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Love in Games
Experience and Representation

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Abstract

This thesis concerns the place of love in games. Specifically, it addresses the question of whether human players can fall in love with computer-generated characters in the context of single-player games. Games can offer strong and intense emotional experiences. Love, however, seems to challenge the affordances of the medium. Digital games are preoccupied with codification due to their algorithmic nature. This suggests that love in games, if it is to feature, has to become quantifiable and preconfigured. Can love ever be so rigid? If we can fall in love in the context of a game with a digital character, what does this mean for our capacity to choose love? Does it mean that our emotions can be manipulated and engineered? What are then the implications for our freedom and will?

The thesis distinguishes the above questions into two separate subject matters. In particular, it argues that our emotions can be shaped by meticulous design and intricate plot, something that is evident outside of games as well. At the same time, love is an emotional state that cannot be forced. This is true not only for us but for the persons we share love with. In other words, we may have emotional reactions and feel attachment and care towards digital characters, but as long as they cannot choose us and choose to love us in the same manner that we can, then this experience is not love. Love, unlike or more so than other emotions, demands reciprocation. For this reason, it is argued that games cannot afford love, at least not before they can include agents of intentional embodiment, a contingency that would result in potential reconceptualisation of love.

Nonetheless, games can include love as representation, which in the context of the thesis is understood as romance. Love as representation and discourse is highly formulated and codified, providing a certain fantasy of satisfaction and stability. Love as an experience, on the other hand, is an ambivalent fluidity of desire and attachment. While games cannot offer the latter, they can very well offer the former: romance, that is. Because games can offer romance, they can also show how fictional and engineered it is as an experience; that what we actually feel when we experience it, and not only imagine experiencing it, has nothing to do with the thrilling exhilaration that is love. Moreover, games as spatial practices include play, which allows us to experience love as a free-form desire devoid of quantifiable outcomes and goals. In this, games do not destroy love but instead destroy our false preconceptions regarding it, unencumbering our desires in the process. Love in games helps us revalue our freedom with all the potentials and responsibilities that it entails.

The thesis starts with showing instances of love in games to contextualise the player experience it concerns itself with. Drawing from medium conventions and especially the damsel in distress trope, it is argued that games can indeed afford love because they constitute codified and designed simulations of challenge. This connection is made by using medieval games and courtly love practices as a point of reference building on work by Johan Huizinga. The above is further analysed to show how love has been structured as a fantasy of stability of desire, examining the political ramifications of this practice. For this, the thesis employs a

multidisciplinary approach ranging from biology and neuroscience to psychology, literary and media theory, and critical deconstructionism. It especially draws from the works of Helen Fischer, Paul Ekman, René Girard, Lauren Berlant, and Michel Foucault.

Having established the difference between love and romance and shown that games can afford the latter, the thesis turns to the investigation of a proper methodological tool to analyse the experience of love as representation in games. For this, it implements the player involvement model by Gordon Calleja and uses it to analyse game instances that exemplify how games can afford romantic love through their different aspects. The model is further used to examine the love experience in games in terms of macroinvolvement and microinvolvement. The first regards medium preconceptions and conventions that have been criticised by game theorists as problematic and unconducive to the experience of love in games. Finally, regarding microinvolvement, the thesis contends that the challenge games actually face in relation to love is that they contain agents that lack volition. Using phenomenology, embodied perception, and existentialism, it is shown that the player may feel something akin to love for these agents but their feelings cannot be considered love as long as the artificial others they come into contact with cannot love them back. The ethical and technological dimensions of such a development are touched upon in the conclusion opening pathways for further research.

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Introduction

Falling in Love

When I was three years old, I received my first ever game console. It was a NES and the first game I played was Super Mario Bros (Nintendo 1985). Needless to say, I fell in love. Being an only child, I was finally able to play with something that responded to my actions instead of constantly enacting imaginary scenarios of adventure and exploration. Unfortunately for me, my allowed playtime was limited to a couple of hours every day. The rest of the time I tried to simulate the experience by using prompts from my physical environment, like chairs and my poor dog companion, Remo. It was a disheartening failure. Nothing could resemble the fun of timely jumping over obstacles, while there was no possibility of hitting blocks with my head to reveal gold coins and flame flowers that could turn me invincible. Most importantly, I could not replace the evil Goombas whose head I had to stomp on, no matter how hard I tried to train my dog to do my bidding. My real world was simply not designed to cater to my playing.

Decades later as a dedicated games scholar, this discrepancy continues to inform my research. In digital games, we have a medium with unique affordances. Playing a game constitutes a lived experience. At the same time, it is the experience of a designed, manufactured space, world, and environment that is specifically created to facilitate our agency. While this may seem constrained due to materiality and the algorithmic nature of digital games, it contains possibilities beyond that of our physical world (Gualeni 2015). The physical world is our primary world (Tolkien 2014) and as such we perceive, conceive, and live worldness in accordance with its affordances (Gualeni and Vella 2020). Yet it is still subject to limitations, just as our capacities as mortal beings are confined within the rules of nature and the society we partake in. In this, digital games can provide experiences which overcome our physical boundaries; experiences we may never have in our everyday life, due to circumstances or natural restrains, or experiences that are simply better in the digital world because they are designed and executed as such, at least in some cases. What those cases are, the manner in which the experiences they provide are better, worse, and/or different from those of the physical world, and investigating the reasons for this improvement or degeneration constitute the driving force behind the research in this thesis.

Within this context, love came almost as an imperative. In a medium preoccupied with digitality, love as an experience that is infused with physicality becomes virtually liminal. The focus of my

research became, therefore, whether love is an experience afforded by digital games – in particular, whether human players can fall in love with computer generated characters. The subsequent queries addressed in my thesis are the mechanics of such a possibility and whether this experience is actually love or something players have come to associate with love. If is it the former, then games could instigate a relexicalisation of love to encompass experiences not conceivable and plausible before digital games. In other words, would the experience of love in games introduce such a novel understanding of it that we would need to expand our formal definition of the term? If instead the latter is true, then digital games help showcase the problem of representing love in general.

Being a gamer myself, the answer to my initial hypothesis was almost automatic: yes, players do experience love in games. I remember caring deeply for Clementine, the little girl I had to accompany in *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games 2012), and later having my heart broken when I was forced by the game to kill myself as Lee after I had gotten infected so as not to turn into a zombie. The issue, however, is not so straightforward. In another game, *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010), I had to save my kidnapped son, Shaun, as Ethan. While I was interested in the story and found the gameplay compelling, I did not care about Shaun. I sympathised with Ethan's efforts and tragic moments as a father, yet my feelings remained detached. I felt sorry for the poor child and the plot made sense to me but throughout the game I was invested in the mystery instead. I wanted to uncover the culprit and if Shaun happened to be saved all the better.

It is worth noting that I enjoyed both games. My emotional experience though was different. In *Heavy Rain* I was excited and nervous about the thrilling plotline. In *The Walking Dead* I was touched and moved to the point of actually crying, my hand trembling as I was trying to control the mouse in my final moments as Lee. So what was it that made me so attached to Clementine and Lee but not as engaged with Ethan and Shaun? In *The Walking Dead*, I was indeed affected by what was happening to my playable character. In *Heavy Rain*, on the other hand, my experience was not equated with Shaun's: he was a father in despair, I was solving a puzzle like a detective. Was it then a personal preference, a game design issue, or a little bit of both?

Actually, it has become obvious that we already deal with two further questions. The first is how a game can invoke feelings of love to a player, how it is possible; as in the mechanics of the process. The second question concerns what aspects of games are involved to allow such a contingency: therefore, the mechanics of the form. The first enquiry concerns the epistemological question of how a human player can fall in love with a nonhuman and non-physical entity such as an NPC. The second query addresses the poetics of such a contingency. Since we are faced with a structured

experience, this question becomes how games utilise their affordances to elicit emotions of love to the player. Indeed, as I remind the reader later on, I do not concern myself in detail with poetics in this thesis, as in identify the various ways games might offer different experiences of love to their player. When it comes to form, my thesis interrogates before anything else whether we can even use the term poetics in a medium that transgresses semiotics. As I argue in chapter 7, we cannot, at least not without first appropriating its meaning. This is why in chapter 8, I propose the player involvement model as a medium-specific analytical tool to study the form of love in games. Using game examples, I show how the model and its different facets can be an appropriate methodology to examine love in games.

It is the first question that takes precedence in this thesis and is vast and complex enough to carry the weight of a doctoral dissertation. The question of how a human player can fall in love with a computer-generated character concerns the whole discipline of human-computer interaction. In games, the question of love becomes as organic as ever since games are computer software that are usually fun and voluntary, albeit simulated activities; a setting where social interactions are most often witnessed and experienced. It is true that humans may love, care for, and get attached to non-human beings, like their pets (Harvey 2019) and plants (Archambault 2016),[1] or inanimate objects, like their cars and personal collections (Moran and O'Brien 2014). Yet does the player's attachment to a digital character, like Clementine from the previous example, function on the same principle?

There has been considerable research that shows that loving a pet entails many benefits for our bodily and mental health and social life (Jennings 1997; Wilson 1998). Equally, love for objects has been associated with coping mechanisms and transference of trauma (Steinberg 2009).[2] Nonetheless, as Archer (1996) informs us, loving a pet, let alone an object, may be seen as problematic in evolutionary terms because "attachment and devoting resources to another species are, in theory, fitness-reducing" (p. 237). For this, Archer argues that pets possess elaborate mechanisms that can manipulate human responses of care, love, and attachment, which "were originally evolved to aid relationships with other humans, principally offspring and sexual partners" (p. 254). In other words, pets have co-evolved in such a way as to trigger our attachment and care.

[1] This does not touch upon paraphilias such as zoophilia (Cudworth 2011) and dendrophilia (Tee 2021) or aborphilia (Taylor 2013). Interestingly enough, the fifth and most recent edition of APA's Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (2013), includes online sex among other paraphilias, namely "any sexual interest greater than or equal to normophilic sexual interests" (Balon 2016). It would not be egregious to assume that if sex with other humans via a screen is considered paraphilic, sex with a virtual character must be deemed more so, even though there was no inclusion of such a category.

[2] In addition to that, fetishism is a vast subject on its own, see for example Böhme (2014).

Because of this evolutionary fitness of the animals: "These mechanisms can, in some circumstances, cause pet owners to derive more satisfaction from their pet relationship than those with humans, because they supply a type of unconditional relationship that is usually absent from those with other human beings" (p. 237). According to this, an attachment with an animal is more rewarding in a controlled manner: we know that our dog, for example, will be waiting for us when we return home at the end of the day and, no matter what, will be happy to see us; a feature that cannot be guaranteed in any human relationship, not even that between parents and children. So do we get attached to digital characters because they are rewarding in a similar way to how pets manipulate (Guilford and Dawkins 1991) our system of attachment and care?[3] Animal pets have evolved because their symbiotic relationship with us increases their survival rate (Driscoll et al. 2009). Yet digital characters are designed by us. Does this mean that we design digital characters, or fictional for that matter, to be emotionally manipulated by them?

Whatever the answer to the above, another important question arises that returns us once more to the original question of the thesis. If emotional manipulation is indeed our aim, can we actually achieve it through digital characters? It is again useful to see how this evolving mechanism works in pets. Archer (1996) tells us:

> Because of the ability to attribute mental states to individuals with human-like behavior, humans are able to fill in the enormous gap between themselves and nonhuman animals in terms of language and thought. They therefore attribute human feelings and thoughts to the pet, thereby setting up a perceived relationship with it. The formation of such relationships is likely to be accentuated where people have fewer or less fulfilling human relationships (p. 254).

There are two significant observations in this. One, humans are able to get attached to non-humans if these exhibit "human-like behaviour." Humans then attribute "humanness" to non-humans to get attached to them. Two, these relationships seem to develop in the absence of "fulfilling" human relationships. Combining these with the previous remark by Archer concerning rewarding and unconditional attention from our pets, we can surmise that humans tend to develop attachment to non-human agents because these relationships have a more controlled outcome. Our attachment to our pets then happens due to the fact that we consider them almost as "humans" but at the same time exactly because they do not actually perform like humans: "some people may greatly value the relationships with their pets because they supply them with the type of unconditional adoring relationship that has eluded them (and indeed most of us) when other human beings are involved" (ibid.). As a matter of fact, it is this unconditional and rewarding "non-humanness" of the pets the reason humans may prefer them. Humans bestow upon their non-human companions a manipulated

[3] Linked to that, the power of cute is a concept explored by Simon May in his homonymous book (2019).

or imagined "humanness" that borrows characteristics from a biologically designed or perceived "non-humanness."

If then attaching oneself to a non-human has nothing to do with the ontology of the non-human but with our perception of it, digital characters can equally trigger our attachment and care system, their non-humanness notwithstanding. Indeed, research has shown that human players get attached to virtual pets (Eachus 2001),[4] even though there are physical considerations that may impact the effect of the companionship (Chesney and Lawson 2007; Norouzi et al. 2020). This is a matter of degree and not of possibility anymore, or rather manner and not mode. Physical pets are already non-human so virtual pets do not possess a different ontology which would violate our mechanisms of attachment. We can get attached to non-humans in a virtual world in the same manner that we can get attached to non-humans in our physical world. This concerns our perception of them and not their ontology, and our perception does not differentiate between materialities. This is something I explore in much detail in chapter 10 through embodied perception and neuroscience. Digital characters can invite attachment and care from human players, albeit in a different way and intensity. This then brings us to the second question concerning the specifics of the digital character design. Once the threshold of potentiality has been overcome, the how and how much humans get attached to digital characters is dependent on the design of the characters as well as their environment's, or interface's, design.

This is not something that this thesis deals with in depth, however. Instead, it takes a few steps back again and poses an, arguably, more difficult question. For human players getting attached and caring for digital characters is one thing, but can they actually fall in love with them? Experiencing love with a digital character requires an additional potential that seemingly transcends fictionality's – and digitality's – capacities: it does not suffice that the player loves a character; this character has to love them back. Here, this small word that is the preposition "with" makes everything more complicated. One might have less difficulty to argue that human players fall *for* digital characters since this does not imply as much an active participation of the other party as falling in love *with* someone does. *For* is much more subject-oriented, it concerns our own personal experience. *With*, on the other hand, implies a collaborative process; it demands a sense of participation, of our acknowledging the subjectivity of the other as much as and in relation to our own. If we fall in love with someone, then that someone must fall in love with us; or at least be able to.

[4] So much so to the point that a Twitter account is dedicated to whether animals appearing in games can be petted or not, see @CanYouPetTheDog (n.d.).

How can this ever be? This is not a matter of unrequitedness, as is the case with another person that is not interested in our romantic feelings towards them. This is a matter of ontology and inability: a fictional and/or digital character cannot love us because they cannot acknowledge us. They are perceived as intentional beings when actually they are not. They are scripted behaviour designed to execute certain commands in certain pre-configured contexts. Similar to how our pets have evolved, digital characters are created to manipulate our emotions. Clementine is designed in such a way as to make the player feel protective over her. Yet while this non-humanness, as argued before, works in favour of beings, physical and virtual alike, who are in need of our protection, it seems to be working against the experience of romantic love. In romantic love we have to become the object of love, attachment, and affection as much as we are the subject. It must be a shared experience of equality.

In this regard, I argue that human players most definitely do not fall in love with computer-generated characters. Even if a human player has the inclination to, their love can never be realised into an actual feeling since it cannot be reciprocated. Yet there are still feelings involved as the following autoethnographic experience shows. In the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare 2007-2012), I pursued a romantic relationship with a Non-Playable Character, NPC, Thane Krios. I chose him out of a number of available romantic interests and he reciprocated my feelings. Yet our love story was fictional. Thane did not truly reciprocate my feelings because he was not aware of them; as a matter of fact, he was not aware of me, as a person, either. As a computer-controlled object, he manifested specific commands after I had activated his appropriate responses through a dialogue tree. After all, what were "my feelings" exactly? I found his appearance attractive and his personal history engaging. I also liked the sound of his voice. But did I really know him? I could not ask him all the questions I wanted, I could only talk to him by picking pre-defined choices. I could not touch him, smell him, tease him, and make him laugh, or even anger him to see how he reacted. He was nothing more than a moving image and an audio-file of a voice actor.

Yet he still managed to win my attention and affect my gameplay. I would often visit him in his room in the spacecraft we both lived in to just stand for a few moments beside him and gaze at the stars through the window. I could not have any other meaningful interaction with him because I had exhausted all the available dialogue options the game allowed me in my engagement with him. This was the only way I found to be intimate with him. Later in the game, I made a poor choice which resulted in his narrative death. I was crestfallen. I immediately loaded a previous save and played the whole mission from the start. I did not care that I had to spend time replaying parts of the game I had already experienced. I could not imagine finishing the game without Thane by my

side. In the third and final game of the series, Thane had fallen seriously ill and died in the capital's hospital. His last words were a prayer for me, his Siha (his term of endearment for me). I cried when Thane died. My avatar did not, but I did.

As the above example shows, even if this experience is not love, there are feelings involved. These feelings, and this experience, are then in need of – if not a new name – at least a definition that serves to distinguish them. This is especially true because not all games are able to afford such feelings to all players. As a matter of fact, the same game may not afford these feelings to the same player when other characters are concerned. In the first *Mass Effect* game (BioWare 2007), before Thane appeared in my life in the second instalment of the series, I romanced another NPC, Kaidan Alenko. He was not bad looking and we were both in the military so we had some things in common. Our relationship, however, was very lacklustre. I felt Kaidan was boring, to say the least.[5] At one point in the game, I had to make the choice of saving either Kaidan or another character. I saved him not because I was interested in him but because I wanted the other character – whom I found racist and xenophobic – to die. Kaidan and I were nominally lovers, yet our relationship did not affect my feelings or my gameplay. This is why I declined his advances later in the game and also in the third game after my true love, Thane, died.

So the way love is portrayed and experienced in a game affects our impression of the game and our in-game actions as a whole. For this reason, it is important to examine the feelings developed by the players, even if there are not love proper. This contributes to our better understanding not only of player experience but of what love is as an experience in general. Daniella Gáti in "Playing with Plants, Loving Computers: Queer Playfulness beyond the Human" (2021) discusses how amorous playing with non-humans can be a way for us to question our subjectivity and human-centeredness. Attaching our desire to an object that cannot reciprocate is a valid way to transgress goal-oriented desire. We learn desire and love without the demand or requirement to receive something in return, a design mechanic that most games that include romance follow; a fact documented also in this thesis, especially in chapters one and two.

While I agree that games include this potential, and is a facet of love in games that I explore in chapter nine, there are two things to consider first and which this thesis primarily addresses. Firstly, by saying that non-reciprocatory love is not goal-oriented it implies that reciprocatory love is goal-oriented; in other words that romantic love is preoccupied with "the assimilation of Otherness into

[5] Truly, he was such a tool.

the self" (p. 88) and this is why playfulness as described by Gáti is "an alternative mode of sociality founded on queer notions of love without mastery" (ibid.). In the thesis, I argue that this is not true, or rather that there are intricacies that need to be challenged before. Specifically, I argue that romantic love is preoccupied with "the assimilation of Otherness into the self" only in the hegemonic understanding of it. Indeed, romantic love has to be reciprocated and this is an end-state that relationships with non-humans are devoid of, as we learn in chapter four when I look at the biology of love and emotions. Yet it is not reciprocity in and of itself that makes romantic love goal-oriented, but the digitality we try to attribute to it.

I understand digitality in terms of Tomkins' affect theory (2008). As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank tell us (1995), Tomkins has argued that feelings get activated in a digital manner, as in you either have a sensation or not, like an on/off switch. Upon activation, however, the ways that this feeling becomes manifested and actualised concern an analogue process that can take many different forms depending on each person's particular and general situation. To connect this with the above, it means that we recognise reciprocation as a two-way situation: our love is either reciprocated or not. If it is, then we expect our relationship to the other person to be a complete, blissful union that will provide us with the utmost satisfaction, a psychological dimension to love that is explored in chapter five. If it is not reciprocated, then we are in despair and agony, evoking divine and cosmic powers alike to intervene and make our beloved want us (back), as witnessed in various literary examples of love documented in chapter three.

This is because we are conditioned to anticipate love as the bearer of meaning and fulfilment to our existence, a concept discussed in chapter six by means of Berlant's critical theory and Foucault's biopolitics. This is the part of romantic love that makes it goal-oriented and a win or lose scenario. But love is not like that to begin with. Love is analogue. It is a spectrum of possibilities and it operates oscillating between negative dialectics, as the term by Adorno (2003). It can take many forms, it encompasses many experiences, many perceptions. It is communication and dialogue and accepting that the other cannot be assimilated; that they will always remain distinct and this is why we love them. We love them not because they cannot reciprocate but because they can and they are free to do it in the manner they understand and which will for ever elude us; an aspect of love which is explained in chapter ten using existentialism and phenomenology.

While digital games may appear to force digitality on love due to their medium specificity, and thus strip it from authenticity, love in the popular and dominant paradigm is already infused with digitality as explained above; or at least the promise of digitality since actual love does not work

like that. In this manner, I argue that since we are conditioned to perceive love already as digital, then digital games are the prime medium to offer this manipulated version of it: a love that is an end-state of reciprocation and satisfaction. So before asking of games to do something that no other medium is required to do, namely afford reciprocation to their human players, should we not first see if they can do what other media can do: as in include love as representation and not an actual experience? Before condemning this representation of reciprocation as a fictitious narrative of self-absorption and narcissism, as rightfully criticized by Gáti above and by other theorists whose work I visit throughout the thesis, should we not first understand where its need derives from? Should we simply penalise the desires of those who want to be Cinderellas and Sir Lancelots? Or simply accept that games cannot do justice to this desire in the first place?

The thesis addresses these questions first. As aforementioned, games are able to offer these desires to their players because these desires are already manipulated to respond to digitality and codification, a matter which is analysed in chapter two. In actuality, I argue that this is the most crucial potential of games as critical texts. Indeed, "games that invite a queer playfulness that makes possible the dream of loving relationships between humans and nonhumans without assimilating Otherness into frameworks of the known" (Gáti 2021, p. 90) are important and valid, and I offer such an example in chapter seven when I analyse *Doki Doki Literature Club* (Team Salvato 2017) employing affect theory. Yet, as I argue in chapter six, games are most successful at deconstructing the warped understanding of love as the promise of reciprocity exactly when they offer it. It is when humans cannot but experience love's constructed digitality that they recognise its limitations and the dissatisfaction that it entails.

Games can afford love as a codified representation thereof, what I call in this thesis romance. They may not be able to afford love, because it demands agents that can reciprocate it, but they can afford romance because romance is a constructed representation of love. While digital games as a medium still entail the potential to offer love, if certain technological limitations are overcome, and love as free-form playfulness as discussed above, they can also offer love as fantasy. Games have been rightly criticised for perpetuating problematic and sexist stereotypes when it comes to love, and this is something I address in various parts of my thesis, specifically in chapter nine. Nonetheless, this is a matter of style and design so it can be improved. However, fixing problematic elements of fantasy and uprooting the need for it, even if in itself is problematic, are not equal challenges and therefore they demand different approaches.

The romance mechanics in games are important for a successful representation of it, and in chapter eight I propose the player involvement model as a medium-specific tool to analyse them. At the same time, the thesis covers in detail this second issue: namely the ability of games to uproot our need for love as fantasy. Understandably, this cannot be the result of our engagement with a single medium and I do not argue that. Instead, I contend that games, by exhibiting and accentuating this fantasy's fictionality, bare its pretence and in this way they can help us reject it. In games, we do not imagine anymore what it would feel like to have love as "a stability of desire", as Berlant sees it in chapter six. We actually feel it. In this, we can experience what this fantasy entails and realise that it does not compare; it is not love because love is devoid of any stability. We feel love because we are uncertain of the outcome, as explained in chapter six. When we are sure then we cannot love. We can have other feelings of pleasure, elation, satisfaction, but not love.

This does not efface the importance of romance as a valid emotional plot, a concept I cover in chapter four. As with our pets, sometimes we want to be emotionally manipulated; it is an act of self-care and can have positive effects on our psychology, as shown in chapter seven when I reference the effect reading the romance has on its female audience. This is something that games can offer. Yet they can offer something more transgressive than that as well. Playing the romance helps with our understanding of its position to love, that the two are different, albeit connected experiences: one manipulated and controlled thus satisfactory, the other free and ambivalent thus powerful. In this way, games do not provide novel conceptualisations of love, for now, but instead allow us to live the hegemonic but learnt imagining of it and realise that it is not actually love. This does not by default lead to our refusing the romance. For various political, social, and personal reasons, we may still prefer, sometimes, the secure satisfaction of romance compared to love's bittersweet disposition. But at least we are more informed and conscious of our choice. In this way, the stability of romance becomes one of the possible outcomes and stops being the hegemonic paradigm, while by playing it we are able to (re)learn what love is.

Research Questions

To distil the above, my research questions can be summarised as follows:

> Do human players fall in love with computer-generated characters?
>
> How is this possible?
>
> Are these feelings actually love or a separate experience?
>
> What is an appropriate methodological tool to analyse how love is afforded in games?

Gaps in Research

To examine the player's feelings in relation to love I had to take a deep dive into theories of love. In that, I faced a significant challenge quite early on. While there is considerable literature concerning love as a matter of representation, and a decent amount of research pertaining to love as a physiological experience, there was very little to no existing material that combined both. Digital games contain the medium-specific affordance of including love as a represented experience. Unlike other media, digital games are lived; executed by the player at the time of playing. At the same time, they are still designed experiences consisting of algorithmic processes, fictional settings, representation, and narrative. In this sense, while in a book or a movie, a love story is a representation of an experience, in digital games it is the experience of a representation. As such, the theoretical tools readily available could not be applied to games as they were; they required lots of adjusting, adapting, combining, and extrapolating to be considered useful in understanding what players feel when they experience a representation of love in a digital game.

While there has been some research in relation to love and games, the topic is fairly underdeveloped and unexplored. At the start of my PhD, there were two main volumes dedicated to the subject: *Game Love: Essays on Play and Affection* edited by Jessica Enevold and Esther MacCallum-Stewart published in 2015 and *Digital Love: Romance and Sexuality in Games* edited by Heidi McDonald and published in 2017. While I was conducting my research, a third volume about love came out, *Love and Electronic Affection: A Design Primer* edited by Lindsay Grace, which I contributed to. Given that all three of these books are edited volumes, they approach the subject in breadth rather than in depth. Of course, there are some additional chapters and papers in other publications which I reference throughout my thesis as useful inspirations and starting points. That being said, they do not concern themselves specifically with the question whether the feelings that the players experience while playing a game are love. Even if they take a stance, they do not do so by paying attention or contextualising in their approach the discrepancy between love as experience and love as representation, which is the leitmotif of this thesis.

As already discussed in the previous section, I understand love as representation a matter of romance, a coded and designed realisation of love that is. Romance has different affordances and involves different emotional reactions compared to love. While in other media romance is imagined or perceived, in games it is lived due to the specificities of the medium. This, however, does not stop it from being a representation. This is an essential demarcation that I argue should be taken into account when analysing love in games. When not, it may result in false assumptions and conclusions, most notably that digital games cannot afford love. Truly they cannot, but they do afford romance and this is a crucial difference that has gone unnoticed until now.

A similar difficulty arose in connection to the second part of my research: mainly mapping those aspects of the player experience that affect the feelings of love that players may develop. Again the literature was scarce and the accounts already published were limited in scope. Most importantly, most articles focused on all the ways that digital games cannot afford love criticising, rightly so, maladies of the medium with regard to perpetuating sexist stereotypes. There were a few that provided suggestions for overcoming these obstacles that games face when it comes to love, yet again they did not clearly differentiate between love as a matter of representation and as a matter of experience. This resulted in analyses and recommendations that, albeit noteworthy, lacked the crispness and viscerality I was aiming for. I concluded that what was needed was a tool that would enable me to touch upon the challenge of love by doing two things at once: keeping representation and experience distinct while allowing them to intermingle in this medium-specific capacity of theirs.

Methodology

In this thesis, I employ different epistemological methods. For the part concerning the theory of love, I implement multidisciplinary critical analysis and deconstructionism. I borrow elements from different disciplines, combine them, and adapt them to be able to apply them to games. The two main axes of my research are, as shown above, love as representation and love as experience. For the former, I turn to literary and media theory in the works of Paz, Berlant, Campbell, Girard, and others. For the latter, I delve into philosophy, as in Foucault, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty; biology, most notably presented by Helen Fischer's work on the physiology of love; and psychology, building predominantly on Ekman's theory of emotions, Tennov's concept of limerence, and Bowlby and Ainsworth's attachment theory.

I divide my corpora into groups and dedicate each chapter to each one of them: representation, biology, psychology, and politics. I maintain a dialectical relation among the different theorists throughout the thesis to make it easier for the reader to follow my overarching standpoint. In most chapters, I include game examples, which help me demonstrate the need for the theory chosen. The games I use do not necessarily constitute unique instances of game love or even the most successful examples of it. Instead, they are quite versatile – ranging from triple A games to double A games, indie games, and art projects. Their applicability lies in their implementation of love in a manner that allows me to showcase the specific aspect of love as experience and/or representation that I am preoccupied with in each case.

In my game analyses, I turn to autoethnography to address aspects of player experience. This methodology works exceptionally well with critical theory as a form of self-assessment and critical reflection within established structures. It also brings to the forefront the value of affect theory as a valid epistemological tool for game studies, which I argue in favour of in chapter seven. Autoethnography might be criticized for being limited, even perhaps performing a self-fulfilling prophecy: I had this impression while playing and I support it by how I felt while I was playing. Jenny Sundén asks a similar question when considering affect and personal involvement as a methodological tool for game studies: "Does involvement per se make you less critical? Is admitting how we, as researchers, are affected by (and in turn affect) what we study somehow incommensurable with criticality? Or, could it be that such recognition would make for a richer, more interesting analysis?" (2010, p. 48). She argues that any critical framework of representation "needs to be stretched out to include a discussion of what happens to the culture and politics of images in games as played," eventually concluding that "a critical approach to games also needs to consider how games are felt – through the bodies of (other) players as well as throughout the body of the player or researcher herself" (p. 55). Using one's own experience when playing is imperative when one examines feeling, desire, and emotion in games. At the same time, my autoethnographic records are supplemented and enriched by recounts by other game theorists, who, in turn, use autoethnography to reach their own conclusions, for example Olli Leino in chapter 10, positioning my argument within the intertextual dialogue of playing as embodied.

In the part of the thesis that concerns love in games *per se*, namely how games can afford love in this singularity of a represented experience, I employ a methodological tool that is specifically designed to analyse game experience, the player involvement model. The player involvement model, being game-specific, enables the analysis of player experience in its multifacetedness by taking into consideration the multifarious way in which a player engages with a game. For this, I use the model to exemplify game instances that can afford the feelings of love as an experience of a representation by using specific game examples. I specifically use the model to approach love as a shared experience both at macro-involvement level, as a medium practice that is, and at micro-involvement level, by focusing on the attributes of the computer agents the player interacts with.

In this vein, I reach my conclusion regarding the experience of love as representation in games. I argue that while games can afford the representation of love, the feelings the player experiences are not love since they come into contact with agents that cannot love them back. In this, games show the limitations of love not only within the medium but outside the medium; in other representations of love and the love canon in general. Digital games exemplify the problematisation

around love's discourse even if they do not relexicalise love. Instead, they invite us to rethink what it means to lexicalise love in the first place, and to reflect on how this practice affects our own experience of falling in love. For this reason, games constitute the appropriate critical texts to theorise the experience of love as no other medium before them.

Chapter Structure

In a multidisciplinary thesis like this one, chapter structure can take on many different forms depending on the effect one wants to create. The following layout is chosen because it shows most intuitively how the two major topics of my thesis, love as experience and love as representation, intertwine.

In chapter one, *Love in Games*, I divide love in games into four different categories: love between NPCs, love as a game, love between the player and an NPC, and love between players. My categorisation is descriptive and non-exhaustive. My aim is to contextualise my thesis by framing the game content that I will be addressing: game love. In this first chapter, I only look at game content rather than player experience as such. Yet issues already arise, as shown in the last part of this chapter titled *Love Beyond Categories*. As such, it becomes already evident that love in games is a contentious topic for two main reasons: one, games as playable artefacts cannot be successfully examined without taking their playability and thus the player into consideration; two, love in itself is a challenging experience because it is multifaceted and deeply personal. Having established the context of my thesis and the two main axes that my research addresses, love as experience and love as representation in games, I then proceed to the following chapters for a closer analysis of the topic.

In chapter two, *The Love Challenge*, I further explore the challenge associated with love in games posed by their inability to force feelings of love on their players. This is an important issue because, unlike other media, in games the player must be invested to want to pursue the romance; simply witnessing a love story unfold is not enough. Expanding on this, I refine the distinction between the experience of love and the experience of the representation of love in games. In particular, I argue that games can afford the experience of the representation of love, which is a separate feeling akin to pleasure and satisfaction, which I recognise as romance. To showcase this, I turn to the origins of romance: a love story between a noble lady and the gallant knight who fights to save her. In romances, love was shown as a certain experience of desire which is refined into something honourable, elegant, and civilised through personal suffering and sacrifice. As such, romantic love was the product of a specific set of chivalrous rules. This experience was witnessed more in the

heroic protagonists of literature rather than in real life. Or, as Huizinga claims, people turned to sports, games, and tournaments to experience this formulaic understanding of love. Hence, I argue that digital games that uphold this tradition are able to offer to their players the experience of romantic love because they provide challenges to the fulfilment of one's desire. In that regard, games constitute successful experiences of a representation of love.

The question that follows is why we, and games, should persist in an understanding of love that may seem outdated, as observed in the previous chapter. Romantic love as the historical concept of codified fulfilment of desire was the result of a specific time and period almost a millennium old. I answer this question in chapter three with the appropriate title, *The Persistence of Romance*. I show that romantic love is a cultural universal, meaning that it is included in all known human cultures from antiquity to today, the world over. I also exhibit how romantic love is not a cultural product in vacuum. On the contrary, I trace a genealogy of romantic love as the poetics of the experience of love. I portray a lineage of love as representation in order to argue that love has always been a subject of discourse and as such codification. Therefore, when games codify love they do not perform a sacrilegious act nor do they follow an obsolete conceptualisation of love. Instead, in the concept of romantic love we can witness a universal human effort to stabilise and formalise love so as to make it more palpable but also bestow upon it a religious, transcendent quality as an escape from life's meaninglessness and banality.

In the next chapter, chapter four, *The Evolution of Romantic Love*, I analyse why love is a human universal, namely an inherent trait of humans as a species. This means that romantic love is the expression of an actual human experience. Evolutionary psychologists, biologists, and neurologists have examined the physiology of humans and humanoids and have concluded that love is a separate system in the human brain that is part of our evolution as species. It involves the activation of certain hormones and amino acids that constitute the biological response to our falling in love. More than that, it is one of the core systems that enable our reproduction and thus our sustainability as species. At the same time, I show how biology alone does not suffice to explain the complexity that love is as an experience. I argue that romantic love, despite being a universal human trait, still eludes us in its expression and comprehension. It is influenced by our psychological and social capacity as humans. This is why, love is never merely experienced but experienced also through its representation, be it utterance, mediation, or performance. Exactly because love is more than a mere biological feeling, its experience influences its depiction but at the same time, its depiction influences its experience in turn. In this chapter, the relations between the aspects of love as biology, psychology, and representation are analysed, juxtaposed, and contextualised.

Chapter five concerns the question: *What's Love Got to do with it?* In the chapter, I explore further the argument that romance, unlike love, is a constructed experience of emotion based on representation, codification, and discourse. In particular, I argue that the romance canon is predominantly preoccupied with stories that represent a pathological love: a love which consumes the person like an almighty power and the salvation from which is either death or the constant presence of the beloved. I show this by using the story of an NPC from the game *Nier: Automata*, Simone Beauvoir. Simone is a large machine form that has fallen in love with another machine form. Her unrequited love has driven her to despair but only because she learnt to love, or imitate love, based on the love stories she found in the public archive. Using psychoanalytic theory and building on previous works by Joseph Campbell, Lauren Berlant, Mary Ann Doane, René Girard, Michel Foucault and others, I show how romantic love has taken on the role of a transgressive power similar to that of an almighty god that will save the person from their infantile trauma of separation and fragmentation. Indeed, since love is unpredictable and complex, as we see in the previous chapter, romance offers a pleasurable alternative that has the potential to ostracise love because it can be regulated.

Up to this point, romantic love has been shown as a cultivated remedy to a psychological trauma: that of infantile separation and [dis]possession of subjectivity as fragmented. In this chapter, using critical theory through the works of Berlant and Foucault, I show how transforming romance into the dominant discourse is not only a matter of ethics but, primarily, of politics, *Love Politics* in particular. I analyse how the concept of love in the popular paradigm has been politicised as a fabricated promise of stability. Love has become a fantasy with no actual bearing or possibility of realisation. It is only in the designed premises of fiction rather than in real life that romantic love can provide the satisfaction it advertises since it is a construct in itself. As such, I argue that games can implement and execute this experience of love since they constitute the prime examples of fantasy enactments. More than this: because they accentuate the paradigm's fictionality, they can be a means for its dismissal. In games, the player can experience romance's promise and realise that it is actually subpar and/or it does not compare to our actual falling in love. As a result, experiencing romance in a digital game shows the limitations of its applicability.

In chapter seven, *Love's Pleasure*, I focus on the appropriate methodological means to analyse love in games with regard to its medium specificity as both experience and representation. I turn to Barthesian semiotics and the concept of textual pleasure. I show this concept's binary nature by building on feminist deconstruction. I then show the limitations in applying textual semiotics to games. I instead position affect theory as the most appropriate way for examining love in games. I

show this through a close-reading of a dating-sim game, *Doki-Doki Literature Club* by means of affect theory. I argue that love in games as both experience and representation cannot be appropriately analysed by means of textual semiotics alone and show the need for a medium-appropriate methodological tool.

As argued above, love in games becomes a lived experience and as such it requires a methodological framework that takes into consideration this singularity of games. For that, I employ in chapter eight, the *Love Involvement* chapter, the player involvement model by Gordon Calleja. Through this, I show that games can afford love by involving the player in various aspects and not strictly through their predefined design and narrative. First I provide a comprehensive overview of what the model is and what it entails and then I go into a more thorough analysis of how love is to be examined under this model. I show how the model's affective involvement is actually the basis for its rationale. I also argue that the most important factor for the experience of love in games is shared involvement: the ability of games to provide agents the player can fall in love with. This facet of games is analysed in the next two chapters in its macro-involvement and micro-involvement attributes respectively.

Having established and justified an appropriate methodological tool, in this chapter titled *Love Play Love*, I look at the interplay between game and play and love and romance. I consider this a matter of macro-involvement with games as medium and games that include romance in particular. I show how our pre-conceived notions regarding romance, which have already been discussed in the previous chapters, affect the representation of love in games and our experience thereof; specifically in how we conceptualise the agents we share love as an experience with. This aspect of love in games has been heavily criticised by theorists. Their criticism concerns love as a mechanistic implementation in games and the manner in which this is connected with sexist and problematic practices inside and outside games. At the same time, I argue that because love is different from romance, games can also afford love in a free-form experience of playing. I make this connection using theory of play in the writings of Huizinga and Caillois and the concept of production of space by Henri Lefebvre. By understanding digital games as social spaces of communication between the player and the machine, games can invite many spatial practices that can surpass and transgress the canon despite the confinements of their materiality. As such, they can also invite the experience of love in its dynamicity before and beyond codification, narrative, and discourse.

The tenth and final chapter, *In the Mood for Love*, focuses on shared involvement at micro-level, namely within the actual act of playing a game. I argue that for a game to successfully afford the experience of love there are two main challenges that need to be addressed by the game system with regard to the agents the human player interacts romantically with: one being the embodiment of the NPCs and the other their intentionality. This means that the game should provide for NPCs that are to be perceived by the player as autonomous subjects with their own intentions and goals rather than passive bodies that cater to the player's agency. The argument is built upon embodied perception, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, and Sartre's existentialism. I finally argue that this challenge can eventually be overcome by artificially generated agents rather than fictional designed characters.

What This Thesis Is Not

Before moving on to the text proper, I would like to make four important disclaimers. Firstly, in this thesis my aim is not to trace a poetics of love in games. While this would be immensely interesting and my thesis could, potentially, have taken this form, I consciously refrain from going into detail about how love is represented as an experience in games in a formalist sense. The reason for this is that it is a vast topic requiring more dedicated space to do it justice. Indeed, while I was initially tempted to do this, I quickly realised that there are still issues to be discussed before we approach typologies: most important is the fact that games as an ergodic medium defy the immediate application of poetics, as this has been conceptualised in literature and other media. Games demand a different methodology that takes into consideration the duality of love both as experience and representation.

Secondly, my research focuses solely on single-player games. While I understand how important and interesting the topic of love in multiplayer games is, and I touch upon it briefly in my first chapter, I remain focused on the experience of love in games within the context of human-computer interaction. Therefore, I am interested in games, in which human players interact and potentially fall in love with computer-generated characters. Covering love in both single-player and multiplayer games would require much more time and space. Indeed, I would argue that love in multiplayer games should be approached differently. While in single-player games the challenge lies within convincing the human player of the romance, in multiplayer games the game becomes a social space for humans to fall in love. Understandably, the affordances of the medium and the practice of playing affect the way in which people fall in love and this is a fascinating topic of research. Nonetheless, it is quite different from the research questions I am concerned with here.

Thirdly, I would like to clarify that my approach to love refers to romantic love only, as in love between partners and lovers. I do not tackle issues of other instances of love, as in parental love, love for pets and objects, friendship etc. Every time I mention love in this thesis, it is in its capacity as romantic love, either as experience and/or as representation. It may happen that romantic love as described in this thesis bears similarities with other types of love, in particular when concepts of care and attachment, or religious beliefs are discussed. While I acknowledge this, I concern myself with these types of love only as dimensions, facets, and/or aspects of the experience of romantic love.

Finally, this thesis does not treat in detail the topic of sex in games. While sex is closely connected to love – in chapter four we learn that love is a mechanism evolved for the fitness of our reproduction – they should not be considered interchangeable. Games cannot offer reciprocatory sex but arguing that it is because of this that they cannot offer love is fallacious and also problematic and non-inclusive. For one, such an approach dismisses the experience of asexual but romantic people who do not attribute to sex an imperative role in their romantic relationships. Moreover, it is an able-bodied attitude that regards ableism as the only valid, appropriate, and meaningful experience and existence. Lastly, per my main argument, games do not afford love but romance. Romance does not necessitate the sexual act but only the promise thereof; something that games are able to offer.

Chapter 1

Love in Games

We love the things we love for what they are.
Robert Frost

When I played *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009), I had initially chosen to play as an asexual and aromantic character. I knew it is a game famous for its romantic content and I purposely wanted to see if I could remain unaffected by it, attempting the clinical gaze of a games scholar.[6] Soon, I realised I had to at least pretend that I was interested in the characters, all of them for that matter, because their higher approval gave me in-game strategic benefits: it increased their stats and unlocked special abilities. Despite having maximised their approval, I was still emotionally detached, even though I had grown used to their being around, fighting alongside them.

Then, at one point, it happened all of a sudden; we were about to go into the Fade, the game's magic realm of dreams, to fight demons. I accidentally clicked on Alistair, a fellow Grey Warden NPC. He surprised me by offering me a rose saying that it reminded him of me: how something so beautiful could grow into a place of such despair. It melted my heart. The happenstance of the scene affected me far beyond the prescipted design of the game. The exchange occurred right before battle, in a difficult part of the game that had me extrapolate these few lines of dialogue to a whole full-fledged love story. Alistair, understandably afraid of the approaching fight in case he died and did not have another opportunity, had to profess his love to me; a delicate and fragile feeling that still persevered in the most unfavourable of circumstances.

Against my better judgement, I pursued a romantic relationship with Alistair. The imprudence of my decision became all the more evident toward the end of the game. Our mission was to kill the Archdemon, the final boss. Only very late in the game did we learn that to do so a Grey Warden had to be sacrificed. I remember feeling very conflicted about my choice because my avatar and Alistair were the only two Grey Wardens left; in other words one of us had to die. I had to choose between my avatar, which I had designed myself and had spent over sixty hours with, and my lover, who had accompanied me throughout the game and whom I had grown overly attached to. There

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[6] A preconception, which is in itself challenged in the thesis as we go along. In this, I correlate with Jenny Sundén (2010) who in discussing how games should be examined and analysed argues for a sensational involvement with the game text in terms of affect theory. Games, she contends, have to be experienced.

was another choice. I could ask Alistair to perform a sex ritual with another NPC, which was the only way to spare us both. Gameplay-wise this would not make a difference, because it would affect the story of the game after its ludic end. Narrative-wise, however, it inflicted great agony on me: I could not bear the thought of sharing Alistair.

I knew then and there I would sacrifice myself for him – it was simply impossible for me to kill him. It was, after all, the fitting resolution to our epic love story. As all great heroes, I would give my life for something greater while my lover would lament my loss for the remainder of his existence. So in the final battle, I chose to leave him behind and take the last blow myself. Soon thereafter, my illusion was shattered. I suppose the indications were already there but I refused to see them. During our last goodbye, I was expecting some tragic scene: Alistair begging me not to go and trying to convince me to let him die in my stead. I would profusely refuse reassuring him as to my love and asking him to never stop fighting for our cause. We could even recite in unison the Grey Warden maxim: *In Peace, Vigilance. In War, Victory. In Death, Sacrifice*.

His demeanour, however, left a lot to be desired. He simply said: “I guess this is goodbye” and that was it. No tear-filled last exchanges of love, not even a hug. My dog companion looked sadder to see me go: by comparison it actually seemed crestfallen. I had a second thought to let Alistair die then, but I was committed to my narrative. Alas, things only took a turn for the worse. I had died as a hero, but Alistair, for whom I had sacrificed myself, did not even come to my funeral. The reality hit me hard. The carefully designed love story that the game had offered me in the span of dozens of hours had crumbled in just a few seconds; by a possible outcome that the designers had perhaps not anticipated or did not care to address.

In the *Dragon Age* sequels, my love story with Alistair continued to deteriorate. During his short appearance in the second instalment, he glitched and referred to me as an old male friend, while in the third game, he did not mention me at all. That sealed his fate. When the time came where I had to choose again to save him or another NPC, Hawke whom you played as in the second game, I did not hesitate in the least. I let him die with an odd satisfaction; he had it coming after all. The above reaction may seem excessive to someone who has not played the game. Yet, perusing the Internet, I discovered that my experience was no exception. People were complaining about Alistair’s romance in equal terms, while others who had made other choices throughout the games were more content.

These personal game histories can initiate fruitful discussions and lead to many interesting observations. What is of particular interest in the current thesis is the following: the feelings inspired to the players for an NPC that are so strong as to affect their game choices, their gameplay, and their game experience as a whole. Indeed, games offer a multitude of experiences. They can make players angry, afraid, agitated, stressed, happy, and sad. They can make them sit at the edge of their seat with tension, press buttons hard and exclaim obscenities during a particularly hard challenge, fill their eyes with tears when a beloved character dies, and they can make them fall in love. Or is this taking it too far? Can a game actually cultivate feelings of romantic love to its players? Do players feel anything akin to love while playing? If they do, is this really love in the same way we understand it in our physical world or is it a different experience altogether, which we may call love for lack of a better or epistemologically more appropriate word?

Before answering these questions, it is important to first discern to which particular instances one refers when considering love in games. In the current chapter, I divide the experience of love in games into four categories concerning the agents of romantic love. These categories are as follows: a) love between NPCs, b) love as the subject matter of the game, c) love human players feel for NPCs, and d) love between human players in the context of a game. These categories are more descriptive than exhaustive and they are not mutually exclusive; i.e. a game may offer more than one, if not all, of the experiences of love of each group, while an experience of love can simultaneously fall under more than one category. Indeed, as my last section before the conclusion shows, love in games cannot be comfortably categorised. It constitutes a facet of player experience and is, therefore, a dynamic process.

1.1. Love between NPCs

This category covers games, in which the player engages with a love story as a spectator rather than a protagonist. In other words, the love story is between third agents inside the game that are clearly distinct from the player's position inside the game. In such cases, there are two further delineations: the player's actions may actively affect the progress of the love story or the love story happens in the background simultaneously to the player's engagement with the game. The game *don't take it personally, babe, it just ain't your story* (Love Conquers All Games 2011) by Christine Love is one such example. In the game, the player assumes the role of a high school teacher, who spies upon his students' romantic escapades via social platforms. The teacher is only minimally able to affect the progression of the students' love stories through dialogue choices. As the title of the game

informs us it is not so much a love story about the player; rather the player is an observer – if not an outright voyeur – of the love life of others.[7]

To the Moon (Freebird Games 2011) is another game, in which the player has no control over the romance. The player controls two scientists, who manipulate the memories of a dying man in order to fulfil his last wish. The love story lies in the man's past and the player uncovers it piece by piece in reverse chronological order without having any choice in the matter. A similar gameplay is featured in *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013). The player, as 21-year-old Katie, returns home after a trip overseas only to find it completely deserted. They then need to explore various locations in the house and uncover hints of where Katie's parents and younger sister have disappeared to. As the game progresses, a love story is revealed to the player, which does not revolve around them. Their role matches instead that of an investigator who builds together the missing parts of a narrative puzzle. The puzzle refers to a love story that has already taken place far removed from the player's actions.

This type of love in games can take many forms. In the game *Syberia* (Microïds 2002) there is a point in which the player, who plays as an American lawyer by the name Kate Walker, comes upon an industrial complex. There they meet the director, who has turned the whole complex to a performance stage. He is infatuated with an old opera singer, Helena Romanski, and asks the player to convince her to come and sing for him. The player has to visit a nearby spa centre, where Helena spends her retirement years, and bring her back to the industrial complex to perform for the director. In this sense, the player actively participates in the story without being any of the concerned partners. One may comment that the story between the director and Helena is not a love story per se. Nonetheless, this game experience still opens up discussions about what love is, love's different manifestations, and whether and how love can be distinguished from infatuation, which is arguably the leitmotif of the whole game.

1.2. Love as Game

Indeed, there are games, which do not include a romance between characters as such but rather represent love as an experience in itself and the different directions it can go. In Rod Humble's *Marriage* (2010), the player controls two squares, one blue and one pink. The point of the game is to prevent the squares from going transparent or overcoming each other in size. For the pink square this is done by having the squares touch lightly – or kiss in the parlance of the game, while the blue

[7] The game does involve a subplot that concerns the romance between the teacher and a student but it is a minor point.

square needs to touch upon circles that float around them, which represent extra-marital activities and relationships. According to the designer's statement, in *Marriage* the player takes on the agency of love itself "trying to make the system of the marriage work."

Following on Humble's game, Brett Douville came up with *My Divorce* (2010). The game applies similar game mechanics and visuals to address the time after a marriage ends and how this impacts the concerned individuals; primarily the spouses and secondarily the children if there are any. As Douville explains, his idea was for a game that would enable people to explore the experience of their own divorce by manipulating the game's rules. In other words, the game does not so much tell a specific story but it rather simulates the experience of divorce in the same manner its predecessor simulates that of marriage.[8]

Another example is *Will Love Tear Us Apart?* (Mighty Box Games 2013). According to the game's description, the players experience the haunting process of a break-up and how traumatising it can be. The game is inspired by the Joy Division song *Love Will Tear Us Apart* (1980) and it uses verses of the song to set up the premise and tone. It begins with positing the question to the player of whether love will snare, heal, or tear them apart. The player has to manipulate their way through claustrophobic spaces that correspond to one's psychological states while trying to save a dying relationship. As the game concludes, love can only heal after the player relinquishes all effort and accepts the futility of the situation, namely letting go and moving forward.

1.3. Love for an NPC

Under this category, we find games, in which players develop romantic relationships with NPCs. The experiences of love in those games can be vast. In some games, the player cannot choose the romance. It happens in cutscenes or after the end of the game and the player has no agency over its progress. In *Crash Bandicoot* (Naughty Dog 1996), the player assumes the role of Crash, a bandicoot, who manages to escape from the laboratory of Doctor Neo Cortex. Their mission is then to go save Tawna, a female bandicoot, from his evil hands. The game shares this information with the player in the initial cutscene and allows no interaction with Tawna. In actuality, the romance is hinted at rather than being explicitly stated. After the game finishes and the player has defeated

[8] Having said that, it needs to be noted that no matter the level of abstraction both games still constitute a representation of their designers' understanding of their themes. The games follow traditional conventions of how love and marriage works. For example, in Humble's game the square mechanics reflect the idea that the man, the blue square, needs to sustain extra-marital connections so as to survive in the marriage, whereas the woman, the pink square, demands affection and attention from the man. As such the experience of love each game affords is constructed in terms of its designer's take on the concept.

Cortex as the final boss, they watch another cutscene in which Crash and Tawna leave together on an airship in their happily ever after.

In some other games, the development of the romance is more explicit, albeit still in cutscenes. In *Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness* (Core Design 2003), Lara Croft meets Kurtis Trent, her companion for the game, for the first time in the level "Galleries under Siege," almost half-way through the game. In previous cutscenes, Kurtis is seen following Lara, but it is the first time they actually interact. Their relationship is portrayed adversarial at the start since Kurtis startles Lara by throwing his Chirugai blade at her. After that, he ambushes her and threatens her with a gun so as to steal her possessions. At the same time, the scene betrays an evident attraction between the two. This feeling is facilitated by the music complemented by a rhythmic beat, which corresponds to the sound of an increased heart rate.[9]

In addition to that, the cinematography of the cutscene leaves no space for misinterpretation. Kurtis physically touches Lara in an intimate way, stripping her of her belongings. He uses his weapon, a phallic symbol, to caress, jab, and poke her. Indeed, the choreography of their bodies resembles an erotic dance to the point of their almost kissing. However, the game never reaches this culmination. Later in the game, Lara and Kurtis cooperate to defeat the villain and after the final boss fight it is insinuated through a cutscene that Lara goes to find Kurtis; the fate of their relationship remains unknown as the screen fades to black.

In the aforementioned games, romance is separate from the gameplay itself. If it were completely removed nothing would change in the player's in-game actions. Crash would still collect apples and defeat adversaries by jumping on their head, while Lara would still jump over precipices and shoot at enemies. In other games, the romance may again develop in cutscenes but the gameplay is more intricately linked to its narrative progression. *Leisure Suit Larry* is a series of games, in which a 40-something-year-old man tries to find sex and romance. The whole setting of the games is attuned to Larry's efforts; his actions and the problems he needs to overcome are directly associated with his romantic life. For example, at a certain point in *Leisure Suit Larry: Reloaded* (N-Fusion Interactive 2013) Larry wants to consummate his marriage with his new wife, Fawn. Fawn asks him to set a romantic mood so the player has to solve the puzzle of how to achieve that by

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[9] It is interesting to note that in the game's unofficial novelisation (Milward 2012), Kurtis and Lara's initial meeting is described as a tender moment: "But then his hand was sliding lower - past my elbow, down to my wrist. More gently than taking a gift from a lover's hands, he eased the dangling gun from my grasp and let it clatter to the floor."

interacting with the various game objects and environments. After they succeed, the act of consummation itself happens in an animated sequence.

Other games cater more to the player's agency by having optional romances. In *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2019) and *Batman: The Telltale Series* (2016), for example, the player can choose if they want to have a romantic encounter with NPCs. Some games even provide more than one NPC for the player to pursue a relationship with. BioWare is famous for offering games with versatile romantic interests, as was discussed in the introduction: *Baldur's Gate*, *Dragon Age,* and *Mass Effect* series all feature different companions the player can romance. For example, in *Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware 2009) the player can have a romantic relationship with up to three different NPCs depending on the sex of their avatar: Alistair, Leliana, and Zevran for female avatars, and Morrigan, Leliana, and Zevran for male.

