

# Video Gaming and Narratives of Love as a potential stance of cultural-political meaning in current societies: A Study of *It Takes Two*, 2021

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## ABSTRACT

*In 2021, arriving shortly after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the social distancing it required, a creative co-op video game, It Takes Two, created by Swedish developer Hazelight Studios and published by American gaming giant Electronic Arts, gained huge popularity on a global scale, including unexpected success in the Chinese market. Although the game is not officially available in China, has no publishing license, and no official promotions, still half of its sales come from China. The game is based on a divorce-themed story, and by integrating cooperative gameplay mechanisms, it enables players to engage in constructing their own “narrative of love” that reflects and coincides with specific cultural indicators. Bringing the dynamics of marriage and divorce to the forefront, the game has generated enormous discussion in mainstream Chinese online platforms, and drew attention to political-cultural notions of what it means to be married and then to struggle and go through the (emotional, practical, and legal) divorce process. The aim of this article is to approach video games such as It Takes Two as a cultural form that should be understood as part of our politics as citizens and individuals in a broad sense, and as part of a wider and more complex connection we have with each other and with society (Street, 2007). Drawing on an analysis of the function of gameplay mechanics in relation to video game setting and structure, this study provides a discussion of the visual and narrative representations of an ostensibly “typical” universal love and divorce issue within the sociocultural context of a Western family, and examines how Chinese audiences make sense of such “lessons” and ideology, and how they work (or might not work) for them. It Takes Two raises awareness of and questions about how games can elicit emotional responses and deep reflection in real life for its players about the vicissitudes of marriage (and love relationships in general) and the culturally specific, at times legal, and broadly visual political implications of their successful or disastrous unfolding.*

## KEYWORDS

Video games; Narrative; Interactivity; Participatory culture; *It Takes Two*; COVID-19 pandemic.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a surge in the popularity of various forms of entertainment in China, including games, movies, TV dramas, as well as a notable increase in the profile of the actors who are integral to these media modalities. This trend, known as “出圈” (chū quān) online, which refers to the fame of a celebrity or the

sub-cultural discursive narratives that transcend their fan community and reaching a broader audience. In terms of video games, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020), *It Takes Two* (2021), and *Elden Ring* (2022) are among the video games in China that have gained immense popularity, sparking significant online discussion. *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020), a life simulation game, has gained popularity in China for its soothing gameplay and themes of community, while *Elden Ring* (2022) attracts players with its expansive open-world design, challenging gameplay, and cooperative multiplayer component. Despite their unique appeals, these games, along with *It Takes Two* (2021), have managed to attract the attention of a considerable number of non-players and have ignited discussion in online spaces beyond the usual purview of their sub-cultural gaming communities.

This paper investigates the impact of popular video games on contemporary Chinese society, focusing on the factors contributing to their widespread appeal and the emergence of sub-cultural narratives. Through an online ethnographic study, it examines the gaming experience of Chinese players and their individual narrative construction during the Covid-19 pandemic, using the co-op video game, *It Takes Two* (2021), as a case study. The game's phenomenal success ("chu quan") and extensive online discussions among Chinese netizens, particularly regarding pandemic-induced shifts in human relationships, make it a relevant subject for analysis. These factors, along with the popularity and themes of togetherness present in such other games as *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*, for example, endow the game with significant relevance for analysis in the context of contemporary Chinese society. Interestingly, *Elden Ring*, though not primarily socially-oriented, also showcases togetherness as online audiences share experiences by watching others face challenges rather than struggling alone. This paper explores how social media and digital communication have facilitated widespread online narrative construction and sharing among a broader audience in the context of the pandemic in Chinese society.

Despite not being officially available in the Chinese market — *It Takes Two* does not have a publishing license or any official promotion in China — *It Takes Two* has achieved unexpected success in the country, with half of its sales coming from Chinese gamers. External journalist Daniel Camilo attributes the surge in popularity of *It Takes Two* to its thematic focus on concepts of family, love, and divorce, which has resonated with players in light of China's increasing divorce rates. China has experienced

declining marriage and birth rates, while divorce rates have surged, reaching a peak of 4.71 million couples in 2019 before dropping to 2.1 million in 2022 (Wang, 2023). The game's themes reflect the changing dynamics of relationships and family structures in China, demonstrating how video games can connect with players emotionally and culturally across borders. As a gamer and researcher, I am interested in exploring this phenomenon by closely observing Chinese video game players.

