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Tap for Intimacy Potentialities: The (In)Visible Queer/Crip Worlds of *Romance Club*

Abstract

This article examines queer/crip intimacy potentialities within the interactive visual novel application *Romance Club*. Focusing on its large Russian-speaking audience, I situate the game's portrayals of intimacy within a discursive terrain where queerness and disability are rendered socially invisible, legislatively constrained, and culturally stigmatized. Approaching invisibility as not only a condition but also as a strategy and a generative realm of possibility, I argue that *Romance Club* functions as a contradictory space: enforcing normative framings of romance through its stories, imagery, and mechanics, while simultaneously enabling queer/crip intimacies to emerge through slippages, player practices, and fan reinterpretations. The article traces the game's normative assumptions, explores moments of rupture and invisibility, and concludes by situating *Romance Club* in a landscape of potentialities, whereby intimacy can be negotiated and reframed in a context of opacity. By analyzing a Russian-language interactive visual novel application, the article offers an account of how queer and crip intimacies are imagined and sustained in contexts where visibility itself remains fraught, situating *Romance Club* within broader debates on digital intimacy, opacity, and non-Western European queer/crip experience.

Keywords: intimacy, opacity, interactive visual novels, crip theory, queer theory, *Romance Club*.

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HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT ABOUT TAKING A DIGITAL LOVER?

In an age of digital intimacy, such a query may not be too far-fetched. Intimacy is experienced and negotiated by millions in real time across the contemporary mediascape of dating apps, porn websites, AI companions, social feeds, and fan spaces. Oscillating between possibility and restriction, digital technology offers unprecedented paths for connection while simultaneously imposing new forms of algorithmic and social control (Andreevskikh and Muravyeva 215; Buyantueva; Sheperd-Murtagh). For queer and disabled users, as well as other marginalized groups, this space is no less complex–being closely entangled with wider systems of oppression, it inhabits local discourses of normativity, safety, and visibility (Buyantueva; Sciberras and Tanner 2696–99; Johnson et al. 3–7). This becomes markedly clear when examining the case of the Russian-language digital realm, where legislation, larger narratives of belonging, and accessibility of both digital and physical infrastructures produce an environment where intimacy, as a way of world-making (Berlant 282), must be continually re-imagined through the cracks in the visibility regimes (Tudor 3905–07).

In the colonial aftermath of the Russian Empire and, later, the Soviet Union, Russian remains relatively widely spoken across several countries in the region, often creating nationally overlapping digital spaces (Konradova 44; Uffelmann 174). The colonial legacy extends far beyond language. In many Russian-speaking environments, queer and disabled users often contend with overlapping erasures, stemming from imperial histories as well as Russia's export of the so-called *traditional values*—self-proclaimed antipodes to broadly defined Western culture—which emphasize traditional gender roles bound to heterosexual families, as well as maintain stigma around disability (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Verbilovich 431; Wiedlack and Neufeld 220). This space, however, is by no means uniform—more than thirty years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia face continuous geopolitical pressure from Russia, resulting in different strategy choices regarding minority policy (Luciani and Shevtsova 665). This has been further complicated with the advent of the Russian–Ukrainian conflict in 2014 and Russia's increasingly restrictive anti-LGBTQIA+ policies, which contributed to the strengthening of the existing "LGBT-friendly" pro-EU discourse in Ukraine (657–58), as well as encouraged the use of Ukrainian as a primary language (Kulyk 172), but brought about discriminatory "Russia-style" legislation in countries like Georgia and Kazakhstan (Luciani and Shevtsova 664–65; "Statement: Kazakhstan Senate Votes to Approve Anti-LGBTI Provisions"). Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion in Ukraine has

resulted in a growing population of people with disabilities in the region, which will undoubtedly impact incoming legislation and policy, along with lived experiences of disability (Hopkins; "Ukraine Presents Its Experience of Inclusive Recovery at International Summit in Berlin"). This context marks a point of difference, where intimacy, visibility, and normativity are negotiated within entangled spheres of influence offline and online.