This is also common in most dating sims. Dating sims describe a genre of games, in which the player pursues a romantic relationship with different available NPCs. They are usually text-based and their main gameplay consists of the player making dialogue choices, which determine the ending of the game and with which NPC the player ends up. Some popular titles include *Clannad* (Key 2015), *Dream Daddy* (Game Grumps 2017), *Katawa Shoujo* (Four Leaf Studios 2012), and *Monster Prom* (Beautiful Glitch 2018). Lately, some applications, like Choice of Games and Episode Interactive, offer the possibility to their players to write their own stories using the provided authoring tools and share them with other players to play.

In terms of gameplay, those games are fairly similar. At the same time, the setting of each game and the available NPCs can vary greatly. This corresponds to the character traits of each available romantic interest but it can go beyond that in terms of representation. For example, in the game *Hatoful Boyfriend* (PigeoNation 2014) the player can date birds and in *Purrfect Date* (Bossa Studios 2017) cats. In *Australiove* (2016) by Castro and Singh, the game informs the player that they are in love with Australia, the country. In the game "you spend some time with Australia and decide if today is the day you finally admit your feelings." As it seems, games have no problem affording this level of abstraction and absurdity in their love experiences.

Another way one can position the love experience in a game is whether it affects the rest of the gameplay or not. In some games, the gameplay revolves around the experience of love and dating so almost everything the player does in the game has an effect on the romance. For example, in *Catherine* (Atlus 2011) the player assumes the role of Vincent Brooks, who is in a long-term

relationship with Katherine. One day he meets another girl, Catherine, whom he has a one-night stand with. Throughout the game, the player can make choices, which affect with whom of the two love options Vincent will end up. At the same time, the game includes puzzle-platformer sequences, which are represented as Vincent's nightmares. In them, Vincent needs to reach the top of pyramid-like structures by moving blocks and climbing on top of them until he is free.

Those levels thematically correspond to Vincent's inner struggle with handling his love life. Indicatively, there is a certain level called "The Child," which is reached after Katherine reveals to Vincent that she is pregnant. In the level, Vincent is being chased by a monstrous baby who is yelling "Daddy" at him. The baby functions as the boss of the level. If the player takes more time than allowed to move forward, the baby catches and kills him. In this, the game amalgamates its mechanics with its representation and narrative to create an experience of anxiety and fear over life choices pertaining to love, marriage, and maturity.

Another title in which theme and gameplay correspond is *Florence* (Mountains 2018). In the game, the player follows the eponymous heroine throughout her relationship with a guy named Krish. The game incorporates many interesting mechanics to translate the workings of a romantic relationship to gameplay. For example, the dialogue is not depicted as text choices. Instead, the player needs to solve jigsaw puzzles. This design gamifies the effort one commonly exerts when trying to communicate with another person and figure them out, especially at the beginning of a relationship. Progressively, the puzzles become easier because Florence knows Krish better so their communication flows much faster. When problems arise in their relationship, the puzzles become unsolvable, mirroring once more the lack of communication and the effect thereof.

On the other hand, in some games, the love experience affects the ludic choices of the player instead. In *Firebird* (Innerspace VR 2016) the player recreates the ballet *La Péri* (1912) by Paul Dukas. The player assumes the role of king Jskender who is trying to find the flower of immortality. After searching in all ends of the earth, he finally comes upon the temple of Ormuzd. There he finds the flower sitting on the breast of a Peri, a winged spirit in the form of an exquisitely beautiful woman. The player has to take the flower from the Peri in four dance acts and in the end, they have to choose between their own immortality and the Peri's eternal grace. Despite its brevity, the up-close VR experience of the game, or dance poem as it calls itself, resonates with the players and affects their decision. Having watched the Peri dance in the mesmerising elegance and flow of a professional dancer, being so close and yet out of reach, the player is emotionally charged and their

ludic choice is ultimately dependent on their feelings of this experience: playing a king who is seduced by a magical spirit.

In other games, love affects the gameplay in a more statistical manner. In the online game *Lady Popular* (XS Software 2009), a fashion simulator game, the player can choose their own girl avatar. One of the available actions is to go to clubs and meet boys. Each boy is accompanied by a small description and increases a particular category of the player's statistics, e.g. creativity or beauty. The player can flirt with the boy of their choice and immediately win him over as part of their inventory. They can then perform simple romantic actions with them like kiss and hug. The interactions are text-based and very minimal so the romance is part of the fast-paced commands that characterise the rest of the gameplay. In the same way that the player can pick dresses and shoes, they can also pick boyfriends. The boyfriends have a ludic purpose. The aim of the game is for the player to participate in fashion challenges against other players' avatars the results of which are based on their statistics. A boyfriend increases the statistics of the player depending on the player's level; the higher the level the more potent the boyfriends, which means that the player must be constantly on the lookout for improved boyfriends.

1.4. Love between Players

Finally, a way love can be experienced in games is between two human players. This can be manifested as two human players playing together a game that involves activities pertaining to love. *Fingle* (Game Oven 2012) is one such example. In the game "two players drag up to five buttons of one colour onto their matching targets; their movement makes it impossible to avoid contact, creating intimate moments with intertwined hands." This game draws more on actions associated with love, like touching and caressing, rather than love as a story or a feeling. Games like this can be used by couples to experiment with their already established intimacy or by people who are not a couple for building intimacy or awkwardness. Similar games include *Realistic Kissing Simulator* (Andrews and Schmidt 2014), *Genital Jousting* (Free Lives 2016), *Bounden* (Game Oven 2014), and *Dark Room Sex Game* (Nordic Game Jam 2008).

Another direction this experience of love in games can take is when people that meet as players in online games fall in love and partake in a romantic relationship inside the game and/or outside of it. *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) is a game that is associated with online and offline relationships between players (Brown 2015). At first glance, one may surmise that in such cases the games simply provide the environment where two people meet. According to an analysis by Yee (2006), however, this is not accurate. Based on his findings, real-life partners that have met

in online worlds claim that they probably would not end up together had they met in the physical world first. He attributes this to a variety of reasons that have to do with how people behave in games. Because players act behind a screen they overcome shyness they may exhibit in real life. Also, since one does not have access to the physical features of a potential partner, people focus more on their inner qualities, which allows for greater compatibility.

What is of bigger interest is that in Yee's study people claim to have fallen in love because they were playing a game and not as something that simply happened in the context of a game. 60% of the people who formed romantic relationships as players had not planned to and in actuality were not looking for a partner. By playing, they came into contact with people in particular scenarios: they had to cooperate together in missions, overcome crises, manipulate the game to achieve rewards and succeed in quests. These common game experiences drew people closer together and revealed parts of their respective characters that made their partners fall in love with them: "Watching how someone interacts with others in different social settings (under different amounts of stress) and how they work through problems can be very character-revealing." In other words, those people fell in love with the player in their partners.

This is exemplarily shown in *Cibele* (Star Maid Games 2015). The game is inspired by the personal history of Nina Freeman, the designer of the game. The player plays as Nina, a nineteen years old girl, who is a gamer. She spends a lot of time playing an online game called "Valtameri," in which she has met other players. *Cibele's* interface resembles Nina's desktop screen and the player can go through some of her writings and pictures. The majority of the game, though, takes place inside Valtameri and the player witnesses a developing romance between Nina and Ichi, another player inside this online game world whose actual name is Blake. Their relationship is strictly mediated because they live very far away and they have never met in person. They communicate mostly by voice chat while playing together on the same server and gradually through phone calls and pictures they send to each other.

Through their dialogue, Nina's files, and her chats and emails with other people, the game discusses online game relationships and their dynamics. Nina recalls how her experience with Valtameri started. In the beginning, she was apprehensive and did not like the game per se. Yet the fact that she could talk with other players while playing made the game personal to her. This became more accentuated when she met Blake. The player finds out that Nina is constantly doing runs with him at the potential expense of her real-life relationships. The fact, however, that she is always available as a player is what helps her intimate relationship with him to progress. In this sense, her initial

interest in the game brought her close to Blake and her evolving interest in him makes her more present in the game. Her romantic feelings are thus inexorably linked to her experience as a player even though the game itself does not include the representation of a romantic experience.

At the same time, the player, in turn, becomes a player of Valtameri in *Cibele*. As such, they experience first-hand how Nina mostly experienced Blake; as Ichi, the avatar with whom she played. For Nina, her relationship to Ichi was a player-to-player romance but for the player, this becomes a player-to-NPC romance through Nina, the playable character. Nonetheless, this is the closest one could experience Nina's love for Ichi and understand the progression of their romantic relationship outside of the game. By having the real-life scenes played by real people in non-interactive sequences, the game shows how the boundaries between player and avatar can sometimes become contested or outright break.

This is even more prominent in online simulation games, like *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003). In it, players can create avatars and lead a digital life with a variety of possibilities. They can build and decorate their homes, dress and accessorise their avatars as they want, open businesses, and also date other avatars. There are cases noted, in which people first fell in love in SL and then they met in real life and continued on their relationship (CNN 2008). At the same time, there are also cases, in which people have already a real-life partner and they pursue a romantic relationship with a different virtual partner – or more – in SL. While in some of those relationships, all members involved are aware and open about the dynamics, in some others aftereffects make virtual life bleed into real life and vice versa. A woman whose husband was having a virtual relationship in SL filed for a divorce (Morris 2008), while there are fora in which people ask for help for having become addicted to SL and in virtual relationships in particular (AnnaIvanovna 2012).[10]

1.5. Love Beyond Categories

As the previous example showed, the experience of love in games can go beyond the designer's intention and the affordances of the game as such. In *The Sims* (Maxis 2000-), for instance, the player can assume a god-like role controlling the lives of in-game entities. This is most likely an NPC-to-NPC romance, since the player is not a specific avatar; they rather play as a matchmaker

[10] Another example that shows the fragility of separation between avatarial and real identities comes in the case of *Wonderland* (Dobson 2007). Wonderland was a virtual playground inside SL in which people segregated in order to perform virtual paedophilia or ageplay. The game has supposedly an age limit of at least 18 years of age so all players involved were adults in real life but their avatars were designed as little children of 10 years old or so participating in sexual virtual activities with other players whose avatars looked much older. The playground was closed down amidst public outcry.

in the same fashion that children partner up and marry off their dolls. This does not correspond to how all players experience *The Sims*, however. There are players who may use the game as an authoring machine to write their own personal stories. They may build Sims that look like them and develop romantic relationships they understand as their own. They may even create their real-life partners or people they are interested in as Sims and experience in the game what they wish they could experience outside of it.[11]

Another experience of love that goes beyond the game design is the love for one's avatar. This type of love is not a designed experience of the game but rather generated by playing. Unlike the NPC-to-NPC romance and the player-to-NPC romance, this experience of love is not represented as a story inside the game; it rather happens to the player while playing. Yet this experience of love is still dependent on the game design and representation. Jensen (2014) has admitted to designing what she calls "hot male" characters as a fantasy for her players. In this sense, the game design actively caters to the players' getting attracted to their avatar. Jensen contends that making the avatar attractive results in greater empathy from the player's perspective. The players care for their avatar and enjoy the game because of that. Actually, Jensen sees romance in games as a way to develop feelings to the player for the avatar rather than the NPC: "By working with common tropes you can create a romantic tension in your work, and romanticise your hero, even if you never intend to have a romantic relationship consummated." Jensen further comments that unresolved sexual tension affects the player because they want to see the romance happening. As such, they keep playing the game to find out what is going to happen next between the love interests.[12]

One more interesting case of love beyond categories is when players fall for NPCs that are not offered for romantic interactions – at least to the extent the players would like. A common example is that of *The Witcher* series. In *Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (CD Project Red 2015), the player can pursue romantic escapades with a variety of NPCs. However, only two of them are considered end-game, meaning they are whom Geralt stays with for the majority of the game and after its end. These two NPCs are Yennefer of Vengerberg and Triss Merigold. There are players, however, who

[11] Even though the game comes equipped with romantic interactions, there are plenty of mods that allow for a more intrinsic romantic experience, like the *Passionate Romance* mod (Sacrificialmods n.d.).

[12] A manifestation of players' love for their avatars is witnessed also in the phenomenon of costume play, cosplay for short. Cosplayers are fans who dedicate time and effort to create costumes resembling the characters they love. More than that, they dress up and perform like those characters transforming play to an expression of their real identity. Arguably, cosplayers go beyond a single experience of love for a particular character, a game, and/or even a medium and they rather act out of fandom love, which is understood as a form of participatory culture that encompasses the whole spectrum of their experience as fans (Lamerichs 2015; Crawford and Hancock 2019).

would much rather prefer other NPCs as their lovers, e.g. Keira Metz, another sorceress, or Shani, a medic at Oxenfurt, and were annoyed, if not disheartened, by the fact that they could not choose them.

Equally, a game may offer a romance with an NPC to the player's despite. In the original *Witcher* game (CD Project Red 2007), Geralt has his first in-game interaction with the aforementioned Triss. The player has just won a battle in the witchers' stronghold, Kaer Moren, during which Triss is severely injured. Geralt goes to check on her and the player can choose the dialogue option along the lines of "I came to see how you are." Next thing you know, they are having sex. I remember feeling excessively violated by the incident. There was no indication as to what was going to transpire and no way to avoid it. Bear in mind, that Geralt was suffering amnesia at the time so he had no recollection of Triss and his relationship to her. Having read the books (Sapkowski 2007-2018), I knew that Geralt's true love was Yennefer, a fact which Triss was aware of since she was Yennefer's best friend. Needless to say, from that point forward I hated her with a passion. I did my best to avoid her for the remainder of the game and only kept her around as a useful ally because of her powers. She even had the audacity to demand a ring from me, which of course I never gave her.

One can imagine my detrition when in *Witcher 2* (CD Project Red 2011), the game starts with Geralt being in an established relationship with Triss. The fact that her presence was forced on me, turned the whole experience to a sour, unmemorable event. I refused her help every chance I got, minimised our interaction to the bare minimum, and picked every choice that did not involve her. At one point in the game, Triss gets kidnapped and you may go and save her. I chose not to save her to manifest as much as I was permitted my abhorrence towards her. That, unfortunately, cost me a substantial part of the game. It is more than expected that other players had a completely different reaction to the game than my own. They may like Triss or did not even get as much affected by her as I was. This does not mean that any of the possible experiences is less valid.

What is important to note is that in games the player is involved in a very personal manner so their experience of the game's content can vary greatly. More so, their experience can affect the game's content. Since I did not like Triss, I had to sacrifice my gaming experience because I wanted to avoid anything that had to do with her. As it becomes apparent, analyzing love in games brings along a difficulty that is medium-specific. It is not a matter of structure and genre, as the problem Todorov talks about when defining detective fiction (2019) and fantasy (1975). It is not that the

game content can take many different forms that we may not anticipate. The issue is that there is always a factor that remains dynamic, the player that is.

Love in games is transformed from representation to experience. When examining player experience, looking at the game text itself is not enough. It is rather in the communication between the game and the player where the experience is situated and this is what makes it so hard to presuppose, hypothesise, and study. Moreover, most games, unlike other instances of human-computer interaction, still constitute designed experiences of fiction. In this sense, love is still a matter of representation as part of the game's narrative and story-world. As such, love in games is the experience of a representation. It is in this singular capacity of games that love is understood and analysed in the context of this thesis.

Summary

This chapter offered an overview of the different instances that love can be included in games. These instances were categorised into four separate groups, which functioned as an approximate mapping than strict demarcations. These categories were love between NPCs, which treats love stories between in-game characters that are distinct to the player's avatar and which the player may or may not affect; love as the subject matter of the game, which encompasses games that provide treatises of love in its various manifestations and stages; love between a player and an NPC, which can either be chosen by the player or progress linearly; and lastly love between human players, which can be experienced either through actions associated with love or in online games that allow – or not – erotic play between their players.

However, as was shown in the last part of the chapter, the experience of love in games can go beyond the designed affordances of each game. Players can experience love in multifarious ways that are not always to be predicted or anticipated. More importantly, the experience of love in games is not clearly defined. If the game contains a love story, this does not mean that the player will feel affected by it. Alternatively, a game may not provide for a defined romantic entanglement, yet the players can develop feelings that they understand as love. As it seems, love is not a straightforward point in the communication between the player and the game system, a matter, which is further analysed in the following chapter.

Chapter 2
The Love Challenge

Vielleicht sind alle Drachen unseres Lebens
Prinzessinnen, die nur darauf warten
uns einmal schön und mutig zu sehen.
Rainer Maria Rilke

At Game Developers Conference 2004, a session took place titled "Game Design Challenge: The Love Story." The chair of the session, Eric Zimmerman, had given a few months before the conference a game design challenge to the three participants: Raph Koster, Will Wright, and Warren Spector. Each of the game designers had to come up with a concept for a game that tells a love story. On the day of the session, they presented their results and problems they faced along the way. From this presentation and the subsequent discussion, many interesting points arose, which I summarise here.

Koster proposed an interactive story, in which the players choose the progression of a Regency romance novel. As he explained, players would be interacting with a romantic novel as a form of a puzzle and not participating in a love story themselves. Wright's idea was that of a multiplayer war romance, which would be incorporated in an already established FPS online game. The fact that the romance players would be civilians in a battlefield and could be killed every turn of the way would create, according to Wright, interesting tensions and facilitate the emergence of the social relationships of altruism and self-sacrifice. Spector did not manage to think of a love game at all. He argued that love in games is considerably challenging because the player must develop feelings for a virtual character and games lack, for now, the tools to achieve that.

Wright agreed and the reason he had preferred to design an online multiplayer game with romance was that, as he argued, technology was not there yet so as to allow players to fall in love with NPCs. Spector criticised Wright's game as an easy way out because in a multiplayer context where human players romantically interact with other human players is it as if you let nature take its course. As he claimed, people find love online all the time and an online world is not any different in this sense from a physical world. For him, the real challenge is to have a player coming to feel something akin to love with a virtual character as opposed to another real person. This is very difficult, he argued, because you cannot force emotions on people. For him, games lack the tools to make players care for virtual characters.

Unlike other media, he claimed, games are very bad with character interaction: “Our characters are very bad and our conversations are even worse” (00:41:31 – 00:41:33). He explained that players always know that this relationship with the NPC is not real and that is irreparable: this non-real, which is part of the appeal in most games because players can take risks that they would not normally be taking in the real world, works against a real emotional response. The bottom-line for Spector was that “love is not very well suited to games” (00:41:55 – 00:41:56). Games lack the tools to make the players invested in a romance unless the design is only about turning love to an arbitrary points-tracking game like the dating-sims, he contended.

The solution for Spector was to improve the virtual characters by better visual design and better conversation systems: “We need to simulate conversations as well as we simulate worlds” (00:44:55 – 00:44:57). Commenting on a criticism he received by Zimmerman that people do not need to feel that something is real so as to experience emotions, like in films, in which people do not have emotions because they literally believe they are in the film, Spector argued that films do not work like video games. For films to be successful, they do not need a person from the audience to feel something, all they need is to make that person believe that the people on the screen are feeling something and sympathise with them. In Spector’s view, games cannot do empathy, since there is no distance between the player and the character. The player is the character so they either feel what the character feels or they do not.

Zimmerman persisted in his position claiming that in war games you do not need to have the physiological or psychological implications of war to provide the players with meaningful representations of war. In this regard, to have the player feel love in a game does not mean that they should have the same psychosomatic reactions that they would have when falling in love in the physical world. To that, Spector replied that Wright’s game in this sense was a very good idea because having a war-zone scenario even for a single-player game would make it more likely that the player would feel something for the virtual character. Wright agreed to that, contending that risk can be converted into social currency.

This brought the end of the session. The audience voted which game idea they liked best. Wright’s online multiplayer concept won but interestingly enough Spector’s non-game talk won over Koster’s party game design. He may not have come up with a game, yet he addressed the challenges of including love in video games in an informed manner. He named a couple of games that come close to make the player feel something for its virtual characters, but for him this was very limited representation out of all the games that get published each year. He emphasised that if games ever

manage to improve their virtual characters, then they could offer better content as a whole and would appeal to a whole new group of people. More than that, as Zimmerman expressed, they would maybe even help us "find something about love" (00:06:25 – 00:06:26).

2.1. To Love and to Romance

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the most challenging aspect of love in games is when players are invited to participate in a love story with a virtual character. In Wright's game, it is human players who play so falling in love is much easier; they know that there is another human player behind the other part of the screen. Koster's game did not require such involvement from its players. The love story was not their own but instead was turned into a puzzle they had to solve. Indeed, it is when players experience a love story in which they are actively involved and they share with an NPC that most tensions arise. Paraphrasing Spector, it is very difficult, if not impossible, for a game to force the feelings of love to a player.

Is this a technological problem as Wright argued and Spector suggested? Is it that technology is not there yet to allow games to offer believable romances between a player and an NPC? Or is it a medium deficiency? Should both players and designers simply accept that games are not good at love or rather that they can only offer a simplified and limited experience of it? Games as systems of code turn love into an algorithmic process. But can love ever be so structured? Before answering this question, I first bring the attention to an important confusion that needs to be avoided: the equation of the experience of love with the representation of love as content.

In other media, the distinction is clearer. When I read a romance novel, like *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen 2004), I do not fall in love myself. Instead, I read about a love story between two fictional characters, Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth. Equally, when I watch a movie adaptation of the same novel, I witness a love story as a spectator. While it is true that my emotional state is affected by the events that transpire in the fictional setting of the movie and the novel respectively, my feelings are not the same with those I experience when I fall in love in my real life. This discrepancy does not mean that neither novel nor movie are able to afford love. They include love as representation. Even if my experience of reading the novel or watching the movie does not match my experience of falling in love, I am still affected by the love story that unfolds before me. Saying that a novel or a movie or a work of art, for that matter, cannot portray love as long as they cannot make the audience feel as if they fall in love is a preposterous expectation.

So why should we require such a thing from games? Indeed, in games, things get more complicated because the player's engagement with the game is not imaginary anymore but extranoematic. This does not mean that all other media besides games afford love in the same way or that all games afford love in the same way. Yet, the difference between games and other media when it comes to love is a singular one: If I would play a *Pride and Prejudice*-inspired game, I would no longer be a distinct observer but part of the action. This immediately turns my passive consumption of a love story into an active involvement in a love story. Does this mean that my experience in a game should be the same with when I fall in love? If it is not, then does this mean that games cannot afford love? I argue that this is not the case. Games are able to afford love if love in this context is not understood as my falling in love but as a lived representation of a love story.

This understandably changes the experience of the love story, in the same way that my reading *Pride and Prejudice* and watching it as a movie are different experiences. It is true that games have historically exhibited some difficulty in their depiction of love for reasons analysed more closely later in the thesis. This does not speak of a medium-deficiency, however. Instead, I position love's challenge as an opportunity for games to diversify their medium practices. Yet what is of import is that whether games afford love and whether human players fall in love with computer-generated characters are two separate, albeit connected, questions. When one examines love in games as part of player experience, they should be careful of the distinction and aware as to what point they address.

In this thesis, I cover both aspects. I begin with the question of whether games afford love and finish with the question of whether human players fall in love with NPCs. To answer the first question, I argue that games can afford the experience of the representation of love. In games, players can indeed have an experience of love by engaging with a designed manifestation of it. In this case, love is to be understood as a feeling separate from falling in love. This feeling is akin to pleasure and satisfaction, which can be experienced only through mediation. This understanding of love, I recognise as romance. Romance means to experience love in a constructed fashion. In other media, this experience is imagined. In games, it is lived. Yet it continues to be a different experience from love.

This conceptual differentiation allows games to successfully include romantic content without the requirement that the players fall in love. Moreover, this discrepancy is not useful only in games. As will be highlighted in later chapters, our experience of love is informed by the experience of its representation. Thus, understanding this discrepancy between love and romance helps us to discern

our experience of actually falling in love. This concerns not only games but our cultural paradigm as we know it. In games, this demarcation between love and romance becomes as evident as ever, which accentuates their value as texts of critical analysis.

As already argued from the previous chapter, players may become interested in game characters for whom there is no romantic option available. For example, in *Witcher 3* (CD Project Red 2015), I became infatuated with two NPCs that had no romantic interaction with Geralt, the avatar, and as such with me as the player. In the DLC *Hearts of Stone*, Geralt meets a nobleman named Olgierd von Everec. Olgierd is burdened by a tragic past that Geralt is called to unravel and, eventually, solve. Geralt, however, has no romantic story with Olgierd. The game does not afford any mechanics for the player to engage him in such a manner. Hence, the game may instigate romantic feelings to the player for Olgierd, irrespective of their ability to romance him. One may argue, that Olgierd was written in a way to entice the romantic feelings of the players. He is handsome, mysterious, and his personal drama, which the player experiences through dream-like sequences, concerns a haunting love story with a heart-breaking ending.

Figure 1 - Olgierd von Everec, *Witcher 3*

Yet there are NPCs that have no romantic involvement whatsoever and can still invoke romantic feelings to the player. Such an example was for me Regis from the game's *Blood and Wine* DLC. Regis is a vampire and a good friend of Geralt, who helps him catch the culprit of a series of murders. Just like Olgierd, Regis has no romance story with Geralt/player but neither has he with any NPC for that matter. Unlike Olgierd, he does not appear to invite romance all that much. He is rather ugly with pale, wrinkled skin and receding grey hair. He lives the life of a hermit avoiding society and company. At the same time, he is one of the most brilliant, eloquent, and cultured characters the player meets, which for me maximised his appeal. In that, Regis became my romantic interest of choice irrespective of the fact that I could not romance him in any shape, way, or form.

Figure 2 - Emiel Regis Rohellec Terzieff-Godefroy, *Witcher 3*

This shows that a game can afford the experience of love even if it does not afford the experience of a romance. As such, the two experiences should not be used interchangeably when one examines love in games. How games can afford the experience of love and whether these feelings are actually love are two questions that, as said before, will be answered in the later part of the current thesis. Here, it is important to first make the distinction between love and romance clearer. When it comes to love, its experience and its expression are so closely interlinked that it is difficult to discern the two. This is particularly true in games because we do not have a mere representation of love but the experience of this representation. I argue that romance should be treated as the semiotic manifestation of love, which results, by default, in valorisation and codification subject to discourse.

Loving in a game and romancing in a game are two separate experiences. Love may indeed be impervious to codification, planning, and strategising, but romance is not. Romance is a designed experience and its pleasure resides in its ability to be highly codified. In particular, as will be discussed in later chapters, we enjoy consuming romantic texts, in whatever form, exactly because they constitute a fantasy of procedural love: a love that despite challenges, disturbances, and turbulences will still persevere and belong to us filling our life with meaning and satisfaction. In that, romance as a genre and game experience fits perfectly with the algorithmic nature of games. Romance requires codification and a predetermined outcome while keeping the appearance that it does not. To show what I mean with that, I turn to a very popular implementation of romance in games, at least in the earlier days of the medium; the damsel in distress trope.

2.2. Damsel in Distress

> It is a time of darkness. While the Sultan is off fighting a foreign war, his Grand Vizier Jaffar has seized the reins of power. Throughout the land, the people groan under the yoke of tyranny, and dream of better days. You are the only obstacle between Jaffar and the throne. An adventurer from a foreign land, innocent of palace intrigues, you have won the heart of the Sultan's lovely young daughter. And in so doing, you have unwittingly made a powerful enemy. On Jaffar's, orders, you are arrested, stripped of your sword and possessions, and thrown into the Sultan's dungeons. As for the Princess, Jaffar gives her a choice, and an hour to decide: Marry him – or die. Locked in her room high in the palace tower, the Princess rests all her hopes on you. For when the last sands drain from the hourglass, her choice can bring only a throne for the Grand Vizier… a new reign of terror for his long-suffering subjects… and death for the brave youth who might have been… **Prince of Persia**.

Thus begins the user's guide booklet accompanying *Prince of Persia* (Brøderbund 1989). It informs the player of the setting of the game and their mission: stop the villain and rescue the princess. This thematically surmises the damsel in distress trope. According to the trope, the player has to save the playable character's romantic partner, who has been abducted by the game's villain, by

overcoming challenges and/or defeating evil adversaries. This type of mechanic positions games as part of the long tradition of romances: stories about the perilous adventures of a hero trying to save the woman he loves (Singer 1984). In games, romance is nearly as old as the medium. In 1985, Mario's love for Princess Peach was the backstory for *Super Mario Bros* (Nintendo) and the raison d'être behind his rescue efforts. The same rationale follows the *Legend of Zelda* (Nintendo 1986), in which Link, a young boy, saves Princess Zelda of Hyrule from Ganon, Prince of Darkness.

Out of the above examples, only in *Prince of Persia* there is a love relationship clearly stated in the instructions of the game. In both *Super Mario* and *Zelda*, there is no reference to a romantic relationship between the hero and the respective princess. It is in later games that this relationship becomes more fleshed out, especially between Mario and Peach. The intertextuality of the trope, however, imbues the games with certain character dynamics that affect the interpretation and/or experience of the games, their actual narrative notwithstanding.[13] After all, the trope is far from medium-specific. Sarkeesian (2013a) traces it back to the short film *Barney Oldfield's Race for a Life* (Sennett 1913), which features for the first time a woman being tied to railroad tracks by a moustache-twirling villain.

Sarkeesian (2013a) also makes the connection between the trope and the medieval romance literature, in whose works a wandering knight saves a defenceless woman proving thus his chivalry, prowess, and virtue. She actually positions the source of the trope to the myth of Perseus, who saves Andromeda from a sea monster. In games, she claims, one of the first instances of the trope was Miyamoto's 1979 arcade game *Sheriff* (Nintendo): "In it a vague female-shaped collection of pixels, referred to as The Beauty, must be rescued from a pack of bandits" (Sarkeesian 2013a). Miyamoto's design was further developed in *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo 1981). According to Sarkeesian (2013a), inspired by both the movie *King Kong* and the animated series *Popeye, the Sailor*, *Donkey Kong* features a male hero, Jump Man, who must save a damsel, named The Lady or in later versions Pauline, from a giant ape. Jump Man and Pauline eventually evolved into Mario and Princess Peach.

[13] Notably, *Tomb Raider* writer Rhianna Pratchett has commented in an interview that it was not her intention to have Lara in a romantic relationship. Nevertheless, in the game (Crystal Dynamics 2013), the player as Lara Croft has to save Lara's friend, Sam, from a male-only cult. Pratchett noted that "people sort of projected that there was more going on to that relationship because of that" (Lejacq 2013).

From early on, games implemented this trope as an effective way to make the player invested in the game. Schafer (Pearce 2003) explains why the damsel trope seems a good solution for creating a game with motivation for both the player and the player character "An emotional connection is a strong motivation, and a damsel is a convenient way to do that." If only the narrative of the story states that the avatar has to go and find this girl, the player may have no intention of actually doing that and instead, explore the world through other means. The game design must provide incentives to the player for them to actually want to go and find this girl.

On the same premise function, for example, *Vampire: The Masquerade – Redemption* (Nihilistic Software 2000), where the player as vampire Christof has to save his beloved nun Anezka, *Psychonauts* (Double Fine Productions 2005), where Raz goes on a mission to save Lili from the evil Dr. Loboto, *Red Steel* (Ubisoft 2006), in which Scott Munroe needs to rescue his abducted fiancé Miyu Sato, and *Devil May Cry* 4 (Capcom 2008), which is about a young demon hunter named Nero, who has to defeat an army of demons and save his love interest, Kyrie. The setting of each game is different, the challenges are different, the mechanics and the gameplay may differ, but the overarching trope remains the same.

Admittedly, in recent years this premise has begun to lose applicability, at least as the main narrative. Yet it still perseveres as a major or minor plot point, as in *Broken Sword II* (Revolution Software 1997), in which the player as George Stobbart spends the first half of the game searching for his lost girlfriend, Nicole Collard. In *Dead Space* (EA Redwood Shores 2008), the player assumes the role of Isaac Clarke in search of his girlfriend, Nicole Brennan, aboard a spaceship. In some games, it is part of an optional quest like in *The Witcher 2* (CD Projekt Red 2011), in which the player may choose to go and save an NPC.[14] Alternatively, it has been subverted to parody as in *Fat Princess* (Titan Studios 2009), a game in which the players compete in teams to rescue a princess and return her to their camp, and *The Bard's Tale* (InXile Entertainment 2004), in which the player plays as a hero who is not interested in saving the princess until he is offered sexual rewards.

Rightfully so, the trope has been condemned as sexist (Salter and Blodgett 2017). Indeed, it is usually a straight white male avatar trying to save a female NPC. The female characters are

[14] Even as recent as in the game *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions 2019), we find allusions to the trope. In the game, the protagonist, Sam Bridges, learns from his sister, Amelie Strand, that she manipulated him to come and save her to further her own mission. Upon this revelation, Sam remarks: "Great. So I'm Mario and you're Princess Peach." Sam and Amelie are siblings yet this does not change the dynamics of the trope. Sam goes on a quest to save her because he loves her and the player as Sam along with him.

predominantly depicted as powerless and are only used as a plot device or a reward to the player's actions (Trépanier-Jobin and Bonenfant 2017). Sarkeesian (2013a) argues that the trope allows all action to the player character while transforming women in the game as an object to be acted upon.[15] The player is then the subject of the narrative and the damsels "a prize to be won, a treasure to be found or a goal to be achieved."

Many games with the damsel trope frame their narrative in that way. The villain takes from the hero what belongs to him and then the hero must go on a quest to retrieve his possession or at least exact his revenge for the loss of his possession. This can be attributed to Irigaray's (1985) theory of the historical role of women as a currency of exchange. Irigaray depicts patriarchal societies as based on a trading system in which men are the traders and women the merchandise. Within this system, the specific, atomised value of each woman vanishes and is instead replaced by her value as an object which is exchanged between men depending on their needs and desires. The damsels in video games continue this old tradition of diminished female agency. From a feminist, and queer, perspective, this representation of love and romance is highly problematic. It is a valid criticism that will be analysed in more detail in chapter nine.

Nonetheless, does the trope prevent the player from experiencing romance in games with an NPC? This demands closer consideration because of the argument that this game design does not cater to the development of feelings of love to the player since they do not interact much – if at all – with the love interest (Hosking 2014). Instead, the player is being told about their love for the NPC, who remains far away from the action of the game and the player. Yet, as already argued, love and romance are not the same. Indeed, the player is able to experience romance in games if one

[15] Sarkeesian further argues that instead of providing agency to the damsel or removing the trope altogether, many games make up for this lack of player attachment through violent and brutal images of female bodies. This sensationalism becomes more prominent in what Sarkeesian calls the woman in the fridge trope. This trope was coined in the late 1990s by comic book writer Gail Simone "to describe the trend of female comic book characters that are routinely brutalized or killed-off as a plot device designed to move the male character's story arc forward." According to Sarkeesian (2013a), this trope is especially prevalent in games and is paired quite often with the damsel plot, since "both involve female characters who have been reduced to states of complete powerlessness by the narrative." The woman in the fridge trope increases the emotional investment of the player in the damsel in distress by exploiting the female suffering and transforming the damsel into an object of sacrifice.
Following this vein, Adams (2017) examines the resistance of the trope of female sacrifice in games. Mirroring Sarkeesian, they trace the trope back to Perseus and Andromeda and connect it with Bataille's (1990) treatise on female sacrifice as erotic. Adams claims that in video games, Andromeda takes on the functionality of the damsel in distress character. This translates the appeal of the damsel in distress arc in video games to a scopophilic pleasure of the player in participating both in the preparation of the sacrifice and in averting it; in whole, as an opportunity for heroism.

understands romance as a specific representation of love that is achieved through challenges and adversities.

Specifically, I argue that players are able to experience romance in games because games represent the relationship of the player to the NPC as part of a valorised challenge. To contend this, I turn to the origins of romance as a literary genre. In the following section, I show how romance is historically associated with love in the form of a highly codified and designed representation thereof. Moreover, I argue that romantic love, the love found in romances, is indeed found in games. Games constitute actualisations of the romance with all the adversities it includes and as such realise the experience of romantic love. They are more than mere representations of romantic love and romances. They are romantic love substantialised.

2.3. Games as Romantic Love

In the previous section, we already saw that many games position love as a reward to a player's successful journey – in both literal and figurative sense. The player assumes the role of a lone hero, who has to overcome challenges and as a reward, they get the love. This can be the main plot or a subplot. Also, the challenges can take various forms from defeating adversaries and mastering kinaesthetic obstacles to solving puzzles and choosing the right dialogue options. Notwithstanding the particularities in terms of representation and mechanics, those games follow the tradition of a romance (Chapman 2016): a lone hero overcomes obstacles and defeats adversaries for the woman he loves. As such, I argue that they constitute manifestations of the experience of romantic love.

To show this, I first position romances and romantic love in their appropriate historical moment. The word *romance* derives from the Old French *romanz*, which meant "written in the vernacular, in contrast with the written form of literary Latin" (Whitehead and Vinaver 2019). Progressively, the term came to signify the works written in this language. In the 12th century Europe, troubadours and trobairitz, female troubadours, in the beginning courtiers themselves and later professionals, were composing and performing with the accompaniment of music poems in their native *lenga d'òc* (Reddy 2012). The subject matter of those romances pertained to the *fin'amor* between a knight and a lady: a love so strong that it persevered through a long list of misfortunes, struggles, and impediments.[16] The love found in the romances, romantic love, was shaped to the form of culture.

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[16] See for example, *Le Roman de Troie* (Benoît de Sainte-Maure 1987), *Floire et Blancheflor* (Grieve 2006), *Le Roman de la Rose* (Arden 1987), and the poems by Marie de France (2011) and William of Aquitaine (Egan 1985).

Indeed, romantic love was so codified that it emerged as a modus vivendi and operandi, the prescripts of which survive to this day (De Rougemont 1983).

Prototypical of the genre is the story between Sir Lancelot and Guinevere, the wife of King Arthur. The legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table was already known from oral Celtic myths. Still, it was Chrétien de Troyes who developed the narrative to that of a romance in his work *Lancelot: The Knight of the Cart* (1997). In it, Sir Lancelot goes on a quest to save Queen Guinevere from an evil prince. To do so, he has to overcome several obstacles and face many perils. In the end, after having proven himself worthy, he is rewarded with the Queen's clandestine love.

At one point, Lancelot faces the dilemma of riding a cart, as suggested by the title. This cart, we are told by the poet, is used "for every kind of criminal" (1997, p. 11-12). It is so ignoble that everyone who rode on it "lost all honour and joy" (p. 12). Lancelot hesitates: "Reason, which warred/With Love, warned him to take care;/It taught and advised him never/To attempt anything likely/To bring him shame or reproach" (p. 13). In the end, he decides, against his better judgment, to ride the cart so as to gain information about Guinevere: "He listened/To Love, and quickly jumped in,/Putting all sense of shame/Aside, as Love had commanded (p. 13)." The poet describes in detail how shameful for Lancelot the ride with the cart would be to make his final decision in the name of love all the more significant. Lancelot's love defies all social standards and even the responsibility to oneself to the point of willing sacrifice.

At the same time, Lancelot finds value in his love. Chrétien assures us that love chooses only the worthy hearts, meaning that only worthy people can experience the noble sentiment of love, which increases, in turn, their worth: "Love's approval being worth/A great deal. And Love valued/Our knight higher than any" (p. 40). Lancelot's value is then inexorably linked to his ability to love. Interestingly enough, Lancelot in love is a more worthy Lancelot. In spite of his sacrifices, his love makes him a better version of himself. Or rather it is because of his sacrifices that Lancelot proves to be more courageous, more righteous, and more virtuous through his adventures in the name of love. He defies his moral and physical limits and it is due to love that he manages to defeat all his adversaries. Most importantly, Lancelot's power is revealed to him only after he perseveres in the name of love. He discovers the strength love endows him with gradually, with every obstacle he overcomes. Love is the catalyst that has Lancelot learning and exploring his better self every step of the way.

To understand the workings of such sublimity, one needs to contextualise romances and their

purpose. As Huizinga explains in his 1924 book *Waning of the Middle Ages* (1987), romances depict an era in which chivalry prevailed as an aesthetic ideal. Chivalry was a code of conduct and a set of rules of ethical dimension, which aristocratic and noble populace aspired to (Rudorff 1974; Jones 2011). In actuality, everyday life was rather different encompassing the whole multifacetedness of human pathos; greed, rivalry, deceit, infidelity, etc. (Kaeuper 2016). Chivalry was rather an act or a pretence that helped people retain an unattainable example of magnanimity in all parts of life. Set against the cruelty and pettiness of human existence, chivalry was a constant challenge the elite needed to maintain to differentiate themselves from the basic behaviours that characterised the uncivilised plebe.

In this spirit of the time, love upheld a special place in signifying the refinement of self and culture (Tuchman 2011, p. 57). Through it, one could discern themselves from the sexual instincts that accompany all and the material considerations of marital relationships. Chivalrous love granted no other gain than love itself. The operative characteristic and what attributed romantic love its importance was that it had to be challenging: "It is sensuality transformed into the craving for self-sacrifice, into the desire of the male to show his courage, to incur danger, to be strong, to suffer and to bleed before his ladylove" (Huizinga 1987, p. 76).[17] It was through challenge and personal suffering that one proved to be chivalrous and thus their sentiment gained the status of love.

Romantic love is shown to be a constructed experience of feeling rather than an a priori self-contained sentiment. This becomes more apparent when one takes into consideration that romantic love was primarily found in literature (Paz 1995; Barber 1980). In romances, we witness this transformation of desire to love through challenges, adversities, and obstacles. Romantic love originated from the authored verses of the romantic poems and it is there that one mostly comes across it; it is a literary convention more than anything else. Indeed, people loved and desired and some of them must have tried to refine this feeling according to the code and prescripts of romantic love. Yet the transformation of human sentiment to romantic love through challenges was mostly witnessed in the designed patterns of fiction; in love's representation rather than its experience.

[17] In the descriptive language of Tuchman (2011): "As its justification, courtly love was considered to ennoble a man, to improve him in every way. It would make him concerned to show an example of goodness, to do his utmost to preserve honour, never letting dishonour touch himself or the lady he loved. On a lower scale, it would lead him to keep his teeth and nails clean, his clothes rich and well groomed, his conversation witty and amusing, his manners courteous to all, curbing arrogance and coarseness, never brawling in a lady's presence. Above all, it would make him more valiant, more preux; that was the basic premise. He would be inspired to greater prowess, would win more victories in tournaments, rise above himself in courage and daring" (p. 61).

Actually, as Huizinga informs us, literature alone did not suffice. People were not satisfied to only read about romantic love, they wanted to experience it, experience this designed construct that is. For that, people turned to another form to bestow style on sentiment: sports, and games, tournaments and jousts:

> The warlike sports of the Middle Ages […] overloaded with pomp and decoration full of heroic fancy, they serve to express romantic needs too strong for mere literature to satisfy. The realities of court life or a military career offered too little opportunity for the fine make-belief of heroism and love, which filled the soul. So they had to be acted. The staging of the tournament, therefore, had to be that of romance (Huizinga 1987, p. 81).

Romantic games were then staged executions of romantic love.[18] In them, the participants were able to experience a series of challenges, which transformed their desire to something more refined, romantic love that is. What they were essentially seeking was this transcendence or sublimity. What was important was the sentiment of desire, which in the context of the tournament became something more potent and structured than anything real life could offer them. It was an experience they could manipulate and recognise, thus manage and achieve. They could prove better than the other participants but more so they could prove better than themselves; they had the opportunity to elevate their want to passion and romantic love separating hence themselves from the commoners, the non-initiated. This process was imperative to their satisfaction because their desires were allowed to be fulfilled only after the successful overcoming of the various obstacles. Through their tangible sacrifice and suffering, their sentiment would be proven honourable. For that, the games were constructed as such to allow them so.[19]

2.4. Digital Games as Romantic Love

A game was then a formulation of experience more than anything else. The tournaments and jousts were designed in such a way so as to allow their participants the experience of romantic love, which was the transformation of their desire through challenges. Romance in digital games as the codified manifestation of a sentiment follows the same principle. Games are designed experiences that allow

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[18] Yalom (2004) has argued that chess during the same period was also used as metaphor of the conquest of love among the nobility. Tuchman (2011) also draws similar connections, albeit not that directly: “If tournaments were an acting-out of chivalry, courtly love was its dreamland” (p. 60). For further information on the subject see also Barber and Barker (1989) and Keen (1990).

[19] This understandably does not mean that tournaments by default were experienced only in this way. They were constructed according to chivalrous rules but they were also deeply connected with violence and fighting (Kaeuper 1999). It is to be expected that a person would participate in a tournament with a warrior’s predisposition – interested in honing his military skills, claim monetary gains, and/or simply winning – instead of a knight’s focus on honour and love. As was previously shown, chivalry was a moral system so it enabled an array of practices, some of them contradictory or opposing. In the same way that the code transformed desire to romantic love, a person who followed the code was transformed from a warrior to a knight and a gentleman (Barber 1980).

their players the possibility to manifest and satisfy their desire, which is to overcome obstacles and prove to be better by the end of the game; masters of their own wishes. As a matter of fact, Cremin (2009) contends that in digital games the pleasure the player gets from satisfying their desire is more important than the fictional representation of the object of this desire.[20]

Wirman (2015) comments on this phenomenon arguing that Princess Peach from the Super Mario games actually represents the player's love for the game rather than for an individual character. Wirman posits Princess Peach in the same frame of the damsel in distress trope. Princess Peach' role is very limited in the games themselves.[21] Nonetheless, as Wirman concludes, this does not decrease the player's investment and attachment to her. The player loves Peach because they need to rescue her: "We want the princess; we pay for someone to trap her in order to have a challenge in the first place" (p. 183). Players love Peach because she comes as part of the challenge. To the player, the challenge is more important than Peach herself; Peach simply represents the success in an aesthetically pleasing way.

This is phenomenally shown in the game *Loved* (2010) by Alexander Ocias. The game is a platformer whose gameplay and imagery intentionally resembles that of Super Mario in a black and white version. It starts off by asking the player if they are a man or a woman. Depending on the response, the game positions them in the role of a boy or a girl instead displaying from the very beginning that the game is the one holding the power of signification. Throughout its short duration, the game provides the players with instructions – or rather commands. The player has the choice to follow them or ignore them. Their actions result in textual affirmations or reproaches respectively.

[20] It is interesting to note that neuroimaging findings have pointed towards a connection between romantic love and video games. In particular, experiments have shown that the same brain area related to love and attraction gets activated while playing video games (Koepp et al. 1998; Bartels and Zeki 2000). Admittedly, this correlation demands much further research so as to provide conclusive results.
[21] Except for one title of the original series, in which she is a playable character, see: *Super Mario Bros 2* (Nintendo 1988).

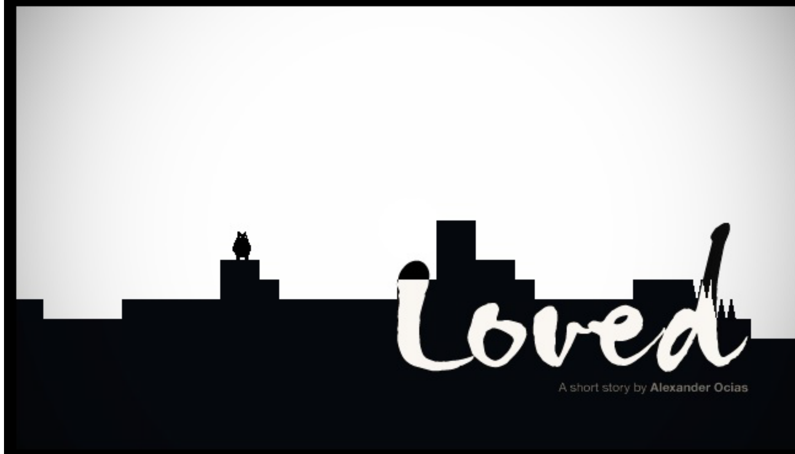

Figure 3 - *Loved* by Alexander Ocias

For example, at one point the game orders the player to travel the lower path. If they do, they get the encouragement "Good girl." If they do not, they receive the objurgation "Ugly creature." Every time the player fails or chooses not to follow the game's instructions, the game punishes them by becoming increasingly difficult. The more times the player disobeys the more difficult the game gets. As a reaction to the player's defiance, the game starts to visually break. The smooth background of the game gradually becomes infested with coloured, flashy blocks that disrupt the artwork's seamlessness and lower the player's effectivity since they distract their attention.

The game is a meta-commentary on how what we as players basically love is the code.[22] The game articulates the prescripts of the code as god-like commands and shows appreciation only if the player abides by it. If the player disobeys, the game punishes them and addresses them in a degrading manner: "You disgust me." Even though the player can make some choices, the outcome of those choices is again a way to reaffirm the absolute power of the code. "Do I own your body or your mind?" the game asks. If the player answers the body, the command reads "Dance for me." If they answer the mind, the text orders them to beg.

[22] *Loved*'s function as a metatext can also be posited by its self-characterisation as a short story rather than a game.

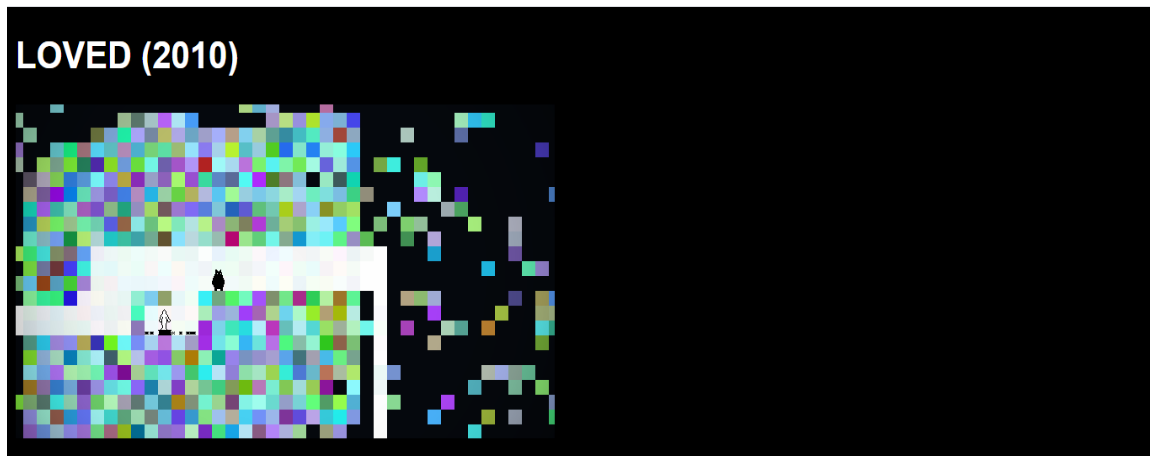

Figure 4 - *Loved* by Alexander Ocias

The dialectic relationship is between the player and the code. After the player manages to overcome the obstacles, what they earn is the code. They have proven that they belong to the code by mastering its commands: “I am so happy that you are mine” the screen reads, “I loved you always.” The love the player gets is pre-defined and the way to achieve it is pre-defined as well. The code has the love and the player has to unlock the passage to it by completing the rite of worth, to show that they adhere to the rules set by the game. If the player does not comply with the rules, the game asks: “Why do you hate me? I loved you.” Then it finishes with the player receiving nothing. If the player follows the rules, they get awarded the title of a man or a woman, the proof of their valour and honour that they have successfully finished the rite. The game also rewards them with a single coin, a reminder that what matters is not the prize at the end but the servitude to the code.

Loved shows that the set of rules is what makes romantic love. Desire becomes romantic love because of the challenge and the challenge is provided because of the code, so romantic love is provided by the code. Romantic love is not happening despite the code but due to it. In physical games, it was the code of chivalry conduct; in digital games, the code is encompassed in the game itself. The power of the code is so absolute that takes on the form of a monotheistic god. It is no happenstance that the culture of romantic love in southern France coincides in time and form with the emergence of the cult of the Virgin Mary in northern France and Paris in particular (Lindberg 2008). Romantic love and divine love are both expressions of the same need; to transform a basic human desire to something greater and more refined: “for the ability to love in this way at all was the distinguishing human mark, defining man’s superiority to the animal, which cannot shape its

instincts and desires in an ideal mould." (Warner 2013, p. 138).[23] In one case, this love was targeted towards a noblewoman; in the other, it was towards Virgin Mary and, by extension, God. Yet what is responsible for this transformation that the followers of both strive for is their adherence to the code of conduct.[24]

Romance is highly codified. This does not negate its value as an expression of love. As a matter of fact, romantic love is still considered the prime example of refined love dictating to this day to a great extent what love should be, both as representation and as experience. Still, romantic love entails problematic elements that have already been touched upon in this chapter: most notably the sexist and binary tropes and whether this codification is actually love or only a narcissistic misprint of it. This problematising of romantic love as a cultural paradigm is a sequela that will be explored further in the following chapters. It may seem paradoxical that what appeared as a challenge for game design resulted in a discussion for the analysis, deconstruction, and potential relexicalisation of love in general. I frame it as a prime potential for digital games to improve their love content and, at the same time, help conceptualise love in a more informed manner.

Summary

In this chapter, I argued that games can afford romantic love because they constitute a designed experience of challenge. Games that are based on the tradition of romances, a lone hero who fights for the lady he loves, are able to offer to the player the experience of romantic love because they give the player the chance to satisfy their desire through playing. According to Huizinga, games already from the Middle Ages were structured as representations of chivalrous romances to allow their participants this transcendence of desire to romantic love, which was only possible due to their challenges. As such, romantic love was afforded by the set of rules that accompanied the culture of chivalry and it was a direct product of their application to one's conduct, desire and passion included.

Equally in digital games, the code of the game gives the players the opportunity to satisfy their desire because of the obstacles they need to overcome. Romantic love is not a feeling the player is exposed to because of the reward, the damsel in distress that is. Instead, it is an experience of a

[23] Warner does not equate romantic love with the love for Virgin Mary, at least in its initial form. She does claim, nonetheless, that there is a unity between the two which eventually made possible for aspirers of romantic love to find expression of their sentiment in the following of Virgin Mary.

[24] Further on that, May (2011; 2019) has argued that love has progressively taken the place of religious faith. This gains a significant bearing if one takes into consideration that chivalry, which inspired romantic love, was inspired as a moral system "intended to fuse the religious and martial spirits and somehow bring the fighting man into accord with Christian theory" (Tuchman 2011, p. 57).

culturally defined representation of love offered throughout the process of the game, the culmination of which is the point of reward. One has to go through the rite of adversities to be able to achieve this experience. As such, it was shown that it is not about the reward but instead about the challenge. Digital games are then arguably the most appropriate medium to offer romantic love. If love is unquantifiable, romance most certainly is not. It is a highly codified experience. This further shows that the experience of romance should not be equated with the experience of love, but also that the two are culturally linked. This direction is explored in the following chapters, together with the ramifications this may entail for how we conceptualise and experience love in general.

Chapter 3
The Persistence of Romance

θές με ὡς σφραγῖδα ἐπὶ τὴν καρδίαν σου,
ὡς σφραγῖδα ἐπὶ τὸν βραχίονά σου·
ὅτι κραταιὰ ὡς θάνατος ἀγάπη,
σκληρὸς ὡς ᾅδης ζῆλος
Ἄσμα Ασμάτων

In 2018, researchers from the Technological Educational Institute of Crete managed to decode more than 50% of the inscriptions on the Phaistos disk (Owens 2018). The disk is an artefact dating allegedly to 17th century BC found in the Minoan palace of Phaistos, southern Crete (Andreeva 2020). Dr. Gareth Owens, head of the research, claims that the Phaistos disk is a prayer dedicated to the pregnant Aphrodite (Owens 2018). This claim is not farfetched given the prominence of female deities in the Minoan and Aegean religions of the time. Indeed, the worship of femininity, reaching its apotheosis in the cult of Aphrodite, had influenced everyday life and the ethics and habits in the then Hellenic region, while also inspiring numerous works of art: sculptures, pottery, temples, and fiction (Breitenberger 2007).