The specific aim of this article is to explore video games as cultural forms that should be comprehended as integral to our politics as citizens and individuals in a broad sense, and as part of a broader and more intricate connection we have with each other and with society. Therefore, by conceptualising gamers as a media “audience” (Gosling & Crawford, 2011), researchers can obtain valuable insights into the intricate interactions between gamers and how they utilise the games they play. To address the primary research questions posed in this article, an ethnographic study that combines game playing and observation with gamers and online communities is employed. For the analysis of *It Takes Two*'s narratives, I played this game twice between March 2022 and March 2023, experiencing it both with my partner and a friend. Through textual analysis of the game narrative, narrative interactivity, gameplay mechanics, storytelling, and embedded ideologies within the game, this paper provides a case study to discuss how Chinese gamers and audiences interpret pre-existing narratives and ideologies within games and how they work (or might not work) for them.

More broadly, this paper aims to add to the discursive field through an examination of video games as cultural phenomena by conducting a critical analysis of the cultural-political meaning occurring around *It Takes Two*. Rather than focusing on defining video game culture or studying the culture surrounding video games, this analysis will approach video games as a cultural form that requires an understanding of gaming subcultures marked by specific tastes (Schleiner, 2001; Shaw, 2010; Winkler, 2006), a specific appreciation of a unique art form (Jenkins, 2006; McLuhan, 1964), and as a social practice (Jenkins & Squire, 2002; Taylor, 2006). In these contexts, the study of games cannot be examined in isolation from the broader social and cultural structures of a specific society. To obtain its insights, the research herein will address the following questions. How do video game players negotiate the pre-programmed narratives and the ideological messages conveyed by game creators? How do players construct individual narratives about love and relationships on social media?

(particularly Bilibili, which is chosen for its prominence in and impact on Chinese society). What function does narrative serve in gaming experiences? And how can it be understood as a socio-ideological phenomenon beyond the confines of video games? In the context of these inquiries lie considerations of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on people's daily lives and the influence of video games—using the widespread success in China of the otherwise narratively-odd game *It Takes Two* as a case study—for their capacity to elicit emotional responses and deep reflections by their players and observers in the real world.

Indeed, over the last decade, scholars in the field of cultural studies have examined social meanings generated around video games, prompted by the experiences of ludic engagement (Vella, 2015; Selander, 2008; Christopher and Leuszler, 2023b), the impact of producers on games from the perspective of political economy (Kerr, 2006; Nieborg, 2014), the role of players in narrative construction and cultural meaning-making (Gee, 2003; Jenkins, 2004; Murray, 1997; Rutter, 2004), and the importance of societal norms and desires (Consalvo, 2003; Taylor, 2009; Leonard, 2004; Kocurek, 2015). Such scholars have further identified several issues as crucial for understanding the impact of video games on society and culture, including their role in the construction of cultural identity (at least within their cult-oriented player communities) (Gee, 2008; Muriel & Crawford, 2018; Newman, 2008; Schwartz, 2006), the negotiation of gender issues (Feng et al., 2007; Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Murray, 2007; Williams et al., 2009; Shaw, 2014), the global effect of colonialism (Mukherjee, 2017), the global spread of capitalism (Dyer-Witheford and Peuter, 2009), virtual environments (Kozlov & Johansen, 2010; Steed & Oliveira, 2009), and ludic narratives and the de facto agency of players to navigate them (Bogost, 2007; Jenkins, 2006; Murray, 2004; Ryan, 2006). With these contributions in mind, the consideration of the popularisation of this game in China requires attention to the unique circumstances of its historical moment. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic not only posed a serious threat to people's health and well-being but also greatly impacted social order and people's daily lives. During this period, people have used social media to share their personal experiences and emotions, further contributing to the broader narratives presented by the government and mainstream media. These individual narratives serve as records and memories of the pandemic experience; a part of the production of

social narratives that have prompted a rethinking of normative interpersonal family relations, bonding, friendship, marriage issues, etc.

In the following, I first situate this study in relation to the growing scholarship of game interactivity and narrative, as well as the role of social media in connecting players' emotions through providing interactive opportunities. Based on the methodological approach outlined in greater specificity below, I will explain the development of *It Takes Two* in China and how it has become an important text for Chinese netizens to discuss and construct emotional narratives. I will emphasise how Chinese players negotiate and construct their own narratives on Bilibili. I will also address the role and importance of interactive narrative in video games. Overall, the findings of this study suggest that video games are an increasingly relevant medium for cultural analysis, particularly in relation to their political implications, which are often discursively subverted into their broader acceptance as mere low art (Christopher & Leuzler, 2023a; Cover, 2006; Juul, 2013). By examining the ways in which video games contribute to the construction of individual narratives, researchers can critically examine the role of video games as rhetorical cultural artefacts, while also considering the broader social and political contexts in which they are situated. Ultimately, and most broadly, this article argues that a nuanced understanding of video games as cultural artefacts can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of society and culture as a whole.

