split Fiction</i>
Teammates	Both players operate as a team competing against other players.	“we actually try to be on the same team... versus, like, online people” (C10B)	<i>League of Legends, Super Smash Bros., Valorant</i>
Rivals	Players compete against each other, with or without additional opponents.	“I also think it’s fun, though, to play competitively against each other... It brings out sort of a like, spicier version of gameplay.” (C2A)	<i>Mario Kart, Mario Party, Super Smash Bros.</i>
Hero-Sidekick	Both players provide input via controls. Sidekick performs limited actions or acts in support of Hero.	“ <i>Pikmin 4</i> , he had to be a side character [...] he could only throw, like, rocks.” (C7A)	<i>Pikmin 4, Split Fiction</i>
Mission Control	One player handles controls; one player operates outside the game (notes, information retrieval, puzzle-solving).	“she can be, like, the one with the controller being the pilot, and then I can be the person with the notepad” (C1A)	<i>Blue Prince, The Last of Us</i>
Performer-Spectator	Spectator passively watches Performer’s gameplay like television or a movie.	“wanting your partner to, like, experience the thing that you really liked [...] play this game, I want to watch it, [...] you get to re-experience it” (C11A)	<i>Ghost of Tsushima, God of War</i>
Parallel Players	Each player plays an independent copy. Players discuss story or mechanics.	“though we weren’t playing the same game at the same time... it was nice to, like, I could ask her questions” (C2B)	<i>Pokémon Legends, Kingdom Hearts</i>
Rescue	One player plays independently. If they are unable to complete a challenging gameplay segment, their partner takes over to complete the challenge.	“I can call him over to my computer if I’m struggling, and he can help me.” (C8B)	Participants did not refer to specific game titles in reference to this strategy.

competition, “*One thing I wish it had a little bit more of is, like, a mini-competition aspect of it, [...], to not just [...] build together, but we can also compete.*” While some couples suggested a desire for greater opportunities for mixed competitive and collaborative play, others avoided competitive play completely and preferred solely collaborative experiences. C18A shared, “*I don’t know if, like, competing is, like, the vibe I want from my, like, romantic relationship.*”

4.3.2 Hero-Sidekick: Couples Flexibly Assign and Rotate Gameplay Responsibilities. In the *Hero-Sidekick* play strategy, one player leads gameplay as the Hero while the other player acts in support as the Sidekick. Game design may prescribe the *Hero-Sidekick* strategy through asymmetric player abilities as described by C7A in *Pikmin 4*, “*he had to be a side character, so he was like me, but he could only throw, like, rocks.*” Some couples expressed frustration when the *Hero-Sidekick* approach was imposed by the game design, instead expressing a desire for each player to have the opportunity to contribute meaningfully. C7A contrasted *Pikmin 4*’s *Hero-Sidekick* design with a preference for *Pikmin 3*’s symmetric approach, “*I definitely enjoyed the experience of Pikmin 3 better, because [...] there was two characters and we could go off on screen.*” Similarly, C2B expressed disappointment when *Split Fiction* limited his contributions, “*she would get this really cool, like, katana, and then I would get, like, a gravity whip that did nothing, and she would carry the whole level.*”

In contrast, when games afforded equal opportunities and abilities to each character, couples spontaneously adopted the *Hero-Sidekick* play strategy by trading roles according to each other’s strengths. In these cases games tended to prescribe the *Collaborators* or *Teammates* style and couples adapted the game to their needs and preferences by leveraging the *Hero-Sidekick* strategy. For example, C5 discussed a *Hero-Sidekick* approach to *Valheim*, a collaborative game.

C5B: I actually enjoy the gathering, the suffering before the fight, rather than the actual encounter.

C5A: I prefer the encounter.

C5B: Yeah, he does the encounter. He’s, like, really good with timing and stuff.

In this case, C5B occupied the Hero role, leading gameplay while they gathered materials and prepared for an encounter and C5A acted as a supportive Sidekick. When the enemy encounter began, C5B took over the Hero role and C5A acted in support. Although they were not equally contributing at all times, they both meaningfully contributed by leading their respective activities.

