



Romantic Love in Games, Games as Romantic Love

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ABSTRACT

In some games, the player is positioned in the role of a lone hero, who has to overcome obstacles and defeat adversaries, in order to save the woman they love. It is argued that such games follow the tradition of adventure romances dating back to 12th century France. From those romances, a particular understanding of love was shaped, romantic love that is. Romantic love as a cultural phenomenon is situated in a limited historic period, in which it pertained to a certain experience of love, that of desire which is refined to something honourable, elegant, and civilized through personal suffering and sacrifice. As such romantic love was the product of a specific set of chivalrous rules, which the aristocracy aspired to so as to elevate and discern themselves from the commoners. This experience was mostly witnessed in literature than real life, or as Huizinga claims in sports, games, and tournaments. In the current paper, it is argued that digital games that uphold this tradition are able to offer to their players the experience of romantic love because they constitute challenges to the fulfilment of one's desire. In that regard, they afford the experience of romantic love in its historically situated meaning due to their code. This posits digital games as the appropriate medium to offer romantic love as they form manifestations of the experience as such.

KEYWORDS

Romantic love, Romances, Code, Obstacles, Huizinga, Desire, Reward

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1 ROMANTIC LOVE IN GAMES

The word *romance* derives from the Old French *romanz*, which meant “written in the vernacular, in contrast with the written form of literary Latin” [1]. Progressively, the term came to signify the works written in this language [2]. The subject matter of most of those romances pertained to the *fin'amour* between a knight and a lady: a love so strong that it persevered through a long list of misfortunes, struggles, and impediments manifested in a hero's journey to save the woman they loved from an evil adversary [3, 4]. This love

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was considered pure and refined exactly because it was sanctified through personal sacrifice and it negated physical pleasure or any other material gain. The love found in the romances, the romantic love, was shaped to the form of culture [5], the prescripts of which survive to this day.

In digital games, the application of romance and romantic love is nearly as old as the medium [6]. In the 1979 arcade game *Sheriff* [7] a pixelated Beauty must be rescued from a pack of bandits and the player is rewarded with kisses. Admittedly, in recent years this premise has begun to lose applicability, at least as the main plot. Yet it still perseveres as a major or minor plot point.¹ Indeed, many games use this trope to make the player invested in the game by creating an emotional attachment between the player and the NPC [11]. Since saving the girl is a romantic narrative and the romantic narratives are based on someone saving the girl they love, having the player save anyone in the game immediately frames their relationship in the context of love; no matter if this is manifested in the game or not.

On the other hand, it has been argued that this game design does not cater to the development of love feelings to the player since they do not interact with the love interest at all [12]. The emotional connection is established only through embedded narrative. The player spends hardly any time with the beloved NPC, who is situated far away from the game's action and interacts with the playable character usually only after the game ends or in cutscenes. Can then players ever experience love and romantic love specifically in a romantic game?

Waern [13] and Leino [14] claim that players can experience love in games only as pretence – through role-playing or acting in bad faith respectively. Here it is argued that players are indeed able to experience romantic love in games in the specific sense of the term as part of a cultural tradition corresponding to a particular historical moment. As such, the experience examined is not compared to existential or phenomenological love as the one addressed by Waern and Leino. Instead, romantic love is itself a structured experience of desire and it is only in this respect that love is addressed here; namely a mediated experience by default which follows a certain cultural paradigm. Therefore, my current argument has to exclude games or game instances pertaining to a more contemporary or conjugal representation of love or games that implement different mechanics to afford the experience of love, such as dating sims and RPGs that use dialogue trees. I would need much more space to address all the ways games afford love.² For this reason, here I focus solely on games and/or in those parts of the gameplay that constitute an actualization of a hero's journey to save his object of desire by overcoming various obstacles, the primordial narrative

¹See for example: *Death Stranding* [8], *The Witcher 2* [9], *Dead Space* [10].

²For example, care, empathy, and intimacy are also important aspects for the experience of love, see indicatively: Möring [15], Morrison and Ziemke [16], and Doyle-Myerscough [17] respectively.

of romantic love that is. I specifically argue that the experience of romantic love in such games is not afforded because they include romantic love narratives as part of their fiction but because they constitute manifestations of romantic love. Games as designs of challenge materialize the constructed experience of romantic love. They are more than mere representations of romantic love and romances. They are romantic love substantialized.

2 GAMES AS ROMANTIC LOVE

Wirman [18] comments on this phenomenon and argues that Princess Peach from the Super Mario games actually represents the player's love for the game rather than for an individual character. Princess Peach's role is very limited in the games themselves.³ Nonetheless, as Wirman concludes this does not decrease the player's investment and attachment to her. The player loves Peach because they need to rescue her: "We want the princess; we pay for someone to trap her in order to have a challenge in the first place" [18]. In other words, players love Peach because she comes as part of the challenge. To the player the challenge is more important than Peach herself; Peach simply represents the success in an aesthetically pleasing way.