## **2. Literature review: From 'active-gamers' to 'active creators'**

This paper offers a theoretical framework to gain insights into the complex world of digital gaming culture—the complex interactions between gamers and their uses of the games that they play. Moreover, Crawford & Gosling (2011) have put forth the idea of conceptualising gamers as more of a media “audience” as opposed to their typical understanding as interactive-associative media *users*, thereby opening up avenues to explore literature on media audiences and fan cultures beyond the activities of the gamers proper. To a large extent, the Internet and video games grew together as largely symbiotic new media forms, each supporting and helping the other grow (Crawford & Gosling, 2011); and today, that strong relationship remains well intact. Online platforms such as YouTube and Bilibili are all packed with gaming channels, which provide the opportunity for gamers to upload videos of themselves playing or

reviewing games, share the production of walkthroughs, mods, fan art and fiction, new games, hacks, game guides, reviews, interpretations, cosplaying, and so on. While both platforms enable gamers to share content such as walkthroughs, mods, fan art, and reviews, Bilibili's distinctive "bullet screen" (danmu) system sets it apart. Bilibili's bullet screen system displays real-time comments directly on videos, fostering a dynamic and interactive experience for viewers. This feature encourages user engagement and creates a sense of community.

Today, video gaming is so much more than simply the interaction of one or a few individuals with a video game machine, and has become one of the key examples and drivers of a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2004; Newman, 2004). Jenkins (2004) argues that participatory culture has brought about a significant cultural transformation, moving away from a passive audience of consumers to a more active culture where the boundaries between production and consumption are blurred. In the context of video games, players, therefore, "do not merely consume a pre-established piece of media but are active participants in the creation of their experience" (Calleja, 2011, p. 56). This interactive and productive nature of gaming enables players to develop not only artefacts and texts but also online communities (Banks & Potts, 2010; Behrenshausen, 2013; Taylor, 2006). The growing importance of social interactions and online communities in the gaming industry is evidenced by the increasing number of individuals who share their gaming experiences on social media platforms and within fan communities. This trend has been facilitated by new digital technologies that provide tools for communication and collaboration, enabling both gamers and non-gamers to participate in and propagate massive communal narrative worlds (Baym, 2010; Jenkins, 2004). This cultural phenomenon raises important questions about the nature of gaming, interactivity, and storytelling, as well as the role of narrative both within and beyond the realm of games, which are central to the primary research questions of this paper.

The discourse surrounding whether digital games have a definite narrative structure has been a topic of discussion amongst ludologists and narratologists for some time now. Although this debate may be perceived as less prominent in current discourse, its examination remains valuable as it highlights the narratological perspective in game studies (such as Jenkins, 2004; Murray, 1997). This approach allows researchers to analyse games as "text," using theoretical tools borrowed from

literary or media studies. It focuses not only on the story being told but also on underlying ideologies, discourses, patterns of reception, interpretation, and so on (Crawford & Gosling, 2009). At its simplest, a narrative can be defined as consisting of two elements—a ‘discourse’ and a ‘story.’ The story provides the material for the narrative, but the way in which the narrative is constructed is influenced by the discourses involved (Carr, 2006). According to Jenkins (2004, p. 121), critics who oppose the narratological approach often pay more attention to “the activities and aspirations of the storyteller” than the actual process of narrative comprehension. However, these critics fail to acknowledge that narratives go beyond the medium they are presented in, whether it is a book or a screen, for example.

Building on this understanding of narratives in digital games, Nitsche (2008) explains the concept of ‘ludonarrative’, closely related to our previous discussion. This concept focuses on the intersection between gameplay and storytelling in video games, examining how they work together to create immersive experiences for players. Ideally, gameplay and narrative should complement each other, but sometimes they can conflict, resulting in “ludonarrative dissonance” (Hocking, 2007). Game developers aim to create harmonious ludonarrative experiences by integrating story elements into gameplay mechanics, offering meaningful choices to players, and using environmental storytelling to support the game's themes. Games like *The Last of Us* (2013), *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), *Life is Strange* (2015) exemplify the effective integration of ludonarrative, blending gameplay and narrative elements to craft immersive and engaging experiences for players.

Scholars in game studies have contributed to the critical evaluation of interactivity in video games. In the context of horror video game narratives, for example, Christopher and Leuszler (2023a) identify nuanced forms of ludic interactivity that distinguish the ludic elements of “participation” from so-called “transportation.” Similarly, but more immediately relevant here, rather than treating “interactivity” as a singular phenomenon, Zimmerman (2004) identified four models of interactivity through its pairing with narrative experience: cognitive interactivity, functional interactivity, explicit interactivity, and meta-interactivity. The last two have received more attention from scholars, particularly in the context of participatory culture, where they discuss the fourth mode, meta-interactivity, or cultural participation with

a text. Interactive elements play a vital role in video games as they allow for user participation, resulting in a more engaging and immersive gaming experience.