4.3.3 Parallel Players, Performer-Spectator, Mission Control, and Rescue: Couples Adapt Single-Player Games for Shared Play. Couples who played single-player games together utilized the *Parallel Players*, *Performer-Spectator*, and *Mission Control* approaches. In the *Parallel Players* play strategy, couples played the same single-player game independently and shared their experiences with each other. C11 described playing independent copies of single-player games synchronously at a shared desk, “*if we’re playing the same game, I feel like we’ll interact more [...] it is, like, different from just playing alone. Like, there is, like, an interactive element to it.*” C2 similarly described times when they have played the same game asynchronously and shared advice or conversations about the game, “*And though we weren’t playing the same game at the same time, because she already played it [...] I could ask her questions [...] like, hey, how did you do this?*”

When couples used a shared copy of the single-player game, they leveraged the *Performer-Spectator* and *Mission Control* strategies. In the *Performer-Spectator* approach, one partner was responsible for all tasks of the game including controls and decision-making while the other partner watched akin to a movie or television show. Participants described both planned and spontaneous instances of *Performer-Spectator* sessions. For example, C5B would “*stand behind him and, like, check what he’s doing,*” C18B might “*pay attention on and off*” while C7B sometimes watched for “*15-20 minutes.*” Other couples described longer sessions during which they rotated the roles of

Performer and Spectator by physically handing off the controller. C11 distinguished this approach from *Parallel Players* because handing off the controller allowed them to experience the same story, “we could sit next to each other and just both play it, but [...] our paths would diverge, so it would be less interactive.”

In the *Mission Control* approach, players delegated tasks such that one player handled the physical input of control while the other provided direction, decision-making or performed a task like note-taking or searching online for information. C2B described this approach to continue play when one of them became fatigued, “we’ll switch to the, like, single-player worldview [...] she’ll have her phone up with, like, how to find that character in the open world [...] she doesn’t actually have to actually keep playing the game, but we’re still, like, participating.”

Mission Control was a common approach to games with puzzle elements like *Blue Prince*, *The Case of the Golden Idol*, and *Baba is You*. C14 described how single-player *Baba is You* became a collaborative experience, “we [...] both have to really use our brains together, because it’s very complicated.” C1A described how they adapted *Blue Prince* to accommodate both shared play and C1B’s motion sickness, “[C1B] gets motion sick if she’s watching me play, so [she can be] the one with the controller being the pilot, and then I can be the person with the notepad to, like, help with the intellectual tasks”.

Couples’ shared environment supported them in adapting single-player games. While spectating is possible remotely through streaming platforms like Twitch, a shared environment allowed the players to happen upon each other or spontaneously check in as an activity that was ongoing in their shared space. Sitting together made it possible for players to physically hand off controls to each other. Co-location also supported couples in spontaneous moments of shared play or facilitating each other’s play through the *Rescue* play strategy. Couples described that when one of them was gaming independently or in the *Performer-Spectator* strategy they would call out to their partner for help getting past challenging gameplay. C18A described that C18B aided in getting through frustrating moments, “if I’m playing by myself and I’m, like, fuck this platforming, like, I hate this. [C18B] will be like, I’ll do it, and then I’ll give it to him, and he’ll, like, do it for me.”

5 Discussion

Through shared gaming, couples built friendship and shared meaning, indicating that shared gaming can serve as a rich ground for relational well-being as conceptualized by the Sound Relationship House. However, shared gaming’s role was more mixed when it came to *making life dreams come true* or couples *managing conflict* prompted by gaming. Although rare, game design sometimes actively disrupted couples’ relational well-being (Figure 5C) by reducing their capacity to engage in constructive conflict management through time pressure or high intensity. When this occurred, couples were able to ultimately manage the conflict or negative affect prompted by the game by pausing or abandoning the game with little spillover into the rest of their shared lives. Participants felt that their relational skills like strong communication, patience, or knowledge of each other provided a buffer from negative fallout from these experiences.