With queerness being restricted or disciplined through legislative or cultural mechanisms, and disability being rendered socially invisible via dominant narratives and lack of accessibility in many Russian-language contexts, discourse around queer and disabled persons is rarely open and leaves little room for the public centering of their subjective experiences, including those of intimacy (Iarskaia-Smirnova and Verbilovich 432; Wiedlack and Neufeld 225; Wiedlack 923). These overlapping erasures are constructed through the interwoven systems of ableism, androcentrism, and heterosexism, which, as proposed by Teodor Mladenov in his discussion of Central Eastern Europe and highly applicable to the Russian-speaking context, hinge greatly on conditions produced by the historical continuity between state socialism and postsocialist neoliberalization, including "the ways in which state socialist productivism, biological reductionism, and institutional confinement have interacted with welfare state retrenchment, re-traditionalization of society, and the creeping marketization that followed 1989" (536).

McRuer theorizes the disciplining of bodies as maintained through the closely interconnected systems of compulsory heterosexuality, compulsory able-bodiedness, and compulsory able-mindedness, which establish dominant bodies, minds, and sexualities as "the natural order of things" (12), effectively rendering existence outside the norm *invisible*. This resulting invisibility, however, does not merely signify absence or exclusion; it actively structures how queer and crip intimacies can be imagined, practiced, and sustained within Russian-language digital spaces. Invisibility, or *opacity*, as conceptualized by Édouard Glissant (190), can be understood as offering a space for refusal to become visible and thus subject to scrutiny. Building on Glissant's work, Anna T. extends the concept of opacity to demonstrate the value of invisibility and the queer closet as valuable spaces of refuge, creating queer joy and existence within gaps and absences (13–28). These very ruptures create potentialities for opaque intimacy beyond the normative—especially in a context of restricted visibility—with digital spaces specifically offering relative anonymity and opportunities for asynchronous, multi-modal communication, providing more possibilities for connection, community-building, and resistance (Maes, van Oosten, and Vandenbosch 135; Johnson et al.).

Within this discursive terrain, *Romance Club*, an interactive visual novel application popular among Russian-speakers, emerges as a curious case of digital intimacy-making in a normative regime that renders queer and disabled persons mostly invisible. Created in 2017 by an independent Moldovan game development studio, Your Story Interactive, *Romance Club* is a choice-based visual novel application in which players progress through illustrated dialogue scenes across a variety of serialized romantic stories, each spotlighting different characters, plots, and settings, from murder mysteries and pirate adventures to Christian mythology-inspired tales of the Apocalypse. In spite of leaving the Russian market in 2024 due to the Federal Executive Agency for Media Control's demands to remove LGBTQ content from the game,[1] the studio continues making Russian-language content, as they maintain a large Russian-speaking audience and fandom, with over 600,000 followers across the Russian-language segments of various social networks, such as Vkontakte, Instagram, and Telegram. Simultaneously, *Romance Club* continues to develop transnationally, with all its stories available and sometimes originally authored in English, and several having been translated into seven more European languages. This intentional transition beyond the Russian-language market has seemingly resulted in a digital space where more diverse, nominally liberal and market-oriented portrayals of intimacy coexist with more traditional storylines. This positions *Romance Club* between two major markets with different normative pressures, particularly at a time of great discursive tension between these two sets of norms—both within the Russian-language space and between Russia and the West.

This article examines how intimacy is represented in *Romance Club*, as well as the ways in which queer/crip intimacy potentialities emerge in spite of, and sometimes through, the invisibility and limited visibility granted by the app. I draw on queer and crip critiques of normativity, as articulated by McRuer, Sandahl, and Willey; the notion of opacity as potentiality inspired by Glissant and T.'s work; as well as the understanding of intimacy as a way of world-making (Berlant 282). This article treats opacity as structuring intimacy-making under constraint, tracing how optionality, partial visibility, and absence define what can be pursued, said, or recognized both in-game and out, across social media and fandoms. By situating my

[1] Since 2022, Russian law forbids the display of any materials including LGBTQIA+ portrayals, which prompted an investigation into the *Romance Club* application (see "'Клуб Романтики' удалили из Google Play"). At the time of writing, the application has been removed from the Russian market for almost two years. However, as of May 2026, *Romance Club* has returned to the Russian app marketplaces in the form of a separate application adapted in accordance to all the "local demands and conditions of dissemination" (@official_romanceclub). Players in the Russian Federation can still continue to use the uncensored version of the application if they have downloaded it before its removal in 2024.

research within the Russian-speaking space and highlighting its embedded norms, as well as the transitions introduced by the developers after leaving the Russian market, I aim to expand on contextualized conceptualizations of crip/queer intimacies within interactive visual novels.

NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

I approach *Romance Club* as a cultural and narrative assemblage encompassing text, visual and structural design, platform affordances, and user practices situated within the context of overlapping normative pressures. This allows for an examination of intimacy not only as represented within the game's narratives, but also as negotiated through gameplay mechanics, replay practices, and fan engagement. I utilize a combination of close play, as articulated by, among others, Edmond Y. Chang, as well as Kimberly Dennin and Adrianna Burton, and digital ethnography (Popova) based on a three-month-long, immersive engagement with *Romance Club* and fan-generated social media content.

The methodology of close play aims to "know games beyond their content, narrative, mechanics and graphics" (Dennin and Burton), supposing that gaming elements are "connected and dependent on the logics, narratives, and histories of the real world" (Chang). Following the principle of oscillating between play as a player and play as a scholar, I note recurring patterns such as intimacy arrangements, aesthetic norms, and choice penalties, as well as my personal interpretations of queering and cripping potentialities within various elements of the game and its fifty stories. My digital ethnographic observations focus on publicly available user-generated material, including photos, videos, and text, on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Telegram. My point of departure has been informed by informal conversations with two acquaintances—long-time players and fans of the game, who shared their favorite public community and creator pages. The analysis within this article focuses on the interplay of possibility and restriction, taking into account platform affordances, cultural boundaries, and normative structures that shape engagement with cultural products, such as that of *Romance Club*.

My engagement with the material within this article is informed by my positionality and embodied experience. As an able-bodied scholar, I do not aim to claim epistemic authority, but rather seek to emphasize the politically significant potentiality for the acts of cripping, which will be defined later in the text as a practice of revealing and reworking the normative assumptions embedded in media (Sandahl 36), within the game. Additionally, I rely on my own embodied experience to engage with the

queer potentialities of the game, as well as their situatedness within an Eastern European, specifically Russian-speaking, context. As the two discussed normative systems, as well as their context, are inextricably connected, I hope to provide a meaningful examination of their nexus.

THE ROMANCE OF IT ALL

Romance Club occupies a space between interactive visual novels, dating simulators, and the conventions of the popular romance genre, while mainly taking on the structure of the former. Camingue et al. define interactive visual novels (VNs) as "a digital narrative focused game that requires interactions where the player must be able to impact the story world or the story's progression" (11). With an impressive library of fifty such games, or *stories*, *Romance Club* allows the players to steer the plot through a series of dialogue choices. Sharing many traits with the *Choose-Your-Own-Adventure* book, they nonetheless have "a less straightforward relationship with player choices than most works of interactive fiction," where "choices . . . may have no immediate effect on the narrative, contributing instead to a complex system of potentialities and character relationships that resolves itself toward the end" (Fiadotau 2085).

Romantic interactive VNs focus on the experience of intimacy, often featuring extensive mechanics of relationship building, as well as erotic or pornographic scenes. Largely borrowing from *otome* games—female-oriented dating simulators that originated in Japan in the 1990s (Sun 2)—*Romance Club* follows similar mechanics, plot points, and focus on male love interests, while adhering to the interactive visual novel conventions. Much like the popular romance genre, romantic interactive VNs "do not only entertain but serve as cultural artifacts that reflect and potentially shape the views of society on gender roles, sexuality, and the concept of romance" (1). As argued by Emily Baldys, popular romance tends to perpetuate compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness through its deeply rooted tropes, conventions, and clichés (129). Similarly, *Romance Club* heavily relies on conventional retellings of popular romance tropes such as enemies-to-lovers, friends-to-lovers, billionaire romance, and third-act breakups, where predominantly heterosexual pairings engage in productive romance that leaves little space for relational failure, queer ambiguity, or bodies and desires that do not conform to the able-bodied, monogamous couple at the center of the genre.