Here, I will expand on Wirman's comment by connecting love and challenge as they have been canonized in romances. As Huizinga [20] explains, romances depict an era in which chivalry prevailed as an aesthetic ideal. Chivalry was a code of conduct and a set of rules of ethical dimension, which aristocratic and noble populace aspired to [21, 22]. In actuality, everyday life was rather different encompassing the whole multifacetedness of human pathos; greed, rivalry, deceit, infidelity etc. [23]. Chivalry was rather an act or a pretence that helped people retain an unattainable example of magnanimity in all parts of life. Set against the cruelty and pettiness of human existence, chivalry was then a constant challenge the elite needed to sustain so as to differentiate themselves from the basic behaviours that characterized the uncivilized plebe.

In this spirit of the time love upheld a special place in signifying the refinement of self and culture [24]. Through it, one could discern themselves from the sexual instincts that accompany all and the material considerations of marital relationships. Chivalrous love instead granted no other gain than love itself which was not even physical, at least explicitly. The operative characteristic and what attributed love its importance was that it had to be challenging. It was through challenge and personal suffering that one proved to be chivalrous and thus their sentiment gained the status of love: "It is sensuality transformed into the craving for self-sacrifice, into the desire of the male to show his courage, to incur danger, to be strong, to suffer and to bleed before his ladylove" [20, p.76].

Romantic love is then the transcendence of desire through challenges, adversities, and obstacles. Romantic love is shown to be a constructed experience of feeling rather than an a priori self-contained sentiment. This becomes more apparent when taking into consideration that romantic love was mainly witnessed in literature [25, 26]. It is in the authored verses of the romantic poems that romantic love is mainly to be found; it is a literary convention

more than anything else. Indeed, people loved and desired and some of them must have tried to refine this experience according to the code and precepts of romantic love. Yet the transformation of human feelings to romantic love through challenges was mostly achieved in the designed patterns of fiction.

Actually, as Huizinga informs us literature alone did not satisfy the need for this experience. For that, people turned to another form to bestow style on sentiment; sports and games that is, tournaments and jousts:

The warlike sports of the Middle Ages [...] overloaded with pomp and decoration full of heroic fancy, they serve to express romantic needs too strong for mere literature to satisfy. The realities of court life or a military career offered too little opportunity for the fine make-belief of heroism and love, which filled the soul. So they had to be acted. The staging of the tournament, therefore, had to be that of romance [20, p.81].

Romantic games were then staged executions of romantic love.⁴ In them, the participants were able to experience a series of challenges, which transformed their desire to something more refined. What they were essentially seeking was this transcendence or sublimity. What was important was the sentiment of desire, which in the context of the tournament became something more potent and structured than anything real life could offer them. It was an experience they could manipulate and recognize, thus manage and achieve. They could prove better than the other participants but more so they could prove better than themselves; they had the opportunity to elevate their want to passion and love separating hence themselves from the commoners, the non-initiated. This process was imperative to their satisfaction because their desires were allowed only after their successful overcoming of the various obstacles. Through their tangible sacrifice and suffering, their sentiment would be proven honourable. For that, the games were constructed as such to allow them so.

This does not mean that tournaments were experienced only in that manner or comprised of only one experience. They were constructed according to chivalrous rules but they were also deeply connected with violence and fighting [28]. It is to be expected that a person would and could also participate in a tournament interested in honing his military skills, claim monetary gains, and/or simply winning, instead of focusing on honour and love. Yet if the participant was interested in following the chivalrous rules, the tournament was the opportune context to achieve it.

3 DIGITAL GAMES AS ROMANTIC LOVE

A game was then a formulation of experience more than anything else. The tournaments and jousts were designed in such a way so as to allow their participants the experience of romantic love, which was the transformation of their desire through challenges. Digital games of the romantic tradition follow the same principle. They are designed experiences that allow their players the possibility to manifest and satisfy their desire, which is to overcome obstacles and prove to be better by the end of the game; masters of their own

³Except for the one title of the original series, in which she is a playable character, see: Super Mario Bros 2 [19].

⁴Yalom has argued that chess during the same period was also used as metaphor of the conquest of love among the nobility [27].

wishes. As a matter of fact, Cremin [29] contends that in digital games the pleasure the player gets from satisfying their desire is more important than the fictional representation of this desire. In this sense, digital games offer the means to satisfy one's desires in all simplicity and bareness demonstrating the experience in all its baseness; that it was never about the princess, it was always about the code.

