Kindness Coins, or Chemistry Casino?
A New Take on Romantic & Sexual Narrative Design

Michelle Clough
Talespinners
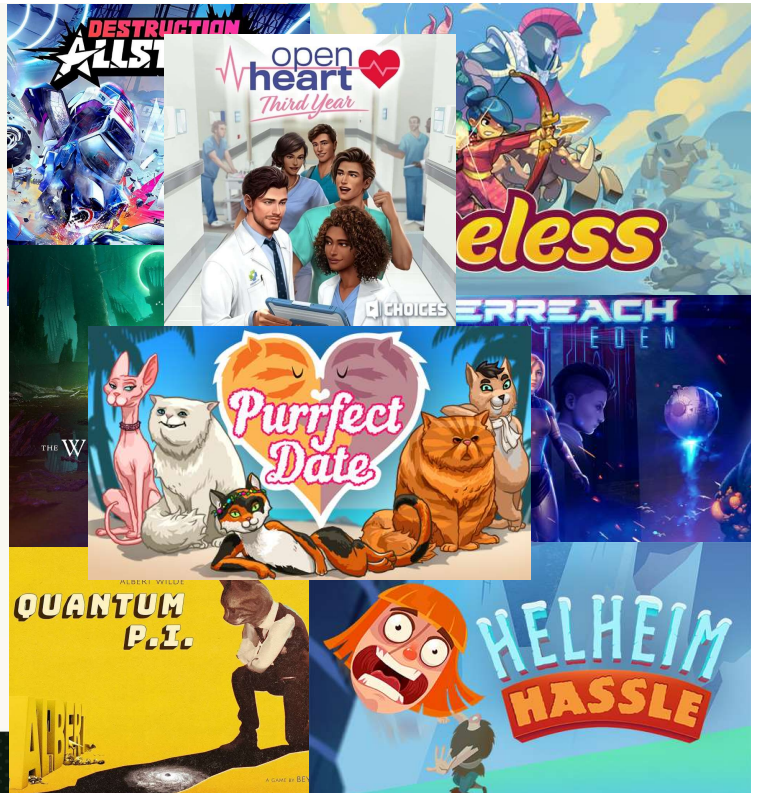**michelle@talespinners.co.uk**

#GDC22

Introduction

•Hello, everyone, thanks for coming to my talk on kindness coin design! Wishing I was there with you, but thinking of you all.

•My name is Michelle Clough.

•I'm a game writer, editor, narrative designer, and partner in the narrative co-op Talespinners

- I've worked on a variety of titles, including some romantic interactive fiction

Who Am I?

- Writer
- Editor
- Narrative Designer
- Partner in Talespinners Studio

Introduction
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- I've worked on a variety of titles, including ***some romantic interactive fiction. Relevant, because…

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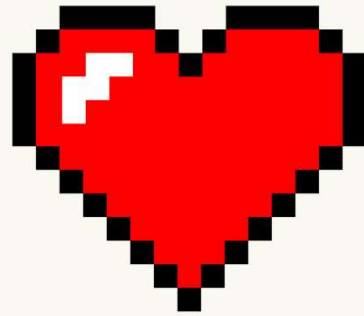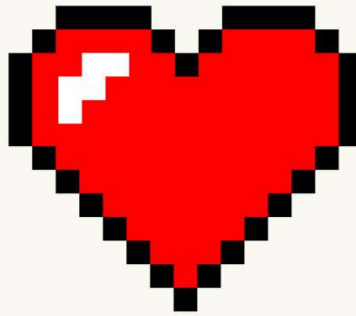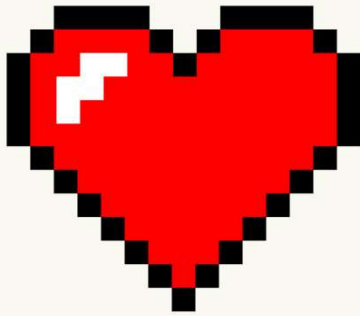
- IGDA Romance and Sexuality Special Interest Group
  - Co-founder (w/ Heidi McDonald) and chair

- **FERIM - F**orum for **E**rotic and **R**omantic **I**nteractive **M**edia
  - Co-founder (w/ Zsuzsa James, Souha Al-Samkari, Monica Fan, Antonin Fusco) and chair

•I am really, really into romance, sex appeal, and sexual content in games
- I co-founded and chair the IGDA special interest group for Romance and Sexuality
- As well as our **Discord-based community, which is being relaunched as the Forum for Erotic and Romantic Interactive Media, or FERIM

•****I've also talked about sex and sex appeal at GDC before… a lot.
- Somehow I talked my way into writing a book on the subject
  - It's called Passion and Play, due out on April 14th, and you can check it out at the bookstore, with a discount for preorder!
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Who Am I?

Holy crap, I wrote a book?!

* Release Date: April 14, 2022

* CRC Press/Taylor Francis

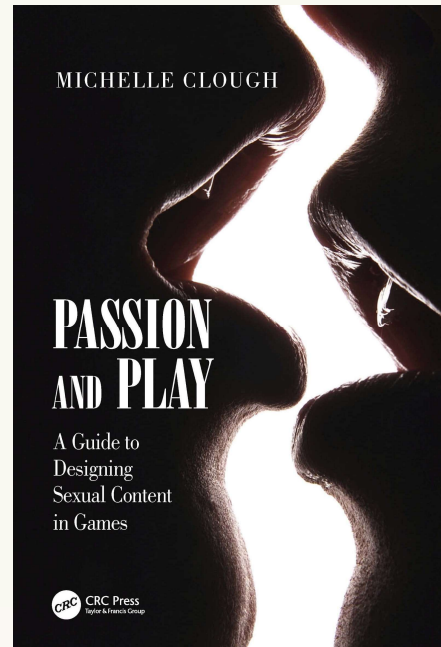* Preorders available at bookstore (with discount)

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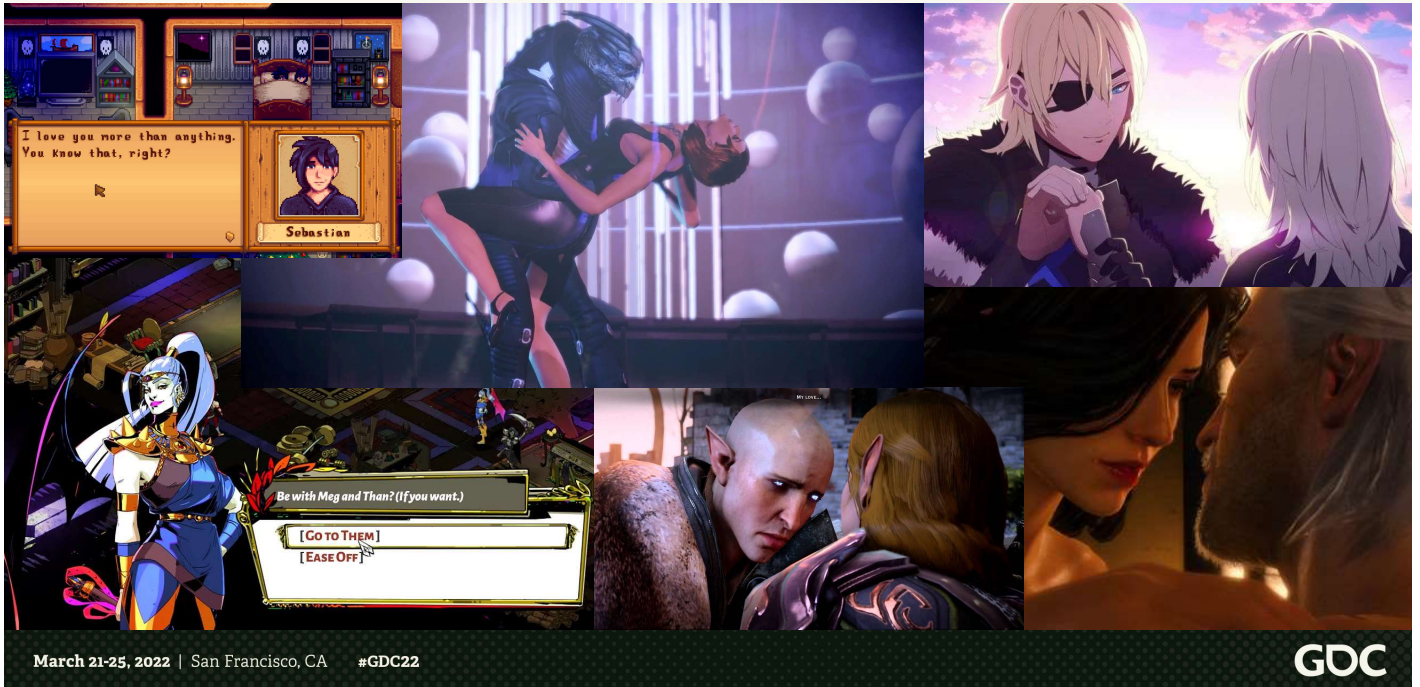
Kindness Coins!

Kindness coins!

•Many of you have heard of them, and even if not, chances are you've encountered them in some of your favorite games

- • It's an extremely popular design for romantic/sexual content both in indie & AAA
- • but it brings a lot of… ***baggage
- • And while many kindness coin romances are compelling, emotional, and sexy, it's often due to the writers being awesome in SPITE of KC, not because of them

Good romances… but "bad" mechanic?

I love you more than anything.
You know that, right?

Sebastian

Be with Meg and Than? (If you want.)

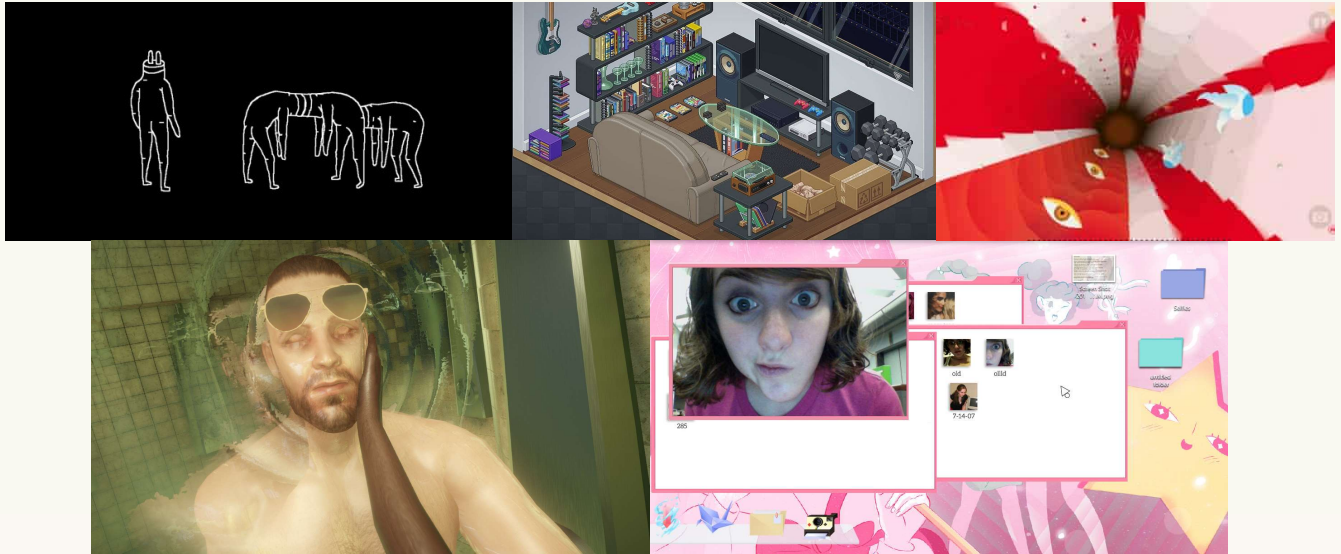[GO TO THEM]
[EASE OFF]

MY LOVE...

GDC

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(now, many games…)

Exploring different mechanics entirely

GDC

•Now, many games reject kindness coin design entirely and embrace completely different gameplay and narrative systems to explore love and sex, which is great
•But ***this talk looks at how we can create systems and structures that are LIKE kindness coins, but with more organic chemistry, nuanced relationship dynamics… and less potential for ick.

WE CAN REBUILD IT.
WE HAVE THE TECHNOLOGY.
WE CAN MAKE IT BETTER THAN IT WAS.
BETTER, SWEETER, SEXIER.

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Today's Talk Outline

1. Kindness Coins
- How do they work?
- The good and the bad

2. Fun With Chemistry
- Endless narrative possibility

3. Model 1: Chemistry Card Tower
- Building 🔥tension🔥 reliably
- Kindness Coins 2.0?

4. Model 2: Chemistry Casino
- Rolling the dice
- Subverting the loop

- So this talk is going to cover
  - kindness coins: what they are, why they're bad, why they're sometimes good.
  - ***Next, we'll discuss the narrative benefits and possibilities of moving away from generic kindness and into character-specific chemistry
  - Finally, we'll explore ***two models that re-imagine the old kindness coin approach through that chemistry
    - One reframes the format to reliably build romantic/sexual tension
    - The other ***subverts the format in favor of unpredictability and chance

YEAH. WE HAD A SYSTEM
BUT IT KIND OF BROKE DOWN.
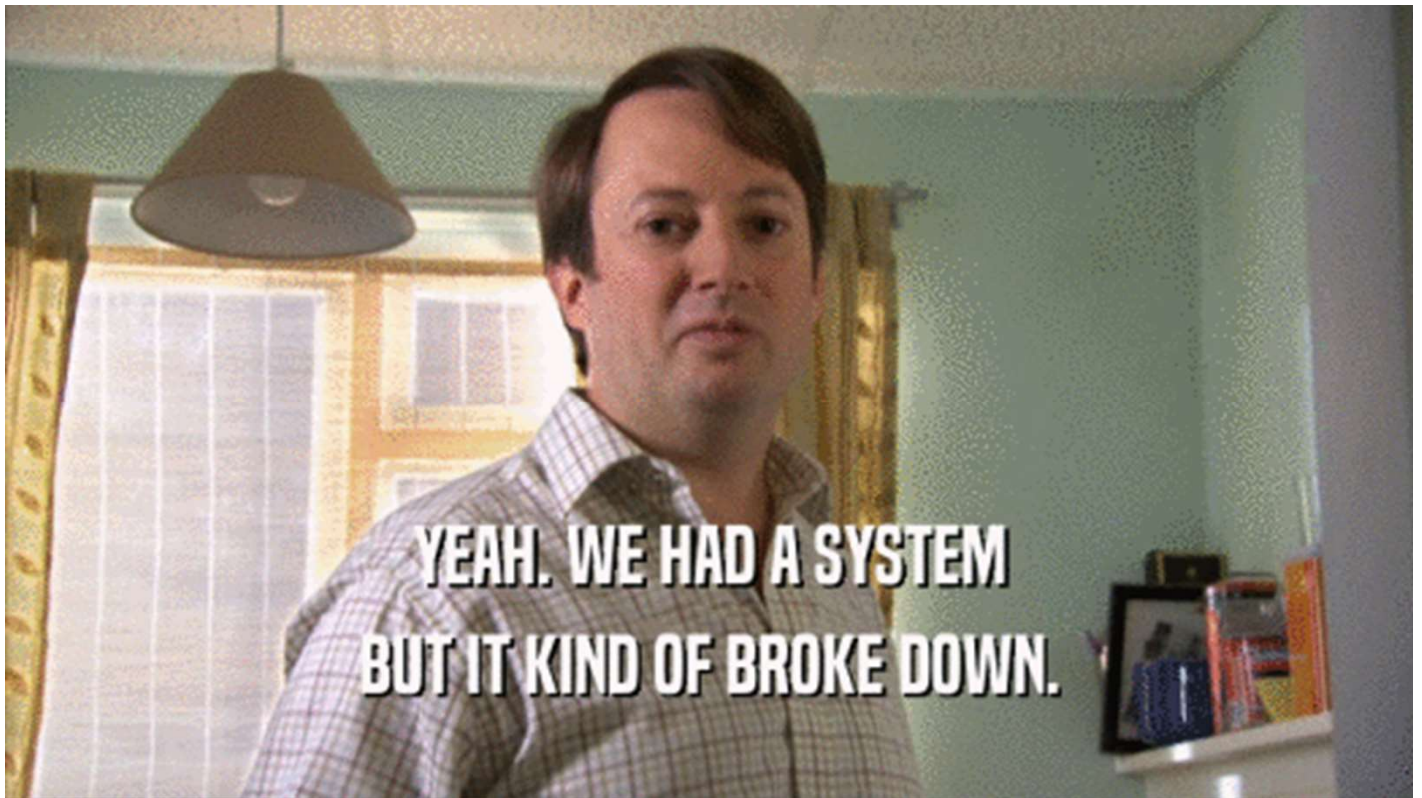
•Quick disclaimer: this is *not* a talk about how to WRITE good romance, sex, or chemistry

- There are other ***great talks on the vault about that, including some of mine
- This talk is more focused on designing narrative systems to tell romantic/sexual stories and to serve as the *foundation* for what we write

So with that said, let's start with kindness coins:

Definition of Kindness Coins

Informal nickname for dynamic where the player:
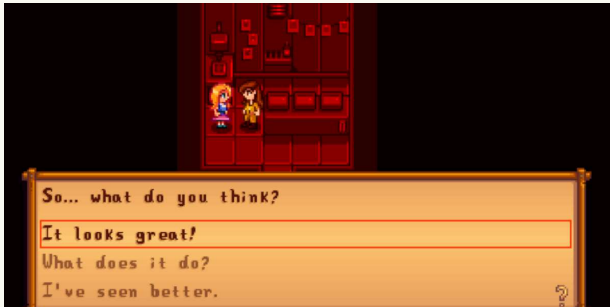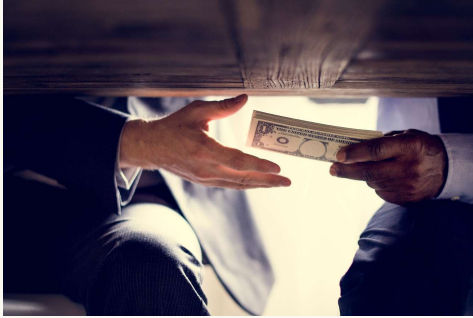

- does "nice" or "kind" things

- is then "rewarded" with affection

•Kindness coins are a nickname given to a particular narrative system in which

- The player does nice "kind" things for an NPC, like giving gifts
- Which then "earns" romantic and sexual affection from the NPC as a "reward."
- ***Hence "kindness coins" - implying earning or paying for love with kindness