Couples surfaced complex and diverse needs for their shared gaming which were influenced by individual, relational, and environmental contexts. Sometimes, game designs successfully addressed couples’ needs and couples’ play dynamics matched the game design (Figure 5A), like when couples played head-to-head competition in *Mario Kart World*. However, game designs did not always neatly meet couples’ needs; instead, couples employed different play strategies to adapt such games to their needs (Figure 5B). We can also see this in couples’ play of *Mario Kart World* when couples spontaneously collaborated or when they utilized the *Mission Control* strategy to adapt the single-player open world mode for shared play. While *Mario Kart World* does not explicitly offer collaborative play in competition mode, it enables it through the inclusion of multiple competitors.

In contrast, some game designs did not enable couples’ strategies, leading to either abandoning a given game or an experience that did not lend itself to constructing relational well-being.

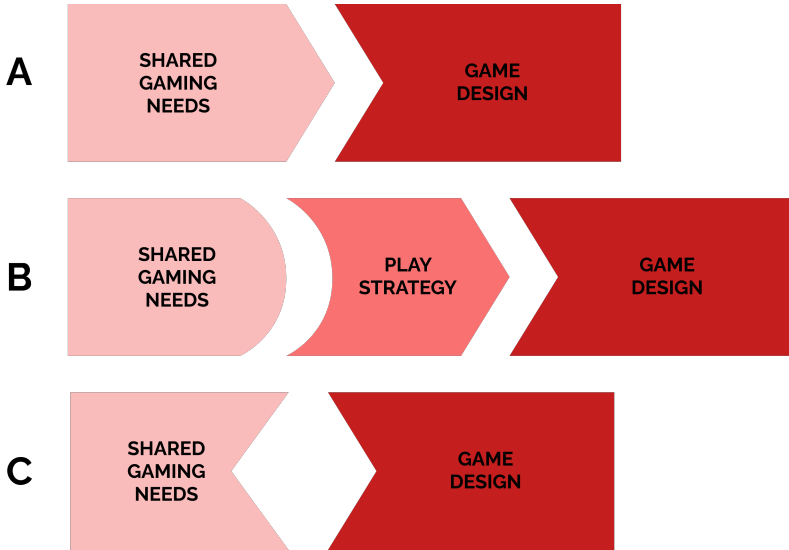


Fig. 5. Shared gaming experiences were composed of shared gaming needs, game design, and play strategy. A) Game designs directly address couples’ shared gaming needs. B) Game designs indirectly address couples’ shared gaming needs by accommodating couples’ play strategies. C) Game designs are incompatible with couples’ shared gaming needs.

5.1 Gaming in Groups and in Romantic Relationships

Our results suggest that gaming practices in romantic relationships shares characteristics with gaming in non-romantic groups and in other close relationships like family or household relationships. However, romantic partners also differed in their motivations, conflict management needs, and communication norms compared to their other relationships. This overlap is unsurprising given that close relationships build upon the characteristics of other social relationships. As such, designs which support building intimacy in romantic relationships may also support intimacy in friendships.

5.1.1 Play Strategies in Social Gaming. We developed a taxonomy of eight play strategies to characterize romantic partners’ shared gaming practices (Table 3). Couples utilized these strategies to adapt game designs to better suit their needs. Facets of our identified play strategies have been captured in research about social gaming more broadly, suggesting that romantic partners and other relationships game together in similar ways. Our play strategies share some similarity with the cooperative strategies identified by Iacovides et al. [37], which detail how players learn to overcome gameplay challenges in single-player and extend these strategies to include interpersonal strategies between players during cooperative gameplay. In particular, Iacovides et al. [37] describe *knowledge sharing* between players, *guidance* from one player to the other, and *surrender control/take over* in which one player takes over the input device from the other, with or without permission. We noted examples of *knowledge exchange* between players and *guidance* across most reported play strategies, especially among couples with mixed gaming familiarity. The *surrender control/take over* strategy aligns closely with the *Rescue* strategy, although our participants described this strategy

in response to one partner's explicit request for the other to take control. While our conception of play strategies is somewhat broader as strategies to achieve a desired gaming experience, both conceptions reflect that players employ patterns of behavior both within and around the design of the game. Prior work examining tandem play, shared gaming of single-player games, highlights how players fluidly trade roles by handing off the controller, even when the players are strangers to each other [13].