Most portrayals of intimacy in *Romance Club* adhere to those imposed through various normative structures, which are integrated into the gaming experience through the interface, marketing materials, game mechanics,

as well as storytelling elements themselves. Launching the app confronts one with a bright and colorful image, a loading screen that updates every few months, portraying four characters from different stories, two men and two women (one of whom is usually a main character in one of the stories), looking playfully at the camera as they pause their laborious half-naked attempt at a car wash. They are simply perfect: their skin glowing, abdominal muscles protruding, and hair virtually untouched by the hard work and moisture. Above all, they *really* want to romance you—the player. Readily aligning with the conventions of the popular romance genre, the desirable and desired bodies are flawless, with the visual medium further exacerbating the establishment of "bodies as romantic agents" (130). They are explicitly sexually capable, highly gendered, and, when actually having a disability, conventionally beautiful.

As the player settles on one of the stories in the catalogue, *perhaps that one about elves and dragons*, they are invited to customize the usually female (at the moment of writing, there are only two stories where the player can choose a male main playable character) avatar, by picking one from around four to five character models of different races and in a few cases two body types, either featuring "athletic" or "slim" options, or "athletic" and "full-bodied" or "curvy," all portraying fit, hourglass bodies. The game's approach to race is superficial and highly limited, with character models reflecting Eurocentric beauty standards and storytelling being largely race-evasive, with very few exceptions.[2] The player can pick their character's name and sometimes customize their appearance further with choices of hair and clothing. On the surface, these customization mechanics promise self-representation and connection with one's character; in practice, however, they delimit intimacy to bodies that conform to narrow aesthetic and functional ideals.

The main heroine, apart from being conventionally beautiful, able-bodied, and implicitly cisgendered, is also usually the epitome of the postfeminist main character, making "good use of the earlier gains of the women's movement, while at the same time, distancing herself from the feminist ethos" (Ostalska 207). Most of the main characters have jobs, which are easily set aside in favor of a grand adventure, or possess generational wealth; yet it is the romance in their lives that helps drive the plot forward. Despite the differences from story to story, the main

[2] The cultural and racial aspects of the game, including its portrayal of characters and plotlines, deserve a separate in-depth investigation, outlining the cultural appropriation, fetishization, and overall adherence to global white supremacist systems. Additionally, this pertains to the limited public discourse around race and ethnicity within certain Russian-speaking environments, as well as the aftermath of the Soviet universalist agenda (Zakharov and Law).

character's rather traditional femininity is often made the focal point, with extensive clothing and hair choices in every chapter, love interests complimenting her explicitly feminine physical features, or through the dialogue itself: in a scene from *Chasing You 2*, the main character asks her female friend to tighten her corset, saying, "I wish I had been born a man." Her friend replies, "And had to listen to the political debates in the smoking room?," to which the protagonist concedes, "You're right. Tighten it." The main character is momentarily annoyed by the demands of the gendered dress code of Victorian England, yet the prospect of participating in political debates, which her friend implicitly proposes as a strictly male activity, seems completely impossible and uninteresting to her.

Beyond character design and dialogue, the game's interactive mechanics also structure how romance and intimacy are meant to unfold. Throughout the story, the player can make several choices, specifically in the form of dialogue or actions. Many of these choices, especially those that lead to significant outcomes or feature interactions with romantic interests, are locked behind a paywall (expanded on below). Romantic storylines occupy a central place in the game, with romantic interactions often driving the plot and a wide array of romantic and erotic scenes that one can *unlock* throughout the narrative.

The player is invited to choose a favorite, one romantic interest that they would like to end up with in the game finale. One can also choose to take the path of a *lone wolf*; however, most of the paid scenes and narratives are aimed at picking a romantic interest that would drive the plot forward. On many occasions, continuing a storyline with more than one favorite can lead to confrontations, break-ups, or a significant worsening of one's relationship with the favorite(s). The game's insistence on picking a single romantic interest is curious; whether it is an (un)conscious decision on the developer's part, or a result of making game mechanics simpler (e.g., the narrative pressure of having to choose), each game is doggedly mononormative in both its playthrough and finale—with player characters often suffering penalties for non-monogamous behavior. Monogamy is regarded as *normal*, or even *natural*, for the target female reader, expanding compulsory heterosexuality to compulsory monogamy (Willey 621).

