Well Played

a special issue on the theme of romance in games

edited by Jane Pinckard

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Well Played on Romance
a special issue on the theme of romance in games

Editor
Jane Pinckard

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Editor
Drew Davidson

Editorial Advisory Board

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Preface

Jane Pinckard

Romeo and Juliet. The Tale of Genji. Pride and Prejudice. Wuthering Heights. Casablanca. Titanic. Love and romance form the foundations of some of the most profound, moving, and popular artistic works. They are interwoven into almost all forms of media today, and yet their development in interactive entertainment is still in the early stages. This themed edition of Well-Played explores the immense opportunity for love and romance in digital games, both in terms of players' ability to enact romance, as well as the medium's ability to portray it.

In "Technology and emotion: Playing for the love of the game," Ferdig and Pytash look at the ways in which players embody and transcend their avatars in online games to find meaningful connections with other players. They suggest a toolkit – a set of terms and understandings – for helping to navigate the complex world of emotions in games. Packed with references, the essay is a fascinating study of player romantic behavior and approach, and ends with an exciting prediction about possible futures for romance.

Switching from player-player interactions to player-NPC interactions, McDonald's piece, "NPC Romance as a Safe Space: BioWare and Healthier Identity Tourism" is a superbly detailed analysis of the results from her NPC Romance Project study. She shows that players seem to explore social romance possibility spaces. They have the freedom of being able to experiment with various gender and sexual identities without   the moral quandary of deceiving another human player (as they would if they were to play a multiplayer game in the same way.) McDonald rightly highlights BioWare as a thought leader in designing spaces that afford these sorts of experiences.

A meditative review of Jason Rohrer's game *Passage* invites readers to consider the term "romance" in a broader sense, one that reflects the word's origins in *romans*, a narrative written in the vernacular. For us, that vernacular is interactive digital media; and Hamel asks us to consider the ways in which the game illuminates the intimate moments of day-to-day domestic life (and death.)

Rounding out the collection is Salter's insightful and graceful "Quest for Love," an examination of *Kings Quest* and the various roles female characters play in that series. Her observation of the role of agency in narrative and the transformative nature of the female player character are especially interesting, and help shed light on the meanings of choices in these games. She also links these games to fairytales in both their fantasy settings as well as the way they transfer positions of male and female roles.

This collection gathers just a smattering of what's possible to discover when we turn a lens to romance and love in games. I'm certain that this journal and others like it will increasingly find the theme an area for rich study. And I'm sure that interactive entertainment will continue to deepen their ability to explore emotional connections for players as well as expand the expressive power of games to reflect the nuanced and beautiful range of human relationships.

Technology and emotion: Playing for the love of the game

Richard E. Ferdig[i] & Kristine E. Pytash[ii]
Kent State University (Kent, Ohio)
rferdig@gmail.com | kpytash@kent.edu

Introduction

In 2012, on a quiet street in relatively suburban Iowa, five housemates share a common bond. They live together with a similar goal of finishing their college degree. They often spend Friday nights at Amore's Pizza on Main. They all struggle with dating, grades, and figuring out what to do after graduation. They have a variety of excuses regarding why they hang out and why they live together.

However, the tie that binds this group is actually an affinity for *World of Warcraft*[iii]. When Phil and Michaela met their freshman year; both were already experienced players. They met online first, not realizing they went the same school and lived in the same town. Michaela thought Phil's priest was oddly romantic; Phil thought Michaela's Elf avatar was *smoking hot*. The rest of the players were face-to-face friends who joined because of their friendship with Phil or Michaela. Dominika just happened to be looking over Michaela's shoulder when "Horatio the Stable Boy" appeared in the Howling Fjord. She was instantly smitten, comparing Horatio to Wesley in her favorite movie *The Princess Bride*. Stella knew nothing about gaming but was intrigued that Michaela was able to find someone to date through a video game. Her Human character ("Lusty") has not, as of yet, found its online match. However, she has spent hours adjusting her avatar...*just in case*. Calvin has less time to play due to his athletic scholarship and his long-term relationship with his girlfriend. When he could join in, he was fascinated with his Tauren Druid named "Perlona." He talks about her often and even admits he skipped some quests because he didn't want her to get hurt. All five housemates are part of the same guild.

What is compelling about each of these individual stories is the collective theme of love and romance in gaming. Phil and Michaela found a way to strengthen their relationship through gaming. Dominika fell for a non-player character, seeing in him characteristics she desired in her day-to-day life. Stella uses the game to search for a mate. And, Phil, although happily in a relationship with a live, non-video game-playing human, cares deeply about his created avatar.

Although the stories like this are not rare, deeper questions remain about why such relationships exist. What power is there within gaming to afford, enrich, create, and destroy relationships in both face-to-face and virtual worlds? Is there a way to dig *deeper* to be able to name the practices that undergird such relationships (Ferdig & Weiland, 2002)? In other words, are there terms, words, and principles that can be borrowed from existing research to explain the interactions around love, romance, and flirting that occur within games and gameplay?

The point of this article is a theoretical and pragmatic look at the psychological and sociological underpinnings behind the concepts of romance, love, and flirting with and through technology. More specifically, the purpose is to address how these theories get played out in games. Such principles and theories could come from fields like psychology and sociology, but also from literature and neurology. Whereas the special issue as a whole is devoted to essays that explore love, romance and flirting within specific games, this article sets out to begin to collect a set of terms and theories to explore why those emotions and/or why those games afford such emotional responses.

Cross-cutting themes and definitions

Prior to exploring terminology for understanding love and gaming, it is necessary to return to a few basic questions. What is the definition of love and how does it relate to romance and flirting? And, what does the research currently say about technology, love, and romance?

<u>What is love?</u>   It seems like a simple enough question to answer. However, there are as many answers to this question as there have fields that have attempted to answer it.   Biologists, sociologists, psychologists, neurologists, psychometricians, philosophers, authors, and poets have all attempted to classify and characterize *love*.   Early philosophical definitions compared erotic love (*Eros)* to friendship (*Philia)* or even divine love (*Agape)*[iv].   One current dictionary defines love as a strong affection, enthusiasm, attachment or devotion to another based on loyalty, sexual desire, personal or kinship ties, adoration, benevolence, common interests or concern[v].

Some theorists and researchers have attempted to define love as a process.   For instance, Hazan and Shaver (1987) see love as "an attachment process (a process of becoming attached), experienced somewhat differently by different people because of variations in their attachment histories" (p. 511.).   Here, drawing on past sociological work, they see attachment as being secure, anxious/ambivalent, or avoidant, depending on the history of the person in love. Sternberg (1986) saw a more triangular process between intimacy (feeling close), passion (leads to romance, attraction, and sex), and the decision to love/commit.   And, Briggle (2008) uses historical work and his own theories to describe the process as having components like union, robust concern, valuing, emotion, and capacity.

The purpose of this paper is not to define love.   A further reading of Pujol & Umemuro (2010), Briggle (2008), and Graham (2011) will provide both theoretical and meta-analytic/psychometric attempts to do just that.   However, we raise the question here to offer two key points about terminology used in understanding love and gaming. First, Graham (2011) differentiates love or romantic love from romantic obsession and practical friendship.   This, in some sense, is where love is further defined from flirting and romance.   Romance and flirting may be the process by which some aspect of love (romantic love, obsession, or friendship) is obtained.   The terms we have begun to collect may be used to further explain why or how the process (flirting or romance) or the outcome (some definition of love or

friendship) is achieved.   Said differently, the terms are not predicated on one specific outcome.

A second reason the definitions are presented is to understand that gamers and game developers might have their own reasons, definitions, and desires for why they play or why they created the game.   It is possible that some of the most compelling games are those that afford any type of love connection.   It is also possible that games that have some of the strongest fan bases may be those where the author and reader/player share the same goals and desires.

What does the research currently say about technology/gaming and love?   In an extremely philosophical discussion of love, Briggle (2008) tells a fascinating history of the relationship between media and love. He provides evidence dating back to the telegraph; and also discusses the interactivity of today's media, ranging from online dating to cybersex.   A point to be taken from Briggle's argument is that where there is media, there will be attempts to use media for love, friendship, and sex.

Thanks to popular press, some of the most recognizable work in this area relates to e-dating.   Anderson (2005) studied e-dating and found that the more time one spent online and the more positive one felt about the Internet, the higher the perception of online relationships. She also found that people generally perceived e-dating unfavorably, although those opinions have changed with the growing popularity of online dating (Heino, 2011; Close, 2004; Donn & Sherman, 2002).

Other research articles have focused on specific technologies.   For instance, Ramirez and Broneck (2009) provided evidence that instant messaging was "employed in sustaining a variety of relationships. Interactions with lovers and best friends were most frequently reported, yet those with friends and acquaintances were also quite common; only family relationships were reported less frequently" (p. 309).   Gilbert, Murphy, & Avalos (2011) found that participants rated communication quality and satisfaction with their virtual partners higher in a three-dimensional space (*Second Life)*, than in their separate, real-life, romantic relationships.   Taylor (2011) found that

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avatars created a sense of emotional involvement in asynchronous online communication.

Romance and love have also obviously impacted video game development and play, particularly given recent technological advances. Just as *World of Warcraft* has been examined to understand how groups function, communicate, and interact (Ecenbarger, 2012), video games can also be explored to understand how people develop relationships and fall in love. Research on emotionally-laden or emotionally-potent games has often focused on the gamer. For instance Cole & Griffiths (2007) found a majority of participants in *Massively Multi-player Online Role-Playing Games* (MMORPGs) made good friends within the game. Over ten percent had also developed a physical relationship with another player. Ravaja et al. (2006) used cardiac interbeat intervals (IBIs) and facial electromyography (EMG) to measure physiological arousal and emotional valence. Their findings provided evidence that playing against other gamers elicited more emotional responses; playing against friends produced more spatial presence, engagement, and arousal.

In sum, research has demonstrated that regardless of whether it is a part of the game or whether it simply affords it within the game, romance, love, and flirting are occurring with and through gameplay. The deeper question for both researchers and game developers relates to whether there are any principles or theories that would help us explain why.

Developing a toolkit of terminology for understanding romance and love in videogames

There are at least four ways in which games and gameplay seem to provide opportunities for love, romance, and flirting. Descriptions of each of the four opportunities are provided and the games where they might be experienced. More importantly, concepts are introduced that begin to fill our toolbox of terminology used to explain such phenomena.