Importantly, the spontaneity of play strategies like *Rescue* and *Performer-Spectator* may be linked to cohabitation. Sharing a home and relatively independent leisure allowed participants to fluidly dip into their partner's gaming experience. Similarly, participants always described *Rescue* as spontaneous and reliant on a shared environment. While these play strategies may occur in other social gaming experiences (e.g., the *Surrender control/take over* strategy identified by Iacovides et al. [37]), they may be less fluid and spontaneous compared to interactions in a shared household. Prior work notes that players tend to drop in and out of social gaming in shared environments and rotate active and passive roles [54, 69]. Like Rautalahti et al. [54], our participants enjoyed shared play of both single-player and multiplayer games and fluidly transitioned between passive and active roles. The *Hero-Sidekick* and *Mission Control* strategies add further nuance to these findings. Not only do players fluidly transition between active and passive roles with regard to controlling a game, they also rotate between leadership and support roles both within and outside the game. Both players are actively playing in *Hero-Sidekick* but are relatively more or less active since one player takes the lead while the other supports. Conversely, one player in *Mission Control* is "passive" insofar as they are not providing input via a controller. However, this role is actively involved and essential to the gaming experience. Likewise, although Consalvo et al. [13] notes that "holding the controller means having the power," we suggest that players exert their influence and agency even without a controller by taking notes, searching for information, and directing the other player. A notable difference in our scenario is the familiarity of gaming partners. Romantic partners or other close relationships may be more comfortable exerting their influence on each other's gaming than strangers. Our interpretation suggests that single-player designs can empower one or more controller-free players by offering mental tasks like puzzles, information-seeking, and information-tracking.

5.1.2 Navigating Gaming Differences. Romantic partners navigated differing skills and preferences to discover games which addressed their unique set of individual, relational and environmental needs. Prior work has noted that groups gaming together must navigate diverse interests and skill levels [69]. In response to these diverse needs, experienced players tend to take on responsibility for the enjoyment of novice gamers by initiating gaming sessions, selecting appropriate games, and showcasing exciting aspects of the game [13, 54, 69]. Consalvo et al. [13] describe this as "a balancing act" between avoiding spoilers, sharing fun elements, enjoying themselves, and avoiding repetition. Participants who were more experienced gamers described a similar orientation towards setting their partner up for success by selecting appropriate games and supporting their growth while also desiring interesting challenges for themselves. Participants who were novice gamers expressed appreciation for their partners' patience, flexibility, and encouragement.

The role and behavior of an experienced player may be particularly relevant in romantic relationships between men and women. Nine couples included women who were either new to gaming ($N = 4$) or described themselves as less skilled or familiar with gaming than their partners despite being experienced independent gamers ($N = 5$). The "cultural inaccessibility" [72] of gaming for women, gender norms about gaming, and experiences or fear of harassment may account for why several women in our participant group came to gaming more recently while their partners were lifelong gamers. Similarly, our participants' descriptions of themselves as less experienced or skilled

may be more reflective of gender norms than a real difference in gaming skill, frequency, or passion. Future work should examine this discrepancy and gender dynamics between partners who game together in greater depth. Our results suggest that shared gaming in romantic partnerships may be a fruitful opportunity to include women in gaming, provided that the more experienced partner is patient and encouraging. In turn, designs that assume prior extensive gaming experience may present barriers to this opportunity.

5.1.3 Comparing Gaming in Romantic Partnerships and Other Social Relationships. While participants reported shared gaming experiences that overlapped with those of non-romantic relationships, they expressed distinct needs, motivations, and gaming experiences relating to their romantic relationship.

A substantial difference between close relationships and other social relationships is the degree of interdependence between partners driven by sharing a life together, particularly over a long period of time. Couples’ environmental needs reflected how they shared both their space and lives. Like other household or family relationships, co-located couples navigated the gaming equipment available in their home and organized their social spaces around gaming [69]. Of particular note, couples described creating spaces where they could express physical affection like cuddling during gaming. Couples’ relational needs included communication norms that differed from how they would communicate with friends or family. For example, while a participant might trash-talk while gaming with friends, they would avoid it if it was unacceptable to their romantic partner.