Consequently, while romantic relationships are often the driving force within the stories, they do not always offer a wide variety of romantic arrangements within the games, with heterosexual, cisgendered, and monogamous pairings being the most commonly available within the stories. Non-heterosexual pairings are also possible, and every story features at least one same-sex romantic interest. However, such pairings often appear homonormative, i.e. monogamous, following straight relationship timelines, and depoliticized (Drucker 279). For instance, romancing the

only female love interest in *Heaven's Secret 2* leads to the exact same wedding scenario as romancing any of the male love interests, similarly to *And the Haze Will Take Us* and *Sails in the Fog*. Sexual encounters within the game are bound by similar normative structures, either completely missing from the plot until the relationship stage deemed appropriate by the authors is finally reached, or featuring rather repetitive descriptions and following able-bodied notions of "what counts as sex" (Santinele Martino 487) relying on penetration and orgasm-focused scripts.

The top five most popular games in the app (which are showcased in the Popular section of the application interface) at the time of writing this article, *Dracula. A Love Story* and *Heaven's Secret–Requiem*, having over a million reads, followed by *Astrea's Broken Heart*, *And the Haze Will Take Us*, *and Song of the Crimson Nile*, all gathering around 700,000 reads, do not include the application's more romantically diverse stories. Mostly featuring only one non-heterosexual and no explicitly disabled romantic interests, the most popular stories cater to what appears to be a relatively homogenous, mono- and heteronormative audience, foregrounding male love interests and using the pairings as part of the promotional material and in-app story covers. *Romance Club* seems to appeal to the juxtaposing trends in post-Soviet romantic relationships (see Chernova and Shpakovskaya 41), featuring both relatively agentic, sometimes queer characters, while still centering patriarchal and heteronormative relationship models. Simultaneously, it seems to avoid tackling the topic of sexuality of people with disabilities, only featuring one disabled love interest in the whole catalogue.

The reproduction of these normative romantic scripts is closely tied to the platform's monetization model, which structures the decisions that the player can make, as well as the speed with which they can complete the stories. *Romance Club* involves the use of two in-game currencies, diamonds and cups. Certain choices and paths that readers can take within the stories are hidden behind a paywall—many crucial plot points and romantic interactions tend to require the spending of diamonds, which players can gain in-game mainly through the completion of story chapters and viewing of sponsored advertisements. Cups, on the other hand, are the currency that allows players to read the story episodes—chapters—in the first place. Each cup takes two hours to spawn, and users can only accumulate up to three cups without additional payments. *Romance Club* also offers merchandise, including body pillows with romanceable characters, mugs, toys, and books.

Each player profile, private by default and accessible by others when shared, features individual statistics, such as the number of finished, started, and unread stories, as well as in-game achievements, collected and wish

list cards, and top matches—sorted from highest to lowest percentage—showcasing romantic interests that the player is most connected to through their in-story choices. Similarly, as noted by Tingting Hu and Liang Ge, Chinese otome games increasingly rely on data-driven optimization, with player engagement dictating narrative development and shaping intimacy possibilities—for instance, sidelining queer and working-class romances as less profitable tropes (1–25). Monetization defines how intimacy is scripted and experienced in the game—mediating access, potential for repetition and circulation through time-gating and pay-to-play options, further reducing the potential for engaging with any of the non-normative aspects of stories, while limiting—or perhaps structuring—the capacity for imaginative or interpretive engagement.

Ultimately, *Romance Club* mirrors the structure of the many interactive VNs focused on romantic intimacy—through relationship-building mechanics, idealized aesthetics, and catering to hegemonic desires and bodies for the sake of profit. Being rooted in the Russian-speaking context, however, with many story authors being Russian speakers themselves, and a large number of stories being initially written in Russian, the displayed intimacies also reflect a regime of invisibility, with non-normative love interests being few and far between, as well as same-sex romance being portrayed as homonormative.