When situating game narrative within the context of participatory culture, it is imperative to ascertain two crucial characteristics of video games, namely interactivity and narrative, and their interdependence. The two features are inextricably linked, as interactivity allows for the player to actively engage with the narrative and shape their own experience. This interdependence has been recognised by scholars such as Marie-Laure Ryan (2004), who argues that video games are a unique form of narrative that combines storytelling with a participatory game world.

While gamer interactivity is viewed as productive in participatory culture, interactivity within video games is seen as underpinned by “democratisation of participation” (Cover 2004, p. 174), saluted with its liberating potentials. It is the third mode mentioned by Zimmerman, the explicit interactivity, or participation with designed choices and procedures in a text, including choices, random events, dynamic simulations, and other procedures programmed into the interactive experience. The interactivity feature in video games allows players to become active agents in the game world, enabling them to shape the narrative through their choices and actions (Zimmerman, 2004). In this context, the concept of interactivity is commonly used to describe the agency of players or player control in video games studies. Some scholars suggest “the notion of interactivity means that the decisions and skills of the player will move the story in a certain direction” (Sawyer et al., 1998, p. 112), thereby allowing the player to change the game as it is played. Janet Murray has argued that agency in video games is not only a matter of player control, but also involves the player's ability to shape the game world and its narrative. From this point, agency can be summarised as what produces changes and transformations in reality (Murray, 1997). According to Janet Murray, this form of agency is both empowering and transformative, as it allows players to experiment with different identities and explore new possibilities. The concept of agency in video game studies is closely tied to the interactivity feature within games. The discussion of agency in video game studies sheds light on the unique appeal of video games as interactive media, where players have the ability to actively participate and influence the virtual worlds they inhabit.

Nevertheless, a tension exists between the *interactivity* of video game stories, which allows players to alter them, and the *narratives* constructed by the designers.



Interactivity has changed the way digital media tells stories, and that is something not taken into account by legacy media narrative theory (Koenitz, 2015). Game narratives, which shoulder the responsibility of giving impetus to the game flow, impose restraints on how the player can interact with the virtual world, as they are not given the agency to change the game's structure and design. This tension between player agency and designer control highlights the importance of understanding the interplay between interactivity and narrative in video games. As players engage with the narrative through their actions, on a micro-narrative level at least, they are also shaping the narrative itself. Even though in almost all video games the overall narrative offers limited choices towards an often-singular game "ending", the choices players make and the paths they take while playing create a unique experience that is different from other players. This personalised experience is what makes video games an exciting and dynamic storytelling medium.

Ultimately, the relationship between interactivity and narrative in video games is a complex and multifaceted one. It requires an understanding of the different models of interactivity and how they interact with narrative, as well as a careful consideration of the balance between player agency and designer control. By exploring and understanding these dynamics, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the unique storytelling potential of video games. In light of the emphasis on video game interactivity and the significance of player choices in existing research, questioning the importance of game narrative in contemporary gaming is inevitable.

### **3. Research Method**

In the study of media culture phenomena, ethnography has been a common methodology for examining audience reception of television programmes, using participant observation to explore audiences' reading of a particular text (Ang, 1985; Radway, 1984)—how they interpret the "information" received; how to express their agreement or opposition to the ideology in the text, create a sense of self, and imagine other realities (Hall, 1983/1996); and how they organise social, political, and economic activities around the media. Ethnographic research on online practices and communications has become increasingly popular in recent years due to the growing influence and prevalence of the Internet in people's daily lives.

This study specifically utilises online ethnography (Baym, 2000; Hills, 2002) to explore the online engagement of Chinese gamers, focusing on their life on the screen rather than their life in front of the screen (Facer et al., 2001; Livingstone, 2003). In particular, I will follow Matt Hills' model of online ethnography, examining specific modes of "communication" and "interaction" that are allowed and promoted in online platforms (Bilibili), and assessing the presence of other forms of interaction, creativity, and critique. The incorporation of an online ethnography approach to collecting data was useful in identifying and locating the audience for conducting this research and in accessing players' engagement with *It Takes Two*. This method allowed for an in-depth exploration without interfering with the perspectives of video game players. Online ethnography permits researchers to unobtrusively examine players' behaviours, interactions, and experiences within their native digital environments. By immersing in online communities and gaming domains, researchers acquire insights without affecting players' actions or views. This non-invasive methodology ensures authentic data collection, accurately representing players' experiences and fostering a thorough comprehension of the subject matter.