1. <u>Videogames that allow for the creation or maintenance of relationships out of the game world</u> (see Figure 1).
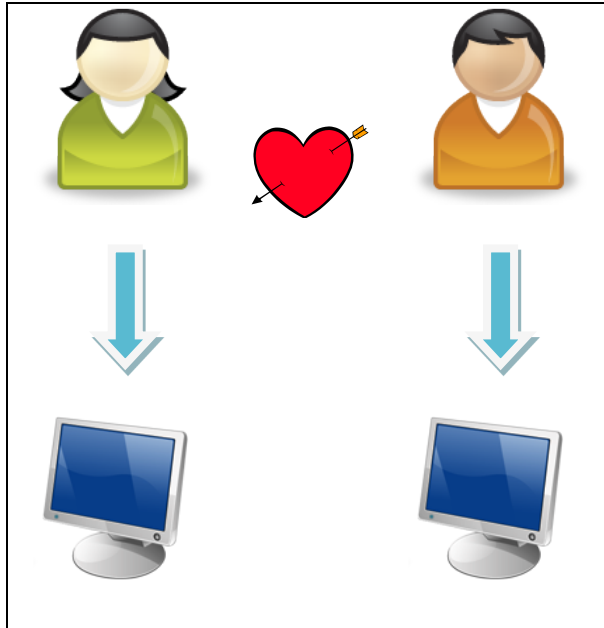

Figure 1: Games people play together, alone.

The idea is that people play a videogame that is, in-and-of itself, not multi-player. However, these games provide opportunities for romance, friendship, and love on one of two levels. First, people get to know each other or enhance their relationship because they play the same game. A person might play *Mahjongg* or *Lego Star Wars* by themselves. They might meet someone face-to-face and then find out they share an affinity for the same game or the same type of gaming (e.g. first person shooter games). This could also occur when someone introduces a friend or lover to a game. They still play individually, but they share experiences in the same way that they would share a book they both admired.

A second way this occurs is through games where players help each other, either coincidentally or through planned outlets by the game developers. Many players enjoy *The Sims* series on their own, but go to social networking sites to post pictures and stories of their players. Fan forums and gaming websites like the *Curse Network* also provide opportunities for players to share experiences and struggles. Other games are more direct in their involvement, such as games on social networking sites (e.g. *MafiaWars or Farmville*). And, developers seem to be tapping into this social potential. *Dragon Age Legends* allows users to collaborate and even use their friends' characters while not necessarily interacting in gameplay. Engines like *STEAM* and Electronic Arts' *Origin* provide offline and single player games with social features like discussions and friend lists.

One could arguably also include in this category multi-player games that are not in-world. For instance, two or more players might play *MarioKart* or *Wii Bowling* while in the same room. Although these games have the ability for online interactions, the players are using these games to supplement their face-to-face interactions.

At the core of this type of gaming interaction is what researchers call *homophily*, or the tendency for those who are together to have similar attributes (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954). Kendal (1978) found that "friends…who share certain prior attributes in common tend to associate with each other and tend to influence each other as a result of the continued association" (p. 435). Said differently, people might meet or grow their relationship because of a shared interest in a game or type of game; they might also further their relationship by suggesting new games. As their relationship grows, they might begin to influence the type of game that the other plays. People fall in love or become friends because they share similar interests and begin to develop interests together. Werner & Parmalee (1979) conclude: "activity similarity may comprise the backdrop against which individuals initiate, develop, and maintain friendships" (p. 66). Once playing together, there are significantly positive effects on relationships between close friends and partners (Cole et al., 2007).

2. Videogames that allow for the creation or maintenance of relationships in world (see Figure 2).
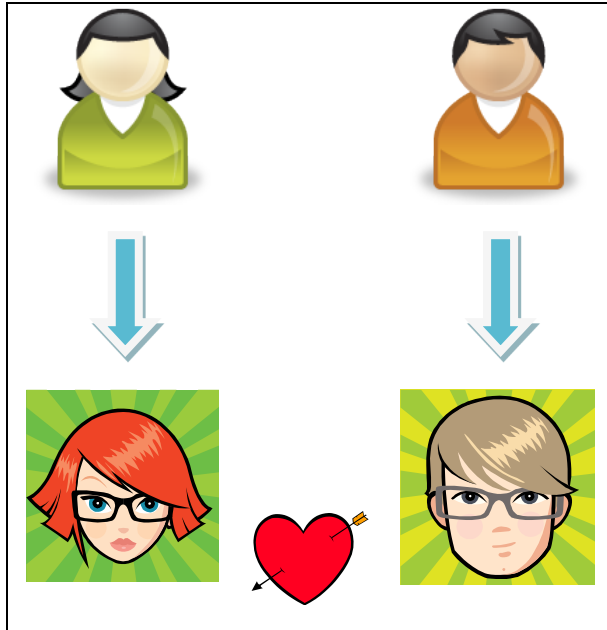

Figure 2: Games people play together online, sometimes as avatars.

In this scenario, the game that someone plays is multi-player and online. These games may be simple in nature, like *Words With Friends*. Or, they can be graphically complex adventures that provide opportunities to live out the life of some other fictional or real character. Video games like *Madden* give players the chance to play other opponents under the guises of a real football player. Other games provide the opportunity for the creation of a character. This might be semi-guided as in the case of *NCAA Football*, where you are playing as a human, male athlete from a school in the United States. You can change attributes like player position, height, weight, and other physical characteristics. Finally, there are online games where the possibilities of character creation are seemingly endless. In

World of Warcraft, you have the opportunity to select many features about your character, including its species.

Research provides evidence that people fall in love, have romantic relationships, and make friendships in these situations (Cole et al., 2007); they even move in together and have children[vi]. There are two interesting terms here that provide insight into romance and love online. The first occurs before love or friendship and focuses on the game experience; it is called the *misattribution of arousal*.

Researchers, in an experiment called *the shaky bridge study* (Dutton & Aron, 1974), demonstrated that when people met in high arousal situations, they were more likely to claim they experienced romantic feelings. In this study, men were asked to walk across one of two bridges: one was shaky and deemed unsafe, the other was considered stable and safe. In both instances a female experimenter was standing at the other side of the bridge. After they walked across the bridge the experimenter wrote her name and phone number on a slip of paper and told them they could call her later that evening with any questions. The men who met her on the shaky bridge were more likely to call and included more sexual and romantic content in their accounts of the situation.

Dutton & Aron (1974) call this effect the *misattribution of arousal*, meaning the men walking across the shaky bridge were mistaking their fear of the high, unstable bridge for attraction to the female experimenter. When this high arousal state is associated with a potential romantic partner, the feelings are linked to that person, creating attraction (Lewandowski & Aron, 2004). This suggests that if the female experimenter had been removed from the situation, the men would have correctly identified the source of their arousal (the shaky bridge).

Video game developers are using innovative technologies to create extremely realistic gaming scenarios that make people feel like they are in the game, in a war, or living out the lives of the characters they interact with. These situations can be highly arousing, whether the emotion is fear, angst, aggression, lust, etc. A misattribution of

arousal means that game players often associate these experiences with an online friend or partner, which can lead to attraction, romance, and love.   The use of the word misattribution is not to suggest the outcome (e.g. love) is false.   It simply explains the situation by which the high arousal initiated the attraction.

A second term occurs during and after gameplay, particularly in games where players create avatars.   Cooley coined the term *looking glass self* (1902).   The term implies one is defined not just by oneself, but also in relationship to other individuals or a social group in which one is involved.   Cooley suggests: "I am not what I think I am and I am not what you think I am; I am what I think that you think I am.   (p. 152). As players create and live out the lives of their avatars, a complex dance takes place.   A player might have physical attributes or characteristics, but those may or may not correlate with the created avatar.   Richard (2012) argues that games give players the opportunity to change roles, relations, identity, and gender/sexuality (p.71).   When two or more players begin to interact, there are at least four personas involved: player 1, player 1's avatar, player 2, and player 2's avatar.   Who a player thinks they are, and how the player sees their avatar become intertwined with how the other player sees their avatar seeing them.   Players may begin to act like their avatar or they may begin to act as the way others see them or see them playing out the life of their avatar.

Some of the terms explain why romance might be created.   The looking glass self might begin to explain why relationships created through games last or fail to last.   Players who meet in person outside of their avatars' interactions often find that their perceptions of the other players are representative or not representative of whom their avatars were interacting with.

3. <u>Videogames that afford relationships with technology</u> (see Figure 3).

There are number of games where interactions with a non-player character (NPC) are either possible or required.   For instance, in *Star Wars Legos*, another character accompanies you.   In order to solve puzzles or unlock doors, you often have to switch characters and become the other NPC.   These NPCs are becoming more and more lifelike.   In the relatively recently released *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, the game frequently gives you NPCs to add to your crew.   A colleague, Joe DiPietro, shared that after a few months of non-gameplay, one of the NPCs actually emailed him, asked him where he was and that he wanted him to return to the ship.
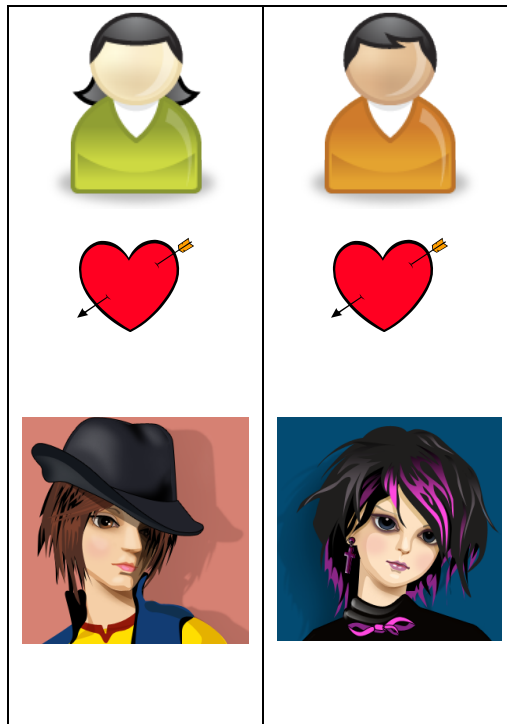

Figure 3: Interactions people have with technology such as non-player characters.

Other game examples include film noir type or single-player narrative games.   In *Broken Sword: The Shadow of the Templars*, players take on the role of both *Nicole Collard* and George *Stobbart*.   After their adventures end, the pair has their first date on the Eiffel Tower. Players have the opportunity to see and live out both NPCs.

There are games where an NPC is essential, but a romantic narrative is not provided; and, there are some games where saving a romantic interest are the goals of the game[vii].   Whether interacting with an NPC or living out the life of an avatar one has created, people occasionally fall in love with a technologically created character.   This is similar to falling in love with a movie star, a musician, or a character in a novel[viii].