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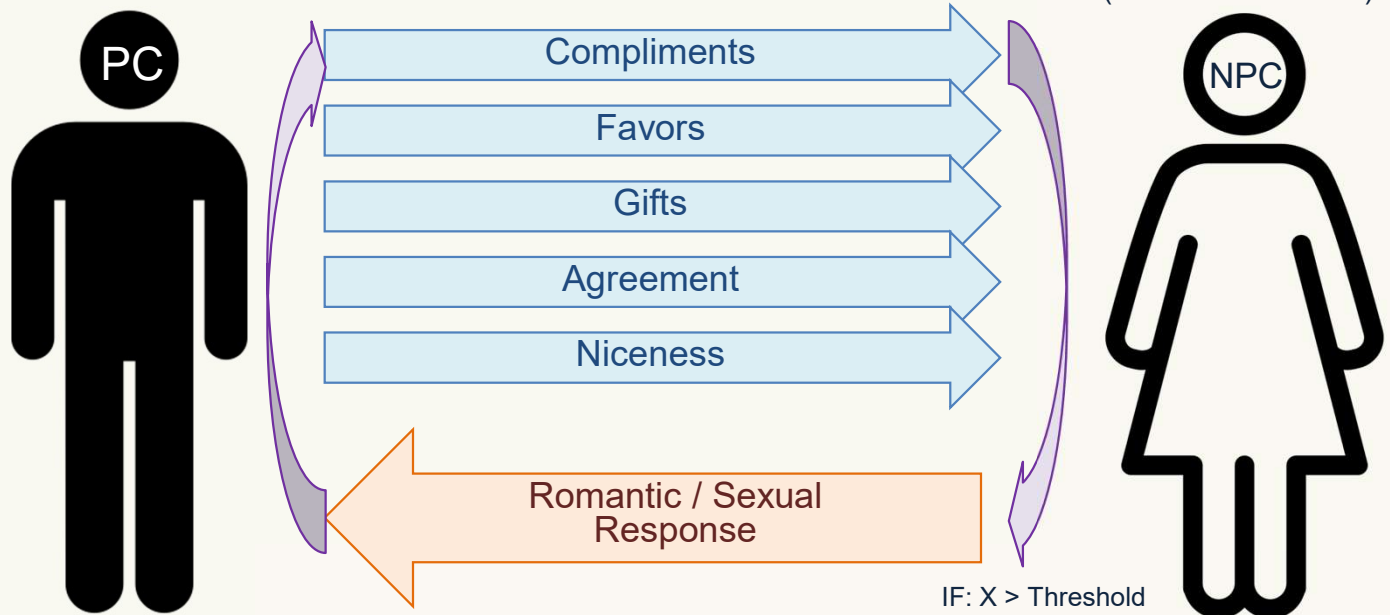- is then "rewarded" with affection

Implication:
- Kindness as "payment" or "earns" love and sex

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The Kindness Coin Loop

X + 1 (where x = affection)

PC

Compliments
Favors
Gifts
Agreement
Niceness

Romantic / Sexual Response

NPC

IF: X > Threshold

GDC

- Here is a visual of how this dynamic actually works.
  - The player character chooses ***"nice" or "kind" actions for the NPC, usually as part of a dialogue tree or choice menu
    - These actions are often clearly ***signalled through UI by heart icons, pop-ups, etc
  - Examples of these actions include compliments, agreement, favors, gifts, loyalty quests, or just spending time together.

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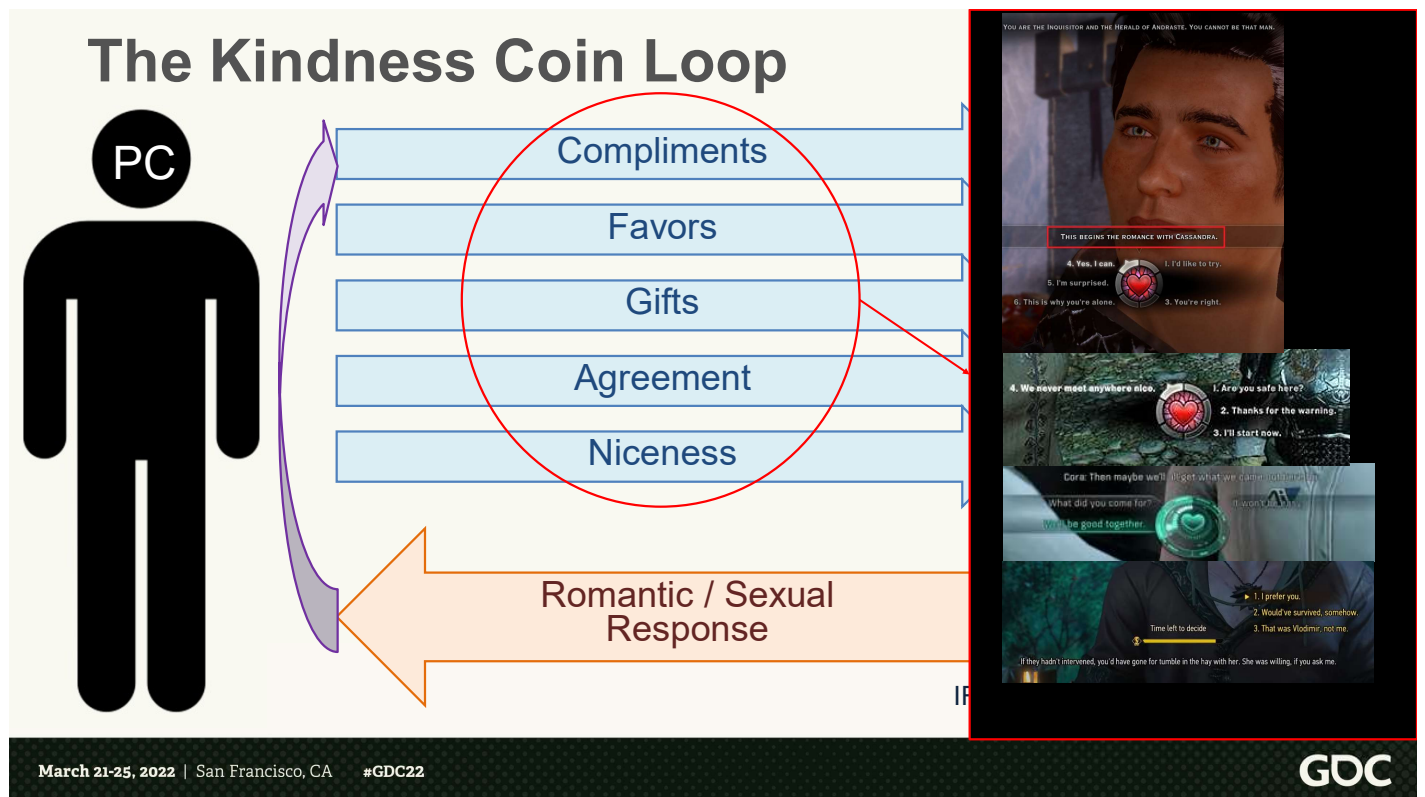
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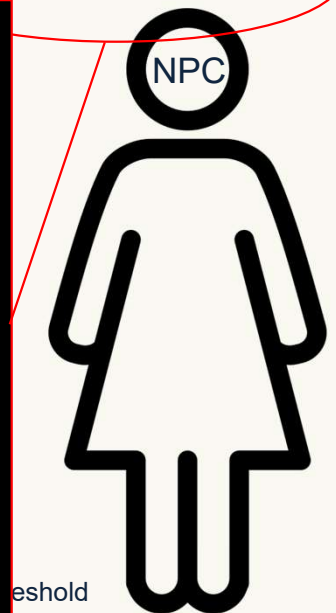
The Kindness Coin Loop

PC

Compliments

Favors

Gifts

Agreement

Niceness

Romantic / Sexual Response

YOU ARE THE INQUISITOR AND THE HERALD OF ANDRASTE. YOU CANNOT BE THAT MAN.

THIS BEGINS THE ROMANCE WITH CASSANDRA.

4. Yes, I can.   1. I'd like to try.
5. I'm surprised.
6. This is why you're alone.   3. You're right.

4. We never meet anywhere nice.   1. Are you safe here?
2. Thanks for the warning.
3. I'll start now.

Cora: Then maybe we'll get what we came out here for.
What did you come for?   It won't...
We'll be good together.

Time left to decide   ▶ 1. I prefer you.
2. Would've survived, somehow.
3. That was Vlodimir, not me.

If they hadn't intervened, you'd have gone for tumble in the hay with her. She was willing, if you ask me.

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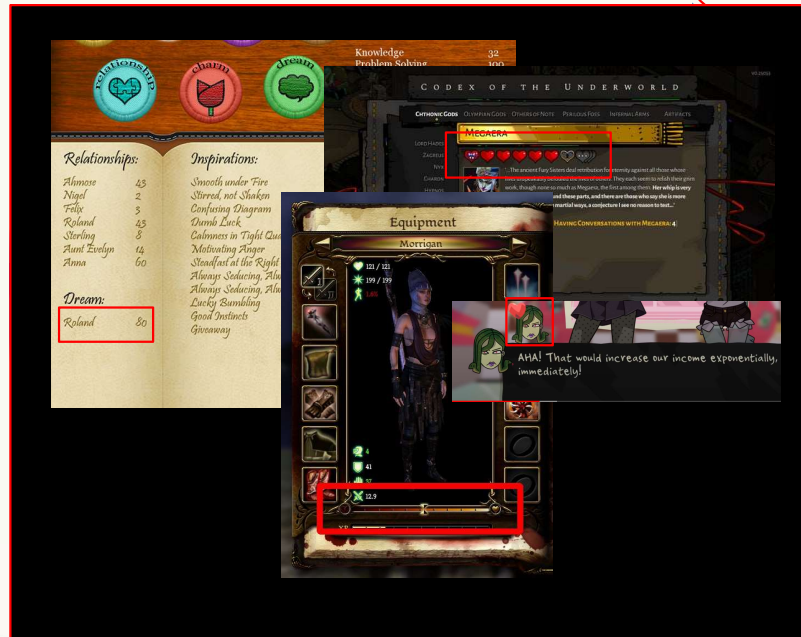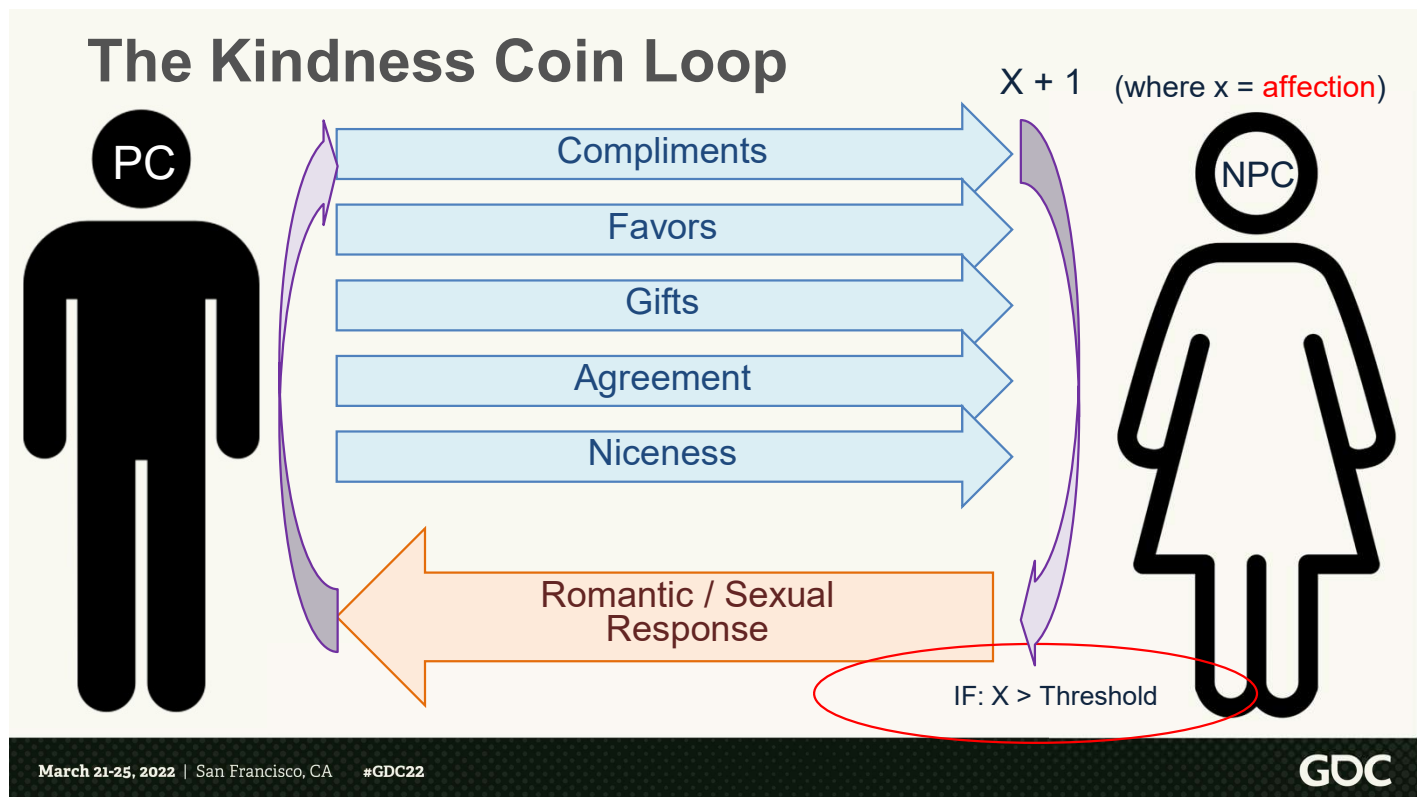
The Kindness Coin Loop

X + 1   (where x = affection)

PC

NPC

eshold

GDC

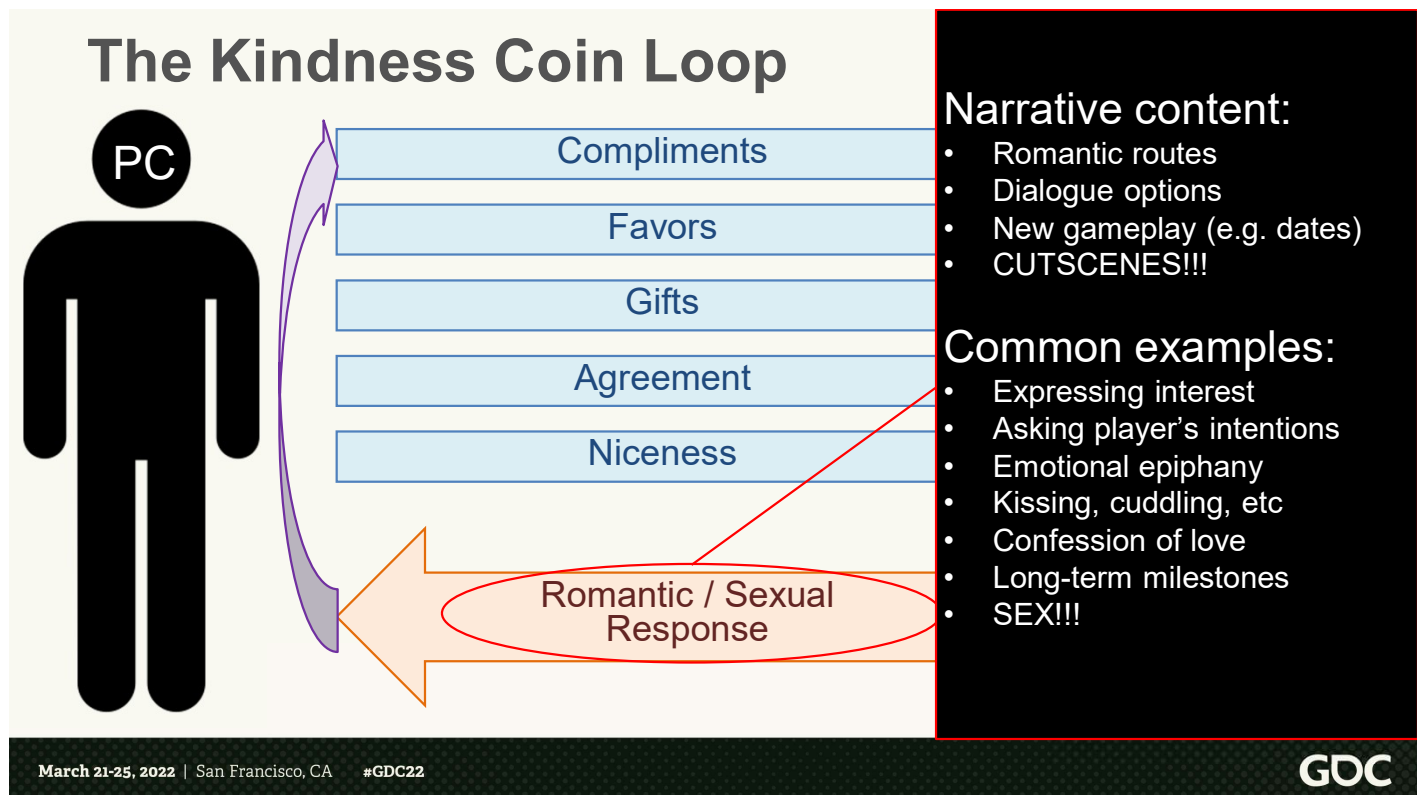- Every time the player character does this, it adds to an internal value for NPC
  - We'll call this value "affection"
  - Sometimes ***it's tracked, sometimes it's a temporary popup, and sometimes it's hidden under the hood
  - From a narrative perspective, this variable measures how much the NPC likes the player (romantically/sexually)