After searching for "It Takes Two" on Bilibili, the recommendation system displayed various sorting options including comprehensive ranking, most views, latest releases, most bullet comments, and most favourites. However, regardless of the selected filter, the platform only displayed 1,020 videos, which equates to 34 pages, with 30 videos per page. To narrow down the search, this study focused on videos under 10 minutes long that belonged to the gaming category and were sorted by the highest number of views. By implementing this filtering process, the aim is to exclude from the research scope videos made by professional gaming streamers. Without limiting the video duration, the recommended videos suggested by the system would mostly consist of content from popular gaming streamers, with a significant number of views well exceeding an average of 2,000,000 views. This article focuses on ordinary users who create videos to share and express themselves. After viewing most of the selected videos, I noticed that certain keywords appeared recurrently in the titles, following a specific formula. These will be visually presented in four groups later in this article. Using this information, I narrowed down the sample size to 50 videos that represent the category. The search terms used in this study were biased towards Chinese-language videos, leading to the majority of video creators being based in Mainland China. This article analyses how a specific sector of

Chinese gamers constructs narratives of love and relationships. The subjects of the sampled videos are freely available on Bilibili and may also be accessible on other platforms like TikTok or Sina Weibo.

Similar to other methods used in researching YouTube videos (e.g. Ellis, 2012; Banet-Weiser, 2011; Dobson, 2016), my study employs discursive textual analysis to examine the recurring narrative and aesthetic patterns that influence the presentation of “relationship” in these videos. This analysis focuses on various aspects, including but not limited to the use of time, editing, imagery, camera angles, and sound. I converted the titles and textual explanations of the videos created by the users into text to identify the discursive techniques used to influence the perception of the stories. While I examined the comments posted by Bilibili users to understand their reactions towards the videos and games discussed, I did not conduct a comprehensive analysis of these comments. Feedback comments will only be addressed if they highlight conflicting interpretations of the videos.

### ***5. It Takes Two: A co-op video game***

In order to examine how video game players perceive pre-programmed narratives and how to develop and construct new ones, *It Takes Two* (2021) will be analysed. Released in 2021, *It Takes Two* was created by the Swedish developer Hazelight Studios and published by the American gaming giant Electronic Arts. Like Hazelight’s debut game, *A Way Out*, *It Takes Two* does not offer a single-player mode and can only be played through online or local split-screen cooperative multiplayer modes. By February 2023, the game had sold over 10 million copies, making it a commercially successful product on a global scale. It won multiple year-end accolades, including two BAFTA awards, Best Multiplayer Game at the Golden Joystick Awards in 2021, and the Game of the Year at The Game Awards 2021 and the 25th Annual D.I.C.E. Awards. In addition, *It Takes Two* won Game of the Year 2021 at the Bilibili Game Awards in China.

Two dimensions of ludic narrative emerge as significant in this analysis because they provide insights into the narrative experience of playing *It Takes Two*: pre-programmed narratives and user-generated narratives. The game narrative is intrinsically intertwined with the game mechanics and revolves around the central theme of a marital relationship within an American middle-class family. Nevertheless, Chinese players may not be receptive to the ideological messages concerning love and

relationships that the game conveys, as evidenced by their resistance to the 'text' on Bilibili. Interactivities within the game are prioritised through its design, fostering a framework for collaborative play that has attracted a significant player base in China.

### **5.1. Pre-programmed narrative and narrative interactivity**

Game narrative plays a central role in exploring storytelling within video games, focusing on the "what" and "how" of stories told in games. Storytelling is an important aspect of game mechanics that can significantly impact users' immersion and interaction experiences by embedding narrative elements like characters, story worlds, emotions, and narrative interfaces (Bizzochi, 2007). While game narrative provides a basic structure created by developers, its development relies on the user's imagination and emotional engagement. In a response to the debate about the relationship between game narrative and gameplay, the pre-programmed narrative of *It Takes Two* offers an interesting case demonstrating how ludic narratives are crafted to enhance gameplay.

Scholars have emphasised the importance of balancing narrative and gameplay to achieve a state of immersion and engagement. It is widely acknowledged among scholars that in traditional cinematic storytelling, there exists a state of mutual detachment between interactivity and narrative. If too much emphasis is placed on the narrative, the player may become passive and only observe the story. Conversely, if too much focus is placed on gameplay, it can absorb cognitive resources, leaving little room for the player to perceive complex narrative patterns (Adams, 2010). Therefore, achieving an inverse distribution of interactive and non-interactive content is key to striking a balance between gameplay and narrative. An increasing number of narrative games that captivate players seem to suggest a clear direction: game narrative should be conveyed through every action, interaction, and gameplay within the game.

*It Takes Two* is a game (Figure 1) that has recently garnered attention for its seamless integration of game narrative and interactive gameplay mechanics, providing a gaming experience that exceeds previous games and interactive devices in both scale and richness. The game narrative of *It Takes Two* actually mirrors the typical three-act restorative structure of modern commercial cinema (Dancyger & Rush, 1995), which includes a beginning (the first act), a conflict (the second act), and the resolution of the conflict (the third act). It tells a simple story about a couple on the brink of divorce (the first act), who, after going through a fantastical journey of self-reflection (the second

act), rediscover their love for each other (the third act). The narrative involves a bizarre co-op obstacle course that Hazelight describes as “a metaphorical merging of gameplay and narrative that pushes the boundaries of interactive storytelling.” In this game, the narrative unfolds entirely within the gameplay itself, where the stages, mechanics, and puzzles of the game drive the storytelling.