Couples also expressed distinct motivations for gaming with a partner, explicitly seeking opportunities to bond, connect, and support each other. While gaming with friends may also result in bonding, connection, and quality time, participants highlighted these as explicit motivations compared to gaming with friends. Novice gamers were inspired to begin gaming specifically to spend time with their partner as well as being able to better understand their partner’s hobby and passion. Many of the issues couples experience conflict over are perpetual, prompted by personality differences [31]. A key aspect of managing these perpetual issues is frequent positive interactions in everyday moments to build *the positive perspective* [31]. Thus, building the friendship system through shared gaming also addresses a unique need of long-term, romantic relationships: building a positive perspective, aiding conflict management of perpetual conflicts. Likewise, couples have a relational need for constructive conflict management, a need that was undermined by game designs that used time pressure or high intensity. Shared gaming not only built intimacy but also excelled in creating shared meaning. By gaming together, couples created a shared ritual enabled by their co-location. Through this shared ritual, couples converged on shared values and symbols, created shared memories, experienced growth together, and built shared communities.

Taken together, our results indicate that shared gaming may support building intimacy in friendships as well as supporting relational well-being in romantic relationships, specifically. These findings reinforce prior work that indicates shared gaming can meaningfully support romantic partnerships [19, 65]. Although our largely heterosexual, monogamous participant group differs in make-up from a primarily LGBTQIA+, polyamorous participant group, our findings align with the sub-themes of Swecker et al. [65] that describe gaming’s role in “facilitating closeness and support,” “building trust,” and “creating shared experiences.” Romantic partners play games together in similar ways to other groups and yet individuals in romantic relationships also have unique needs and motivations for gaming together. As such, it would be appropriate for future work to both examine romantic relationships alongside other relationships in shared gaming as well as examining romantic relationships specifically.

5.2 Shared Gaming Experiences as “Bricks” to Build the Sound Relationship House

We conceive of shared gaming experiences as a relationship between three components: couples’ shared gaming needs, game design, and play strategies that act as a bridge between players’ needs and game design. When game designs meet couples’ shared gaming needs either directly or indirectly through couples’ play strategies, a shared gaming experience becomes a brick that couples can use to build and reinforce their Sound Relationship House (Figure 6). A shared gaming brick is one of many experiences, or, bricks, that romantic partners can use to construct their Sound Relationship Houses. A Sound Relationship House may be able to weather a few misshapen bricks if the components do not fit together due to a mismatch between the game design and couples’ shared gaming needs. However, a sturdy brick is certainly a better building material.

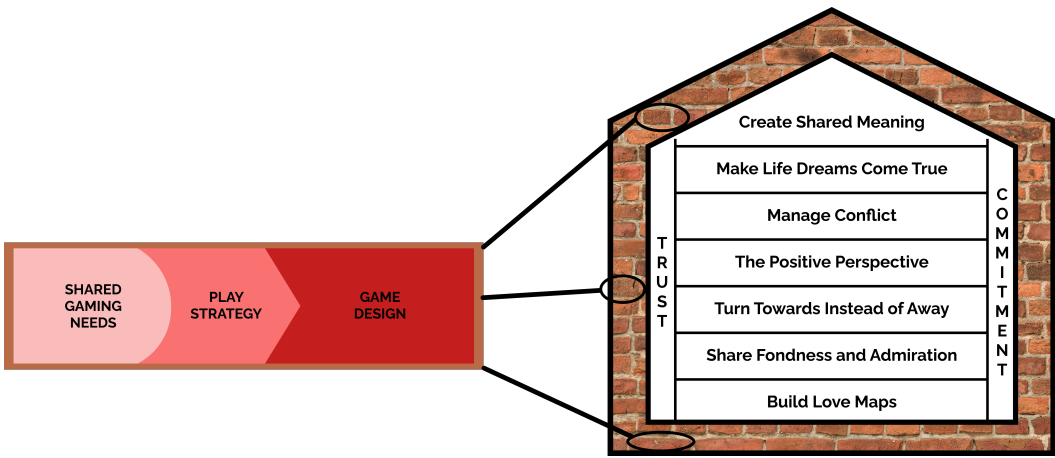


Fig. 6. Shared gaming experiences act as bricks to build and reinforce the Sound Relationship House [31]

Based on this model, designers can foster opportunities for relational well-being in two ways. First, game designs can better directly address romantic partners’ gaming needs (Figure 7A). Second, game designs can better accommodate romantic partners’ play strategies (Figure 7B). These two approaches create opportunities for relational well-being by improving the fit between components to create a sturdy brick, thereby enabling relational well-being downstream.