The Kindness Coin Loop

PC

NPC

Compliments

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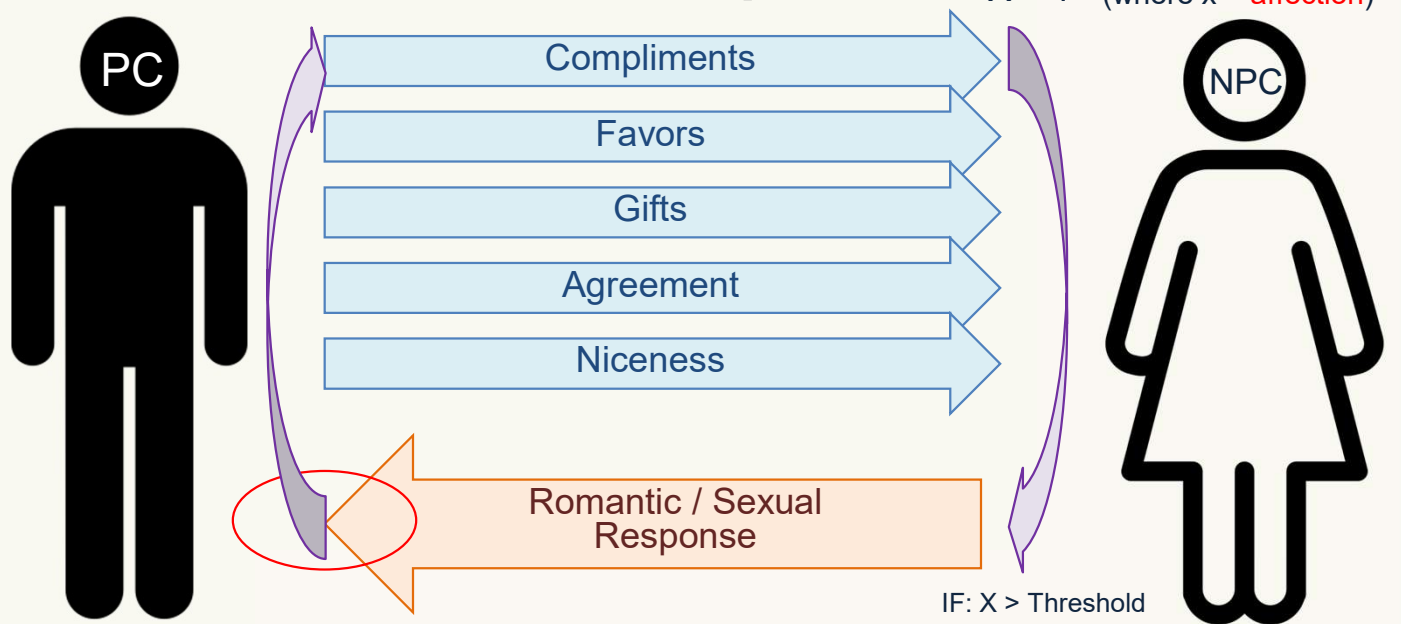
Romantic / Sexual Response

IF: X > Threshold

- So, the NPC's affection variable keeps increasing until it hits a specific threshold
- Which then triggers a response that evolves the relationship***, either by unlocking gameplay, or most commonly, showing a major relationship beat in a cutscene: things like communicating interest, first kisses, confessions of love, and of course, SEEEEXXXXX.
- Then it either transitions into a more traditional linear story, or the loop repeats with new threshholds where the player keeps making "nice" choices and the NPC occasionally "rewards" them with more love/sex.

The Kindness Coin Loop

PC

Compliments
Favors
Gifts
Agreement
Niceness

Romantic / Sexual Response

Narrative content:
- Romantic routes
- Dialogue options
- New gameplay (e.g. dates)
- CUTSCENES!!!

Common examples:
- Expressing interest
- Asking player's intentions
- Emotional epiphany
- Kissing, cuddling, etc
- Confession of love
- Long-term milestones
- SEX!!!

GDC

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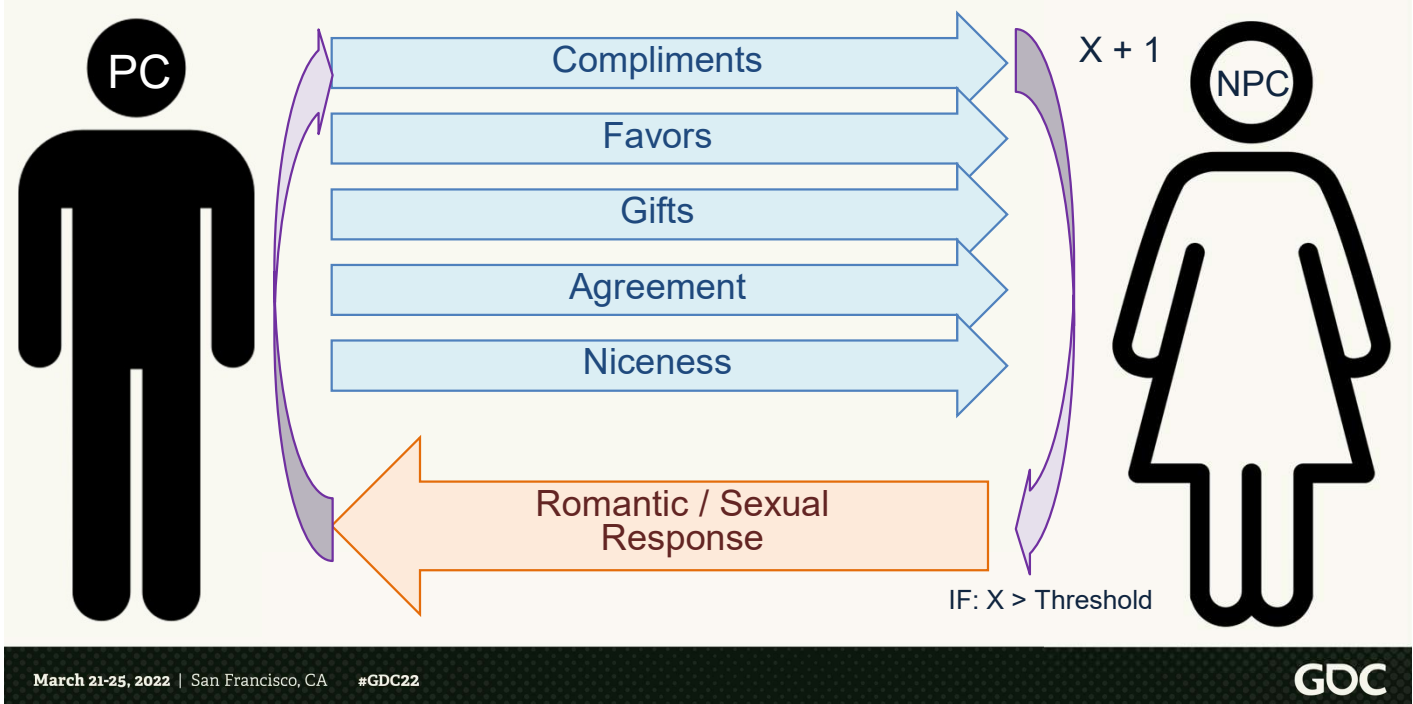
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The Problem with Kindness Coins

PC

Compliments →
Favors →
Gifts →
Agreement →
Niceness →

X + 1

NPC

← Romantic / Sexual Response

IF: X > Threshold

- At this point, you are probably seeing some… ***issues with this system
    - I think that sums up a lot of them pretty well.
    - There is a LOT to criticize about kindness coins
        - ***Most people focus on the larger negative cultural implications: about problematic ideals of transactional relationships, entitlement to sex, and of course, gender relations
            - All worth their own talks
        - But for this talk I want to focus on the ***narrative and writing issues that make it harder for us to write good romance and sex stories.

The Problem with Kindness Coins

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Compliments →
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Niceness →

← Love and sex

GDC

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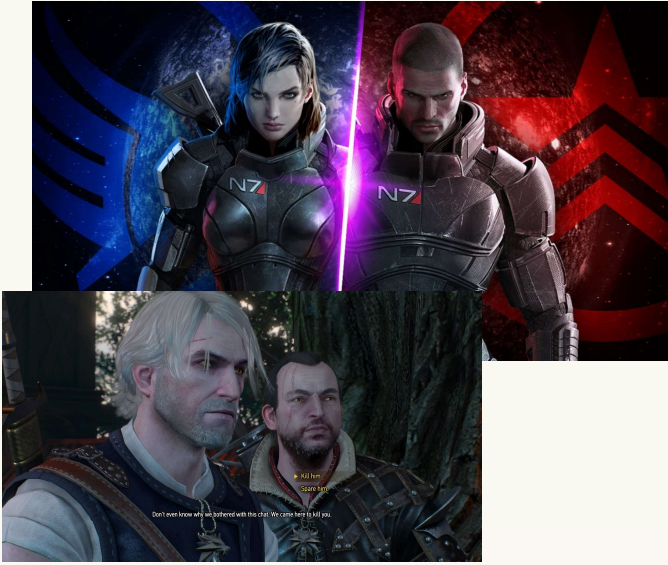# The Issues of Kindness Coins – Cultural
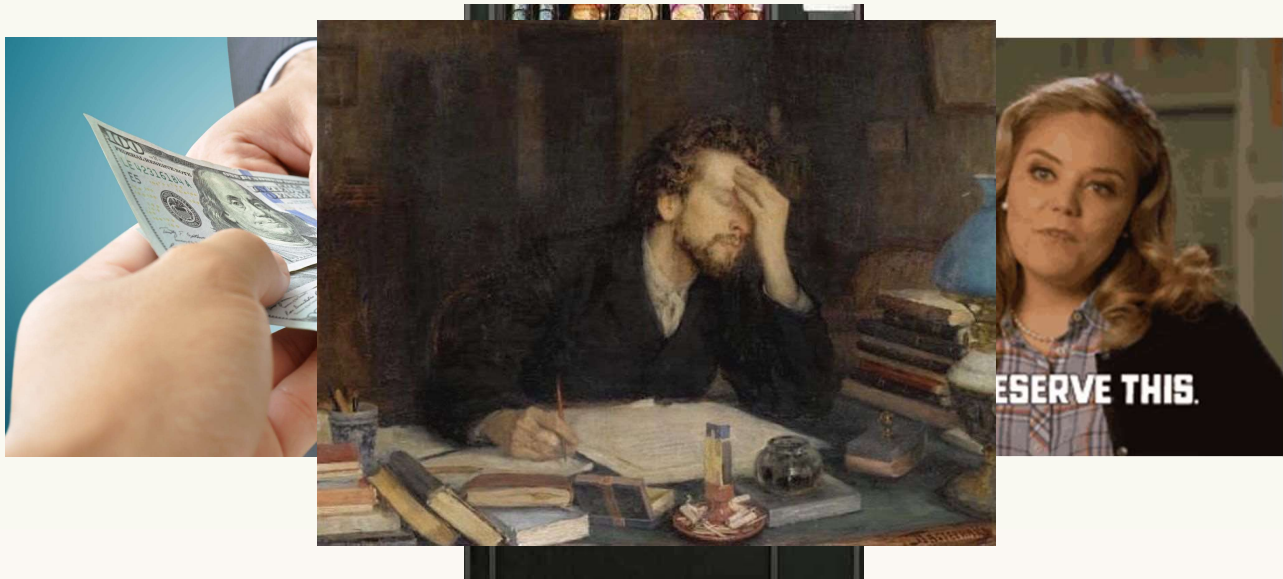
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The Issues of Kindness Coins – Story

1. **Does not build OR reflect player character**

•So, firstly:
- Kindness coins rarely develop or reflect the player character (vs rest of game)
  - You can roleplay wildly different personas, but kindness coins completely disconnect from those.
    - You could be playing a puppy-killing MONSTER or a literal SAINT, but either way, when you talk to your love interest, it's all, ***"hey, I got you a flower, I hope you like it" and none of the rest matters
  - Very often, kindness coins have to be written to work for WHATEVER personality type the player is playing.
    - So we, as writers, have to write more… generic stuff that can fit any character. Not too good, ***not too bad… just… nice.
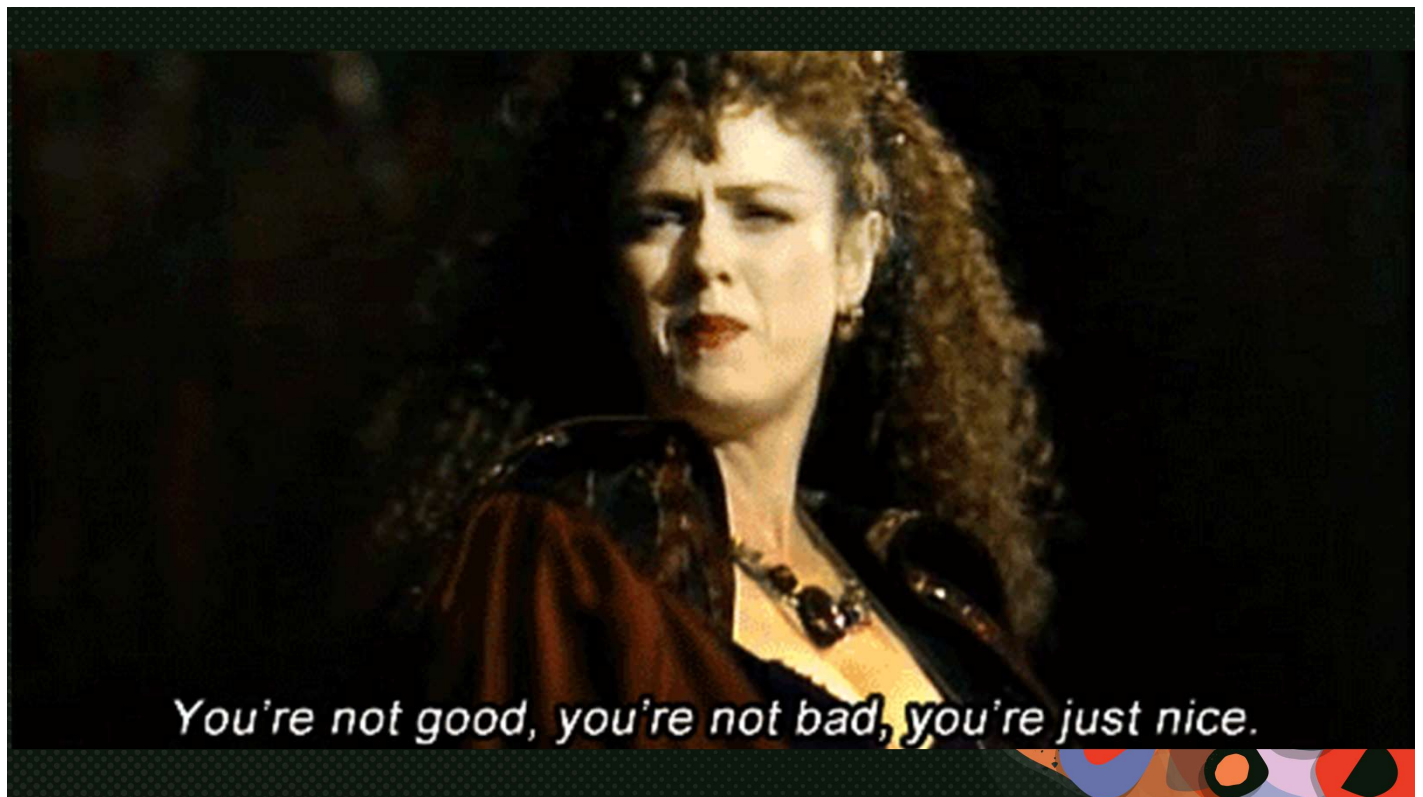
Issue #1 – Failing to Develop/Reflect the PC

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You're not good, you're not bad, you're just nice.

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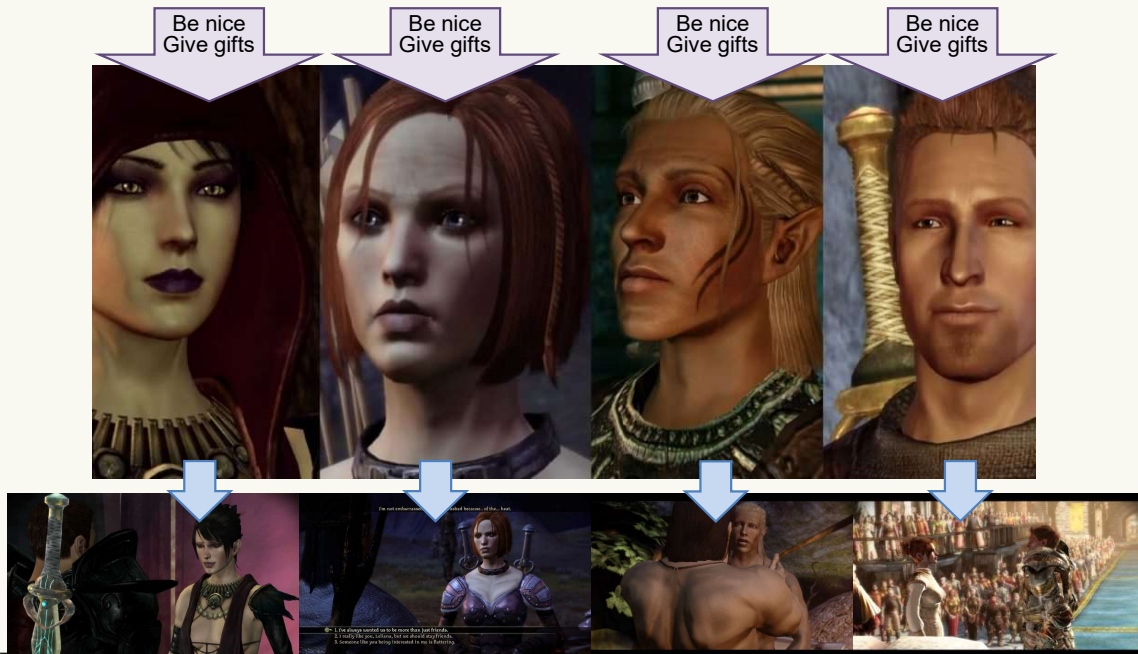# The Issues of Kindness Coins – Story

1. **Does not build OR reflect player character**

2. **Flattens your NPC cast**

•kindness coins flatten out your cast of NPCs
- You have a ***varied cast of NPC love interests with different romantic arcs
  - Great… but you still end up ***engaging them all in the same way, and they still all respond positively.
    - Again, it's the ***vending machine model; they may all "dispense" different cutscenes and content, but you're still putting the same currency of niceness into them
    - Which drains them of nuance and difference