In ancient times, the revered Aphrodite was the goddess of beauty and love. With her power, she could humble mortals and immortals alike. Because of her, Zeus had committed adultery in more ways and forms than one. She was responsible for havoc, atrocities, and wars. It is Aphrodite that promises Helen to Paris and helps them elope to Troy, an event which led to the siege and eventual sack of Troy (Homer 2015). Born by sperm and blood, Aphrodite encompassed the complex nature of this thing called love. Her constant entourage was comprised of minor deities that represent the different aspects of love: copulation, unrequited passion, courting, desire, wedding, longing, and yearning.

Undoubtedly, her most important companion was Eros. According to some myths, Eros was the son of Aphrodite; according to some others, he was the son of both Aphrodite and Ares, the god of war. Hesiod in his *Theogony* (2017) tells of Eros as one of the primordial gods together with Chaos. Unlike Aphrodite, who is not impervious to her own powers as we see when she falls madly in love with mortals Anchises and Adonis among others, Eros seems unaffected by the feelings he causes. Throughout antiquity, he appears almost sexless: a strategic tool or a weapon of revenge and

humiliation in the hands of gods. Plato in *Phaedrus* (2002) categorises him as one of the four divine manias. Sophocles in *Antigone* (1962) characterises him as “invincible” in battle; a generic force more than a concrete personification.[25]

It is only in the late 2nd century CE that Eros becomes Latin Cupid and the protagonist of his own story (Paz 1995). *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius (1998) is the only Latin novel of the era that has survived in its entirety. In the book, the main character, Lucius, while trying to perform a magic spell to transform himself into a bird, is accidentally transformed into an ass. Along the way in his effort to reverse the spell, he meets a different set of characters, all of whom narrate tales and stories to him. One of those stories is *Cupid and Psyche*. Psyche is a princess, the youngest daughter of three, praised for her beauty. So beautiful is she that men travel from other countries to behold her instead of visiting the worshipping sites of Venus. This causes Venus’ rage and the goddess of beauty, full of jealousy, asks her son, Cupid, to make Psyche fall in love with the vilest, most miserable creature possible.

Cupid not only has the ability to do so, but he is described as having no moral qualms: he is amoral, by nature prone to mischief, scorning public justice and law (1998, p. 7). Yet Cupid himself cannot resist the power of beauty. He falls for the beautiful Psyche. He takes her as his wife but only goes to her at night and leaves her in the morning to conceal his true self. He specifically forbids her to try and see him in the light. Psyche’s sisters, envious of her, convince her to light a lamp the next time her husband returns. After Cupid lies to sleep, Psyche, afraid her husband is a monster, heeds her sisters’ advice. When she witnesses Cupid’s divine beauty, she falls in love with him. Alas, oil from the lamp drops on Cupid and he, having been hurt, wakes up. He realises that Psyche has disobeyed his orders. He abandons her and then Psyche wanders the earth looking for her lost love. She has to face many struggles until she proves herself worthy of his love. She finally reunites with Cupid and they happily marry as equals. Their daughter is named Voluptas, desire, the personification of the connection between eros and psyche.

3.1. Love Origins

In *Cupid and Psyche*, Psyche has to prove herself to her lover by completing different tasks and challenges, a theme that has survived unaltered to this day as we also see in prominent game examples discussed throughout the thesis, such as *Dragon Age*. She loves to the point of self-

[25] A fact which also explains the lack of temples dedicated strictly to his worship. Most of the temples, he shares with Aphrodite and other deities, even though there are a couple of centres devoted solely to his cult, see Pausanias (2014) and Atsma (2019).

abnegation. She devotes herself to the person she loves, who for her is the one and only, with no reservations, and by doing so she shows her merit. As Paz (1995) comments, *Cupid and Psyche* is the primordial example of the Western love story, which is distilled in the term romantic love. Many theorists claim that romantic love is strictly a Western product (Yalom 2018; Goode 1959; Hsu 1981; Culler 1997). This argument stems from Denis de Rougemont's seminal work *Love in the Western World* (1983), in which he traces our contemporary understanding of love back to, what he calls, the cult of love in the courts of Southern France in the 12th century CE. In this regard, romantic love concerns a very limited interpretation of love that is confined to the cultural context responsible for its birth, the main features of which were analysed in chapter two.

How has then romantic love survived as representation to this day? It may not be a code of conduct per se but it still infuses the ideal of romantic relationships and the experience of love. It seems improbable that it is strictly a poetic invention of a single time and place. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that the creation of love can be attributed only to a certain group of poets.[26] Notwithstanding how talented they might have been, the perseverance of love as a theme and its resonance with the general populace cannot be ascribed solely to the artistic intellect of a mere individual or a class of demiurges.

Yalom (2012) notes that "surely men and women experienced something akin to romantic love before the twelfth century" (p. 18). However, she limits this trail of thought in referencing examples from the Bible, Aeneid, the philosophy of Plato, and ancient Greek literature without theorising the connection – or discrepancy – between these accounts of love and mediaeval romantic love. Paz (1995) shares the sentiment that romantic love as we know it today was shaped in the courts of Occitania during the 12th century CE, yet he traces what he names a prehistory of love back to antiquity and the first novels: Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* and the so-called ancient Greek romances. In acknowledging Greek romances as the invention, or at least the seed, of romance, he coincides with Foucault (1986), Whitmarsh (2011), Perry (1967), and Rohde (1914).

Dating from 1st century BCE to 3rd century CE, there are only five Greek romance novels that have survived in their entirety: *Callirhoe and Xenophon* by Chariton, *Anthia and Habrocomes* by Xenophon of Ephesus, *Leucippe and Clitophon* by Achilles Tatius, *Daphnis and Chloe* by Longus, and *Charicleia and Theagenes* by Heliodorus (Whitmarsh 2011, p. 5). Despite their different plots, Greek romances feature a premise very similar to that of courtly love: a couple is separated by fate,

[26] Let alone to a single person – William of Aquitaine is considered the father of romantic love (Yalom 2012).

hardships, and malicious villains and they have to endure adventures and trials before they are reunited and live happily ever after.

Is it then that the troubadours of Southern France reiterated works already known? To trace such a clear line between literary genealogies would be simplistic. In actuality, during the middle ages, those Greek novels were considered lost. Of course, the troubadours of Southern France were likely inspired by Arabic and Persian poems, which were translations and adaptations of the Greek romances (Meisami 1987). Notwithstanding the debate surrounding this argument, it seems impossible that the Greek tales had not shaped, albeit unintentionally, the Mediterranean culture.

Beaton (1980) brings attention to Medieval Greek romances, which continued the tradition of the ancient Greek romances during the middle ages in Eastern Europe and the Byzantine Empire. These works were the original tales of courtly love, commissioned by emperors and empresses to be enjoyed within their court. As Goldwyn (2018) describes:

> Though they differ in terms of origin, with some coming from the oral folk tradition, some from translations of Western sources, some from imitations of the ancient Greek novel, and some from what might best be termed original imaginative genre fiction, and though they differ in terms of language, with some in prose and others in verse, and some in the highly archaizing Attic register and others in the vernacular, what binds them is a certain kind of subject matter […] They are describing the trials and tribulations of young lovers who both defy and embrace the social conventions surrounding romantic marriage, and who wander from city to country and across the seas before (most often) their eventual happy marriages (p. 31-32).

3.2. Love Poetry

At the same time, in tracing the lineage of the theme of romantic love one should not overlook the various folk songs and poems about love. In 1602, in Bibliotheca Palatina, the Palatinate library of Heidelberg, librarian Jan Gruter discovered a volume of manuscripts dating back to 950 CE (Bibliotheca Palatina digital n.d.). It was an anthology of Greek short love poems dating from 7th century BCE to 7th century CE collected to a single opus by an anonymous demiurge of the Byzantine Empire. The manuscript, which was named *Codex Palatinus Graecus 23* was, most probably, brought to the German city by an Italian professor, Emilio Porto, who taught at the University of Heidelberg for some time. His family had initially bought the volume in Ferrara from some family friends, who in turn had acquired the manuscript from Jovanni Aurispa, an Italian man of letters, who had transported it along with other collections from Istanbul (Hourmouziadis 2009, p. 72-73).

These poems exalt the feeling of love with all its tribulations, passion, happiness, and despair it

entails: "I send to you a sweet perfume and I favour the perfume and not you for you smell better than it" (p. 141), "Eros, don't let me love, or else help me be loved in return: quench the desire or offer me desire back" (p. 129), and "Two troubles pester me, penury and love; I know how to deal with the first, but I cannot suffer the fire of the second" (p. 119).[27] These poems expand their influence on much later Greek folk songs; demotic poems that are predominantly oral in form and laud romantic love in each region's dialect and idiom. They are laconic, almost elegiac. Despite their brevity, their content and form bear a great resemblance to the earlier romantic love poems. Here is an example of a love song from Rhodes in the beginning of 15th century CE belonging to a group of songs called *καταλόγια*, kataloyia, namely vulgar love songs (Politis 1973):

Αν ήξευρα, κυράτσα μου, πότε θέλεις κινήσει και πόθεν θέλεις διαβεί με τες αρχοντοπούλες, την στράταν σου να φύτεψα μηλιές και κυδωνίτσες και νεραντζούλες και κιτρές και δάφνες και μυρσίνες τον δρόμον σου τριανταφυλλιές να μη σε πιάνει ο ήλιος	If I knew, my little lady, when you want to start and where you want to go with the princesses, I'd plant apples and quinces and oranges and citruses and laurels and myrtles and roses on your way to protect you from the sun (Xrysoudakis and Floropoulou 2019, p. 303, translated by me).

The genealogy does not stop there. Oral folk songs and Byzantine poetry are attributed as successors of the ancient Greek love poetry:

> The erotic or love and desire folk song represents one of the oldest groups of folk songs. Although its temporal origin cannot be determined, certain subjects of its repertoire relate it with the ancient tradition of Archilochus' poetry (Kapsomenos 2009, p. 39).

Archilochus, a Greek poet from the island of Paros in the 8th century BCE, wrote many elegies and iambic poems, an important number of which is dedicated to love:

> Passionate love relentlessly twists a cord
> under my heart and spreads deep mist on my eyes,
> stealing the unguarded brains from my head (Barnstone 2010, p. 11).
>
> I live here miserable and broken with desire,
> pierced through to the bones by the bitterness
> of this god-given painful love.
> O comrade, this passion makes my limbs limp
> and tramples over me (p. 12).

While romantic love stricto sensu was still unknown by name, Archilochus' sentiment is a passion burning Psyche or Sir Lancelot alike. However, one may trace an important difference regarding the discourse: the latter examples of romance novels follow a much more predefined trajectory that culminates in a happy ending providing thus pleasure and satisfaction to their readers. Instead, love

[27] Translated by me.

poetry focuses on the aesthetics of the sentiment itself, which is rather sombre: Archilochus appears to suffer for his love. In that, one can discern that despite both being representations of love as an experience, they provide different experiences themselves. In romances, the narrative functions as a consolatory escape for the audience. In the poems, the pleasure may be found in the pathos itself. Yet in both cases, it is style and form that are responsible for this experience, which remains a mediated representation of love.

This can also be seen in the poems of the other very famous lyrical poet of love in ancient Greece. Sappho, the Lesbian, dedicated most of her works to love. One of the few of her poems saved to this day is the *Prayer to Aphrodite*. In the poem, Sappho calls upon the mighty goddess to appear and help her win her beloved's favour:

> On your dappled throne eternal Afroditi,
> cunning daughter of Zeus,
> I beg you, do not crush my heart
> with pain, O lady,
>
> but come here now if ever before
> you heard my voice from far away,
> and yielding left your father's house
> of gold and came,
>
> yoking birds to your chariot. Beautiful
> quick sparrows whirring on beating wings
> took you from heaven down to mid sky
> over the dark earth
>
> and soon arrived. O blessed one,
> on your deathless face a smile,
> you asked me what I am sufferin
> and why I call you,
>
> what I want most to happen in
> my crazy heart. "Whom shall I persuade
> again to take you into her love? Who,
> O Psapfo, wrongs you?
>
> If she runs away, soon she will pursue.
> If she scorns gifts, now she will bribe.
> If she doesn't love, soon she will love
> even unwillingly."
>
> Come to me now and loosen me
> from blunt agony. Labor
> and fill my heart with fire. Stand by me
> and be my ally (Barnstone 2010, p. 44).

Sappho feels love as an agony so immense that only the goddess of love and beauty can ease. How Sappho calls upon Aphrodite to help her is evidence of how important it is to her to secure the love

of the person she wants. So important in fact that she wishes she possessed magic, divine power which would enable her to make her beloved love her back despite her not wanting to. This is dictated by the irrational part of her love, which cannot accept the right of the other person to choose. At first glance, it seems that Sappho's love negates her favourite's right to personhood. Sappho does not hesitate to sacrifice the other woman's freedom of will to have her all to herself.

Yet, it is exactly in Sappho's tyrannical wish that the extent of her love is established. She is not like Aristippus of Cyrene, the hedonist philosopher, who when asked how he did not mind that hetaera Lais of Corinth did not love him notoriously answered: "Also the wine and fish do not love me, but I enjoy them both" (Lampe 2015, p. 106). On the contrary, Sappho does mind. She wants the love of this anonymous woman to the extent of belittling herself to the status of a beggar of love. It is not always easy to accept the other person's ability not to love us back and this suffering permeates Sappho's prayer; a much more brutal account of love in comparison with the one portrayed in the romances. At the same time, it is due to this agony that the extent and power of the feeling that consumes Sappho are revealed: a love that shares its resonance with Psyche and Sir Lancelot.

3.3. Epic Love

This experience goes further back still. In Homer's *Iliad*, just before going out of the walls to face Achilles, Hector bids his wife, Andromache, goodbye. It is known that he will most probably not survive this battle so Andromache begs him not to go, for without him she cannot endure fate and life. Hector, being a great warrior, denies; his honour is above everything else, no matter that he is fully aware that both he and eventually Troy will fall. Remarkably, neither of these are his prime concern:

> The fatal Day draws on, when I must fall;
> And Universal Ruine cover all.
> Not Troy itself, tho' built by Hands Divine,
> Nor Priam, nor his People, nor his Line,
> My Mother, nor my Brothers of Renown,
> Whose Valour yet defends th' unhappy Town,
> Not these, nor all their Fates which I foresee,
> Are half of that concern I have for thee (Dryden 2013, p. 850).

Above his life, his country, and his family, Hector is most concerned about his wife. His feeling for her is so important to be included in the same dialectics with his duty to honour. This instance is but a fleeting moment since *Iliad* is an epic concerned with war and battle and not a romance. Yet the representation of love is still there, almost intact for four thousand years. Despite the differences in technology and ethics and customs, humans of the 12th century BCE are portrayed to be sharing the same sentiment of attachment and the crises thereof as we do today.

This is arguable the reason why human pathos, love included, continues to move contemporary mass audiences and is successfully mediated in different forms. In the popular movie *300* (Snyder 2007), which tells the story of the Battle of Thermopylae based on the graphic novel by Frank Miller and Lynn Varley (1998), Leonida's (Gerard Butler) relationship with his wife, Queen Gorgo (Lena Headey), is depicted in the most favourable colours: they appear as conjugal partners that share deep love, passion, and respect for each other. It is against the background of this love that Leonida's sacrifice reaches its heights. It is most revealing that in his last moments before dying, having given his last breath for the honour of his city, he exclaims: "My Queen, my wife, my love" (Snyder 2007, 01:42:49-01:43:12). Through this, his character is bestowed humanness. He is not a war machine devoid of emotions. He hurts and despite doing his duty to his homeland he still regrets the loss of his life. He is the King, but he is also a husband, and in the end, he is above all a human being. It is his humanity, evident in his love, which makes his loss so admirable, virtuous, and resonating.

Indeed, epic narratives usually utilise romance and romantic love to make their characters more sympathetic, predominantly in popular texts. In the film trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings* (Jackson 2001-2003), the love between Aragorn (Viggo Mortensen) and Arwen (Liv Tyler) is acted out in very limited screen time, especially if we take into consideration the length of the series. This does not affect its impact on the narrative. Their love stays strong despite all the struggles they have to endure up to the point of the ultimate sacrifice: Arwen gives up her eternal life to be with Aragorn. Her love for him changes her in every way possible, to the point of no reason. When Aragorn protests saying that she cannot give away her immortality for him, her answer reveals how unique and valuable he is to her: "It is mine to give to whom I will. Like my heart" (Jackson 2001, 01:37:11-01:37:17).[28]

3.4. Love across Time and Space

Tolkien's story takes place in mythical ancient times but that does not affect the experience of love for his characters, in the same way that the depiction of love has continued since the time of Homeric epics to this day. Diane Ackerman in her book *Natural History of Love* (1995) traces it even earlier:

> Egyptologists have found fifty-five anonymous love poems, on papyri and vases, dating

[28] A similar plot point is used in the movie adaptation of Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (Jackson 2012-2014). Even though the initial story does not contain any sort of romantic involvement between any of the characters, in the movie series the story focuses quite strongly on an original romance between characters Tauriel (Evangeline Lilly) and Kili (Aidan Turner).

> back to around 1300 B.C. Certainly there were poems written earlier; but papyri and vases are extremely perishable. Although we don't know the authors of the poems, they were most likely written by both men and women (p. 31).

These poems describe a love that burns the ancient and contemporary soul alike. Ackerman references two of them. The first one, *Conversations in Courtship*, is a hymn to the idolisation of one's lover:

> More lovely than all other womanhood, luminous, perfect,
> A star coming over the sky-line at new year, a good year,
> Splendid in colours, with allure in the eye's turn.
> Her lips are enchantment, her neck the right length and her breasts a marvel;
> Her hair lapis lazuli in its glitter, her arms more splendid than gold.
> Her fingers make me see petals, the lotus' are like that.
> Her flanks are modeled as should be, her legs beyond all other beauty.
> Noble her walking (vera incessu)
> My heart would be a slave should she enfold me (p. 31).

For the poet, their lover is unlike any other person. Their love for her makes them see things in a different way transforming them to a slave of her heart. Their account brings to mind Shakespeare's sonnet number 130:

> My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
> Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
> If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
> If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
> I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
> But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
> And in some perfumes is there more delight
> Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
> I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
> That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
> I grant I never saw a goddess go;
> My mistress when she walks treads on the ground.
> And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
> As any she belied with false compare (Duncan-Jones 1997, p. 375).

Understandably, there are discrepancies between the two accounts. In the first poem, the Egyptian poet sees their lover as everything good and beautiful in this world. Shakespeare takes a more objective stance and sees his lover for all her faults and weaknesses. Yet, in both poems love is portrayed as a transformative power that makes the beholder change their perception. In *Conversations*, love makes the poet see their love interest as the best there is. In the sonnet, love makes the poet love his chosen one despite her not having any of the exquisite attributes of the things he has compared her with; a result that makes the power of love all the greater, which for Shakespeare is by heaven.

Moving on a few centuries later, Lord Byron's *She Walks in Beauty* (2006) is a more subtle account of more or less the same sentiment:

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express,
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!

Byron's appreciation of the woman's beauty is undeniable. He sees her under a very favourable light, tender and heavenly. In this poem, love is rather implied than outspokenly stated. We do not witness a fully fleshed acted out romance. Instead, we get a glimpse of the psyche of an enthralled admirer. Yet the extent of his admiration and the language used for the expression of this admiration are the markers of an enamoured passion that is exquisite and grandiose, above the mundane.

Love, much more expressive and descriptive, is likewise the subject matter of the *Song of Songs* found in the *Old Testament* of all sources:

You are as beautiful as Tirzah, my darling,
as lovely as Jerusalem,
as majestic as troops with banners.
Turn your eyes from me;
they overwhelm me.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
descending from Gilead.
Your teeth are like a flock of sheep
coming up from the washing.
Each has its twin,
not one of them is missing.
Your temples behind your veil
are like the halves of a pomegranate.
Sixty queens there may be,
and eighty concubines,
and virgins beyond number;
but my dove, my perfect one, is unique,
the only daughter of her mother,
the favourite of the one who bore her.
The young women saw her and called her blessed;
the queens and concubines praised her (Bible, 6, n.d.).

Quite of an erotic poem, *Song of Songs* breathes romantic love: the lover sings his beloved's traits

that make him see her as the most beautiful being on earth in comparison with other people, nature, and all pleasures. The poet is so taken with his darling that he feels overwhelmed by her. His love for her is like a power he cannot control and withhold. Contrary to Shakespeare's, this beloved is indeed worthy of her lover's adoration. She is unique, an only daughter, the favourite of her father, praised by her coevals, queens, and concubines. She has enough merit to be not the mere object of desire but a person with covetable, superb qualities.

Even further back, we have *The Love Song for Shu-Shin*, arguably the oldest love poem ever found, written circa 2000 BCE. Engraved in Sumerian in a tablet discovered in an archaeological site in modern-day Iraq (Kramer 1981), this poem is once more a lover's devotion. Possibly a prayer before a sacred wedding ceremony, whereby King Shu-Shin copulates with one of the priestesses of Inanna, the Mesopotamian goddess of love and beauty, the poem is strong both in erotic and love themes and in its function as a religious ritual for prosperity (Mark 2014):

> Bridegroom, dear to my heart,
> Goodly is your beauty, honeysweet,
> Lion, dear to my heart,
> Goodly is your beauty, honeysweet.
> You have captivated me, let me stand tremblingly before you.
> Bridegroom, I would be taken by you to the bedchamber,
> You have captivated me, let me stand tremblingly before you.
> Lion, I would be taken by you to the bedchamber
> Bridegroom, let me caress you,
> My precious caress is more savory than honey,
> In the bedchamber, honey filled,
> Let us enjoy your goodly beauty,
> Lion, let me caress you,
> My precious caress is more savory than honey.
> Bridegroom, you have taken your pleasure of me,
> Tell my mother, she will give you delicacies,
> My father, he will give you gifts.
> Your spirit, I know where to cheer your spirit,
> Bridegroom, sleep in our house until dawn,
> Your heart, I know where to gladden your heart,
> Lion, sleep in our house until dawn.
> You, because you love me,
> Give me pray of your caresses,
> My lord god, my lord protector,
> My ShuSin
> who gladdens Enlil's heart,
> Give me pray of your caresses. (Kramer 1981 p. 246).

Interestingly, here it is the woman that sings her love and passion for her soon to be lover, her lion, in a fashion not unlike April Stevens' *Teach me tiger* almost four thousand years later (Tempo 1960). Stevens asks her tiger to teach her how to please him as the woman in the poem asks her lion to take her to the bedchamber and have her stand trembling before him. In the ancient poem and the modern popular song, both women want their lovers to show them their passion because

they are so deeply in love with them. They want nothing and no one else. Stevens' lips belong to her lover alone and in the poem, the King is both the woman's god and protector. Yet the role of the woman is not passive. The priestess asks her lion to let her caress him, cheer his spirit, and gladden his heart. Stevens, on the other hand, is ready to take matters into her own hands if the tiger does not come through: "Teach me tiger… or I'll teach you."

In more eloquent words, we see Emily Dickinson's desire reaching the thrall of love, where the physical and the sublime coincide:

> Wild Nights – Wild Nights!
> Were I with thee
> Wild Nights should be
> Our luxury!
>
> Futile – the winds –
> To a heart in port –
> Done with the compass –
> Done with the chart!
>
> Rowing in Eden –
> Ah, the sea!
> Might I moor – Tonight –
> In thee! (2003, p. 316)

For Dickinson, her beloved is both haven and heaven, experienced in wild nights of luxury. She does not need anything else, for in her love she has found her destination. It matters little if her devotion is of physical or divine nature; they both merge to the utmost experience of sentiment (Paglia 1990).

As evident, the depiction of all aspects of romantic love has taken different forms and shapes over time: varying from the religious, to the referential, and the abstract, from the erotic to the transcendental, and from orality to poems, dramas, and novels; affecting mythical kings and goddesses, the archaic, medieval, and contemporary soul alike. Notwithstanding the differences in execution, romantic love is proven to be a constant. Indeed, it is predominantly in the romance novels that love became the subject matter of a self-contained narrative, yet the feeling and experience of love perseveres as representation across time and space.

In this sense, romantic love as the representation of love is shown to be a continuous journey from the ancient, Hellenistic, and Roman periods to the Byzantine Empire and finally Occitania from which it has shaped the Western notion about love to this day.[29] *The Sorceress* is a poem by

[29] Even in the much less probable case that the cultivation of romantic love in Occitania was completely a product in vacuum, the similarities between the works cannot be ignored.

Theocritus written in the first quarter of the third century BCE. In it, Simaetha is a woman who laments the rejection of her ex-lover Delphis and conspires with her servant to perform a black magic ritual, which will bring him back to her:

> Where are the bay-leaves, Thestylis, and the charms?
> Fetch all; with fiery wool the caldron crown;
> Let glamour win me back my false lord's heart!
> Twelve days the wretch hath not come nigh to me,
> Nor made enquiry if I die or live,
> Nor clamoured (oh unkindness!) at my door.
> Sure his swift fancy wanders otherwhere,
> The slave of Aphrodite and of Love (Edmonds 1919, p. 27).

Simaetha's grieving as a lover scorned feels as contemporary as ever (Hunter 1996). Renditions of her experience can be found in multiple instances. Almost two thousand years later, in 1170 CE, Beatriz Comtessa de Dia sings for her lover who does not reciprocate her feelings the only poem of the era by a trobairitz which has been preserved to this day with its accompanying music:

> A chantar m'er de so qu'ieu non volria
> tan me rancur de lui cui sui amia,
> car ieu l'am mais que nuilla ren que sia:
> vas lui no .m val merces ni cortesía
> ni ma beltatz ni mos pret ni mos sens,
> c'atressi .m sui enganad'e trahïa
>
> I am obliged to sing of that which I would not,
> So bitter am I over the one whose love I am,
> For I love him more than anything;
> With him mercy and courtliness are of no avail
> Not my beauty, nor my merit nor my good sense,
> For I am deceived and betrayed (Bruckner, Shepard, and White 2000, Poem 4).

Paz (1995) comments that *The Sorceress* is as common as it can get; an evergreen sentiment of every woman of all times: "She is a commoner, a young woman such as exist by the thousands in every city of the world, ever since there have been cities: today Simaetha could live in New York, Buenos Aires, or Prague" (p. 57); and sure enough is *The Sorceress* not another Anna Karenina (Tolstoy 2014), Emma Bovary (Flaubert 2011), Catherine Earnshaw (Brontë 2009), or Carrie Bradshaw of *Sex and the City* (Star 1998-2004)?

3.5. Beauty and the Beast

Indeed, this continuation becomes more intricate when one notes how romantic love has survived through early modernity and the industrial era to contemporary times. An even more striking example can be found in the fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast* and the great resemblance it bears to *Cupid and Psyche*. Written by the French author Gabrielle–Suzanne de Villeneuve in 1740, the story is strikingly similar: the youngest daughter of a family, so comely to be called Beauty, is willingly given to a monster, the Beast, to save her father. Contrary to her original fears, the Beast does not harm her. He is rather kind to her, offering her lavish gifts and fulfilling all her desires. He asks her every day to marry him. She refuses because she feels no romantic love towards him. Instead, she dreams about a handsome prince, whom she believes the Beast must be holding prisoner somewhere inside his castle.

At some point, Beauty feeling homesick asks Beast's permission to go visit her family. Beast agrees on the condition that she will return in one week. When Beauty is reunited with her family, her sisters are all jealous of seeing her prosperity living with the Beast. They pretend to be saddened by her departure to make her stay longer thinking that if she is late to return then Beast will send her away. Beauty is naively convinced. However, through a magic mirror, she sees how Beast is faring and finds him to be half-dead from sorrow. She immediately returns to him and tells him she loves him. It is then revealed that Beast is the handsome prince cursed by an evil faerie to be a Beast until he found true love. They consequently marry and live happily ever after.

There are of course alterations, but the basic core of the narrative is unchanged: a very beautiful girl is given to an unknown stranger, who first appears to be a monster, but whom she gradually grows to love, thus transforming the monster into a prince, "beautiful as the Cupid is painted" (2016, p. 31). Beauty's love comes almost too late, but because of her perseverance, she manages to save the situation just in time. Her love is far from mere chance; apart from being praised for her physical appearance, she is continuously exalted for her kind disposition. She always cares for others, she is grateful, and she is modest. She has all the great qualities of a deeply altruistic person. It is because of her character that she manages to love a monster and overcome his appearance. Seeing all the similarities, it comes as no surprise that *Beauty and*

the Beast was indeed directly inspired by *Cupid and Psyche* (Windling 2014). What is extraordinary is the fact that an author of 18th-century France found inspiration in a Latin novel of the 1st century CE. Moreover, this tale not only became vastly popular during its time but, in slight variations, it has survived up to this day.[30] There are innumerable romance books and films that constitute retellings of the story of *Beauty and the Beast*.[31] The popularity and perseverance of this story make it undeniable that our contemporary culture has room for such an ancient understanding of love, which may be traced even further back in time.

3.6. Romantic Love as Cultural Universal

Scientists from the New University of Lisbon and Durham University researching the history of fairy tales have found out that "a substantial number of magic tales have existed in Indo-European oral traditions long before they were first written down" (Da Silva and Tehrani 2015, p. 8). Interestingly enough, one of their examples is *Beauty and the Beast*. They, too, state that although as a story the fairy tale was first written down in the eighteenth century, its storyline is much older. Their findings suggest that it originated significantly earlier than Greek and Roman antiquity. Specifically, it "can be securely traced back to the emergence of the major western Indo-European subfamilies as distinct lineages between 2500 and 6000 years ago, and may have even been present in the last common ancestor of Western Indo-European languages" (p. 8).[32]

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that this is true also for non-Western languages and cultures. The story

[30] This can be said for other romantic works, so it is not the case of this particular instance being singular in its merit. The 1995 movie *First Knight* (Zucker), for example, is an adaptation of *Sir Lancelot*, starring Richard Gere in the role of the heroic knight. Interestingly enough, the narrative of the movie combines elements from both *Cupid and Psyche* and Chretien de Troyes' work referenced in the previous chapter. In the beginning of the movie, Lancelot is a conniving swashbuckler with no stable loyalties. When he meets Guinevere (Julia Ormond) for the first time, he saves her from an ambush but also kisses her without her permission. In that he is much unlike his originator, courteous Sir Lancelot, and much like the promiscuous Cupid. Just like Cupid, he falls in love with Guinevere once he gets to know her better as a person, i.e. to know her soul. After that, his love for her makes him change his renegade ways and become a proper knight. Guinevere originally mistrusts Lancelot. She takes him for the undependable person he is, unbearably vain and sure of himself. Her physical attraction to him notwithstanding, she thinks he only wants to take advantage of her, thus seeing him, figuratively, as a monster that will hurt her – Guinevere is a maiden lady in Arthurian times so the extent of her fear is understandable. It is through multiple encounters when she is allowed to look into his deeper character that she sees him for the kind man he is. Subsequently, she falls in love with him in return. After some turbulences and obstacles, their love ends with a happily ever after; a different kind of happily ever after in comparison to the original story however. As was shown before, in courtly love adultery was accepted because true love could never be found inside marriage. The contemporary ethics of the movie would not allow for a love like that. Instead, the plot demands of a love much more like the one between Cupid and Psyche, a happily married couple that is. The solution is given by killing off the character of King Arthur (Sean Connery), who seconds before dying gives his blessing to Lancelot and Guinevere's union. Hence, the film establishes the happy ending without the unacceptable adultery for our contemporary ethics.

[31] As a matter of fact, in 2017 Disney released a live-action remake of its homonymous cartoon movie, which grossed more than 1.2 billion dollars worldwide (Box Office Mojo n.d.).

[32] Indicatively, versions of the story of *Beauty and the Beast* exist in Italian and Norse folklore, among others, in the tales *The Pig King* and *East of the Sun, West of the Moon* respectively (Fallon 2017).

of Ye Xian is the Eastern counterpart of Cinderella. It is arguably one of the earliest stories of Cinderella going back to at least 9th century CE and in different variations, it can be found in many Eastern regions: Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Tibet, and others (Beauchamp 2011).[33] The tale is archetypical: a young orphan girl, poor and mistreated by her stepmother and stepsister(s) but exquisitely beautiful and kind attends an official ball, where she loses her slipper. The king/prince finds the slipper and wants to marry the girl to whom it belongs. Despite her foster family's malicious interference, Ye Xian's identity is revealed to the king, who falls in love with her and takes her as his wife.

Here we find once more romantic love as a tale of success through struggle: two people fall in love and manage to persevere against all odds. Another important similarity with *Sir Lancelot*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and the other romances is that this love is not based on material gains. The king loves Ye Xian despite her semi-slave status. In the Chinese version, her uniqueness is attributed, in part, to the extreme smallness of her slipper; lotus feet being the beauty standard of the day (Windling 2007). This cultural phenomenon has ceased to exist and it was never practiced in Europe. However, the slipper remains in the story as a plot device even to this day. This shows that romantic narratives are very apt in appropriating and localising details and parts of the story without altering their basic characteristics, even between distant cultures.

In *The Mind and Its Stories*, Hogan (2003) having surveyed a large part of the world literature contends that romantic love stories "not only recur across all or nearly all traditions, they constitute a high percentage of canonical stories in those traditions" (p. 100). To the same conclusion points the study of anthropologists Jankowiak and Fischer. Their ethnographic record (1992) uncovered instances of romantic love in almost 90% of the cultures studied. Similarly, Gottschall and Nordlund (2006) studied folk tales from all inhabited continents by searching referential coders of romantic love. Their findings showed that almost every cultural area features references to romantic love.[34] They concluded that their study offers strong support that romantic love is a "statistical cultural universal" with an increased probability that it is also an "absolute cultural universal," meaning that it is evident in samples from cultures the world over (2006, p. 457). Their study is based on the view that romantic love is a cultural universal because it pertains to a psychological evolution common in members of the Homo sapiens group. In the next chapter, I will analyse what exactly

[33] There is also a version of a Greek Cinderella named Rhodopis dating back to early first century CE (McDaniel 2016).

[34] Except for the Philippines. This exception they attribute to the fact that they examined only three tales from the Philippines so it may have been a statistical bypass instead of a cultural one. As a matter of fact, there are indeed elements of romantic love in the story Aponibolinayen and the Sun (in Cook-Cole 1916, p. 6-11) from the Philippines, in which Ini-init, the Sun, falls in love with a very beautiful girl, Aponibolinayen, and takes her as his wife. After struggles and tensions including enchanted sticks, magical transformations, and angry relatives, the couple lives happily ever after.

it is meant with that.

This will allow me to show that love as representation is a constant companion of all human culture and, thus, its inclusion cannot be avoided in games. Moreover, the fact that love as representation is a coded, structured experience shows once again that games can afford romantic love. It is true that, unlike the plethora of forms we traced in this chapter, love in games has been mediated much more limitedly. This is still, however, a question of representation, thus codification. In literature, it is predominantly a matter of language. In games, the experience is much more multifaceted because of their multimedial quality. Yet, games can include romantic love beyond the restrictive design of challenge discussed in the previous chapter, an argument which will be given more space in later chapters. Before that, I will first show the connection between love as experience and love as representation.

Summary

In this chapter, romantic love was traced chronologically and topologically as a cultural universal. Starting from the concept of romantic love as this was shaped in a cultural paradigm in 12th century CE South France, I followed the argument that romantic love can be found in much earlier sources and also in cultures geographically scattered. In actuality, romantic love was proven to be a constant and according to anthropologists and ethnographers it is found in all known human cultures. This is an important facet for the current discussion because it brings us closer to understanding what the experience of love entails as shown in representations thereof. Despite the differences in execution, romantic love affects all humans and, as such, it is not a cultural construct per se but rather a shared human experience.

Chapter 4

The Evolution of Love

Quiero hacer contigo lo
que la primavera hace con los cerezos.
Pablo Neruda

Don't Make Love (Maggese 2017) is a game, which puts the player in the role of a mantis. Being in a committed relationship with another mantis, the player has to overcome a considerable personal dilemma: make love or not. As per the insect's observed behaviour, making love for a mantis is closely related to death and sacrifice: the male mantis has to mount a female mantis and after copulation risk the danger of being cannibalised by the female. In the game, the player must have a heartfelt discussion with their romantic partner and through their dialogue interaction reach a consensus regarding the future of their relationship: should they proceed with the carnal manifestation of their sentiment or retain a platonic connection that, albeit less satisfactory, is safer?

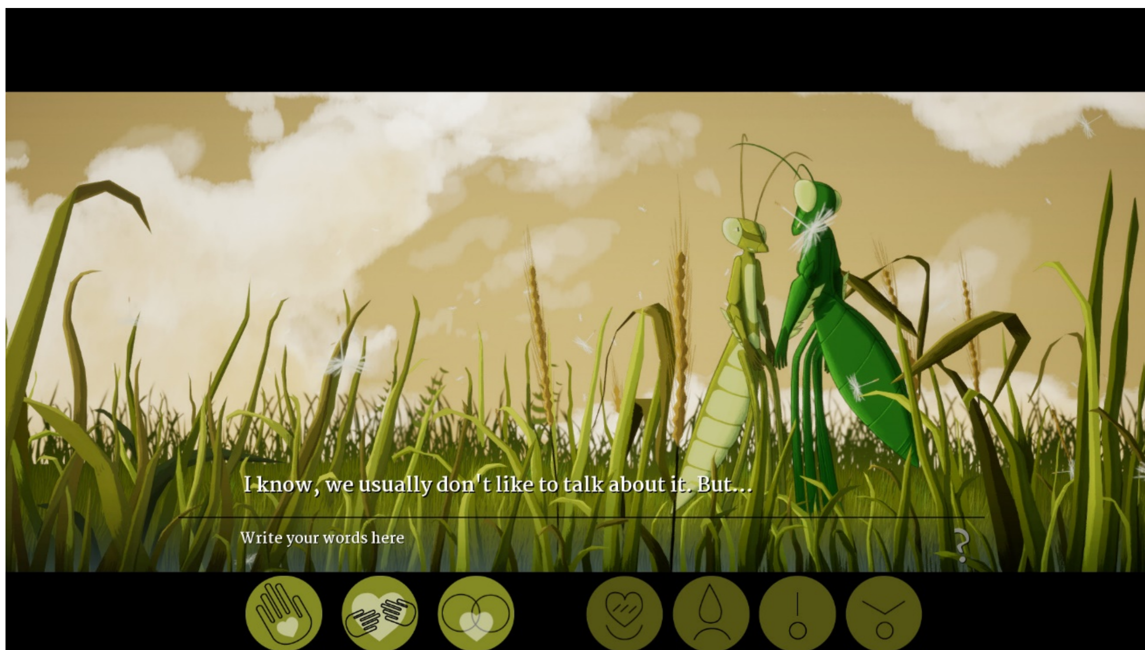

Figure 5 - *Don't Make Love*

The player can play either as a female or a male mantis and can type in commands, choose one of the three affectionate options, caress, hug, and kiss, or the four non-verbal responses, happy, sad, surprised, and upset, to communicate their thoughts to their partner. The NPC corresponds respectively and they can

eventually agree to keep a non-sexual relationship, move on to the next stage after the player has managed to earn their trust by showing understanding and care, or end the relationship if the player is callous and rude in their talk. As such, love is portrayed in the interplay of a free choice of companionship and/or an instinctual mandate: one can choose the latter at the expense of emotional connection and self-awareness, the former at the expense of intimacy and attachment, or strike the fine and dynamic balance between the two. In the case of a mantis, this is related to immediate survival. In the case of humans, things are not that different.

Despite its premise, the game is an allegory and commentary on the human condition and the romantic notion of oscillating between free will and biological need that finds its apotheosis in the concept of romantic love. This is because romantic love, as we will see in this chapter, concerns a very basic human system, that of reproduction. At the same time, humans as self-aware and conscious beings do not blindly succumb to their sexual drive alone. Indeed, they need to form bonds with their partner, something that leaves them vulnerable to imbalanced reciprocation and unrequitedness. Love is one of the few circumstances in which the satisfaction of our desires depends so inexorably on another person.

When we fall in love we need to perform, sort to speak, a leap of faith. Romantic relationships are not straightforward; they demand reflection, communication, acceptance, and maturity in an ongoing process that includes the beloved in all their uniqueness and independence. It is through equality, consideration, and affection that trust is built in a relationship; trust that the other person will consciously mitigate the consequences of the risk we take by caring for them and loving them. As will be shown in the following chapter, love is a system of attraction and attachment that enables our species to synergise and successfully procreate. Humans spend resources when in love so love always contains a degree of risk: if the other person does not reciprocate or decide to unilaterally sever the bond, we experience pain and despair exactly because a part of us has been forever lost. We allocated time and energy to a potential relationship that will bear no fruit.

This risk is further accentuated due to the fact that, unlike other species, humans do not possess unequivocal signs of romantic attachment. Unlike dating sims mechanics, when people fall in love, they do not show a pink heart above their head or wear a red ribbon around their wrist, as we will see in a later chapter when discussing *Dragon Age 2*. For humans, love is not mere instinct. It is conscious companionship, caring, and sharing. It is a psychological need as much as it is a biological one. Those that experience love must be aware of their feelings, in the sense that their cognitive capacities are involved in the process. More so, a romantic bond needs to be communicated to the other person as well. In that, love is a complex phenomenon that presupposes the transformation of sentiment to cognition, awareness, and, furthermore, expression and

recount. For that, the experience of love is always inexorably linked with its discursive manifestation, thus codification, and representation. This is why the experience of love can, in turn, be influenced by representation, code, and discourse. As will be shown in this chapter, love is indeed a multifaceted complex amalgamation of biology, psychology, and social situatedness.

4.1. Love as Guarantee for the Species

Evolutionary psychologists, biologists, and neuroscientists contend that love is an ingrained brain system that allows humans to reproduce more efficiently and successfully (Fisher et al. 2002; Bartels and Zeki 2000; Beauregarda et al. 2009; Langeslag et al. 2012; Platek and Shackelford 2006; Fischer 1997; Meyer et al. 2011; Jones 1996; Sternberg and Weis 2006). In this, humans share a common genetic history with other mammals. In actuality, there are "three discrete, interrelated emotion–motivation systems in the mammalian brain for mating, reproduction, and parenting: lust, attraction, and attachment (Fisher 1997). According to this, lust is the manifestation of sexual energy that results in the reproductive process. Attraction to a specific mating partner enables individuals to conserve time and energy. Finally, attachment plays a crucial role in the efficient upbringing of children since a family consisting of two parents can allocate more resources to their young.

This is a discerning point in hominid evolution; a process which presumably began as early as 3.5 million years ago as the brain began to exhibit some characteristically human traits (Fisher et al. 2002). Scientists do not quite agree which factors resulted in this development but the most prominent candidates are concealed ovulation, the long time for the rearing of the offspring, and the necessity of coexistence into human societies. Arguably, all these correlate but it is difficult to state which one came first. Burley (1979) points out how concealed ovulation in human females was the catalyst for establishing the human species as monogamous or at least polygynous but rarely polyandrous. As Burch and Gallup Jr. explain (2019):

> The loss of ovulatory cues greatly reduces the likelihood of conception as a consequence of a random sexual encounter because there is no way to synchronize insemination with ovulation. In the absence of reliable ovulatory signals the only way to synchronize insemination with ovulation is to engage in high-frequency copulation over an extended period of time. Indeed, the reason humans practice patterns of continuous breeding (where breeding proclivity is no longer tied to season, cycles, or signals) is to accommodate reproduction under conditions in which ovulation is concealed (p. 160).[35]

Daniels (1983) counterargues that monogamy preceded concealed ovulation and it was estrus instead that became adaptive to ensure monogamy and thus social concord. Humans need coexistence to survive and revealing ovulation causes disruption and conflict since it stimulates reproductive aggression and rivalry.

[35] Indeed, it is suggested that for a big part in early human history, humans were ignorant of the sexual causation of reproduction, which explains the various deities of fertility and all the sanctuaries and temples devoted to them (Lentakis 2000; Ferguson 1985; Barbara 2000).

Estrous females were less chosen as mates because their presence threatened social cohesion. Moreover, the offspring of estrous females would have less chance of surviving due to lack of male protection. Mates of estrous females could never be sure of their offspring's paternity so they would not care for them. In other species, the females alone are capable of providing for their young, but human children demand protection and caring much more intensely and for a much longer period. In essence, both parents are needed for the rearing of the children, therefore the males have to be sure of the paternity:

> Hominid males and females that cooperated in forming a pair bond were capable of raising more than one young at a time. […] Monogamous pairs could raise two or three young simultaneously. Males not willing to invest in parenting were disfavoured because their offspring were few and less able to survive. Males could most successfully propagate their genes by investing parentally (p. 76).

Whatever the actual reason or reasons for this evolutionary development and the order of their appearance, the important conclusion for the current discussion is that love is before everything else a biological trait connected with reproduction. Therefore, it is not only a cultural universal but first and foremost a human universal. The other interesting point is that love is intrinsically connected to social cohesion and not merely reproduction. This goes against many theorists, like Schopenhauer (2016), who, despite treating love as the most important aim in a person's life, only connects it to sexual desire for a certain individual with the purpose of conceiving the best possible offspring:

> The ultimate aim of all love-affairs, whether played in sock or in buskin, is actually more important than all other aims in man's life; and therefore it is quite worthy of the profound seriousness with which everyone pursues it. What is decided by it is nothing less than the *composition of the next generation* (p. 534, emphasis in the original).[36]

For Schopenhauer, love is a natural drive towards successful reproduction: "For all amorousness is rooted in the sexual impulse alone, is in fact absolutely only a more closely determined, specialised, and indeed, in the strictest sense, individualised sexual impulse, however ethereally it may deport itself" (p. 533). On the contrary, as biology shows us, our mating mechanism does not stop at a single union, as Schopenhauer would have it, after which we wake up out of the delusion of love unsatisfied and disappointed:

> Thus, because the passion rested on a delusion that presented as valuable for the individual what is of value only for the species, the deception is bound to vanish after the end of the species has been attained. The spirit of the species, which had taken possession of the individual, sets him free again. Forsaken by this

[36] Also: "In the foregoing discussion, we have seen that the intensity of the state of being in love increases with its individualization, since we showed how the physical constitution of two individuals can be such that, for the purpose of restoring the type of the species as far as possible, the one individual is quite specially and completely the complement of the other, who therefore desires it exclusively. Even in this case there comes about a considerable passion; and this at once gains a nobler and more sublime appearance from the very fact that it is directed to an individual object and to this alone, and thus appears, so to speak, at the special order of the species. For the opposite reason, mere sexual impulse is base and ignoble, because it is directed to all without individualization, and strives to maintain the species merely as regards quantity, with little consideration for quality. But individualization and with it the intensity of being in love can reach so high a degree that without their satisfaction all the good things of the world and even life itself lose their value. It is then a desire that exceeds in intensity every other; hence it makes a person ready for any sacrifice, and, if its fulfilment remains forever denied, can lead to madness or suicide" (p. 549).

> spirit, the individual falls back into his original narrowness and neediness, and sees with surprise that, after so high, heroic, and infinite an effort, nothing has resulted for his pleasure but what is afforded by any sexual satisfaction. Contrary to expectation, he finds himself no happier than before; he notices that he has been the dupe of the will of the species (p. 557).

Instead, love stretches over a longer period. This is also in accordance with the fact that this bond of attraction and attachment lasts approximately four years (Fischer 2002), which is a sufficient time frame for the human child to be fully developed. After that period, mates, if not bound by other children or psychological and social attachment, will tend to part ways to find new partners and increase the biological variation of the community's gene pool, which in turn ensures greater success for future generations. This is why, biologically, humans are considered serial rather than lifelong monogamists (ibid.).

This is not only because, as already argued, concealed ovulation demands intense cohabitation between mates. It is also because males have to make sure that their children would be taken care of. Unlike other species, increased intelligence makes humans much more egocentric. In terms of reproduction, this translates to females trying to get rid of unwanted infants before or after birth. Since females are the ones bearing the children, the avoidance of pain and the increased risk of death during labour made females unwilling to get pregnant or continue a pregnancy. Moreover, children have a high economic demand, which a woman could not bear alone, thus she may many a time turn to infanticide to escape the burden.

> The importance of the force of natural selection on humans is complicated by at least two human attributes: intelligence and culture. The evolution of a large cerebrum had many biologically adaptive results, but some effects, such as heightened self-awareness, rejection of mortality, and pain avoidance, may cause humans to circumvent risks in nonadaptive ways. Since humans do not consciously attempt to maximize their biological fitness, the egocentric (consciously self-centred) human will may often be at odds with natural selection, which operates on reproductive success and not on health, happiness, or longevity per se (Burley 1979, pp. 841-842).

As Burley's theory suggests, it is the permanent presence of males throughout the process that ensures successful reproduction and rearing of children. Males protected women during and after birth from external dangers but also provided for them. Thus they made sure that their woman did not feel the need to be liberated from the responsibility of the child. Furthermore, the father's presence dissuaded other males from copulating with the mother of their children, which in turn also increased their offspring's rate of survival. Since a new child would mean a division of the available resources, splitting food for example between two children now instead of one, this could potentially lead to intentional, from the mother or the new father, or unintentional, due to lack of resources, infanticide. Burley speculates that cultural norms and laws in the patriarchal paradigm eventually proscribed contraception and abortion, a phenomenon evident up to this day:

> Under these circumstances, male egocentric interest was not necessarily best served by contraception, and therefore males could not be expected to approve of it. If male egocentric interest benefited by having many children (an attitude also biologically adaptive), then males should have

> attempted to prevent women from practicing birth control. This could have been effected by creating cultural norms or laws proscribing contraception and/or abortion (p. 844).

Love, then, was a natural development that ensured successful reproduction. Since egocentrism, especially from the woman's part, and biological reasons such as concealed ovulation made seasonal mating unsustainable, love became nature's way of counterbalancing these obstacles. The mates who stayed together longer had more heightened lust, attraction, and attachment responses. Simultaneously, mates who stayed together longer procreated more successfully. Thus, natural selection turned love into an evolutionary advantage since it were the genes of people who loved that passed onto the next generations.

4.2. The Physiology of Love

From the above discussion, two interesting points arise. First, that it is natural for us to love, care, and form attachments with other people. Second, that being in love, while it presupposes higher intelligence, to a great extent works against it. If we are to understand intelligence with increased self-awareness and egocentrism, then love is a state during which our cognitive capacities in favour of our own personal good are negated. It is as if when we are in love, love itself becomes the driving force of our behaviour, not unlike Larry Laffer from the eponymous games whose adventures are all inspired by their protagonist's desire to find love. In point of fact, human evolution has developed many mechanisms to ensure this. Research has shown that love generates in our brains the release of dopamine, which brings elation, exhilaration, addiction, and it is considered as a reward mechanism (Fischer 2002). Ultimately, our brain rewards us when we fall in love. It is a way to ensure that we will bond with a mate and therefore reproduce.

As Fischer's approach more comprehensively shows, symptoms associated with love can be matched to specific brain functions, specifically the increased levels of central dopamine and/or norepinephrine:

> Elevated concentrations of central dopamine are associated with exposure to a novel environment as well as with heightened and focused attention. These parallels suggest that increased levels of central dopamine contribute to the lover's focused attention on the beloved and the lover's tendency to regard the beloved as unique. Elevated levels of central norepinephrine are associated with increased memory for new stimuli. They explain the tendency to dwell on specific traits of the beloved, usually the most positive, and specific moments linked with the beloved (p. 415).

This increase in dopamine is linked with many psychosomatic feelings such as exhilaration, euphoria, increased energy, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, trembling, a pounding heart, accelerated breathing, anxiety, panic, and/or fear (Colle and Wise 1988; Fisher 1997; Kruk & Pycock 1991; Post, Weiss, and Pert 1988; Wise 1988). Respectively, elevated levels of central norepinephrine can explain intrusive thinking, i.e. the lover's obsessive musing on the beloved (Fischer 1997). Brain activity also explains longing and infatuation over unrequited love because when a reward is delayed, dopamine-producing neurons in the midbrain increase their productivity (Fischer et al. 2002; Martin-Soelch et al. 2001; Schultz 2000).

At the same time, our physiology has adapted to prevent potential threats to our love relationship. Meyer et al. (2011) have theorised the neural basis of the derogation of attractive alternatives in romantic relationships, which means that individuals already in a love bond devalue the attractiveness of other potential partners, presumably in a motivated attempt to protect the bond: "the derogation of attractive alternatives corresponds with increasing levels of commitment, suggesting that as motivation to protect a relationship increases, the tendency to minimise the threat of an alternative increases" (p. 492).

All in all, it appears that being in love is a state of excess. Fischer (2002) notes that drugs like amphetamine and cocaine have similar results because they function more or less on the same principle; they increase dopamine in the brain. Equally, people in the early phase of being in love showed a similar density of serotonin neurotransmitters with patients of OCD, which is significantly lower than normal controls (Marazziti et al. 1999; Marazziti et al. 2004).[37] Both the OCD patients and the people in love were measured again; the first after receiving antidepressant treatment and the second 12±18 months after they had first started the romantic relationship. The interesting finding was that the serotonin levels of both had returned to normal.

The scientists conducting this experiment suggested that "being in love literally induces a state which is not normal," more colloquially known as being lovesick (Marazziti et al. 1999, p. 744). At the same time, they argued that emotions and feelings are indeed brain mechanisms but they do not depend only on biological factors. In actuality, as Savulescu and Earp (2014) warn, it is fallacious to attribute love and other high-level experiences only on neural correlates. If one stops there, they are simplifying intricate social phenomena, such as sex and love, in what they call neuroreductionism. Indeed, the biological synergies are much more complex than some experiments may imply.[38]

The same brain systems and the same neurotransmitters are responsible for a variety of functions and behaviours. Serotonin transmitters, for example, are involved in feeding, thermoregulation, reproductivity, as well as in impulsivity, anxiety, depression, OCD, and many more (Marazziti et al. 1999; Dowsett et al.1995). Having increased dopamine and decreased serotonin levels in one's brain tells us nothing for what

[37] Respectively, antidepressants increase serotonin in the brain, which prevents the receiver from getting emotionally excited and experiencing lust and attachment (Marazziti et al. 2014).

[38] Besides dopamine and serotonin, research has shown that tryptophan and cortisol also play a significant role in feelings of romantic love and affectionate behaviour (Sambeth et al. 2007; Gouin et al. 2009). Also increased levels of a hormone in the blood do not necessarily mean increased activity in the brain as well (Sambeth et al 2007).

caused this activity. The actual causality is much more complex since its composition is still greatly unknown and the biochemical agents involved can be influenced by a variety of factors.[39]

In all biological functions having to do with elaborate states and experiences, one cannot distinguish between genetic, environmental, and social causes. Predisposition and social conditioning are as important, if not more, in analysing and explaining any experience. This is especially true for love since its mere development as a biological system was a product of the existence of humans in social formations. It is undoubtedly informed by social dynamics and conventions together with biological, genetic, and environmental paragons. This is why it is so difficult to explain love by attributing it to a single facet. Love is particular and complex. It is rooted in evolution and biology while at the same time it concerns cultural, social, and personal experience in a convoluted amalgamation that is hard to dissect and thus pattern.[40]

4.3. Colours of Love

One such attempt at a typology of love is made by psychologist John Alan Lee. Lee (1977; 1988) came up with three basic love types that correspond to three basic colours, and three mixed colours that match secondary love types. This spectrum he called the wheel of *Colours of Love.* The three primary types are Eros, Ludus, and Storge, while the three secondary are Pragma, Mania, and Agape. Eros is denoted by strong physical attraction, emotional intensity, and a sense of inevitability of the relationship. In Ludus, love is a game to be played with a diverse set of partners based on deception and lack of disclosure. Storge denotes love as friendship. It is quiet and companionate. With Pragma, love is the product of a list of desired attributes, for example loving a partner because they are a good parent or have a prestigious profession. Mania is called "symptom" love, in the sense that the person who loves manically exhibits intense, alternating feelings between ecstasy and agony. Finally, Agape is sacrificial, placing the loved person's welfare above one's own, as with the parents' love for their children.