THE (IN)VISIBLE

Nonetheless, some storylines within the *Romance Club* catalogue seemingly attempt to depart from the normative imaginaries of intimacy. Various stories feature examples of polyamorous relationships, visibly disabled queer characters, non-binary characters, and more-than-human romantic interests. For instance, *The Missing*, a story about a Danish detective, introduces Alba, a confident, visibly disabled courier who initiates a sexual and romantic relationship with the female protagonist and identifies as a bisexual woman. *Seven Brothers*, arguably one of *Romance Club*'s most *queer* stories, allows the player to choose and customize their romantic and sexual preferences, from indicating their curiosity toward polyamory to identifying as asexual and deciding whether they are interested in BDSM practices, which can become an important part of the narrative as a result of certain player choices. The story also features an autistic love interest, Chloe.

Some of the more recent stories showcase alternative forms of intimacy, allowing the reader to create meaningful friendships alongside, or instead of, romantic relationships by making choices that either lead to the progression of one or the other. This game mechanic allows for

experiences of non-romantic intimacy that also affect the plot and have a generally positive impact on the story's outcome. In the story *Garden of Eden*, the protagonist's friendships dramatically shape not only the overall ending of the story, but also her very survival. In stories such as *Astrea's Broken Heart*, the main character can also build a caring relationship with an animal companion. The above choices allow the readers to experience intimacy in a non-romantic way, while still being able to influence the plot and unlock scenes with no romantic or erotic content, thus decentering romantic intimacy and allowing for alternative modes of connection.

While these additions undoubtedly contribute to the visibility of non-hegemonic intimacies, they can also be interpreted as attempts to appeal to a new audience by making superficial inclusions that create the illusion of diversity (Sun 8), potentially coinciding with *Romance Club* leaving the Russian market in 2024. Moreover, the interface of the game does not provide any explicit accommodation for disabled players, including players with vision impairments, raising the question of who is allowed to access it in the first place. Arguably, the characters mentioned above do not play the same crucial roles in the stories as some of their male counterparts—Alba rarely makes an appearance in the episodes, while Chloe does not quite fit into the story's premise of the main female character moving into a fraternity. Overall, these departures from the norm are rare and largely absent from most popular stories in the app—as posited by games studies scholar Bo Ruberg, queer content that is legible, optional, and non-disruptive can coexist comfortably with normative systems (1–2). Situated within the Russian-speaking space, I read these inclusions as conditional and uneven: limited canonical visibility can be meaningful where representation is scarce and policed, yet it is often structured as peripheral and opt-in, and thus easily bypassed—a player can complete many of these stories without encountering non-heterosexual romance or romance with disabled characters if they do not pursue those routes.

At the same time, other queer/crip possibilities emerge less through the most legible routes than through negotiated engagements with the game's architecture and interpretive play, where opacity becomes an affordance for making meaning under constraint. Queer engagement beyond representation "disrupts the neoliberal instrumentalization of LGBTQ content in video games" (17). The invisible forms of intimacy that can be "read" into the game through fan interpretations or uses of existing game mechanics allow for a meaningful and authentic engagement. Following Sandahl's framing of queering/cripping as a practice of revealing and reworking the normative assumptions embedded in media, I approach the invisibility of non-hegemonic intimacies in the game not only as absence

but as an active site of intimacy-making (37). For instance, on Instagram, the childhood experiences, inner monologue, and social interactions of the protagonist of *Heaven's Secret–Requiem*, Lane, are interpreted by fans as autistic traits they found relatable. A TikTok by user maratum reads:

> While everyone keeps saying that Lane is a psychopath, a sociopath, or has schizophrenic tendencies, based on her childhood memories, I get intense flashbacks from my own life with autism spectrum disorder. She has feelings—they're just different, often more intense than usual, and she doesn't always know what to do with them. At the same time, Lane understands others' emotions quite well—she has learned this and developed cognitive empathy. She doesn't crave constant social contact, but she gets restless if she can't fully grasp a topic. She is deeply absorbed in her special interests, straightforward yet not closed off. And that distant look in her eyes, as if she disappears into her own thoughts. . . And if someone wants to claim that Lane is just a traumatized girl who needs a diagnosis, I must disappoint them: Lane has always been different by nature. Her brain functions differently, her consciousness is wired differently. And if we translate this into the language of our reality, she looks very much like a woman with autism spectrum disorder. (translation mine)