This is phenomenally shown in the game *Loved* [30] by Alexander Ocias. The game is a platformer whose gameplay and imagery intentionally resembles that of Super Mario in a black and white version. It starts off by asking the player if they are a man or a woman. Depending on the response, the game positions them in the role of a boy or a girl instead displaying from the very beginning that the game is the one holding the power of signification. Throughout its short duration, the game provides the players with instructions – or rather commands. The player has the choice to follow them or ignore them. Their actions result in textual affirmations or reproaches respectively. For example, at one point the game orders the player to travel the lower path. If they do they get the encouragement “Good girl”. If they do not, they receive the objugation “Ugly creature”. More than that, when the player fails to follow the game's instructions the game punishes them by becoming increasingly difficult. The more the player disobeys the more difficult the game gets. As a reaction to the player's defiance, the game starts to visually break. The smooth background of the game gradually becomes infested with coloured, flashy blocks that disrupt the artwork's seamlessness and lower the player's effectivity since they distract their attention. The game is a meta-commentary on how what we as players basically love is the code.

The game articulates the prescripts of the code as god-like commands that show appreciation only if the player abides by them. If the player disobeys, the game punishes them and addresses them in a degrading manner: “You disgust me.” Even though the player can perform some choices the result of those choices is only a way to reaffirm the absolute power of the code. “Do I own your body or your mind?” the game asks. If the player answers the body the command is “Dance for me” whereas if they answer the mind the text orders them to beg. The dialectic relationship is between the player and the code. After the player manages to overcome the obstacles, what they earn is the code. More so they have proven that they belong to the code by mastering its commands: “I am so happy that you are mine” the screen reads. “I loved you always” which means that the ending state was a given from the start. The love the player gets is pre-defined and the way to achieve it is pre-defined as well. The code provides the love and the player has to unlock the passage to it by completing the rite of worth, to show that they adhere to the rules set by the game. If the player does not comply with the rules, the game asks: “Why do you hate me? I loved you.” Then the game finishes with the player receiving nothing. If the player follows the rules they get awarded the title of a man or a woman, the proof of their valor and honor that they have successfully finished the rite. The game also rewards them with a single coin, a reminder that what matters is not the prize at the end but the servitude to the code, which takes on the absolute form of a monotheistic god.⁵

⁵It is no happenstance that the culture of romantic love in southern France coincides in time and form with the emergence of the cult of the Virgin Mary in northern France and Paris in particular. Romantic love and divine love are both expressions of the same

The set of rules is what makes romantic love. Desire becomes romantic love because of the challenge and the challenge is provided because of the code, so romantic love is provided by the code. Romantic love is not happening despite the code but due to it. In physical games it was the code of chivalry conduct; in digital games, the code is encompassed in the game itself. Does this mean that representation is not important? This is not the case made here. Representation is what offers nuance to the experience and it is thanks to representation that desire can take on multiple levels of signification. Literature has language to transfigure a crude romance about the fulfilment of one's desire to lyrical poetry that manages to express and realize the subtleties and gradations of sentiment [20, p.77]. In games and digital games specifically, representation plays an important role in enriching and augmenting the player experience to a multifarious event. In other words, the fiction of the game helps shape this experience of challenge into the experience of romantic love. In medieval physical games this was done by the individual's adherence to chivalric ideas based on the code of chivalrous conduct. In digital games, it is done by the code which encompasses the challenge and the representation of the challenge as a romantic narrative both.

4 CONCLUSION

In this paper it is argued that games can afford romantic love because they constitute a designed experience of challenge. Games that are based on the tradition of romances, a lone hero who fights for the lady he loves, are able to offer to the player the experience of romantic love not because of their fiction but because they give the player the chance to satisfy their desire through playing. According to Huizinga, games already from the Middle Ages were structured as representations of chivalrous romances so as to allow their participants this transcendence of desire to romantic love, which was only possible due to the challenge. As such, romantic love was afforded by the set of rules that accompanied the culture of chivalry and it was a direct product of their application to one's conduct, desire and passion included.

Equally in digital games the code of the game gives the players the opportunity to satisfy their desire because of the obstacles they need to overcome. Romantic love is not a feeling the player is exposed to because of the reward, the damsel in distress that is. Instead, it is an experience offered throughout the process of the game, the culmination of which is the point of reward. One has to go through the rite of adversities so as to be able to achieve this experience. As such, it is shown that it is not about the reward but instead about the challenge. Digital games are then arguably the most appropriate medium to offer romantic love. Whether games can go beyond this historically limited understanding of love is a compelling direction for future research.

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need; to transform a basic human desire to something greater and more refined. In one case it is a noble woman, in the other it is Virgin Mary and by extension God. Yet what is responsible for this transformation that the followers of both strive for is the code of conduct. Further on that, May has argued that love has progressively taken the place of religious faith [31, 32].

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