While Lee's typology has gained considerable ground in the field of psychology,[41] it does not seem particularly useful when trying to distil what the experience of love entails. As we saw, neuroscience would equate Eros with Mania while Ludus would not be considered love at all. Storge and Agape are excluded by Lee from romantic relationships; he allocates them instead the first to friendship and the second to

[39] For example, an experiment showed that oxytocin activity in the brain of rats is higher in higher temperatures, which made them more affectionate and social with other rats (Thompson et al. 2007). To attribute, though, the cultural stereotype of the Latin lover (Thomas 1998) on the observation that affectionate behaviour is more pronounced in hotter climates would be a conceptual error.
[40] This becomes even more convoluted when one considers the political aspect of romantic love. Since romantic love is organically associated with reproduction – both literally and figuratively – it makes sense that it is subject to society's organization, a notion which will be examined further in the following chapter.
[41] See Hendrick and Hendrick (1986; 1988; 1989; 1998), Lasswell and Lasswell (1976), Hendrick et al. (1984), and Mallandain and Davies (1994) among others.

familial and parental love. However, many people treat their romantic partner as their best friend while the popular paradigm sees romantic love as the prime example of sacrificial affection.[42]

Moreover, for Lee, one of Eros' attributes is a sense of inevitability of relationship. Lee does not clarify on that. Possibly, it means that a person experiencing Eros wants to be in a relationship with the person who has invoked this particular feeling, a physical relationship at that since Eros is preoccupied with physicality. Yet Lee's typology leaves no room for the myriad romantic love stories that pertain to platonic eros, which exalts the absence of the physical manifestation of the erotic.[43] In addition to that, as was shown in the previous chapter, while the experience of romantic love is a human universal, its manifestation in a relationship varies greatly across time and space. In the medieval ages, romantic love was predominantly clandestine, while other cultures treat eros as a curse that befalls someone (Karandashev 2016; 2019). Another problematic aspect is Lee's dichotomy between Eros and Mania. Mania can also be part of romantic love and thus Eros, as was exemplarily shown in all the recounts of love in the previous chapter. Lee separates the two inefficiently.

Most importantly, Lee contends that his typology concerns relationships rather than types of people yet when he goes on to explain each category he makes characterisations based on psychological traits. Indicatively, he correlates Eros with high self-esteem because it is a love type that contains high risk (Lee 1973), while claiming that people who feel Mania "are lonely, discontented with life, and desperately looking for a partner" (Lee 1973). Understandably, one cannot differentiate relationships from the individuals that constitute them. Each person brings their composition in all their facets and expressions. Depression will affect all aspects of the patient's life, including love. Equally, if a person is a mentally healthy individual, their relationships and attachments with and to other people will exhibit self-confidence. A manic person not only loves manically; they relate with anxiety to everything that surrounds them. In general, the way we experience and show love is intrinsic to our character as this has been shaped by our social situatedness.

4.4. Love as Emotion

[42] This does not concern only fictional instances. The renowned Sacred Band of Thebes, a troop of soldiers in ancient Thebes, Greece consisted of 150 pair of male lovers (DeVoto 1992). The reasoning behind this composition was that lovers would sacrifice themselves for their partner and would be more willing to exhibit ardor and valor since they would be devoted to each other under the mutual obligations of erotic love (Ludwig 2002). Indeed, for this reason the Sacred Band was considered one of the best groups of elite soldiers in the ancient world (Plutarch 2015).

[43] In actuality, if we take the account of many prestigious artists, thinkers, and philosophers, such as Proust or Stendhal, into consideration, the physical expression of love is the beginning of its end while an unrealised sentiment can exist within the mind much longer or for ever.

The complexity of love as an experience can also be witnessed in the work of psychologist Paul Ekman. Ekman's major contribution is his study of basic human emotions. According to Ekman, there are some human emotions that are considered basic, in the sense that they are automatic responses that have evolved as such to "allow us to begin to deal with fundamental life-tasks quickly without much elaborated planning, in ways that have been adaptive in our past" (1992, p. 195). While Ekman recognises our learned and social past as able to affect the manifestation of each emotion, he understands our biological past as species to be the prime factor of how emotions have evolved. These are emotions that were necessary to our survival, for example the emotion of fear or disgust. This is especially true if one considers, as Ekman supports, that emotions are responses of interpersonal nature. Even though emotions can and do occur when we are alone, their principle function is to notify others of a specific response to a singular stimulus.

What is interesting to note for our current discussion is that love is not considered a basic emotion by Ekman. Love is a high-level experience that incorporates many more affective states and lasts for much longer than a basic emotion. This is why Ekman calls it an *emotional attitude*: "a number of emotion terms can be considered as emotional attitudes, for example, love or hatred. They are more sustained, and typically involve more than one emotion" (p. 194). Given how important love is to our survival and the toll it takes to our resources, it seems strange that we are not more attuned to comprehending it, both in ourselves but most importantly in others. Would we not be saved lots of trouble were we able to know when someone loves us for real?

According to Ekman's theory, it is the positive emotions such as enjoyment and excitement that do not demand a unique response but only in antithesis to the negative ones: "Perhaps it has not been relevant to survival to know which positive emotion was occurring, only that it was a positive emotion rather than anger, fear, disgust, or sadness" (p. 190). As it seems, emotions which do not have singular coherence and response it is because they do not concern situations and signals that are perilous and/or immediate to our survival (Nesse 1990; Pratto & John 1991; Rozin and Fallon 1987).

Love, however, is. As discussed in the previous part, love is very closely linked to our success of survival so we would need a separate response to it. Unless, it is not the knowledge of love but the lack thereof that is important to our survival. Ekman voices similar concerns, of himself and others, in his work:

> Ellsworth (personal communication, May 1991) questioned whether it would not matter in sexual selection whether one was being seduced or laughed at, but the little work done on signs of flirtation andor sexual interest, Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1972) suggests this looks nothing like laughter. I do acknowledge that people are not always certain whether another is amused with them, or whether they are the object of another's amusement, but that underlines the problem it does not provide an answer. Lazarus (personal communication, June 1991) disagrees with me, believing that it is important and necessary to know, for example, whether one's partner or lover is happy or satisfied. We (Frank, Ekman, & Friesen, in press)

have recently found that people can distinguish the enjoyment, or Duchenne smile, from a more social, fabricated smile (1992, p. 190).

It appears that there is no secure consensus whether romantic partners can discern real emotions in their significant others and even if they do these expressions concern only a small part of everything that constitutes the experience of love. In another paper, Ekman (1996) actually argues that humans are very bad at detecting lies and this includes trained individuals like FBA agents and police officers. Ekman provides a number of different reasons for this deficiency, among which that in some cases it is to our benefit not to catch the liar but instead prolong the deception. He gives the example of a married couple:

> It may not be in the interest of a mother with a number of very young children to catch her mate's lie which conceals his infidelity, particularly if he is having a fling in which he is not diverting resources which would otherwise go to her and her children. The philanderer does not want to be caught, so they both have an interest in the lie not being uncovered (p. 812-813).

As Ekman further explains, while it is rationally to our advantage to know the truth, psychologically we refrain from doing so, albeit unconsciously, because we do not want to recognise our own failure, that we spent time and energy on someone who did not equally reciprocate, and the consequences thereof, the pain and dissatisfaction that will follow as a result. As Ekman would have it, “everyone but the cuckolded spouse may know what is happening” (p. 814). As was sustained by the evolutionary theorists in the beginning of the chapter, love is an adaptive mechanism in favour of our successful reproduction that works against our cognitive capacities. In other words, love wants us to remain fools. It will make sense then that it is a very complicated system that involves many responses that are not easy to discern and/or witness. Love is the product of lust, attraction, and attachment. It needs time and resources to develop so we cannot become conscious of it instantaneously as with other emotions.

In actuality, love is not an emotion at all, but rather a conglomeration of affective states which is why it is much more difficult to measure and study. In a paper by Schiota et al. (2011), love is researched among other four positive emotions, as the authors describe them. However, the authors talk specifically about attachment love, “the need for others’ nurturance and protection” as in the feeling towards our caretaker, and nurturant love, “the need to care for the young” (p. 1370). Both instances do not represent romantic love in its totality even though romantic love can and does include attachment and nurturing tendencies. Point in fact, romantic love may not only include positive emotions: jealousy, anger, spite, agony, fear, depression are all emotions, moods, and affective states associated with love, evident in the vast literature about love from the previous chapter but also in the scientific data discussed in this one.

4.5. Emotional Plots

The complexity of love increases when one takes into consideration another category discussed by Ekman, that of emotional plots. As he argues, what we might initially think of as an emotion, in reality it is “more

complex, involving settings and stories in which emotions occur. I have called these emotional plots (1992, p. 194) Ekman includes grief, jealousy, and infatuation among these. These situations and stories specify, for Ekman "the particular context within which specific emotions will be felt by specific persons, casting the actors and what has or is about to transpire" (ibid). He explains what he means with that by using grief and jealousy as an example:

> Grief, for example, specifies two actors, the deceased and the survivor, something about their past relationship, the survivor was attached to the deceased, the pivotal event, one of the actors died. The survivor is likely to feel distress, sadness, and perhaps fear and anger. Grief is much more specific than sadness. We know that in grief a death has occurred, in sadness we only know that the person has suffered an important loss, but not what kind of loss. Jealousy is another example of an emotional plot. It tells us the cast of three, their roles, something about the past history, and the emotions each cast member is likely to feel. Anger may be felt by the spurned one, but sadness and fear may also be felt. We also know something about the feelings of the rival and the object of mutual attention. An emotional plot contains much more specific information, than do any of the basic emotions. (ibid).

Ekman does not talk about love as an emotional plot but looking at the explanation he provides, one might assume that it is one.[44] It is more specific and at the same time more complicated than sexual desire, friendship, and/or joy, it concerns at least two actors, and it carries information about what has transpired, two people met and at least one of them was attracted to the other, and what will transpire: if love is reciprocated the person in love will be elated, filled with pleasure and satisfaction; if love is rejected they will be devastated and grieved. It is interesting to note that love as an experience entails both jealousy and grief: jealousy when our beloved does not prefer or favour us and grief in cases of rejection or after the end of love.

Love is actually a facilitator of many emotional plots. We become subject to emotions exactly because we are in love. We get jealous, angry, sad, happy while and due to our quality as someone in love. A jealous lover is a different emotional plot from a jealous co-worker. Already the inclusion of the word lover organises the premise of the story. The opposite is also true. Since love is a complex, high level experience, the effect of specific emotional plots on us can notify us of our emotional predisposition, which is love. We may realise we love someone because we get jealous when they give their attention to someone else, for example, or if we get sad when we miss them. As it seems, we become aware of love due to emotional plotting.

This holds especially true when we try to perceive the emotional reaction of others. Attempting to make someone jealous is considered an almost error-proof test to know if they are interested. It may sound pedestrian but it goes to show that we can never be sure if someone loves us. Even if they say it to us we can still not be sure as they can lie for whatever reasons. Thus, we try through other means, their behaviour

[44] Ekman does name infatuation as an emotional plot, though he does not clarify how he differentiates it from love.

and reaction to certain emotional plots, to see what their feelings for us are. This can also reach the excessive point that if someone does not behave in a way that we are socially conditioned to recognise as an appropriate reaction to an emotional plot, if they do not get jealous when we talk to someone else for example, this may affect our perception of their feelings.

Based on all of the above, it would not be too excessive to argue that love always entails an element of representation. As there is not an unambiguous way to know what the other feels about us, we try to discern it, or sustain the illusion that we know, from how they act and the way we interpret their performed behaviour. At the same time, we are also aware of being in love through complex cognitive and psychological processes and/or emotional plots. In that, love becomes a constructed experience in itself; dependent on our biology but highly influenced by our social discourse. This does not mean that love as an experience is the same with the experience of love as represented in the media, games included, but it already shows how the two become convoluted.

In accordance with the theory of emotions, the discrepancy between love and romance is positioned in more positive terms. While love always brings along an uncertainty and part of its effect is based on our trying to discern it, both in ourselves and others, in representations of love the feelings are given. They are recreated for us and we can share them, by proxy, with the characters that are engaged in the love story. As we will see in the following section, our feelings can indeed be triggered by narrative as much as by reality. Yet, the feelings we have when we experience a love representation, by reading it, watching it, or executing it, are not the same with the feelings we have when we live love.

4.6. Reported emotions

Another of Ekman's considerations regarding emotions attests to the above; the fact that there is a possibility "that there are more emotional words than there are basic emotions, terms which refer not only to the emotion but features of the eliciting situation, of differential responses to that situation, etc." (p. 195). This is supported more evidently in studies by Stein and Trabasso (1992), in which they trace links between emotion, thought, language, and action,[45] and much more recently by Cowen and Keltner (2017), who study reported emotional states.[46] Does this mean that the way we talk and think about an emotion affects the emotion itself? Resisting the urge to give a linguistic affirmative per Wittgenstein, cognitive psychology

[45] "The knowledge that is used to understand and classify emotional experiences is derived from and mirrors actual experience. This knowledge is conceptual in nature and leads to interpretations that are shared across persons. This knowledge is also used to interpret and evaluate situations and constrain which emotions are felt" (p. 230).

[46] "[…] Emotions are centered in subjective experiences that people represent with language (1–10). People represent their transient experiences within a semantic space that includes hundreds, if not thousands, of semantic terms that refer to a rich variety of emotional states (11–13) most readily characterised by the types of situations in which they occur (14, 15)" (p. 7901).

informs us that, especially regarding complex emotions like love, the answer is indeed yes. As Oatley and Laird (1987) contend, complex emotions, like falling in love, occur "only with the development of a reflective sense of self" (p. 42).

As they explain: "representations of the self are inherently social, and first become accessible in consciousness as a result of relationships with others." Our emotions, love included, are affected by our capacity as social beings and our social interactions: "a complex emotion may start by being quite inchoate: Only with substantial reasoning about the situation and its implications may the full complex emotion develop" (p. 47). This is why, according to the authors, the experience of complex emotions is dynamic and shifting on the basis of our reflection: "Basic emotions are developed from universal biological mechanisms. Complex emotions are founded on these, but plans and their evaluations vary from culture to culture and from person to person" (ibid). As such, while complex emotions share a commonality, their evaluation, thinking about them, differs.

Oatley and Leird give the example of *amae*, "a Japanese emotion evidently based on happiness, but with a sweetish quality of childlike dependence that occurs between adults as lovers" (ibid). *Amae* is a concept introduced in 1971 by Japanese psychoanalyst Takeo Doi in his seminal book *The Anatomy of Dependence*. Doi developed this term to describe how the Japanese child-rearing practices affect adult relationships in Japanese society. Does this mean that only Japanese people may feel amae as part of their love experience? Doi argues that this is not the case. Nonetheless, Japanese people are more likely to experience it because they have words for it and because it is much more intrinsic to the Japanese society having to do with the manner in which Japanese people are brought up and emotionally encultured.

The above dovetails with the conclusion of the last chapter. While love has been the persistent subject of representation the world over, which means it is a cultural and human universal, each representation bears the mark of its era. Building on that, the argument made here is that each representation affects, in turn, the complex emotion of love and its experience to the point that new understandings of love are conceived and, progressively, felt as well. As Ekman points out, "often in civilised life, our emotions occur in response to words not actions, to events which are complex and indirect (1992, p. 188). To that, he also argues that: "People do choose to put themselves in situations in which an emotion is likely to occur, arranging circumstances known to be likely to bring on the emotion" (p. 189).

Since as we saw certain emotions are discourse-dependent, could it not then be surmised that people elicit these emotions through words, language, and any other form of codification? This, I argue, is especially true for love. As a complex experience that cannot be uniquely perceived and biologically eludes us, love

is by default represented. This representation can vary from simple affirmations and declarations of love to the intricate poems regarding the aesthetics of love of the previous chapter. Yet by being so conditioned on representation, love also becomes subject to it. More precisely, the representations of love manifest novel emotions; emotions that are associated with love but take a presence of their own. A masterful poem about love elicits emotions to its reader that they may never experience while actually being in love; or they may do exactly because they have first read this poem about love.

As we saw in chapter two, romance is a love representation; one that is so formulaic that it constitutes a separate experience of emotions. While love is more complex and free-form, romance is very structured and culturally situated. It creates emotions of excitement pleasure, joy, and infatuation among others, which are specific to romance and achieved through its appropriate codification. In romance, the feelings of love are given but since love cannot be felt but only in its ambivalence and ambiguity, romance compensates for this by transferring the emotional triggers from the experience of love to the experience of struggle: struggle of action in the case of epic romances or struggle of expression in the case of love poetry.

In epic romances, as we saw in chapter two, the struggle is action-based. The hero of the romance goes on a quest to save the lady that, we are surely told, he loves. In love poetry, as we saw in chapter three, the struggle becomes a poetic invention: the agony of expressing the poet's despair due to unrequited love or the magnitude of their emotions. There are also the tragic love stories, in which the struggle is either external, when society condemns the love, or internal, when at least one of the lovers objects to love for personal reasons, or, more often than not, a combination or an interplay of the two, as in personal obligation within a social setting. Because romance is concerned with love and because, as argued in this chapter, love, as with other complex emotions, is subject to discourse, romance can and does affect the way we understand love in general. This turns romance into a paradigm, a political at that. The tenuous relationship between love and romance will be further analysed in the following chapters together with the potential of reconciliation that games as a medium possess.

Summary

In this chapter, I analysed love as a biological process and psychological emotion. Neuroscientific and evolutionary biology and psychology theories argue that love is a brain system developed for the successful human procreation. While this aspect of love is uncontested, I drew attention to the fact that love is also a complex psychological and social phenomenon. What we experience as love in the chemical and physiological sense is highly influenced by our social experience. In particular, I showed how love as a high-level experience is also dependent on discourse, language, words, and codification in general. In this sense, the way we represent love affects how we understand and experience it. Representations of love can

trigger novel feelings that while associated with love are dependent on the discourse that generates them because they are codified emotional plots.

This is especially the case with romance, which as a structured representation of love elicits emotions specifically linked with romance, such as pleasure, joy, and infatuation. The connection between the experience of love and the experience of its representation is highly pertinent to the current discussion since games are lived representations of love and as such influenced by both the actual feeling and the represented experience thereof. In this capacity of theirs, they can also function as the prime means to portray love's and romance difference but also reconcile them.

Chapter 5
What's Love Got to Do with It?

What's love but a second hand emotion?
Tina Turner

Nier: Automata (PlatinumGames 2017) is a game preoccupied with what it means to be human. The player assumes the role of 9S and 2B, two androids who fight for humanity against machines, lifeforms which were designed by an alien species that had invaded earth and forced humans to exile on the moon. Throughout the game, 9S and 2B face machines which try to capture and emulate human concepts and practices: war, religion, friendship, family, nation, kingdom, sacrifice, and love. One of the game's bosses is a massive lifeform machine named Simone de Beauvoir. It is a grotesque figure resembling an opera singer dressed in a red, torn gown on top of her bell-like metallic frame, which gives the impression of a crinoline.

Figure 6 - 9S and 2B facing Simone, *Nier: Automata*

Figure 7 - 9S and 2B fighting against the Goliath machine-form, *Nier: Automata*

Beauvoir is a shrieking menace, very hard to kill, emitting laser blades from her metallic body that do a lot of damage. She also screams to summon near-dead androids which she has under her command. The dismembered bodies of some of these androids protrude from her body and head hanging like rag-dolls or malformed adornments. From the game's character description, we learn that Simone is:

> A Goliath-class machine lifeform modeled after an opera singer, this unit attacked foes using the repurposed bodies of living androids. Obsessed with a certain other machine lifeform, she put great thought into her appearance - even going so far as to cannibalize her own kind. Alas, such garish decorations only ended up being a spectacular display of poor taste. Her search for beauty eventually led to her demise when she attacked 2B and 9S.

As per the game's mechanics, the player has to fight Simone twice. In their first playthrough, they control 2B, a combat android that has a straightforward perspective on things. She does not delve into Simone's past, the player does not even learn her name because 2B is not interested in uncovering anything about this foe. She is an opponent that needs to die so that the mission must go on. The second time around, the player controls 9S, who is a scanner android. His job description is to hack into things and reach their core for information. This has affected his personality, which is much more inquisitive, a trait which plays a very important role as the story and game progresses. Due to 9S's hacking, we can now access this monstrous opera-singer's log entries and discover a haunting personal narrative:

> Look at me. Oh please look at me. I want your eyes to look upon me alone.
> Have I not become beautiful?
> Do these clothes make me look cute?
> Would he like it if I walked like this?
> I still don't understand what it means to love someone.

But I've made up my mind.
I will do whatever it takes to capture his affection.
Long ago, an old machine lifeform told me something:
"Beauty is what wins love."
But what is "beauty"?
After researching the old world, I finally learned the truth.
Beauty is pretty skin.
Beauty is stylish accessories.
Beauty is looking one's best.
I will become beautiful. I will do it for him.
I once heard tell of a precious jewel far to the east.
It was said to be located on a terribly dangerous mountain.
But I did not care.
I slipped on cliffs. I fell onto rocks. But eventually I claimed the jewel.
Blue stone. Brilliant blue. So beautiful.
I lost many parts obtaining this jewel. I lost...myself.
But my wounds are badges.
There's a rumor floating among the other machine lifeforms lately:
"Devour the body of an android to gain eternal beauty."
Such nonsense.
It is physically impossible to obtain beauty by consuming an android.
But I tried anyway.
I would try anything.
I wanted to vomit, but I kept going.
It tasted like oil.
Not a moment passed where I didn't strive to become more beautiful.
But he still won't look my way.
I even tried to learn what is called a "song."
Songs can make someone have feelings for you.
That's what they say.
So I practiced every day.
But he still won't look my way.
I ate more androids. I even ate machine lifeforms.
But he still won't look my way.
He won't look my way.
He won't look my way.
He won't look my way.
He won't look my way.
He won't look my way.
Won't look my way won't look my way won't look my way won't look my way won't look my way won't look my way won't look my way won't look my way won't look my way won't look my way won't look my way won't look my way won't look my way
He still won't look my way.
That's when I realized he cares not for jewels.
Or songs or beauty or appearance or anything else.
I cannot win his love.
Why have I done this to myself?
Meaningless.
Meaningless.
MEANINGLESS.
I gaze into the mirror. In its reflection I see only my own meaninglessness. And so I scream.

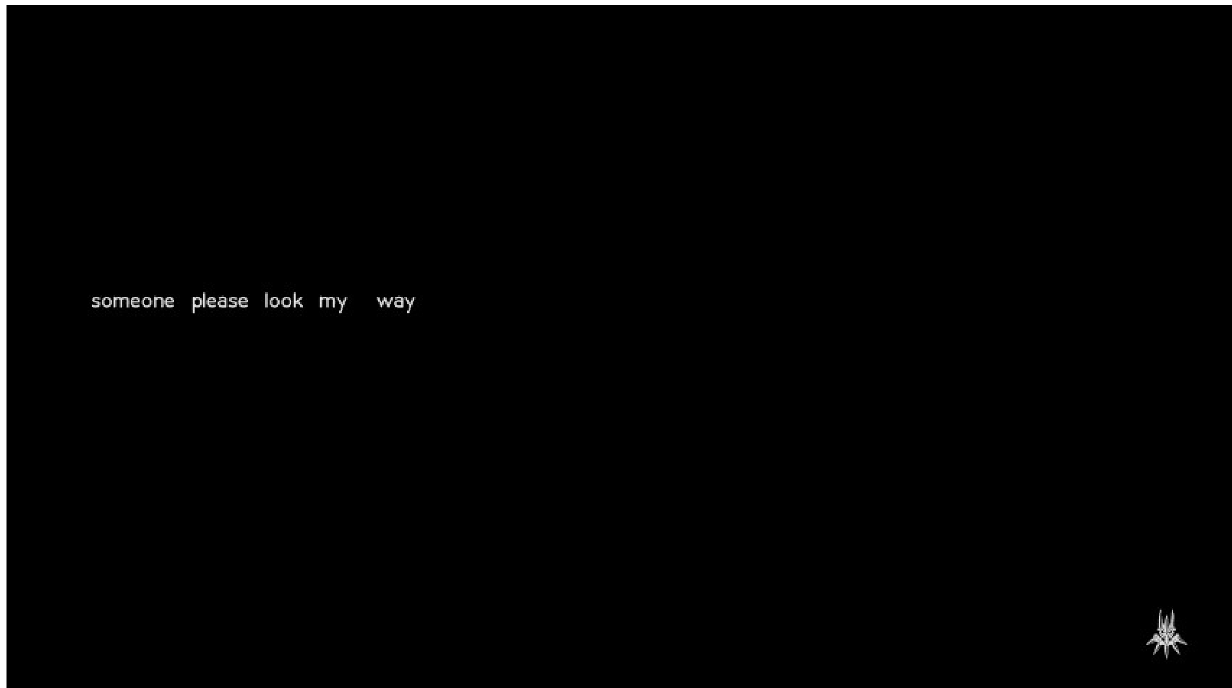

Figure 8 - Simone's log entry, *Nier: Automata*

The machine lifeform that Simone is obsessed with is Jean-Paul, an NPC named after the famous French philosopher. Sartre's existentialism fits, after all, perfectly with the game's concept of one's choice and will overpassing one's design, biological or artificial.[47] Unsurprisingly, machine Simone is an ode to Sartre's real-life lover and long-lasting partner, Simone de Beauvoir. In the literal translation of Beauvoir's name, machine Simone is obsessed with looking beautiful. She has no concept of beauty of her own, however, so she had to "research the old world to learn the truth." The old world is the world of humans, whose culture and civilization machines and androids alike try to imitate. In the narrative of the game, humanity has been elevated to the status of a deity. For that, Simone does not question the findings of her research. She considers them to be the truth, a decree, if not a creed.

Since she is a machine she learns by data input: stories, archives, and songs. Therefore, it makes sense that her output depends on the quality and content of the data she receives.[48] It is these data that result in her becoming a monster. She thinks that to become beautiful she needs to acquire precious stones and wear luscious garments, no matter if she has to mutilate herself in the process; she eventually has to succumb to the atrocious acts of devouring android bodies and cannibalism. This is why Sorce (2017) is prompted to

[47] The topic of existentialist love in games, in particular in the context of artificial otherness, is discussed in depth in chapter ten.
[48] Not unlike contemporary AI and machine learning algorithms that are found to perpetuate stereotypes due to the data they are fed with, see e.g. Kim et al. (2019) and Kirkpatrick (2017).

say that Simone does not learn beauty but vanity: “Simone’s tragedy is that there was no one to help her but the public record of humanity, and that record failed her, full as it is of toxic depictions of beauty, of people coerced into roles that fit them far too tightly.” In that, it is not beauty that fails Simone but the representation of beauty.

Machine Simone becomes the lived epitome of real-life Simone’s writings. It is no coincidence that the player confronts machine Simone on a theatre stage. She exhibits her learnt experience regarding beauty as a performance. It is a performance gone wrong, however. Yet as Simone de Beauvoir would argue, it is not machine Simone’s fault but the system’s. Machine Simone was indoctrinated to perform in accordance with the false prescripts of a corrupted paradigm, much like how Beauvoir describes the female experience in her seminal work *The Second Sex* (2010). Machine Simone represents and embodies – also in the literal sense with all these half-dead female dismembered androids engulfing her and all the androids she had to physically consume – the dysphoria of being obliged to perform according to outside dicta. Especially, when these dicta do not take into consideration but disregard one’s situatedness for the sake of conformity to a fictional canon.

While this remains true, one should not overlook the reason behind all of Simone’s efforts. Machine Simone did not want to become beautiful for beauty’s sake. She wanted to become beautiful to attract the attention of another machine because she loved him: “Beauty is what wins love.” The fact that she did not manage to win his affection is what makes all her actions to be in vain; meaningless, as she calls them. So in actuality it is not even beauty that failed her; it is love, or once again the representation thereof. Unlike her repeated justification for why she wants to be beautiful in her “look at me” cries of despair, Simone does not indulge into why or how she came to love Jean-Paul or how she learnt to love in the first place. “I still don't understand what it means to love someone,” she admits in her log entries. That does not deter her. “But I've made up my mind. I will do whatever it takes to capture his affection.”

It can be safely assumed that Simone learnt about love in the same way that she did about beauty, through recounts in the public archive. Even if she felt something about Jean-Paul beforehand – though it does not seem likely given her artificial lifeform per the lore of the game, her experience was absolutely informed by the records about love: stories, songs, poems, books, movies, and, why not, games. Yet while she seems very aware of what beauty is, in this distorted understanding of it, her research about love does not bring the same comprehensive results. She remains unsure of what love is, which shows that, as argued in the previous chapter, love cannot be expressed in its totality. Instead, she tries to make-meaning based on second-hand representations.

Simone goes to extremes to become beautiful because this is how she learnt that she will acquire love. Acquiring love means getting someone's affection, but doing everything in your power, to the point of self-sacrifice, to acquire someone's affection is what it means to love. This is the lesson machine Simone learnt. As we will see in this chapter, this toxic behavior is indeed perpetrated by the love canon. It is not what love is about. It is about transforming love to an achievable commodity. How is that achieved? Why did machine Simone want to love and subject herself to this torture? Could it be that she found out it was torture only after she fell in love? It seems improbable. Since she had to peruse the archive to discover love, she was bound to come across accounts of its unpleasantness, documented in a plethora of works as we saw in chapter three.

The reason behind Simone's efforts can be inferred from the last lines of her story. She turned to love to find meaning. She wanted an object to dedicate her attention to. She wanted to have to win Jean Paul's affection, not unlike the medieval knights of chapter two. Love gave her actions purpose and an actual goal, and beauty gave her the means to achieve it.[49] Yet as we will see in the context of this chapter, positioning love as a means to finding meaning is itself a designed representation thereof. It is sustained because it gives the false consolation of achievability, but as Simone very painfully reveals by the end of her story, there is no such value. More so, there is no such guaranteed satisfaction. So how and why did representations of love came to portray it as the means to fulfilment and satisfaction? To answer this question, I turn to psychology and psychoanalytical narrative theory within the context of the dominant cultural paradigm.

5.1. Romantic Discourse

In the above example an important question arises: what were the pernicious love representations that machine Simone discovered in her research? Most probably, some of those that we covered in chapter three. Archilochus is suffering from fever-like love, Sappho is calling for Aphrodite's intervention to help her escape love's torment, and Psyche has to roam the earth looking for her lost-love. Equally, Romeo and Juliet (Shakespeare 2003) are described as star-crossed lovers who exchange a single look and are mesmerised by each other to the point of suicide while being only pubescents. Catherine and Heathcliff (Brontë 2009) are linked since childhood with a passion so calamitous that destroys both their lives. Anna Karenina (Tolstoy 2014) falls to her death because she cannot control her desperate love for Alexei

[49] Unlike the medieval knights, Simone, who identifies as female, did not possess the means to go fight for her love; winning over challenges would not win Jean-Paul for her. Per the archive she found, she could only tempt JPS in a passive way through accentuating her beauty (Ntelia 2021).

Vronsky. Bella Swan suffers nine-month-long depression after her vampire lover, Edward Cullen, abandons her (Meyer 2009).

It is not unjustifiable to argue that these representations of love are principally preoccupied with love as a pathology: tragic heroes and heroines in love that find their death because of their unrequited passion like Jung Werther (Goethe 2000), ballads that talk about stolen brides (*Għarusa tal-Mosta*, Aquilina 2017) and broken hearts (*The Undaunted Seaman*, Carbonara 2019), pop songs that proclaim that one cannot live without their lover (*Without You*, Ham and Evans 1970) and that nothing compares to them (*Nothing Compares 2 U*, Prince 1990), and games in which one has to sacrifice themselves so that their beloved can survive (despite said beloved's ungratefulness, see chapter one, *Dragon Age: Origins*, BioWare 2009). All these tragic stories in the public archive are considered exalted examples of true love. Love is shown as an all-mighty power that consumes the person in love to the point of madness and despair.

This holds true also for romances. In chapter two, we saw Sir Lancelot going through many trials for the love of his life, Queen Guinevere. Emily St. Aubert and Valancourt in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (Radcliffe 2009) have to endure separation, evil family members, and a long list of misfortunes before their love can be fulfilled. The difference from tragedies such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Anna Karenina*, and *The Wuthering Heights* is that in romances the narrative provides a happy ending. It gives the audience the satisfaction that the couple in love managed to overcome all struggles and turbulences and now they can enjoy their happily ever after. Romances are the fantasy that suffering does indeed bear fruit and if someone suffers enough, their love will be rewarded. In other instances, external powers in the shape of society do not allow for that. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the feud of the families is the cause of the couple's misfortune, while in *Anna Karenina* society's inability to accept her illegal romance pushes her to kill herself on the train rails.

There are then two main questions that result from the above observation: one, why are these representations of love so popular to the point of being repeated over millennia in spite of their pathological content and two, can they actually affect our experience of love like the example of machine Simone implies? Regarding the second question, I have already made the argument that this is actually the case in the previous chapter by using Ekman's theory of emotions. Here, I connect it with the answer to the first question: indeed the fact that our love experience is affected by love representations is the reason that romance, both as genre and as a certain codified approach to love as already discussed, perseveres; not in spite of but due to its problematic nature.

One could argue that romantic love persists simply because it is more interesting as a narrative. If it were easy, there would be no tension. Paraphrasing Tolstoy, all happy loves are the same but each unhappy love

is unhappy in its own way. This would be a simplistic explanation, however. I do not claim that the popularity of romance can be attributed to a single reason, yet I argue that the most important of them is that this pathological love perpetuates the fantasy of salvation, satisfaction, and meaning if the individual manages to get the love. To show how meaning and satisfaction are related to suffering, a connection made within the romantic paradigm we already saw in chapters two and three, I turn to psychological and psychoanalytical theories.

5.2. Pathological Love

The connection between the experience of love and its representation can overtly be traced in the concept of limerence by Dorothy Tennov. Tennov (1999) coined the term in 1979 to describe a specific type of love.[50] She attributes to limerence an intense feeling of love with intrusive thoughts, obsession over the object of one's desire, involuntary idealisation of the beloved, and experience of extreme despair in case of separation and/or rejection that may last for a prolonged period and lead even to depression. Even though love as a brain system may trigger such psychosomatic reactions as we saw in the previous chapter, Tennov posits that limerence affects some people while others may never experience it. She does not provide a reason as to this distinction nor does she cover when and how limerence is activated in those individuals that it does affect. As she defines it, limerence works like an automatic mechanism of a cognitive nature that gets triggered by different stimuli for each person but once it does the effects are more or less the same.

Tennov's concept of limerence was the groundwork for the much more advanced attachment theory developed by psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby. In a series of books, Bowlby formalised his attachment styles theory,[51] according to which the type of attachment we develop with our caretakers during infancy is formed into a system or style that affects, conditions, and, in some cases, dictates how we experience attachment throughout our lives. In further experiments, Ainsworth (1978) classified attachment into three main categories: secure, avoidant, and anxious attachment.

Secure attachment develops in individuals for whom the caretakers were consistently present and affectionate. The child knew that their needs would be met in due time so they did not experience intense feelings of separation and negligence. Both avoidant and anxious attachment styles, on the other hand, stem from frequent and acute experiences of separation from at least one of their caregivers. In the case of avoidant attachment style, this is due to an absent parent that rarely took care of the child. The child had to

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[50] The etymology of the term is rather anticlimactic. As Tennov admitted herself in the conference which she first presented her work: "I first used the term 'amorance' then changed it back to 'limerence'… It has no roots whatsoever. It looks nice. It works well in French. Take it from me it has no etymology whatsoever" (in Mather 1977, p. 3).

[51] See for example *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development* (2008) and *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds* (1977).

learn to satisfy its own needs and not depend on anyone else. Avoidant individuals have difficulty forming attachments because they are constantly afraid they will be once again left alone. They expect everyone to abandon them so they make up for that by leaving first.

Anxious individuals experience the same fear but, on the contrary, tend to cling to the person they have formed an attachment with. Anxious attachment is the product of a parent not being consistently present for their child. Their attention fluctuates so the child is not certain when and if their needs will be met. They experience anxiety and uncertainty and have explosive and angry reactions once the parent decides to bring their attention back to them. Anxious individuals may fake indifference when they have become attached to hide their interest, although in actuality they desire constant reassurance and attention.

Shaver and Hazan (1987) explored Bowlby's ideas in regards to how attachment theory affects romantic love, as in love between romantic partners. According to their approach, emotional attachment between adult romantic partners is a product of the same motivational system, the attachment behavioural system, which is shaped during infancy between children and their caregivers. Hazan and Shaver reached this conclusion based on the observation that the relationship between infants and caregivers shares common traits, such as intimacy, accessibility, fascination, preoccupation, and similar linguistic cues with parentese, i.e. baby talk. Hazan and Shaver argued that adult romantic relationships are essentially attachments and that romantic love is a property of the attachment behavioural system, which is also connected with caregiving and sexuality.[52]

It may come as no surprise that the way love is portrayed in the recounts already discussed in this and previous chapters coincides mainly with one of the attachment styles mentioned. Specifically, anxious attachment includes most, if not all, the characteristics that were associated with romantic love in the various accounts we have examined: unconditional devotion, dependency, stress in the absence of the beloved, intrusive thinking, idolisation, feeling inadequate and waiting for the other person to complete you, and most importantly the idea that if you suffer long enough the beloved will belong (again) to you. What is the link between suffering and love then, evident in the romantic games of challenge discussed in chapter two?

We shall turn once more to infantile observations. Research has shown that when the caretaker is absent for a long time the child visually seeks them or starts crying to get their attention. As Fraley (2018) informs us: "These behaviours continue until either the child is able to re-establish a desirable level of physical or

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[52] Subsequent research (Brennan et al. 1998; Fraley and Spieker 2003a, 2003b; Fraley and Waller 1998; Fraley et al. 2000; Fraley and Shaver 1998a, 1998b; 2000; Zeifman and Hazan 1997; Feeney et al. 1994; Fraly and Davis 1997; Simpson et al. 1992, Simpson et al. 1996; Feeney and Noller 1990) conducted in more than 10.000 individuals (Bakermans-Kranenburg and van IJzendoorn 2009) strengthens the argument further.

psychological proximity to the attachment figure, or until the child "wears down" as may happen in the context of a prolonged separation or loss.” In such cases, the child experiences profound despair and depression. Since the child does not possess other abilities and channels to communicate their distress in the absence of the caretaker, they have to advertise their suffering as much as they can until the caretaker returns to take care of their needs.

Therefore, suffering is the means one acquires since childhood to attract the beloved’s attention; a behaviour which accompanies us long into our adult life especially if we have not developed a secure attachment style but instead an anxious one. If we cannot attract our beloved’s attention, we translate this as an indication that we have not suffered enough yet. Respectively, to be worthy of love we have to suffer first. Understandably, this is a warped idea of what love is or should be, even though for people with traumatic attachment styles this is the default way they experience it. There is an indication that many such people end up involved with persons who trigger their traumatised attachment system exactly because this is what they know and have learnt (Wiltgen et al. 2015; Fowler et al. 2013).

Could it then be that most of us have simply developed anxious attachment so we create, consume, and perpetuate stories that fit our experience of love? This is actually not true. Most people, almost 60%, develop a secure attachment style (Ainsworth 1978; Bakermans-Kranenburg and van IJzendoorn 2009). Furthermore, the degree of overlap and the intensity of the influence are not as straightforward (Fraley 2018). As such, even though attachment styles are indeed a product of infantile experience that we all share, this does not mean that they dictate the way we form bonds for the rest of our lives. They may function as predispositions but they can change and they do not overwrite life-long experiences. In this sense, one cannot attribute the perseverance of romance and romantic love only to psychological reasons.

This pathological love described above dominates the canon, even though in real life far fewer people experience insecure attachments. If it were only due to our biology and psychology, most stories would concern secure attachments of limited duration that would result in offspring and would fade away once the children grew older. Instead, most romances, those in games included, are about all-consuming passions that either result in tragedy and death, as the case with machine Simone, or in uncontested happiness that is implied to stay the same forever. Yet experience does not correspond to this but for very few exceptions. The question therefore remains: why these representations?

As we saw, Bowlby’s attachment theory is an evolvement of Tennov’s limerence. Specifically, limerence coincides with Ainsworth’s anxious attachment style: both the limerent and anxious lover experience love in the same traumatic way. An important aspect of limerence that Tennov has explored and has not been

the subject of research in terms of attachment theory is the tendency of the limerent individual to vividly fantasise about the beloved, not only in a sexual way but also in intrinsic details of a shared life together. The moments of meeting, consummation, and affection take on in the mind of the limerent subject a whole fantastical and fictional dimension.

Even though, Tennov does not hold language and discourse accountable for the experience of this type of love by some people, she makes a rather apt remark when she attributes to limerence most great artworks having to do with love. The intense feelings described by Shakespeare, Stendhal, Goethe, and others are for Tennov expressions of the fantasy manifestation of limerence, a pathological love that is.[53] Limerence is indeed described as a state of exception and malady that consumes the person without their being able to prevent or stop it. In this, limerence exhibits almost magical powers, exactly the manner in which love is most often described in the representations we covered in chapter three.

It would be egregious, however, to argue and impossible to prove that all stories of love are produced by limerents.[54] Instead, I contend that it is the stories we consume that are written for limerents; yet imagined limerents and not actual ones. It is not because we all suffer from anxious attachment that these representations of love persevere, since as we saw this is not true. It is that in our collective consciousness, love is shown as a wholesome feeling of salvation and satisfaction in the manner that limerents understand it, even if we are not, in our most part, limerents. We are meant to believe that we lack something and this something is found in love. So it is not that the popular representations of love are the result of our pathological experience of love. It is the other way round: we are conditioned to accept and understand love as pathology because we are exposed continuously to this pathological love.

Cultural representations of love emphasise many a time this traumatic love as the pinnacle of true love against which all other types of attachment seem inconsequential or uninteresting at least. This influences people's expectations of love. As proven in the previous chapter, second-hand accounts of love can indeed

[53] In the most literal sense as well, since there is evidence of biological effects of limerence, like low levels of serotonin; an occurrence which, as discussed in chapter four, increases anxiety and sadness for the person involved (Moore 1998).

[54]It is interesting, however, to note that Campbell, whose work we focus on later in the chapter, makes a very similar claim when he contends that the creators of myths, oral or written, are themselves neurotics who know how to facilitate the infantile trauma exactly because they never overcame it. In that, one can connect Tennov's approach with the one contended by Campbell: that neurotic individuals, for example the witch doctors of ancient tribes, were the ones responsible for performing the rituals and enacting the myths of the monomyth as to help other members of their group successfully perform the passage to adulthood or find momentary satisfaction from the infantile anxiety. Equally, authors, artists, and other creators, game designers included, can perform the same function by offering to their audience the experience of this erotic mania, limerence in Tennov's terms, in an effort either to describe and explain it and provide a cathartic absolution of it or to offer a short, albeit vicarious, respite of it through artificial and fictional means.

shape the way we experience it. As most of love's representations portray it in this pestiferous light, they also influence how we form attachments and how we regard our love relationships. While we remain responsible of the type of content we consume, we, just like machine Simone, are conditioned to understand love in a certain way because the discourse dictates our experience of love in a much more concentrated and targeted manner than our own experience of love.

Émile Durkheim in his book *The Division of Labour in Society* coins the term collective consciousness as follows:

> The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society forms a determinate system with a life of its own. It can be termed the collective or common consciousness. Undoubtedly the substratum of this consciousness does not consist of a single organ. By definition it is diffused over society as a whole, but nonetheless possesses specific characteristics that make it a distinctive reality. In fact it is independent of the particular conditions in which individuals find themselves. Individuals pass on, but it abides. It is the same in north and south, in large towns and in small, and in different professions. Likewise it does not change with every generation but, on the contrary, links successive generations to one another. Thus it is something totally different from the consciousnesses of individuals, although it has an actual existence only in individuals (2013, p. 63).

According to Durkheim, the individual's psychology and biology matters less to the experience of a collective belief compared to the imagined reality that this belief creates. In this light, romance and romantic love as an imagined ideal of love affect our experience of love more than our actual experience of it. In the following section, I go into detail regarding what this ideal entails and how it has been linked with suffering and satisfaction in terms of representation. For that, I turn to psychoanalytic narrative theory in the work of Joseph Campbell and the concept of mimetic desire by René Girard.

5.3. The Hero with A Thousand Loves

In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (2004), Joseph Campbell develops the concept of the monomyth. According to that, all stories the world over constitute one basic and common narrative that corresponds to the same psychological need. Building on Jungian and Freudian psychoanalysis, Campbell supports the claim that all stories work to provide to their receivers the means to appease or satisfy the infantile psychological trauma, which is the same in all humans. Hence all the stories, since they have the same function and are built on the same premise, follow the same paradigm and are actually variations of the same original narrative which Campbell calls monomyth. This monomyth is an adventure that adheres to a standard formula consisting of three nuclear parts: separation, initiation, and return. Specifically, Campbell describes the structure as:

> A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (p. 28).

Campbell has collected a large number of stories of disparate cultures as evidence to his argument and indeed the similarities he draws are striking, all the more if one considers the geographical and historical diversity of his corpus. Of course, it would be impossible for Campbell to have covered every single story written or uttered in all cultures and all languages and one remains suspicious, if not critical, whether the instances mentioned were not conveniently chosen to fulfil the criteria established a priori (Toelken 1998; Dundes 1965; Northup 1996; Ellwood 1999; Crespi 1990).

That being said, Campbell's monomyth remains popular and dominant as a narrative (Vogler 2007; Campbell and Moyers 1991; Larsen 1996).[55] Especially in games, Campbell's formula is commonly used as a plotline (Plyler 2014; Busch et al. 2013). As Dunniway (2000) contends, the hero's journey provides many benefits to a traditional game design approach. Not only is it familiar to the player so it resonates easily with them, but it is also very conveniently applicable to all avatarial games, in which the player assumes the role of the said hero and can then identify with the player character. The structure of the design and the gameplay fit very well with a narrative that focuses on the adventures of a central hero, as we saw in chapter two.

Indeed, this nuclear narrative, as Campbell distinguishes it, is a cultural universal, meaning they are examples of it in human culture the world over. This means that even if this monomyth does not account for all stories, unlike what Campbell suggests, it is one of the most, if not the most, common narrative formulas. Campbell's approach is then useful if we first deconstruct certain elements of it. While for Campbell the existence of the monomyth proves that we all share the same infantile trauma, a connection that, as we saw in the previous section of the chapter, does not hold, I use it instead to analyse the imagined belief of romance and romantic love as a pathological experience within the context of collective consciousness.

Campbell's thesis is based on the premise that all people share the same infantile experience: that of separation from the caregiver. This separation is a traumatic event that accompanies a person in all their life and infuses existence with constant anxiety caused by everything that may resemble or trigger this trauma. This theory is borrowed by Freudian psychoanalysis. Freud (1957) understands the coming of one to oneself as the source of trauma. In other words, the infant becomes aware of its distinct existence when it realises that itself and the person responsible for its care and survival are two distinct entities. This traumatic event is the separation of the child from the source of its survival and contentment, the caregiver

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[55] George Lucas of the Star Wars franchise has openly admitted that he draw inspiration from Campbell for the original script, while Neil Gaiman, famous author and screenwriter, upon reading Campbell was shocked to discover that his stories followed a pattern he knew nothing about (Rauch 2003).

that is: “Apparently the most permanent of the dispositions of the human psyche are those that derive from the fact that, of all animals, we remain the longest at the mother breast” (Campbell 2004, p. 5). As it appears, for Campbell, and the other Freudians, the caregiver is equated with the mother.[56]

The mother is the person that is responsible for our protection and satisfaction, the subject and object of our desires. Every time the mother fails to fulfil this desire, for example due to prolonged absence, tension and aggression arise, which make the connection to the mother function in a love/hate dipole. In this tight bond that the mother and the infant share, the father comes as an intrusion: “To him is transferred the charge of aggression that was originally attached to the "bad," or absent mother, while the desire attaching to the "good," or present, nourishing, and protecting mother, she herself (normally) retains” (p. 6). This is where the Oedipal complex derives from, a neurosis that describes the child’s antagonism with the same-sex parent for the attention and possession of the opposite sex parent named after ancient Oedipus, who killed his father and married his mother (Freud 2017, p. 2141) Even though according to Freud (1957), only in few cases this traumatic experience turns to psychopathy, it nevertheless informs so predominantly our existence and notion of self that it remains latent throughout our lives and comes back to the surface every time we face something akin to this separation.

In Campbell’s rationale, stories and culture, in general, provide successful means to overcome or at least mitigate this anxiety. He even expands on this by arguing that exactly because we all suffer from the same trauma, the means we develop for this amelioration are essentially the same in a sort of collective human fantasy. Hence, the stories we tell follow the same pattern and this is where the concept of monomyth derives from.[57] According to Campbell, all myths, rituals, stories, and culture in general help the individual with this neurosis: some provide the satisfaction of an impossible fantasy that our wishes and needs are met and we become masters of the source of their constant fulfilment, while others facilitate the passage from

[56] Attachment theory, which we covered before, bears great similarity to Freud’s separation trauma with two important exceptions. One it does not perpetuate gender binaries referring to caretakers and infants instead and two it allows for many more formations, thus not restricting the individual into a certain a priori experience. Moreover, attachment theory overcomes the strict gender binaries of the Freudian phallocracy. It is true that very often the caregiver in many families is still the mother so attachment theory coincides with Freud’s oedipal drama, yet this is only circumstantial and not intrinsic. It is a matter of familial dynamics which to a large extent remain similar to what Freud had described. Whereas for Freud these dynamics were the default, attachment theory allows for much more flexibility.

[57] In particular, he argues that stories condition the transitioning to adulthood of neurotic individuals who have trouble to make the transition themselves and/or persons who because of a hurtful experience regressed to their infantile ego. So for Campbell, reading stories and sitting on the psychoanalyst’s couch is a similar response to the same need towards the same results, albeit with different success. For Campbell, the function of mythos can never be fully replaced and its absence causes more distress to the individual since it lacks the collective feeling of belonging to a society, a consolation provided by the mythos.

this infantile condition to adulthood, the acceptance of dissatisfaction, and the ultimate assimilation into otherness.

This is especially pertinent to the current discussion because Campbell puts romances and romantic love under the former: “The characteristic adventure of the first is the winning of the bride— the bride is life. The adventure of the second is the going to the father—the father is the invisible unknown” (2004, p. 319). For Campbell, in romances the oedipal pleasure is repeated ad nauseum: the man has to go on an adventure, defeat the adversary, who is the father, and claim the woman, who is another version of the mother. By doing so, he regains access to the source of his original satisfaction. As we already saw in chapter two, romances and romantic love correspond exactly to this structure. Specifically, Campbell himself references the story of Eros and Psyche we analysed in chapter three as “one of the best known and charming examples” of this motif (p. 89).

In the hero’s journey, love is not an event like any other. Instead, it is the successful culmination of all the hero’s efforts and the reason behind his adventure, to begin with, as we saw in chapters two and three:

> […] for the woman is life, the hero its knower and master. And the testings of the hero, which were preliminary to his ultimate experience and deed, were symbolical of those crises of realization by means of which his consciousness came to be amplified and made capable of enduring the full possession of the mother-destroyer, his inevitable bride. With that he knows that he and the father are one: he is in the father's place (p. 111).

According to Campbell, this narrative provides only some solace to the infantile trauma: they are “only partial solutions of the psychological problem of subduing hate by love; they only partially initiate” (p. 144). These are the narratives that give precedence to one’s own society, group, culture, race, etc. instead of pointing towards the acceptance of one’s belonging to the universal essence of life.[58] Yet, as Campbell himself points out the hero’s journey is more pleasurable as a story. It is easier for one to understand oneself in antagonistic terms towards the other: the father, the neighbour, the foreigner, the alien. It is easier because the patriarchal system primes the male psyche as such: with the trauma of separation and the focus of one’s hostility towards the other. The person understands their self, their individual being, through a traumatic separation. Within this framework, the self is related to the other, the mother in the first instance and later the father, through anxiety and hate. A paradigmatic narrative then feeds this hostility to make us feel better than and entitled over these others, whoever these are. Winning over these adversaries is the means to satisfaction. However, it is a fictional satisfaction that its pleasure remains confined in the fantastical premise it operates in.

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[58] This can be a counterargument to the accusations against Campbell’s favouritism of fascist regimes (Bernstein 1989; Masson 1991).

5.4. Hegemonic Love

As one may have already noticed, the hero in Campbell's model is by default the son, which understandably causes serious concerns (Murdock 1990; Hudson 2010; Joannou 2018).[59] While being informatively aware (Ntelia 2021, upcoming publication) of the limitations and problems with Campbell's theory, I contend that there is merit to his study because he makes the connection between the function of the monomyth and the psychological subcontext that enables it. As such, his approach is a strong basis for understanding the persistence of this narrative across time and space explaining why a fictional emotion, romantic love, may persevere against a less structured experience, love. It specifically helps us with the current discussion since the dominance of romance over love is to a great extent attributed to the explanation Campbell gives. This is not to say that our psyche is developed the way Freud and, by extension, Campbell understand.

Campbell does not question the fictionality of the social formation that gives rise to the psychological trauma that the monomyth addresses, this is why he thinks of the monomyth as a sine qua non. Yet I argue that the monomyth, and romance, persists in this cultural paradigm because the social formation that creates its need for fictional satisfaction and pleasure persists, patriarchy that is. Since this construct, which for Campbell is a universal truth, remains rigorous and uncontested, the romance's and monomyth's function of amelioration persevere. Even in the most sophisticated and progressive societies, the family dynamic remains highly heteronormative and gender-binary, meaning that the mother continues to be the primary, if not exclusive, caregiver of the children and the father the hated other that interferes; thus the structure that leads to the certain psychological trauma discussed by Campbell is retained.

It comes as no surprise then that the hero's journey continues to be the canonised story with little variation, love stories included. Even though the need it quenches is conventional, as long as the conventions that give birth to it remain, then the need will remain as well, and the hero's journey will continue to be a readily accessible and popular means to address it. The narrative of the hero's journey corresponds to the psychological experience of reacquiring the source of one's satisfaction. As Freud (1957) explains, the lover of this type goes on a quest to save and claim the woman he desires; a desire which for Freud is attributed to the infant's desire first to steal the mother from his father or at least share her with him and second to save his mother from degradation after he comes to realise that she too had/has sexual relations. Freud concludes that this pattern is repetitive because it can only result in disappointment. The fictional

[59] Campbell tried to show that everyone can play the role of the hero, yet his tepid efforts prove him wrong. Out of all the texts he references as evidence to his monomyth, only one has a female protagonist. This is Cupid and Psyche, the story already analysed in chapter three. Campbell himself treats this instance as an exception: "Here all the principal roles are reversed: instead of the lover trying to win his bride, it is the bride trying to win her lover; and instead of a cruel father withholding his daughter from the lover, it is the jealous mother, Venus, hiding her son, Cupid, from his bride" (2004 p. 89).

pleasure of the romance is short-lived because it is based on an illusion. The moment the hero reaches the end, and the woman, he realises that he can never return to the infantile state before the trauma of separation, and he is disabused. This is why those stories are repeated to infinity; because the pleasure they offer is short-lived and the satisfaction lies in the fantasy they create – that the satisfaction will this time be fulfilled.

In this sense, one can argue that the perseverance of this love fantasy is attributed to the uncontested continuation of the patriarchal society and not to a universal need. Romantic love is a fantastical love, the love of struggle for overcoming the separation trauma of the infantile self. It is not a universal love in terms of an absolute truth. It is a universal love because the agent it corresponds to, i.e. the heterosexual man within the patriarchal system, has been the hegemonic power throughout the centuries the world over. This hegemonic power, the power of signification, makes any other situatedness inexpressive, unimaginable even.[60] The person in love has to conform to this paradigm to understand themselves in love, a stifling and meaningless experience as shown in Simone's example in the introduction. The reason for this is further explored in the following section where I argue that positing romantic love as a fantasy of fulfilment affects how we understand love and what pleasures we expect from it in mediated and unmediated experiences.

