

# THE MIRROR BETWEEN US

A RELATIONSHIP POWER  
DYNAMICS SANDBOX TTRPG

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## ABSTRACT

*The Mirror Between Us* is an original two-player tabletop roleplaying game (TTRPG) designed to explore the psychological and interpersonal dynamics of romantic and family relationships concerning systemic power, emotional attachment, and identity within intimate partnerships. Drawing from social psychology, couples therapy research, and attachment theory, the game invites players to roleplay as two individuals in an arranged marriage, navigating mismatched expectations, hidden agendas, and evolving emotional bonds. Through asymmetric information, strategic decision-making, and immersive storytelling, *The Mirror Between Us* becomes a reflective sandbox in which players can experiment with different relational behaviors, confront the consequences of their actions, and practice essential relational skills. The game fills a gap in learning-oriented game design targeting emerging and mid-life adults, individuals who are often navigating pivotal transitions in identity, relationships, and life directions. By offering a structured yet creative space to explore underexamined themes such as relational power and the psychological complexity of love, it becomes a compelling medium for both personal reflection and pedagogical application.

## INTRODUCTION

Romance, across various forms of media, is often perceived as a “less serious” and more feminine subject compared to more masculine narratives centered on rivalries, strategies, and sociopolitical maneuvering (Cameron, 2020; Halford, 2011; Lois & Gregson, 2015). However, this perception diverges significantly from reality: power dynamics are intrinsic to intimate relationships. Power, in this context, has been defined as one’s ability to influence a partner, and the partner’s corresponding capacity to resist such influence (Simpson et al., 2019). These dynamics are shaped by a multitude of factors such as gender, access to resources, levels of commitment, individual personality traits, etc. (Harman et al., 2021; Körner & Schuetz, 2021; Young & Seedall, 2024). Together, these elements form a sophisticated yet ubiquitous system that profoundly impacts one’s self-identity, life decisions, relational satisfaction, and even overall health (Bookwala & Gaugler, 2020; Dover et al., 2024; Lawrence et al., 2019). Despite its relevance, public understanding of power within relationships remains limited, as love and politics are less commonly paired together in common conception (Körner & Schuetz, 2021; Lindová et al., 2021; Malherbe, 2021). Consequently, this knowledge deficit and accompanying power imbalances could negatively affect relationship quality (Conley & Gusakova, 2018; Körner & Schuetz, 2021; Young & Seedall, 2024). Attachment theory also plays a significant role in shaping how individuals approach and maintain intimate relationships (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Securely attached individuals tend to demonstrate greater vulnerability and willingness to share power. In contrast, avoidantly attached individuals often withdraw at the first sign of emotional risk to avoid potential harm, while anxiously attached individuals may seek to control various aspects of their partner’s life in an effort to preserve a sense of security (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). When partners possess markedly different attachment styles and “love languages,” couples frequently struggle to achieve balance and mutual understanding, resulting in long-term relationship deterioration (Gottman et al., 1998; Gottman & Levenson, 2002). Research examining hundreds of couples has identified specific qualities and traits that

prove highly effective in cultivating and maintaining satisfying relationships such as: clear perception of power dynamics, capacity for forgiveness, active listening, the ability to show empathy, effective communication of anger and frustration, and the expression of gratitude (Gottman et al., 1998; Gottman & Levenson, 2002; Jain & Arya, 2024; Jin et al., 2024; Young & Seedall, 2024).

Drawing from these theoretical and empirical foundations, I designed *The Mirror Between Us*<sup>\*</sup>, an original tabletop roleplaying game that serves as a reflective sandbox for both individuals and couples. The game invites players to explore the often-overlooked intersections of power, self-identity, and intimacy. Through a combination of semi-structured narrative prompts, roleplaying, card-drawing mechanics, and embedded information asymmetry, the game challenges conventional notions of romance while encouraging players to engage with its emotional and strategic complexities. Simultaneously, players practice essential skills such as communication and negotiation, gaining insights applicable to real-life scenarios.

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\* An updated and different version of the game, *The Mirror Between Us*, is currently under development.



## BACKGROUND

Like many primates, humans engage in play during early life as a vital mechanism for learning. Social play in particular carries significant evolutionary benefits, enabling individuals to develop cognitive models that enhance their capacity to navigate community life and social hierarchies (LaFreniere, 2011; Lewis, 2000). However, as people age and their life goals shift, play often recedes from daily routines, despite consistent evidence showing that engaging in playful activities throughout the lifespan positively supports both cognitive performance and mental well-being (Colston et al., 2024; Pellis & Ham, 2024). Interactive media—including live action roleplay (LARP), tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPG), and video games—however, present valuable opportunities for adults to continue experimenting with diverse life scenarios beyond conventional societal expectations of maturity (Bartenstein, 2023; Coe, 2017; Yuliawati et al., 2024).