There are three terms that relate to this experience, two of which are very well known in the gaming world.   First, researchers often discuss *presence*.   Presence can be defined as "a psychological state in which virtual objects are experienced as actual objects in either sensory or nonsensory ways" (Lee, 2004, p. 44).   A second term is *flow*, first proposed by Csíkszentmihályi (1990).   Flow refers to full immersion into an activity to the point of focused motivation; emotions become aligned with the task at hand.   Video game developers often tie these together, trying to create presence so that players can experience flow.   When presence and flow are achieved, it is easy to understand why emotions like romance, love, and flirting occur as they would in everyday life.

Given the ubiquity of these terms in video game studies, we turn to a third concept—*the media equation*.   Reeves and Nass proposed the media equation in 1996.   The basic idea is that you can take any social science finding involving two or more people, replace one of the characters with a computer or technology, and you will get the same result. The example they provided in the book involves the social science concept of politeness.   Their research studies showed that people were polite to computers in the same way that they would be polite to other humans.   Other research studies followed this work; one demonstrated that people showed deep emotional responses to

computers (Ferdig & Mishra, 2004).   Those responses included anger, spite, and even attempts at revenge.

People fall in love, flirt, and have romance in real life.   Given virtual environments that are immersive for players, it is easy to understand why they would do the same thing with a technology such as a game, or more specifically, an NPC.   The question according to the media equation is not why do they fall in love with non-player characters, but why wouldn't they fall in love?

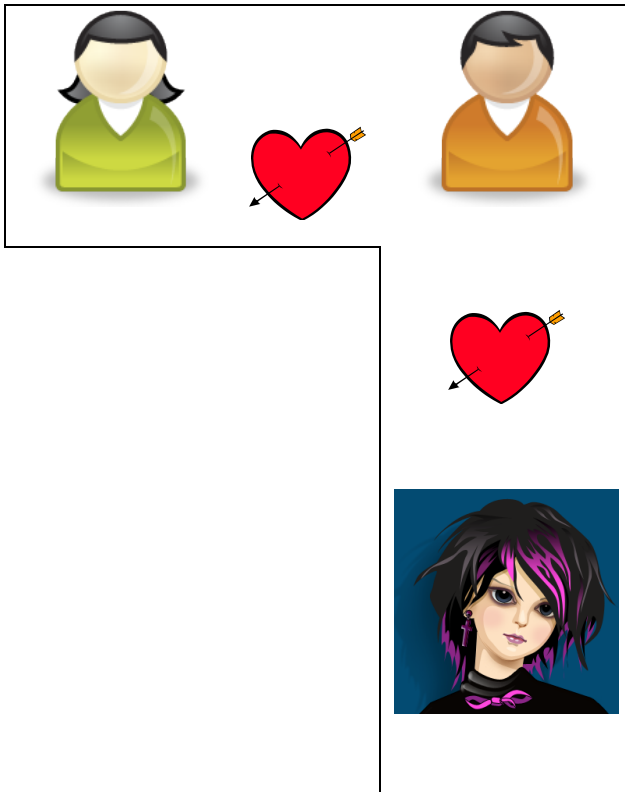4. Videogames that impact the player outside of gameplay (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Interactions the impact people outside of the game.

In the first example, two or more people connected outside of a game around, with, or because of the game. The concept here is that someone plays a game, and then reacts differently to a live friend or spouse (who may or may not play the game) because of their interactions within the game. A person playing *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball* may have a different conception of women than a person playing *Portal*. Based on those interactions in-game, they might treat a person outside the game who represents the same gender, race, vocation or characteristics differently then they had before. The interactions are not just person-to-person. In *Free Rice*, every correct answer inside the 'game' equates to ten grains of rice donated to the *World Food Programme* outside of the game. Thus, the outcome could be direct (how I now treat someone) or indirect (what spending my time gaming has done to someone else).

Much of the mass media has focused on the negative impact of gaming. This occasionally involves actual gameplay. For instance, one man died after playing videogames for twelve straight hours[ix]. Another man let his two twins drown in the bathtub while playing video games three rooms away[x]. More often than not, these reports are about the real-life actions of a person outside of the game. People theorize deeply and ask questions about whether video games are to blame for real life murders. They wonder whether consistently playing *Grand Theft Auto*, a game where it is acceptable to kill cops, led an eighteen-year-old to kill actual police officers[xi].

What about the media/game impact on romance, flirting, and love? Some research reaffirms the negative evidence, particularly in relation to gameplay. For instance, one study found that 20.3% of participants believed playing MMORPGs had a negative impact on their relationship with non-game players (Cole et al., 2007). They also found a significant but weak negative correlation between the number of hours played per week and its impact on relationships. Not all of the research is negative. "As well as making good friends online, 81% of gamers play with real-life friends and family, suggesting that MMORPGs are by no means an asocial activity, nor are the players socially introverted" (Cole et al, 2007, p. 582).

Outside of a broader label of *media impact*, *experience-taking* may help define the relationship between in-world involvement and then out-of-world actions. Experience-taking is defined as a phenomenon when "readers lose themselves and assume the identity of the character, adopting the character's thoughts, emotions, goals, traits, and actions and experiencing the narrative as though they were that character" (Kaufman & Libby, 2012, p. 1). Kaufman & Libby (2009) explored this concept in six studies in which participants were asked to read narratives and respond to a series of questionnaires. They found that participants found themselves feeling the emotions and internal responses of characters to which they felt connected. One of the most important implications was that experience-taking can change or cause shifts in personality traits and behaviors. For example, in one study, people were more significantly inclined to vote in an election after reading a story about a character that overcame obstacles to vote.

This experience-taking could result in positively or negatively affecting one's relationship outside of the game, due to the amount of time played or the content learned during the gameplay. One of the potential positive outcomes relates to a second set of terms: *primary and shadow emotions* (Cook, 2011). Shadow emotions are those that we experience when reading a story, participating in an action scene during a game, or watching a car chase during a movie. These emotions are different than primary emotions, those feelings we experience when we are in a situation with consequences we perceive to be real.

Movies, books, and video games allow us to explore emotions without partaking in the actions that might accompany these feelings (McKinley, 2011). These imaginative rehearsals allow us to safely explore situations we might otherwise avoid. We can experience new emotional connections, sexual encounters, and even genders. These opportunities allow us to contest traditional gender roles, examine how we react and interact with others, and consider our identities, how others and we perceive ourselves (Richards, 2012).

The future of love and gaming: Conclusions and future directions

Followers of the Digital Romance Lab (http://www.dirolab.com) will undoubtedly point to a fifth possible scenario where new terms will be required. There are now games being developed in which interactions between players or with biometrics shape the outcomes of the game. These physiological interfaces are not new (see Gilleade et al., 2005); for instance, there was a Japanese game released in 1997 called *Oshiete Your Heart*. The goal of the game was to go out on a date with a girl and make her fall in love with you. Your success was based on how you answered the question and on a sweat and pulse sensor.

The recent equivalent might be the *Kiss Controller* (http://www.hynam.org/HY/kis.html). The Kiss Controller is a haptics device that uses a magnet on the tongue of one player and a headset on the other player. The person with the tongue magnet can interact by kissing to control the speed of a bowling ball or the direction of a racecar. The point is that whether biometric or haptic, new designs will provide for new interactions that will require new terms.

The purpose of this manuscript was not to categorize every situation or discover every term. Rather, it was to begin a conversation about the need to define both. Love, romance, and flirting happen in, with, through, and around games and gameplay. Deep and thick descriptions of such interactions are important to further understanding both the physiology and the psychology of romance in games. Additionally, creating a toolkit of terms can help researchers identify what is happening and can help game developers more directly connect with their audiences. In this paper, we have introduced four scenarios (plus a future scenario) and presented eight terms that might be useful in: a) understanding why love and romance takes place in games; b) how developers could continue to create opportunities for such outcomes; and c) what happens after a connection is made between people or between a person and an NPC. The goal is not to end the conversation, but rather to begin the

conversation—to have others present and explore terms that might be useful in explaining the love in and of the game.

In addition to exploring existing scenarios, creating new experiences, and defining terms, there are at least three future directions that deserve investigation. First, we have provided evidence that people come into games and leave games with different definitions, expectations, and experiences with love and friendship. Researchers recognize these perspectives differ when examining both gender (Richard, 2012) and culture (Bachen & Illouz, 1996). Future investigations should continue to explore the role of cultural and gender-based perspectives on love and romance in gaming—and particularly the type of gaming. For instance, if females have less motivation to play in social situations or are less oriented towards games with competition and 3D rotation (Lucas & Sherry, 2004), it could help explain why love or friendship happens or fails to happen in such environments.

Second, in this future section, we have already discussed new technologies that are changing how people interact with the game and with each other. Daft and Lengel (1984) offered the *media richness theory*, or the concept that "communication media differ in terms of the number of channels used, the immediacy with which feedback is available, and the form of language utilized" (Ramirez et al., 2009, p. 311). Innovative games present new modes of interacting, communicating, and loving (Briggle, 2008). We have provided terms from sociology, psychology, and communication studies that have been used to describe face-to-face experiences that are happening in electronic gaming. There will obviously have to be new terms created for the types of experiences that have not been explored in face-to-face domains.

Finally, McKinley (2011) cites data from the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, reporting that 45.7% of females and 47.9% of males in high school engage in sexual intercourse. She uses that point to highlight *young adult* (YA) literature as a way to provide girls with issues surrounding sex and the decisions to have sex (e.g. love,

self-esteem, etc.). YA literature provides young adults opportunities to play out romantic involvements and gives them insights into how to respond to emotions, how to engage in sexual encounters, and how to have intimate relationships.   Literature can be a catalyst for significant changes in people because it provides "an almost infinite number of alternative lives and personas" (Hayakawa, 1990, p. 1).

There are some examples of video games being used to explore sex education, gender roles, and gender identity (Gross, 2005). However, this is a point that has not received enough attention.   The Pew Research Center reported in 2008 that 97% of teens aged 12-17 played games[xii].   In other words, it is time we re-define YA literature as beyond that which is solely in print format (Gerber, 2009).   Video games are a part of the culture of our young adults.   It is part of the texts they read as they attempt to navigate life's complexities. Players can "lose themselves and assume the identity of the character, adopting the character's thoughts, emotions, goals, traits, and actions and experiencing the narrative as though they were that character" (Kaufman et al., p. 1).   Researchers, educators, and game developers should continue to explore the ways in which YA literature (including games and interactive fiction) is impacting or could be impacting adolescents and the angst they manage.

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Endnotes

[i] Richard E. Ferdig is the Summit Professor and Professor of Instructional Technology at Kent State University's Research Center for Educational Technology.

[ii] Kristine E. Pytash is an Assistant Professor of Literacy at Kent State University's College of Education, Health, and Human Services.