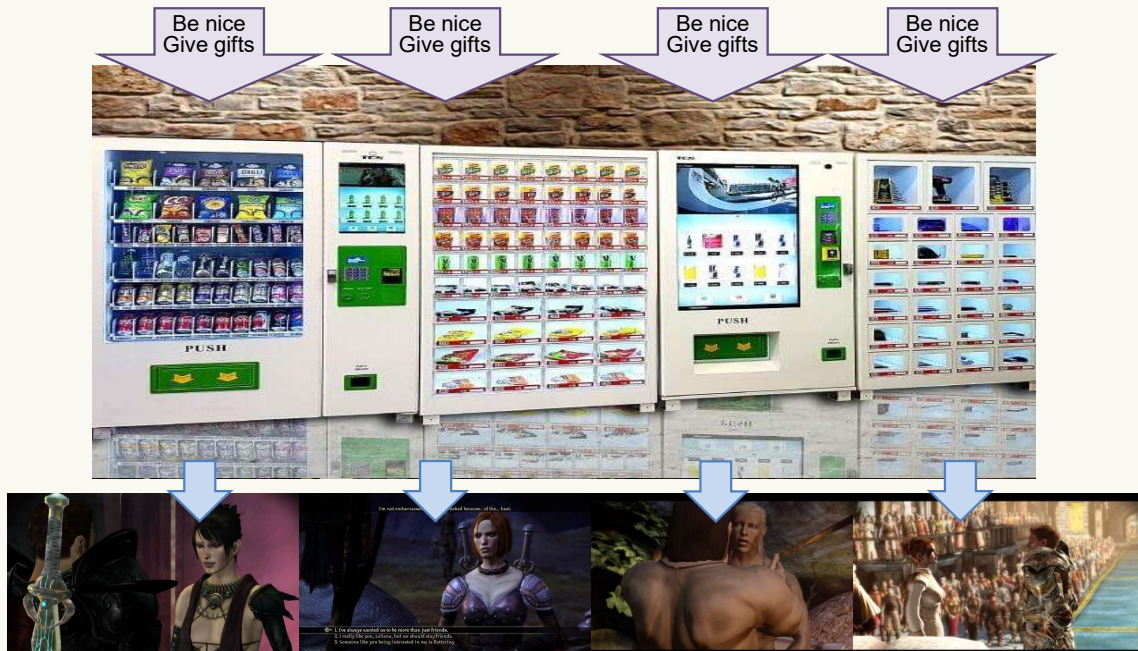# Different characters… same road to romance

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The Issues of Kindness Coins – Story

1. **Does not build OR reflect player character**

2. **Flattens your NPC cast**

3. **Denies your NPCs agency**

• Kindness coins deny your NPCs agency over their own desires
•   This isn't "mutual" romance; this is the player romancing AT the NPC, bombarding them with niceness until the NPC responds positively
    •   ***They're a passenger in the player's car while they drive towards a relationship
    •   And yeah, they're a WILLING passenger…
    •   ***But they could be driving THEMSELVES in that direction.
    •   Without a strong sense of the NPC's drive and desires, we don't know WHY they dig the PC other than "they were nice to me.
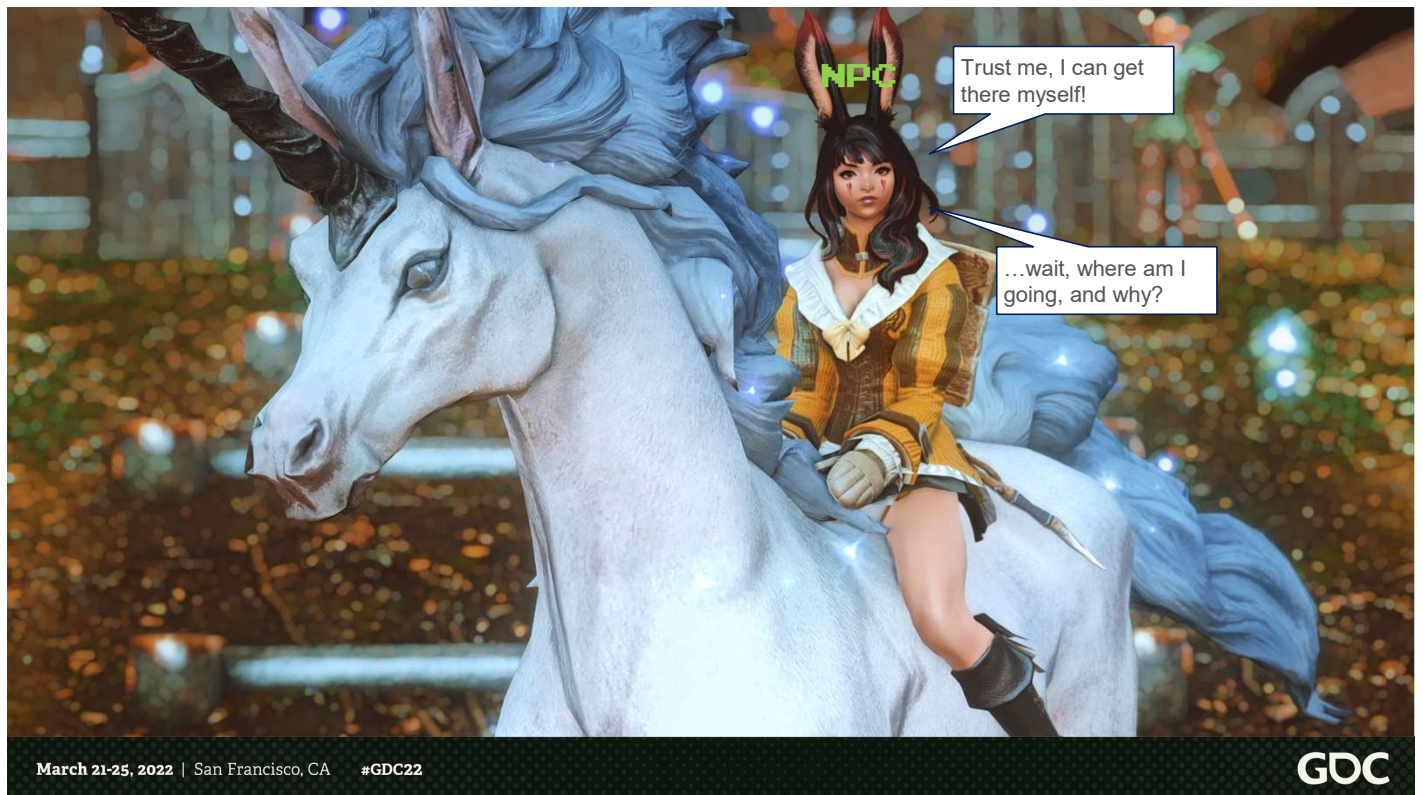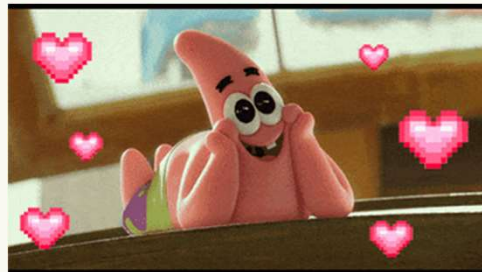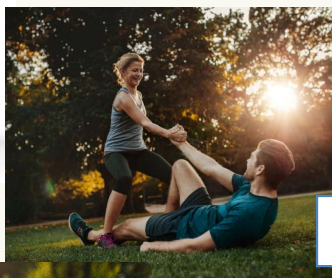
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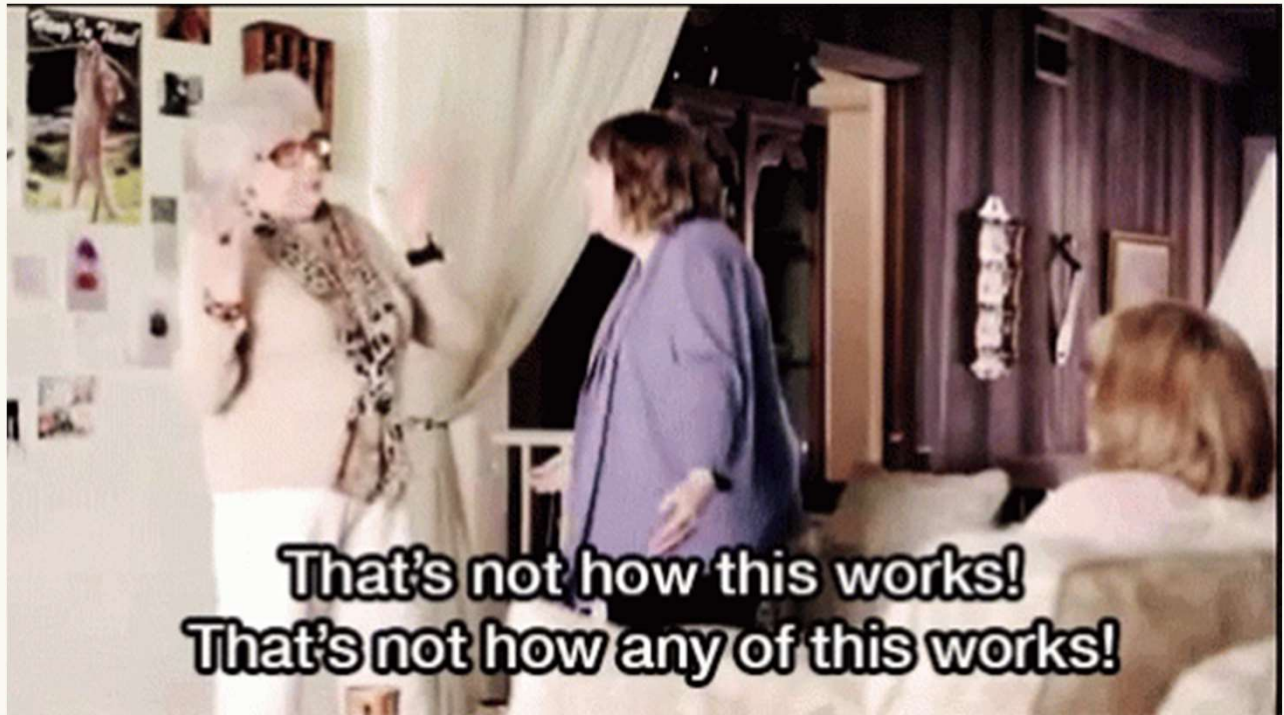
The Issues of Kindness Coins – Story

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4. **Conflates platonic respect with romantic/sexual interest**

•Which brings me to a big issue: kindness coins conflate platonic feelings with romantic/sexual attraction
- ***If someone of your preferred gender is kind to you, apparently the only natural reaction is to ***fall madly in love/want to sex them up.
    - If that were true, I would be having torrid affairs with every nice person I've ever met, and I'd be very tired.
- ***Kindness is great, but making love/desire the **default** reaction doesn't reflect what makes those feelings different from just platonic respect
    - ***So at best, the writer has to do the extra work of fleshing that out *anyway*
    - ***At worst, you have a platonic dynamic stuffed into a romantic or sexual one with no chemistry behind it

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Writing romance as "default" response

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•Also, bluntly this is where kindness coins can trigger bad memories of real life experiences
- Many women have had encounters with guys who weaponize this logic and expect sex for their "kindness"
- ***People on the ace spectrum or with platonic friends of preferred gender also often have bad experiences with this
- Kindness coins aren't to BLAME for these cultural attitudes, but they can certainly bring them to mind if not handled well
  - And if your players are frustrated with experiencing this stuff in reality, they do not want to experience it ingame

•So yeah, lots of problems with kindness coins. …now let's talk about the GOOD things

And now for the good
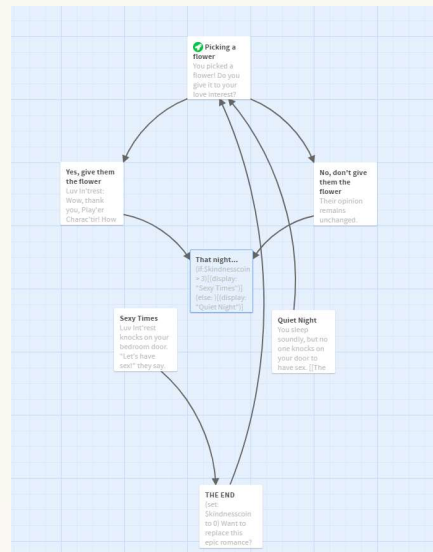

Why would you say something so controversial yet so brave?
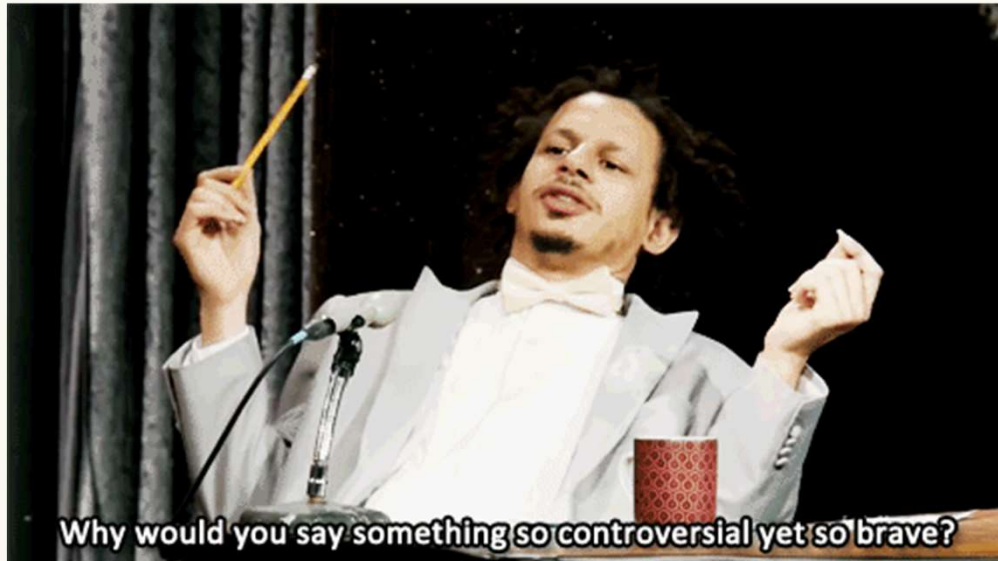
•Because yes, they exist, and by identifying their strengths, we can work towards improving or replacing them with structures that keep those strengths but ditch the weaknesses.
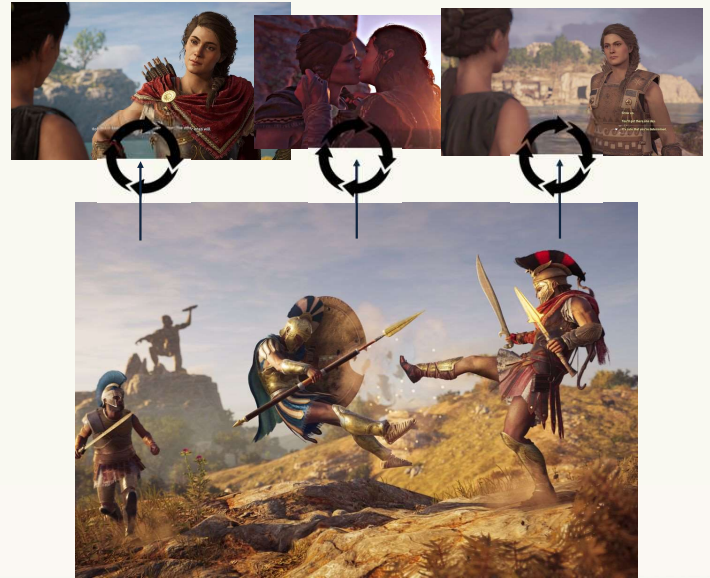
The Strengths of Kindness Coins

1. **Easy to program and design**

• One strength is that it is RIDICULOUSLY EASY TO DO
•   The code and logic for this loop is a super basic programming structure anyone can learn
•   ***It is also very simple and straightforward from a design perspective - robust enough for a **whole game, ***simple enough to add to a larger project
•   That's why you see it in everything from baby's first visual novel to a full AAA game.
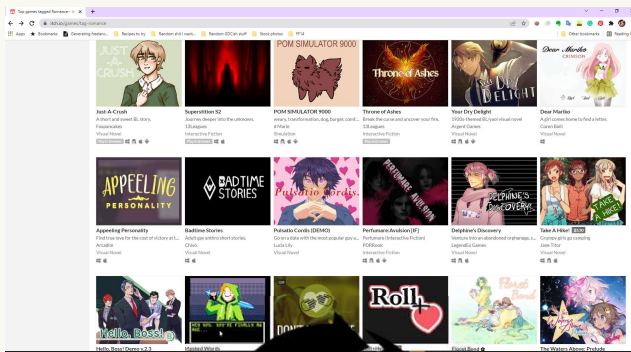
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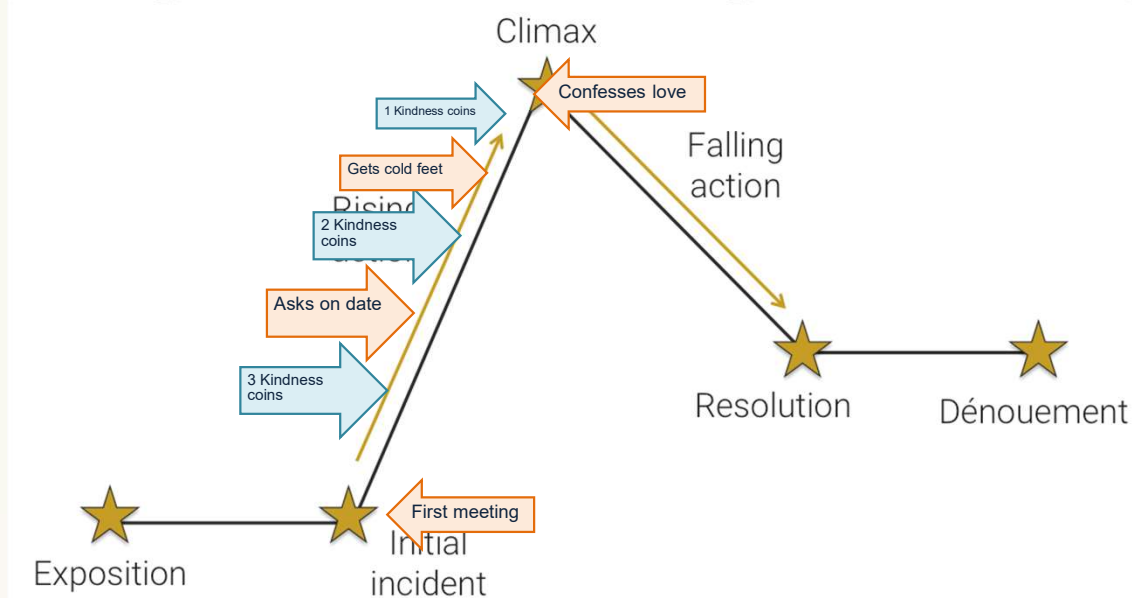
The Strengths of Kindness Coins

1. **Easy to program and design**

2. **Easy to plot out**

•And to be fair, this also makes it easy for us to outline and plot out major and minor beats
•   It's a flexible framework to work out not just the big cutscenes but the minor interactions along the way, and it can be easily expanded or shrunk as needed.