As a game designer, I advocate for the concept of lifelong learning through interactive gameplay, using games as dynamic environments for personal reflection and interpersonal growth. Domains such as serious games, educational games, and transformational play already embrace this pedagogical philosophy (Arias-Calderón et al., 2022; Culyba, 2018; Din et al., 2023; Keller et al., 2023). Yet much of the current discourse and design centers around formal education or childhood development, leaving adult self-education, particularly in areas like emotional intelligence, relationships, and life transitions, relatively underexplored. While promising studies on gaming for older adults suggest notable cognitive benefits for populations over the age of 60 (Dell’Osso et al., 2024; Guardabassi et al., 2024), there remains considerable potential for games specifically targeted at emerging and mid-life adults, especially those between 18 and 40, who are often navigating pivotal identity, relational, and professional shifts (Arnett et al., 2014; Riser et al., 2024; Trafton, 2015). It is within this context that *The Mirror Between Us* was conceived—a game designed to facilitate introspective learning and nuanced social engagement for cognitively mature players by combining flexible gameplay mechanics with emotionally and contextually rich content. Although its primary audience is younger to mid-life adults,

the game's core themes—love, power, vulnerability, and identity—are universal. The desire for intimacy, understanding, and belonging transcends age, gender, and cultural background (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

*The Mirror Between Us* was developed over a six-month iterative cycle using a research-through-design approach (Zimmerman, Forlizzi, & Evenson, 2007). Grounded in relationship psychology and attachment theory, the game's mechanics were designed to model emotional asymmetry, identity negotiation, and relational decision-making. Early prototypes were refined through informal playtests with adult participants (ages 22–45), primarily recruited from graduate programs at Northeastern University. These sessions informed the balancing of core mechanics such as hidden information, resource negotiation, and script divergence. All participants provided verbal consent to share anonymized reflections, and no identifying data was collected.

## GAMEPLAY

*The Mirror Between Us* is a two-player tabletop roleplaying game (2.5–3.5 hours) that blends traditional character creation with card drawing and resource management mechanics. Both physical and digital versions are available (for the digital version, see Yang, 2025). The game provides a flexible narrative structure, allowing mature content incorporation based on player roleplay choices, though the game itself contains little to no mature content.

Set in a modern arranged marriage scenario between two powerful families, players assume the roles of spouses (gender-flexible), creating their characters independently using a detailed character sheet and questionnaire. These cover family background, personal experiences, relationship values, and expectations for the future. Players also roll for stats, including Wealth, Status, Mind, and Execution, which determine their initial resources and influence endgame outcomes. All character statistics remain hidden until endgame calculations. Players may fabricate any information, provided it doesn't contradict explicit card costs or attribute gains stated by scripts or rules.



**About You (Your Character)**

1. **Rate your character's appearance from 1 to 10:** \_\_\_\_\_
2. **Education background:** \_\_\_\_\_
3. **What does a typical day look like for your character?** (e.g. Where do they go, who do they talk to, and how do they feel throughout the day?)

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4. **What adjectives would others use to describe you?** (Note: What they see from the outside may differ from the inside.)

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5. **You seriously messed up a relationship with someone you are close with** (romantic, family, friendship), **how?**

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*Image 2b: Character sheets (excerpts).*

Following character creation, players begin roleplaying on their wedding night, their first story world encounter. Since characters were created independently, aligning with the arranged marriage theme, dramatic mismatches often emerge, establishing interesting dynamics.

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Partners remain largely unknown, requiring the remainder of gameplay to develop understanding and collaboration before final outcomes, which may include divorce, reconciliation, and property distribution. Three main story scenes comprise complete game stages, symbolizing different marriage phases across one year, with three- to four-month intervals. During scenes, players resolve crises and experience stories, achieving various narrative outcomes.

Each scene concludes with Investment and Event phases where players draw investment cards for individual business ventures and potential collaboration under agreed terms. This constitutes the primary mechanism for increasing Wealth and Status. Players may pursue deals independently or negotiate collaborative investments, with both parties contributing their own assets. The amount each partner invests, as well as how any gains or losses are divided, is determined entirely through player negotiation. Players also draw Event cards, generating positive or negative effects. Active event cards remain usable anytime, while passive cards take immediate effect upon drawing. Event cards are wild cards where anything can happen, leading to various stat changes. Additionally, players secretly track partner approval using Love (pink heart) or Hate (black X) tokens, revealed during the endgame alongside all other hidden attributes. Upon completing all script and investment phases, players reveal statistics and calculate victory points. The dominant partner (higher influence) single-handedly determines the marriage's final outcome. This phase includes optional reflection on gameplay discoveries, including potential deceptions or secret character feelings. Many of my play testers voluntarily spent time discussing inspiring or frustrating gameplay moments post games.