Here, an interpretation beyond the canon signifies connection with the main character, and the ways in which she relates to others. The potentiality of difference, positioned as concealed within the narrative itself, brings to life a character whose very existence becomes disruptive to conventional interpretations. This can be considered quite common among the Russian-speaking audience, with the queering and shipping (fan-creation of non-canonical pairings) of male romantic interests, as well as alternative reimaginings of existing characters (Rajagopalan).

The very act of posting LGTBQIA+ or government-critical content on social media, even anonymously, carries a great deal of risk in a country such as Russia, with harassment and criminal charges being only some of the possible consequences ("Russia: Rising Toll of LGBT 'Extremism' Designation"; Borodina 279). Nonetheless, queer and disabled users continue to use digital spaces for resistance, love, and dwelling through the use of opaque language, anonymized accounts, and various tools for accessing blocked content, such as VPN for Instagram. This, naturally, constrains the possibilities for engagement, and the examples I outline here can be interpreted as opaque subversions of normative intimacies.

Many popular short-form videos on Instagram also convey a certain longing for Boris, another character from the same story who dies in the first season yet returns to the protagonist in visions—a significant

departure from the more normative pairings of living characters. Reinterpretations of characters also occur through cosplay, with one or multiple people portraying non-canonical interactions between characters in online social media content. An Instagram post by koval_tyan (Fig. 1) showcases a cosplay of the *Song of the Crimson Nile*, with the protagonist being surrounded by four love interests in sensual poses, hinting at a desire to transcend the need to choose only one.



Fig. 1. "Этот песок поглотит вас" ["This sand will consume you"]—a *Song of the Crimson Nile* cosplay. Courtesy of @koval_tyan. Author of the post: @koval_tyan. Author of the novel: @alerogute. Photographer: @rmegusta_photo. Models: Amen @genshe_cos, Eva @crazy_pink.lyudmila, Set (Ash) @darky_cosplay, Agnia @trisha_layons, Livius @theromanovss.

In addition to user-generated content, certain game mechanics within *Romance Club* can also be perceived as allowing for the queering and cripping of the storylines and intimacy potentialities. Strategies such as playing to lose (inspired by the queer/crip art of failing), moments of no fun, and queer manipulations of time within the games can be seen as different ways of engaging with games in a queer and crip way (Ruberg 209–30; Meinen 260–63). In *Romance Club*, there are potentialities for similar strategies, with players being able to create new save files and be unproductive in-game, use the app interface to connect with other players, and engage with the game's intimate content in new ways.

The possibility to create multiple save files allows players to make different choices, pursue other romantic interests, follow paths to different endings, and create new main characters. This grants the reader the power to maintain multiple narratives at once, letting go of the commitment to a single character or a single storyline. This dynamic is highlighted in the game's Russian-language Telegram channel, where users are often invited to vote on the romantic interests they are currently pursuing within a certain story. Such surveys seem to be initiated by the users themselves in the comments under a post about the related story, and they often feature the option of "Путь путаны/Несколько слотов" ["A slut's way/Multiple save files"], which are two separate possibilities grouped into one within the format of this survey. Interestingly, the desire for multiple love interests is labelled with a rather specific word, *путана* (Rus. slut, prostitute).

Even though the term is, of course, used in a conscious, light-hearted manner, it still points to a certain perceived social transgression—in this case, romancing multiple lovers at the same time or aspiring to do so, which departs from the normative ideals of intimacy. Simultaneously, creating multiple save files requires a certain commitment: one must restart the game and spend resources, such as cups and diamonds, to have the opportunity to make different choices or choose a new love interest. The manipulation of game mechanics can be read as generating "alternative presents" (Barton 9) of intimacy, or world-building through the exploration of different choices, romantic interests, and relationships, still performed in an opaque and relatively safe way. However, even this feature becomes restricted behind a paywall within the game—players can use up to three save files for free, with additional seven having to be purchased. Utilizing the game's free structures to their full capacity, in turn, can be interpreted as yet another way of queer/crip engagement. Most features in *Romance Club* can be used without any monetary investment with sufficient patience and commitment, with the app itself being free to play, and events such as diamond rush (and analogous in-game events where cups and outfit purchases are free) providing significant time-windows where play is completely unproductive, and where experiences of intimacy do not generate profit, but rather dwelling.