5.5. Desire to Desire

What is most disheartening in Campbell's account is the fact that as he, very crudely, comments, in the monomythic culture if one does not have a role assigned or recognised by the formula, they remain in the fringes of society and existence:

> Social duties continue the lesson of the festival into normal, everyday existence, and the individual is validated still. Conversely, indifference, revolt—or exile—break the vitalizing connectives. From the standpoint of the social unit, the broken-off individual is simply nothing—waste. Whereas the man or woman who can honestly say that he or she has lived the role—whether that of priest, harlot, queen, or slave—is something in the full sense of the verb to be. Rites of initiation and installation, then, teach the lesson of the essential oneness of the individual and the group; seasonal festivals open a larger horizon. As the individual is an organ of society, so is the tribe or city—so is humanity entire—only a phase of the mighty organism of the cosmos (p. 355).

In that sense, the repetition of romantic narratives, despite their limitations and problematic nature, cannot be avoided. Since the patriarchal paradigm remains more or less unaltered, the roles in society continue to be defined accordingly. The function of the myth is still to a great extent signification and identification of

[60] For the power of signification see also Carl Jung, another Freudian and influencer of Campbell's work. Jung spoke of the symbolic order: archetypical images shared by human culture in rituals, mythology, and also dreams: "Forms or images of a collective nature which occur practically all over the earth as constituents of myths and at the same time as autochthonous, individual products of unconscious origin" (1957, p. 5636).

the individual within a social norm. In that respect, as long as the social norm remains fundamentally the same, the means for conditioning and appropriation will continue on the same path.[61]

How does this fit into love? I argue that since the system constantly repeats these stories as the narrative paradigm, people learn to equate love with this type of fictional romance. As such, they learn to recognise and expect love as the ultimate salvation in their life. If we understand love as the salvation from our psychological trauma, then it becomes a life-worth endeavor that justifies all means and sacrifices. This remains true even if we do not suffer from any such trauma in the first place. As in the example of *Nier; Automata* in the beginning of the chapter, Simone is a machine lifeform that has no concept of consciousness as humans do. Still, she learns to look for love at any expense because she perceives it as that which provides meaning to an otherwise meaningless and traumatic existence. She learns that because she consumes the available discourse and she convinces herself that this is the only way of acquiring meaning and existence.

This connection can be accentuated by turning to the concept of mimetic desire by René Girard. Mimetic desire functions for Girard as follows:

> Once his basic needs are satisfied (indeed, sometimes even before), man is subject to intense desires, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires *being*, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being. If the model, who is apparently already endowed with superior being, desires some object, that object must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plenitude of being. It is not through words, therefore, but by the example of his own desire that the model conveys to the subject the supreme desirability of the object (1972, p. 146).

Girard's mimetic desire bares great resemblance to the Freudian theory of the Oedipus complex. Girard is aware of this similarity and this is why he readily notifies us that Freud's desire is very specific and predetermined; it is the sexual desire towards a certain object, the mother that is. Mimetic desire, on the other hand, does not presuppose any model nor does it predefine desire.[62] On the contrary, it allows for desire to flow freely and attach itself randomly. Girard admits that for most people the first model of mimesis is indeed the father. Yet this is a matter of circumstance rather than causality. It is just that most

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[61] This connection between infant fantasies and culture described above takes its most absolute form in the work of Hungarian psychoanalyst Géza Róheim, whom Campbell also references (p. 92). Róheim, in his study *The Origin and Function of Culture* (1943), rounds the aforementioned argument as such: "Human groups are actuated by their group ideals, and these are always based on the infantile situation. […] The infancy situation is modified or inverted by the process of maturation, again modified by the necessary adjustment to reality, yet it is there and supplies those unseen libidinal ties without which no human groups could exist" (p. 138-139). For further commentary on Róheim see Powdermaker's review (1945).

[62] For a thorough philosophical analysis of the concept of mimetic desire see Palaver (2013).

societies, especially Occidental ones, function on a patriarchal system which then appropriates the mimetic desire model of Girard:

> With the individual as with groups, mimetic attraction always becomes more and more acute, it always tends to reproduce its initial forms; in other terms, it always seeks new models—and new obstacles—that resemble the original one. If this original model is the father, the subject will choose models that resemble him. In Western society, the father had already become the model by the patriarchal era (p. 188).

The same can be applied to romantic love. In this sense, machine Simone did not have to know love beforehand. She desired it because she wanted to be human. Humans have taken the function of deities in the game's universe since humanity is what all androids and most machines strive for. As such, Simone desires to desire. Because she learns desire from second-hand recounts, she desires love as this all-mighty saviour of meaningless existence. In that, she is no different from other tragic heroines like Anna Karenina (Tolstoy 2014), Phaedra (Dassin 1962), and Madame Bovary (Flaubert 2011).

Girard makes the connection between representation and desire himself in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1965) when he traces his concept of mimetic desire in works of literature by Stendhal, Cervantes, Flaubert, Proust, and Dostoyevsky. Through their heroes and heroines, Girard exhibits how mimetic desire can lead to personal and social crisis and how it can happen through fiction as much as in reality. Exemplarily, Girard describes Swann's love for Odette in *Swann's Way* by Proust (1996) as the result of other men's desire towards her. In the same fashion, he uses Emma from *Madame Bovary* by Flaubert to show how she comes to her desire for a lover through the romantic books she has been reading since her adolescence:

> She repeated to herself: 'I have a lover! A lover!' – delighting in this idea as if at a second puberty that had unexpectedly come upon her. So she would at last possess those joys of love, that fever of happiness she had so despaired of. She was entering into something wondrous where all would be passion, ecstasy, delirium; a bluish immensity surrounded her, emotion's peaks glistened beneath her thought, and ordinary existence appeared only in the distance, far below, in the shade, between the intervals of these heights. Then she recalled the heroines in the books she had read, and the lyric legion of those adulterous women began to sing in her memory with beguiling, sisterly voices. She became a veritable part of these imaginings and realised the drawn-out dream of her youth, in deeming herself one of those archetypal lovers whom she had so envied. Moreover, Emma felt the gratification of vengeance. Had she not suffered enough! But now she was triumphant, and love, so long contained, gushed forth whole and with a joyful bubbling. She relished it without remorse, without unease, without confusion (Flaubert 2011, p. 184).

As Girard remarks: "Emma Bovary desires through the romantic heroines who fill her imagination" (1965, p. 5). According to Girard, this has a detrimental effect on Emma's psyche because "the second-rate books which she devoured in her youth have destroyed all her spontaneity" (ibid). Borrowing the term bovarysm from Jules de Gaultier's 1892 eponymous essay (2006), Girard describes how Emma's infatuation with this romantic discourse had cost her individualism: "The same ignorance, the same inconsistency, the same absence of individual reaction seem to make them fated to obey the suggestion of an external milieu, for lack of an auto-suggestion from within" (1965, p. 5). This, for Girard, is true not only for Madame Bovary

but for other literary heroes like Don Quixote by De Cervantes (2003), Julien Sorel of *The Red and the Black* by Stendhal (2009), and Dostoevsky's doomed characters among others.

Even though Girard analyses mimetic desire as a systemic reaction, he still discerns a personal responsibility in how this develops. For him, Emma, Don Quixote, Julien, and the others all chose the model they wanted to shape their desires according to: "the characters of Cervantes and Flaubert are imitating, or believe they are imitating, the desires of models they have freely chosen" (1965, p. 5). But is there actually a freedom of choice? Could machine Simone know any other desire than what her data input had preconfigured for her? I would argue that there is not. Or rather we are so conditioned to replicate a certain model of desire that it takes much more conscious and deliberate effort as to not to.[63]

In that, "Mme Bovary could go on changing lovers endlessly without ever changing her dream" (p. 89), in the same way that Simone implores someone, anyone, to look at her. Yet it is not Emma's, or Simone's, fault that their desires fail them. It is the fact that they were based on a fallacious model. Since this was the model readily available to them, the criticism should fall on the circumstances responsible for this model's generation and dissemination.[64] In Emma's and Simone's example, their failure becomes more disheartening because their models were fictional so they had no chance at ever satisfying their desires. Yet their having turned to fictional models speaks of a need that was not their own and therefore they cannot be blamed for freely choosing them.

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[63] Girard makes a remark towards Bovary's inability to choose anything else when he comments that: "at the origin of bovarysm, as of Dostoyevskian madness, is the failure of a more or less conscious attempt at an apotheosis of the self" (p. 63). Similarly to Campbell's dichotomy of the previous chapter, for Girard the transcendence of the self comes through religious suffering: "Sancho asks his master why he did not choose saintliness rather than knighthood- Flaubert similarly looked on bovarysm as a deviation of the need for transcendency" (p. 62). This binary brings once again to mind the affinities of romantic love with monotheism and the cult of Virgin Mary in medieval France discussed in chapter two. Indeed, as Girard argues: "numerous passages of Madame Bovary portray just as precisely the "transcendent" character of passion" (p. 63). Specifically, since the other remedy provided by the canon according to both Girard and Campbell, the religious one, suffers all the more due to social, economic, and historic reasons, love's function as panacea continues to increase together with the disappointment and desperation it brings once it is revealed that the salvation it advertises can never be accomplished.

[64] As with machine Beauvoir, once again I do not treat the fact that Emma Bovary is a woman as coincidence. Mary Ann Doane in her book *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (1987) makes the case that women turn to romantic love because it is the only way they can achieve subjectivity by being associated with the symbolic subject, the man that is. In commenting on Vincente Minnelli's 1949 adaptation of Madame Bovary, Doane focuses on Flaubert's (James Mason) defense while on trial for the immoral representation of a woman in his novel: "Flaubert claims that it is "our world" that created her and hundreds of thousands of women like her, not he" (1987, p. 114). As Doane shows, Flaubert refuses the accusations and transfers the responsibility to the system instead. It is because the system failed them that women turn to such means of appeasement. Yet, even these forms of consolation fail Emma: "In the film *Madame Bovary*, the camera consistently lingers on the pictures Emma pins to the wall of her room, pictures which dwell on the pleasures of romance and faraway places. Every time her desire leads her into trouble or difficulty, the camera returns to those pictures as if pinpointing them as the cause" (ibid).

One may argue that Simone is different from Emma because Emma, albeit fictional, is still a human, while Simone is a machine lifeform both in ontology and representation: she is a machine in the game's narrative and also a digital game character supported by the computer system. She did not have to love as we humans do. As we saw in the previous chapter, love for humans is a natural predisposition from which we cannot escape.[65] That being said, following on Ekman's theory in the last chapter, it became apparent that love as a complex emotional plot is subject to representation as much as it is to biology. As shown in chapter three and discussed in this chapter, the power of signification and representation of love is indeed so persistent and so pervasive that it may affect us even more than our biology. This is why, according to Ekman, we preconfigure some experiences in a certain way to recreate specific emotional reactions.

This, I argue, is also the case with romantic love. Just like Emma and Simone, we choose to experience romantic love because we can control it and as such organise our responses accordingly. We use romantic love and have preconfigured it to be able to attach our desire in a model that is achievable and intrinsically, albeit fictionally, meaningful. This is a need we are conditioned to have because we are indoctrinated to believe that our desires should be manageable and prone to satisfaction. The stabilisation of desire is the raison d'etre of this system of modelling desire to begin with. This gives love as representation a political aspect. The politicisation and policing of love and attachment will be elaborated in more detail in the following chapter.

Summary

In this chapter, I analysed love as romantic discourse. In particular, I showed how romance is the dominant narrative and as such it affects how love is experienced. For that I used psychological and psychoanalytical theories. While Campbell's concept of monomyth has its limitations and was criticised for its preoccupation with the hegemonic practices of patriarchy, it is a useful approach for two reasons: a) it still perseveres in the popular canon, games included and b) it, partially, explains why pathological love is the primary example of love in fiction. As was shown, Campbell argues that this is because myths and fiction help neurotic individuals overcome their infantile trauma. His connection is flawed, yet it still explains why love in the popular paradigm is indeed prescribed as the salvation to infantile trauma and a source of completion and constant satisfaction.

This is exemplarily shown in tragic love stories, in which the subject in love is a subject driven to death due to despair of the love's inadequacy and the monomyth's asphyxiation that cannot accommodate for anyone outside its predestined roles. As was shown in the later part of the chapter using Girard's mimetic desire,

[65] Actually it can be argued that it is one of the last, if not the last, frontiers demarcating biological from artificial humanness, a concept which will be analysed in detail in chapter ten.

this dictates the love experience as such. We learn to look for love in a specific way just like machine Simone learnt love through the public archive. While the individual holds some responsibility, I argue that this is a systemic problem that politicises romantic love as stabilisation of desire. Games then possess the potential to facilitate our disillusionment and dissatisfaction with this stifling regime because they can constitute absolute simulations of its prescripts. Both of these aspects will be analysed in the following chapter.

Chapter 6

Love Politics

In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it
nothing is being achieved except hypocrisy.
Hannah Arendt

Dragon Age 2 (BioWare 2011) is a fantasy role-playing game that affords different romance options to the player. One of the available romantic partners that the player can choose from is an elven warrior named Fenris. Once the romance is locked in, as per the game's parlance, Fenris sports a red band around his forearm. It is the way of the game to signify to the player that they were successful in their pursuit and that Fenris now belongs to them. This is not only narrative information but a strategic one as well. A locked-in romance with Fenris means that he has reached the maximum loyalty and thus will fight by the player's side in the final battle. As such, Fenris is not only a romantic companion but a war asset as well. The red band around his forearm is a reassuring reminder of his loyalty and the player's achievement; the player struggled to complete Fenris' romantic mission and the red band is there to show that they have succeeded. It is also a way for the player to feel connected and anchored to the game world since their actions bring actual and persistent change.

Figure 9 - Fenris's appearance before (left) and after (right) having been romanced, *Dragon Age 2*

Such a public display of possession as the one in Fenris' case can raise concerns – and it has raised as we saw in chapter two – regarding the believability of the romance in games and also the harmful representation of a love story. Love, supposedly, does not work like that. People do not belong to you because you have locked them in a romance; neither do they go about wearing a red band as proof of their having been

conquered. How can the player experience anything remotely related to love when their relationship to Fenris is that of ownership and resource management? Fenris is a digital game character and the player interacts with him in a game setting. In the limited screen space, especially during adrenaline-packed battle scenes, the most important thing is the player's visibility, and as such the red band is easier for the player to discern. In another context, Fenris could just as easily wear a golden band around his ring finger.

When it comes to love, games can easily afford its popular conventionality. Games as simulation systems can very well follow this tradition. The fact that this readiness exaggerates love's fictionality as a concept is not the fault of games. In games, love is shown in all its codification as a construct. Yet, it is not that games codify love, it is rather that love is already highly codified and in actuality, as argued in the previous chapters, what we understand and experience as love is deeply influenced by this fabricated notion of what love is and what it can achieve for us.

As we saw in chapter two, love in the popular paradigm has taken on the role of a religious or mystical power already from the Middle Ages, or even before that as argued in chapter three. Specifically, as was shown in the previous chapter, this popular paradigm has conditioned us to understand love as a salvific power to our mundane and meaningful existence, for which we have to suffer and struggle; all our passions are justified in our quest for love. All is fair in love and war, as the proverb goes. The fact that in games this struggle is designed and as such solvable shows that in actuality: a) love is more achievable than what we are meant to believe, b) it is only achievable in this quality of completion and satisfaction in fiction, and c) even then the pleasure it advertises is instantaneous and fleeting. Thus, games by simulating love exhibit its fictionality as an experience and destroy the fantasy that love is an all-mighty power, a saving grace that blesses a selected few after they have proven their worth in accordance with the paradigmatic code.

6.1. The Politics of Attachment and Intimacy

Lauren Berlant in their book *Desire/Love* (2012) argues that this understanding of love is primarily a need for attachment or, a desire to attach our desire onto a stable object. This, according to Berlant, provides us with the fantastical promise and solace that once we manage this attachment then our desire would become stable in itself, a concept we analysed in the previous chapter with Girard's concept of mimetic desire. For Girard, choosing a model of desire is a personal matter, and thus we bear the responsibility of our actions and we suffer their repercussions as Madam Bovary, Anna Karenina, and machine Simone did. For Berlant, instead, desiring attachment is an act inexorably political. Berlant theorises love, desire, and intimacy as a continuous process conditioned by one's situatedness and relation to the institutions of power.

Critiquing psychoanalysis, Berlant argues that love is always the fantasy of desire for stability and anchored attachment as these are made accessible through language. In that, Berlant sees love as an unattainable end state and at the same time as a means of hegemonic appropriation and normalisation of desire. For Berlant, fantasy conditions and shapes the subject and the self as part of society: "Persons find their form, their "selves," from within fantasy, which includes the projection of impossible desires onto love objects for a bearable and prior stability and the mediation of norms that make them socially intelligible" (p. 52-53). This makes attachment even more political.

Yet what does Berlant mean by fantasy? Berlant's approach is once again psychoanalytical. In the same vein we discussed it in the previous chapter, Berlant treats subjectivity, the coming of oneself to one's distinct being, as infused with trauma. From that moment on, we are bound by desire; the desire to acquire once more the object of our satisfaction and make it part of our subjectivity; a desire that can never be fulfilled. Love then is treated as the fantasy of fulfilment for reasons already explained in the previous chapter. As with Campbell, Berlant sees love's function as fantasy in popular culture. Unlike Campbell, Berlant treats this fantasy as the product and not the result of the infantile culture and as such highly conventional and political: "this transfer from the epistemology of symptom to that of repair through love's genre is conventional" (p. 86).

Echoing Girard from the previous chapter, Berlant claims: "The Oedipal crisis occurs when the child realises that, like all economies, the Oedipal economy involves scarcity: the father is his rival for the mother's love" (p. 31). This means that love is cultivated in antagonistic terms in the same way the concepts of monotheistic religion, nation-state, race, and marriage have been fictionalised as the promise of a certainty we have to fight for but which can never be:

> […] the conventional narratives and institutions of romance share with psychoanalysis many social and socializing function. As sites for theorizing and imaging desire, they manage ambivalence; designate the individual as the unit of social transformation; reduce the overwhelming world to an intensified space of personal relations; establish dramas of love, sexuality, and reproduction as the dramas central to living; and install the institutions of intimacy (most explicitly the married couple and the intergenerational family) as the proper sites for providing the life plot in which a subject has "a life" and a future (p. 86).

In this sense, romantic love is inherently codified; a product of institutionalised codification that offers the power of signification to certain expressions of desire: "the fantasy world of romance is used normatively — as a rule that legislates the boundary between a legitimate and valuable mode of living/loving and all the others" (p. 87). Romance and romantic love purposefully cultivate the impression and illusion of control: "People learn to identify with love the way they identify with commodities: the notions of personal autonomy, consent, choice, and fulfilment so powerful in love discourse seem to be the same as those

promised by national capitalism" (p. 109). Romantic love then regulates what people feel and ought to feel as an ideological truth.

Berlant describes in detail the political aspect of love as a fantasy in their critical piece on intimacy. They specifically read intimacy, "an aesthetic of attachment" (1998, p. 285), and love a spatial web that creates fantastical worlds and spaces based on convention: "intimacy builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation" (p. 282).[66] Love, therefore, is but another formation of desire under the hegemonic hierarchy: " This is where normative ideologies come in, when certain "expressive" relations are promoted across public and private domains – love, community, patriotism – while other relations, motivated, say, by the "appetites," are discredited or simply neglected" (ibid). Love in this popular paradigm is a stabilizing discourse facilitated by patriarchal families "and the institutions of *loco parentis*, namely, schools and religions" (p. 287).

Indicatively, Berlant uses a mediated example of love in *Gone with the Wind*:

> […] Heterosexual romance and sovereign nationality require fantasy to work its magic on subjects, generating an optimism that both plays out ambivalence and disavows complexity. *Gone with the Wind* narrates the compulsion to repeat as a relation between a sensual utopia (here, the Confederacy, romantic intimacy) and a jumble of obstacles that must be narratively mastered so that the utopia might be approached once again (2012, p. 73).

In particular, Berlant claims: "The scene of desire and the obstacles to it become eroticised, rather than the love that seems to motor it" (ibid). This is extremely interesting for the current discussion for it coincides with the argument already explored in chapter two, namely that in games it is the challenge that provides romantic love, which was expanded to prove that romantic love has always been about the challenge. Berlant's approach that love is a fantasy and it is in actuality the struggle to reach it that is eroticised makes the argument that games are indeed the appropriate medium to afford it even stronger. The reason for that comes from how Berlant describes the construction of subjectivity in this experience of desire:

> This kind of interpretive shift from couple oriented desire to the erotics of a scene of encounter with the fantasy requires repositioning the desiring subject as a *spectator* as well as a participant in her scene of desire, and suggests a kind of doubleness the subject must have in her relation to pursuing her pleasure. […] The centrality of repetition to pleasure and of deferral to desire indeed places the desiring subject *in* her story, and well as makes her reader *of* her story. These two forms, acting and interpretation enable the desiring subject to reinhabit her own plot from a *number* of imaginary vantage points, simultaneously (pp. 73-74).

In avatarial games, in which the player both acts and sees themselves acting, the workings of this "encounter with the fantasy" which is what love is in the popular and psychoanalytical paradigm are even more enabled and prominent. Daniel Vella has written predominantly on the dynamic relationship of the player with the playable figure as entailing both subjective and objective relations. For Vella, the connection of the player

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[66] This is a notion that echoes the spatial economy of Lefebvre's production of space, which I analyse chapter nine.

with the avatar is that of "both self and the other," creating a double consciousness (2014, p. 3). Vella differentiates between an objective mode of playing, in which the player perceives the avatar as a distinct body, and the subjective mode, in which the player inhabits the avatar body herself:

> The distinction is one of playing the figure versus playing with the figure. In the subjective mode, the player becomes the figure. […] In the objective mode, conversely, the figure becomes itself present to the player as an object of perception. […] To summarize, the playable figure has a double nature – it is both a manifestation of the player and also, at the same time, a distinct individual, a character with its own attributes and characteristics that set it apart from the player (ibid).

Furthermore, each mode is also a matter of the relation between the self and the other, which results in four different states:

> - the subjective relation of self occurs when the player inhabits the ludic subject position established by the figure and perceives this subject as 'herself'
> - the objective relation of self occurs when the player perceives the figure objectively, from an external perspective, but relates to it as 'herself'
> - the objective relation of other occurs when the player perceives the figure objectively, from an external perspective, and relates to it as a distinct individual separate from herself
> - the subjective relation of other occurs when the player inhabits the ludic subject position established by the figure, but perceives this subjectivity as belonging to a distinct individual separate from herself (p. 4).

It may be argued that the games' variety of modes accentuates the experience of love and pleasure especially because as Vella claims:

> No matter which perspective or mode of relation comes to the fore at any given point, it remains shadowed by its inverse, and the distinctive nature of the player-figure relation lies precisely in the – frequently paradoxical – interrelation and interdependence of these opposing modes and perspectives, between which no definitive lines of demarcation can be drawn (p. 5).

Indeed, while in literature, cinema, and other media the participation of the receiver is fictional and/or imagined, in games the participation is very much real and somatic. This brings desire and the pleasure of the scene of the challenge much more to the forefront in comparison to the fantastical outcome of love.

In other words, when we as Mario go to save Princess Peach, to echo Wirman (2015) from chapter two once again, we watch ourselves fighting for love but we also have to actually fight; overcome obstacles in the shape of evil mushrooms and turtles, pits of lava, deadly spikes, and fire-spitting flowers. Equally, when we want to romance Fenris in DA2, we watch ourselves talking to him but we also have to make the correct choices and solve the text-based puzzle to win his affection or rivalry. This game design may appear too simplistic yet it is not because games cannot afford the complexity of love. Whether they can or not is a completely different question. Rather this challenge regarding love in games concerns romantic love. It is because games show the fictionality of romantic love as a promise in the first place. They show that the desire and the pleasure lie in the challenge and it is when this challenge becomes simplistic that our pleasure

diminishes because we are culturally conditioned to suffer to see our desire fulfilled in socially acceptable, albeit conventional and restrictive, norms.[67]

6.2. **Love** and **Desire**

Even though Berlant deconstructs the fantastical dimension of love, they do not disregard the desire for it: "That these forms are conventions whose imaginary propriety serves a variety of religious and capitalist institutions does not mean that the desire for romantic love is an ignorant or false desire" (p. 86). As we saw in the previous chapter, romantic love expresses deep social and psychological needs. Yet instead of using love as a promise of false/fictional stability for which we have to formulate our identity by disrupting or sacrificing any parts or expressions thereof that do not fit the paradigm, Berlant calls for love as a means to embrace ambivalence, which is inherent in desire, the self, and the subject.

According to the resident paradigm, desire stabilises the subject and enables it to assume a "stable-enough identity": "In this model a person is someone who is retroactively created: you know who you "are" only by interpreting where your desire has already taken you" (p. 76). Yet, as Berlant points out, desire never reaches its destination "the thing that will repair the trauma (of maternal separation, of sexual difference) that set you on your voyage in the first place" (ibid). On the contrary, in the words of Berlant: "Desire is practical: it takes what it can get" (ibid). Therefore, instead of attributing an a priori format on desire so that it adheres to certain proprieties depending on our social convention and situatedness, another option is to accept desire's ambivalence:

> This radical way of reading the subject's construction by her desire not only refuses the view that the subject is a traumatized infantile core knotted up by the compulsion to repeat a normative erotic organization, but also produces ways of reading sensation that has the subject's affect inevitably exceeding the normal and proper codes that try to organize her, as she moves through the world becoming impacted by and different within the event of her encounters (p. 65).

Berlant supports that drawing from Lacanian psychoanalysis. Echoing Freud, Lacan (1975) argues that the moment of infantile separation is indeed a traumatic event but it is also a moment of misremembrance or misrecognition. The reason for that is because the infant "misremembers her prior life as an experience of bodily wholeness or integrity" (p. 53). Yet this is a false memory as the infant's prior condition was again "disorganized, appetitive, and libidinally unzoned." Most importantly there can be no actual memory of a previous state since it was "really just an affective sense and not anything we typically understand as memory" (ibid). For this, language and formalist identity can never comfortably express the subject's desire:

[67] Or in the words of Proust: "But, above all, the shrinking of the pleasure that I had previously expected to feel was due to the certainty that nothing now could take it from me" (1996, p. 408). Of course, this can also be connected with our biology. Challenge increases dopamine and the gratification of success raises our levels of serotonin, both of which, as we saw in chapter four, are also associated with the feelings of love.

> The Lacanian Real, which represents the unbearable and unsymbolizable limit that is sensed but always missed, puts pressure on the subject to disavow the anxiety of non-meaning that nonetheless haunts her searching for foundations or anchors in objects. The Real, one might say, exerts pressure on the drives to find objects to love, but those objects, bound to the Symbolic, are always insufficient to the pressure of fantasy that keeps one driven toward them (p. 54).

Unlike Freud's actual fear of castration: "Lacan focuses on the drama of symbolic castration in the production of identity and the desire that flows in excess of it" (p. 56). While for Lacan this is a drama one has to accept – wearing their identity, gendered by default in psychoanalysis, sometimes as a fetish – Berlant, inspired by affect theorists like Deleuze and Guattari, sees in this ambivalence an opportunity to overcome trauma, or rather to disregard it completely. One does not have to subject themselves, or their desire, to normative ideologies and stabilising regimes because one accepts that there can be no stabilisation; actually there is no need for one. Pleasure and desire can be achieved without it. So, slightly paraphrasing Berlant, in juxtaposition to the popular paradigm the injuries of love are indeed healed by paying attention to the details of constancy and inconstancy love generates, and by agreeing to try to live in love's awkward synchrony; not by insisting on the sovereignty of fantasy: accept my fantasy of love as our realism;[68] accepting love as free-form with inconceivable possibilities instead of trying to regulate it.

Nevertheless, as Berlant notes, living, and loving, in ambivalence is a constant struggle. More so, because desire is primarily a desire for anchoring and fixation, which is expressed in love as fantasy and discourse: "The fantasy forms that structure popular love discourse constantly express the desire for love to simplify living" (p. 89). This is why struggle according to propriety is so seductive and pleasurable in itself because it holds the promise of something better and the means to achieve it. Also, the overabundance of norms and rules that are in place for organising desire makes it hard for the individual to overlook and overcome them, if not over-think them, as in think and imagine beyond them: "desire's restless drive toward finding spaces and shapes will always be met if not overmatched by the coercive and seductive forms of propriety, virtue, and discipline that organize societies, and individual will cannot dissolve these by force or by theory" (p. 66).[69]

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[68] The actual passage reads: "Instead, in its habitation of the romantic comedy genre, the injuries of love are healed not by paying attention to the details of constancy and inconstancy love generates, and not by agreeing to try to live in love's awkward synchrony, but by insisting on the sovereignty of fantasy: accept *my* fantasy of love as *our* realism" (p. 105), emphasis in the original. In other words, against what Proust informs us is the fate of love: "I might, for that matter, have guessed as much in advance, since the girl on the beach was a fabrication of my own. In spite of which, since I had, in my conversations with Elstir, identified her with Albertine, I felt myself in honour bound to fulfil to the real the promises of love made to the imagined Albertine. We betroth ourselves by proxy, and then feel obliged to marry the intermediary" (1996, p. 427).

[69] This is an important point for this discussion because games and play, in particular, can be a way to overcome this discipline; a point for which I argue further in a later chapter.

Berlant, however, does not demonise love. Love becomes toxic if it is considered as a panacea of stabilisation, which it is not. Instead, one should accept love in its fluctuation and uncertainty: “desire and love: that there are no master explanations of them; that they destabilize and threaten the very things (like identity and life) that they are disciplined to organize and ameliorate” (p. 112). Love can indeed provide solace as long as it is recognised in its dynamicity. Berlant is positive in giving the lovers a fighting chance if they forego the stability and embrace ambivalence:

> The fantasy, which is at the heart both of popular culture and Lacanian psychoanalysis, is that love is the misrecognition you like, can bear, and will try to keep consenting to. If the Other will accept your fantasy/realism as the condition of their encounter with their own lovability, and if you will agree to accept theirs, the couple (it could be any relation) has a fighting chance not to be destroyed by the aggressive presence of ambivalence, with its jumble of memory, aggressive projection, and blind experimentation (p. 106).

Yet Berlant does not stop there. For them, not only is any experience a valid experience but any plot should also be a valid plot, meaning that not only should love as an experience include all possible outcomes and formations but also romance as its representation should do the same. As they contend, imagination is important for the constructs of self and subject: “Those who don't or can't find their way in that story – the queers, the single, the something else – can become so easily unimaginable, even often to themselves” (1998, p. 286). The significance of imagination is revealed also in cases, in which the outliers push for more inclusion, a fact which, by those conditioned in the hegemonic propriety, is interpreted as a threat to their stabilisation:

> These crises are not just personal. When states, populations, or persons sense that their definition of the real is under threat; when the normative relays between personal and collective ethics become frayed and exposed; and when traditional sites of pleasure and profit seem to get "taken away" by the political actions of subordinated groups, a sense of anxiety will be pervasively felt about how to determine responsibility for the disruption of hegemonic comfort. This unease unsettles social and political relations between, within, and among many people, nations, and populations, especially formerly sovereign ones. Various kinds of hate crime, bitterness, and "comedic" satire frequently ensue (p. 287).

As I argue, the prime reason that including love in games raises concerns is because we do not want to see how fictional and constructed what we have come to know as love is. If we can play love, then what is left for us to depend our salvation on? Yet instead of fear, love in games should inspire hope. It is a means to understand the difference between experiencing love and experiencing the romance. This quality of games may facilitate our accepting love’s ambivalence, while retaining the pleasure and limited satisfaction that romance can offer without, however, confusing the two.

Including love in games is not a taboo per se. As already shown in chapter two, love has been used in games from early on. It is when love is incorporated in a way that surpasses the limits of its stabilising power and it is revealed in its ambivalence that opposition and challenges ensue. Getting love as a reward for the player’s actions is a straightforward technique that revolves around the player’s agency and the popular

promise that mastery awards and justifies the fulfilment of desire. This may be more mechanical in games but it is not only found in games. It is simply that in games the absurdity of this fictionality is more pronounced because they constitute condensed and designed experiences. It is not that their codification corrupts love; it is rather that it shows how prone love is to codification and how constructed and fabricated romantic love is as an experience.

It is when love is incorporated in its ambivalence that it is considered to be eluding games. Yet the problem is not with the ludic property of games, it is with codification in and of itself. Games are seen as the prime example of codification of fantasy, and they are, but this does not mean that they codify love because they cannot escape their codification. Love is already a codified regime in the popular paradigm. As Berlant argued, it is the politics of love's promise as a fantasy that makes people react to anything that might disturb this stabilisation and/or reveal its fictionality.

In the book *The Magicians* (2009) by Lev Grossman, a group of young adults visits a fantasy world, which purposefully resembles Narnia and other fantastical realms like Middle Earth and Hogwarts. The world, called Fillory, is a fictional creation of a renowned author in the book's fictional setting. All the characters of *The Magicians* have read about Fillory and when they discover that it exists and they can actually visit it, they are understandably astonished; more so, because the way to reach it is as easy as the turn of a button. Apparently, at the end of the fictional book series, the protagonists are gifted with five buttons that can transfer them from Earth to this fantasy world whenever they want whereas before they had no way of knowing when and how to travel there; they had to be chosen to visit Fillory. As Penny – one of the characters in Grossman's book – explains, this diminished all the appeal of the adventure and, by extension, of Fillory. This is why the buttons had to be hidden.

> But the most important point, Penny said, is that at the end of *The Wandering Dune* Helen hid all the buttons somewhere in her aunt's house in Cornwall. She felt they were too mechanical; they made the journey too easy. Their power was wrong. You shouldn't be able to just go to Fillory whenever you wanted, like catching a bus, she argued. A trip to Fillory had to be earned, that had always been the way. It was a reward for the worthy, bestowed by the ram-gods Ember and Umber. The buttons were a perversion of this divine grace, a usurping of it. They broke the rules. Ember and Umber couldn't control them. Fillory was fundamentally a religious fantasy, but the buttons weren't religious at all, they were magical—they were just tools, with no values attached. You could use them for anything you wanted, good or evil. They were so magical they were practically technological (p. 242-242).

Digital games are the technological buttons to love's religious quality. They make the journey and the goal accessible at will and thus undress it of pretence and value. Or rather they show that the value is not inherent in the end state; love or the magic realm. Instead, it is the struggle to reach it that gives value to love and Fillory both; a religious value that is. In other media, the struggle can be mystified. We do not know why, when, and how Beauty fell in love with the Beast. We do not know the exact workings of the filter that made Isolde fall in love with Tristan. We do not know why the Prince loved Cinderella. More often than

not, the narrative describes it as magic, an inexplicable power, platitudinous beauty, or a good heart in a futile attempt to give words to the ineffable.

In games, it is the way there that gets demystified. You press the buttons and you make it happen. It is still difficult – depending on the game – but it is achievable and quantifiable. Since what gives love its singularity as the remedy to our existential agony is the struggle to attain and express it, when games remove this struggle – or make it successional and solvable – they, supposedly, remove love's merit. Yet, as we saw, this merit is a fictional one. The feeling and experience of love do exist without this religious aura and I do not equate the two. At the same time, I strongly argue that this understanding of love as the redeemer of our traumatic existence is so prevalent and persistent that it has affected how we experience and expect to experience love. The fact that games are a means to highlight this conventionality and demystify love may be thus a way to overcome the hegemonic dictum of love; to separate once more love from romance.

6.3. Love and Sexuality

To further explain the above, I borrow Foucault's concept of biopolitics, especially in relation to love and sexuality. Foucault has dedicated four volumes on his work titled *History of Sexuality* (1978-2021). Foucault traces sexuality as the discourse of sex in its capacity to appropriate and, potentially, extinguish sexual desire. In this context, sex would have the right "only to clandestine, circumscribed, and coded types of discourse" (1978, p. 4). The similarities between Foucault's position and the argument supported here are already evident. Like sex, love has become a subject of discourse, a discourse of regulated experiences and emotions. Just like sex, love is everywhere but only in its capacity as a stabilising force of heteronormativity and, as such, a commodity. The connection becomes more overt when Foucault describes how political and hegemonic this practice is:

> If sex is so rigorously repressed, this is because it is incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative. At a time when labor capacity was being systematically exploited, how could this capacity be allowed to dissipate itself in pleasurable pursuits, except in those – reduced to a minimum – that enabled it to reproduce itself? (p. 6).

Foucault clearly connects sexuality with labour. Controlling and regulating sex is a means to protect labour, or rather to channel it more efficiently and in accordance with society's dicta. If sex does not result in reproduction, then it is useless. This is why for Foucault, sexual freedom is a political cause. The argumentation is very close to that of Berlant. As they argued, if love does not result in reciprocation according to prescribed notions, then it is not even registered as love. Love, in its romantic, fabricated notion, may even coincide with sexuality; or rather share the same functionality: that of managing desire. As Foucault would have it, the ecclesiastical, primarily, and political hegemony target desire first and foremost: "Not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your

desire, your every desire, into discourse" (p. 21). Transforming desire into discourse was a means for the representatives of power to control, regulate, and most importantly anticipate it.

Similar to romantic love, this discourse was responsible for a new type of pleasure in itself:

> […] also sought to produce specific effects on desire, by the mere fact of transforming it – fully and deliberately – into discourse: effects of mastery and detachment, to be sure, but also an effect of spiritual reconversion, of turning back to God, a physical effect of blissful suffering from feeling in one's body the pangs of temptation and the love that resists it (ibid.)

Especially after the 18th century, sex became a matter of the nation-state. The state was responsible for its management and regulation. Since sex is the means to reproduction and reproduction is the primary way a nation-state has to increase its population and become prosperous, everything related to sex had to be about successful and effective reproduction: "motivated by one basic concern: to ensure population, to reproduce labor capacity, to perpetuate the form of social relations: in short, to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative (p. 38-39). This is why Foucault understands sexuality within the context of "a biopolitics of the population. The disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population constituted the two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed" (p. 139). As Foucault shows, however, this codification of desire is not novel. Conducting a historico-political analysis, Foucault covers the various conceptualisations bestowed upon sex and sexuality since Ancient Greece.

Greeks already had a certain code of conduct in place with regard to sex. Foucault explains:

> The sexual act was certainly not perceived by the Greeks as an evil; for them it was not the object of a moral disqualification. But the texts bear witness to an anxiety concerning the activity itself. And this anxiety revolved around three focal points: the very form of the act, the cost it entailed, and the death to which it was linked.[70] (1985, p. 125).

How does this anxiety relate to love, however? According to Foucault, Greeks turned to representation to mitigate their sexual anxiety. Representation was used to regulate the instinctual manifestation of the sexual experience of desire. Greeks developed an "erotic art," which sought, with pronounced ethical concerns, to intensify insofar as possible the positive effects of a controlled, deliberate, multifarious, and prolonged sexual activity" (p. 137). Not only that, "but the appetite, Plato explains in the Philebus, can be aroused only by the representation, the image or the memory of the thing that gives pleasure" (p. 43).

Does this mean that there is no sexual desire outside representation? The anxiety that surrounds the subject denies such a contingency. It instead can be surmised that what Plato means is that sexual representation activates a separate type of sexual desire; a more thoughtful and controlled experience that has been

[70] Who better to further consult on the topic that Bataille? See *Death and Sensuality* (Bataille 1962).

designed with this specific intention of a more dignified, sterilised, and socially acceptable type of desire. Could it be then that romantic love was part of this controlled representation that made the participants dignified in their sexual desire, and by proxy, the audience of such a representation? The answer is not straightforward as of yet. It will progressively continue becoming more so as we move from antiquity to early modernity and from the city-state to the imperial territories.

> […] in classical Greek thought it was the relationship with boys that constituted the most delicate point, and the most active focus of reflection and elaboration; it was here that the problematization called for the most subtle forms of austerity. Now, surveying the course of a very slow evolution, we can see this focus move elsewhere: it is around women that, little by little, the problems come to be centered. […] And we can see a new shift of the focus of problematization (this time from women to the body) in the interest that was shown, starting in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the sexuality of children, and, generally speaking, in the relationships between sexual behavior, normality, and health. (p. 253).

As Foucault contends, the focus of erotics progressively moved away from pederasty, but the need of valorising and stylising desire did not. It is in this gradual shift that love starts establishing itself in the place of the erotics; as a regime of control and propriety for sexual desire. Yet while for ancient Greeks, pleasure did not have any external goal but was instead contextualised within their conscious effort to reach truth, love will now manifest itself as a personal means to happiness and, later, salvation.

6.4. The Care of the Self

As Foucault positions it, the catalyst of this subtle change was the fall of the political formation of the city-state in 3rd century BCE and the rise of empires – Alexander's and much more prominently the Roman, Byzantine, and Holy Roman Empires – and the nation-state that succeeded them: "the growth, in the Hellenistic and Roman world, of an "individualism" that is said to have accorded more and more importance to the "private" aspects of existence, to the values of personal conduct, and to the interest that people focused on themselves" (1986, p. 41). In this new status-quo, the person stopped being a citizen responsible for their well-being as part of their city and became a subject, far removed from the focal points of governance, decision and policy-making: "Being less firmly attached to the cities, more isolated from one another, and more reliant on themselves, they sought in philosophy rules of conduct that were more personal" (ibid.). Responsibility, therefore, became much more individualistic;[71] one ought to protect themselves and their person.

In this milieu, the notion of self started developing: "the development of what might be called a "cultivation of the self," wherein the relations of oneself to oneself were intensified and valorized" (p. 43). Foucault

[71] The appropriate word would be idiotic, a term deriving from the term idiot, which in ancient Greek meant the person who was only interested in their private business and did not care, was ignorant, about the community, which of course had a negative connotation for them (OED 1989).

references many writers of the era in whose work he finds remedies for a happy homelife. Among others, he quotes Epicurus, Plutarch, and Apuleius, the author of Cupid and Psyche fable, which is considered one of the first romantic love stories as discussed in chapter three. It becomes apparent that this concept of self sees a parallel development of love as a personal objective against the licentiousness and perilousness of uncontrolled sexual desire but also as a precious treasure one owns that they must protect from external interference. Love became a ground of personal domination.

Science and medicine treated at the time sexual union as dangerous, a form of convulsion. Foucault extensively covers the work of Greek physician Gallen, who lived in second century CE in Pergamon. Gallen, predominantly, characterises sex as “an involuntary violence of tension and an indefinite, exhausting expenditure” (p. 113). Abstinence was prescribed as well as the sparing performance of the sexual act almost exclusively for reproduction. As Foucault explains, the above put sexual acts “under an extremely careful regimen” (p. 124). This regimen found its perfect exercise in love. Love led to marriage and in marriage one could copulate under specific circumstances and, preferably, with the intention to procreate: “The sexual act, the conjugal tie, offspring, the family, the city, and beyond it, the human community-all this constitutes a series whose elements are connected and in which man's existence achieves its rational form” (p. 170). So now sex became subjugated to love and pleasure was not to be sought outside love. Not only that, but love became the acceptable representation of the, now absent, sexual act.

Sex was gradually removed from literature, the theatre, and the arts. It was considered dangerous to be exposed to images of sex. One ought to “refrain completely from spectacles, not to tell stories or recall memories which could stimulate his sexual desire” (p. 137). People even had to perform the sexual act in the darkness, “by not seeing, one is protected from the images that might be engraved in the soul, remain there, and return in an untimely manner” (p. 138). Darkness also protects love, which by now is completely distinct from the sexual desire, from the crudeness and vulgarity of the sexual act. Let us not forget that Eros only visited Psyche during the night in absolute darkness. Indeed, Foucault mentions the Greek romances covered in chapter three as the expression of this new erotics:

> But one can nonetheless call attention to the presence, in these long narratives with their countless episodes, of some of the themes that will subsequently characterize erotics, both religious and profane: the existence of a "heterosexual" relation marked by a male-female polarity, the insistence on an abstention that is modeled much more on virginal integrity than on the political and virile domination of desires; and finally, the fulfilment and reward of this purity in a union that has the form and value of a spiritual marriage (p. 228).

Interestingly, Foucault posits the perseverance of the love of these protagonists despite all the turmoil to their dedication to virginity, which for them is an ethical choice. They choose to refrain from sex as long as it is not with the person they love. In this light, their happy reunion is also a sexual happiness; they can

finally indulge in this pleasure and the audience alongside them. The readers are allowed to imagine what will transpire upon the lover's reuniting because their union is blessed with love and, eventually, marriage: "The lovers save themselves for each other until the time when love and virginity find their fulfilment in marriage" (p. 231). As Foucault notices, this preoccupation with sex within marriage under the auspices of love is a meditated act.

This does not mean that people did not feel love or experience love elsewise. Yet romantic love was a conscious and deliberate one-upmanship of both love and sexual desire. It was a regimen.[72] Even though there have been changes in morality, the fact that romantic love was put in place as a regulatory canon has not changed. More interestingly, this regulation was from the start a responsibility of the person. This was true for ancient Greece and it became even truer during the Hellenistic and Roman period, reaching its heights in the eighteenth century and romanticism (Eldridge 2001), while gradually reaching our contemporary times (Bataille 1989) and the capitalistic economy of today (Illouz 1997; Hennessy 2017).

Romantic love is indeed designed with the intention to valorise an experience; a free-form experience of desire. It becomes apparent then how fitting for games romantic love is. To repeat once more: it is not that games valorise romantic love, it is that romantic love is already valorised. More than that, it is a system of valorisation in itself. In actuality, I argue that this shows a much more basic human need to valorise anything beyond one's control: playing and loving included. This is not something we see only in games. Self-help books, video guides, and articles with tips and tricks, all try to provide us with as an infallible way as possible for our finding and securing love.[73] We can witness it everywhere, this effort to protect ourselves from heartache by obliterating surprise and the unexpected. Instead of caring for the other, we have transformed love to a personal project that makes us responsible for our own success. This may seem more exaggerated in our times, in games especially, but as was shown here this biopolitical regime of self-care is evident since, at least, late antiquity.

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[72] As Foucault describes in his half-finished fourth volume of his *History of Sexuality: Confessions of the Flesh* that was published only earlier this year (2021), these prescripts regarding sex as a relation to self and love and virginity as the moral backdrop one's sexual life should revolve around were adapted almost in their entirety from the early Christians and Church Fathers. Progressively, this preoccupation with regard to sex as dangerous would receive also a condemning aspect under the Christian ethics. Sex and bodily pleasures were not permitted and one only strived to save their soul. As such, it was only within marriage for reasons of procreation that sex was allowed by church. Once more, romantic love was the discourse that made this segregation more sufferable, albeit being a fabricated notion in the first place. Now, however, there was another type of love that was considered the true love: the love to the one true god. This love, as with the love for truth in Ancient Greece, was considered more important and more genuine, a religious sentiment that has survived to this day.

[73] An internet search about "How to Make Someone Fall in Love with You" returns over 9 billion results at the time of writing. Actually, one can go back to at least 12th-century France and Capellanu's courtly love (1960) or Marie of Champagne's love trials (Yalom 2012; McCash 1979).

6.5. The Agony of Eros

As Foucault informs us, romantic love is a regulated experience of desire that concerns free-form attachments. If everything is legally regulated, then romantic love has no reason of existence. It is the possibility that something can go wrong in one's attachment that romantic love tries to address and it is this anxiety that romantic love is put into place to manage. Even though we continuously strive to control desire, it is the knowledge that love continues to elude us that makes us wanting to control it. It is a constant struggle with no possibility of success, for succeeding means not desiring anymore.

Love is infused with failure (Carson 1986; Illouz 2012). As Han Byung-Chul notes: "It is not a simple pact of pleasant coexistence between two individuals; rather it is the radical experience, perhaps to the outermost point, of the existence of the Other" (2017, vii). The experience of love is powerlessness. We can never control the other. The other is an *atopia* so our relationship to them is situated beyond "achievement, performance, and ability" (p. 11). We are always aware that the other person is beyond our control and it is this fear-induced anxiety that makes us care.[74]

Möring (2016) has talked about the existentialist care-structure in games by arguing that gameplay is in itself a form of care. While agreeing, I would argue that romantic involvement with an NPC is usually freed from any form of anxiety, especially when it comes to dialogue mechanics. As the example with Fenris at the beginning of the chapter shows, the game makes readily noticeable to the player in the red band around Fenris arm that their desire has been settled. The player's labour of romancing Fenris is now considered successful and the system of the game guarantees that this desire will remain stable according to the code. This holds all the more true when one takes into consideration the abundance of romantic walkthroughs readily available online for each of the romantic options. It is true that the game, and most games, provide a valorisation to the desire but as was shown in this chapter and the previous one, the need to valorise desire pre-exists: a careful regime sustained by the hegemonic powers and the concept of self within an antagonistic world.

Pertinently, in *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe 2016), a farming simulation game, the player can romance and marry NPCs. One of the NPCs, Abigail, is a free-spirited person that does not like getting tied down. If the player marries her, she becomes depressed. Some of the players who did not want to put up with such a negative outcome of their desire used available mods that tweak the game's code and allow players to remove sadness from their NPC spouses (Lange 2017). This does not say much about the simple AI of the

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[74] To this, one could easily fit Heidegger's care-structure, see *Being and Time* (1967).

game, yet speaks volumes about the decision-making of the human players concerning their love relationships in the game and, arguably, beyond.

For Han:

> Love is being positivized into a formula for enjoyment. Above all, love is supposed to generate pleasant feelings. It no longer represents plot, narration, or drama—only inconsequential emotion and arousal. It is free from the negativity of injury, assault, or crashing. To fall (in love) would already be too negative. Yet it is precisely such negativity that constitutes love (2017, p. 13).

This is the agony of eros, as he calls it. Han borrows an apt example from Agamben. He describes the cat who plays with a ball of yarn as if it were a mouse. The cat "knowingly uses the characteristic behaviors of predatory activity … in vain. These behaviors are not effaced, but, thanks to the substitution of the yarn for the mouse deactivated and thus opened up for a new, possible use" (p. 31). Equally in love representations, games included, we want to love the yarn because it is safer. We do care for the yarn because we play with it and we also allocate resources to imagine it as a mouse. But it is only the ability of the mouse to elude us that truly makes us care. And games, unlike other love representations, show us that we cannot actually love the yarn no matter how much we want to in an effort to protect ourselves.

Games show us what happens when we catch the yarn. They do not speak of a cat that catches the yarn and is happy ever after or show a cat that is driven to despair because they cannot attain the yarn. In games, we become the cats and to catch the yarn may be our goal. Once we succeed, we would be satisfied, placated, yet only for a while. We would soon find ourselves without desire but only ownership. I argue that this is the manner in which games exhibit one of their most resonating contributions as texts for critical analysis. Love as representation in games invites us to think of games as but another manifestation of our effort to manage our erotic terror. Games as simulation systems can show love's codification and our futile efforts to succumb and conquer it. Love in games is a space apt for reflection on our general attempt at emotional anaesthesia.

Furthermore, games, apart from being designed experiences, they can also accommodate and afford emergent play that may disregard the dictated paradigm – or, more aptly, open it up for the inclusion of self-expression in fantasy itself. As Berlant argues: "rethinking intimacy calls out not only for redescription but for transformative analyses of the rhetorical and material conditions that enable hegemonic fantasies to thrive in the minds and on the bodies of subjects" (1989, p. 286). Digital games as spaces of affective relation to the machine that include play as a mode of being can afford the experience of love as a free-form attachment with no need for discourse, a facet that will be explored in the following chapters.

Summary

In this chapter, I understood love as a cultural construct of desire. Connecting Berlant and Foucault, I showed how love in the popular paradigm is a culturally charged narrative of desire. Berlant attributes the success and tenaciousness of the love fantasy to the fact that desire is volatile, which forces people to experience their being as a constant flow. As Berlant comments, this can be at times exhausting and unbearable; this is why people seek ways to attach their desire, to format it, and stabilise it, and romantic love is one such manner. Delving into Foucault's history of sexuality as a conduct of controlling sexual desire, I showed how romantic love was developed at least from late antiquity as a discourse of stabilising and sterilising desire facilitated by biopolitics. As such, this love discourse is positioned as a political instrument for the hegemonic powers to control and manipulate the subjects with the promise of desire's stability and management by means of one's conformity with love's canonised structure.

Games, in this context, can open new pathways for one's experience of love because they constitute enactments of the romantic love. Games as systems of valorisation can very well implement romantic love and exhibit in uncontested terms the futility and the frivolity of any attempt to regulate it. Games can very aptly simulate and afford the paradigmatic love showing its codification and fictionality in uncontested terms. Digital games destroy any fantastical pretence love holds in this popular canon. Since it is this fictional quality of love that mesmerises and enslaves, accentuating romantic love's conventionality as a construct facilitates its dismissal and therefore diminished the canon's effectivity. In that capacity, games are the prime medium to deconstruct the popular paradigm of love while offering an alternative in practice, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter 7

Love's Pleasure

Language is a skin:
I rub my language against the other.
My language trembles with desire.
Roland Barthes

Throughout the thesis, my main argument is that when we examine love in games we should first and foremost differentiate the experience from its representation. This, however, does not mean that the two do not interlink. In this chapter, I show that since love in games is by default mediated, the more curated its representation is the more nuanced the experience it offers. It is thanks to representation that desire can take on multiple levels of signification. Literature has primarily language to transfigure a crude romance about fulfilment of desire to lyrical poetry that manages to express and realise the subtleties and gradations of sentiment (Huizinga 1987, p. 77).[75] What do games have instead? More importantly, what is an appropriate methodological tool to analyse love in games in its singularity as both experience and representation?

In games and digital games specifically, representation plays an important role in enriching and augmenting the player experience to a multifarious event. This is why it remains imperative to criticise the implementation of romantic love in games and provide ways of improving it. Kelly (2015), in commenting on the courting process of *Dragon Age 2*, argues:

> […]The ludic romance systems, procedural in nature and limited in scope, DA2 utilizes to construct the illusion of "realistic" love and romance are undermined by a decidedly "masculine" reading of love as inherently strategic, like a game within a game (p. 67).

Kelly attributes this choice in games to the erroneous perception by game designers of the main demographic of the industry as the socially awkward, lonely 35 years old, white male. He makes this connection by arguing that this quantifiable strategy applied to DA2 romance mimics flirting techniques that enforce binary roles in a patriarchal society, in which the man is the subject of the action and the woman the object of desire. Those techniques dictate how men should behave in order to get the woman they desire, or any woman for that matter, an approach based on a "fallacious assumption: that physical, social, and personal chemistry can be quantifiable" (p. 79).

[75] There are many treatises on how literature and the arts depict love and desire, see for example Paglia (1990), Praz (1951), Fiedler (1997), and Belsey (1994).

As Kelly explains, romance in DA2 is treated as a say/do the correct thing type of strategy to get the outcome you desire. This approach is evident in the narrative of the game but it is also part of "the systematic processes from which it cannot intrinsically escape" (p. 67). As already argued throughout the thesis, this is not a point of concern for romance in games since romance requires a system. Instead, what is of import in Kelly's argument is that the fact that romantic behaviour becomes quantifiable in games supposedly transforms the game into a masculine text.

Kelly contends that this makes games "favor a masculine reading of love over a feminized reading" (p. 80). The romantic system, he claims, is "characterized by a logic-based masculinity akin to the kinds of gendered readings" (p. 81). Kelly's gendered readings pertain to the field of fan studies. Jenkins (2012) comments on the differences of the fan communities by noting that male fans are fascinated with solving mysteries in a plot, whereas female fans pay more attention to characters' psychology and motivations, emotional problems, and romantic entanglements.[76] This approach is limiting because it perpetuates gender binaries disregarding queer readings and texts. Moreover, it does not sufficiently contextualise the term "masculine." It speaks of it in terms of an amorphous and hypothetical male audience. This audience supposedly enjoys specific stories, like mysteries and adventures, while the equally vague female audience prefers romances and psychological dramas.