Image 3: Originally designed Event (top) and Investment (bottom) cards.

## GAME DESIGN

Each element of the game's design is crafted to mirror aspects of real-life marriage, encourage self-reflection on personal identity and preferences,

and invite players to engage with essential relational skills that influence marital satisfaction. Several psychological frameworks are implemented to enhance overall learning and gaming experiences. In addition to design highlights, the following section also presents selected gameplay moments from playtesting sessions. As part of this research-through-design process, they offer illustrative examples of the game's design goals and the types of experiences it can facilitate according to intended game design. All participants consented to having their character narratives and gameplay reflections shared anonymously. Given the exploratory and iterative game design nature of this project, it was not submitted to the IRB. The playtesting group included fourteen individuals, with an average age of 28.56 and a median age of 25. It is important to note that these accounts are anecdotal and exploratory in nature, serving mainly for playtesting purposes, and primarily to demonstrate the game's potential to generate meaningful interactions within its target demographic.

## SELF-ASSESSMENT AND ATTACHMENT STYLE

In TTRPGs, though players' characters may not entirely reflect their authentic selves, a portion of their "real existence" invariably "leaks through" during gameplay. Research suggests that participants commonly utilize roleplaying to explore personal identities and values (Morris, 2022), which aligns with my playtesting observations, where participants revealed themes mirroring their lived experiences. Role-playing becomes a vehicle through which individuals engage with aspects of their self-concept, whether consciously or not. To facilitate this process, *The Mirror Between Us* begins with a detailed character creation phase, extending beyond randomly rolled mechanical attributes. Players are prompted to complete a character questionnaire spanning four domains: 1) self-perception, public image, and lifestyle; 2) family background and parental dynamics; 3) core personal values; and 4) expectations surrounding love and marriage.

From a pedagogical perspective, such in-depth character creation focusing on character psychology and family origins initiates self-psychoanalysis and establishes foundations from the start of the game.

When participants define their characters' history (e.g., upbringing, parental dynamics, life experiences), they lay the groundwork for a developmental arc that continues throughout the game. As previously discussed, early life experiences influence a person's attachment style heavily where secure, avoidant, and anxious individuals will approach their relationships very differently (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). During multiple playtesting sessions, participants explored real-life themes such as abandonment, anxiety, or neglect experienced within their family systems, many of which they acknowledged in post-game discussions were partial reflections of their own perceptions and lives. In the game, players can actively see how these elements fit into the picture of a theoretical marriage and observe interactions with their gaming partners, both beneficial for self-analytical and exploratory purposes.

## Conflict of Interests and Problem Solving

Sustaining a healthy, long-term relationship often hinges on a couple's ability to navigate conflict and solve problems collaboratively. Research highlights key contributors to this ability, including the capacity to forgive, the practice of open emotional disclosure, and responsiveness during times of need, often paired with expressions of gratitude (Gottman et al., 1998; Jain & Arya, 2024; Jin et al., 2024; Young & Seedall, 2024). *The Mirror Between Us* provides ample in-game opportunities through both scripted scenes and strategic investment phases for players to practice these essential interpersonal skills and test the efficacy of different approaches.

For instance, during main story sequences, participants discover their partners are engaging in infidelity, simultaneously betraying them professionally. Faced with this critical dilemma, players must decide whether to confront their partner, how to approach the conversation, and whether to de-escalate or retaliate. Throughout the game, similar decision points arise, where players must weigh emotional risk, relational power, and their own character's goals. These narrative junctions serve as a practice ground where players can directly observe the short- and long-term outcomes of various conflict-resolution strategies. In

doing so, they gain insight into how different relational behaviors—constructive or destructive—can influence partnership outcomes.

Tension does not arise solely from external threats; internal conflicts embedded in the characters themselves continue to drive the drama. In the character creation phase, each player independently designs their persona's background and expectations for the marriage. This often leads to mismatched intentions. A typical example would be where one character longs for a romantic connection despite the arranged context, but their partner views the marriage strictly as a business alliance, leaving no room for falling in love. Though meeting one's spouse for the first time on the wedding night is far from common in most real-life contexts, the game uses this device to underscore a very familiar truth: long-term partnerships often reveal deep divergences in values, life goals, and emotional needs—sometimes only after the commitment has been made (Gottman & Levenson, 2002).

