

*Death Do Us Part* is a microsimulation game developed with the Unity game engine. The aesthetics are inspired by dating simulation games, specifically other parodies of the genre. Dating simulators often involve the player inhabiting a first-person perspective in a game and in some form attempting to woo the NPCs. I was inspired by a critique I read of the idea of “romance in games”, both in genres wherein that is the focus like dating sims, but also in other genres such as RPGs where it may be an optional side mechanic. In either case, there are almost always pass/fail conditions as to if the player is able to successfully romance an NPC, and in order to pass, generally players need to behave in ways the NPC approves of, including choosing ‘correct’ dialogue options. Players may need to behave in ways they would not normally do for the sake of gaining the NPC’s approval if they wish to pursue a romance. By breaking down the flow of events, we can see a general logic:

*learn NPC’s likes → behave in ways that garner approval from NPC → successful romance*

Again, if this was the real world, such a mindset could be called manipulative, dishonest, and maybe even sleazy. But in the context of games, that is the typical flow of how player romance works. Depending on the genre of game, the romance can even culminate in marriage.

I am of the opinion that marriage should not be seen as a logical end-state of a relationship, but pop-cultural depictions always tend to stop there (think of fairy tales). So, I wondered what a dating simulator would look like after the characters involved get married. Relationships are complex and changing things that are highly susceptible to circumstance, which I think makes some people uncomfortable to think about. Games are all about player agency and control, which means that any inclusion of relationships are (broadly and generally speaking) ridiculously simplified to where only the player’s wants impact the relationship(s) between their own character and any NPCs. In life, I feel that sometimes no matter how much you care for a person, romantically or otherwise, sometimes things just don’t happen the way you want them to. I wanted to explore this idea using the aesthetics of dating simulators to contrast gamified relationships with examples of moments that may happen in real relationships.

*Death Do Us Part* is an experiment in framing the random uncertainty of life as the most influential factor in a partnership. The core of my design process was giving the player a false sense of control in the game’s progression. I want players to become emotionally invested in the future of the in-game couple, and form their own opinions about the viability of the relationship

as they see it unfold. I feel that this will allow for deeper reflection about what 'winning' or 'losing' is in regards to a topic as complicated as romantic relationships. For instance, if a couple's happiness is always very low but still not at divorce level, it's possible the simulation will end up successful, thereby playing the winning funeral scene. That is a case where I hope the player will consider whether a lifelong unhappy marriage is really a better outcome than if the couple had just divorced. The game is saying you won, but does it really feel that way?

The simulation is currently in beta– it is functional and representational of the final product, but some features are still missing. In the future, I have plans to implement more ways for players to feel they are influencing the outcome of a simulation. I also will develop more situations to extend the length of one simulation.