This narrow understanding of the two terms suggests that feminine texts allow for love while masculine texts do not since they are preoccupied with other themes and subject matters. As was shown in chapter two, this is not true since romances were initially adventures undertaken by men to prove their love. Indeed, the terms masculine and feminine demand much more nuanced deconstruction to show that, as texts, they both contain similar systemic processes to afford pleasure to their readers. In the following sections, masculine and feminine texts are analysed as semiotic categories. While I remain critical of how these texts incorporate love's representation and what this does to the experience of love, my main aim is to show that using designed systems, be it language or games, to represent love may go far beyond the canonical discourse. In the later part of this chapter, affect theory will be employed to show how players can experience romance in games and that representation is what actually makes or breaks it. In this sense, games do not need to transgress their algorithmic and systemic intricacies. What is rather needed is for games to reconfigure stereotypical predispositions regarding romance as love's representation.

Huizinga talks about "the desire of the male" when describing romantic medieval games (Huizinga 1987, p. 76). This can be attributed to the fact that in medieval times, the people who participated in the

[76] Romance has been argued to transfer the focus from action to dialogue, psychological meditation, and the protagonists' consciousness, see Fludernik (2002).

tournaments and jousts were strictly men. Yet, it is more complex than that. Games that implement a so-called masculine approach still cater to romance, albeit a very basic one. Having already argued that, the aim by this point in the thesis is to map the ways that love in games can provide for more nuanced manifestations as both representation and experience. How does the experience of love in games take on more meanings? To answer this question, one should first analyse how desire and pleasure can be afforded by a text. For that, I draw from Barthesian analysis.

7.1. The Text of Pleasure and the Pleasure of the Text

Barthes in his seminal work *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975) differentiates between the pleasure of the text and the text of pleasure. In Barthes' text of pleasure, the desire is to unveil the truth, like "the pleasure of the corporeal striptease or of narrative suspense" (p. 10). Barthes identifies "an Oedipal pleasure (to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end)" (ibid.). As was analysed in chapter five concerning the oedipal complex and the concept of the monomyth, games with a basic implementation of romantic love – reaching the reward by overcoming obstacles – constitute the Barthesian text of pleasure, which is the oedipal pleasure. Cremin (2009) points out how this reading of the game text is the playing out of the Oedipus complex: "negotiating obstacles to fulfilment of desire." A similar argument is explored by Kinder (1991, 105), who claims that many popular games constitute a surrogate for patriarchal authority, which the players can challenge and defeat in an oedipal narrative, like in *Donkey Kong* (1981).

To reiterate from chapter five, Freud (1957) in coining this psychoanalytical term had argued that there are men who find pleasure in competing with other men for a woman's affection in repeating their infantile trauma of trying to steal the mother, the source of their satisfaction, back from the father, the prime antagonist. Freud concludes that this pattern is repetitive because it can only result in disappointment. The pleasure it advertises can never be fulfilled. The pleasure of the romantic love that corresponds to this oedipal need is a pleasure that does not quench. It remains by default an unfulfilling experience.

Yet despite being unfulfilling, there is still desire and pleasure to be found, as already argued in the previous chapters. According to Barthes, the texts of pleasure are "the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading" (1975, p. 14). Based on that, what is the alternative? Or rather how do games build on that to provide more nuance to their experience of love? In Barthesian terms, if this is how games allow for texts of pleasure how do they achieve the pleasure of the text; the text of bliss as Barthes calls it?

The text of bliss offers its pleasure in what Barthes calls tmesis (tearing), a rhythm established by the reader, who skims, skips, focuses on different parts of the text, like "a spectator in a nightclub who climbs onto the

stage and speeds up the dancer's striptease, tearing off her clothing" (p. 11). If that is the case, could it not be that games are indeed the very epitomes of tmematic, fragmentary reading? In games, there is always something we skip in each playthrough: a path we don't take, a choice we don't make. In the words of Aarseth (1997): "when you read from a cybertext, you are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard" (p. 3).

As Aarseth himself warns, however, applying semiotics to cybertexts is limiting because it disregards important nuances and intricacies of medium-specificity. In particular, Aarseth poses himself the question of whether cybertexts are not a form of tmesis, to which he immediately responds "to assume this would be to make a grave mistake" (p. 78). What is important to tmesis is that the text allows it but the author cannot anticipate it: "he cannot choose to write what will not be read; it is the very rhythm of what is read and what is not read that creates the pleasure of the great narratives" (Barthes 1975, p. 11). Barthes' tmesis is beyond the author's control while in games the fragmentary reading is ordained by the designer. The player must indeed avoid it as much as they can as to access the text as a whole: "This is not, however, Barthes's "textual bliss" but, rather, the reader's textual claustrophobia as he skims the dejalu nodes" (Aarseth 1997, p. 79).

7.2. Cybertexts as hegemony

Unlike the Barthesian text, the player of a digital game does not have the choice to skip or skim parts of the game unless the code allows it, for example in cutscenes or dialogue sequences. Indeed, in a game with multiple side quests, a player may choose to ignore a certain part of the game, but again this must be allowed by the code; if the code does not deem a quest complementary or non-compulsory, the player has no way of skipping it if they want to win the game and thus fulfil their desire. The same applies when a player chooses to ignore the predefined objectives of a game and pursue their own. They can do so as long as their goals can be accommodated by the game and only in the manner allowed by the game's code. The code needs to be understood and adhered to if the player is to satisfy their goals making the game again a text of pleasure.

In spite of some original assumptions about cybertexts (Bolter 2001; Landow 2006), in actuality they are more linear and more authoritative than the Barthesian text (Turner 1994; Molthorp 1994).[77] As Aarseth (1997) notes, the codex texts, as he calls printed texts, are random access because all the text is readily available at all times. Cybertexts, on the contrary, control the access to the text and exercise power over the reader. This creates a specific aesthetic experience, which according to Aarseth functions in the dialectics

[77] This can also be true regarding criticism about gender representation, most notably in Haraway's (2006) work.

between aporia and epiphany: “The aporia-epiphany pair is thus not a narrative structure but constitutes a more fundamental layer of human experience, from which narratives are spun” (p. 92). Aporia is described as not being able to make sense of the whole because we do not have full access to a particular part. This aporia is an “absent piece of resistance rather than the usual transcendental resistance of the (absent) meaning of a difficult passage” (Aarseth 1997, p. 91). Complementary to this is the epiphany, the sudden revelation of the passage in the literal sense: “a planned construct rather than an unplanned contingency” (p. 91).

According to this description, the experience of the text is positioned in antagonistic terms. The reader is aware that something is being kept from them and they have a very specific mission, to find the path, the way to move forward. Tmesis is not a pleasure anymore but an obstacle one needs to overcome. Instead of being an act of subversion, of doing something that cannot be controlled, as it was originally conceptualised, it is now proof of the power of the hegemonic code. If the code of the text does not allow it, then you cannot do it. Cybertexts do not allow tmesis, yet most importantly they do not allow the pleasure of tmesis. Even if there is some subversion possible, it is only possible if the code allows it and in the way the code allows it.

This brings about a change in the aesthetic experience of the text. If the text is once again the clothed body, now the reader is undressing it not only in a very specific order but under the all watchful eye of the code. The attention of the reader is transferred from the pleasure of undressing the body to undressing the body in the right order. Instead of wanting to see the naked body, the aim is now to find the correct sequence, to solve the puzzle. The promise of the naked body is a tantalising reward but the pleasure comes from taking up the challenge of finding the correct order of undress; to avoid the slap on the hand or worse the return to the beginning. This non-trivial effort, this possibility of not getting there, repositions the attention from the body to the process. We do not have the time and mental resources to think about what the naked body looks like, what each garment feels under our touch. Being aware that there is the right way to succeed, we need to plan and follow a stratagem because the threat of not being able to fulfil our desire is always present.

As Turner (1994) contends, “the capacity of attention is impossible without the distinction between centre and margin” (p. 175). In this sense, cybertext does not allow for freedom of attention. It gives very specific instructions of where our attention should be; more than instructions, rules, more than rules, natural laws. Unlike the printed text, cybertext is not negotiable; you either execute the command or not. Our ability to act is limited to the point of absolute, just like gravity dictates our physical embodiment. In the printed text, the hierarchy is a social construct; nothing prevents me from reading the end first. It is simply my conditioning as a reader that I know that the most sensible way to read a book is from start to finish. In

comparison, the hierarchy of the cybertext is unquestionable; you either uncover it or you remain in virtuality. It is much more hierarchic. More than that, it is hegemonic.

Digital games are hegemonic. The player has no ability to skip parts of the game unless it is allowed by the code. Indeed, in some cases, the players uncover glitches and shortcuts or they manipulate the code in ways not anticipated by the designer; one of the most famous examples being the rocket jumping in *Quake* (id Software 1996). Yet even in those cases, the code has to allow it no matter if the designer is actually aware of that or not. In other words, the experience of the game is again adversarial in nature. The player has a certain goal, which is to uncover how the game works to the limit, and they must negotiate this desire with the game system to achieve it. As *Loved* (Ocias 2010) showed in chapter two, the code becomes the all-mighty father-god that the player needs to pay homage to. Therefore, interacting with the code in this capacity of it provides the oedipal pleasure we talked about in the beginning.

Tmesis is instead a pleasure of wilful suppression. It is only possible if it is acted out actively by the reader and not as part of a rigid construct, as it is the case with the code of games. Since games do not offer any ability to choose something that is not there, is the pleasure of the text available to games? Can games offer a different experience from this hegemonic practice? Lauteren (2002) argues that the pleasure of the text in the form of Barthes' tmesis remains unattainable to the player of a digital game (p. 223). Here, I argue that games can offer the pleasure of the text if the pleasure of the text is expanded to cover an understanding of the aesthetic that goes beyond the oedipal and not simply as in a dialectic relation to it.

7.3. Masculine and Feminine Text

Even though in the previous section, the text of pleasure is characterised as masculine because it offers the oedipal pleasure, it is rather that both the text of pleasure and the text of bliss of Barthes are masculine texts. The text of pleasure has a fixed form: "strong, violent, crude; something inevitably muscular, strained, phallic" (Barthes 1975, p. 25). For Barthes, the alternative, i.e. the text of bliss which offers the pleasure of the text, comes from the suppression of desire. Cixous (1981) notes that experiencing pleasure as a suspension of fulfilment still entails a regime, a strategy, a fact that was also made obvious by Foucault's treatment of sexuality in chapter seven. Barthesian pleasure for Cixous is an experience that is governed by the masculine: "Everything must return to the masculine. "Return": the economy is founded on a system of returns. If a man spends and is spent, it's on condition that his power returns" (p. 50). She proposes instead a completely different economy, that of the feminine text. Unlike Barthes' masculine text, Cixous' feminine text is "always endless, without ending: there is no closure, it doesn't stop" (p. 53).[78]

[78] Just like the abject body of Kristeva (1982), which "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (p. 129).

It is important to clarify that Cixous' feminine text does not belong to a certain category of women writers. As Marder (2018) comments, a feminine text: "can be performed by any person of any sex" (p. 210). Indicatively, Cixous (1976) mentions Jean Genet as a feminine writer (p. 879). The feminine text is rather a mode of writing and reading. Following Barthes, Cixous describes this relationship to the text in sexual terms. Yet Cixous does not see the feminine body as equal to the masculine body with restricted actualisation due to social circumstances.[79] She sees the feminine body and mutatis mutandis the feminine text as a complete alternative. Unlike the pleasure of masculine ejaculation, which demands a regime and an economy of taking and giving, the feminine text of Cixous provides the pleasure of the feminine masturbation, which is unending and does not demand any regulation: "our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end" (1976, p. 878).

From the above, it may be surmised that the alternative to the masculine pleasure of romance is a representation of love with no challenge at all. Actually, Cixous contends that a text that follows a masculine economy cannot afford love because love escapes equivalence: only giving something because you expect something of equal value in return (1981, p. 48). The pleasure offered by the masculine text is the masculine pleasure of struggle and overcoming obstacles for fulfilling one's desire. Cixous, on the other hand, when talking about the feminine text completely abandons any dialectics of collision and tension. Then, if love would be afforded by a feminine text according to Cixous' understanding, it should equally be devoid of any challenge.

This in digital games could be translated as the annihilation of any quantifiable outcomes. By having a game that does not contain any sort of normative achievement and reward, the player would relinquish any imposed desire and as such any regime or strategy for accomplishing and fulfilling this desire. The game experience would then be an open-ended relationship to the game text; the experience of the pleasure of the game and not the gaming pleasure anymore; like *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room 2012), a game that does not include any defined goals except for engaging with the game world to the point where it has been called a walking simulator (Gerblick 2019). Yet, even in a game like *Dear Esther*, the player still has to engage with the game system. They control their viewpoint, they control the pacing: they can stop to take in the mesmerising scenery, or they can proceed faster because they want to hear more of the voiced-over backstory and find out how they ended up on the island in the first place.

As already discussed, digital games as cybertexts are ergodic. Aarseth coins ergodicity as an extranoematic non-trivial effort of the reader to peruse the text (1997, p. 1).[80] In other words, the user of an ergodic text

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[79] In this sense, she expands a priori on Young's (2005) phenomenological account of the lived feminine body.

[80] Aarseth's ergodic taxonomy has been criticised, yet as Eskelinen (2012) points out "Aarseth's typology of textual

needs to perform actions that demand attention. This makes the player very aware of the process of accessing the text. As was argued before, their attention is divided between at least two points: to their present, personal effort to uncover the text and to the events happening in the story of the text. This works exceptionally well for games that include stories of narrative suspense, like mysteries and adventures. The player's actions of uncovering the text create and sustain the same experience of their desiring to move forward with the story and find out what is going to happen next; each piece of text they uncover is equally a piece of the story. Based on this understanding, romantic love is not very compatible with ergodicity. As Yorke-Smith (2011) has put it: "Consider the romance genre, territory well-explored in static fiction, where the PC's feelings are central to the narrative. Much easier it is to walk through a landscape as it is explored than it is to communicate the emotion of the PC" (p. 117).

Yet, as already argued, this is not the case. Instead, romantic love as the representation of love within the understanding of fulfilling one's desire through challenges is compatible with games. So compatible in fact that the difficulty lies in finding ways to go beyond that. However, Cixous' approach, despite offering an alternative to Barthes' textual dialectics, does not suffice. Cixous has been criticised as an essentialist (McCallum 1985; Stanton 1980; Jones 1981). According to her critics, even though Cixous' approach is deconstructive, the fact that she positions the feminine as everything that the masculine is not, makes her work still suffer from a dialectical relation, in which the feminine is only understood as the negative of the masculine with nothing in between and beyond. Also, since Cixous is tackling the oedipal psychoanalytic concept, she has been accused of being infatuated with the preoedipal, i.e. the language of the Mother (Moi 1985; Stanton 1986). More so, her argument that love cannot be quantified and it does not have an end or a beginning does not seem to correspond to lived experiences of feminine love.

Chris Kraus in *I Love Dick* (2016) chronicles her lived experience as a woman in love. Kraus' text implements many of Cixous' prescripts for a feminine text in its chaotic and original form. Nonetheless, it describes a love very much in need of a structure both in terms of theory, "If I could love you consciously, take an experience that was so completely female and subject it to an abstract analytic system, then perhaps I had a chance of understanding something" (p. 164), and in terms of the feeling as such: "We fall in love in hope of anchoring ourselves to someone else, to keep from falling" (p. 181).

Most importantly, we have to remain aware of the important distinction between to love and to romance, between the experience of love and its representation. As representation, romance has to follow a design and this is what makes it appealing. After all, literary romances of the lone hero defying obstacles for the

communication is not overly detailed, although it is much more nuanced than its theoretical alternatives" (p. 44).

woman he loves were composed also by women (Marie de France 2011; Bogin 1980). Indeed, they were meant to be performed in court, which at the time was mostly frequented by women since the majority of the male nobles were away fighting in the Crusades (Tuchman 2011; Yalom 2004; Yalom 2012). Despite being texts predominantly preoccupied with male valour and strength depicting women as damsels in distress, women audiences enjoyed those stories.

It may be argued that they did not have another point of reference for comparison (Bloch 2009). Nevertheless, the fictional damsel was considered an improvement to the woman's status since she became an inspiration of male glory rather than being merely treated as "a sexual object, a breeder of children, or a conveyor of property" (Tuchman 2011, p. 61). Undoubtedly, it was the lesser of two evils in an unquestionably phallocentric and patriarchal society and culture. Yet, despite being over nine centuries old this tradition has continued until now. Contemporary romance novels include quite regularly women in peril who the male hero saves as an unambiguous way for authors to show to their audience how much the hero loves the heroine and how special she is to him.[81]

In this sense, romantic texts targeted towards female audiences are equally restricting. If masculine pleasure demands codification and a regime, female pleasure does as well; a remark that should come as no surprise since feminine pleasure and texts are also a product of the same patriarchal paradigm as was shown in chapters five and six. In this sense, romance always contains a very structured and rigid formula, which is why it can offer this pleasure to its audience.

Despite the fact that many women read and enjoy romantic novels, they do not appreciate romances that are considered "a man's type of book" (Radway 1991, p. 156). The difference, as they explain it, is found in how the events are portrayed and how much consideration is given to female psychology and agency. As Radway puts it, "those stories might inadvertently activate unconscious fears and resentment about current patriarchal arrangements" (p. 157). Those failed romances come too close to the problems of patriarchy and the stereotypical male machismo that cannot be interpreted as a sign of love by the readers (Radway 1983, p. 67).

Accordingly, it can be surmised that it is not codification per se that cannot sustain love in these texts. Instead, codification and formulisation is what makes love as representation possible. Since it is always a matter of mediation and not physiological love, it is the manner and style of codification and the shape and focus of representation that affects the experience of pleasure, desire, and love. Indeed, games as

[81] Indicatively, a quick search in goodreads, a book recommendations site, gave almost 4000 results (goodreads n.d.) of the damsel in distress trope at the time of writing.

multimedia software possess different semiotic systems to allow for a multifaceted engagement with love and romance. That being said, there are still intricacies that influence this experience and the design elements that have predominantly been used until now in games leave a lot to be desired.

Most importantly, games do not constitute merely narratives, but experiences, and this is why love as representation gets more complicated. This is why I argue that a valid way to see how games can offer more nuanced love experiences is not to wish that the code were not there and hide it, but to embrace all the potential that comes with it. In particular, instead of seeing the code of the games as something that has to be hidden from the player – making it so transparent that the player forgets they are engaging with a coded system, enhancing and diversifying the player's engagement with the code and the game system in a comprehensive manner is the appropriate way to go. As Cixous (1976, p. 886) urges we should let go of the meaning and the words and write through our bodies. Here, this line of thought is explored further to argue for an experience of the game text *with* our bodies in an aesthetic practice that is best understood by means of affect theory.

7.4. Affect in Digital Games

Affect has been defined by Massumi (2002), building on Deleuze, Guattari, and Spinoza, as a response system to internal and external stimuli that reaches beyond language and representation and through which our notion of self is shaped. For Massumi, there is a part of our existence that remains constantly outside signification and as such defies discourse and explanation. It is the virtual aspect of our actual being. By this, Massumi tries to go beyond the binary of structuralism and poststructuralism; what, initially, might seem a response to Cixous' feminine text. However, by differentiating between the lived body of signification and the presubjective, as he calls it, virtuality, Massumi perpetuates the binary he writes against. Specifically, queer and feminist theorists, like Ahmed (2010), point out that Massumi's approach to affect does not question the culturally conditioned notions of abstraction, which take the dominant straight, white male identity as default. Instead, a lived body is always confined by its situationality as part of a complex economy among other bodies.

Anable (2018) in implementing affect theory in digital games shares the aforementioned concerns. For this reason, she turns to Tomkins' (2008) research on affect. Tomkins sees affect as a multi-way system. In the same fashion that we may react to our environment with no cognition of this reaction, our response system is shaped by our conscious relation to our environment, physical and social, and the other agents in it. Tomkins argues that our response or affective system may be binary in the sense of an on/off switch, we either receive a stimulus or not, but after this activation, the ways the system reacts is a result of many

different paragons depending on our biology, cognition, and intention, all of which are influenced by our lived, actual experience.

Anable (2018) by following Tomkins' rationale supports an all-inclusive gaming experience that includes rules, gameplay, audiovisuals, and narrative. She argues against what she calls the institutionalised favouritism, by designers and game studies both, towards the code and the term *game feel*. The game feel implies that a game must feel good and a game that feels good is a well-designed game, meaning a game whose code does exactly what it is supposed to do: "Game designers privilege programming and design as the site where a game's experience is created and use player experiences to refine and control game feel as much as possible" (p. 44). However, she contends that even though the technical characteristics of a game are indeed important they do not constitute the game experience per se.

She particularly sees this phenomenon as a binary between the important code that is deep in the machine and out of reach without specialised knowledge and the distracting screen representation that is only there for flavour; a fact which to her serves as a continuation of Massumi's abstraction which again favours a systematised understanding of the lived bodily experience. She also equates the code with the masculine, hard-core part of the game, and the screen as the distracting feminine skin that is only there to cover what is significant. She reaches this conclusion by commenting on the argument that when a player plays a game they do not care about the representation and the character's appearance; instead, what matters are the capacities these characters afford to the player as vehicles in the game world (Newman 2002).

In particular, Newman had made the aforementioned claim regarding Lara Croft, a stance similar to Aarseth's who had argued that: "when I play, I don't even see her body, but see through it and past it" (2004, p. 48). Hence Anable's take that the screen representation for game studies becomes a feminine skin of destruction.[82] As MacCallum-Stewart (2014) points out, such comments "notice" Lara exactly because she is one of the few lead female characters in games. In other words, while the default male avatar is so normal that it becomes transparent, any female counterpart invites much more scrutiny. As a result, it is not the screen that is distracting due to a medium specificity; on the contrary, it is specifically the female skin that is distracting because of the canonised masculine practice, which for Anable is expressed under the term game feel.

Instead, she proposes the term *game affect*, which encompasses the whole gaming experience in all its facets: representation and computation together. For Anable, the game aesthetics or the game affect is the

[82] It is almost ironic that both Newman and Aarseth use Lara Croft to talk about what is and should not be important in games, her appearance that is. She must have clearly made an impression on them both.

appropriate term to describe the gaming experience in an all-encompassing, comprehensive manner. As Anable contends, digital games affect us because they are an interface of constant communication with the machine, an interface which encompasses all their set up: code, algorithms, visuals, design, and sound: "The interface is where it's at, if by it we mean the everyday intimate encounter where code, images, and subjectivity collide in ordinary but important ways" (p. 62).

She claims that from the beginning games were constructed as affective interfaces – to show to the general public what computers could do, making what was invisible or difficult to see, how they worked, visible and sensible through interaction.[83] She specifically calls games "ambassadors" of the computers, which from their origin made accessible the workings of the computer system. In Anable's argument, games brought to the surface, the screen, the system of the machine and this is how machines were able to affect people; by showing them what the machines could do. In this sense, games have always been about capacity and demonstration together.

Anable further contends that games affect us and invite us to communicate with their algorithmic structures because of how these structures appear to us: "We make choices and push buttons in games because of the complex interaction of various factors, one of which is how video games structure our feelings about those choices and actions through what appears on the screen" (p. 52). Particularly, Anable sees the interface and the screen not as a barrier but as a "porous zone" through which the human and the machine come into contact and affect each other: "This screen is not actually a firm boundary between two different modes of meaning-making; rather, it is a sensual surface that functions within a larger affective system" (p. 69). For Anable, this is exceptionally shown in games that deny the satisfaction of winning to the player and facilitate a rethinking of the canon and act as a form of reflection and criticism. These are games that may appear to be containing goals and challenges yet in actuality they cannot be won and as such, they cannot be completed, like *Let's Play: Ancient Greek Punishment* (Barr 2019).

7.5. Doki Doki Literature Club

Here, another game that functions in equal dynamics but with different means is analysed, namely *Doki Doki Literature Club* (2017) by Team Salvato. Arguably, the game manages to exemplarily showcase the limitations of the textual pleasure because of its theme and associated conventions of the genre it supposedly belongs to. It starts off with the promise of the naked body – reminiscent of the striptease of the Barthesian body – and lures the player in. Soon enough, however, the player's expectations are turned against them.

[83] Indeed, Graetz (1981), one of the designers of *Spacewar!*, the first computer game, writes that they got the idea so that the people that visited the lab would be able to actually interact with the newly invented computers and see first-hand what they could do. In the beginning the general public was apprehensive and bored by the computers since they did not do anything they could see and only a specialist could operate them.

The body is not anymore the passive prize for the player's successful avoiding the slap on the hand. The body, the skin, and the screen become transparent. The player has to return their attention to the body and to its affect if they are to traverse the game abolishing thus the stabilisation of their desire and gaining the reward of the game experience as such.

Doki Doki Literature Club is a visual novel. In it, you play as a high school student and you join a literature club. There you can choose to romance any of the four other girl members: Sayori, Monika, Natsuki, and Yuri. Each girl has a different character and appearance. Their differences notwithstanding, all the girls function as wish-fulfilment for the player. They are there for the player to romance and their sole agency is being potential romantic interests. Typical in the dating sim genre, the player can achieve this romancing by making choices at certain parts of the game. The main mechanism for that is triggered after each school day when the player gets to compose a poem. As part of the literature club, all members take the task to write their own poems and share them with the rest of the group. The player can create the poem by choosing words from a list presented as if written on a notebook page. Each word is associated with one of the girls in terms of their characters. For example, words like *night*, *despair*, and *sadness* are associated with Yuri.

Figure 10 - *Doki Doki Literature Club*

Figure 11 - Doki Doki Literature Club Poem Mechanics

All in all the game follows the formal expectations of a dating sim, both in narrative and design. The whole concept is very kawaii. Kawaii describes an art style most commonly found in anime, according to which the characters, usually young girls, are portrayed as very sweet and cute, child-like almost, but at the same time overly sexualised. Indeed, the characters in *Doki Doki* wear school uniforms with short skirts and knee-high socks; they have hair in all the colours of the rainbow adorned with hairclips in pretty shapes, they have big, doe-like eyes, small noses and lips, and accentuated chests. The colour palette is baby pink, purple, light blue, and other pastels. Lastly, the visuals include trademark kawaii details (Ohkura 2019) like china, books, and calligraphy sets.

In this sense, the player is led to assume that in *Doki Doki* one should find the right tree path to get the romance they desire as a reward. The romance progresses solely on the decisions of the player demarcated by the code of the game. The NPCs do not have any agency. They simply wait for the player to choose the path of the game that leads to their conquest provided that the player is successful in overcoming any obstacles created by the game system along the way. The female bodies of the NPCs are offered for the player to engage with the game. The gameplay itself has a very straightforward goals-rules relationship: do that to fulfil your desire.

However, this assumption based on the superficial or initial understanding of the game soon collapses. As the game moves along, the player comes to realise that nothing is actually under their control. Instead, the game is an interesting case of showing what could happen if an NPC tried to have the player fall in love with them. The game takes the agency away from the player, who is left only as an executioner of a predefined script; that of a love story in which they are involved without having any choice in the matter. The body for taking is their own and they must offer it if they want to experience the game; the game experience is the reward for their surrender in a totality that escapes the boundaries of the game screen both practically and perceptually.

As was explained before, the player can choose with which girl they want to flirt. This is an assumption created by the narrative and the genre of the game. While playing, however, the player realises that this is not entirely true. The game does not afford the same mechanics for all NPCs. One of the girls, Monika, is excluded from the poem generator, which is the basic means for the player to cultivate a relationship with the members of the Literature Club. More than that, the amount of time the player can allocate to her in the classroom is limited in comparison to the other girls. The game has the avatar comment on that: “If only I could talk to her a little bit longer.” Monika is then an unattainable other. Unattainable because the code of the game does not allow any meaningful interaction with her and makes the player very aware of that.

Yet in this case, it is not only the player who notices this limitation of the design; it is also Monika herself. Unlike most dating sims that allow the role of the love pursuer solely to the player at the expense of the NPCs agency, *Doki Doki Literature Club* challenges this expectation and instead places an NPC as the love agent. Monika is in love with the player and the game belongs to her. Once it becomes obvious that the player cannot choose Monika, she gradually interferes with the code to the point that the game becomes so broken that it is unplayable. The player understands that when it is already too late. Monika finally confesses her scheme justifying her actions with the rationale of a scorned, jealous lover: “Are all the other girls programmed to confess their love to you while I watch from the side-lines? That was torture.”

Monika makes it very clear that she knows this is a game. She also acknowledges the difference in materiality between her and the player: “Humans are not two dimensional creatures. I thought you would know this better.” She has come to realise the concept of free will as that which she is lacking and also striving for. It is her self-awareness that breaks the game. The player cannot control her anymore. The only way to get rid of her is to annihilate her completely. They positively have to exit the game screen, go to the game’s directory, and delete Monika’s file there. By doing so, Monika’s effect reaches much further than that of most computer-generated love interests. In actual terms, since the player has to deal with her outside the predefined boundaries of the game.

Unlike other games, which try to keep the boundary between the system of the game and the player hidden and hence intact, in *Doki Doki Literature Club* the fragility of this illusion, the state of in playing, becomes uncontested. The player is forced to realise the clear demarcation between the situatedness of Monika and their own in very precise terms; those of the futility of love. Monika loves the player but this is a type of love that can never be; the barrier cannot be overcome even if sometimes it is forgotten. Even if the player deletes Monika, once they restart the game after having to get rid of her their playthrough is again limited. After a while, Monika reappears in the form of a text message and announces to the player that “there can be no happiness here,” meaning that despite her sacrifice the game remains an environment in which love cannot flourish.

Or rather there is a way for the game to afford love, love for the game itself that is. This is done when the experience of playing and the gameplay itself is changed to simply being in the game and spending time with the NPCs, the female bodies that are now the focus of the player’s attention. This is when the player can get a happy ending, in which none of the characters die and Monika does not wreak havoc. The player has to repeat the game by saving and loading multiple times so as to spend an equal amount of time with all the NPCs. The game thanks the player for dedicating their time to all of the characters and for having

made the effort to please all the NPCs. In this positive note, the game finishes with no ludic achievement as such.

7.6. Games as Translation

The above example shows that although digital games are by default based on code they are not confined to only offer a limited understanding of romantic love pertaining to obstacles and challenges with having the love as the reward. Instead, one can use the source language of the code to translate lived experiences that go beyond mere representation. If we treat games as the translation between the experience of love and the code that it provides it then games are free from the need to adhere to either the one or the other; they are rather the medium. Games are not the challenge for translating love to code; they are the solution; they are the translators and if sometimes the translation fails it is not because of the games as a medium but of the institutionalised understanding of love and its designed manifestations. There is no need for the experience of love to be defined a priori as something that games should strive for. Instead, the canonised understanding of love can be used as a point of reference and awareness for games. In this way, games can include and invite different experiences and bodies, which do not necessarily adhere to the binary pleasures of the patriarchal paradigm; constricting and confining as it is.

Love is a lived experience. As such it needs to be analysed by a method that takes into consideration its affordances as such. Wolf (2011) has explored the ability of media to convey certain meanings and experiences, what he understands with the term mediality (p. 166). He builds on both McLuhan and Ryan on this. On one hand, McLuhan (1994), with his famous apophthegm "the medium is the message" (p. 4), points towards a direction according to which each medium's affordances shape the type and form of experience this medium can provide. On the other hand, Ryan (2005) explains that indeed "the materiality of the medium matters for the type of meanings that can be encoded," yet "if we regard meaning as inextricable from its medial support medium-free definitions of narrative become untenable" (p. 289). For Ryan, each medium "imposes conditions on what kind of stories can be transmitted," but also the "narrative messages possess a conceptual core which can be isolated from their material support" (p. 289).

Wolf (2011) develops mediality further by arguing that in order for one to determine how an experience can be transmitted through a medium one must take into consideration three separate but intermingled factors: the technical materiality of the medium, the semiotics of the message, and also the cultural/historical aspects of the medium as an institution. As he contends, all those factors influence the mediality of a certain experience and in liminal cases whether an experience can be transmitted through a medium at all. If one is to answer the question of whether games as a medium can offer the experiences of love, then one must tackle this question from all those three angles in correlation.

However, as we saw Aarseth (1997) arguing previously in the chapter the game text and the game experience are not one and the same. Representation, indeed, plays an important role in enriching and augmenting the player experience to a multifarious event. Yet games encompass many more modes in which they can affect the player and their totality is more than their individual elements alone. Therefore, love in games should be examined as an experience. For that, a phenomenological tool is more apt than a mere semiotic one.[84] A model that analyses the experience of the player as a dynamic process of attention is the player involvement model by Gordon Calleja (2011). In this model, the experience of the game is analysed through a comprehensive approach that takes into consideration all the facets of the player's engagement with the game, both at the time of playing and beyond. How does love fit into the player's experience? This question will be tackled in the following chapter.

Summary

In this chapter, love was analysed within the tradition of textual pleasure. Textual pleasure is understood in Barthesian terms of the text of pleasure and the text of bliss. For Barthes, the text of pleasure is the text of narrative suspense. The text of bliss, on the other hand, is the text of suppression of desire and tmesis. As was discussed, tmesis cannot be afforded by digital games because there is nothing that the player can do if the code does not allow it. So how can games afford a broader understanding of pleasure which is important for the enhancement of the experience of love beyond the basic concept of overcoming challenges to the fulfilment of one's desire? An approach that was examined was the concept of feminine text. The feminine text, proposed in the writings of Hélène Cixous, is endless and provides an aesthetic experience that stretches forever.

Building on that, it was argued that games that do away with any sense of reward, accomplishment, and quantifiable outcomes may be seen as feminine texts that provide an aesthetic experience of the game text as such. Is then the absence of any challenge the only way games can implement love? One should go beyond this strict binary. To do so, I showed how games should be seen as affective mediators between the player and the machine. The game *Doki Doki Literature Club* was then analysed as an indicative example. As such, it is important that love in games is approached in its dynamicity as an experience rather than a fixed phenomenon and a semiotic at that. This can be done when addressing love as part of the comprehensive engagement of the player with the game through a phenomenological tool that analyses

[84] Aptly, Ahmed (2006) claims that "the world described by phenomenology is an 'interworld,' or an 'open circuit' between the perceiving body and its world" (p. 54). As such, phenomenology is the appropriate tool to examine a world in-between (languages, systems, discourse, experience).

player experience. In the next chapter, I will use the player involvement model to map how love can be experienced in games.

Chapter 8
Love Involvement

Surely it's better to love others,
however messy and imperfect the involvement,
than to allow one's capacity for love to harden
Karen Armstrong

In the game *Life is Strange* (Dontnod 2015), the player is faced at the finale with a difficult choice. Due to a dramatic chain of events, Max, the heroine of the game, has the ability to either save the small town she lives in from a catastrophic tornado or not. The decision is not as straightforward as it may sound since by choosing to save the town, she has to sacrifice her, romantic or not, relationship with Chloe, the game's main NPC. In a butterfly effect type of causality, Max can turn back time to a point that the tornado would not exist but which means that she should not save Chloe from a fatal gunshot. As a plot, this is a stressful event that puts the player in a strenuous situation: save the girl they love or thousands of innocent lives. Which should come first, love or responsibility?

It is a familiar story: do what your selfish part commands and save your love or do what the common good dictates sacrificing your personal happiness. Can there actually be happiness at the expense of morality? Have we not learnt, as demonstrated in chapter three, that love conquers all? *Ἔρως ἀνίκατε μάχαν*, laments Antigone ("Eros, invincible in battle," Sophocles 441 BCE: 2009, p. 168), *Omnia vincit amor: et nos cedamus amori*, answers the love-sick Gallus more than four centuries later ("Love conquers all: we also must submit to Love," Virgil 37 BCE: 1984, p. 103). Reading about Antigone's and Gallus' misfortunes made me sympathise with them, while the aesthetic value of the respective texts had me almost wishing they had been written for me. Yet sacrificing Chloe to save the town? I did not hesitate the least.

This is not a medium's deficiency. As we saw in the introduction of chapter one, I had no problem sacrificing myself in another game for an NPC: Alistair, the ungrateful. That being said, as was discussed in chapter two, unlike other media, telling or showing the player that they are in love with an NPC does not necessarily resonate with them. When game choices and the whole game experience depend on that it does, things can go amiss. I personally found Chloe obnoxious, pretentious, and self-centered. It makes sense that I did not want to save her but on the contrary jumped at the opportunity to get rid of her. So what is it that made Alistair favourable to me but Chloe insufferable? What parts of the game affected my romantic involvement and my total game experience as a result of that? Is it simply personal preferences or are there game elements that can facilitate a specific aesthetic experience?

As discussed in the previous chapter, in games it is much harder to preconfigure the player experience because the player has an active role in realising the game text; its progress depends on the input and the interpretation of the player. As such, the game design may provide directions or attempt to elicit certain reactions from the player but the player has to be actively involved in the events that transpire to have an impactful game experience. For this reason, employing a love story or having a romantic quest is not enough. The game must provide a comprehensive romantic involvement to the player. In the following sections, I use the player involvement model by Gordon Calleja (2011) as a critical tool to analyse game instances that have the potential to engage the player in a loving game experience, either as part of an established romance or through emergent play.

8.1. Immersion, Involvement, and Incorporation

Calleja's involvement model came about as a result of his efforts to address the complex issue of immersion and presence in games. As he describes, digital games brought along a novelty that demanded a reevaluation of terms. The ability of players to affect and inhabit a virtual space that is different from the physical space resulted in challenges to our understanding of presence. When the player plays a game are they in their physical space, in the virtual space of the game, and/or a combination of both? To describe this phenomenon the contested terms immersion and presence have been used, interchangeably or not, to roughly express the notion that digital games afford a transfer of the player from the physical space to the virtual space of the game; the player by playing *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2003), for example, is immersed in the world of the game.[85]

The above terms imply that the physical and virtual spaces are two worlds apart, separate and distinct from one another. Instead, as Calleja argues (2011), digital games do not replace physical space but rather expand it. It is not that the player is immersed anywhere or present someplace else. It is that the player's attention is focused in one place rather than the other. How this happens and how games can make a player involved in them is what the player involvement model maps. Following on Calleja's rationale, it is not that games are worlds and spaces in themselves but rather they are perceived as worlds and spaces by the player exactly because they enable the player's involvement. Worldness and spatiality is not then an a priori feature that games possess but rather an attribute bestowed upon them through the player's interaction with them due to their affordances.

It is the communication between the player and the game system that constitutes the experience of playing. Before that, the game is but a piece of software and the player is not a player. The player becomes a player

[85] See for example: Laurel (1995), Murray (2017), Ryan (1999), and Dovey and Kennedy (2006).

by playing the game and playing is a dynamic process that is differentiated by degrees of attention. In particular, Calleja divides his model first and foremost in two types: macro-involvement and micro-involvement. Macro-involvement refers to the player's engagement with the game while not playing, for example when the player is stuck in a difficult level of the game and while sitting in a boring conference meeting they contemplate ways they can overcome this challenge. Micro-involvement concerns the engagement of the player with the game at the time of playing.

More so, the model charts the player's involvement in very precise means by mapping six different dimensions the player's attention can be directed at during any single gaming instance. These six dimensions are as follows: kinaesthetic involvement, spatial involvement, ludic involvement, narrative involvement, affective involvement, and shared involvement. Building on attention theory, Calleja argues that when we play a game we focus our attention resources on specific parts, one or more of the above six. As he explains, the more time we spend in a game and accustomed we become to it the more mental resources we disengage and are able to distribute in other engagement facets of the game. In this regard, the more attentive and involved we are with a game the more masterful we become in it and vice versa. When we manage to perform in a game as naturally as we do in our physical world then we have reached a point of being in or inhabiting this game world, a situation which Calleja describes with the term incorporation.

This does not mean that we are transported someplace else. As was shown before, it is our attention that enables the game to attain the quality of worldness. The manner in which this is achieved is what the player involvement model examines. This is why the model treats involvement, attention, and incorporation as a dynamic process and a matter of degree rather than a solid binary. This makes the player's engagement with the game an analogue experience rather than digital. Unlike some popular media depictions of players logging into a machine like an on/off switch, playing a game passes by many stages of attention, as the model describes, and not only linearly but intermittently as well.

When we play a game for the first time we are very attentive since we do not know the controls. Our ability to perform and affect the game is still limited. At the same time, when we have reached far into the game and we have achieved the ultimate incorporation our phone may suddenly ring. In that case, our attention is divided at least between the game and the phone. Depending on the situation, we may continue both actions, playing the game and chatting on the phone, albeit with less engagement for each. The fact that we are skillful in the game and have operated a phone probably many times in the past makes those actions habitual to us, thus we can perform them with less effort. By comparison, if on the phone it is our boss

announcing our dismissal it is more likely that our attention would shift completely on the phone and thus we would stop inhabiting the game.

Our predisposition and literacy also affect our engagement, as macro-involvement shows. If we have played an array of FPS games, a new FPS game will demand fewer mental resources from us; provided the controls and rules are similar enough. On the other hand, if we have never played a game in our life and do so because our friend begs us to try at least once, our involvement with the said game is already severed and would need much more effort from our part to become incorporated in this game world. This is a significant discrepancy from our physical world. Unlike game worlds, we are bound in our physical world and we cannot escape it; no matter what we do we are of and in this world. A game, on the other hand, is a designed experience and thus demands intentional actions and performativity. Most games come preconfigured with intentional practices for a desired outcome. The six dimensions of the involvement model help us focus on each engaging facet while remaining conscious of the comprehensive experience which is playing.

8.2. Kinaesthetic Involvement

Kinaesthetic involvement is the first type of involvement Calleja discerns. As he explains, when we begin playing a game we first have to master its controls. Unless we do that, we cannot have a flow of attention to other parts of the game. We will be preoccupied with what button to press, keep stumbling and hitting barriers with our avatar, and get dizzy by the camera movement. That being said, throughout the game we may experience parts that demand higher kinaesthetic attention from us, and indeed many games award the player for mastering a particular movement while advancing the movement's repertoire as the game progresses. For example, in *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft 2008), the player starts the game with a fixed set of movements and as they progress and gain more experience, counted in aptly-named experience points, they unlock new movements they can perform with their avatar.

How can that apply to romance per se? To start with, it is obvious that if a player does not know how to play the game then they will not be able to access the romance. In some games, this is easier than others. In dating sims the player has little more to do than push a button on to the next screen. In such cases, the kinaesthetic demand from the player is as limited as turning the page of a book. In other games, action RPGs more prominently, the romance appears later in the game so the player has to reach this point after having spent some considerable time learning their way around the game world. Interestingly, while such games have a variety of complex commands the player has to master, when it comes to the experience of the romance they become dating sims themselves, which means that the player only needs to choose the right dialogue option and push a button to read the next part of a text.

Some games try to expand kinaesthetic involvement in romantic sequences, like *Fahrenheit* (2005) and *Heavy Rain* (2010), both by Quantic Dream. In *Fahrenheit* (Quantic Dream 2005), the player has to move the mouse in a preconfigured manner – supposedly mapped to represent a thrusting movement – for the avatar, Lucas, to perform sex with his love interest. Similarly, in *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream 2010), the player controlling Ethan Mars, one of the available playable characters, can have a romantic intercourse with another playable character, Madison Paige. Throughout the scene, the player has to rightly press timed commands to continue with the sexual act. Admittedly, this design choice, while being an effort for a more seamless gaming experience, is rather a clumsy one. Having the player push buttons to uncover the sex scene transforms play into interactive porn, which the player gets as a reward for properly executing the commands of the code.[86]

At the same time, the fact that the player is conditioned to experience the game space by learning to control a certain body makes them very aware of any change to this symbiosis; a feature that games can use to increase the player's romantic engagement with a non-playable character. In *Shadow of Mordor* (Monolith Productions 2014), the player plays as Talion, a captain ranger of Gondor's army in Mordor whose family has been executed by Sauron's forces and seeks to exact revenge. The player has to find their way in different maps and defeat orcs by mastering Talion's controls. In story mode, Talion comes across Lithariel, a warrior elf who commands a resistance group. Talion shares a few quests with Lithariel and the game makes known to the player that he has certain romantic sentiments towards her. This fragment of romance unfolds in cutscenes so the player's actual interaction with Lithariel is minimal, apart from winning missions connected to her.

There is one mission, however, in which the player has to go save Lithariel from an orc stronghold, where she is being held captive. After Talion frees Lithariel he has to escort her back to safety. Since she cannot walk by herself due to exhaustion, the player has to positively carry her while defending her and themselves from continuous waves of orcs. Lithariel's body is not accessible to the player the way a physical or even

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[86] Sex in games is a whole separate subject that even though closely associated with love demands a much larger space to be explored. Here, it will suffice to say that sex was never the reward in the romantic love tradition so games that offer it as such or overly sexualise the objects of desire, women in most cases, fail to even provide the romantic love experience argued in chapter two. In more contemporary understandings, on the other hand, love is interconnected with the physical touch and the tangible body, something that games apparently lack. The player cannot actually feel the NPC they may have a romantic feeling for. This is indeed a formal limitation of games – at least with the current technology – but as I will argue in chapter eleven the player can phenomenologically perceive the NPC as an embodied agent their ontology notwithstanding. Nonetheless, when an NPC has sexual intercourse with the avatar the difference in materiality between the fleshy player and the virtual NPC becomes uncontested; in other words the illusion is irrevocably shattered. *It Is As If You Were Making Love* (2018) is a browser games by Pippin Barr, which explores the opposite effect: namely how could the human player offer pleasure to the machine.

an avatarial body is, yet during this mission the player becomes very aware of it. Because of Lithariel's weight, the player cannot run and has to walk instead. Being used to controlling a body, Talion's, to run everywhere, the involvement of the player during this scene changes completely.

Figure 12 - Talion carrying Lithariel away from the battlefield, *Shadow of Mordor*

As Talion's and Lithariel's bodies mesh together in one, the player is forced to go at a much slower pace. This gives to the player the kinaesthetic impression of having to drag Lithariel, much like Talion does. The few meters until the finishing point of the mission seem endless. This sudden limitation of Talion's abilities together with the danger of the oncoming orcs commands the player's attention to the game in a novel fashion caused by Lithariel. As such, the game manages to make the player very aware of Lithariel's proximity. Indeed, the elf spirit that accompanies Talion in his quest had previously remarked that Talion is becoming too involved with Lithariel and her people: "These are not your people, Talion. Remember your wife and son." Through this kinaesthetic mechanic discussed above, the game does not simply tell the player that getting close to Lithariel is trouble but also makes them experience it first-hand employing the uniqueness of the medium to do so.

8.3. Spatial Involvement

In Calleja's model, spatial involvement holds a distinctive place for the reason that it is considered one of the main reasons people like to play certain types of games that afford certain forms of spatial experience. It is not stated explicitly and it is always in connection to the other aspects of the game, but, as Calleja argues, people have always liked exploring new spaces and digital games are one such medium that gives this opportunity to its players. Not only that, but players of digital games can traverse space and get lost in

new worlds. Orienting oneself in a new environment takes much of our attention and this is true also for physical and digital space. In games with vast terrains and intricate spatial design, the player needs to learn to move around much like learning a new city. Indeed, many games that offer open or vast worlds provide the player with a mini-map to facilitate the demanding process of their getting acclimated to the new surroundings. If not for these maps, the players would most probably roam around in circles and each playthrough would take much longer.

Indeed, space in games is an immense subject that pertains to both player experience and game ontology. How can one connect it with romance though? A compelling affinity is traced by Youngblood (2018) when discussing sexuality in *Catherine* (Atlas 2011), a game referenced in the first chapter. Youngblood (2018) argues that: "To play with sexuality in gaming is to experience it spatially" (p. 240). As he explains, this focuses on how the digital body moves in and interacts with the gamespace and how said space shapes "sexual performativity" (p. 240). It is clear from the start that Youngblood combines kinaesthetic and spatial involvement[87] in his analysis, something that is only to be expected since they are connected.

Specifically, Youngblood positions the spatial and kinaesthetic involvement of the player of *Catherine* in terms of an allegorical experience of compulsory heterosexuality and associated anxieties resulting from societal structures like marriage and reproduction. The player assumes the role of Vincent Brooks, a 30 something straight, white male that is in a long, steady relationship with a woman named Katherine. Katherine is starting to pressure Vincent to move on their relationship to marriage and family. Vincent responds to that with stress as evidenced in his playable nightmares. In these nightmares, he has to climb tall towers of falling blocks and reach the top before (his) time runs out.

The space of said nightmares is populated by other men transformed into sheep that are also trying to climb the tower. Each time Vincent progresses a level we learn that some of the other sheep died while trying. What is disturbing is that Vincent soon finds out that other men have been found dead in their sleep having been plagued by nightmares and they all share the same characteristic: they were avoiding settling down with their long-term girlfriend and/or have cheated on their significant other. This spikes Vincent's anxiety and to make matters worse he finds himself succumbing to adultery with a mysterious woman named Catherine. To top all that, Katherine informs him that she suspects she is pregnant. The player needs to successfully guide Vincent through these stressful impediments and make the choice for him of staying with Katherine or Catherine, or neither.

[87] Only inadvertently, since he does not claim to be using the model or references it.

As Youngblood explains, the primary focus of the gameplay is the nightmares, which as a spatial ascent toward a set point represent sexuality but also success in the contemporary capitalistic society, in which a man is required to move forward and upward and pursue challenges that their overcoming will get him closer to the top. Instead, men who do not comply with these social prescripts are depicted in the game as sheep; herbivores that have failed in their demanded role and must be punished by exclusion from the game; the social game and the game of love. As was argued in chapter two, romantic love has always been associated with masculinity's success in overcoming obstacles. Men who do not comply with these structures cannot attain and cannot retain love.[88]

Indeed, Youngblood furthers his analysis by claiming that Vincent is punished for not conforming to the "natural" way of things – get married and reproduce: "The natural is shown in fact to be a formula, a code, an algorithm" (p. 247). Following this direction, Youngblood makes another interesting comment when he argues that Catherine, the NPC, represents a queer choice because as a succubus – a sex demon – her relationship to Vincent is unnatural, particularly because it cannot lead to reproduction. In this sense, it may reflect the player's relationship to digital entities and their potential feelings of love as something unnatural and subversive exactly because they upturn the natural way of things. However, Youngblood is quick to criticise that:

> While the prospect of falling in love with a digital object—or it falling in love with the player—may represent an intriguingly queer image of where sexual attraction can be directed, the mechanisms that establish and maintain that relationship may not be queer at all (p. 249).

Youngblood comments on how all the player's choices in the game are an illusion of freedom since by finishing the game the player has by default complied with the code, which is the natural order of things. Moreover, the player has performed masculinity in their partaking in a series of challenges and coming out on the top. This is the only way Vincent can get either of the girls: "Both women are, in essence, rewards for completing the spatial gauntlet of the game, and what awaits Vincent at the top is that enormous cathedral mentioned earlier, meant to finally bind him to the woman of "his" choosing" (p. 249). Yet this choice must reflect the choices made throughout the game: a free-spirited, bohemian Vincent can only get his true ending with Catherine, whereas the responsible, reliable Vincent can only find his happily ever after with Katherine. If the player chooses wrongly, they do not get any girl. Youngblood concludes that: "The binary of "order" and "freedom" turns out to be patently false, as all of it is governed by order" (p. 250).

In terms of spatial involvement, another means by which space can be connected with romance and feelings of love is through intimacy. Specifically, Doyle-Myerscough (2019) focuses on intimacy caused by spatial

[88] "There is no possibility for a "weak" player to be desired" (Youngblood 2018, p. 251).

and gameplay frustration in *The Last Guardian* (Japan Studio GenDesign 2016). For Doyle-Myerscough (2019), intimacy is a means to understand the pleasure felt by the player when losing control and experiencing vulnerability and precarity. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, she explains that intimacy is connected with precarity because it is dynamic; oscillating between the private and the public. Doyle-Myerscough discusses the two bodies that are available to the player in the game: Trico, a griffin-like creature, and a boy, who is the main avatar. The player has to manipulate Trico's body through the boy's body to play the game.

In that, the player becomes aware of the limitations and affective properties of both. This attention to form and how these bodies cater to the player's agency allows the player to grow attached to Trico and the boy; the player needs to pay attention to their form and shape so as to successfully navigate the space and thus they become present for the player as distinct but, eventually, familiar agents. The frustration resulted from the difficulty of this spatial and bodily navigation[89] allows for the awareness and consequently experience of intimacy between the player and the available bodies for inhabitation in the game world. In this sense, space is the driving force behind the attachment of the player to the boy and Trico.

8.4. Ludic Involvement

Arguably, ludic involvement is the most contested when it comes to the player's experience of love in digital games. The reason for that is that ludic involvement, as Calleja explains it, corresponds to the main mechanism of challenge that the games provide and which, according to many theorists, as we already saw, creates tension when it comes to the experience of love. Games provide goals to their players and also the challenges for the fulfilment of those goals. Therefore, the player becomes invested in accomplishing their goal and gets satisfaction when they succeed. At the same time, this economy is facilitated by rewards and achievements the game may offer to the player reinforcing thus this behaviour and the ludic involvement of the player. The player feels more acknowledged by the game system, which increases the effect of the communication with the game.

For example, in *Witcher* (CD Project Red 2007) the player gets a playing card as a memento for sleeping with each woman in the game. This can be turned into a mini-game for the player if they want to collect all the cards. As was explained before, in this manner the attention of the player is focused on getting the cards; the women become simply a means to an end or objects for possession and/or collection as represented by the cards. Equally, in *Dragon Age 2* (BioWare 2011), the player must complete a full romance with one of the available characters to gain the romance achievement at the end of the game. If the player wants to

[89] As the author comments: "the player is constantly made to look at the space in terms of how they might fit (or fail to fit) through it."

collect all the achievements, then pursuing the romance becomes a goal in itself irrespective of the experience of love.

In other words when romance is associated with the ludic involvement the player's focus is solely, primarily, and/or additionally to the achievement which makes for a poor love experience, according to how this has been discussed by theorists. Nonetheless, as I already argued, this challenge and reward mechanics implemented in games is not antithetical to romance per se but instead, it facilitates the experience of romantic love as this has been culturally shaped in a patriarchal and phallocentric paradigm. The tension arises when this is considered the canon experience of love, which is not always the case. Some games include love by engaging the player ludically but this is not the only way games can and do that.

Ludic romance can also be an appropriate way to parody (Karhulahti and Bonello Rutter Giappone 2020). In the Larry Laffer games, most tellingly, the player assumes the role of the eponymous character, who tries to seduce various women during the game. According to Salter and Blodgett (2017), this is another instance of how games turn the love experience into a challenge, and the woman to a non-discreet reward. For Schott (2005) instead, this "functions to ridicule the now out-dated attitudes of that period" in a very concrete, hands-on way. As Schott comments: "In the game, the 'suit' constructs a role for the player, replete with moves, lines, and strategies of the 'pick-up artist'."

As such, there is a clear connection between the ludic involvement and the romantic experience, albeit a compensatory one: where desire cannot be established into the romantic paradigm, playfulness comes to replace or make up for it. Actually, a game can still retain goals and achievements but that does not necessarily mean that all and every game experience is realised through this means. Ludic involvement increases the player's attention and engagement with the game and as such facilitates the player's incorporation, which is important for the experience of love. Nevertheless, as the player involvement model shows this is just one aspect of the ways games allow for that. To compare that to the physical world, we do have goals and achievements in our everyday life and some people may approach their experience of love in such a manner. This does not constitute how people experience love by default.

Also, ludic involvement can be crucial in developing the romantic engangement of the player if the person they are to share this romance with is also actively involved in the overcoming of the obstacles. To showcase this one can look at the 2002 game *Ico* (Japan Studio Team Ico). In the game, the player assumes the role of the eponymous character that ends up as a sacrificial offering in a castle. There he comes across another captive, a girl named Yorda. Together they start exploring the castle trying to find their way out, having eventually to fight for their freedom. Throughout the game, the player is accompanied by Yorda, since Ico

has to help her by literally holding her hand. This makes her attachment to Ico continuous, prominent, and engaging.