**Fig. 1.** Split screen shows the interactive gameplay that encourages collaboration and communication in *It Takes Two*. © **Electronic Arts, Hazelight Studios.**

The game begins with a married couple, May and Cody, getting into an argument, after which they inform their daughter that they are getting a divorce. While playing with dolls in the form of her parents, Rose's tears fall on them, causing in May and Cody to be transported into their cloth counterparts. The couple is then greeted by *The Book of Love*, who explains that he is Rose's guardian and will not allow May and Cody back into their bodies until they reconcile their differences and attempt to rekindle their love. This divorce-themed narrative incorporates cooperative gameplay elements, where two players must work together to navigate seven dreamscape levels. These levels are filled with platforming, puzzles, and distinctive combat challenges. The game also features a very intricate, story-driven narrative filled with plenty of twists and turns.

The gameplay has been expertly designed to complement its interactive storytelling needs, reflecting the central theme of collaboration in a marital relationship. The methods of using these elements and solving the puzzles offer a ludic reflection of the game's overall theme of "cooperation." Indeed, the character Dr. Hakim from the book explicitly exclaims, "This is a story of collaboration!" as Cody and May escape from a large, enraged mandrill in an orange onesie, a sentiment that is prominently echoed throughout the entire game. Regardless of the gameplay or

cinematic elements, everything serves the story about "a couple on the brink of divorce and their journey to rediscover their love for each other." Jenkins (2004) describes this type of narrative as "embedded narrative," which involves integrating scripted narrative components within a game to create a backdrop for the story. In this context, the game space transforms into a memory palace, requiring the player to interpret its contents and piece together the storyline. The game designer has meticulously crafted seven distinct chapters: the Shed, the Tree, Rose's Room, Cuckoo Clock, Snow Globe, the Garden, and the Attic. These chapters are carefully set around the protagonists' residence and objects that hold great significance within the story. Each chapter corresponds to a critical phase in the couple's relationship. The game's two-player cooperative gameplay is perfectly aligned with its narrative philosophy. Every action and level completion are focused on rebuilding trust, familiarity, and synergy between the two characters. The game's two-player cooperative gameplay requires players to work closely together, communicate effectively, and rely on each other's strengths to progress through the game, reinforcing the significance of teamwork and collaboration in relationships.



**Fig. 2.** Mini-games: Musical Chairs. © Electronic Arts, Hazelight Studios.

While completing missions that follow a predetermined storyline is important in gaming, it is the cooperation and interaction between players that truly engage them in the game. In *It Takes Two*, the gameplay mechanics are designed to complement the narrative by providing challenges that require teamwork and communication. Players must collaborate to solve puzzles, requiring effective communication and attentive listening. Along with a plethora of teamwork-centric puzzles and "bosses", the game

also features 25 mini-games that encourage players to explore the space and compete against each other (Figure 2). These mini-games, which are narrative interactivities interspersed throughout the story, allow players to actively shape and influence the story as it unfolds. By doing so, they offer a refreshing change of pace and further enhance the game's immersive qualities. While game narrative can be expressed through various mediums such as language, sound, visuals, and filmic techniques, its unique significance lies in the concept of narrative interactivity. Narrative interactivity refers to the participation of users in a text through design procedures, including choices, random events, dynamic simulations, and other programmed interactive experiences (Zimmerman, 2004). Such non-linear gameplay often enables and fosters emergent narratives (Muriel & Crawford, 2018), granting players the freedom to explore the game universe and act without adhering to a pre-established script.

Under such conditions, the game incorporates several ideological thematics, including love, collaboration, and perseverance. Among these, love is the primary theme that holds a prominent place in the game's narrative. The game portrays love as a powerful force that can overcome any obstacle, even when a relationship is on the brink of collapse. The game's narrative constantly reinforces this theme, especially in the way that it requires players to work co-operatively to overcome challenges encountered throughout the gameplay. The game posits that successful and fulfilling relationships require effort and persistence, but with the right mindset, they can be achieved. The therapy sessions facilitated by Dr. Hakim ('Book of Love') delve into issues surrounding time, passion, and attraction, providing a comprehensive framework for players to reflect on their relationship-building skills (see Figure 3). The narrative approach of "Three Lessons to Save a Broken Relationship" is interwoven into the gameplay mechanics, requiring players to exercise prosocial relationship behaviours to play effectively. Throughout the game, players are immersed in a rich emotional experience that is activated through interactive gameplay.