Strength – Ease of Plotting and Outlining

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The Strengths of Kindness Coins

1. **Easy to program and design**

2. **Easy to plot out**

3. **Easy for players to engage**

•And for your players, kindness coins provide a simple, easily accessible way to engage with the romantic and sexual narratives they like
- The *story* might have twists and challenges and ***unhappy endings, but the SYSTEM for experiencing it is dependable and straightforward:***
  - Pick the right options, and the relationship story will progress
  - The options are usually obvious; if not, walkthroughs, baby!
- Many of your players REALLY appreciate that aspect of kindness coins

Strength – Ease of Engagement

GDC

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Strength – Ease of Engagement

- •Many of your players REALLY appreciate that aspect of kindness coins
- And no, they aren't all lazy or ***need spoonfeeding; nor are they all entitled incels wanting boobs
- Many are players of marginalized genders or sexualities who want simplified, safe spaces to enjoy a fantasy
  - Many players are busy and stressed and don't want to strain their brain just to kiss their favorite character
  - They're not there for transactional relationships; they're there for romantic or sexual stories that they can navigate in an easy, stress-free way.

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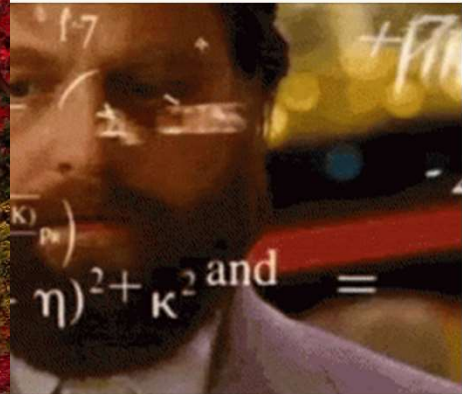
Visual ... ...k out
more "com... ...echanics

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Strength – Ease of Engagement

- •Look, not everyone likes Dark Souls; some people like Kirby
- Some people like both, but at different times and contexts
- So while we need games that explore love and sex in ***deep, complex, realistic ways, we also need games that embrace ***good old simple wish-fulfillment…
- Just maybe not kindness coins.

So how do we make BETTER wish-fulfillment?

•How do we **ditch the coin metaphor, **reframe this thing that increases for the NPC? How do we **reframe their response, and how do we **give players choice beyond bland niceness?

        •   *** Lemme think… yeah, that'll do it!

•I posit one of the best ways to improve this system is to ground the relationship and the storytelling*** in chemistry and attraction

Which I am defining here as anything that inspires **non-platonic** interest - romantic, sexual, whatever.

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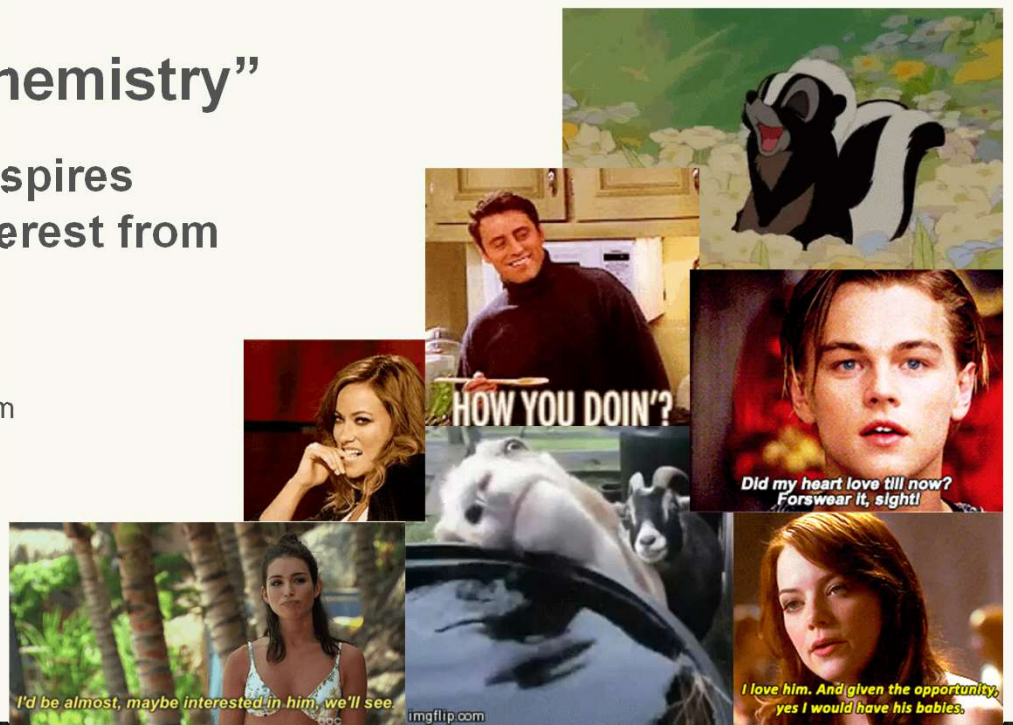   •   *** Lemme think… yeah, that'll do it!
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Better Living Through Chemistry: Benefits

- **Anything goes re: chemistry**

•This approach has many benefits
- For one, when I say anything, I mean AAAAANYTHING.
    - ***By defining chemistry in a holistic way, you can have ***the most profound connection to the most deliciously shallow appreciation
        - Sometimes, of course, you'll **luck out and get the whole package
        - But sometimes it's more skewed to one end or the other, and that's interesting too.
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- **Anything goes re: chemistry**

- **Anything goes re: gameplay**

•Also, when I say it can be AAAANYTHING, I ALSO mean in terms of the player actions and, more importantly, gameplay
- Chemistry can be baked into **EVERY gameplay system, not just dialogue
- And that's not to crap on dialogue! But **physical and emotional attraction don't just happen when you're talking to someone, they're happening ALL THE TIME
- So NPCs could be attracted to the way *your character fights, or *their look, or *how they move, or *how they chop wood, *pet cats, *conquer kingdoms or… U get the idea.
- If narrative design is considering how systems can tell stories, let's tell romantic and erotic stories with these systems!

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Gameplay as chemistry

Combat

Character creation

Platforming

Resource gathering

Open world interactions

Strategy

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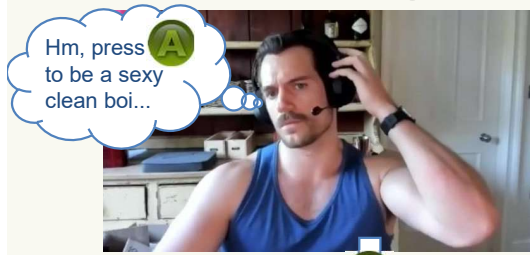
- **Anything goes re: chemistry**
- **Anything goes re: gameplay**
- **Greater scope for player roleplay**

•And if you do, it offers more interesting possibilities for player roleplaying and character development
- It's not just giving gifts and saying nice things, it's choosing options to define who you are and what your traits are, and **THOSE sparking attraction because the NPC digs those things
- For example, if you're romancing an NPC who finds adorkable people irresistable, **you "game the system" by saying or doing adorkable things. That's FINE, because… now you're roleplaying an adorkable person and someone this NPC could be attracted to.***

Roleplaying through Romance and Raunch

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- **Fleshes out NPCs**

GDC

•Speaking of: this approach gives more room to flesh out and differentiate your romanceable NPCs

- Different people are attracted to many, MANY different things
- ***So instead of blanket bland niceness making every character swoon, you can dig into what each NPC wants/what differentiates them
    - This means actually figuring out things like your characters' turn-ons, relationship goals, what attracts them, and how they act on it, so ADD THAT INFO to your character bios!
    - And friendly reminder, this includes your ace characters, where *some* or even all of the answers might be NOTHING.
    - But that's STILL an answer, rather than "I got nothing," so really think about this.

Get turned on to character turn-ons

	Niceness	Niceness	Niceness
Romantic turn-ons			
Sexual turn-ons			
What they do when attracted			
How fast they move			
Relationship goals			

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- **Grants NPCs agency**

•Lastly, it's a lot easier to write romances where the NPC is active vs. reactive
- Because the **player dynamic is no longer "I will wear them down with favors", it's "I'm acting in a way this person finds attractive."
- And then… **the ball is in the NPCs court. They have this** internal feeling **inspired** by player action, but ***they decide how to act on it in a way that works with who they are.

NPC agency is sexy!

- **PC blasting kindness coins**

- **PC building a persona**

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NPC agency is sexy!

NPC

Internal feeling from PC

NPC's decisions (or lack thereof)

I know what I have to do but I don't know if I have the strength to do it.

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Fun With Chemistry

PC/NPC vs NPC/NPC attraction!

Polyamory and different chemistry!

Preferences changing over time!

Turn OFFS!

Track romance and sexual attraction separately!

Different routes for different attractions!

To Be Continued

GDC

•I could talk about the systemic and narrative possibilities of chemistry forever

•	And I know this because*** the first draft of this talk had 30 mins about it
•	But that talk will have to be*** next year. ;-)

•THIS year, let's get back to the kindness coin system and see what it becomes when you swap out the kindness and coins for chemistry.

I call it **the chemistry card tower**

The Chemistry Card Tower

- **Player chooses actions that are attractive to specific NPC**

- **A value, "attraction," goes up**

- **When attraction reaches a threshold, trigger romantic/sexual content**

- **Kindness Coins 2.0????**

•In the chemistry card tower:
- The player chooses character actions that attract a specific NPC
- This causes a value - "attraction" - to count up
- When it reaches a threshold, it triggers a major relationship beat, usually the NPC acting on their attraction

•Now, ***you may be thinking that it's the exact same thing as kindness coins, with the exact same problems, but I think the subtle differences, even in how we as writers frame it in our heads, have huge impact on our writing

The Card Tower as Chemistry Metaphor

- Even shifting from coins to a card tower is a better metaphor to apply because now it's about building something, not earning something
- With card towers, each card builds the tower higher**, and the tension with it**, bigger and higher*** until inevitably, the tower falls
- With chemistry card towers, the cards are every interaction that **piques the NPC's interest. You're building the **chemistry and the attraction and tension higher and higher
  - Until your CHARACTERS fall… into each other's arms
  - Or they ask each other out for drinks, whichever

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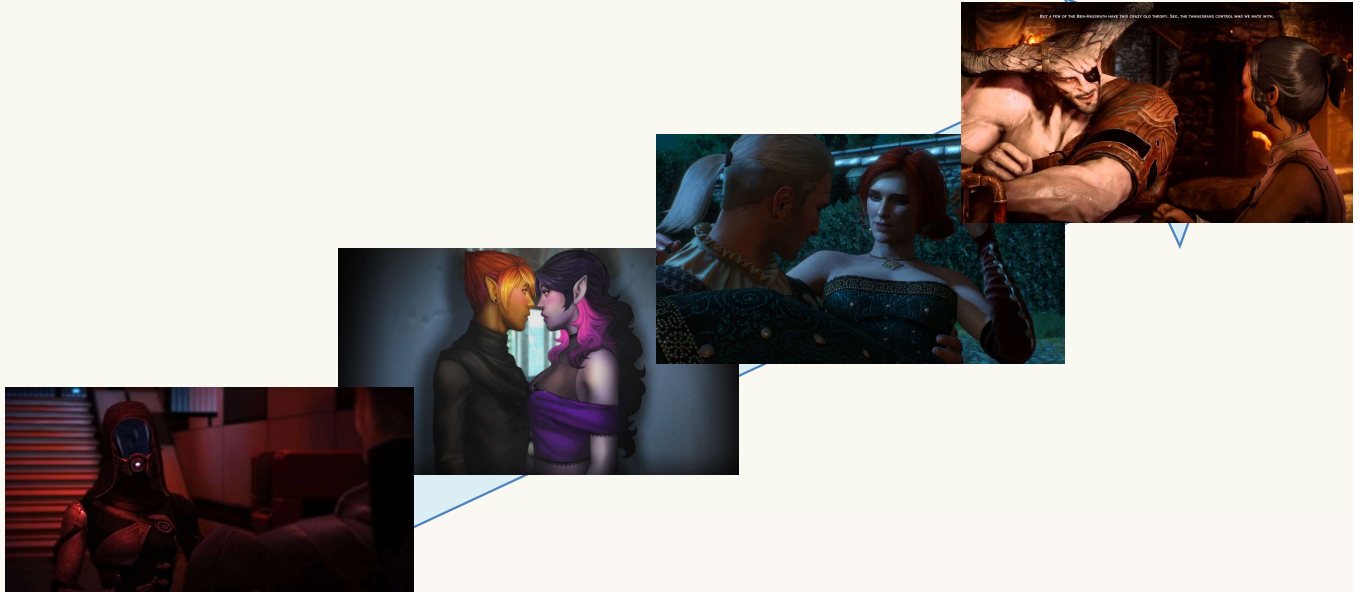
The Card Tower as Chemistry Metaphor

Tabletop example: Star Crossed
(by Alex Roberts)
- Jenga tower vs. cards
- Same principle in gameplay
- Roleplay characters resisting mutual attraction
- Attractive action = remove a piece from tower
- Tower falls = characters act on their feelings and desires

- There's a great TTRPG called Star Crossed which uses this as its core gameplay and story mechanic, albeit with a Jenga tower instead
- The players roleplay characters who are mutually attracted but have to resist for some reason
- But every time they do something attractive, they have to remove a piece from the tower
- when it tumbles, they surrender and act on their desires.
  - It's a great way to conceptualize certain relationship dynamics, and can be good inspiration for actually writing dramatic arcs of love and lust
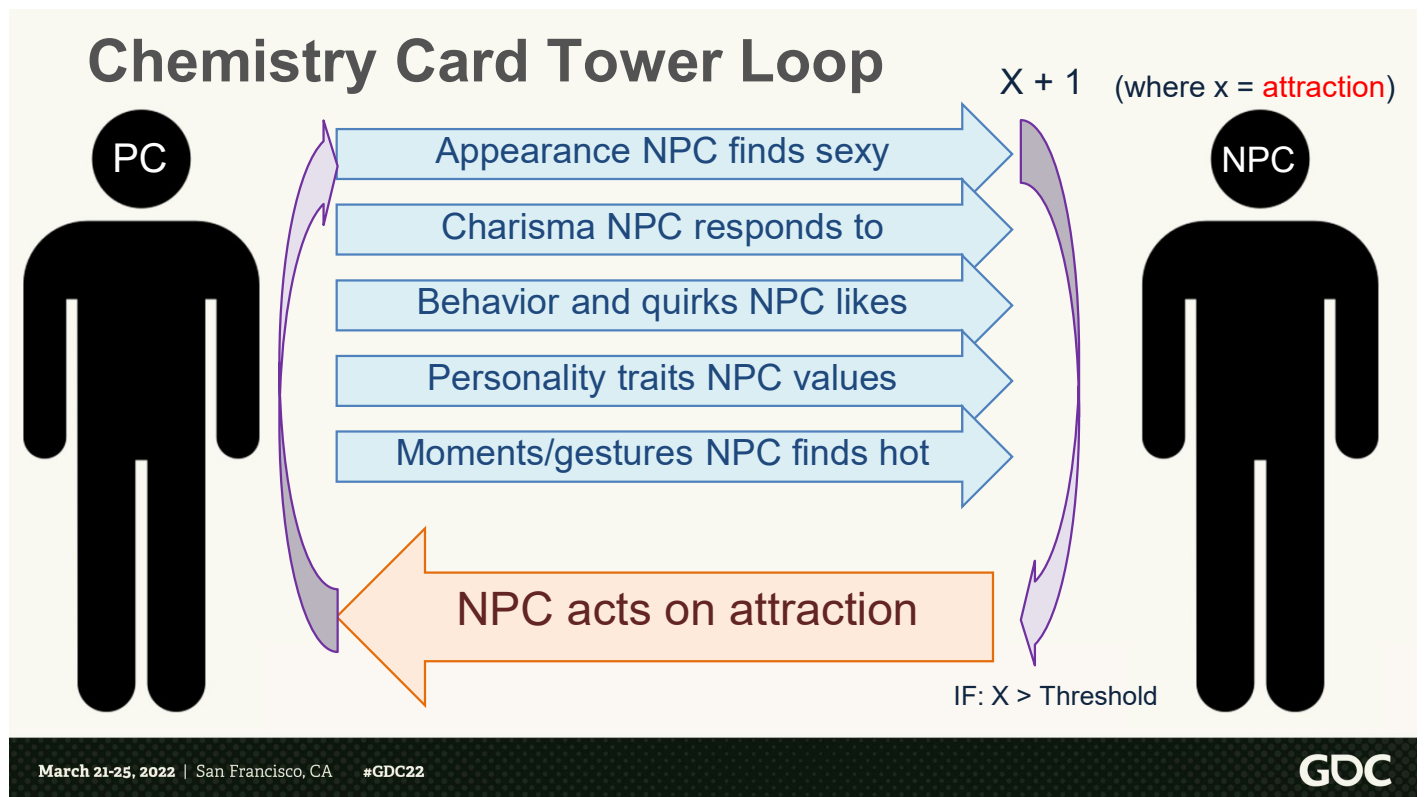
Chemistry Card Tower Loop

X + 1 (where x = attraction)

PC

NPC

Appearance NPC finds sexy

Charisma NPC responds to

Behavior and quirks NPC likes

Personality traits NPC values

Moments/gestures NPC finds hot

NPC acts on attraction

IF: X > Threshold

• So let's take a look at the new loop to see more of the differences from KC
• BIG difference in the **nature of the player choices and actions - rather than generic niceness, they're interesting, varied, and specific to the NPC
   • They can be super shallow, deeply meaningful, dialogue, gameplay, etc
   • And of course, romancing a different NPC = different attractions and actions
      • These are probably still clearly signposted though, because this model is still aiming for simplicity and reliability