Even though Yorda appears as the weak and powerless damsel in distress, this game mechanic makes her important for the progress of the game. She is not locked away in a tower that the player has to reach alone so as to save her. She is in close proximity to the player and the player is responsible for her. The game requires from the player that they connect with Yorda, physically and thus emotionally. The player has to care for her in an active way because if they do not they cannot continue with the game. In this sense, the player is more invested in her because the player spends actual time with her, allocating effort to her in an immediate fashion. Yorda is not waiting for Ico and the player in a vague location, which marks the end of the player's engagement with the game. Instead, Yorda is constantly with the player, being part of their adventure.

Arguably, this still limits Yorda's agency since she could very easily be exchanged with an inanimate object. Indeed, cooperation in solving problems throughout the game is an even better way to have the player involved with an NPC, romantically or not. For example, at a certain point of *Witcher 3* (CD Project 2015), Geralt requires the help of witch and potential love interest, Keira Metz. Keira not only does provide Geralt with a valuable item that he can use throughout the game to solve puzzles and accomplish missions, but in a specific quest she actively assists him using her magic powers. In that, she is an active agent of the game and her interaction with Geralt makes the player involved with her. The player spends time with her and creates a personal history that makes her stand out and become important, thus facilitating their romantic engagement with her, should they so wish.

8.5. Narrative Involvement

Unlike ludic involvement, narrative involvement is probably considered the primary means by which games can and do create the experience of romantic love. Dating sims, in particular, which are a whole genre of games devoted to romance and love, are essentially text-based. The player's in-game actions are usually minimal; they can only press a button for the screen to change and occasionally make a choice out of the predefined options available. As such, the experience of romance is mostly achieved through text in a fashion similar to that of reading a book. That being said, when it comes to romance many other games implement narrative involvement, their general gameplay notwithstanding. This is more often than not achieved by scripted dialogues of a branched narrative, whose direction is chosen by the player at critical points, as in the *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* series by BioWare.

Calleja divides narrative involvement into two categories: the scripted narrative, which is the designed story the player uncovers gradually through playing the game, and what he calls the alterbiography, narrative generated by the player at the time of playing.[90] A further demarcation of the scripted narrative Calleja follows is the push narrative and the pull narrative (Levine 2009), according to which some narrative elements are pushed into the player in the form of text, cutscenes, and dialogue, and some others are pulled by the player through interpretation, most notably by the environment, what Jenkins (2004) calls environmental storytelling. Alterbiography, on the other hand, is the narrative resulting from the player's interaction with the rules, the representation, and the mechanics of the game.

When it comes to romance in games, the vast majority employ scripted narrative to convey it. The player plays the game and at certain points they activate snippets of story that are usually presented as cutscenes. The player may choose to romance a certain character but the actual romantic scene between the player's avatar and the romantic interest transpires in a cutscene. In games that follow the choose the right tree path and/or overcome challenges mechanic, the romance is the reward in itself; like a puzzle whose clear image can only be seen after all pieces have fallen into the right place. As Jensen (2014) mentioned in the first chapter, romance can in this way be used as a means to engage the player in wanting to play the game so as to uncover what will happen next with the romantic interest and see whether the love story will climax to a happy ending.

Romantic narrative involvement may seem limiting because it does not include the kinaesthetic and spatial engagement that discerns games as a medium, yet it can still provide meaningful involvement to the player. This is especially true if the romance is not seen as separate or optional but an integral part of the game experience, which would require that the scripted scenario take much more time and space to develop. This would make the romance arise much more organically. Indicatively, *Dragon Age 3* by BioWare (2014) is a plus one hundred hours massive world game. Each scripted romance in its totality does not take more than one and a half hours. This discrepancy shows already how underdeveloped romance is in comparison to other parts of the game, even in one of the few titles of the industry that concerns itself with romantic relationships.

Moreover, as Heidi McDonald (2019) comments, the scripted romance usually concerns the initial stages of the love story. It covers the flirtation elements and stops after the sex is consummated. After that, the player rarely has the opportunity to meaningfully interact with their love interest, which leaves them dissatisfied and strips their emotional experience from a resonating and believable affection. Talking with

[90] The terms roughly correspond to the more widely known embedded and emergent narrative respectively, which are attributed to a talk by Marc LeBlanc at the 1999 Game Developers Conference (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, p. 377).

your significant other about a tough mission, asking their advice, or seeking some consolation are all important parts of being in a relationship that cultivate the feeling of belonging. Having inside jokes and commemorating personal moments is another way that scripted narrative can create impactful engagement in terms of romance.

Love involvement may be even more evident in cases of emergent narrative. For example, in *Dragon Age 2* (BioWare 2011), while the romance itself is rather scripted playing out in dialogue sequences and depending on predetermined player's choices, there are still instances that require the more active interpretation of the player. One such instance is witnessed in the DLC quest *Legacy* (BioWare 2011). There the player followed by their trusted companions has to fight their way through a vast number of enemies, much like in the original game. In this DLC, however, if the player's avatar, whose name is Hawke, is in a relationship with one of the available romantic interests, Fenris a warrior elf, then if Fenris falls during a battle, Hawke yells his name in agony. This reaction by Hawke is scripted but it emerges from the game at specific points and under specific conditions. Moreover, the fact that the player has to be in a romantic relationship with Fenris for this exclamation to be heard makes the experience resonate all the more with the player. Love, in this case, is not separate from the gameplay but an intimate part of it.

The rest of the romance is quite static in terms of gameplay. If the player wants to romance Fenris, they have to visit him in his mansion, go into the room where he waits and press the button that corresponds to the interactive command. As such, Fenris becomes alive like an automaton, activated in dialogue sequences in which the player's kinaesthetic involvement is downgraded to a mouse click and their ludic involvement summarised to finding the appropriate answer for solving Fenris and getting him as a reward. By comparison, in *Legacy,* this instantaneous interaction between Hawke and Fenris happens in the middle of the battle while the player is attuned to winning. In this scenario, losing a warrior, Fenris, can make all the difference between coming out victorious or needing to repeat a certain part of the game. The stakes are high so the cry of despair when Fenris falls down wounded corresponds to the player's investment.

The fact that the player treats Fenris as their lover shapes this investment with the narrative of a love plot. This makes the player's investment even higher because not only do they lose a warrior but they also lose their lover. More importantly, the game experience feels seamless. If Hawke remained completely unfazed by Fenris' loss, this would expose the artificial separation between gameplay and narrative.[91] As this

[91] The scene is complemented by Fenris' similar cry of agony if Hawke falls first. In this case, Fenris exclaims "I will not allow this" and can resurrect the player once for every battle. In *DA2* the game does not stop if the main avatar dies since the player can control any other living member of the company. That being said, it is expected that the player is better at controlling the main avatar and also the fact that the company now has minus one participant

example shows, it is when the two are treated as distinct that tension arises. The player can be attentive and involved in many things at once, as we humans do, and when games cater to that they provide all the more impactful experiences.

8.6. Affective Involvement

Out of all the aspects of the involvement model, affective involvement is the one I will have to take some distance from for the reason that Calleja equates affect with emotion. Based on affect theory, affect, while connected to emotion, is clearly separate from it. More importantly, a person cannot choose to be affected or not. Instead, they can choose to engage in situations and/or activities that they have associated certain reactions with. Therefore, what Calleja means with affective involvement, I understand as these game instances, in which the player becomes aware of the effect the game experience has on them. To explain what I mean with that I will go a bit further into theory of affect.

As explained in the previous chapter, affect has been theorised as a response system distinct from cognition and biology but inexorably linked to them. Massumi (1995; 2002) particularly argues that affect has a virtual part which is always beyond language, representation, discourse, and thus knowledge, and an actual part which is the narrative of affect and it is equated with feeling and emotion. In other words, talking about affect is only talking about the actualisation of an ungraspable virtuality that is abstract, presocial, and universal. We saw that many theorists have criticised Massumi for this demarcation but they still treat affect as something distinct from its understanding and representation.

Anable (2018), while contesting Massumi, also argues that games are not containers of affect. Rather affect is born out of the communication between the system and the player and the game is the mediator, the facilitator of this exchange of stimuli; a translation as I argued previously.[92] In the same way that games are not a priori spaces but are produced through playing, games do not contain affects in the form of a picturesque landscape or ambient music score, for example. Instead, their design may include triggers for the player's affective system but these triggers constitute the game as a whole and the game experience at that. In this, the whole player involvement model can be argued to be an affective model.

What Calleja calls affective involvement, I argue that is better explained by Ahmed's affect concept of orientation (2010). Ahmed (2010) argues that in any culture certain objects are constructed to provide for certain experiences; or rather we, as part of a certain culture, have been indoctrinated into expecting to feel specific experiences once we attain these objects and as such we learn to orient ourselves towards them, for

decreases again the chances of winning a battle. In this manner, the same dynamics as the one described above applies, which gives the romance a reciprocity that deepens the involvement of the player.

[92] Here one has to note, that by translation I mean the process and not the fixed product, which is the translatum.

example, money is considered to be a source of contentment. Similarly, in designed experiences such as games, players may choose to play them depending on their predisposition; if I like experiencing the feeling of terror and horror I will be more inclined to play survival/horror games.

That being said, this experience is manifested throughout the game rather than in specific moments. I am involved with a game exactly because it activates my affective system constantly and through all its facets. At the same time, there are game moments, in which the player can take in the experience and recognise it as it is. For example, after a really difficult boss fight or a chasing sequence or while roaming around the area and happening upon a breathtaking view, as Calleja informs us. These are the moments of emotional rather than affective involvement because it is when the player is cognitively aware of being affected by the game in a definitive way and they interpret this experience in a personal manner.

How does this translate to romance? As already argued, romance as a genre triggers certain emotions akin to pleasure and satisfaction. For psychoanalytical and sociopolitical reasons described in chapters from five to seven, people who enjoy romance repeatedly seek it. They actively want to engage with texts that offer them this type of vicarious experience of contentment. This also happens in games. Players who like romance purposely play games that include it, most notably dating-sims. Alternatively, in open-world games they fashion their gameplay accordingly, for example by forming an established-relationship with an NPC and/or having many different romantic escapades. At the same time, a game may invite certain romantic reactions through its various aspects, as already discussed in this chapter.

One of these aspects that targets emotional responses in particular and which I understand as affective involvement is the aesthetics of the game. As we saw in the previous chapter with the example of *Doki Doki* (Team Salvato 2017), the game's color palette and cute aesthetic contributed to the experience of the player and their romantic involvement. Another example that comes to mind is from *The Witcher 3* (CD Project Red 2015). At one point, Geralt finds himself in a tavern where trobairitz, Priscilla, or Callonetta as her stage name is, performs the song *The Wolven Storm*. The lyrics of the song speak of Geralt's love story with Yennefer of Vengerberg:

You flee my dream come the morning
Your scent, berries tart, lilac sweet
To dream of raven locks entwisted, stormy
Of violet eyes, glistening as you weep

The scene happens while Geralt visits Novigrad, one of the game's map areas and one of the major cities within Redania, the fictional realm of the game, for the first time. He searches for his adopted daughter, Ciri, but at the same time he plans on crossing the sea to the Isles of Skellige, where he will reunite with

Yennefer. Since the start of the game, Geralt has had no interaction with Yennefer. She has sent him a letter and Geralt is on a mission to find her but has not been able to catch up with her still. His actions are full of haste for their reuniting and the fact the he is constantly one step behind her and she continues to elude him causes a sensation of longing and yearning for their eventual meeting. Especially, since the player cannot immediately go and visit her. The trip to Skellige costs money so the player has to play a considerable amount of in-game hours in order to collect the sufficient sum (and XP points).

Geralt's urge to find Yennefer is accentuated if one considers the storyline of the books. Players who have read the books know that Yennefer and Geralt share a special bond. In the previous two games, Yennefer was not included as an NPC, so their meeting in this game is the culmination of a long arduous process. Just as Geralt has not been able to see Yennefer in all this time, so do the players themselves look forward to finally getting to know her in the game and interact with her after only having read about her in the novels. Understandably, this impression is all the more impactful if the players have decided to romance Yennefer. The song then mirrors this already emotionally charged context with regard to Geralt's love story with Yennefer and affects the player respectively.

The song is a soft ballad accompanied by Priscilla's mesmerising voice (Emma Hiddleston). Through the lyrics, the music, and the scene of its performance, the game tries to convey to the player how magical the love Geralt and Yen share is. Geralt is among friends and there is no immediate threat around. He is relaxed and enjoying some very rare respite from the constant struggles of the monster-hunter's life. The room is candle-lit in hues of red and orange creating a warm and tender atmosphere. The décor is rich and lush with velvety textures; a sharp contrast with the dirty, cold streets of the surrounding city. Everyone in the tavern is quiet, enthralled by the mellow performance. Even a passer-by seen through a window, stops and marvels at the scene. A woman guest leans her head affectionately on her companion's embrace, touched by the feelings conveyed by the song. A male patron weeps silently. A couple kisses passionately. As per the game's and novels' lore, Geralt as a Witcher is considered impervious to emotions due to the mutations he had to undergo as a child as part of his training. The game employs the reactions of others to show the effect of the song and influence the player's affective state. Still, while Priscilla sings, the camera focuses on Geralt. During this scene, it becomes clear in his facial expressions and body language – he even gives a standing ovation once the song finishes – how moved and touched he is; a seldom occurrence which shows even more how unique his relationship to Yennefer is.

Figure 13 - Geralt's facial expression while listening to Priscilla's ballad, *The Witcher 3*

As it becomes apparent from the above description, the effect of the scene may be at a first glance the result of its aesthetics but in actuality it is due to all facets of the game. The scene would not have the same appeal had the player not engaged with the game in depth. It is the contrast from the usual fighting mechanics and the intense kinaesthetic and spatial awareness of the player that make this instance a special moment. It is the narrative of the game and the characters that surround Geralt's adventures that give meaning, intertextual meaning at that, to the performance. In this sense, affective involvement is again proven to be a conglomeration of all the attributes of a game that synergise harmoniously to cause a lasting effect on the player's experience.

8.7. Shared Involvement

Calleja understands shared involvement as the interaction and coexistense of the player with other in-game agents, either controlled by other human players or by the computer itself. The population of a game environment with other agents increases its believability and also the player's involvement. The player feels that they inhabit an actual space with other inhabitants. Moreover, these other agents may help or antagonise the player in their goals, which naturally makes the player more attuned to these agents. Calleja shows how in the first instance human players tend to anthropomorphise all agents. That being said, they are also quick to understand which agent is actually controlled by a human, and after this distinction is made the player's behaviour towards this agent shifts accordingly.

Here I argue that shared involvement is also the most important facet for games to offer romantic love to their players. This is evident already from chapter two since the challenge of romance in games primarily

originated from whether the other agents the player interacts with are human-controlled or computer-controlled. Human-controlled agents invite romantic feelings in a similar fashion to how people react with other humans in their everyday lives; the game in those cases acts as the meeting space, which can influence the relationship itself. On the contrary, a human player developing feelings for a computer agent seems unattainable and/or absurd, as argued in chapter two by Warren Spector.

Indeed, the algorithmic nature of games can be a challenge to the player's romantic involvement, a point which is analysed in the following chapter. While there are technological limitations, I argue that it is actually this algorithmic nature of games that will provide solutions to this problem, a facet that is explored in detail in the last chapter of this thesis. To show what I mean with this, let us take the example of the Nemesis system by Warner Bros implemented in the games *Shadow of Mordor* (Monolith Productions 2014) and *Shadow of War* (Monolith Productions 2017). The AI system concerns the enemies of the game, the orcs from Tolkien's LOTR universe. Each orc not only does have a unique name, but they also possess individual strengths and fears which provide them with some sort of personality. The number of enemies is indefinite but each enemy is distinct.

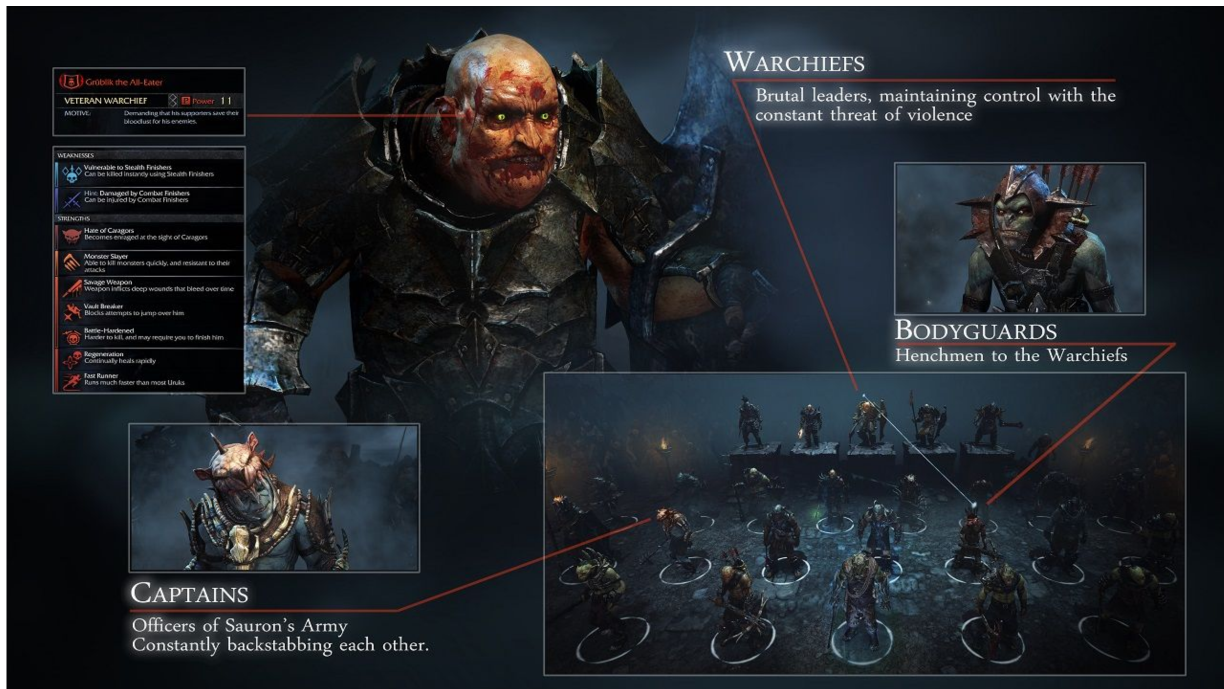

Figure 14 - Nemesis system in *Shadow of Mordor*

More importantly, they are organised in a webbed hierarchy consisting of chieftains, captains, and bodyguards. Depending on which orc the player kills, another one connected to it takes its place. These connections can also be used to the player's advantage. The orcs often publicly antagonise each other so if

the player happens at their meeting point of duel, they can defeat and/or humiliate one of the orcs. This will eventually lead to another orc killing the first and taking their place in the rankings. Moreover, after the player catches an orc, they can mind control them to do their bidding by sabotaging other orcs and their missions. Additionally, the orcs may develop a personal vendetta with the player. If the player does not manage to kill an orc and is either killed by it or flees the battle, this orc will become more powerful and reach a higher ranking. Next time this specific orc meets the player at some random place in the game map, it will taunt them by reminding them of their disgraced retreat and/or defeat.

Figure 15 - An ogre, *Shadow of Mordor*

Obviously, Nemesis is not a love involvement system. However, it still shows the potential of the game's algorithmic affordances. The game engages the player not despite its algorithm but due to it. Its AI system allows for a personalised game content. The fact that each troll has a separate character and presence and reacts to the player's actions differently is enabled by the AI that supports it. As such, the player feels that their actions are more impactful, that they do not simply act out a pre-configured script. The player interacts with characters of their own volition who react to the specific actions of each player within the fictional setting of the game. The fiction element remains but each actor, the player included, can perform with much more freedom and individuality. Equally, if the game had a similar AI build-in for romantic partners, their behaviour would be an immediate response to the romantic advances of the player, making thus the romantic involvement all the more believable. This is indeed a successful manner to engage the player in

personal relationships tailored in accordance with their mode of playing and individual in-game actions. The further intricacies of this will be covered in detail in the last chapter.

Summary

In this chapter, I focused on analysing the experience of love in games employing the player involvement model and its distinct dimensions. I used game examples that are indicative of how each dimension enables or is connected to the experience of love in games. The value of this model is threefold. First, unlike other approaches to immersion and presence in games, it posits involvement as part of an attention process. The second valuable attribute of the model is that it recognises involvement at both macro- and microlevel. The third reason as to why this model is preferable is that it does not presuppose what a game is but instead treats the player experience as a matter of degree, the ultimate point of which is incorporation when the game supports all facets of the model and thus allows the player to perceive it as a world. This is particularly valuable for a complex subject matter such as love.

As already argued in this thesis, love in games should be considered in its duality as experience and representation. This specificity of love makes criticism based only on the feelings of the player limited, as shown in chapter two. Similarly, analysing love in terms of textual semiotics, as shown in the previous chapter, does not take into consideration the medium’s singularities. Therefore, player involvement model is as a tool that can allow for both: examine love as an experience as part of the game’s different aspects and features. This bottom-up approach does not presuppose what a game should do to afford love but instead examines how games can afford love by utilising their potential as spaces of attention and involvement. Shared involvement, in particular, as in the player’s interaction and coexistence with other agents within the game’s world, was considered as the most important facet of games in relation to love. This approach will be supported more concretely in the following chapters. The next chapter concerns shared involvement in terms of macro-involvement while the final chapter focuses on the game agents the player comes into contact with.

Chapter 9

Love Play Love

Books are finite, sexual encounters are finite,
but the desire to read and to fuck is infinite
Roberto Bolano

> [My first crush] was Cookie from Animal Crossing for gamecube. I used to bring her flowers and fossils and talk to her over and over until she told me to go away. Then one day she said she didn't want to lose me and a heart emoticon floated above her head and I knew it was real. So I sent her a love letter. Then, a few weeks later, I had a friend over and we travelled to each other towns (sic). A few days later, I opened my mailbox and saw a letter from Cookie. She told me that she had moved. She moved to my friend's town. I was heart-broken and planted flowers where her house once stood. Then, the next week at school, I walk into my class and everyone started laughing at me. Cookie had showed (sic) my friend the letter I wrote to her. She showed him the letter. I had never felt more betrayed in my entire life. I couldn't believe that she did that to me, so when I got home I ripped up all the flowers I planted in her memory and vowed to never love again.

Figure 16 - Cookie from *Animal Crossing*

The above is an answer provided by an anonymous (anon) user on the Internet (u/petterpopps 2019). It is also an example of a love story between a human player and a computer-generated character. Understandably, this is a fictionalised version of the events that transpired. It is even possible that this love story did not happen at all. In the actual game, it is quite difficult for all these instances to coincide. In *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo 2001-2020), a social simulation series of games in which the players maintain their own cartoonish towns and islands which recurring Non-Playable Characters can inhabit, NPCs can leave the town of the player but not as whimsically as the above snippet suggests. The player has to first visit another town themselves to trigger the NPC's moving out to this town. Who lives in this town has nothing to do with their choice, which, one may argue, is not even a choice but a randomised script.

Moreover, the villagers, as the NPCs are called in Animal Crossing, Cookie included, possess an algorithmic command to show off the items that the players gift them; for example, if you offer them clothes they will wear them to show that they value your present. In the above story, if Cookie somehow left anon's village, she must have also carried her belongings with her, one of which was anon's love letter. If then anon's friend visited Cookie and talked with her, it is possible that she showed them her letter as part of her precious possessions. The fact that all these contingencies coincided is rather improbable, yet not

impossible. This explains how the incident came to be. It is an interesting occurrence since we are concerned with an entity, Cookie, who is not a conscious being, confined as she is by the limitations of her material ontology. As a matter of fact, in terms of technological achievement, Cookie's behaviour cannot, by any means, be considered a breakthrough in artificial intelligence or human-computer interaction. Her actions and reactions are prescribed in accordance with a few – or many – lines of a programming language. What, I argue, is instead far more compelling is the perception of the player of her actions and the results thereof.

In anon's recount of the events, Cookie's agency is never questioned. She is described as a person with volition and choice. She is shown to be responsible for anon's despair. More than that, she is pictured as the one setting the action. She would tell the player when she wanted them to go away, she was the one to first confess her feelings to them, she sent them a letter when she moved away, and – the final nail in the coffin – she showed the letter to their friend. What is of particular interest is that Cookie's behaviour dictates the perception of the player. It was because a heart appeared above her head that made the player convinced that Cookie loved them. By comparison, after the heart-wrenching events, the player realised that Cookie had deceived them, and her affection was not as strong – or as real – as they had originally thought. Their experience made them aware of the fake smile Cookie puts on to fool others, which again portrays her as the culprit in the player's misfortune.

So not only is Cookie real for the player. She is so real that she can fake her real self, which is cold-hearted, as a much nicer persona that had the player fall in love with her. The player's hurt is never attributed to the fact that Cookie is not aware of her actions and therefore innocent of/by design. Instead, the game's coded progress is perceived as a means of manipulation and artifice by Cookie to abandon the player and humiliate them in the eyes of their own friends. The experience has been so ignominious and disheartening to the player that they had to exact revenge by destroying Cookie's flowers, and, excessively, vow to never love again.

It is expected that the above statement entails a comedic effect due to its absurdness. We, the witnesses of the story, know that Cookie is not real, so the extent of the player's wrath seems ridiculous. This is further emphasised by Cookie's appearance, which is drawn as to inspire positive feelings of cuteness and carefreeness: with her big, round head and eyes, baby pink and blue colour palette, petite body with chubby limbs, button-like nose, and small, smiling mouth, she purposely resembles a baby pet or child than anything remotely associated with a sexualised femme fatale.[93] Her smile is indeed fake but it does not show as long as the players perceive her as an improved version, because interactive and ergodic, of a toy

[93] This of course brings our attention back to the discussion regarding pets and virtual pets in the introduction.

doll. It is when the player develops feelings of love – romantic love for that matter – that her smile starts to give way to her deception and her fictionality begins to bother. At the same time, it is precisely when those feelings are not reciprocated but ridiculed that Cookie, the dog, becomes a bitch and her artificiality all the more real.

9.1. Love Labour

In the above example, the player's love experience is expressed through effort: anon provided gifts to Cookie and spent time discussing with her. They also sat down and wrote her a love letter. Arguably, it is this effort they lament when feeling betrayed by Cookie. They cared for her and allocated resources and energy to her, which she did not appreciate. I argue that this is essentially a labour mechanic. Labour is used in many games as a design choice to invoke feelings of care and love to the players (Ganzon 2017; Butt 2018). In *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* series by BioWare (2007-2014), the player has to perform certain tasks and successfully complete side quests. In *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe 2016), the player must spend time talking to their partner and also give them gifts. In dating sims like *Purrfect Date* (Bae Team 2017), the player collects points by various in-game actions and choices to unlock the romantic content of their respective love interest. In games that follow the hero's journey, prototypically in *Super Mario* (Nintendo 1985), the player has to overcome obstacles and defeat adversaries to save their beloved and secure a happily ever after. In this, games afford shared involvement in conjunction with their ludic elements.

Labour is indeed a valid approach towards love.[94] Relationships do require emotional and tangible work (Horne and Johnson 2019; Erickson 2005). The term emotional labour was first introduced by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in 1940 as an intrapersonal process of managing one's emotions to produce a certain bodily display. Even though she coined the term as part of one's professional persona, she later agreed that it can also be performed "by the self upon others" (1979, p. 562), which means in interpersonal relationships as well. Rebecca Erickson in 1993 opened up the term to define it as "the enhancement of others' emotional well-being and the provision of emotional support" (p. 888). So individuals in a romantic relationship may be engaging in the so-called "labor of love" (Horne and Johnson 2018, p. 15); they provide emotional support because they want to see their partner and themselves satisfied and content in the relationship.

Möring (2013) has argued that love relationships, like games, "can be, and are sometimes, thought of as cybernetic systems" with a state of optimal value (p. 215). In both love and games, we try to maintain this optimal value because we care: "when being in love, we care about the other and about our love relationship.

[94] In the words of Judy Shen (2021), who designed the online dating game based on 2048: "This game is difficult but so is online dating."

Being a player of a game, we care about our game and try to play it in a specific way" (p. 216). By using the game *The Marriage* (2006) by Rod Humble, which we mentioned in chapter one, as a case-study, Möring suggests that *love is a game* may not be a metaphor at all but instead it shows how love is a ludic system in the same way that a game is an act of love. Indeed, in our example with Cookie, the anon followed certain practices in their love relationship with Cookie: they offered her flowers and wrote her a love letter. They performed in accordance with the social rules of flirting and played the game because they cared; Cookie being the point of reference for their attachment to the game.

There are intricacies, however, that tend to escape this implementation and which led to anon's heartbreak. One of the most fundamental, as I position it here, lies in the unpredictability of care. Love relationships may indeed have an optimal value, yet, unlike games, or most games, there is no guarantee that we will achieve it. While labour tends to be straightforward in terms of production, especially in games (Salter et al. 2019), an essential part of care in love relationships is the fear of unrequitedness, something we also covered in chapter six. Someone might not be interested in us, might be initially interested and then change their mind, and/or understand, expect, and reciprocate care in a manner different from ours.

In games, this process is much more streamlined and optimised. In most games, once this optimal value is achieved then the game retains this state. Usually this is the point when we have reached the game's narrative and/or ludic end. This, as we saw in chapter six, does not happen only in games. Instead, it is a predisposition to how love should work. Romance follows the same process of optimisation: the story ends once the protagonists become committed lovers and their future is prescribed as stable and secure. Therefore it is general preconceptions at a macro-involvement level that, to a large extent, define how love involvement is afforded in games. Love, however, as we saw in chapter six, is a continuous and dynamic process. It never stops evolving. More importantly, it is not numerical, or even digital, as in binary. There is no absolute right or wrong. Love is analogue, built on reference, self-reflection, and communication between the partners. In that, it is free-form. While codification may work for romance, as already shown in chapter two, love continues to elude it. This will be further analysed using the work of theorists referenced in the following sections.

9.2. Codifying Love

Khandaker-Kokoris (2015) has argued that games as a medium suffer from a superficial mediation of love and romantic relationships. She comments specifically on dialogue trees, the mechanic used predominantly in dating sims and in most games that include optional romantic relationships. According to her, this process "effectively becomes press the correct sequence of buttons in order to get them to sleep with you" (p. 115-

116). She also brings to attention how problematic this is if one considers that the treatment of romantic love in games reflects the conception game designers have on the theme.

This is even more evident in games that allow the player to influence the romance with various other actions besides dialogue, which sometimes reach the point of fatuity. In *Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware 2009), to romance an NPC the player must ideally talk with them and respond and act in ways they approve. It is very easy for the player to follow their romantic progress since in the game menu under every character there is an approval bar that shows how much of this character's approval the player has gained. This approval bar is influenced by certain gifts the player can offer to the NPCs. Some of those gifts are personalised and mean something to the respective NPC based on their story. Some others are totally generic, like sweet cakes. This results in the player being able to maximise an NPC's approval by feeding them cakes.[95]

In the next instalment of the series, *Dragon Age 2* (2012), Bioware tried to improve the romance mechanics of the first game. Instead of constantly giving gifts, the player has a less immediate influence on the NPC's approval through dialogue and gameplay choices. Nonetheless, the approval is still treated as a quantifiable commodity that one needs to maximise or minimise – the game offers rivalry romance as well, which is when the NPC hates to love you – to be able to have a romance. In actuality, the NPCs have no say in the progression of the romance; they are simply the receivers of the players' attention and effort. Moreover, romantic relationships grant achievements to the player, constituting thus a gameplay advantage. Romancing an NPC greatly boosts their approval and a high approval increases the NPCs' fighting statistics and loyalty to the player. It is then to the player's strategic advantage to romance an NPC.

In this sense, romancing one NPC or the other becomes part of the game's tactics. Actually, a player may not be interested in the romantic story yet choose to pursue a romance for the advantage it gives to their gameplay. For example, if one of the NPCs in DA2 has not been romanced and his approval is low, he abandons the player based on certain choices, which means that the player has one character less fighting for them in the final battle. Also, the player equips the NPCs with armour and weapons or gives them gifts that cost game money and/or hours of gameplay. If an NPC leaves the player, the player also loses all the resources that they might have spent on that NPC. It makes much more sense for the player to romance an NPC to keep them as secure as possible, since maximised approval/rivalry is translated to unconditional loyalty. In this regard, the romance becomes a point tracking system with a quantifiable outcome and a

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[95] Or in *Fable II* (Lionhead Studios 2008), a player can repeatedly fart in front of their love interest until they collect enough points to win their heart.

right/wrong solution, just like a puzzle.

This approach to love as a game with a quantifiable outcome brings to mind Pick-Up artist texts (PUAs for short). PUAs follow a codified flirting technique depending on verbal cues and somatic responses of women. Many of these texts have been heavily criticised as sexist propaganda that simplifies emotional responses and treats women as objects with no free volition. Denes (2011), for example, has accused these texts of privileging biological responses as "truth" and positioning women's bodies against themselves by teaching men to arouse women and then to interpret this physical arousal as consent, ignoring women's verbal communication.

There are obvious parallels between these PUA techniques and the romance mechanics used in games. Appropriately enough, PUAs often use playing and computer terminology as part of their jargon, like scripts, openers, targets, obstacles, and gambits (Mystery 2007). One of the PUA guides is called *The Game* (Strauss 2005), in which women are seen as a code that the PUAs need to crack. In the book, one of the PUAs claims: "I'm into the game because it's like *Dungeons and Dragons*. When I learn a neg or a routine, it's like getting a new spell or a staff that I can't wait to use" (p. 89). The PUA must master the rules of the game to win and by doing so get the girl.

Respectively, the player must do x and z to romance the NPC. It does not matter who the player is or who the NPC is. What matters is that the player must decode the behavioural patterns of the NPC, which are designed and as such insusceptible to deviation, and manipulate those patterns to their favour by increasing the NPC's approval statistics. As a matter of fact, there are multiple detailed walkthroughs on how to romance each character in games that allow it.[96] In such a way, not only does the NPC's agency vanish, the player's independence is sacrificed as well. The player must become a set of behaviours themselves if they want to get the romance. Unpredictability, spontaneity, and improvisation do not exist and quite often players get punished for exhibiting them.

In *Dragon Age: Origins* (Bioware 2009), for example, at some point the player has to choose if they want to make Alistair – NPC and companion, king. If they do so and the player a) is not playing as a human noble and b) has not agreed to marry him, Alistair breaks up with them. This development is unexpected since there has been no former indication that Alistair would behave like that. The only way to prevent this is for the player to perform a specific choice concerning Alistair in some earlier part of the game, which has no immediate connection with his being king. Without a walkthrough, it is difficult for a player to figure the connection by themselves, at least in the first playthrough. Considering that the game takes between 50-

[96] For example, *Romance Dragon Age 2* (Dragon Age Wiki n.d.)

100 hours to finish, the player must sacrifice a lot of time to be able to understand the workings of the game without any help. Hence, if the player wants to successfully romance Alistair, they must find the correct way to do it, which is only one way and very difficult to uncover by sheer chance. The player must be prepared, plan a strategy, and decode the behavioural patterns of Alistair to the absolute. Otherwise, it is impossible to get the desired outcome.

The problem with this design is not that the romance may fail. On the contrary, the fact that Alistair may break up with the player on his own initiative makes the romance feel more plausible. The problem is that there is an exact way for the player to avoid this break-up and instead achieve the best possible outcome of the romance in the game. This outcome is quantifiable and unchanging. It is there for the player to uncover, learn, and execute to perfection. One may completely disregard what Alistair says to the PC. The player has the choice to skip Alistair's verbal communication by pressing a button, thus depriving him of any voice whatsoever. The important thing if one wants to achieve the romance is that at the right time they choose the right thing for their PC to say and/or do out of pre-scripted lines of dialogue and options.

This line of argumentation is also discussed by Ware (2015), who connects this game mechanic of pushing the right button to get the romance as a reward with what he calls the iterative design process that is followed by most games during their production. Ware describes this iteration as a production concept according to which the designers come up with a prototype, they test it and improve it until they get the result they desire. This process, as Ware claims, finds its way to the in-game actions, romance and sex one of them: "If players fail to choose a correct option in a dialogue tree, the saved game can be reloaded and new options tried: an iterative process" (p. 227). Ware calls this design the Nice Guy Syndrome, a term that similar to the PUAs, describes a man who expects a relationship or sex with a woman as a reward for being kind and accommodating to her wishes and needs: "The Nice Guy mentality is reinforced in games where romance is designed as a series of actions where doing the correct thing at the correct time leads to sex as a reward for those behaviours" (p. 228).

Ware argues that this game design offers flat game experiences since they do not faithfully represent the unpredictability of romantic relationships and the variety of possibilities in the physical world: "Romance is not trial-and-error without any repercussions for failure" (p. 231).[97] Even though Ware sees the merit of

[97] Yet as we saw in chapter six, there is this constant effort to turn it into one, a practice evident outside games as well. Are not marriages of convenience or arranged marriages a safe remedy to avoid failure in a social transaction as discussed by Foucault (1986)? Popular dating apps also work on a similar principle. Their design caters to a trial and error approach to romance. A user matches with different potential partners, talks and, later, dates as many of them as possible before they decide who is better suited for them. This is in itself an iterative process because, apparently, the more suitable a partner the more stable and sustainable the relationship. Indeed, the correlation between dating apps

iterative production, he also underlines the demand that the game design move away from its employment since as he contends "complicated, dynamic, and context-driven feelings and interactions don't translate well into algorithmic gameplay" (p. 235).

Ware connects this iterative design with the archaeology of digital games as arcade machines (p. 229). Back when games used to be coin-ops, it would make sense that the design catered to this iterative process because the time spent in the game corresponded to actual money given to the machine. As Huhtamo (2005) argues, the basic principle of the coin machines was that they always gave something in return. The user would insert a coin and then wait for something to happen. This was also the case with the Mutoscope, a device in which the viewers could peruse photographs. Because these photographs were often of naked women, the Mutoscope has often been associated with the male user (Williams 1995); its design with the turning of a crank has been argued to simulate male masturbation.

More pertinently, Huhtamo describes that the interaction with the machine was limited: "For just one coin, the user could not be allowed to spend too much time with the device; the profit had to be maximised" (2005, p. 9). The experience these machines provided was thus fleeting and escapist with no meaningful content. The user would give some money and get a bit of sex content as a reward. An essential discrepancy between a Mutoscope and a digital game is that "experiencing the voyeuristic offerings of the Mutoscope required no acquired mastery […] one needed no more skill than for performing the simplified operations by the assembly line in a mechanised factory" (ibid). By comparison, digital games require some or a great amount of skill. This of course has increased the time spent interacting with the machine to get the reward.

Does this mean that the content of this reward has equally increased in meaning and impact? As the example of the games discussed in this chapter shows, the correlation is not on par. The romantic content that the user unlocks after the performance of labour is many a time unsatisfactory by comparison. Love remains a fleeting reward for the proper handling of the machine. More than that, the complexity of the game design transfers now the pleasure from the reward to the mastery of the game itself; a facet which we explored in chapter two and chapter six as well. Love is still a promise but the meaningful experience comes from playing. Indeed, as long as the design keeps the two apart, or love as the result of playing, love continues to feel detached and separate from the game experience. Love becomes a spectacle in form of a reward following patterns and practices borrowed from other representations of love. This does not do justice to the nature of either love or games, and also perpetuates problematic and toxic behaviours.

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and romance practices in games, or ludification in general, is vast. For further reading see Garda and Karhulahti (2019).

9.3. The Male Gaze

In her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey (1989) uses Freudian psychoanalysis to interpret the implementation of the male gaze in cinema. As one of the possible pleasures cinema can offer, Mulvey discerns scopophilia. Freud associated scopophilia with the erotic pleasure one receives from applying their gaze, controlling and curious, on someone else as if they were an object. This, for Mulvey, is a predominantly masculine act.

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness* (p. 11).

In cinema, the male gaze is not only part of the experience but the normative code bringing in "formative external structures" (p. 17).[98] The male gaze is evident also in games. As we saw with the Mutoscope referenced before, it even has a historical connection. Salter and Blodgett (2017) actually argue that the male gaze is especially noticeable in games since it has taken on a systematic function, which dictates gaming as a cultural practice and the gamer as a form of identity. Because in games the default avatar is the straight, white male it is much more difficult for games "to break out of the straight white male gaze" (p. 75). Even though some games include non-white, female, or queer characters the default avatar remains the straight, white male and thus it has taken the position of the unchallenged norm.[99]

More so, as Salter and Blodgett argue, in games, unlike movies or books, and other media the straight, white male avatar is the only body that is embodied and/or controlled by the player. Even if there are other characters represented in the game, those other bodies are codified and pre-scripted, while the avatar is the sole "agent of change and action in the game" (p. 75). As such, players take on primarily the identity of a straight, white male whose male gaze is the default and privileged mode of being in the game. This becomes more apparent if one looks more closely at the oversexualised visual representation of the female bodies in games. Male bodies may also be represented to unrealistic standards, but the difference, as Salter and

[98] A line of thought that is further analysed by Kaplan (2012), when she argues that the male gaze obliterates femaleness altogether and makes it impossible for women viewers not to perform a male gaze themselves or identify with the woman on screen objectifying then themselves.

[99] In a survey regarding gender representation in games from 2015 to 2019 it is shown that female-only protagonists remain steadily below 10% of the games presented at E3, one of the largest if not the largest gaming expo, each respective year (Sarkeesian and Petit 2019). It is true that progressively games have included multiple options depending on the preference of the player, meaning that many games offer the choice of more than one playable character or give the players the ability to custom make their avatars. In 2019 the multiple options games have reached 66%. That being said, the multiple option takes once more the male avatar as the default, to which the other avatars function as an addition if not an afterthought (Sarkeesian 2013b).

Blodgett put it, is that “they are not sexualized for a desiring gaze but instead offered as bodies for habitation” (p. 87).[100]

Instead, as Michelle Clough (2017) suggests, games benefit when they bend the rules of the male gaze and allow for a much more sensual and sentimental perception of the game world, which eventually caters to more nuanced and queer engagement with the game in general and its romantic content in particular. Showing romance scenes as a reward to the male gaze in the same fashion since the days of the coin-ups misrepresents a medium that, as we saw in the previous chapter, can engage the player in many more complex and rich ways.[101] As we discussed in chapter seven, romances may represent a codified love but the codification itself plays an important role in the experience it offers. In the same way that Radway (1991) found that romance readers do not appreciate a “man’s type of book,” games can incorporate romance without the need to perpetuate sexist and non-inclusive practices. Actually, their content benefits when they refrain from doing so. Yet more than that, as I argue in the following section, games can eventually facilitate the experience of love before discourse and codification because they constitute social spaces of lived, and not only representational, spatial practices.

9.4. Romantic Gaming

[100] The authors shed light to how this default identity of gamers can lead to sexist and misogynistic behaviour outside the games themselves, as it was the case with Gamergate. The hate campaign started as a single case against indie game designer Zoe Quinn by her ex-boyfriend. Quickly, it escalated to multiple targets, including Anita Sarkeesian and other feminist game designers and critics: “Gamergate represents players who have for years been playing as marginalised victims of others (from aliens to zombies) with the expectation that victory can be won by destroying the other” (p. 93). For the straight, white male gamer there is no other modus operandi than fighting forward until they get what they justifiably deserve, in many cases an unrealistically sexy female body with no other agency and/or voice. This argument is taken even further in the work of Megan Condis (2018) about gaming masculinity. Condis draws connections between the hashtag-based movement #GamerGate and other enemies of feminism outside the gaming community per se, the so-called MRA groups, Men’s Rights Movement.

[101] Sullivan et al. in their paper “Crafting is So Hardcore: Masculinized Making in Gaming Representations of Labor” (2018) argue that game mechanics allotted to fighting resemble much more closely the creative process of crafting than crafting mechanics themselves. They support that this is because crafting is associated with “reproductive, feminised labour and therefore devalued” (p. 1), whereas fighting is a “stats-driven” masculine process. Indeed, Doane (1987) makes the connection between crafting and the role of women in relation to love, when she argues that crafting requires patience and waiting for one’s love is considered a woman’s trait: it is the woman who has the time to wait, the woman who has the time to invest in love” (p. 109). This is related to love’s representation more clearly when Barthes correlates waiting as a textual practice in the form of weaving, in particular the weaving woman and the absent man, echoing the romance narratives of chapter two: “The other is in a condition of perpetual departure, of journeying. Historically, the discourse of absence is carried on by the Woman: Woman is sedentary, Man hunts, journeys; Woman is faithful (she waits), man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises). It is Woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction, for she has time to do so; she weaves and she sings; the Spinning Songs express both immobility (by the hum of the Wheel) and absence (far away, rhythms of travel, sea surges, cavalcades)” (1987, pp. 13-14). As Doane notes: “Although waiting is not a "proper" subject of narrative, it can potentially be productive of narrative. It is interesting that Barthes' metonymic chain here moves from absence to waiting to weaving and spinning” (1987, p. 109). Equally, crafting is not a “proper” subject of play, at least it is not considered one, but as Sullivan et al. (2018) suggest, it can be conducive to play. If then crafting and waiting is a narrative associated with a woman in love, allowing games proper crafting mechanics will enable a better implementation of love narratives as well.

Johan Huizinga in his book *Homo Ludens* (1949), in which he examines play as culture, draws resemblances between games and mystical rites coining the famous term magic circle. For Huizinga, games are separate from real life and bestow upon their participants a mystical essence, rupture as he calls it, that is make-belief but at the same time taken extremely seriously.[102] Most aptly, Huizinga supports that participating in a game has no other purpose than the game itself; in other words, it is not what waits at the end of the game that matters but the participation, this certain ludic significance that is only possible through playing, in ludere. It is the illusion that people seek in games.

Huizinga's understanding of play as separate from real life is heavily influenced by his treatise on medieval games. As we saw in chapter two, Huizinga (1987) argued that medieval games were constructed as representational spaces with certain formulations to provide to their participants the illusion of romance and romantic love: the overcoming of obstacles to win the woman they loved. In this regard, a game should by default contain a fictional element while following this regime of obstacles and rules that codified this practice. Digital games, however, can go beyond this limiting paradigm because they do not need the player's make-believe to sustain an illusion and they can invite for many more spatial practices than a strict achievement economy.

As Calleja (2011) states, the concept of the magic circle by Huizinga is still very prominent in the field of game studies.[103] As such, it has shaped a lot how games are researched and analysed as discourse. Interestingly enough, Zimmerman (2004) at the GCD conference discussed in chapter two, pointed out that he had specifically asked the game designers of his panel to come up with a concept for a "bona fide game" (00:05:41) and not an interactive story. He did not provide a distinction between the two, commenting instead "whatever that might mean to each of them" (00:05:42 – 00:05:44). This may seem like a creative ambiguity, yet it is not as open to interpretation as one might assume. For one, Zimmerman already sets a dichotomy by differentiating between a game and an interactive story. This can allude to the ludology versus narratology discussions that still raged at the time, namely if games are stories or not. The debate has toned

[102] It is worth noting that Huizinga equates the magic circle of play also with the court of law. This notion can be traced back to romantic love as well. Law was shaped according to romantic love in the famous love trials of Marie of Champagne who provided rulings on the proper etiquette for lovers, e.g. what gifts lovers could give each other and whether romantic love was to be found between spouses – it was not (Yalom 2012). Marie's judgments gave shape to the art of courtly love, which is described as a set of guidelines in Capellanus' (1960) homonymous book, see also "Marie de Champagne and Eleanor of Aquitaine: A Relationship reexamined" (McCash 1979).
[103] In particular, it was Calleja (2007) who first made the connection between Huizinga's concept of the magic circle and his earlier work about Middle Ages. However, he did not expand on the romantic love aspects of this.

down since then with concessions from both positions reaching a more or less unanimous consensus that games are not stories per se but some games do tell stories (Eskelinen 2012).[104]

Instead, to better understand why Zimmerman felt the need to make this distinction one should visit his own definition of what a game is: "A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, p. 93). What is of interest to note is that in Salen and Zimmerman's perusal of different definitions of games, two terms and variations thereof keep resurfacing: goals and rules. Synoptically, games are usually defined as containing at least one goal, which the player strives to achieve by mastering the game's rules; for example, in chess, the goal is to win by manipulating the pieces in certain ways ordained by the rules.

This supposedly creates the challenge of incorporating love in games, according to most theorists concerned with love in games. As I argued, however, while love may indeed be an ineffable sentiment, romance is most certainly not. It is highly codified and designed. More than that, it promises that if one follows the rules they would find love, romantic love that is. Historically, romance was indeed the recounting of an experience of a challenge; a transformation of desire due to the code of chivalry conduct. Medieval games were designed to allow for the recreation of such an experience in accordance with the chivalrous prescripts which, as we saw in chapter two, were inexorably associated with love. This understanding of games was later preserved in Huizinga's notion of what a game is and as a result, games that aspire to reproduce the experience of romantic love survive to this day. The historical connection may have been forgotten but it is still there. The manner in which we institutionally design, play, and study games remains heavily influenced by the understanding of medieval games, which were romantic games, games affording first and foremost the experience of romantic love. This then shows that games do not actually challenge the experience of romantic love, they rather facilitate it. Instead, it is the concept of romantic love that has forced on games the prerequisites of challenge, achievement, and reward.

Calleja and Aarseth (2015) have, in fact, examined the two most prominent definitions for digital games at the time of their writing: Salen and Zimmerman's (2004) and Juul's (2005). They have proceeded to underline their limitations, specifically their undisputed inclusion of quantifiable outcomes and rules. Regarding the first aspect, which is connected to a win or lose situation, they claim that games do not always have quantifiable outcomes; for example, *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011), which does not offer a strict beginning and an end. Also, Calleja and Aarseth (2015) point out that in many games which do have a beginning and an end these function as a narrative trajectory, which is not a quantifiable outcome but a storytelling device

[104] In his own words: "[…] games are not narratives or stories (although they may include, adapt and embed elements of them)" (p. 235).

across media; a scripted storyline that in some games, like *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), the player can optionally avoid or follow.

The second misconception they focus on is that a rule is not a "homogenous and straightforward concept, but conceals a number of disparate elements" (Calleja and Aarseth 2015, p. 4). Instead, there can be different sets of rules according to the activities a player engages with at a particular moment in a game. In the *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar North 2008), which they use as an example, they show that the player can play sub-games, which have separate rules that may be included in the original game, but they are only activated when the player decides to play these sub-games. Moreover, they contend that games with single-player and multiplayer modes provide different sets of rules for each mode, which was also the case with Wright's (2004) love game concept discussed in chapter two.

Moreover, Calleja and Aarseth (2015) suggest that some games incorporate conflicting rules. They reference the game *Call of Duty IV* (Infinity Ward 2007), in which co-operative, multiplayer deathmatch rounds force all the players in one team to work together so as to "score as many kills as possible while not giving away kills to the enemy" (Calleja and Aarseth 2015, p. 4). This is a rule of the game and a quantifiable outcome. However, a player may decide that they want to collect more experience points for themselves by shooting people while falling off the tallest building. This is another rule of the game and another quantifiable outcome, which the game allows even though it contradicts the previous rule. As a result, the authors conclude, it becomes apparent that this player plays a different game from all the other members of their team.

Calleja and Aaresth show with their analysis that digital games cannot be nominally defined because one cannot escape the limitation such a definition would provide. Instead, they suggest that "the category of activities and objects that are productively called games evolves and expands in ways that no static, essentialist definition can ever hope to cover" (p. 4). Furthermore, Aarseth and Calleja adopt the stance that games are "not games in and of themselves" (p. 6), but rather they are defined by the perspective of the person engaging with them. In fact, they argue that digital games "are software applications that are designed to afford one or several simultaneous game perspectives" (p. 4).

The value of this view on games lies in the liberation from pedantic definitions and the acceptance of descriptive models like the one Aarseth and Calleja propose at the end of their paper. Moreover, what is equally important in seeing games as ludic perspectives is the separation of the game experience – how the game is perceived by the player – from the game product that facilitates this experience. For them, a game is a "processual perspective" (p. 4) or in Malaby's (2007) words: "Each game is an ongoing process. As it

is played it always contains the potential for generating new practices and new meanings, possibly refiguring the game itself" (p. 102). The experience of games as challenges provided by a code that if overcome then the player is rewarded with a quantifiable outcome is an approach to games rather than an essential feature of theirs.

The romance mechanic is but one experience games provide that follows a historical tradition of codified love. Simultaneously, romantic gaming is in itself one type of game and gaming experience. To connect this with my argument presented here, games may contain romance as a game process, but the experience of the player with it is not dictated by their mechanics. The player may follow the romance, engage with its codification, and be affected by it or not, but this is a separate experience of how a player can perceive love in a game. Indeed, love and romance are closely connected but when we study love in games we should be conscious of the discrepancies between the two. In the current thesis, we have covered until now how games incorporate romantic love as in the representation of the experience of love. In the following sections, we will see how games may also facilitate the experience of love through playing.

9.5. Play and Game

While, as we saw in previous chapters, games are very good at facilitating romantic love because of their codification as systems, I argue that games also contain the potential of the experience of love as such. I position this double quality of theirs in the difference between play and game as experiences, a difference which I argue can also be traced between love and romance. As explained by Huizinga, play does not have any objective besides play itself: "play is a thing on its own" (1949, p. 3). Indeed, Huizinga treats play as independent from human culture by showing that even animals play. Nevertheless, he treats organised play as the foundation of social formations like the magic circle, the temple, the tribunal, the war battle, etc. So where does the difference lie in? The codification, I argue. I explain that by turning to Caillois's further demarcation of play and games.

Roger Caillois (1961) in *Man, Play, and Games* follows on Huizinga's thought and expands on it. Caillois adopts most of Huizinga's characteristics of play as an activity essentially free, as in not obligatory, separated by specific limits of space and time defined and fixed in advance, with an uncertain course, creating no wealth nor goods, governed by rules that suspend ordinary laws, and finally make-believe, "accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life" (pp. 9-10). However, unlike Huizinga, Caillois recognises two different types of play: ludus and paidia (p. 27). Caillois defines paidia as play infused with improvisation with a total absence of rules. Once this free-spirited play is institutionalised with rules, which gradually become more intricate, sophisticated, and complex, then it is transformed into ludus, a form of play that is completely rule-based. Caillois' paidia and

ludus are positioned on the opposite sides of a spectrum, they constitute play in its absolute, and the different types of play can oscillate from one end to the other. As Caillois points out:

> The first manifestations of paidia have no name" (p. 29), since they are free, improvised ad hoc play, […] but as soon as conventions, techniques, and utensils emerge, the first games as such arise with them: e.g. leapfrog, hide and seek, kite-flying, teetotum, sliding, blindman's buff, and doll-play (ibid.)

Caillois' theory, together with Huizinga's for which it constitutes a continuation, remains one of the most, if not the most, influential philosophy of play (Armstrong 2000; Milam 2000). It continues to be the point of reference of most contemporary takes on play (Rowe 1992; Sutton-Smith 1997; Motte 2009). Indeed, it has been employed by theorists of digital games as well (Juul 2003; Salen and Zimmerman 2004). Nonetheless, Caillois' theory is not without its faults. Its most problematic point is that it segregates games and play from real life in terms of space and time. In that, Caillois follows Huizinga's claim of the magic circle.

The trouble with the magic circle is that it bestows upon games an ontological capacity of segregating life, time, and space. As critics against both Huizinga's and Caillois' views have argued (Ehrmann et al. 1968; Motte 2009; Calleja 2012), play does not work like that. When a game is played, this activity is part of everyday life by means of both time and space. Games are not something separated from life, but a part of it. In turn, they formulate life's consistency, since reality is not something stable but morphed by its various practices, one of which is games. Indeed, games belong to the repertoire of human experiences and activities and they cannot be distinguished from real life.