5.2.1 Addressing Romantic Partners’ Gaming Needs. Four of the 13 couples we spoke with consisted of one partner who was very familiar with gaming and one less-familiar partner. If targeting romantic partners as an audience, consider how approachable the game is to a new player. What unwritten rules of games do players need to understand to be able to navigate the game? Novice players may require reduced controller complexity or user-paced gameplay to become comfortable with game controls. Also consider how to provide challenging gameplay for each player’s ability level. Joint media engagement literature suggests that multiple planes of engagement offer compelling experiences for parents and children when gaming together [66]. One common approach to multiple planes of engagement in gaming is to make one character the lead while the other tags along with a limited skill set such that the game can be functionally played with or without the additional character. We do not recommend this approach when targeting adult romantic partners. Instead we recommend each player’s contribution be required to overcome gameplay challenges. This approach fosters opportunities for *building love maps*, *turning towards*, and *building shared*

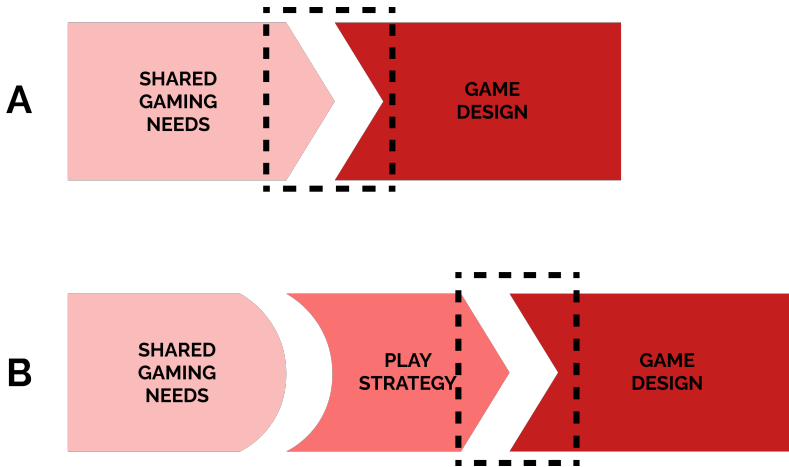


Fig. 7. Design opportunities for supporting romantic partners’ shared gaming. A) Designers can focus on improving the fit between game designs and romantic partners’ needs. B) Designers can focus on improving the fit between game designs and partners’ play strategies.

meaning. In contrast, designs which sideline one player prevent opportunities to recognize each partner’s unique interests and strengths.

Game designers should avoid designs which are directly counter to constructive conflict management practices. Most negative interactions between couples occurred during tense gameplay, after repeated failure, under time pressure, or otherwise in the heat of the moment. Rather than avoid these possibilities entirely, which may be infeasible, we suggest that game designers consider scaffolding moments of self-soothing between intense gameplay. By giving romantic partners time to return to calm between intense moments, designers can support them in engaging in constructive rather than destructive conflict. Notably, Emmerich and Masuch [22] found that implementing time pressure did not affect behavior between players while playing a cooperative game. It is possible that although couples perceived time pressure as a salient factor, it does not affect behavior in the moment. Future work may wish to further investigate the relationship between players’ behavior and perception of time pressure during social play.

The degree to which couples engaged in active discussion or reflection about their shared gaming experiences was unclear. Game designers may be able to further promote relational well-being for romantic partnerships by prompting reflection of their partners’ strengths or celebration after completing challenges. Similarly, designers may consider how to prompt conversations before or after playing to consider what a given shared gaming experience should feel or look like. These suggestions may be in tension with other aspects of gaming which make shared gaming valuable for romantic partnerships. Players may feel that these conversations are forced or that the overhead of these conversations disrupts the convenience and ease of gaming together. Such designs may also risk disrupting romantic partners’ own strategies for creating shared meaning and expressing fondness.