**Fig. 3.** Dr. Hakim's therapy sessions in *It Takes Two*. ©  
Electronic Arts, Hazelight Studios.

Moreover, the game narrative also addresses gender ideology within a Western context by challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The game narrative empowers both Cody and May by granting them equal agency and enabling them to contribute equally to their journey. Through the struggles of communication and understanding that Cody and May face, the game explores the gendered power dynamics that often exist within romantic relationships. By reflecting on these dynamics, players are encouraged to consider the ways in which gender roles and expectations may impact their own relationships. The game's collaborative puzzles emphasise the importance of working through relationship problems and not giving up when things get tough. Ultimately, *It Takes Two* suggests that love is not simply a feeling but an action that requires effort and dedication.

While *It Takes Two* offers insights into relationship-building skills and encourages players to consider gender roles and expectations in their own relationships, the game's representation of gender normativity and relationship structures is limiting. The game's narrative focuses on a heterosexual, bourgeois, married couple, potentially excluding players who identify with diverse sexual orientations or relationship structures. There is no option in the game to allow, for example, two gay men to play as a couple, which would have contributed to a more inclusive and democratic representation of relationships. This absence highlights the need for further consideration and expansion of diverse relationship representations within video games. Additionally, the depiction of women in the game, especially in the "girlfriend" role, often diminishes or trivialise their gaming skills and experiences. This representation reinforces certain gender stereotypes and could limit the potential for



players to fully explore and challenge traditional gender roles and expectations. Addressing these issues could contribute to a richer, more inclusive gaming experience that encourages players to think critically about the various dimensions of relationships and gender dynamics.

Beyond these identity-based shortcomings, however, *It Takes Two* is a remarkable example of how game narrative and gameplay can be integrated to offer a unique and immersive experience for players. The game highlights the significance of communication, cooperation, and trust in a marital relationship, while also demonstrating the potential for video games to deliver impactful and emotional narratives. While the narrative and interactivity of video games are widely discussed, there tends to be less focus on players' personal gameplay experiences and everyday practices related to narrative and interactivity.

## **5.2. 'My/Our story': gamers constructing narratives of love on Bilibili**

Although the interactive gaming experience is often celebrated as a form of the "democratisation of participation," it is important to explore the cultural meaning generated from user-created videos on platforms like Bilibili. These videos offer deeper insights into players' perspectives and experiences, shedding light on the nuances of gaming culture. Players use various methods on social media platforms to reinterpret and share their gaming experiences. One approach involves exchanging game videos and commenting on them. This exchange not only helps other players understand the game better but also enables the discovery of additional details and stories within the game. Another approach involves creating original content, such as images, videos, and written pieces, which enables players to express their thoughts and imaginative interpretations of the game world.

Herein are samples of a series of videos that provide a resource for analysing gamers' personal narratives regarding love and relationships with respect to their experiences with gaming. These narratives are situated within the broader context of everyday online practices on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Love, as a complex and multifaceted experience, can be challenging to navigate. Closely examining the personal narratives of Chinese gamers regarding love reveals a deeper understanding of their relational patterns and behaviours.

Based on an analysis of the titles of 1,020 user-generated videos on Bilibili, this study classified the most frequently-appearing indicative words and phrases into two main categories: descriptive gameplay and emotional narrative (see Figure 4).

Descriptive gameplay		Emotional narrative	
game narrative	live streaming	'elephant'	broke-up
game walkthrough	gaming streamer	amuse	divorce
hidden level	friends pass	romantic adventure	love
mini game	Link EA Account	girlfriend	couples
completion	Co-op game	tacit	hilarious
pre-recorded	singer player	rescue	become enemies

**Fig. 4.** Indicative key words and phrases from the titles of user-created videos on Bilibili between March 2022 to March 2023.

The high-frequency vocabulary found in the “descriptive gameplay” category indicates that a significant portion of the videos were created to share gaming experiences and strategies. On the other hand, videos containing words from the “emotional narrative” category tend to convey a heightened emotional resonance through their content and storytelling. Analysis of the second category shows that pre-programmed narratives and divorce-themed storylines have declined in popularity on Bilibili. Notions concerned with collective viewing and interaction also permeate the discourse, whereby watching others play the game becomes a gaming experience in itself. It is not necessary to have prior knowledge of the game or to play it personally to participate in this collective experience. The creators of these videos often construct their stories through a combination of moving images and accompanying audio, such as in-game footage recorded by players or amusing moments captured from a boyfriend’s perspective while his girlfriend plays games. While textual descriptions are not commonly used, the videos do convey a sense of authenticity and documentary-style realism. Many similar videos also exist on other social platforms, such as TikTok.