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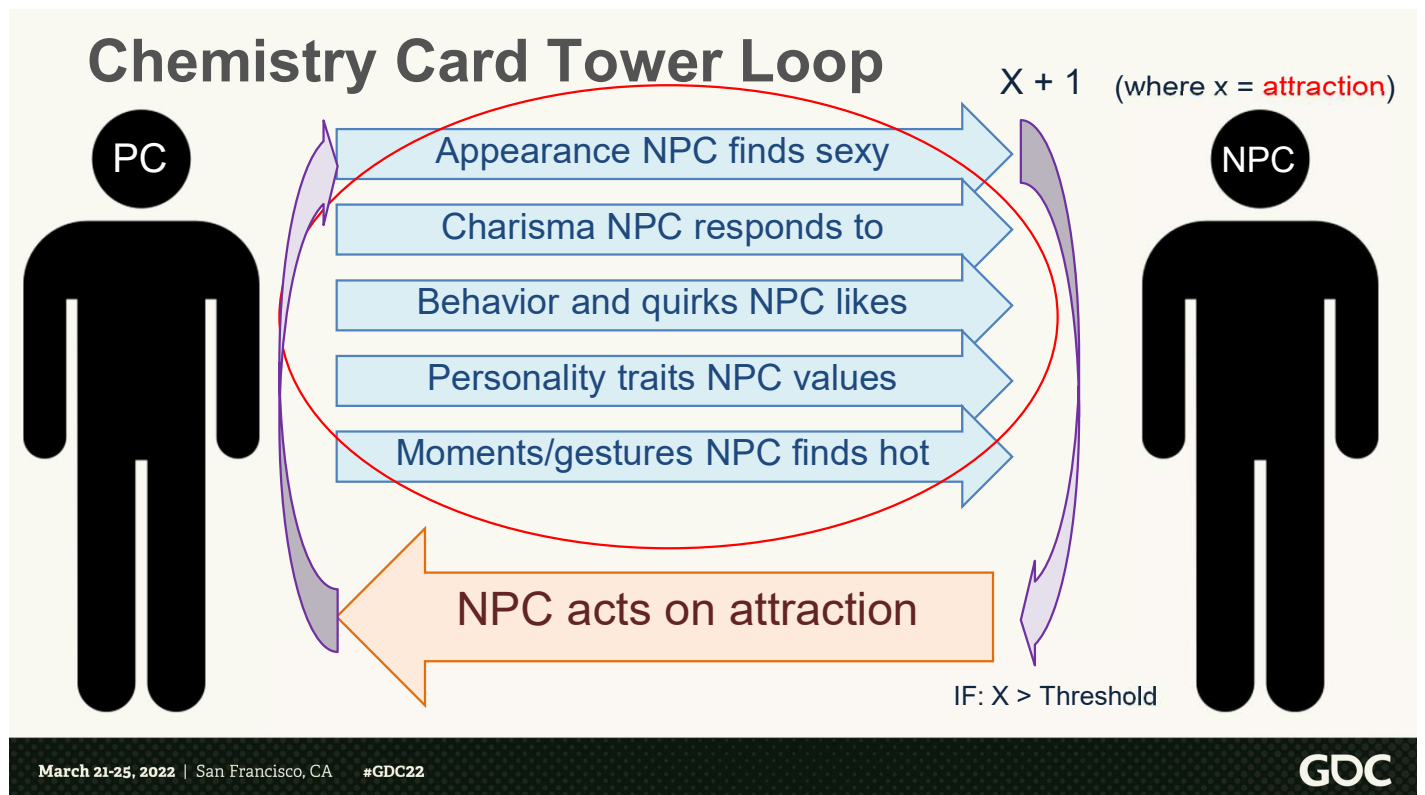
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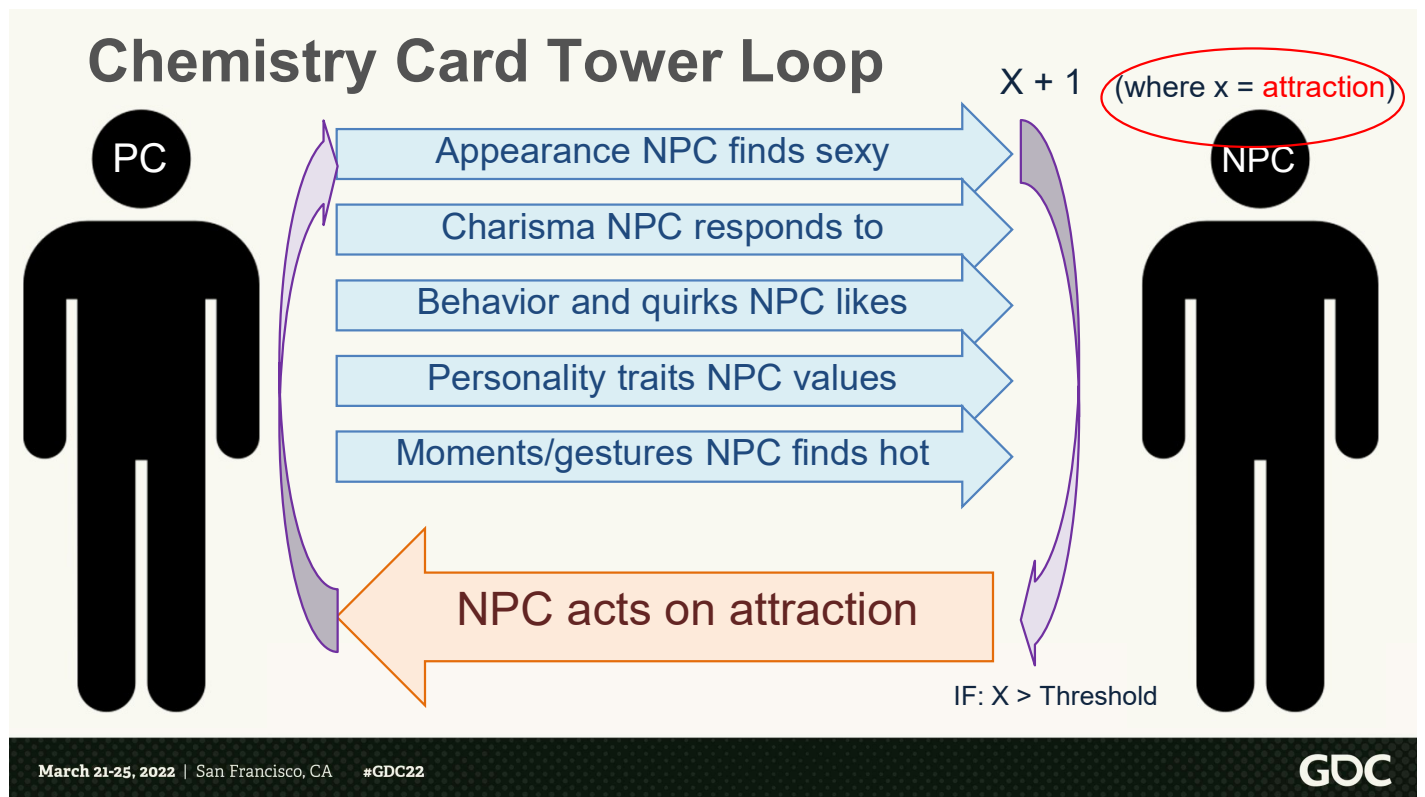
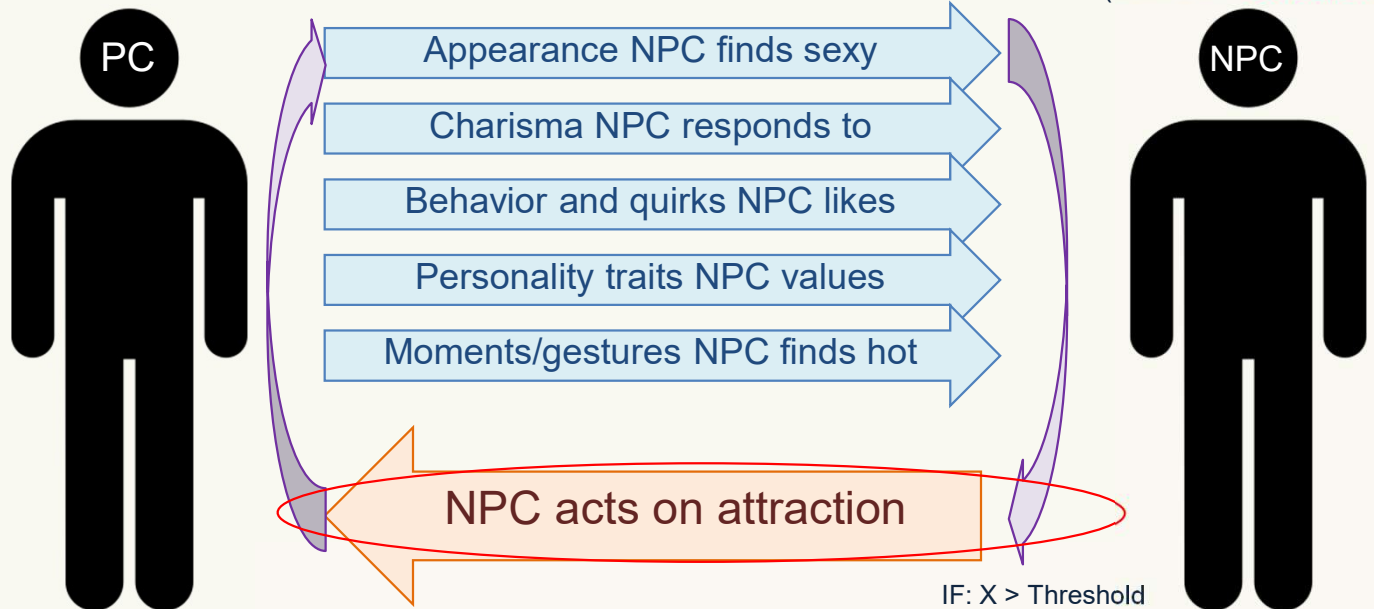•Next, there's the **impact of framing this as attraction, not affection
- For one thing, it avoids conflating platonic warmth vs sexy/romantic warm
- But it's holistic enough to allow for that broad range of types of interest
- And most importantly, framing it as "attraction" better connects it to the NPC's specific active desires, not reactive gratitude.

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• As such, **the threshold has more weight and meaning
  • It means the NPC's attraction has BUILT to a point where they:
    • **HAVE to act (because their feelings are too strong to ignore)
    • **They CHOOSE to act (because they embrace their feelings)
    • **Or they're COMPELLED to act (because they've been overwhelmed by their feelings)

Writing NPCs Acting on Attraction
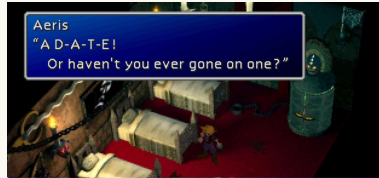
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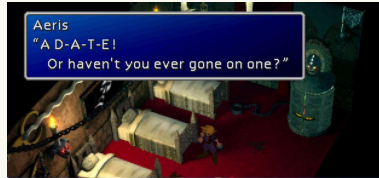

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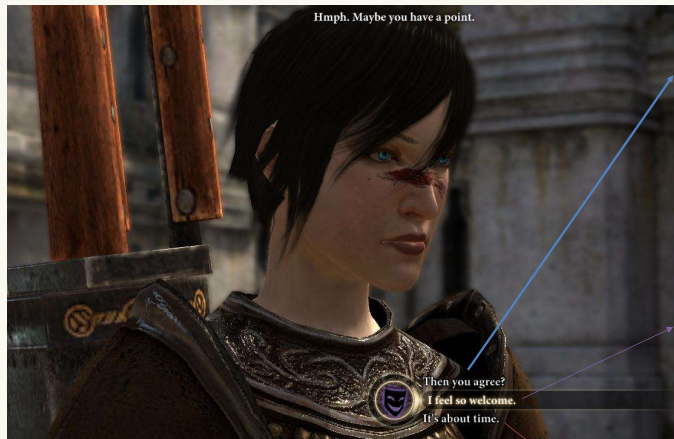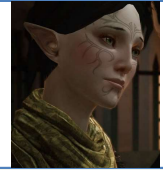**They CHOOSE to act.**

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Hypothetical Example: Dragon Age II

Diplomatic
Kind
Respectful

Witty
Sarcastic
Glib

Aggressive
Blunt
Angry

- Lets look at how this could work with a game like Dragon Age II:
  - In the actual game, the dialogue system lets you ***shape Hawke's personality OUTSIDE of romance towards 3 personality types.
  - Go one step further, and those ***personalities could slot in nicely with certain love interests and what they might be drawn to in a partner.
  - Their romance scenes ***then take on more context. They come to you because they are moved, amused, or inflamed by who you are, not just when you're with them, but all the time.
  - A model like this can be easily converted to a chemistry card tower that runs in every moment and dialogue choice, not only romance setpieces.

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Witty Sarcastic Glib

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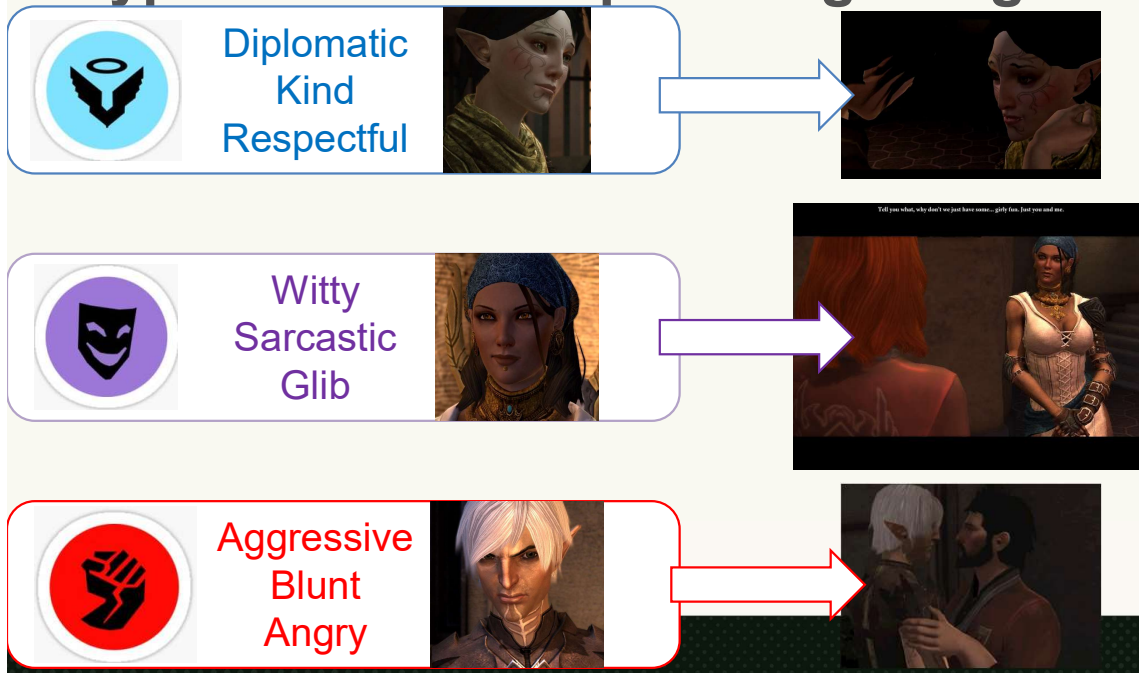
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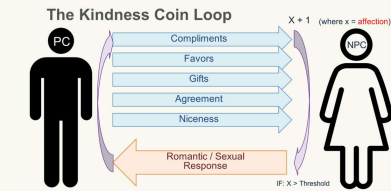
Kindness Coins vs. Chemistry Card Tower

The Kindness Coin Loop

X + 1 (where x = affection)

PC
- Compliments
- Favors
- Gifts
- Agreement
- Niceness
- Romantic / Sexual Response

NPC

IF: X > Threshold

Chemistry Card Tower Loop

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- NPC acts on attraction

NPC

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VS

✓ Easy to program and design
✓ Easy to plot out
✓ Easy for players to engage
✗ Does not build OR reflect player character
✗ Flattens your NPC cast
✗ Denies your NPCs agency
✗ Conflates platonic respect with romantic/sexual interest
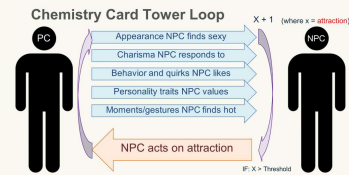
✓ Easy to program and design
✓ Easy to plot out
✓ Easy for players to engage
✓ Greater scope for player roleplay and gameplay
✓ Fleshes out NPCs
✓ Grants NPCs agency
✓ Acknowledges desire and attraction as separate from gratitude and respect

• So… same loop, subtle differences, big impact

  • Most of the strengths of kindness coins, arguably not the weaknesses

    • And yes, you're still choosing the right options to get with a digital hottie, but the options are more interesting, the "getting with" is more organic, and the story has more depth

If kindness coins are about
saying and doing the right thing
until you're *rewarded* with love or sex…

…then the chemistry card tower is about
being the right kind of person
to make the NPC feel that way.

- If kindness coins are about **saying and doing the right thing** until you're **rewarded** with love or sex
- Then the chemistry card tower is about *being the right kind of person* to make the NPC feel that way.
- That's what I mean by better wish fulfillment - giving players a clear easy path to the romantic or sexual arcs they want, but making that path more meaningful and more interesting, both to take and to write

Use Chemistry Card Tower for…

-Game genres that traditionally use kindness coins

-Romantic/sexual narratives where mutual interest + outcome is clear

-Players seeking emotional but idealized experiences and stories

•Best places to use the chemistry card tower:
- Game genres that already use kindness coins heavily
  - No need to design whole new systems, you can iterate on the one that's already there, which makes producers/money very happy
- Romantic/sexual narratives with themes of matching, compatibility, certainty
  - Because part of the appeal is that you KNOW where things end up
- And for players seeking more idealized experiences and stories, or at least ones that are easy to engage with.

Okay, great…

Otherwise…

We don't do that here.

Okay, great… what if none of those apply?

•What if your target player base wants the complication and weirdness and pain of real world sex and romance? What if they ***WANT it to be hard?

- Or maybe you want that! Maybe you're making a game where the tone or themes don't lend themselves to stories where love always wins, or where you always know what to do. You may want to tell more realistic stories about confusion, uncertainty, the random chance love punches your players in the face.