Recently introduced mechanics of gifting, sharing collector's cards (often showcasing erotic portrayals of romantic interests from different stories), and displaying and captioning one's favorite cutscenes (also usually featuring erotic content) from the game add another dimension to the intimacy landscapes within *Romance Club*. Readers can befriend other users, as well as their real-life friends, by entering their unique game tag in the search bar, which can only be shared directly from one person to another, adding a relative degree of anonymity.

The avatar is customizable, offering images of various in-game characters, with readers being able also to showcase their answers to prompts, such as "I play RC. . ." and "My motto," and add their favorite characters and stories—these allow for free-form writing, adding more flexibility and customization, as well as a direct engagement with the content of the game, and even co-creation. Users can gift each other up to thirty diamonds and collector's cards that usually contain various amounts of in-game currencies and which can be obtained for free through participating in a daily lottery. In-game messaging is yet another new feature which adds a way to connect, share intimate moments in the game, and discuss experiences, as well as, of course, topics outside the scope of *Romance Club*.

The relative opacity of the environment opens up opportunities for engaging with the game in queer and crip ways, inserting one's experiences, desires, sentiments, and interpretations into an otherwise normative structure, labelling scenes in subversive ways, using in-game currency to express feelings of attachment to fellow players, discussing slash pairings, or describing one's off-canon fantasies in writing. This mode of connection provides a less structured way to engage with the game's content and fellow players alike, creating potentialities of intimacy that extend beyond the norm. These seemingly invisible ways of doing intimacy allow for alternative connections to emerge—through interpretation, replay, and the social practices of the game's community.

Throughout the instances described above, the potentialities for subversive engagement with *Romance Club* and its content emerge as potentialities for experiencing different forms of intimacy and belonging. In the Russian-speaking context, where both are often defined along patriarchal and heterosexist value-systems, the subversion of said structures can mean survival and existence at the interstices in spite of erasures, violence, and risks that opacity itself can also carry.

CONCLUSION

Romance Club mirrors the majority of romantic interactive visual novels with its portrayals of intimacy. The normative frameworks that shape most of its stories cater to the white, heterosexual, monogamous, and able-bodied reader, perpetuating hegemonic imaginaries of relationality—through character design, paywalls, and privileging romantic monogamous heterosexual intimacy. The portrayals of connection within the stories clearly delineate what is allowed to remain visible, spotlighting what is most marketable, even when superficially inclusive by extension. Thus, *Romance Club* creates an environment of relative invisibility, where certain intimacies are rendered or

made normative and even compulsory; not everyone makes it into the *Club*, nor is everyone entitled to the *Romance*. Yet, it is the gap in between that allows for subversive readings, imaginaries, and canon-breaking.

In the larger context of the invisibility of queer and disabled persons in many Russian-speaking environments, the digital space of *Romance Club* both reproduces the dominant standards of compulsory heterosexuality and able-bodiedness and allows for them to be contested and reimagined. It is important to note that, through simply featuring non-heterosexual romance in Russian-language stories, *Romance Club* contravenes the legislation of the Russian Federation, providing an otherwise inaccessible opportunity to experience non-heterosexual romance, even to a limited extent. *Romance Club* makes the tensions between the strict legislative and cultural regulation in certain Russian-speaking environments and the neoliberal normative structures particularly clear.

While providing limited visibility to normative experiences of homosexuality, as well as, recently, more queer portrayals of romance, *Romance Club* also creates a space of opacity through relatively anonymous play, as well as a lack of explicitly subversive, emancipating depictions of intimacy that extend beyond the normative. This opacity, however, is only the beginning, enabling the emergence of alternative worlds of intimacies through user-generated discussions and content, and manipulation of game mechanics, as well as reader engagement with the few stories featuring queer, disabled, or crip-coded characters.

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