The game is designed to surface relational tensions in a safe, low-stakes environment where trial-and-error becomes emotional rehearsal. Core mechanics—such as asymmetric scripts, randomized events, and tracked consequences—embed miscommunication, unmet expectations, and value mismatches to mirror real-world relationship complexity. *The Mirror Between Us* allows each player to bring their own problem-solving style, which in turn shapes the dynamic. Models of conflict response identify four primary styles—positive problem-solving, conflict engagement, withdrawal, and compliance—each carrying distinct relational consequences (Adriani & Ratnasari, 2021). These stylistic differences become especially salient in intimate contexts where two people must “make it work” or risk mutual loss. As such, players are exposed not only to their own relational instincts but also to those of others, which can be just as informative.

## Information Asymmetry and Struggle of Trust

The game incorporates extensive information asymmetry to maximize participant interactions and establish foundations for power dynamics. The script exists in two versions, A and B, ensuring participants possess knowledge their partners lack, and vice versa. Physical board game

sessions employ screens, creating barriers that prevent participants from viewing each other's attributes and properties. The digital Tabletop Simulator version utilizes "hidden zones," concealing personal statistics. Participants cannot directly reveal stats such as Wealth and Status at any gameplay stage, despite their being critical game success criteria.

During partnership collaboration, participants exchange corresponding gold coins and display status points they're willing to contribute, but keep totals hidden. This knowledge gap regarding each partner's true Wealth and Status creates doubt, enabling possibilities for deception and manipulation. Players may fabricate any narrative provided it doesn't contradict direct monetary or status gains indicated by scripts or cards. The script presents betrayal opportunities, and following through remains discretionary; individuals can choose personal gain over partner trust. Beyond collaborative investments, drawn cards remain hidden from partners. Participants may deploy Event cards that negatively affect their partners for personal benefit while lying about the reason, portraying themselves as victims rather than perpetrators.

This opens the door for extra psychological gameplay. Players may choose to sacrifice trust for personal advancement, weaponize plausible deniability, or exploit their partner's goodwill under the guise of affection. If a player studies and understands their partner's preferences and tendencies very well, they can use these deceptive mechanics to the extreme and achieve goals in a manipulative fashion. It is not surprising that trust remains central to the success of any long-term relationship (Shujja, 2013). One particular playtest illustrates this vividly. A player spent the entire game professing love to their partner while continuously lying, stealing, and cheating. The "victim" in this narrative wasn't necessarily deceived due to a lack of intelligence or awareness, but perhaps due to a desire to believe, overlooking red flags and choosing emotional security over critical evaluation. The cost of losing a game's virtual money and fictional status is far lower than the emotional and material consequences of being manipulated in real life. In this sense, the game not only entertains but educates, offering a protected space for recognizing the patterns and roles we may unknowingly adopt.

## Power in Love—Who Has More Say in What and When?

Numerous scholars have identified various sources of relational power, and I will examine how *The Mirror Between Us* reflects and highlights these sources for participant exploration. This analysis adopts established theories and models examining relational power, though it does not constitute an exhaustive examination. Power often remains invisible and varies significantly due to cultural norms and social roles (Komter, 1989), while individuals' perceptions of power may shape its form and enactment (Körner & Schuetz, 2021). Power dynamics naturally emerge when multiple parties must make decisions together. *The Mirror Between Us* presents plenty of instances requiring partnered decision-making.



Image 4: Game asset: Bedroom layout reference picture.

During main scenes, participants roleplay their characters through various story scenarios. Though the script provides guidance by establishing settings (e.g., describing couple meetings or presenting engaging events), it serves primarily as a framework rather than rigid direction. A classical power dynamic example occurs immediately in the opening scene, where newly wedded couples, essentially strangers, must determine their sleeping arrangements for the night. Participants discuss and decide scene progression freely. Although participants may choose any character gender during the character creation phase, *gender* represents one factor potentially contributing to power dynamics. Research suggests that cultural norms frequently position men as the holders of power in opposite-sex relationships (Kim et al., 2019). Even within roleplaying contexts, participants' character perceptions may influence behaviors, resulting in varied couple interactions.

Aside from gender, many other character design choices players make affect subsequent dynamics, such as *family background*, corresponding to *dominant group status power* sources. This encompasses diverse attributes including racial identity, religion, social class, sexual identity, and influential family systems (Pratto, 1998). Character age and appearance also influence interpersonal approaches, as those considering themselves older or less attractive may exhibit reduced confidence, perceiving themselves as less desirable.