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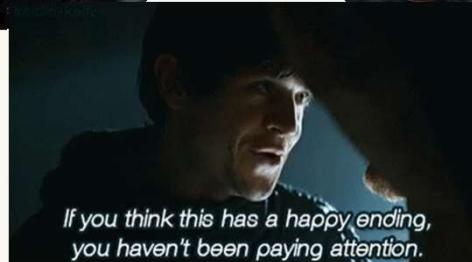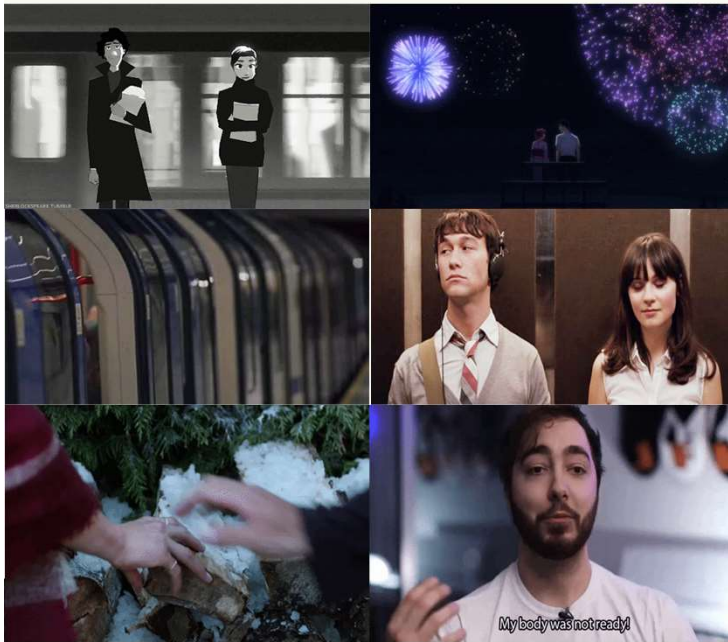
- Because let's face it…

Luck and mystery in real-world relationships

- **Situational luck and chance**
  - Meet-cutes
  - Accidental glances/touches
  - Right place, right time
  - Lucky/missed opportunities

•Because let's face it, in real life, love and sex involves uncertainty and LUCK.

- Some of it is situational luck of meeting the right person at the right time, or experiencing a random moment together… you can't plan for that.
- ***And in reality, you can't plan for attraction either! The "spark" is tough to predict even when you have a type, or know what you like.
- ***Plus people don't come with walkthroughs and UI, you don't know what's going on in their head! You barely know what's going on in yours! None of us know what we're doing!
- Luck? It's a goddamn *miracle* anyone ever hooks up…
  - and yet, we risk it anyway. We take the plunge into mysterious waters because*** the love or booty we're looking for is worth it.

•And you know what? That all sounds like great fodder for storytelling!

- And it just so happens we're telling stories in a medium where*** luck and random chance are baked into the foundation. ;)

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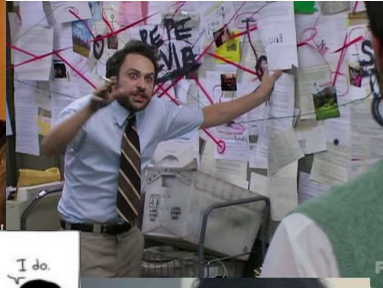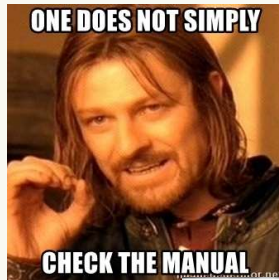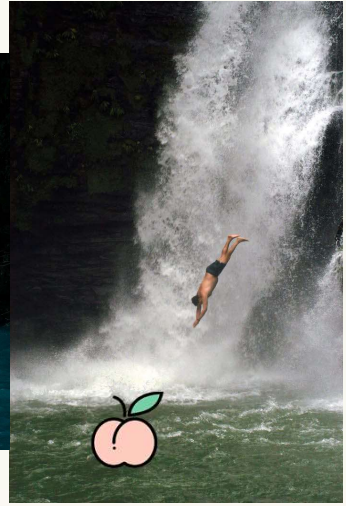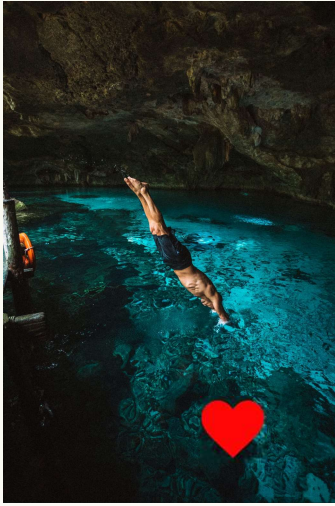# Luck and mystery in real-world relationships

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- **Let's face it, we're clueless**
  - No walkthroughs or UI for people
  - Don't know their type/feelings/etc
  - Don't know OUR OWN type/feelings/etc
  - No one knows what they're doing!

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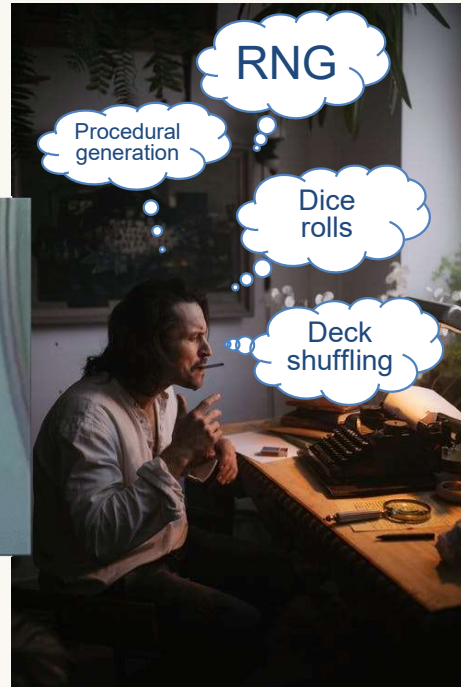
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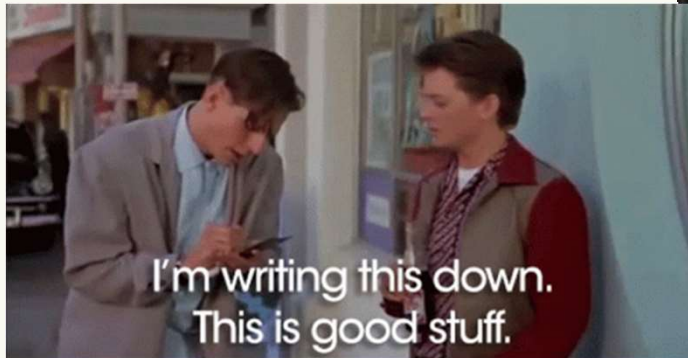
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The Chemistry Casino

Thus, the second model: the chemistry casino
•As the name suggests, ***this model incorporates chemistry and attraction, but adds unpredictability
- Either through game systems like RNG AND/OR through the writing, and by hiding information and feedback

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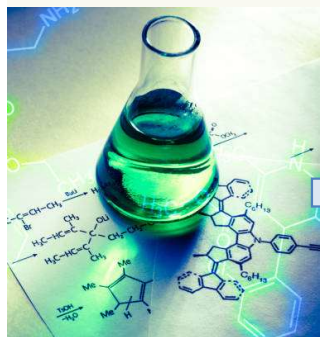
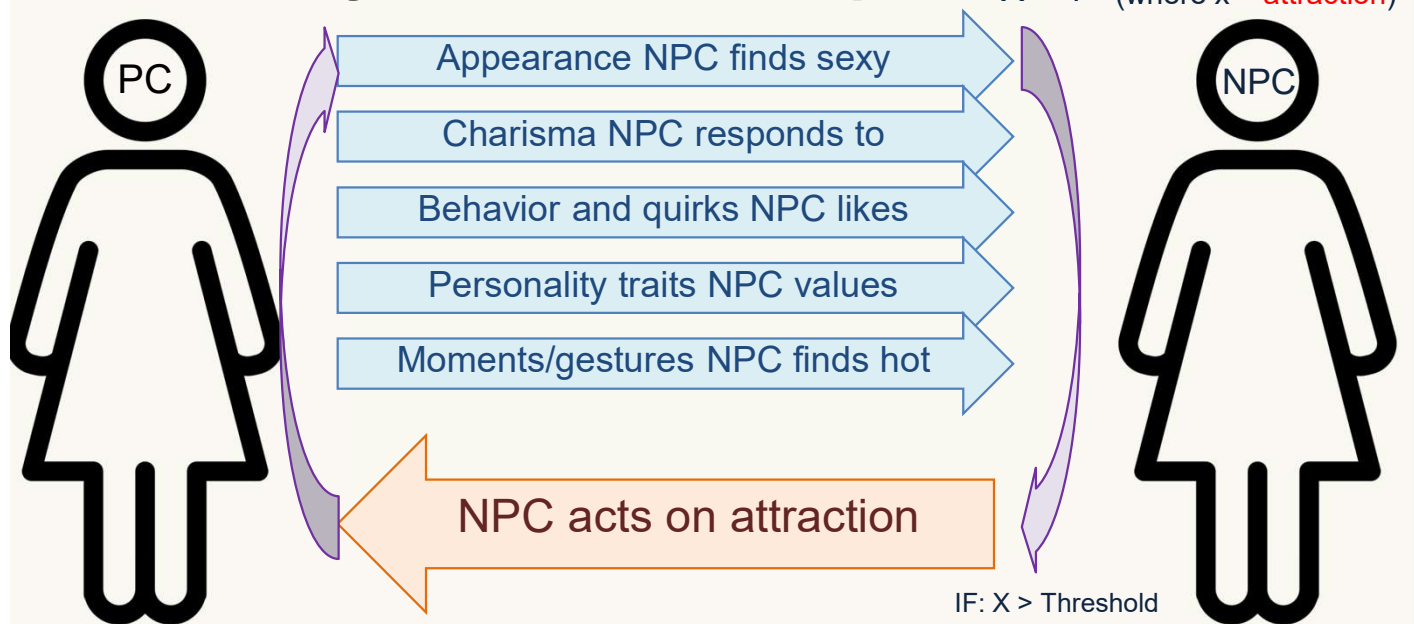**Thus, the second model: the chemistry casino**
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Chemistry Card Tower Loop

X + 1 (where x = attraction)

PC — NPC

- Appearance NPC finds sexy
- Charisma NPC responds to
- Behavior and quirks NPC likes
- Personality traits NPC values
- Moments/gestures NPC finds hot

NPC acts on attraction

IF: X > Threshold

•In chemistry card towers, you **know** what the NPC finds attractive, you **know** they'll become attracted, you **know** they WILL act

•In chemistry casino, ***you might not know any of these things for sure, either because they're hidden from you, or because they're genuinely random.

- This still encourages roleplaying and exploring attraction, but from a different angle, one that does not offer guarantees.
    - **For example, the NPC's "type" may not be clearly communicated.
        - **Meaning you can't just pick an "obvious" trait they dig
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Roleplay and Chemistry at the Casino

I swoon for aggressively dumb butch lady himbos.

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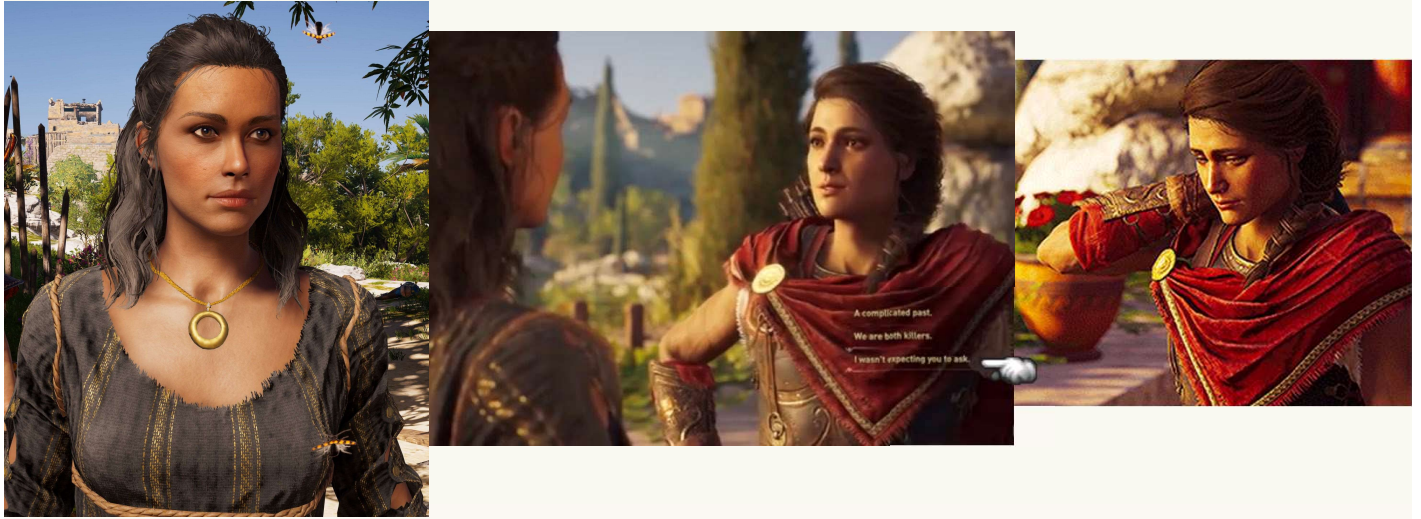
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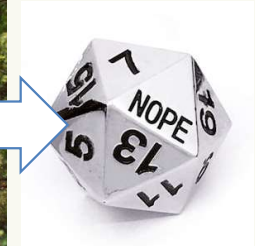
Roleplay and Chemistry at the Casino

+2 for nice hair
+1 for style
+3 for grace

- •To borrow a dice metaphor that isn't a casino, your character's attractive traits may be more like ***modifiers on a dice roll in D&D
- NOT a Seduction roll, but a roll to see if there's a "spark" there
- If you have a lot of traits they're drawn to, it's more likely
    - But it **still might not turn out that way.
- Of course, this works in ***reverse too
    - You might be the opposite of who they usually like… but** boy, they're feeling it with you.

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Randomization – Great for some stories!

Examples of major RNG:
- Randomly generated characters
- Randomly generated attraction
- Randomized scenes and events
- Randomized "successes"

Game example: Crusader Kings III
- Randomized marriage prospects
- Randomized events
- Affected by random traits
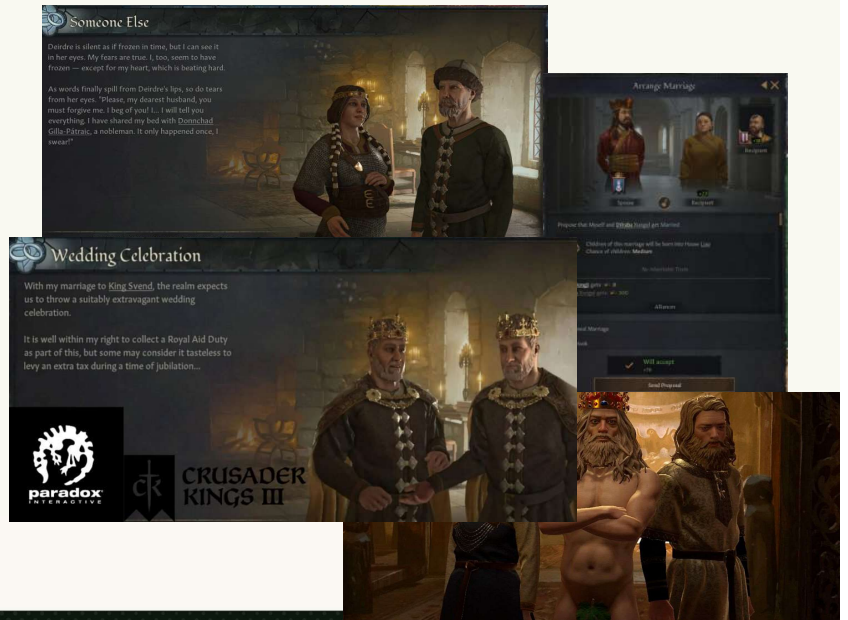
GDC

•So, actual randomization in chemistry casino design - using things like randomized characters, events, RNG, etc - GREAT for games with that design already
- Example: Crusader Kings III is basically a soap opera generator thanks to its random characters and events: marriages, adultery, pregnancies, you name it. Makes for GREAT emergent storytelling.

Randomization – Not so great for others…

Issues with major RNG:

- Traditional "pre-made" stories
  don't mesh well

- Players blocked from romance
  by bad luck, resulting in lost time, etc.

200 hours of playing, and *__one__* failed chemistry check means **my waifu hates me forever.**

GAME OVER

…this is bull$#!+.

GDC

•But for more traditional game stories, there are issues
- ***For players, most do not want to be blocked from romantic or sexual content by one stroke of bad luck - PARTICULARLY if they've been playing for hundreds of hours.
- ***And for writers? Effective romantic and sexual storytelling often depend on very non-random things like characterization, pacing, logic.
    - So having random things happen out of nowhere with no narrative connecting tissue is going to wreck the whole story.
•If you want randomization AND traditional narrative, try a hybrid model
- Either have the narrative be modular and easy to shift
- Or have the randomization is be light and subordinate to narrative

Randomization – Not so great for others…

Issues with major RNG:

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- Players blocked from romance by bad luck, resulting in lost time, etc.

- Writers can't "handcraft" a deeply meaningful romance/sex story

2 WHOLE PAGES ARE MISSING! THE STORY DOESN'T MAKE ANY SENSE AT ALL AT ONCE!
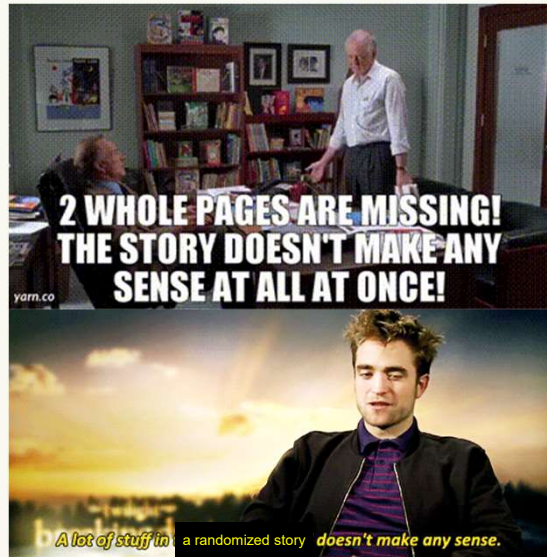
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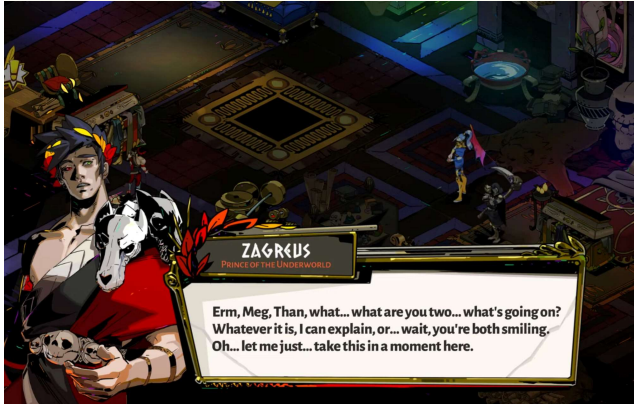- Or have the randomization is be light and subordinate to narrative

Randomization – Hybrid Model

Modular narrative examples:
- "Standalone" scenes
- Story as building blocks
- Specific "pools" of events, dialogues, etc.