While there are opportunities to better address romantic partners’ needs in gaming, it is infeasible to predict the needs of every partnership, particularly because the needs of romantic partners are highly variable and shift moment to moment. Attempting to enforce one style of playing in hopes of addressing partners’ needs may backfire, instead constraining partners’ play strategies and preventing them from engaging successfully with the game.

5.2.2 Accommodating Romantic Partners' Play Strategies. When games failed to meet players' needs and ultimately did not enable relational well-being it was because couples were unable to flexibly apply play strategies to adapt the game. Often this arose from games overfitting to conceptions of players' static needs. For example, while romantic partners leveraged the *Hero-Sidekick* play strategy themselves, games which enforced this paradigm caused frustration and irritation from romantic partners. We theorize that this response is because partners are no longer able to choose for themselves on an ongoing basis who operates as Hero or Sidekick. When partners utilized this play strategy, they regularly rotated each role, providing opportunities to demonstrate their unique strengths and interests. In contrast, games like *Pikmin 4* enforced a static dynamic where one player was always cast as the Sidekick, limiting opportunities to contribute and showcase their talents.

Despite these challenges, couples' breadth of play strategies actually expand the design space available to game designers targeting an audience of romantic partners. Notably, most of the couples we spoke to enjoyed playing single-player games together and experienced relationally-beneficial behaviors. As such, designing a successful multiplayer game does not necessarily require supporting two or more input devices. Indeed, single-player puzzle designs were particularly rich in opportunities to *build love maps*, *turn towards*, and *create shared meaning*. One aspect of puzzle gameplay that may have supported these opportunities is the degree of mental work required which can be easily and flexibly split between players. Designs like *Blue Prince* and *Lorelei and the Laser Eyes* that prompt players to take notes and manage information lent themselves to the *Mission Control* play strategy. These games offered a clear delineation of tasks which players could distribute among themselves. Similarly, couples played single-player narrative games by handing off one controller to each other. Designers can support this strategy by prompting optional controller hand-off at checkpoints. To accommodate each player's preferences, designers can implement character customization profiles that are easy to switch between during controller hand-offs.

5.2.3 Design Provocations. Finally, we contribute the following guiding questions to support the design of games for romantic partners which we synthesize from our findings about shared gaming and the Sound Relationship House [31].

- (1) **Build Love Maps:** How does this design allow partners to showcase their unique interests, problem-solving skills, and perspectives?
- (2) **Express Fondness and Admiration:** How does this design facilitate the meaningful contribution of each partner?
- (3) **Turn Towards not Away:** To what extent does this design require each player's attention and input? How does the design support players with different skills and gaming familiarity? To what extent does the design accommodate novice players?
- (4) **The Positive Perspective:** How does this design facilitate repeated positive interactions over time?
- (5) **Manage Conflict:** To what extent can players' goals and priorities diverge? Can players manage conflict in the moment or do they need to pause or quit the game to resolve it?
- (6) **Make Life Dreams Come True:** How does this design support players in exploring different roles and perspectives? How does the narrative prompt conversation about dreams and aspirations?
- (7) **Create Shared Meaning:** How does this game fit into romantic partners' shared lives? To what extent can it be picked up and put down? How does the narrative provide a ground for conversations about shared values?

5.3 Limitations

Qualitative analysis of couples’ gaming perspectives and behaviors provides an interpretation of how our participant couples gamed together and developed relational well-being through shared gaming. This approach aims to inspire design insights by enriching and expanding our understanding of romantic partners’ shared gaming rather than to generalize these findings broadly. This study investigated couples who already gamed together and as such we limit our conclusions to when shared gaming is already an established pattern in supporting romantic relationships. Future work remains to understand the experiences of romantic partners who have attempted to game together but abandoned the practice to better understand the role of shared gaming in romantic relationships. Similarly, romantic partners who were comfortable with sharing the details of their relationship may have been more likely to participate in our study. As such, our interpretations would be inappropriate to apply to dysfunctional or struggling romantic partnerships. Further, the participants in this study were co-located, monogamous couples between 27 and 42 years old with little racial, ethnic or socioeconomic diversity. Media use varies substantially in families of different socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity [46]; this variability likely applies to households without children as well. Likewise, romantic partners in LGBTQIA+ relationships, polyamorous and long-distance relationships may have substantially different experiences which are not adequately represented here. Future research could build on work which examines joint gaming by minority gamers (e.g., [65]) and long-distance partnerships (e.g., [19]). Notably, none of the couples in this study raise children together, which may significantly impact shared gaming habits. Future work on family and household gaming could adopt the approach of Rautalahti et al. [54] to examine gaming between adults, adult-child gaming and children’s shared gaming together.