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NPC Romance as a Safe Space: BioWare and Healthier Identity Tourism

Heidi McDonald, Chatham University/Schell Games, 112 E. Swissvale Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15218, hmcdonald@schellgames.com

Introduction

The NPC Romance Project began as class project for a 100-level Communications course at Chatham University, for which the assignment was to "examine in depth an aspect of any medium of your choosing." My group chose to examine romantic relationships, and as a game designer at Schell Games whose focus is on narrative and content design, I chose to examine romantic relationships in video games. Understanding that much work has already been done about romances which take place virtually between players who meet in real time while playing massively multi-player online roleplaying games (MMORPGs), and having no relevant personal experience of that kind, I decided to examine my own behavior toward romance-able non-player characters (NPCs) in single-player roleplaying games.

I realized that over the years, while I as a straight woman had always played straight female characters and romanced nine male romance-able NPCs, eight of these male NPCs had personal characteristics (such as "emo," untrustworthy, non-monogamous, and violent) which would be completely impractical in real-life partners. In the ninth case, I was so obsessed with Alistair from BioWare's *Dragon Age: Origins* (a character resembling my real-life romantic partner both physically and in personality) that I re-played a 50-hour game completely through three different times, in order to get that romance to work out in a way that was most satisfying for me. Baffled by the disconnect between my real-life attractions and romantic behaviors and that I was displaying within games, I decided to survey other gamers to try to understand people's romantic behaviors toward

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NPCs. I began with no clear hypothesis other than to identify patterns in player behavior.

With the help of industry mentors Jesse Schell and Sheri Graner Ray, a comprehensive survey was developed and administered online between the dates of March 1, 2012 and April 25, 2012. Jennifer Brandes Hepler, a mentor and senior writer at BioWare, indicated that BioWare does not collect and has not collected any data relating to NPC romance. Even if such metrics were in BioWare RPGs (they are not, according to Hepler), it would be impossible to truly know the real-life gender of the player. Hepler assisted in development of the survey, but this survey is otherwise independent of BioWare even though its results may be of benefit to that company.

The survey was publicized using social media, by bloggers, using cards distributed at the 2012 Game Developers' Conference in San Francisco, and through posts to threads for specific game forums on the BioWare Social Network; this publicity resulted in 525 total participants, all of whom are gamers or professional game developers (non-gamers were screened and disqualified). Using SurveyMonkey for this research had strengths and weaknesses. The strengths include ease of use and distribution, assistance with data interpretation, and anonymity (which encourages more honest answers in a survey that was called "uncomfortable" by some participants). The weaknesses include the fact that people could opt out of certain questions or stop the survey at any point; participants could also re-take the survey multiple times and thereby thwart the data. Richard LaPiere's 1934 study in behavior and attitude found that self-reporting in surveys can be a faulty method because respondents' actual behaviors may not match their stated attitudes. Anonymity is one way to combat this issue, which could still be a factor here. Absent actual game metrics, which again, BioWare reported they do not use for this purpose, it was determined that a self-reporting, anonymous survey was the best means of obtaining this data. Recognizing the strengths and weaknesses inherent to the process, and reporting honestly about them, it then became important to examine and interpret the findings.

85% of survey respondents were between the ages of 18 and 40 years old, with the 39.6% majority being between the ages of 18 and 25. 41 respondents were disqualified for being non-gamers; 88.2% of respondents identified as "gamers" while 17.5% identified as "professionals in the gaming industry." 64.1% of respondents identified as female, 33.8% identified as male, and 2.1% identified as other (allowing for transgendered or other alternatives outside the male/female binary). 57.2% of respondents were in a romantic relationship at the time they answered the survey, with 25.9% being married and 26.7% describing their attachment as a "long-term relationship." 71.8% of respondents identified as straight, 19% identified as bisexual, and 9.2% identified as gay, lesbian, or other. The composite survey respondent was a 21-year-old straight female gamer, in a relationship. 70% of the survey respondents completed the entire, comprehensive, 25-question survey.

Sex-Swapping in Single-Player RPGs

In "Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet," Lisa Nakamura coins a phrase called "identity tourism," meaning that people "use race and gender as amusing prostheses to be donned and shed without 'real life' consequences." Nakamura believes that such identity tourism, when adopted by gamers, is harmful because identity tourists often take their "virtual experiences as other-gendered and other-raced avatars as a kind of lived truth." Nakamura asserts that online role-playing games are primarily where identity tourism takes place.

In a related essay from the book, "World of Warcraft & Philosophy," Phill Alexander describes his experiences playing *World of Warcraft* as a female character. Alexander describes what it was like to play as a female character, when female members of his gaming guild began to confide in him about their personal lives, believing that he was female in real life. Alexander felt terrible remorse for his inadvertent dishonesty. Alexander supports Nakamura's theories. He cautions that identity tourism cannot happen without ethical cost when playing an online roleplaying game in real time with other human beings because

of the real-life connections and emotional attachments that develop in games.

It is not news that when playing single player RPGs, people play characters unlike who they are in life: this is an object of an RPG. However, when I searched for data suggesting the degree to which this happens, the way it happens, and why it happens, I could find none; this was a key motivation for the NPC Romance Project. The survey data suggests that sex-swapping and the exploration of alternative sexualities IS happening in single-player RPGs, and the research data suggests reason and degree. In consideration of sex-swapping and experimentation, my data also supports Nick Yee's work on behavior mapping and demographics in RPG games, though he primarily studies MMORPGs and my work is in single-player RPGs. Yee's findings about sex-swapping, however, could fall into Nakamura's definition of identity tourism.

When I began to consider my data and what it meant, I kept returning to the idea of identity tourism. People are experimenting with gender and sexuality in these games, to a large degree. Once the human-to-human component of an MMO is removed, it also removes the ethical cost described by Nakamura and Alexander. It occurred to me that perhaps in the case of the single player RPG, Nakamura's identity tourism could actually become a healthy and positive form of exploration, resulting in greater self-awareness and confidence in players, and greater tolerance for sexualities other than the player's own.

Apply Nakamura's concepts to single-player RPGs such as *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age: Origins*, and a different dynamic emerges. Nakamura's "identity tourism" occurs, but without the ethical cost warned by Alexander because you aren't misrepresenting yourself to real people. Data from The NPC Romance Project suggests that a much healthier version of identity tourism is taking place in single-player RPGs, and it can therefore be argued that important cultural work may be happening which creates more tolerance toward people of varied sexual orientations.
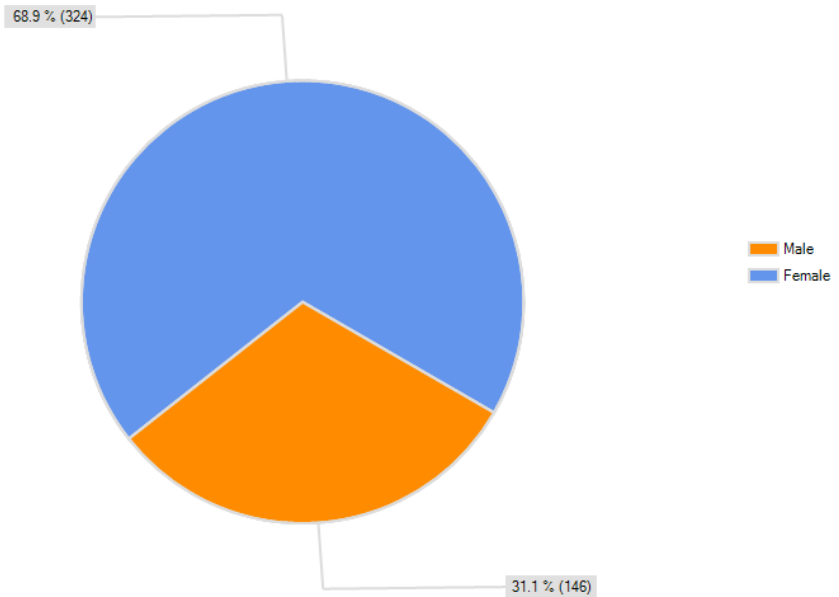
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Fig. 1. Preferred Gender Avatar While Playing Single-Player RPGs.

Recognizing that there are some games such as Witcher that do not allow players a gender choice when selecting an avatar, the question was posed to respondents regarding which gender character they prefer to play when playing a single-player RPG. Keeping in mind that the real-life gender makeup of respondents was 64.1% female to 33.8% male, there is a discrepancy in this answer [Fig. 1], as some 68.9% of respondents prefer to play a female character. This result suggests that there is a degree of sex-swapping going on. Unclear here is whether specific female respondents prefer to play male-gendered characters, or whether specific male respondents prefer to play male-gendered characters, and as this research is currently in process and evolving, more attention will need to be paid to this factor in future study. To try to understand gender role preference in avatar a bit further, the question was posed a second time in a slightly different way:

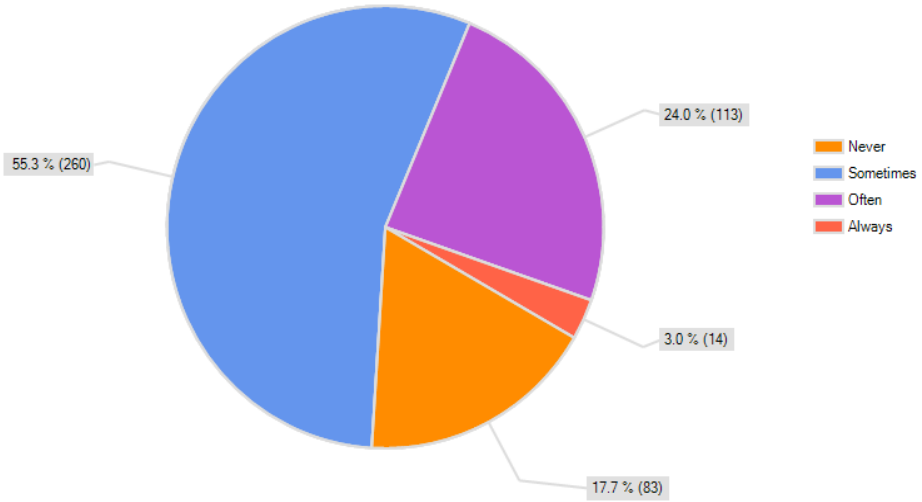**Do you play role-playing games as a character whose gender is different from your gender in real life?**

24.0 % (113)

55.3 % (260)

3.0 % (14)

17.7 % (83)

- Never
- Sometimes
- Often
- Always

Fig. 2. Frequency of Sex-Swapping While Playing Single-Player RPGs.