Light randomization examples:
- Random modifiers
- Randomized timing
- Randomized <u>minor</u> events

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Hybrid Example: Monster Prom

- Great example in Monster Prom, where the goal is to ask a monster out for prom!:
    - There is a chemistry system where their attraction is based on whether you have high stats in the traits they like
    - BUT! the scenes and challenges where you BUILD those stats and traits are largely randomized every time you play
        - So if you end up in the wrong encounters, you might be going stag.
- So that's one approach to the chemistry casino. The other is to *fake* randomization… a ***rigged casino, if you will! And this is where narrative really comes in.
- Even if the player ****can* just keep picking the right choice and lock in a guaranteed romance, the narrative and other systems can make the relationship FEEL like luck.
- And yes, someone will figure it out and post a walkthrough because fans are fans, but you can ensure those that go in blind experience that feeling of gambling with their heart or loins. How?**

The Rigged Casino: "Fooling" Your Players

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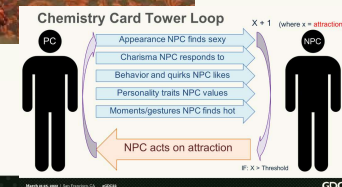 - So if you end up in the wrong encounters, you might be going stag.

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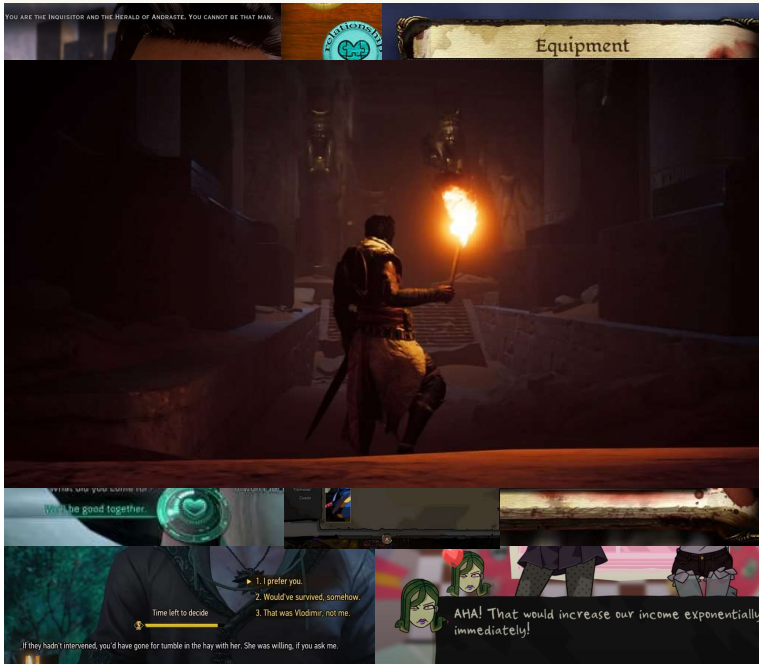
The Rigged Casino: "Fooling" Your Players

- **HIDE EVERYTHING**
  - (ie hide feedback to players)

•Well, one of the easiest things to do is HIDE EVERYTHING
- More specifically, hide immediate feedback for romance actions
  - Don't indicate the "right" choices of what the NPCs like or think
  - Keep player in the dark the way REAL people are in the dark
  - Let them guess, let them stumble, let them experiment.
  - The uncertainty drives tension - tension you can then tap into to power your romantic and sexual tension.
- The most obvious way to hide things is with the UI - doing away with affection bars or popups
- BUT there is also feedback LIKE that to hide or avoid in writing
  - In many romances, the dialogue gives explicitly clear feedback whether the player's romantic interest is reciprocated or not
  - But what if your player flirted, and instead of a line of dialogue like that, your NPC raised an eyebrow, smiled unreadably, and changed the subject?
    - Cue your players going OMG, WHAT DOES IT MEAN?
      - Like real dating and hookups feel sometimes!
  - So when format and scope allow, lean on things like body

language that can be ambiguous and subtle

The Rigged Casino: Hiding Your Info

HOW TO HIDE
- Avoid indicating "right" choices
  - Before: no clearly marked selections
  - After: no pop-ups, meters, etc.
- Keep the player in the dark
- Let them experiment
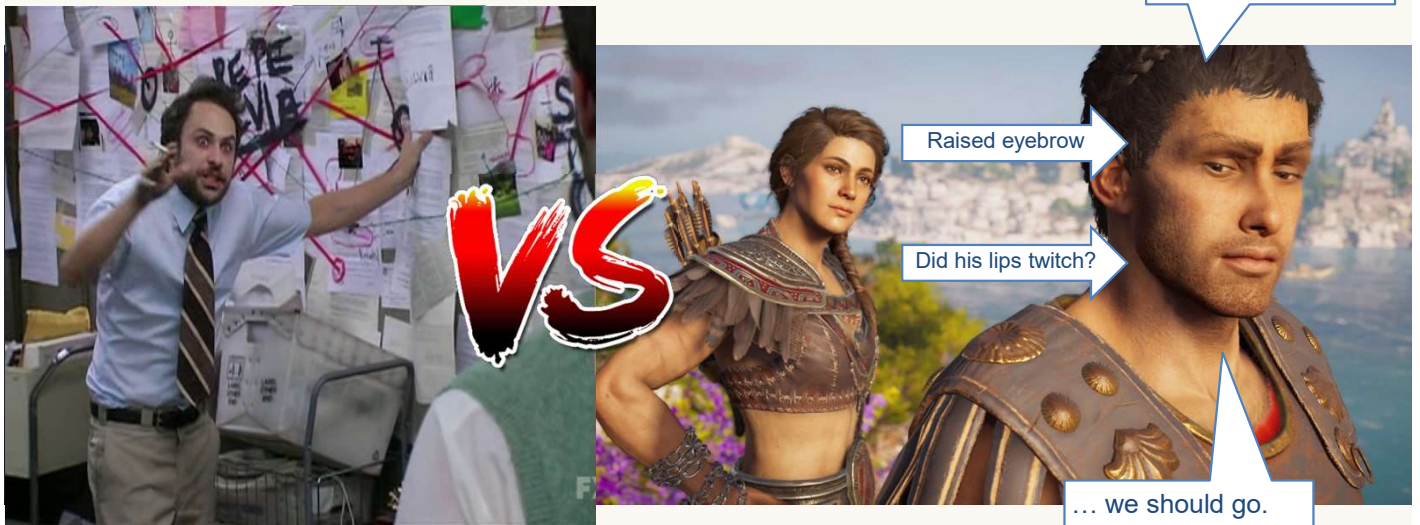- Drive uncertainty and tension

MAIN WAYS OF HIDING
- UI
- Writing!

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The Rigged Casino: "Fooling" Your Players

- **HIDE EVERYTHING**
  - (ie feedback to players)

- **Will they, won't they?**
  - They might not!

- There are other ways make a non-random romance system feel random
  - For example, there's the old "will they won't they" dynamic, but write it in a way that makes "they won't" an equally likely outcome
  - Try approaching it like a sexy/romantic whodunnit, only the mystery isn't the identity of the killer, but the nature of the feelings involved
  - And write the eventual connection not as inevitable - even if it secretly is - but as a lucky win or a little miracle
    - That can mean themes and motifs of happy chance or sexy coincidence
    - Or it can mean just writing that feeling of jumping out of a plane and finding out your parachute does, in fact work. In other words,
      - "I took a chance, made the leap of faith, and it worked out"
  - Remember, love and lust can be uncertain and confusing and even terrifying, but that makes the successes all the sweeter.

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- **Write for a surprising, joyful "win"**
  - Mutual love/lust = winning the lottery!

- There are other ways make a non-random romance system feel random
  - For example, write the old "will they won't they" dynamic, but in a way that makes "they won't" an equally likely outcome
  - Try approaching it like a sexy/romantic whodunnit, only the mystery isn't the identity of the killer, but the nature of the feelings involved
  - And write the eventual connection not as inevitable - even if it secretly is - but as a lucky win or a little miracle
    - That can mean themes and motifs of happy chance or sexy coincidence
    - Or it can mean just writing that feeling of jumping out of a plane and finding out your parachute does, in fact work. In other words,
      - "I took a chance, made the leap of faith, and it worked out"
  - Remember, love and lust can be uncertain and confusing and even terrifying, but that makes the successes all the sweeter.

The Rigged Casino: Celebrating the Wins

Serendipity:
Meet-cutes, accidental glances, right time
right place, fireworks, etc.

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"Rigged Casino" Example: First Bite

- Queer erotic horror dating sim
- Must "impress" a vampire
  - Succeed: sexy times!
  - Fail: THEN PERISH
- Feedback subtle, non-existent
- Occasional misdirection
- Gameplay is card tower…
- FEELING is all casino
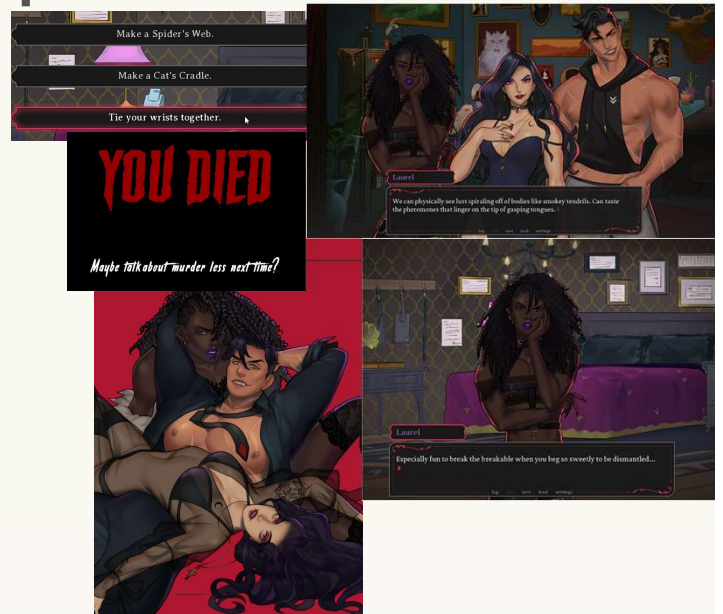
•First Bite is a great example of this style of a random-feeling narrative hiding a non-random chemistry card tower.

- It's an erotic gothic horror dating sim about vampires. Impress and attract them, and they'll have very hot vampire sex with you; fail, and they eat you.
  - It is the Dark Souls of dating sims. It is TENSE.
- And part of what makes it tense is that, although there are "right" choices, you can only guess what they are, and you cannot always trust these vampires' responses. Are they smiling because they like you, or because they're toying with you?
- The danger and tension makes the sex hotter, and the happy ending feels like you won the lottery

Conclusion

Friends, writers, narrative designers, I came to bury kindness coins, not to praise them
•But new things can sprout from that soil… or **emerge like a zombie, whatever.
•I don't pretend the chemistry card tower and the chemistry casino are the beginning and end of romantic and erotic narrative design, but I hope they'll be useful frameworks for you.
- I feel like they're great ways to take this tarnished kindness coin dynamic and reforge it through writing and narrative design into something better
- And I feel they're also great ways to tell different stories about love and desire
  - Whether as unstoppable forces or little impossible miracles
  - Both visions can be beautiful and compelling; it just falls on you and your team to decide which works best for your game.

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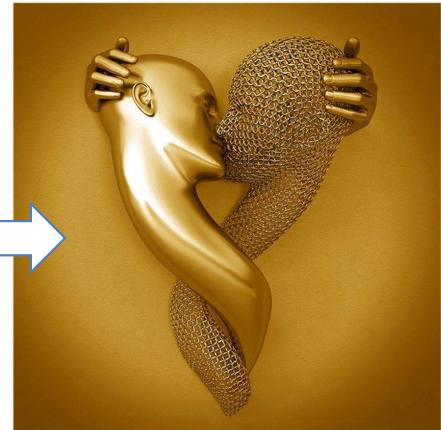
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Conclusion

- Chemistry, not "niceness"
- Give your NPCs agency
- Use all game systems for love and sex
- Predictable vs random chance.
- Create simple wishfulfillment
- AND create more challenging visions

...Were those his words, any of them? Is that how he really feels?

I want something to go right. Just once. Just...

- So to sum up:
    - Go for chemistry, not bland niceness
    - Give your NPCs agency
    - Use every game system to tell love and sex stories.
    - Explore the design and narrative differences between randomness and predictable outcomes
    - KEEP creating and supporting gleefully simple, shallow wish fulfillment
    - AND create and support content with more complicated, realistic visions
    - Design systems to make hearts race, write moments that launch a thousand ships… and create stories of sex and love that take flight.
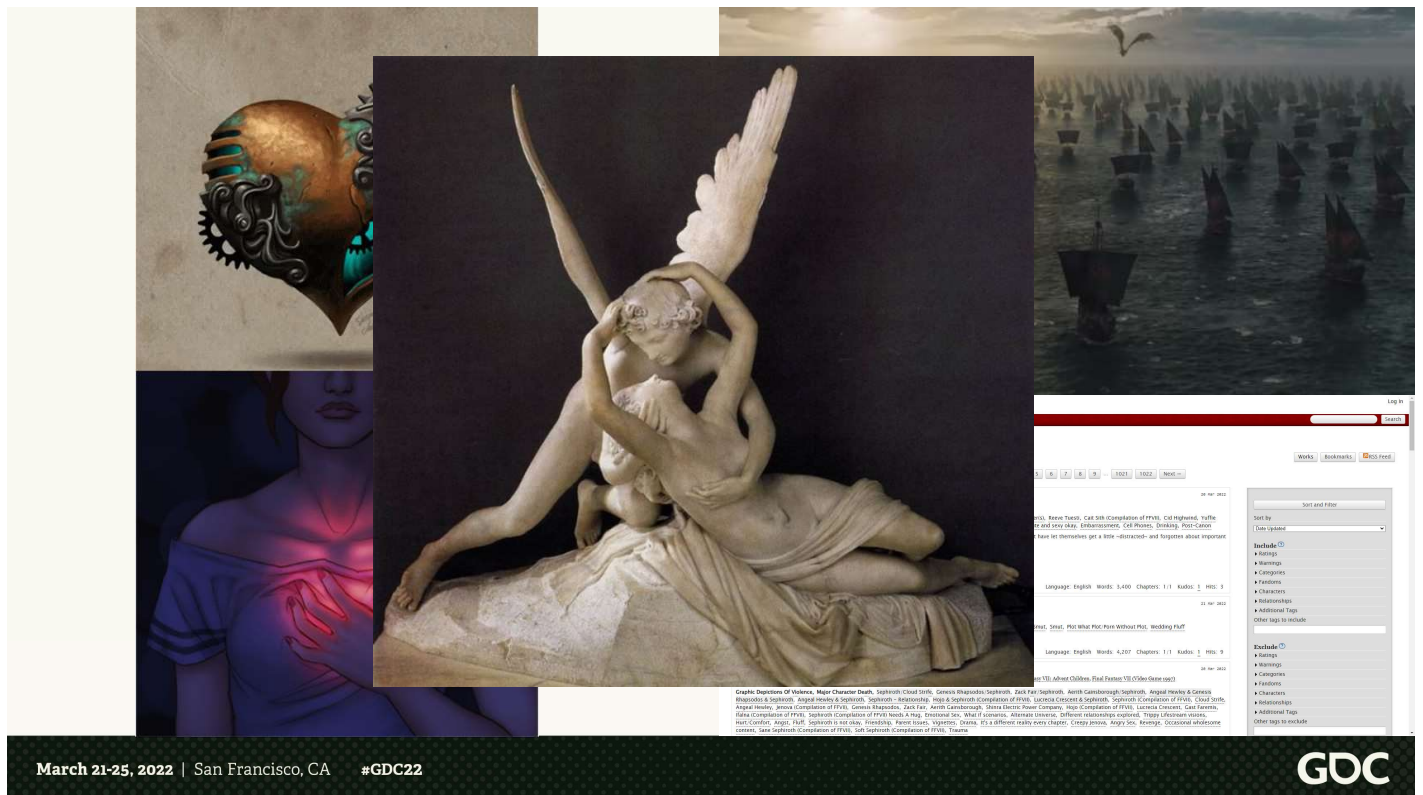
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Thank you!

- Email: michelle@talespinners.co.uk
- Twitter: @michelle_clough
- Discord: MichelleC#2425

Check out *Passion and Play*
at the bookstore (with pre-order discount!)

Join us on Thursday 5:30 PM for
A Rousing Roundtable on romance
and sex in games!
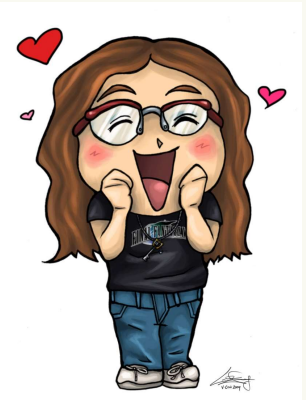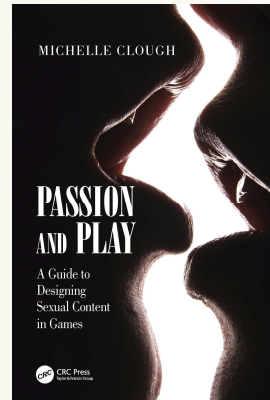
Thank you! If you're interested in the talk, FERIM, the book, or anything else, I'd love to chat, or you can reach me by email, Twitter DMs, LinkedIn, or friend me on Discord. Check out my book at the store, and have a wonderful safe GDC! Thank you!