6 Conclusion

We interviewed a majority-heterosexual participant group of 13 co-located, monogamous romantic couples to investigate how they played video games together and their perceptions of its influence on their relationship. First, we found that couples built relational well-being through *building love maps, expressing fondness and affection, turning towards instead of away, and creating shared meaning*. Shared gaming did not robustly support *making life dreams come true* and game designs featuring time pressure and high intensity undermined *managing conflict*. Next, we found that romantic partners had diverse needs for their shared gaming. These needs were constructed from their individual contexts (e.g., genre preference, motion sickness sensitivity), relationship context (e.g., mixed levels of gaming familiarity, communication norms), and environmental context (e.g., gaming set-ups, weather). Needs shifted day to day and moment to moment in response to shifts in these contexts. Lastly, we found that romantic partners used different play strategies to adapt games to their shared gaming needs. These strategies were informed by their shared gaming needs and the strategies available to them were influenced by the game’s design. When a game outright met romantic partners’ needs either directly, through its design, or indirectly, through romantic partners’ adaptive play strategy, shared gaming provided substantial opportunities to enhance romantic partnerships. We suggest game designers can further support romantic partnerships by (1) directly meeting partners’ needs with their designs or (2) indirectly meeting partners’ needs by facilitating adaptive play strategies. Broadly, our findings reinforce the necessity of examining technology use through the lens of design rather than with monolithic constructs like time spent gaming or video game use. In particular, we hope that researchers continue to examine how the design of technology can facilitate meaningful relationship experiences.

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A Interview Guide

Bolded questions are prioritized, remaining questions are suggested follow-ups or can be asked to stimulate conversation.

Individual Gaming Habits

- For each:
 - **Tell me about your individual gaming habits.**
 - * How frequently do you play? How long do you typically play for?
 - * What platforms?
 - * What types of games?
 - * Do you ever play with others that aren’t Person 2?

Tandem Gaming Habits

- **Tell me about your gaming habits together.**
 - How frequently do you play together? For how long?
 - What platforms and types of games do you usually play together?
 - How do you usually play together? Online, co-located, same screen? What does ‘playing together’ look like?
- Tell me about a game you played together that is different from a game you usually play together.
 - What makes it different?
- Tell me about a game you’ve played that’s typical of the games you play together.
 - What makes it typical?
- How do you decide what games to play together?

Environmental Factors

- What goes into deciding that you’re going to play together? What happens before and after?
- When/how do you decide to end a session?
- What aspects of your lives impact your gaming sessions together?
- Do you ever play games individually near each other? Or one of you is playing a game individually while the other does something else in the same space?

Design Features

- **Tell me about a time you really enjoyed gaming together.**
 - What do you enjoy about gaming together?
 - * How do different games affect that enjoyment?
 - Tell me what you feel you get out of gaming together. Why do you do it?
 - * What do you get out of gaming individually?
 - How are they different, if at all?
- **Have you ever picked a game to play together and felt that it didn’t give you what you wanted out of it?**
 - Why?
 - Have you ever had a negative experience playing together?
- Do you watch TV or movies together?
 - When do you decide to watch TV/movies together and when do you decide to game together?
 - Do you feel like there’s a difference between watching TV/movies and gaming together? How is it different?
- Are there any games you wish you could play together but life circumstances get in the way?
- **If you could wave a magic wand and have the perfect game to play together, what would that game be like?**

Effects on Relationship

- **How, if at all, does gaming together affect your relationship in a negative way?**
 - What about gaming individually or gaming overall?
- **How, if at all, does gaming together affect your relationship in a positive way?**
 - What about gaming individually or gaming overall?

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