Respondents were also asked about the frequency of any sex-swapping behavior they engage in when playing single-player RPGs. The result was that some 17.7% of players stated that they never sex-swap, while the remaining 82.3% of respondents stated that they either always do (3%), sometimes do (55.3%), or often do (24%). 82.3% of respondents appear to be sex-swapping in some way, at some times, yet the overlap in gender preference in the previous question was only about 6%. This suggests that 1) either the first question is correctly reflective of actual behavior and not the second, or 2) the second question is reflective of actual behavior and not the first. A compelling read of this data would be that 82.3% of players are sex-swapping, and that the 6% of players who demonstrated overlap in gendered avatar preferences are reflective of males, sex-swapping to female characters. This finding would support Yee, but again, Yee's work is in MMOs and therefore that result might be more

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representative of the type of identity tourism Nakamura and Alexander caution us about.

BioWare and the Representation of Romance

In Eastern culture, it is culturally accepted to actively market Otome games, which are games exclusively devoted to NPC romance. In Western culture, however, there is controversy sometimes surrounding romance-able NPC content. This can be attributed to theories discussed by Dr. Marty Klein in his 2006 article in the *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality*. Klein believes that sexuality in America is a war between two types of people, "erotophobes" and "erotophiles." Writes Klein, "The goal of this war is to control sexual expression, colonize sexual imagination, and restrict sexual choices." (Klein, 2006) The erotophobes are people associated with the fundamentalist Christian right, whom Klein describes as threatened by sexuality, sexually repressed, and wanting to control not just their own sexual behaviors but those of everyone else. The erotophiles are those who are more open to sexual expression, sexual exploration, sexual arrangements, sexual privacy, sexual choice, sexual entertainment, sexual health, sexual imagination, and sexual pleasure. Klein argues that in recent years, the erotophobes have been winning.

One recent example of erotophobe involvement in the gaming industry surrounding NPC romances is the criticism of BioWare Entertainment by the Family Research Council, for having same-sex relationships available to explore in the company's most recent release, *Star Wars: The Old Republic* MMORPG (Deloria, 2012). This story, widely circulated in gamer blogs and electronic news sites, shows how a conservative group is attempting to control the gaming experiences of players according to their own religious codes. It has been BioWare's policy for some time to write their romance-able characters in both male and female directions.

This is not the first time BioWare has endured such criticism, as lead writer David Gaider received widespread internet coverage for a statement he released in response to a straight white male who had complained on the BioWare forums that *Dragon Age II* should not

contain homosexual romance options, because he is offended by them, and because he represents the majority demographic of gamers. Gaider responded:

> *"The romances in the game are not for 'the straight male gamer.' They're for everyone. We have a lot of fans, many of whom are neither straight nor male, and they deserve no less attention. We have good numbers, after all, on the number of people who actually used similar sorts of content in (Dragon Age: Origins) and thus don't need to resort to anecdotal evidence to support our idea that their numbers are not insignificant… and that's ignoring the idea that they don't have just as much right to play the kind of game they wish as anyone else. The 'rights' of anyone with regards to a game are murky at best, but anyone who takes that stance must apply it equally to both the minority as well as the majority. The majority has no inherent 'right' to get more options than anyone else."* (Gaider, 2011)

BioWare deserves scrutiny on the topic of games with romance-able NPCs in them, because they are the largest and most successful company producing games of this nature. Gaider's stating of his personal policy (and by extension, BioWare's policy) was partially responsible for inspiring me to study more about player behavior in video games with romance-able NPC's. BioWare, I found, deserves a place in any intellectual conversation about NPC romance in single-player RPGs because of the prevalence of their titles in my survey data.

Dragon Age	73.2%
The Sims	66.8%
Elder Scrolls	66.6%
Mass Effect	64.5%
Fable	57.1%
Final Fantasy	50.4%
Knights of the Old Republic	46.7%
Baldur's Gate	45.6%
Neverwinter Nights	42.4%
Harvest Moon	32.5%
Witcher	29.3%
Jade Empire	26.1%
The Old Republic MMO	24.4%
Vampire	19.0%
Planescape	18.4%
Star Ocean	15.3%
Alpha Protocol	14.2%
Katawa Shoujo	4.3%

Fig. 3. Games Played Containing NPC Romance.
(Yellow highlighting indicates a title by BioWare.)

Respondents in a preliminary interview of 37 respondents, which helped with developing my survey, were asked what roleplaying games they had played that contain some form of NPC romance in them. Of the 18 titles most popularly cited, 6 of them – one third – are BioWare titles. The top response was the *Dragon Age* series, and two BioWare titles have been played by over 50% of respondents. (The popularity of these titles in my preliminary interviews was what inspired me to post links to the survey on the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* forums on the BioWare Social Network, to get respondents.)

Upon establishing the importance of BioWare to a conversation about NPC romance, and given BioWare's policies toward making their romance-able NPCs romance-able by both genders, it follows that I sought to collect survey data about the importance of sexual exploration to the audience. What the data found is that players definitely play homosexual and bisexual romance content, when it is offered. The piece that is less clear, however, is whether players are

playing that content because it's there, or experimenting for experimentation's sake, in an effort to add depth to the game. Further study can unpack this a little more.

Single-Player RPGs as Safe Spaces
for Sexual Experimentation

Recently in the United States, there has been an unfortunate trend concerning children's suicides where the child was either identifying as gay, or was perceived by others to be gay (Miller, 2011). One of the inherent issues with this unfortunate string of events is the notion that these children who do identify as occupying a non-heteronormative space on the continuum of human sexuality don't feel they have a safe space in which they can be themselves without a social cost. Perhaps BioWare's policy on gender and NPC romance, coupled with the notion of Identity Tourism used in a way that's without ethical cost, can provide a safe space in which people can experiment with sexuality. This could be one aspect in which, as Jane McGonigal noted, "gaming can make a better world."

Over 70% of the survey respondents identified as straight, yet the majority of players do engage in some sort of experimentation with homosexual NPC romances while playing single-player RPGs. They are doing this primarily to add dimension to their gaming experience, and to see where the game's meta-narrative goes based on the romance they are playing. Most reasons players gave for what appeals to them about NPC romance had to do with narrative and story, and physical/visual aspects registered in a comparatively minor way.

When playing a role-playing video game with romance-able NPC's, do you romance the same gender NPC you would in real life?

34.3 % (161)

27.2 % (128)

Never
Sometimes
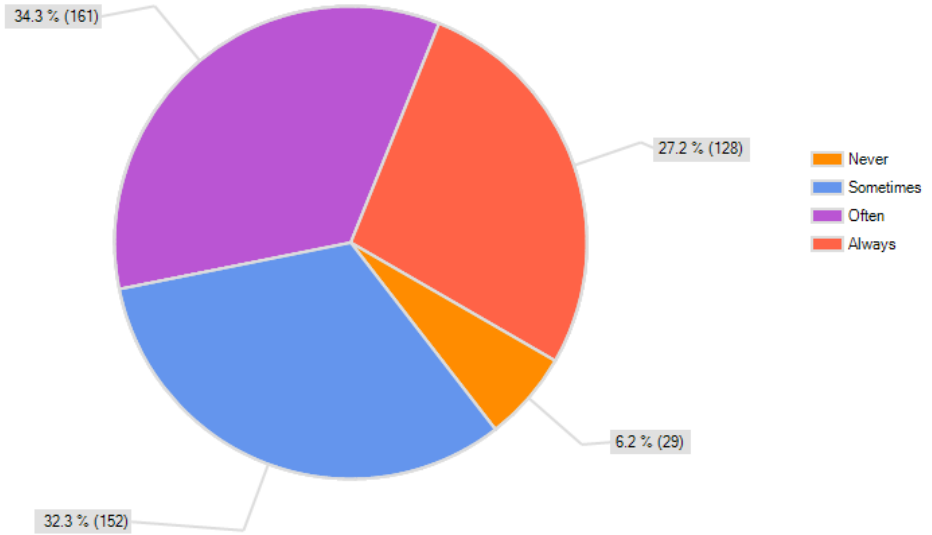Often
Always

6.2 % (29)

32.3 % (152)

Fig. 4. Differences in Gender Romance Between Real Life and RPG.

While 27.2% of players indicated that they always romance the same gender they would in real life, 72.8% responded that they do romance a different gender than they would in real life, either sometimes, often, or even never. This means that a majority of players are experimenting with an NPC romance option different than one they would pursue in real life.

Which romance options have you played before (or might consider playing) in a role-playing video game?
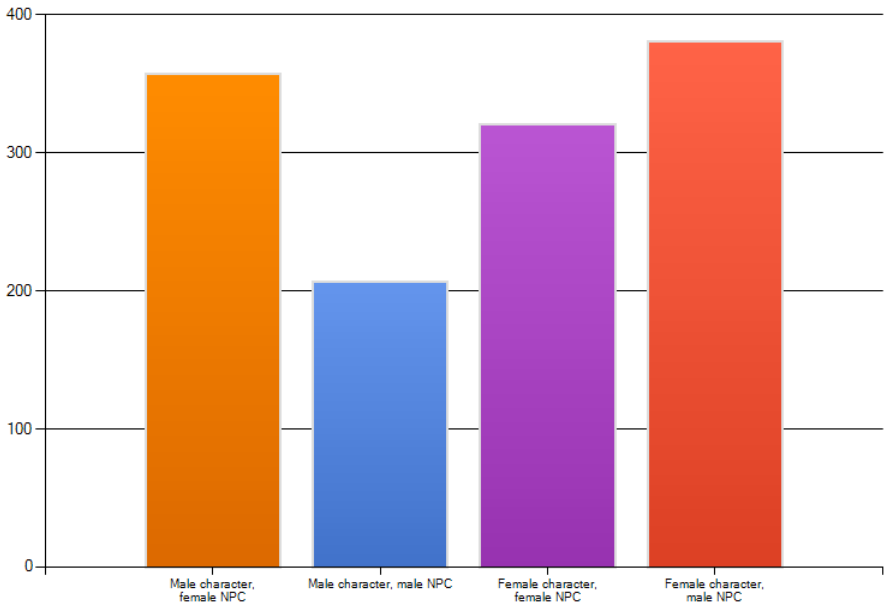
Fig. 5. NPC Romance Combinations Played.

While heterosexual NPC romances (male character with female NPC and/or female character with male NPC) appear to be the combination played most often, male character with male NPC appears to occur at least half as often, and female character with female NPC appears to occur slightly more than ¾ as often. It is certainly possible that the high percentage of female/female experimentation includes male players with a lesbian fetish. However, the fact that the percentage of players experimenting is over 70% should be enough to compensate for experimentation of that nature as a number that large is suggestive of a more widespread bent toward experimentation.