In terms of *personality* factors, individuals possessing prosocial traits such as superior communication skills or enhanced empathy may wield greater relationship power (Fast & Chen, 2009). In my playtesting sessions, participants better at reading partner expressions, interpreting their emotions, and understanding character motivations typically assumed leadership roles in decision-making. *Relationship commitment* represents another power source, where partners more dependent on their counterpart or more strongly motivated to preserve the relationship occupy more vulnerable positions. Conversely, more psychologically and economically independent and detached partners usually possess greater agency and personal autonomy, translating into increased relationship power (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). People-pleasing participants, for instance, may prioritize marriage preservation, making them more likely to comply with partner needs despite personal reluctance.

Power dynamics and potential imbalances emerge frequently during the game's investment phases, where participants draw Investment and Event cards, enabling decisions that affect character stats, which ultimately determine dominance within the marriage and final authority over divorce decisions, alongside rights to claim all partner Wealth and Status regardless of marital outcome. Two investment types exist: individual and collaborative. Each participant draws cards equal to their Execution points (determined by character creation rolls) and selects the types of investments. In collaborative mode, participants decide both contribution levels of Wealth and Status for initial investments and distribution once the investment phase is complete.

Collaborative investments present numerous moments where power plays a vital role, manifesting beyond narrative elements. First, cardholders possess the ultimate decision on whether the collaboration is initiated in the first place. Not all Investment cards offer equal deals; some provide more gains and require less initial input than others. If cardholders dislike proposed terms and cannot reach an agreement with their partner, they may refuse collaboration, preventing both parties from accessing the investment. Second, because initial Wealth and Status vary based on character creation rolls and fluctuate throughout gameplay, participants with higher influence might secure more favorable gains by proposing self-serving deals, advantaging them toward achieving dominant endgame positions. This exemplifies *resource-based* power sources, where parties with greater access to income, prestige, or education (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Patterson, 2000) wield more relationship power. Predictably, participants with lower in-game Wealth and Status must make more compromises than their advantaged partners. This is particularly true when the two struggle with other parts of their simulated marriage, such as having different personal values and life objectives.

An intriguing observation emerged during one playtesting session where a participant used subtle, misleading language to suggest higher Status than they actually had without breaking rules. This bluff led to favorable early deals, eventually translating into real power and greater control later in the game. The episode illustrates how *perceived power* can shape relationship dynamics (Körner & Schuetz, 2021).

Beyond directly observing and studying power dynamics during gameplay, participants may improve partnership cooperation skills. Not all interpersonal decision-making must be resolved through manipulation or conflict. Optimal outcomes tend to occur when both parties understand their advantages and disadvantages when interacting. Research supports that marital satisfaction increases when dominant parties actively recognize their status and their partner's position, exercise restraint in power usage, reduce imbalance risks, and willingly share more authority (Young & Seedall, 2024). In daily life, couples may not face intense decision-making as regularly as players do in this game. The intent is to practice and participate in cooperative deals as much as possible until one can recognize power sources more intuitively and feel comfortable taking initiative while being supportive and generous to their partners.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

As a framework and sandbox for exploring relationships, marriage, and their inherent complexities, *The Mirror Between Us* presents a promising subject for further research and empirical evaluation. TTRPGs designed especially for topic-based learning and self-discovery constitute a relatively nascent field awaiting comprehensive exploration. Fundamental questions remain unanswered regarding the system's effectiveness at promoting the anticipated type of self-directed learning. Furthermore, identifying which components facilitate learning and determining how designers and scholars can develop more beneficial products for audiences requires continued investigation. Sustained exploration of these research areas and expanded applications of interactive media will prove essential for creating meaningful, engaging products that serve diverse populations, both established gaming communities and individuals who may consider gaming as a transformative pursuit. Such efforts will advance our understanding of how interactive systems can serve as vehicles for personal growth and relationship development.

## CONCLUSION

*The Mirror Between Us* offers a structured yet expressive framework for exploring the emotional mechanics of romantic partnerships—specifically, how power, trust, and attachment interact within systems of constraint and negotiation. Through its combination of hidden information, narrative asymmetry, and resource-based decision-making, the game simulates the psychological complexity of real-world relationships while providing a safe, low-stakes environment for self-reflection and interpersonal experimentation. As a design artifact, it challenges the common boundaries of TTRPGs by shifting the focus from fantasy or combat to emotional realism, structural compatibility, and relational growth. As a research tool, it invites further inquiry into how game mechanics can surface internalized beliefs, model affective dynamics, and facilitate perspective-taking. Overall, *The Mirror Between Us* contributes to a growing body of work in transformational and emotionally-focused game design, offering a template for future explorations into intimacy, identity, and the psychology of play.

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