The selected sample videos in general shares a similar narrative. They were chosen to showcase the co-op gaming experience with a ‘girlfriend’ from a male perspective. Overall, these videos often portray the ‘girlfriend’ as either clumsy and inexperienced in gaming or as a hardcore gamer who defeats her boyfriend in the game. Evidently, the former represents a greater proportion. This could take the form of a gentle reminder to cherish life and avoid making the girlfriend angry (“Cherish life, don’t

upset your girlfriend”); a playful teasing that showcases the ostensibly ‘adorable’ side of having a ‘silly’ girlfriend (“When your non-gamer girlfriend starts playing *It Takes Two*”); or a caring approach that emphasises the importance of patience and teamwork in overcoming the game together (“we make a great team,” “our cooperation is seamless”). The bid to share gaming experiences with a girlfriend can also be interpreted as a longing for empathy, resonance, and support in a space where they can *get away* from the notion of *reality* (Calleja, 2010). In the context of social distancing, where physical interactions with loved ones are limited, these videos also serve as a means for individuals to connect and bond with others virtually, even if they cannot do so in person. It highlights the importance of these videos in providing a sense of community and belonging.

The study shows that video gamers are not solitary individuals but are capable of sharing and constructing collective experiences about video games in various ways. As such, this article highlights the development of an agency that is collectively articulated and digitally mediated through participatory culture (Budgeon, 2003). From a gamer’s perspective, “the importance of gaming is never about the game itself when you embark on a journey with your girlfriend,” and “having someone to play games with must be such a joyful experience.”

## 6. Conclusion

Video games, as evolving narrative media, hold significance not only in interactive design but also in fostering social activities and connections beyond gameplay. While game narratives may impose constraints on player interaction with the virtual world, understanding these narratives in a broader participatory culture requires focusing on players’ personal gameplay experiences that are produced, shared, and circulated within online media platforms. The gaming experience has shifted from merely playing games to encompassing who we play with, how, and where we gain experience. By viewing video games as comprehensive experiences that go beyond gameplay to include participatory culture, personal experiences, and social activities, we can gain a deeper understanding of the narrative’s role, player agency, and the influence of online media platforms on shaping game narratives.

If, as Jenkins (2006) argues, gamers can be considered both consumers and producers, then they are audiences engaged in an *active* process of “decoding” the

ideological messages that are “encoded” in a media text (Hall, 1980) whereby gamers reject, reinterpret, and/or negotiate the “meaning” of the original text. Through the active engagement of players, *It Takes Two* challenges players to question the cultural norms and expectations surrounding relationships, while also encouraging them to reflect on their own experiences and beliefs. By doing so, the game highlights the potential for video games to serve as a powerful medium for social commentary and change.

By examining the co-op game *It Takes Two* (2021) and its diverse narratives reconstructed by Chinese gamers, this research highlights the importance of understanding video games as valuable cultural artefacts that contribute to our comprehension of ourselves, society, and the broader political landscape. While game texts may reinforce conventional notions of love and relationships, individual narratives outside of video games can challenge and expand our understanding of these concepts. From this perspective, this article has explored the impact of video games as cultural forms on contemporary Chinese society, especially considering the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased longing for love and connection. The pandemic has accentuated the significance of narratives within specific social, political environments, and historical moments. Through playing games such as *It Takes Two* (2021), *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020) and *Elden Ring* (2022), and observing the diverse interpretations generated by players, we can appreciate the impact of these narratives and their influence on our understanding of relationships, identity, and societal norms.

Moreover, comparing the pre-programmed narratives in *It Takes Two* with the individual narratives created outside of the game, foregrounds the complex interplay between containment and resistance, as well as the challenges and expansions to conventional notions of love and relationships. Scholars have recognised the crucial conceptual and political role of self-representation in shaping subjectivity in the context of digital media. This has involved examining how such practices compare to, challenge, or respond to the established representational discourses of mainstream media (Thumim, 2015). In this context, the study of the narratives analysed in this paper shows that they offer sophisticated and complex constructions of individual and collective identity. These constructions navigate between containment and resistance,

situated along a continuum, showcasing the dynamic nature of player engagement with mainstream ideologies and norms.

Furthermore, the analysis of self-representation in digital media contexts demonstrates the crucial conceptual and political role it plays in shaping individual and collective identities. It is time to rethink what gaming experiences and communication mean to us in the real world. Interpreting video games as experiences opens up a vast field of theoretical and practical possibilities, and plays a central role in discerning the different aspects—material, symbolic, political, and social—that constitute video games as culture. For this game, it attempts to establish a narrative of how couples drift apart and the powers that can hold people together, arriving, unsurprisingly, after a year of pandemic social distancing, at this challenging time. Summarily, *It Takes Two* raises awareness and questions on how games can connect us emotionally in real life, rather than how we fall apart in a relationship.

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