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Why might you pursue an NPC romance in a role-playing game? (Check all that apply.)
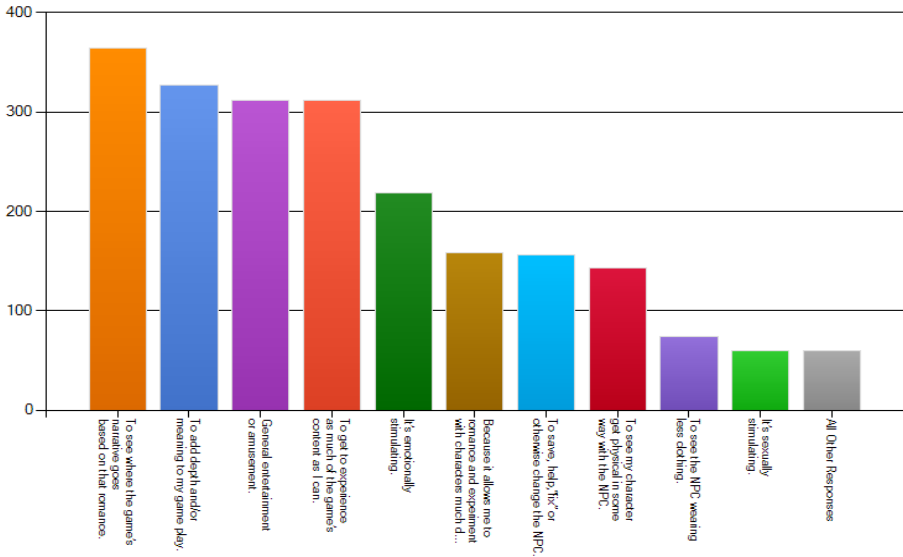
Fig. 6. Reasons Behind NPC Romance.

The main reasons players are engaging in NPC romances while playing RPGs mostly have to do with narrative. Physical factors such as seeing the NPC with less clothing, or seeing one's character get physical with a certain NPC, are a lot less important to players than the overall story. Players are using NPC romance to drive the narrative and add depth to their play. For more than half of respondents, NPC romance is emotionally stimulating, while a small group of respondents admits that it can also be sexually stimulating. Some 158 of 408 respondents who answered this question did say that they enjoy experimenting romantically with characters much different than they would pursue in real life. This could mean different genders, or could mean different personalities as well; we still need to unpack the degree to which players are experimenting for its own sake.

How important are romance-able NPC's to your overall gaming experience in a role-playing game?

- 28.2 % (115)
- 38.5 % (157)
- 3.4 % (14)
- 3.4 % (14)
- 26.5 % (108)

Legend:
- Very important!
- Somewhat important.
- Could take it or leave it.
- Not that important.
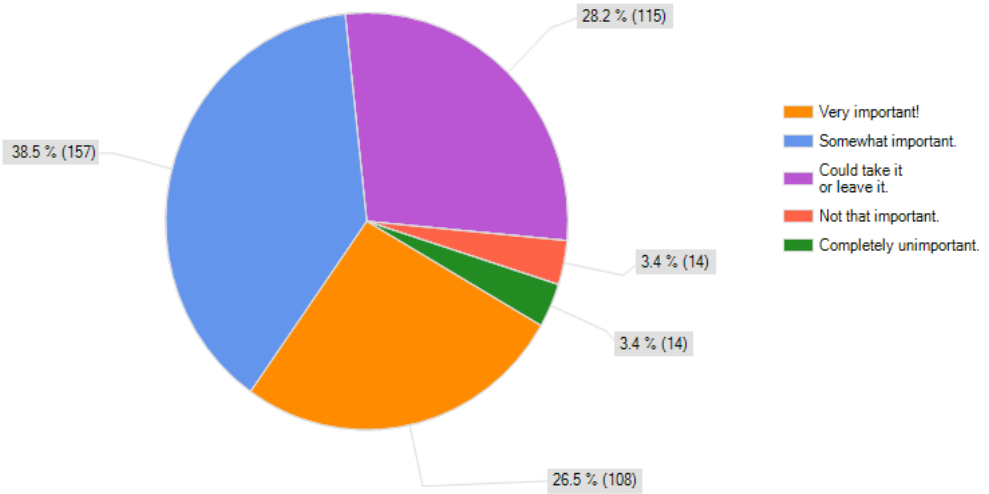- Completely unimportant.

Fig. 7. The Importance of NPC Romance to RPG Gameplay

This set of data is particularly interesting because it reveals that NPC romance is an important component of the RPG experience for many players. While only 6.8% of players said that NPC romance is either "not that important" or "completely unimportant," and 28.2% said they "could take it or leave it," 65% of respondents found NPC romance to be either a "somewhat important" or "very important" component of their RPG experience.

Essentially, players are experimenting regularly with sexuality in NPC romance. The majority feels that NPC romance holds at least some degree of importance to their gaming experience. By extension it follows that such experimentation is also important to players. Most players cite narrative as the reasons behind their pursuit of NPC romance. Perhaps players are both asking for this kind of content, *as*

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well as playing the content because it's there, and the two may not be mutually exclusive. Again, further study may shed more light on this.

Conclusion

BioWare, shown by this survey as important to any conversation about NPC romance, seems to have a relevant policy relating to NPC romance and gender. BioWare's policy and their NPC romances can be improved upon by expanding beyond typical binaries and archetypes, and by providing more and more varied options for those interested in NPC romance. While there is room for improvement, more realism and more inclusivity, BioWare does appear to be providing what the majority of players want to see, despite criticism stating the contrary. Players want NPC romances which contribute to the larger narrative and allow for player experimentation.

In a single-player RPG where there are no live players situated behind the other characters, the ethical cost of Identity Tourism as defined by Lisa Nakamura disappears. Experimentation with sex-swapping and NPC romance in different sexualities could be a safe opportunity – without social cost -- for people who have no other way to explore issues of gender and sexuality. Such exploration could, conceivably, lead to greater self-awareness and tolerance for sexualities different than one's own. This could be very important in light of our society's increasing polarization over issues of sexuality, and specifically in light of recent children's suicides related to issues of sexuality where safe spaces for exploration, without social cost, were clearly lacking. To think that games might be inadvertently performing important cultural work in this regard is an exciting prospect.

Acknowledgments

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Tick Tock: A review of Jason Rohrer's *Passage*

Eric Hamel, Carnegie Mellon University

There are few things in the world that I consider more romantic than the passage of time. Change, death and mortality go hand in hand with the loss of time and moment by moment it slips irrevocably into the past, never to be acquired again. Consequently my favorite time piece has always been the hour glass, because you can actually see the time that you've spent. In no game is this sentiment more beautifully explored than in Jason Rohrer's game *Passage*. It is admittedly a simple game, but despite its style and the fact that it was released in 2007, it is still considered a "must play" in indie game communities.

Passage is a simple, five minute maze game illustrated in an 8-bit, pixelated style. Navigating the maze is essentially the core game mechanic. The plot of this game is quite elementary. The player navigates their avatar deeper and deeper through a maze picking up treasure and eventually expires. However, all good games operate on a higher metaphoric level. *Passage* is far from the exception. This maze game is a rather effective metaphor for life. The aesthetics and design elements all support this over-arching exploration of what it means to be mortal.

The character of this piece is intrinsically linked to the visual design and game mechanic. The player experiences the game through a simply illustrated man comprised of about 27 pixels. Because there is no explicit plot apart from navigating the maze, the player has no specific clues as to who this man is. However, this is actually an asset. Because of the simple pixelated design and the vague, open-ended plot, the player very quickly feels as though they are the character. He quite effectively represents every man. Additionally, while the illustration is simple, it's also quite aesthetically pleasing and quite adorable. Thus, before the player is aware of it, they identify

with this character and develop an emotional bond.   The simplicity of the design allows the player to endow the pixels with life.   This could only be improved, and be made more personal, by allowing the player to choose their sex at the start of the game.

The visual design of this piece is also quite brilliant.   The entire game is played on a rather thin horizontal rectangle.   The rectangle is tall enough for the player to see all of the player character, but almost none of the maze can be seen above or below him.   At the start of the game, the player is placed completely on the left hand side of the viewable world.   The character can see quite a distance in front of him.   But all the images on the far right hand side of the screen are blurry and distorted.   Very gradually however, while the player is exploring the maze, the character's position on the rectangle changes. Very slowly he shifts toward the center and then by the end of the game he reaches the right hand side of the screen.   As he does this, the space behind him begins to blur and distort.   Before long, there is less and less space in front of him and much more space behind him. Also, the closer to the right the player gets, the slower he moves. When the player reaches the right hand side of the screen, he dies. This is illustrated by a grey, pixelated head stone.

One might think that because the nature of *Passage* is so simple that there aren't many meaningful choices that can be made throughout the game.   However, that would be untrue.   For example, very early in the game the player may choose to take a spouse.   This very simple act has a huge impact on the game.   Choosing to fall in love makes the score increase more quickly while progressing through the maze.   However, because the movement of the two characters must be accounted for, they can't maneuver as easily through the maze together and frequently the player will need to find an alternate route.   As the player negotiates the obstacles, they must decide whether they will spend time chasing treasure or moving forward. Additionally, not long before your character dies, your spouse will die. If, at the beginning of the game you choose to go alone, the score will not increase as quickly as it would if you had a partner.   However, the

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maze is easier to maneuver, but feels longer, lonelier and is somewhat less challenging.

The immersion element in this game is somewhat astounding. The player can quickly get wrapped up in the lives of these two little characters and before they realize it, they are so intensely focused on the game that the mechanic begins to translate into a story. Through moving the character, the player is able to enact the story of his life. Every move that is made, and every obstacle that is encountered tells a portion of that story. For example, if a player chooses to fall in love and later in the maze gets stuck because there isn't room for his spouse, he must consider her, and retrace his steps to progress. Similarly in real life, one can't make decisions in a relationship unilaterally. You must consider your partner. These events that the player enacts tell a story that slowly becomes a touching, personal experience. When your spouse expires, the player actually feels loss. This is heightened by the fact that your avatar moves more and more slowly. You feel as if he's struggling to go on, but cannot live without her. Additionally, because all the story elements are conveyed through action and game mechanic, there isn't any moment when the player is not in control of the character. All the story elements and choices belong to the player.

The design for *Passage* is somewhat sparse. However, spectacle and extraneous sounds might not be necessary. It's quite a colorful game. The illustrations employ a variety of colors and use an efficient number of pixels to draw the obstacles and treasures the player encounters. Additionally, as the player moves through the maze, the background art shifts in gradients and patterns. Perhaps the strongest aspect of art lies in the blur and distortion special effect that helps to illustrate the character's uncertain future and hazy memory of the past. There are no particular sound effects. There is only a slightly dark but also sentimental melody played with minimal instrumentation in an 8-bit style, similar to that of the visuals. The sentimental melody is delightful and exquisitely sets the proper mood for the piece. Certainly more complicated music would feel out of place and wouldn't fit with the overall design.

Passage is a very simple game with very minimalistic design elements. But the choices made for each design element contributes to the overall metaphor and culminates in an effective narrative experience. The story, mechanic, spectacle, music, all the moving parts help to reinforce the higher concept and tell a cohesive story. Admittedly, the replayability level of *Passage* is not very high. Once you understand the metaphor, the experience has served its purpose. *Passage* encourages the player to reflect on their own life through game play. It asks the player to maneuver the maze of life with its twists and turns, evaluate obstacles, sacrifice for loved ones, experience the passage of time, and ultimately to examine our mortality. If there is an antagonist in this game, it must be time. This is not a game that you can definitively win. Just as in real life, you cannot stop time. There is no pause button. In the end, *Passage* invites the player to make meaningful choices with regard to what to do with the time they are given before they inevitably lose the game.

Quest for Love: Playing the Women of King's Quest

Anastasia Salter, University of Baltimore, Maryland,
asalter@ubalt.edu

Playing an Avatar

The first game of the King's Quest series begins as the player is introduced to his or her onscreen avatar: "You are Sir Graham, the bravest and most honorable knight in the troubled realm of Daventry" (Sierra 1984). The avatar of Sir Graham is now iconic—pointy blue hat, black hair, red tunic and knee high black boots. This introduction serves as all the needed back-story for Sir Graham's life prior to his adventure. This initial figure from the earliest version of *King's Quest I* lacked any specific characteristics or capability of displaying expression—Sir Graham was mostly an iconic male figure left somewhat blank for the projection of the own player's humanity. Sir Graham develops as a specific character more as the series develops, as each game continues to relate to him and his family as he becomes first the ruler of Daventry and then a husband, father, and aging king. Stepping into Graham's black boots and experiencing Graham as a character at first requires filling in the blanks with the traditions of the questing knightly hero: Graham is singled out by the king as a knight of honor, and the player's first impression of him is through the king's eyes, as the king explains the reasoning behind his choice of Sir Graham as future leader of the realm. Later, when Graham goes on his quest to rescue his future wife Valanice, Graham is revealed through her circumstances as a valiant love interest (1985). Through interacting with these characters, the player gets a heroic image of the character he or she inhabits.

The avatars of the *King's Quest* series are royalty, and as such they display traditional princess iconography. While the first three games focused on Sir Graham and other male protagonists, this trend ended with the role of Princess Rosella as the lead character in *King's Quest*

IV: The Perils of Rosella (1994). This stands in stark contrast to the world of *King's Quest I*, where the only visible female characters are a wicked witch and a fairy godmother. At the beginning of *King's Quest IV*, King Graham has decided he is too old for adventuring (1988). He is ready to hand off that iconic blue hat from his own questing days to his children. King Graham has two children, a son and a daughter, but he does not distinguish between the two in his desire to see them adventure. As Graham is literally passing the hat to his children, his own weakness and age are revealed as he suffers from a crippling heart failure—and it is his daughter Rosella who goes to find a cure:

Prior to *King's Quest VIII: Mask of Eternity* (1998), the games only had two-dimensional graphics—rendering figures was always done in a style that was cartoon-like. *KQ IV* uses simple lines and shape for the early renderings of young Princess Rosella, the first female playable as an avatar within the game. Rather than being sexualized or overtly feminine in body type, most of the early female avatars rely on dresses and basic indications in line and feature to differentiate them from the male avatars. When Rosella is first seem before venturing on her quests, she has on a dress and displays a traditionally slim figure to some extent though mostly she lacks any particularly specific figures or sexuality. Her appearance in this cartoon form may be necessitated by the technology, but it also gives the character the trait of an icon: as Scott McCloud describes the concept of the iconic character, the simplicity and ease of identification as a generalized female allow the player to project upon her (1994). She is a character to be assumed, not a figure presented to be desired.

In the transition of Princess Rosella into a playable avatar in the beginning of *King's Quest IV*, she physically assumes an even more generic appearance (1988). Before she can fully enter her quest in *KQ IV* (1994), Rosella has her clothing transformed to that of a peasant. She pursues the quest thus not as a princess but as an ordinary member of the populace, and this in turn affects her quest. In one iconic fairy tale moment, Rosella kisses a frog prince. After he appears transformed before her he does not even realize her status and leaves in disgust to seek an actual member of nobility to be his bride. This

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sequence emphasizes the importance of physical traits in how identity is conceptualized, both in the game and in general. The avatar of Rosella has a status only as certain as the clothes on her back, and when the player steps into her position the player too has that status.

Rosella is once again at the center of the story in *King's Quest VII* as one of two of the game's playable avatars, the other being her mother (1994) in a rare juxtaposition of two females as central characters. As the graphics have improved through the years, her representation is still cartoon like but reflects more character. Rosella again starts the game beautiful and garbed in the manner of a princess, but this time she is not shown accompanied by any male figures—her father and brother remain entirely absent from the introductory sequence, and neither one is the motivating force behind the quest. Rosella is shown first standing alone, singing of her desire to be free of marriage and the boundaries her family is trying to place on her.

A Fairytale Transformation

The transformation of Princess Rosella for the purposes of the game throws these traditional standards somewhat awry, as Rosella is immediately warped into the persona of an ogre in the early stages of *KQ VII*. This warping of physical form seems to be a prerequisite for every quest Rosella embarks upon, from her disguise as a member of the "lower class" in *KQ IV* to her disguise as a member of a different, "uglier" race in *KQ VII*. Both of these transformations occur entirely outside of her control. They are inflicted upon her through magic. These transformations in both cases rob Rosella of her identity and her power—she is no longer physically the princess of the kingdom of Daventry. Returning to Rosella's encounter with the frog prince, this situation is a classic fairy tale moment—princess kisses frog, frog turns into prince. But here, the fairy tale ending is avoided because robbed of her royal trappings, Rosella is no one. The prince feels no obligation to his rescuer. He is to marry a princess, and Rosella is not of his class. In the case of the frog prince, Rosella is spared romantic pursuit by the arrogant frog prince because she appears to be of low power. This could be seen as the denial of what Rosella deserves by the right of

her rank. But at the same time, it is this disguise that allows Rosella to be on a quest. Her disguise as a peasant grants a freedom from the binds of being a princess.

The use of cross-dressing of economic class is a standard transformation in literature. For instance, in Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, the economic switch of clothing styles allows for a pauper to pose as a prince once the prerequisite requirements of a fairy tale reminiscent similarity are met. *The Prince and the Pauper* uses the disguise of clothing to reveal identity, according to Bradford Smith's study of the book: "Disguise is often a way of exposing either the 'real' identity or the essential mystery of all identity. In *The Prince and the Pauper* Prince Edward, shorn of his fine clothes, is no better than the boy whose rags he wears. He merely makes himself ridiculous when he tries to be the king he really is…while Tom Canty quickly takes on kingly qualities and is soon able to rule as well as Edward" (1963).

The supposed moral purpose of a story like *The Prince and the Pauper* is to convey a message of self-worth to a younger reader: the story informs them that while they may not have the privileges of extreme wealth, such wealth is not defining of character. Switch the clothing and the trappings of power and they too could blend into such "high society." A similar message runs through the fairy tale of Cinderella, where the transformation from poor cinder girl to princess is accomplished through a change of gown. Elisabeth Panttaja (1993) looks at this transformation in her essay "Going Up in the World: Class in 'Cinderella.'" The stepsisters try to put Cinderella in a class situation where she could not aspire to marry the prince: "they disrobe her, give her old clothes, set her to do the chores of the class between them." She observes that "the battle for the prince's attention is not waged at the level of character at all but at the level of clothes." In Panttaja's view, "The prince marries Cinderella because he is enchanted (literally) by the sight of her in her magical clothes." The power imbued in these physical objects does seem to reflect a contemplation of the lack of inherent traits because of a state of birth, but at the same time Panttaja observes that Cinderella was already

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possessed of noble birth, more so than her wicked stepsisters: the clothes are merely reflecting her "true" nature. It is thus the rags that are the disguise—Cinderella was born to wear a ball gown, just as Rosella was born to be beautiful and noble.

In *KQ VII*, Rosella's transformation heightens rather than alleviates her problems. An Ogre princess bride is still an attractive option for an Ogre king. Thus in her newly transformed body Rosella begins her quest to escape marriage to a man she does not desire, a man who is most literally an ogre. Rosella's physical transformation here is itself a status change to be overcome. In his essay "Out of Aladdin's Lamp," Bernard Welt (1963) suggests that "the transformations of fairy-tale plots contrive to reveal their protagonist's essential states, underneath the appearance effected by purely external and contingent circumstance." Rosella does not want to remain with this body image, even though her actual situation is not much different. If the transformation helps to reveal her essential state, then perhaps the player sees some of Rosella's own selfishness and vanity. Rosella's loss of her own beauty gives her a window to see the value of beauty. At the beginning of the game, she is a princess being pressed into marriage to a prince not of her choosing. Once transformed into an ogre, Rosella is still a princess being pressed into marriage to a prince not of her choosing. Her situation seems at first not to have improved much: her agency over her own life is continually taken from her by forces beyond her control.

The difference in her situation is not merely aesthetic, however. The transformation in *KQ IV* was relatively harmless—Rosella could easily regain the trappings of her class. This transformation, however, can be seen as crippling. Going from beauty to ugliness is a classic fairy tale affliction, often used as a lesson on the dangers of vanity. Rosella is intended to be beautiful, blonde and blue-eyed, and desirable. When she is left unattractive, that is a condition that has to be overcome. Until the player gets Rosella through her quest and back to her normal self, the player is in control of an "ugly" avatar, and the quest for Rosella to gain physical beauty becomes the player's quest. If the player is indeed projecting onto the avatar throughout the game, then

the player is becoming a participant in a traditional woman's quest towards desirability in the eyes of men. If the player admits to him or herself a personal preferences to control an avatar who appears as Rosella the princess rather than Rosella the ogre, than the player is furthermore embracing a traditional aesthetic view of the world, and endorsing the opinions of non-player characters who would encounter Rosella and find her ogre form worth shunning. Rosella herself even shares this view—when the player chooses to have Rosella look in a mirror at her newly transformed self, she is repulsed, expressing her own disgust aloud with only the player to hear her and work to bring her back from beast to beauty.

A Fairytale Ending?

However, one strong effect of this socializing role of fairytales shows in the models of gender roles. Where storytellers hold values supporting traditional gender roles, the stories tend to reflect these same values regardless of the needs or desires of their child audience, who rarely have a voice in expressing their own opinions. Gender roles in the traditional fairytale therefore reflect these normative expectations. Zipes (1983) describes the traditional models of gender as presenting clear binaries: "the young girl must display through her actions such qualities as modesty, industriousness, humility, honesty, diligence, virginity…the young man is generally more active and must demonstrate such characteristics as strength, courage, wisdom, loyalty, and, at times, a killing instinct." These traditional fairytale archetypes are presented in contrast with what Zipes characterizes as a "liberating" fairytale. In order for a fairytale to be considered liberating, Zipes suggests that it must "reflect a process of struggle against all types of suppression and authoritarianism and posit various possibilities for the concrete realization of utopia."

Feminist scholars writing since Zipes have been suspicious of embracing modern fairytales as fully liberated tales. In her discussion of fairytales, Lieberman (2004) notes that "[a] close examination of the treatment of girls and women in fairytales reveals certain patterns which are keenly interesting not only in themselves, but also as

material which has undoubtedly played a major contribution in forming the sexual role concept of children, and in suggesting to them the limitations that are imposed by sex upon a person's chances of success in various endeavors." The spirit these stories imbue is not one where boys and girls play on the same terms: "Girls win the prize if they are the fairest of them all; boys win if they are bold, active, and lucky."

This tendency in stories can be troubling if, as Linda Parsons argues in her look at the modern relevance of the seemingly antiquated fairytale tradition, "fairytales are sites for the construction of appropriate gendered behavior…[they] are an integral part of the complex layering of cultural stories and influences that affirm and perpetuate cultural norms" (2004). This layering of tradition is particularly important in that it aims to prepare girls for their roles in the heterosexual traditions of marriage. When girls read of a heroine aiming for marriage, they recognize themselves in the character they are reading about: "…they identify with the characters, especially when those characters reaffirm what they already know through cultural discourse…what is possible and acceptable for the protagonist becomes possible and acceptable for the reader." If a woman they read about is powerful, that character is most likely ugly, victimizing other women out of jealousy of their beauty. This ugliness is often associated with mannishness, with being "…unwomanly if not inhuman." This distinction returns to Liberman's problem with fairytales where girls achieve victory through beauty: if feminine power and ugliness must coincide, then a powerful woman is unnatural and doomed to never achieve victory in fairytale land. Characters onscreen in computer games often reinforce this expectation: rarely does a player find him or herself watching an unattractive avatar through to the completion of a quest.

This positioning of women and men in the fairytale environment transfers to the initial worlds of fantasy adventure games. Avatars and characters understood by the player through their positioning with in relation to these traditional archetypes, as the player enters a world that is in many ways familiar. The positioning of women as either

fitting the archetype of the virtuous and beautiful girl or the powerful but evil witch governs women across the spectrum, not only in *King's Quest* but also in other early adventure games, as gender roles are established along familiar lines. As the player goes through the game, the player participates in the gender assumptions in the fairytale framework and furthermore falls into some of the traditional fairytale traps—including the inevitable move from love to marriage.

In the final sequence of *King's Quest IV*, Rosella faces the problem of a budding relationship with Edgar, the man who escaped from the evil fairy's castle with her and who now is professing his love to her in one of the final cut scenes of the game. Witnessing the character's internal struggle rather than being able to quickly make the choice for Rosella might here be the more powerful sequence, perhaps more so because, as Crawford notes, "There was nothing players could do to avert it" (337). Players succeeding in Rosella's quest are granted the final emotional payoff: Rosella and the rest of the family surrounding a revitalized King Graham, beaming with happiness in the final cut scene of the game. These last moments of the game offer an emotional counterpart to the opening sequence, an uplifting conclusion to follow the grim beginning. However, the sequence is not without its emotional complexity, and even as the player sees Rosella standing happily at her father's bedside the player knows only moments before Rosella was rejecting a profession of love from a desired companion in favor of returning to this spot. This layering is part of this early attempt at a story of complexity, where the happy ending is not without its consequences and the character is not only defined by the one dimension of success in an initial easily defined quest.

The experience of playing Rosella is the experience of taking over for Rosella's mind, but it is not yet the experience of taking over for Rosella's heart. Experiencing the desire of someone removed from one's self and one's own situation is a fundamental challenge and power of any form of storytelling, whether in the form of a novel or computer game. Computer games today continue to use cut scenes despite their seeming flaw of being non-interactive by nature. Juxtaposed with the *King's Quest* novels, these cut scenes echo some

of the novels strength in offering moments of character that provide perspective while focusing on empathy, not interaction. They are a powerful tool for communicating emotion and desire and for showing actions by a character that belong to that character, not to the player. As one reviewer notes looking back on *King's Quest IV*: "*KQIV* broke new ground, both with its female protagonist and its relationship-driven plot. It may not have withstood the last two decades as the emotional powerhouse that Sierra claimed in their ads, but the game did explore interpersonal relationships with a depth that few, if any, games had up to this point" (Morganti par 2).

For that emotional plot to function, the player must relate to Rosella not just as an avatar and not just as a character but as both. As an avatar, Rosella is under the player's protection, subject to the player's control and thus the player's responsibility. As a character, Rosella exists with her own desires and motivates the quest that the player accompanies her on. The power of the ending relies on the player's ability to consider a daughter's anguish for her father, even when daughter and father are both virtual characters. The question of "why play this particular game" is then answered in emotional resonance: the emotional experience causes the player to care about advancing the story, and success for the player means seeing the epic through to its finale.

Love and Marriage

In some of the games, there is the possibility of an alternative "unhappy" ending—in *KQ VII*, failure to rescue Edgar results in Rosella ending the game without being reunited with her love interest. The choice on the part of the player to create this path is influenced by the player's success in rescuing Edgar, meaning that if Edgar is rescued the player cannot decide that Rosella might be happy to see him live but not particularly interested in a relationship: the endings represent only the two binary paths. The ending sequence indicates that this particularly ending is indeed a failure, a less fortuitous path through the game. The player can determine the outcome, but the player cannot recode the implications that Rosella without her implied love

interest is less happy than Rosella reunited with him. At the outset of the game, Rosella indicated her desire to live free of the constraints a husband would place on her life, but that dream is ignored by this ending sequence. Is the player's agency in the adventure game as illusory as the woman's apparent agency once she has escaped her obvious physical prison for the socially constructed one of a literally medieval style wedding?

While the object of the quest is not marriage, the final destination for Rosella is towards romance with Edgar, a character from *KQ IV* who returns in his true form to court his first love. It is Rosella who helps break the curse on him rather than the other way around, and this after refusing him in *KQ IV* in favor of returning to help her father. In *KQ VII*, Rosella continues her trend of acting as rescuer, and the implication is that Rosella "wins" Edgar as her reward for her virtue throughout. Edgar exists as a prize, one that Rosella refused at the end of *KQ IV* in favor of returning to save her father. Now, years later in the arc of the story, Rosella doesn't have to make any sacrifices to have Edgar—except, as the player may notice watching this "happy ending" unfold, she must sacrifice her desire for adventure and independence in favor of eventual bonding within the traditions of royalty and marriage.

The implication of the unhappy ending in *KQ VII* is minimized in part by the fact that the mistake is easily undone: "In videogames, regret is an easily vanquishable phantom; it operates merely as a fleeting wound that may be quickly salved" (Poole 224). If Rosella fails at first to rescue Edgar during the course of the game, it is always possible for that failure to be reversed. The ability to reload a game eliminates the element of tragedy to death or failure—"great stories depend for their effect on irreversibility—and this is because life too, is irreversible" (Poole 99). The same meaninglessness strikes any death that cuts short gameplay. In the *King's Quest* series death might lurk around any corner and strike down Rosella or Valanice on their way to trying to find a happy ending, but the reload button always erases the loss.

The earliest examples of women within the King's Quest progression fit the most traditional archetypes of passivity: these are women who wait to be rescued, as with Princess Valanice, who escapes her tower and becomes Queen Valanice not through any actions of her own but rather through the intervention of others. In *King's Quest II*, it is Graham's own quest that ends with rescuing a woman who will be his wife. The ending is no less final for him than it is for his bride, and he knows her as little as she knows him prior to the union, but it is his desire and whim that the rescue quest fulfills. It is Graham's desire that propels him to seek out the woman he envisions as his future wife—her desire does not play a role in the action. The position of Queen Valanice as the object of Graham's quest has particularly complicated implications because the player is actively seeking the Queen as a bride: in order to be successful at the game, the player as Graham must rescue and then marry Valanice. The player is complicit in Valanice's entrapment—first as she sits in the tower and later as she sits in Graham's castle as wife. In the sequels to this particular adventure, Valanice and Graham are both shown as content with where Graham's choice has landed them; however, Valanice herself is not shown as taking an active role until *King's Quest VII*, when she makes the decision to pursue her daughter and try to bring them both home safely. In redemption of the entrapment of the previous games, *King's Quest VII* offers an adventure game where the women are instead active in escape.

The progression of empowerment of women in the *King's Quest series* occurs over generations of characters just as it does over years of game development. In *King's Quest VII*, Valanice's daughter, Princess Rosella, moves from potential marriage to potential marriage. The topic dominates each stage of her quest. When Rosella first falls into the hands of the ogres, she is following a dream of adventure over marriage—but quickly she lands in path after path that seems to lead inescapably to a wedding. Her path this time is different from her first adventure in *King's Quest IV*, where she finds a love interest in Edgar and then abandons him. This time when Rosella finds love, she ends up allowing Edgar to court her. While marriage is not finalized at the resolution of the game, it is implied that this is the fate that waits for

Rosella when she returns to the life of a princess, and that this adventure is the last that she will ever embark upon. Rosella's life as a princess may remain a trap—but when she is under the player's control and on a quest, Rosella experiences freedom and adventure, and, however briefly, the player and character shape her fate together. Valanice's daughter chooses to seek out and rescue a potential lover of her own.

These later *King's Quest* games reverse the earlier models, and the series essentially ends with women saving themselves: the designer reworks the experience so the player and character have agency in the fate of women. Now in current computer games, the gender neutrality of the rescuer and rescued paradigm is taken for granted. In role-playing games and their descendants such as *World of Warcraft*, quests are gender neutral: women and men can fit the role of rescuer and rescued. In any game where the player chooses what gender to make the avatar, however, this distinction is minimal—the element of gender is all but removed from gameplay. The distinction has more meaning in games that are still designed to follow the experience of a specific character, and the implications for agency show clearly when looking at the difference between a Princess who rescues herself, and a Princess who waits up in the tallest tower, practicing her curtsies for the day a knight appears to rescue her.

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