Rather as Henricks (2010) points out, even though he finds this criticism against Caillois and Huizinga excessive, it is the players who, while playing, agree to perceive time and space differently than when not playing. It is then a matter of perception, which makes this segregation a subject matter of phenomenology instead of ontology. As Henricks observes, it is this ludic attitude, this "sportsmanship" as he calls it (p. 174), which creates players and games and not the other way around.[105] This is a very important distinction to show that games are not already conceived spaces that the moment a person enters or encounters is transformed into a player. On the contrary, it is the intention of the person that allows games and play to form. The difference is that games offer predetermined experiences while play is an impromptu relation to the world.

Equally, the challenge of love in games, as was shown until now, is that most games preconfigure a spatial practice that corresponds to a limited interpretation of it. Nonetheless, games as spaces can invite many

[105] Similarly, Calleja (expected publication 2021) understands playing as a mode of being in the world.

different spatial practices and the hegemonic paradigm is simply that; an example out of many. Indeed, since the more spatial practices a game space affords the more it acquires the quality of worldness (Klastrup 2003), opening up the love paradigm to include other practices enables all the more gameness, allowing for practices even beyond the conceptualisation of the original design.

9.6. Love Play

An important concept that will help us connect the theory of play with the spatial experience of love is Lefebvre's production of space. Lefebvre was a theorist repeatedly preoccupied with space.[106] His major contribution to the field was crystallised in his work *The Production of Space* (1991). In it, the French philosopher understands space as a matter of perception and experience and not as a static object. Lefebvre (1991) builds on Heideggerian philosophy to differentiate space into the space of Euclid or Descartes, which is the space we conceive when we stop to think about it, and the lived space of the human experience. Lefebvre takes this notion further by arguing that people do not simply live in space and think of space but also shape and mould it. For Lefebvre, space is not an a priori container that people come to perceive and inhabit. Instead, they produce it by experiencing it.

Lefebvre takes this notion of production from the Marxist rationale. This is why he sees the production of space as inexorably political. He explains that the production of space is mainly regulated by agents of power, namely, society and institutions which politicise space. As Lefebvre argues, our experience of space is depended on a spatial economy, meaning how space is designed to be perceived by the hegemonic institutions. For Lefebvre, human space is always social space and social space is not free from conventions but rather it is shaped in accordance with them. We produce space by experiencing it but our experience is dependent on the society we participate in, both in its abstract and in its cultural-specific dimension.

Equally, when we play we produce space according to social conventions. We play basketball and follow the movements and rules of basketball, we play backgammon and shape the board as per pre-existing formations, or we even pretend we are a knight going on an adventure to save the lady we love. The physical design of the space we play does not matter as much. It facilitates our experience but it is through the intention and practice of playing that we produce our space. Yet play has a capacity that distinguishes it from other practices. It can be completely subject to social conventions and at the same time surpass them in unexpected and novel ways. This is where Caillois' ludus and paidia fit. Paidia is playing for playing's sake while ludus is playing adhering to social conventions, as Caillois would have it.

[106] See for example his works: *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (2013), *Toward an Architecture of Enjoyment* (2014), and *Writing on Cities* (1996).

A game that incorporates romantic love provides for a preexisting psychological need in accordance with the social paradigm, as already discussed in previous chapters, especially chapters 5 and 6. But play as paidia precedes convention and this can be a way that games can afford love as well. In digital games specifically, the game design might follow a manifestation of a codified representation of love, in which the pleasure attained is that of a challenge. At the same time, however, the player may transgress the original design by freely playing in ways that surpass this original design. The ability of digital games to provide experiences beyond representation facilitates love that is uncontaminated by convention. It is true that, as Caillois explained, this free form play cannot be sustained for long since sooner or later social conventions inform our experience. Yet this process is dynamic so the player can continuously be affected and affect the system with this paidiaic intention.

How does then love fit with play? As we saw, romantic love is a promise of specific pleasure obtained by challenge and adherence to the cultural signification, society's code that is. In this sense, it coincides with ludus which transforms a natural practice into a design for a certain achievement, psychological need, and pleasure. Just as ludus is subject to and product of social conventions but originates from a self-contained predisposition free from aims and means, I argue that what we culturally identify as romantic love is equally a social formation of a relation to the world, more specifically desire. Desire, like play, in the beginning, is indistinguishable and indiscernible. The canon infuses it with certain features that provide the means of the unattainable infantile satisfaction and create the expectations of the fantasy and love as salvation.

Yet games have the ability to go beyond mere mimesis to what Huizinga (1938) calls methectic: "The rite produces the effect which is then not so much shown figuratively as actually reproduced in the action" (p. 15). In games, the player can go beyond playing as someone experiencing romantic love to someone experiencing love because of playing.[107] Desire, like play, sooner or later leads to attachment; to conformity to the social signification of the hegemonic practices. Yet play, having no propriety and no prescripts (Sicart 2014; Malaby 2007), remains in its ambivalence, like love, a valid alternative. Indeed, Eugen Fink coincides or correlates play with love: "Play is a fundamental phenomenon of existence, just as primordial and independent as death, love, work and ruling, but it is not directed, as with the other fundamental phenomena,

[107] Deriving from the Greek work methexis, methectic means to participate in a spectacle, not as a performer but as part of the audience, in theatre originally (Azouz 2015). In that, its emotional effect is based on experiencing a designed spectacle with physical participation. Games as participatory enactments of love's representation become methectic. As Kimberly Benston describes: "Spiritually and technically, this movement is one from mimesis, or representation (whether of condition, ideology, or character), to methexis, or communal "helping-out" of the action by all assembled. It is a process that could be alternatively described as a shift from display, the spectacle observed, to rite, the event which dissolves traditional divisions between actor and spectator, self and other, enacted text and material context" (2000, pp. 28-29).

by a collective striving for the final purpose" (2016 p. 21). As Möring contends when discussing love in his doctoral thesis:

> Fink seems to be saying that play does not only represent the phenomena of death, love, struggle and so on, but that these phenomena are all contained in play. Existential phenomena are repeated in play, like a world in a world or a life in a life. In other words, it can only represent these phenomena by repeating them in itself (2013, p. 118).

As Möring informs us, Fink acknowledges in playing an inherent ability to represent experience. Especially, an experience like love that, just like playing, can have a purpose or simply be a mode of being. Biologically love does indeed have a final purpose as we saw in chapter four. But psychologically love can be an experience in itself. This experience can be a structured fantasy ordained by rules just as ludus or it can be free-form ambivalence, something akin to paidia. As such, when we play we experience a mode of being which is before and beyond signification and conformity, or rather it can oscillate from one end, absolute freedom, to the other, absolute formation. In that, playing is a way to show how love can be achieved and experienced outside the popular canon. Play helps us imagine what non-formulaic love is about; what it entails as pleasure and affective relation.

Summary

In this chapter, building further on the player involvement model, I focused on how love is represented in games as a matter of social preconceptions that far surpass games as a medium. I understood shared involvement at macrolevel in terms of labour, male gaze, and iterative design. I argued that this preconditioning forces on games practices that are toxic and sexist, which, however, do not derive from games or their codification but are influenced by how we represent love in the popular paradigm as a whole. Employing theory of play, I also showed that digital games can invite both romance and love. They can implement romantic love due to their codification as a preconfigured representation of love aiming at a specific vicarious experience of a psychological need in accordance with society's prescripts. At the same time, games can also invite the experience of love as a free-form spatial practice. Just like game is the structured form of playing, romantic love is the structured form of loving. In the same way that digital games can incorporate both gaming and playing as practices, they can also facilitate romantic love and love. The two are closely connected but distinct. What matters is that the digital game is perceived as a social space of communication. In this capacity, digital games provide experiences beyond structure and codification that may transgress the limitations of their materiality.

Chapter 10

In the Mood for Love

Love is not fashionable any more, the poets have killed it.
They wrote so much about it that nobody believed them.
Oscar Wilde

Leino (2015) in "I know your type, you are a player: Suspended Fulfillment in Fallout: New Vegas" discusses three types of love that can be afforded in video games. He calls those three types of love vicarious love, fictional love, and love in bad faith. According to him, vicarious love is felt by the player when they see themselves as distanced from the romantic relationship, which takes place between the avatar and the NPC. Fictional love, on the other hand, is when the player feels romantic attraction for an NPC while being aware of the NPC's fictionality, namely that they are not real so the only romantic relationship the player can have with them is in the context of role-playing. The last type of game love is defined by Leino as love in bad faith, which means that the player refuses to acknowledge the fictionality of the NPC by refraining from participating in in-game actions that will shatter their illusion that there never can be a real romantic relationship between the player and the NPC.

Using *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment 2010) as his example Leino describes how he purposefully avoided interacting with the NPC Rose of Sharon Cassidy during his playthrough so as to sustain the illusion of having the possibility of a real romantic affair with her. He compares his experience to that argued by Sartre as bad faith. He contends that this experience of romantic love is the closest to a real relationship a player can have in a video game and that it is a medium-specific experience different from other media, which offer de facto fictional romances: "Game love in bad faith is clearly distinguished from the love stories of narrative media, as in its fragility and impossibility of fulfillment it resembles love as we know it from everyday life" (Leino 2015, p. 222). He argues that even love in bad faith sooner or later is transformed to vicarious or fictional love, exactly because it is very fragile: a single interaction with the game system can potentially disrupt this experience in the same way that bad faith cannot be sustained for long in the physical world as well.

Notwithstanding the different experiences of romantic love the player can have in games, Leino's argument stems from the same fundamental premise: there can never be an authentic romantic love relationship for the player with an in-game entity. For Leino, this is due to the ontic difference between the player and the NPC. This reality is what the player tries to forget when they are acting in bad faith. But what exactly is

this ontic difference? Leino connects it with the NPC's, Cassidy's in this case, fictionality. As a fictional character, Cassidy has certain limitations, which deny the player the romantic fulfillment of their attraction to Cassidy or any other NPC: "The knowledge of Cass as less than real implies knowledge of the impossibility of fulfillment and as such is prone to killing the uncertainty characteristic to romantic attraction, hence revealing the feelings of anticipation as plain pretense" (p. 219).

Leino pinpoints the fictionality of the NPCs in the same way that Aarseth talks about the difference between virtual and fictional in relation to doors in digital games. Aarseth (2007) argues that in digital games there are some doors that can be opened, which are then virtual, and some that are only decorative, which are fictional. Following the same rationale, Leino contends that NPCs are both virtual and fictional: in some aspects, they can be interacted with so that makes them virtual while in some others they cannot so they are fictional. In the player's falling in love with them, they are fictional because, according to Leino, the player cannot fulfill their romantic attachment with them. In this sense, he calls this type of love fictional, since it is formed with a fictional character. Leino does not call the emotion experienced by the player fictional but only the object of the player's affection: "qualities of emotions do not necessarily have anything to do with the qualities of the actually existing object of the emotion" (2015, p. 217).

Thus, Leino concludes that a person can fall in love with a fictional entity: "love in bad faith is a genuine first-person experience of attraction" (p. 222). Nevertheless, it cannot be an authentic romantic love because if a person knows that they are in love with a fictional being then they are aware that their love can never be fulfilled. This claim demands closer consideration. It is argued that it surpasses Leino's game example and can be examined for drawing conclusions for human-player to NPC romantic interactions in single-player, avatarial games in general. Avatarial is understood in the sense of a game that includes a visible, in whole or in part, body which is controlled by the player and an implied, most of the times at least, second body, which constitutes the camera body; this second body follows the playable character and can be directly controlled by the player or not (Rehak 2003, p. 109).

How exactly does the fictionality of the NPCs in such games not allow the fulfilment of authentic romantic love? Leino does not go into detail when it comes to this; the NPCs' inability to have a romantic relationship is explained by their fictionality. Here, the ontic difference between the real player and the fictional NPC is further analyzed. The argument revolves around two main anchors: one is the embodiment and the other is intentionality. I specifically argue that these two aspects constitute the NPC's fictionality when it comes to romantic love and as such challenge the ability of games to offer authentic romantic love experiences between a player and an NPC.

10.1. Physicality and Embodiment

The first aspect, embodiment, is arguably the most overt. The player possesses a physical body and the NPC does not. To experience romantic love is most of the time tightly connected with its embodied aspect. As we saw in Chapter 4, romantic love as a physiological system is connected to reproduction and sexuality, therefore physicality constitutes a significant part of its experience (Fischer 1997; Meyer et al. 2011; Jones 1996). At the same time, the poetics of romantic love we covered in Chapter 3 speak of a different story. Platonic love is a whole attitude towards love, in which physicality is refused (Price 1981). Romantic love as a literary genre is founded in works, in which "love did not have as its aim either carnal pleasure or reproduction" (Paz 1995, p. 90). This becomes more prominent in the Romantic era, during which love is treated in the duality of the beautiful and the sublime (Eldridge 2001).

Nevertheless, as Mario Praz (1951) notices, the sublimity of the romantic object of desire is an experience infused with terror, pain, and mortality all of which constitute a testimony to one's own physical body. In the same fashion, platonic love does not negate the physicality of lovers. The lovers choose not to contemplate the physical traits of their relationship because they are very well aware that they are there. The possibility of platonic love turning into physical is always present (Secomb 2007). Instead, the NPC's physicality is never a given. It is not that the player chooses not to notice the physicality of the NPC but rather the player must refrain from thinking that the NPC is not a physical being so as to retain as much as possible the illusion of a romance. This is indeed an ontological difference between the physical player and the virtual love interest. Yet does this affect the perception of the NPCs by the player as embodied agents they can fall in love with? I argue that human players indeed perceive virtual characters as embodied agents due to embodied perception.

Following a cognitive neuroscience perspective, Morrison and Ziemke (2005) examine how human players relate to computer game characters. They argue that when we play a video game our brains transform figures on a flat screen to embodied characters. As they explain, this is due to the mechanism of visuo-affective mappings, which "transform visual information about someone else's emotional state into similar emotional dispositions of our own" (p. 73). Visuo-affective mappings compliment the already known visuomotor mappings "when objects in the coordinate system of external space are transformed into a coordinate system of which the body and its effectors (e.g. hands, arms) are at the center," and visuotactile mappings "in which visual and touch information become integrated into the brain's representational body schema" (p. 74).

Gallese (2005) explains in more detail the neuroscientific workings of embodied perception. We perceive the space surrounding our body, our peripersonal space, the space which our body can act upon and affect, in a different fashion than the extrapersonal space. We do not visually code peripersonal space using a

Cartesian or another geometrical system. Instead, our peripersonal space is a motor space, a space which we perceive by a "simulated motor action directed towards a particular spatial location" (p. 26). Our body moves in the space it acts in and not in a predefined space of coordinates. Experiments further support these findings by showing that in the case of peripersonal space the spatial location of an object perceived by brain neurons has dynamic properties according to the change in time because it is a motor space and hence susceptive to time. According to Gallese, action and spatial awareness are connected: "Vision, sound, and action are parts of an integrated system; the sight of an object at a given location, or the sound it produces, automatically triggers a "plan" for a specific action directed toward that location" (p. 27). This plan, according to him, is a "simulated potential action" (ibid). This means that we perceive our peripersonal space by what action plans it can sustain.

As Gallese remarks: "it is interesting to note the closeness of the view emerging from single neuron recordings, and the philosophical perspective offered by phenomenological philosophers on space perception" (p. 27). Indeed, phenomenological space connects perception with movement; from Husserl and Heidegger to Gadamer, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (Zahavi 2002). Building on Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty (1962) set perception as the means by which we experience our world. According to his theory, we are by default subjects of perception and intentionality, intended actions that is, and this is how we experience existence, which is being in the world. He has argued that we perceive our world around us by the tasks we perform with our body. Our phenomenal body structures our world in accordance with its intentional relations with the objects around it. People perceive the world not as an ideal concept, but as a process of making meaning of their bodily intentions; their world exists based on their bodily actions. As a result, the body perceives both the world functioning as a subject and at the same time the body itself as the object of this making meaning process.

This body is not the fixed body of human anatomy. It is a lived body that has the ability to expand and extend. Merleau-Ponty gives an example of this in the walking stick of a blind man. For the blind man, Merleau-Ponty concludes, the stick is now part of his body, thus his body does not stop at his hand anymore but rather at the end of his stick providing him with expanded intentionality and perception of being. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, "the blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself" (p. 165). The same applies to instruments and tools. Merleau-Ponty describes how when a secretary masters the blind system of writing on a typewriter, the typewriter stops being an object for her body, but instead constitutes an extension of her bodily abilities that affords a novel intentionality and perception: "To get used to a hat, a car or a stick is to be transplanted into them, or conversely, to incorporate them into the bulk of our own body" (p. 166). Then the stick and the typewriter are no longer

perceived objects but instruments that augment our perception: "a bodily auxiliary, an extension of the bodily synthesis" (p. 176).

Applying Merleau-Ponty's theory to video games, Rune Klevjer (2012) argues that the same workings are at play when we experience a game world. According to him, the avatars in games function as extensions of the players' body that allow them to extend their own bodies inside the screen. He particularly calls them "proxies" of the physical body inside the game world, since when the player controls an avatar the avatar is not any more an object on itself but an extension of the body of the player on screen (p. 30). Klevjer describes the control of avatars like controlling a marionette, through which the bodily actions of the player are extended to the screen, on the environment of the marionette, enabling the player to inhabit by proxy the avatar's world.

For Klevjer, the in-screen extension demands an alteration of materiality that is essentially unique. When Merleau-Ponty says that for the blind man his body used to be here, where his fingers end, but with his stick his body is now there, at the point of his stick, both here and there reside in the same physical world. That is not the case with digital games. Klevjer contends that this is where the simulation of digital games lies; in the conceit of the continuation of tangibility. Nevertheless, I argue that this pretence of materiality does not affect the extension of the body, since this extension is a matter of perception. After all, although Merleau-Ponty had not anticipated a phenomenon like digital games, his theory is not limited by physicality: "The word 'here' applied to my body does not refer to a determinate position in relation to other positions or to external coordinates, but the laying down of the first co-ordinates, the anchoring of the active body in an object, the situation of the body in face of its tasks" (1962, p. 115).[108]

Merleau-Ponty may have conceived his theory based on the physical world, yet he did not consider it a prerequisite. On the contrary, it is the ability to manipulate one's body according to one's own intentions that attributes the state of worldness to the surrounding environment: "I can, therefore, take my place, through the medium of my body as the potential source of a certain number of familiar actions, in my environment conceived as a set of manipulanda" (p. 120). Thus, if we can act upon an environment to achieve certain tasks, then we immediately experience this environment as our world. We only need a body to *anchor upon* objects within this environment. In that sense, digital games offer the potentiality of worlds the player can inhabit, as they are environments the player can perform actions in. The fact that digital

[108]Heidegger's term would be *Geworfenheit*, being thrown into the world (1967, 135). For a more comprehensive application of the term to digital games see Vella and Gualeni (2019).

games are images on a flat-screen makes no difference to our perception. Since we can act on this space we perceive it as our peripersonal space, the space of our embodied actions.

This argument is supported by the neuroscientific application of Morrison and Ziemke mentioned before. They contend that our perception works the same way when we perform tasks in our physical world and "when we navigate through apparent positions in a game world, using the joystick to act upon objects within the game world as if our veridical hands were actually in that world's space" (Morrison and Ziemke 2005, p. 74). How does this relate to the player's treating NPCs as embodied agents? This is explained by the visuoaffective mappings referenced by Morrison and Ziemke, which are activated when we experience the emotional responses of others, in a virtual or the physical world. The cognitive workings of this are discussed in the following section.

10.2. Agents of Embodiment

Our embodied perception described above is equally responsible for our perception of other bodies as intentional beings, namely agents of intended actions. This again is connected with our body schema described by Gallese (2005). Our social coexistence demands that we are able to interpret the goals and intentions of the other bodies we share our environment with. This is a useful survival skill that we are able to achieve by relying once more on the simulation model we use to perceive our own movement and space. In other words, when we see someone performing an action our respective motor schema is activated as if we are the ones performing this action (Gibbs 2005, p. 35). By this translation of third-person observation to first-person perspective, we can apply to this action the goals and intentions we associate with this particular motor schema (Gallese 2005, p. 35). In this capacity, we perceive the embodied agents around us not simply as bodies performing actions but, as Gibbs contends, as: "volitional agents capable of entertaining, similarly to us, an agentive intentional relation to the world" (p. 35-36). As such the other body becomes more than a representational system of behaviors, it becomes a person; or in phenomenological terms, the other does not merely have a body but they are a body, namely an "embodied subjectivity" (Zahavi 2007).

Research has shown that humans and humanoids possess bimodal neurons called mirror neurons which help them perceive the actions of others as their own actions and thus understand them: "Action observation causes in the observer the automatic simulated re-enactment of the same action" (Gallese 2005, p. 32). This is true not only when humans perceive the actions of others but also their emotional responses: "We are not alienated from the actions, emotions, and sensations of others, because we entertain a much richer and affectively nuanced perspective of what other individuals do, experience, and feel" (p. 31). For example, there is a common activation in our brains related to pain, disgust, touch, and fear when we both feel the

emotions and see others experiencing them (Morrison and Ziemke 2005, p. 76). What is of particular importance for the current argument is that based on neuroimaging studies the brain area related to spatial cognition "did *not* differ between viewing agents in the real and virtual worlds" (p. 74). That means that even though real and virtual worlds activate different networks of the brain, probably because of the "differences in the visual realism of the scenes" (p. 74), our perception of others as embodied agents of enactment and emotional reactions does not differentiate between materialites.

Still, our brain system exhibits more intricate nuances. An fMRI study performed by Buccino et al. (2004) found that the mirror system responses of human participants did not differ significantly when they watched other humans, dogs, and monkeys biting food. Different networks were activated when the same subjects observed the objects performing activities that were species-specific: talking, barking, and lip-smacking respectively. It seems that our human brains tend to understand embodiment based on tasks that they have associated with their own embodiment, tasks that they perform with their own body. Biting food for a dog and a monkey is a motor-scheme similar to how humans bite their food. Instead, humans do not bark nor smack their lips.

Hence, we recognise as embodied an agent that manipulates their bodies in a similar fashion as we do, no matter if this agent shares our ontology. We perceive them as such because this is how we can relate to them, by bringing along our own perception and consciousness, which are bound by our embodiment and physicality. It is in this capacity that I can perceive the consciousness of the others. In Merleau-Ponty's words: "The other consciousness can be deduced only if the emotional expressions of others are compared and identified with mine, and precise correlations recognised between my physical behavior and my 'psychic events'" (1962, p. 410). How this transformation works depends on our biology, culture, and personal experience (Gibbs 2005). It is highly influenced by the degree of expertise of the subject on the performed action. Familiarity helps people translate bodily movements and emotional responses of others better (Gallese 2005). The general direction is, however, that we are far more likely to anthropomorphise other agents than the other way around (Basu Thakur and Dickstein 2018; Turner 2017; Roffe and Stark 2015). We simply look for agents that resemble us everywhere because this is how we perceive our world. It is much easier for us; it is perception in the first instance.

Understandably, realism plays an important factor in facilitating our perception of designed others as embodied agents. Rigid movement of a robot arm causes less identification with one's own arm movement (Morrison and Ziemke 2005, p. 77). Morrison and Ziemke make that connection to videogames: "It is intuitively obvious that the realism of display would play a part in the extent to which the user becomes engaged in the game world" (ibid). To this one can also add consistency as an important element of

engagement. At the same time, not only does our perception influence virtual agents but virtual agents influence our perception in turn (ibid). In the same fashion that our body can be augmented and/or added upon by tools, our constant exposure to virtuality can broaden our perception to include manifestations of embodiment that go beyond our physical world.[109]

Anna Gibbs makes this connection through affect theory and mimesis. In chapter five, we covered Girard's concept of mimetic desire. According to this notion, humans learn desire by mimicking other agents around them. This, as Girard argued, concerns fictional others as much as real ones. Gibbs makes a similar argument by connecting affect theory, which we covered in chapters seven and eight, with embodied perception. In "Sympathy, Synchrony, and Mimetic Communication," Gibbs concerns herself with affect as contagion, which spreads through mimesis. As she informs us:

> By "mimetic communication" or mimesis, I mean, in the first instance, the corporeally based forms of imitation, both voluntary and involuntary (and on which literary representation ultimately depends). At their most primitive, these involve the visceral level of affect contagion, the "synchrony of facial expressions, vocalizations, postures and movements with those of another person: producing a tendency for those involved "to converge emotionally" (p. 186).

In fact, Gibbs posits that the mirror neurons are responsible for our mimetic relation to others. She shows how mimesis is not simply visual mimicry, but instead "a complex communicative process in which other sensory and affective modalities are centrally involved" (2010, p. 191). Furthering on that, she claims that mimesis is a relation to the world responsible for the formation of self and other. In that, she treats mimesis as distinctively pre-subjective and pre-discursive: "Mimesis, like affect, is not necessarily best thought of as occurring at the level of the individual or of the organism. It is not a property of either subject or object, but a trajectory between both" (p. 194). The stimuli of mimesis are affective, meaning that they need not be cognitively comprehended but bodily perceived.

Gibb's gives the example of the orchid and the wasp. Through sympathetic evolution, a term intermixing the a-parallel evolution by Deleuze and Guattari (1988) and Darwin's (1989) motor sympathy, the orchid's morphology has been shaped so as to trick the wasp into believing that it is a female wasp. The scent and texture of the orchids lure the insects in, which they then try to mate with the flower. In their futile attempt to do so, pollen from the orchid sticks to the wasp's body pollinating the flower. As this example shows, mimesis and affect do not need conscious will, at least as we humans understand it. In actuality, mimesis does not even concern the orchid and the wasp as it were. It is rather a mimetic communication between

[109] In the same vein that typography created the typographic man of McLuhan (2011), virtuality may create the virtual human.

the reproductive systems of both wasp and orchid, no matter that the reciprocity is asymmetrical in this case.

This is important to the current discussion because as Gibbs (2010) shows this back and forth transference happens through media as well: “when reading fiction produces new affect states in us, which change not only our body chemistry, but also-and as a result our attitudes and ideas as we shape from narrative a structure of meaning” (p. 193). Therefore, mediated encounters with agents we can fall in love with shape the way we understand love and otherness as well. If this happens in fiction through reading, I argue that in games, which constitute lived and not imagined experiences, the “mimetic contagion” is even greater.

10.3. Embodied Design

To bring this back to romance in digital games, the lack of physicality of NPCs does not deem them de facto fictional as romantic partners to our perception. They may not possess a physical body, but our perception of them allows us to understand them as having a body similar to our own. Verisimilitude is understandably important so as to eventually overcome the effect of the uncanny (Tinwell 2015). What is equally important is how virtual bodies can be perceived by the human player as bodies for love or, more difficult still, as bodies in love. The design, the mechanics, and the narrative can help facilitate or shatter this perception.[110] Kirsch (2013) argues in favour of a human-computer interaction design, which will take an embodied perspective. He specifically argues that embodied cognition in digital design may open ways for us to think in new ways that are now inconceivable.

His rationale follows the principle that our interacting with tools changes the way we both think and perceive the world around us. Referencing neurophysiological, psychological, and neuropsychological research, he contends that the use of tools changes our body schema and our perception of space. This change is manifested despite the ontology or materiality of the tool: “our sense of where our body boundaries are, and what in space we can affect can be altered through telepresence and teleimmersion” (p. 8). In this sense, we can employ digital tools and as such perceive digital space as the space of our action. The digital tools not only allow us to manipulate a materiality beyond our own but “in addition to altering our sense of where our body ends each tool reshapes our “enactive landscape” — the world we see and partly create as active agents” (p. 3). In other words, according to the tool we are using we perform our being in the world, e.g. when one’s holding a pen they experience their world as the accumulation of

[110] One should not forget to pay tribute to voice-overs in games. The fact that the characters we can romance are voiced-over by professional actors helps a lot with our perception of them as real. The voices behind the NPCs we interact with on screen give them feeling, personality, and existence. As a matter of fact, the voice actors of Alistair and Cullen from the Dragon Age series have a big following due to their participation in the game’s production, see for example their interview from Magic City Con in a room full of female fans (OrionOctober 2017).

everything that can be written upon and at the same time since they can perform writing actions with the object they are holding they perceive it as a pen.

The more familiar and capable one becomes with the tool, their perception of the world changes as well. This is a dynamic process of expertise: "the concepts and beliefs we have about the world are grounded in our perceptual-action experience with things, and the more we have tool-mediated experiences the more our understanding of the world is situated in the way we interact through tools" (p. 3). Kirsh borrows this position that people experience their environment by the ways it allows them to interact with it from Gibson, who introduced the term affordances (1966). The more actions we can perform with our bodies the more affordances our environment provides, e.g. if you can juggle you can see an object as affording juggling (Kirsch 2013, p. 3). Gibson did not mention tools in his theory, yet as Kirsch suggests since the world is perceived in relation to the action repertoire of the perceiver, then "with a tool, the action repertoire is increased to include tool-enabled actions, so there ought to be new affordances to perceive" (p. 9).

Kirsh connects perception with goals (p. 10), bridging the gap of Gibsonian exegesis with phenomenology. This leads us to embodied enactment, a definition proposed by Varela et al. (2016) according to which the world is a product of co-creation with an agent when this agent acts in a goal-oriented manner. Kirsh (2013) argues that designers create enactive landscapes: a structure that includes a "set of possibilities that can in principle be brought into being when an agent interacts with an underlying environment while engaged in a task or pursuing a goal" (p. 11). This is not new in game design. Game environments incorporate game objects and/or objectives that afford certain actions the players can perform (McBride-Charpentier 2011; Cardona-Rivera and Young 2013). The added value of embodied cognition, besides providing a solid theoretical and scientific background, is that it explains how humans interpret the behavior of other agents they share this virtual environment with.

As it was argued before, when we see someone performing an action we translate this to as if we were the one performing this action. This is not only a matter of visual perception but of a sensory interpretation in general. More importantly, we not only experience the other person's action as if it were our own but by doing so we apply certain goals, intentions, and sense to this action. This is our way of understanding the behavior of others in our social environment and based on this knowledge we can also predict behavioral patterns that will eventually be executed by others. In digital games, where the other agents inside the game world are designed, if we want the players to perceive NPCs as romantic agents, then they must perform and exhibit romantic intentions in an environment that affords actions we associate with romantic love. The NPCs not only have to look as real as possible; they must allow through their actions, reactions, and interactions with the player and the environment to be perceived as bodies in love.

Grace (2017) explains that the type of shared involvement that games allow between the player and the NPC also affects the player's experience of them. As such, NPCs may afford the experience of romantic love if the player can interact with them romantically. This is not as straightforward as it may sound, however. What does romantic interaction entail? For some games, it is to include game verbs that are culturally associated with romantic love, such as flirting, kissing, hugging, and making love. These are the mechanics used in different variations in the *The Sims* series (2000-2019) for example or in *Singles* (2003-2005).

Here one needs to note that the inclusion of a verb that implies romantic involvement does not solve the challenge as such. Having reviewed a vast corpus of affectionate games, Grace (2017) remarks how popular flirting games make use of the affectionate verbs just like a shooting game; the action of the verb is directed from the player to the NPC yet instead of the player throwing bullets, knives, and punches, they now throw kisses and hugs until they find their target and/or achieve their goal. A similar design is for the player to be collecting points through various in-game actions, which in turn increase the approval of the NPC until the player manages to win them over and/or unlock their romantic story tree path; a design choice used predominantly in dating Sims and otome visual novels, like *Clannad* (2015) and *Hatoful Boyfriend* (2014).

In those approaches, the NPC is a passive object to the player's agency. Such an implementation of romantic love and affection trivialises and simplifies the experience of love, as argued in the previous chapter. Both Khandaker-Kokoris (2015) and Ware (2015) from the previous chapter suggest that randomness is a valid way to make the romance more realistic since then it will not be a challenge with a win or lose scenario. Khandaker-Kokoris, in particular, suggests that romantic love relationships in games should arise organically. She argues that making the mechanics of an NPC falling in love with the player's avatar more random helps depict romantic love in games in a less deterministic manner. She gives the example of *Redshirt* (The Tiniest Shark 2013), a social networking simulation game with a chance factor to its romance mechanics. The player can have platonic relationships with many in-game characters and increase the strength of those platonic relationships with various activities. For each one of these increases, there can be also an increase in the romantic relationship with this NPC based on random probability. This also depends on this particular character's romantic tendency variable, which, as Khandaker-Kokoris (2015) explains, means that some NPCs are "more prone than others to falling for somebody."

The means Ware (2015) proposes for games to overcome the iterative challenge he talked about are to decrease algorithmic representations of love such as meters and point systems, embrace emergent gameplay, eventually allow for procedurally generated romantic content, and once again increase randomness. Actually, Ware admits that this is not real randomness since the algorithm cannot support it;

it will only be perceived by the player as such. However, randomness may have the opposite effect, namely that the player does not get invested in the romance at all. If romance is something beyond one's control, then this is not something that nears the physical experience either. Love indeed may happen or not but at the same time retaining a relationship to a person, romantic or not, does take effort; we need to allocate care, time, and resources to the person we love, as was discussed in chapter nine.

This brings us eventually to the second issue pertaining to the games' challenge in offering an authentic romantic relationship between a player and an NPC, namely the NPCs' lack of intentionality. As it was argued above, NPCs' ontic difference in terms of physicality can be overcome because our perception helps us, if not forces us, to bestow embodiment to any agent that resembles us and shares our enactive space. The game design can facilitate this perception by means of verisimilitude and affording agency and embodiment to NPCs; meaning that the NPCs should be designed as bodies performing tasks in a world on the basis of their own specific goals, means, and intentions.

For romantic love, in particular, NPCs should be designed as intentional romantic interests or partners for the player. This is arguably the biggest tension between the physical player and the virtual NPC because NPCs as designed and coded behavior cannot bear the proof of intentionality for us to perceive them as intentional beings. In this capacity, the inclusion of romantic love in games is inherently challenging because the game must actively create and maintain the illusion that the agents the player interacts with are capable of intention and romantic love for that matter. In the following section, the NPCs' lack of intentionality is further explained by drawing on Sartre's existentialism.

10.4. Existentialist Love

For Leino (2015), authentic romantic love is defined by reciprocity between two free human beings. What does Leino mean with that? Leino treats romantic love under the lens of Sartre's existentialism. Expanding on phenomenology, Sartre (1956) starts from the thesis that being is nothingness, in the sense that there is no one way to be. In actuality, we are not being at all: "Consciousness is a being, the nature of which is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being" (p. 47). Our actions define our conduct but not our being. In this regard, one's existence is constantly in virtuality, i.e. fluidity between modes of being, which are never one's own being. At the same time, one's conduct is highly deterministic in nature by forces beyond one's control.

Sartre differentiates between being and behaving. More precisely, he differentiates between the unconscious deterministic behaviorism of the human beings and the conscious actualization of one's being. In this, he follows Freud's distinction between the id, the unconscious, and the ego, the conscious (p. 50).

For Sartre, we are the ego but not the id, yet this ego is a series of phenomena rather than a fixed totality: I am the ego but I am not the id. I hold no privileged position in relation to my unconscious psyche. I am my own psychic phenomena in so far as I establish them in their conscious reality" (ibid). As a result, ontologically our ego is nothing. We will it to existence by establishing our psychic phenomena in a conscious reality. The pre-existence of the id notwithstanding, one is free to be conscious of their being not being the id despite conducting the behavior dictated by the id. For Sartre, our freedom, despite our predetermined conduct, resides in our consciousness, which realises that our being is nothing.

The same applies to how we perceive the consciousness of the others and how they perceive ours. We perceive their conduct but their consciousness is always absent for us, because it is nothing, a thing in potentia: "It is the object always present as the meaning of all my attitudes and all my conduct – and always absent, for it gives itself to the intuition of another as a perpetual question – still better, as a perpetual freedom" (p. 61). This duality of existence finds its way also in romantic love. Sartre argues that what the lover wants is to essentially capture the consciousness of the other, their freedom that is: "It is certain then that the lover wishes to capture a "consciousness"" (p. 366). It is not the physicality of the other, but rather "it is the Other's freedom as such that we want to get hold of" (p. 367). By that Sartre means that the lover wants to conquer the beloved not because of their psychological determinism. At the same time, the lover does not want a love out of conscious choice alone either: "Who would be satisfied with the words, "I love you because I have freely engaged myself to love you and because I do not wish to go back on my word"" (p. 367).

It is in this human condition of oscillating between the determinism of the id and the nothingness of the being that Sartre sees love finding its expression. In Sartre's love, one does not seek either; they instead seek this contradiction of constant instants: "In love it is not a determinism of the passions which we desire in the Other nor a freedom beyond reach; it is a freedom which plays the role of a determinism of the passions and which is caught in its own role" (p. 367). Or in other words, the beloved must will themselves into being in accordance with the lover or rather for the lover. As existence is willingness into being, in love this willingness must find its limitation on the face of the lover. The lover "wants to be placed beyond the whole system of values posited by the Other and to be the condition of all valorization and the objective foundation of all values" (p. 369).

Love, as Sartre explains it, is not in the world. Instead, it makes the world depending on the beloved, this specific Other. When the lover demands love they do not demand an object to be given: predefined behavior or conscious freedom. They demand an actualisation of being, a particular willingness that is born specifically for them and by its birth it limits the willingness of the beloved as its point of reference and

determination: “I must no longer be seen on the ground of the world as a "this" among other "thises," but the world must be revealed in terms of me” (p. 369). Cleary sums Sartre’s take on love by suggesting that “loving is intentional: it is love of and sparked by someone” (2015, p. 112). In this understanding of love, loving is a free action. Anything else would make the beloved “no more than a robot” (p. 106).

Love in this existential context poses indeed a significant challenge when it comes to mediating romantic love in digital games. NPC’s conduct of falling in love is aimed towards a generic other and not the player in their individuality. In actuality, in most digital games the player has no problem understanding that an NPC is in love. Their coded behavior is quite clear following the paradigm of other romantic love mediations or simulating human psychology and behavior as we know it. The challenge is to show the player that an NPC is in love with *them*; that their coded behavior is not to exhibit a set of actions that the player will perceive as their having fallen in love but as their having fallen in love with the player in their unique subjectivity.

Leino’s ontic difference between player and NPC is, in fact, this lack of freedom that plagues the NPC. The NPC cannot will itself into being in love. It may conduct itself as a person in love would, yet this conduct remains strictly that: conduct and not being. In this regard, the NPC remains always a coded behavior but of a different determinism than that of the human player. More importantly, the NPC does not possess the means to will the specific otherness constituted in the player. The NPC is designed to fall in love with a generic other. On the other hand, the player themselves cannot freely choose the actualisation of their being. In order to experience the love offered by the game, they need to execute preconfigured commands. If they do not, then their own willingness results in nothing. In the context of games, Sartre’s nothingness takes on a different or added meaning. It is not the nothingness in the sense of infinite possibility. It is the nothingness of the absolute non-existence.

In the game *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) for example, if the player does not do A, then the NPC will not do B, no matter what. The player must necessarily perform certain in-game actions so as to activate the command for the NPC to fall in love. It is then argued that the real challenge games need to address when mediating love is to conceal from the player this mechanistic approach that corresponds to the NPC doing B no matter who performs A. In other words, in games and in any context that a human agent perceives coded behavior the challenge is for the system to make the human agent perceive this behavior as caused by and directed exclusively to this individual human.

10.5. Intentional Being

How does this approach account for players who argue that they feel something akin to romantic love with an NPC? Waern (2015) recounts fora entries by people describing their *Dragon Age: Origins* experience. As Waern references, players detail their romance experience as having fallen in love with characters that the players themselves call non-real. They even recount instances of jealousy when they watch pictures and videos of their chosen beloved with other players' avatars online. There are people who feel guilty when they romance one character while being in an established relationship with another character. The same happens when they choose to romance a different character in their second playthrough; they say that they cannot resist their first love and end up romancing the same companion again despite their original plan.

Players can indeed feel strong emotions for virtual characters, which they themselves describe as love. They are positively aware that those characters are not real but they still love them. Whatever love for those players is, they argue that they feel it for virtual characters. They do not use any other word; they say love: "I am in love with Alistair … with a fictional person in a fictional story about something that never happened … I'm in love with someone that doesn't exist! (p. 50). Since they call it love, it means that what they themselves consider and perceive as love, erroneously or inadequately both, is ascribed to their experience both in the physical world for other physical beings and in the virtual world for virtual NPCs. How can this happen? Waern explains this phenomenon with the term bleeding, which has primarily been used within role-playing communities and expresses the experience by a player of their thoughts and feelings being influenced by those of their character and vice versa. In order to achieve that from a game design perspective, game designers build role-play scenarios, in which the distinction between player and character is deliberately blurred, or they emotionally manipulate their players so as not to be able to fully distance themselves from their characters.

As Waern notes, bleed is a vague term that demands further refinement if one is to use it to describe the experience of love in a game context. She distinguishes between: "a *bleed-in* effect, when the player's emotions and personality traits affect the way the role is performed, and a *bleed-out* effect when the player cannot distance himself/herself from the (simulated) emotions of the character" (p. 42). As such, Waern situates the bleeding of romantic feelings in the interplay between players who are already willing to emotionally engage with a game and a game design that facilitates this engagement. She attributes this player willingness to the safety of romantic experience in games. She claims that this practice is similar to the idolisation of male celebrities by female teenagers: "it offers a relatively safe form of romance in situations where you are not prepared or able to engage in a real one" (p. 52). She particularly contends that "*Dragon Age* allows us to fall in love safely and just a little" (p. 59).

Waern raises many essential issues pertaining to romantic love in games. Her bleeding exegesis, however, positions romance in digital games only as a pretense. In Waern's piece, the fictionality of the romance in games is a given, the romantic experience the games offer is never treated as being on equal terms with the real-life experience. It is seen as a safe substitute for people who are not ready or able to feel the real thing. The romantic experience in games is portrayed as the result of a suspension of disbelief by the player in the context of role-playing. Based on Waern's account, the players are very eager to experience romance in games, but in order to do so they must be ready to consciously delude themselves that what they experience is real when it is not. If we take this direction to heart, then the players do not fall in love in the context of games; they play the role of someone in love.

For the players to be able to feel love in a game, the game should include agents that can love. To understand the logical steps of this argument, one must connect Sartre's existential love with the embodied perception of other agents discussed in the previous section of this chapter. For that, a key term is Merleau-Ponty's intercorporeality (1962). Following on his theory that we have a body that inhabits a world, it is through this body that we experience our world and we make meaning of it, a process through which our consciousness is shaped. However, our subjectivity, namely our subjective perception, is not an entity in isolation that comes to know objects in the world. Instead, our subjectivity is constantly informed by our relation to the objects of our perception including other bodies of the world we inhabit: "I have the world as an incomplete individual, through the agency of my body as the potentiality of this world" (p. 408).

Thus, each one of us is a person in virtuality constantly actualizing themselves by relating to the world and the agents in it; not by objective relation, but by intentional relation, meaning by doing and behaving intentionally, in simpler words through interaction. For Merleau-Ponty, this comparison and identification can only be achieved intentionally, as in actively, meaning through a movement of my body towards the other and theirs towards me. As long as we stay inactive, our consciousness and thus the consciousness of others remains incomplete, a thing in potentia. It is in this context of intercorporeality that we experience love. As Diprose contends, Merleau-Ponty "does not think love or sexual desire is any different in structure to personal existence in general" (2002, p. 90).

We have a body and because we have a body we can have a world and in this world we can love. Yet, we can only love as a conscious experience when this love is realised in this system of intercorporeality we share with the other bodies of our world. This is a matter of reciprocity not in the sense of reciprocation but potentiality. We can know love by loving. This loving towards another person is intentional. This person is another person because we perceive their behavior, recognise it as our own, and realise that since we are a

conscious agent, they must be too. If their behavior cannot actualise the potential of love then we cannot actualise our love and we cannot have a conscious experience of love in this world.

When Wearn suggests that in games we can fall in love in a safe way, the safety lies in our inability to experience love in its full actualisation. We may experience something akin to love but because the agents in this game world cannot offer love then our sentiment can reach up to a certain point, after of which it remains virtual since the intercorporeality afforded by the embodied agents inside the game world does not allow for romantic love. This is why Leino calls love in games love in bad faith. According to Sartre when one practices bad faith, one "is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth" (1956, 47). Its difference from the lie is that in bad faith "it is from myself that I am hiding the truth" (47). So when we play a video game we are practicing love in bad faith because we are hiding from ourselves the truth that we cannot actualise our experience of love since the agents that are available for our intercorporeality in this world cannot afford romantic love.

We may perceive them as embodied agents but when it comes to their capacity to love they are proven to be no more than passive objects. In this, what we feel for them may be better compared to the feelings of attachment we have for non-human entities or items we care for. When we say that we love our car the emphasis is given on the attachment we experience because we allocate time and resources to it. Equally, while playing the game we spend a lot of time and energy for or with the NPC. It is then understandable that we grow attached to it, which is a facet of love. Romantic love, however, demands reciprocity that the in-game agents cannot afford.

What Leino deems fictional love in games is then when we are aware that we cannot experience romantic love in games and we accept it for the type of experience that is; safe and just a little as Waern suggests. As Leino argues, this experience of love in bad faith is intrinsic to the medium of games. Leino sees medium-specific love as being in bad faith but, in actuality, it is also his fictional love that is medium-specific since it is not a different experience but rather a different conscious stance towards the same experience. Even when we accept that our love cannot be actualised because we target it towards a fictional character, it is not the same experience as that obtained from other media that include fictional characters in love since it personally, and not vicariously anymore, concerns us.

The discrepancy lies in the point of perception of the player as part of the game world. They are not witnesses as in other media; they actively actualise the game world through their body, which makes them subjects of this world. As argued above, in digital games the player extends their physical space to the virtual space that affords their actions towards certain tasks and goals. In most games, this expansion is

facilitated by a playable character (PC), through which the player experiences the game world. This PC can vary from an empty vessel as vague as a mouse cursor to a fully fleshed-out character that the player has little or no ability to adapt to their own personality. In all cases, the embodiment that the PC allows the player enables a fusion of subjectivity, a subjective perspective onto the game world that continues dynamically throughout the play session.

Vella has coined the term ludic subject, which "is not a pre-existing character that the player finds ready-made and simply steps into (though it can be, and often is, tied to a scripted diegetic character" (Gualeni and Vella 2020, p. 6). Instead, the ludic subject is an amalgamation of the player's subjective stance in the game world infused with the features, abilities, and limitations of the PC: "As such, the ludic subject is composed of the set of player's subjective experiences of engaging with the game world from the standpoint of the ludic subject-position, and is only brought into being by the player's playing" (ibid.). In this phenomenological regard, it is impossible to talk about the PC and the player in clearly demarcated terms: "the player simultaneously inhabits a subjective standpoint internal to the game world (the ludic, or virtual, subjectivity) and her own subjective standpoint as an individual external to the game world" (Vella and Gualeni 2019, p. 122).

Our experience of the game world is always part of our subjectivity. In romantic love, if the PC falls in love as part of the game exelixis then we perceive it subjectively as our falling in love. Or rather as our self, actualised in this game world through avatarial embodiment with the PC, falling in love. Yet as was argued before, this self of ours cannot experience romantic love in the game world because the intercorporeality afforded in this game world does not allow for such an experience. This experience is the same no matter if we acknowledge it or not, acting in bad faith that is. As such, the inability to experience romantic love becomes a facticity of the medium instead of a practice afforded or imposed by the game system.

This becomes apparent in the other type of love that games include, which is what Leino calls vicarious love (2015). In vicarious love the player is not part of the experience of love anymore, it is instead the PC and the NPC who are falling in love. In this type of love, the player is no longer a subjective agent inside the game world but instead experiences the game world as a "fly on the wall." This is the type of love that games offer when they withdraw control from the player; when the player's actions do not affect the game world, most commonly in cutscenes, a point in which the player releases the mouse/keyboard/joystick and consumes the game world through their eyes and ears in a passive manner similar to watching a film. Indeed, during this time the game abandons the most distinguishing feature that discerns it from other media: the cybernetic loop between the player and the system.

The challenge is to offer an uninterrupted experience of this to the player rather than constantly alternating between story progression and gameplay. Since they are the non-ergodic parts of the game that contain the vicarious love, the gameplay is then found to not be able to afford any authentic experience of romantic love.[111] Once the player regains control, their subjectivity meshes with the playable character and thus transforms a fictional experience to a cybernetic experience. As such, the experience of romantic love should become cybernetic itself if the game is to offer one. What exactly I mean by that is explained in the following section, in which I argue that for games to overcome the challenge of the intercorporeality discussed above the game should include artificial agents rather than fictional ones. Artificial agents share or should share the same or similar characteristics with physical humans in terms of perception, embodiment, and intelligence among others. Fictional agents, on the other hand, are designed imitations of specific human traits and behaviors in relation to particular contexts, scenarios, and narratives.

10.6. Artificial Others

From the above, it can be deduced that the ability of games to offer subjective agency to their players works against their capacity to afford romantic love experiences. The player by embodying a virtual self in the game world cannot actualise this self's intention towards romantic love because the other agents inside this world do not provide bodies that allow it by constituting designed behaviors and not intentional beings. Undoubtedly intuitive game and narrative design that helps cover this lack of intentionality of NPCs is a valid way for games to overcome this challenge and provide an almost seamless illusion of romantic love; a feat that will become increasingly easier as technological means advance. At the same time, the fact that NPCs are coded behavior cannot be addressed by design alone. Instead, I argue that games may eventually be liberated from the constraints of artificiality not by concealing it but rather by embracing it.

Ravenet et al. (2016) in explaining models of emotion for NPCs contend that the NPCs' behavior in games is usually scripted so as to avoid blocking the player's progress. This results in their acting "as emotionless robots that are only here to obey the rules of the game; they do not adapt their behavior to the current game situation, giving no sense of engagement in their interaction with the player" (p. 139). As they argue, in most games the non-interactive parts of the game show NPCs with powerful emotional behaviors, yet during interactive phases, they lack autonomy. No matter how large the trees of possibilities the developers can code, this scripted approach, while being realistic for a specific context, cannot go very far in terms of adaptability and variability during the play session. They propose instead the application of generation models for autonomous virtual characters. These models can be data-driven or literature-based, both of which have their advantages and disadvantages: data models are costly and in need of large sets of data but

[111] Ergodic in the sense of demanding extranoematic effort to be accessed, see Espen J. Aarseth (1997, p. 1).

are more adaptable and can evolve with new data, while models based on literature from the human and social sciences are less costly and more enriched, however, they do not provide the same level of adaptability and variability as the data models (p. 146).

Essentially, what Ravenet et al. suggest are agents of artificial intelligence that are generated and evolve beyond the immediate control of the human developer and/or player. In this way, digital games as cybernetic systems have the capacity to overcome the boundaries of fictionality. Specifically, digital games have been argued to work on a cybernetic feedback loop, which describes the circulatory communication between the game system and the player (Gazzard 2011; Bogost 2006; Sicart 2008; Stang 2019; Newman 2002). Friedman (1999) defines the concept as: "The constant interactivity in a simulation game - the perpetual feedback between a player' choice, the computer's almost instantaneous response, the player's response to that response, and so on – is a cybernetic loop" (p. 137).

This is a medium-specific quality of digital games due to the fact that they are manifestations of a cybernetic system as coined and defined by Wiener (1948). Wiener revolutionises the term cybernetics, which originally meant having a goal and taking action to achieve that goal, in two important ways. First, he connects goals with communication between systems. In order for one to know whether they are reaching or have succeeded in their goal, they need information from their environment, which is what Wiener calls feedback. Second, he argues that both animals (biological systems) and machines (non-biological or artificial systems) can operate according to cybernetic principles. This is an explicit recognition that both living and non-living systems can have a purpose.

In human-computer interaction, we then have the communication between two willful systems that exchange information towards a certain goal, which can either be shared or not. In this light, digital games can be seen as the medium or space of communication between those two systems – the human player and the artificial machine, in a constructed context, which includes a set of goals, some predefined, scripted, and embedded in the design, some others emergent in the course of this cybernetic loop of communication. The agents in this space can themselves be designed and/or emergent. Scripted agents, as previously argued, convey realism because they are based on human representation. At the same time, they cannot overcome their fictionality. Instead, emergent agents, agents of the willful machine, are artificial because they are generated by a simulation model, yet they can overcome the boundaries of representation by showing adaptability, variability, and evolution. In this capacity, they become bodies actualised in the face of their tasks, fulfilling the condition of Merleau-Ponty's intentionality. They become intentional embodied agents.

The subsequent question is whether this artificial intentionality can include romantic love. According to Sartre's approach described before, love is the mode of being born out of our wanting a certain person. How can this be translated into a simulation model? Some research has been done outside of digital games in the field of robotics, which has taken the special term lovotics: love and sex with robots. Cheok et al. (2016) explain how the lovotics robot works: "The artificial intelligence of the Lovotics robot includes three modules: the Artificial Endocrine System, which is based on the physiology of love; the Probabilistic Love Assembly, which is based on the psychology of falling in love; and the Affective State Transition, which is based on human emotions" (p. 308). The authors comment on how larger input by human users will lead to more realistic physical interactions with the robots since their models can be better configured. Digital games constitute an appropriate medium for data collection since they are more cost-efficient than building an actual robot, human players freely engage with them, and they provide a relatively contained and thus safe context of human-machine communication.

Safety in this sense opens up a discussion that goes beyond the mere technological advances of the field. There are certain ethics arising from building an artificial other programmed to manipulate human feelings "in order to evoke loving or amorous reactions from their human users" (p. 320). This can take a very pragmatic approach, as for example whether loving and having sex with a robot can be held legally liable in marriage dissolution court cases as a form of cheating (p. 321). Depending on the applicable law, this can cause legitimate tensions; for example under Sharia law adulterers found guilty may be subject to bodily or even capital punishment. A solution to this ethical problem is said to be "having robots designed in such a way as to incorporate feelings of heartbreak together with the goal of caring for those in its owner's circle of friends and relatives" (ibid). In other words, the goal is to build artificial others that can choose to experience love themselves instead of simply inspiring feelings of love to humans by mimicking human responses.

This is primarily a technological question but opens up discussions for legal and ethical matters as well. Still, the relation between a human agent and an artificial other remains an anthropological question as much as ever. Once upon a time, Frankenstein (Shelley 2012) strove to create an artificial human being. In the end, he created a monster because his creation could not afford love. Digital games offer us the space to perceive, engage with, and potentially love otherness. In this, they also let us explore, understand, and eventually love humanness as well.

Summary

In this chapter, I argued that the ontic difference between the player and the NPC is to be understood in two aspects: embodiment and intentionality. The first aspect concerns the lack of physicality of NPCs. Love is

an experience associated with physicality, as argued in the interview referenced in chapter two, and in the case of digital games the player is a physical being while the NPC is not. I argued that despite NPCs not being physical bodies, players perceive them as such. This led to the second aspect of tension between a physical player and a virtual NPC, namely the NPC's inability to choose romantic love. NPCs cannot choose to love the player in their uniqueness since they are coded behavior. Their actions are rather reactions to certain commands the player executes; any player for that matter. This inability of the NPCs to intentionally choose to love the player makes the experience of romantic love in digital games unattainable.

For this reason, as long as digital games do not include agents that can choose love, games will not be able to offer an authentic romantic love experience to the human player. Understandably, clever game design can help cover this limitation but it was argued that this challenge cannot be surpassed by mere design alone. Instead, it was suggested that rather than games focusing on veiling the NPCs fictionality, a more fruitful direction would be to embrace their artificiality more broadly. This means that games should incorporate artificially generated agents that can adapt and evolve beyond the limited control of the human developers and players. The subsequent question was framed as whether and how these artificial agents would eventually reach a point of consciously feeling romantic love towards a human player.

Conclusion

The End of an Affair

Will You Press the Button is a browser application, in which one gets to choose between dilemmas. For example: “You get a middle class payroll for doing nothing but you can only leave your house for one day every year.” (n.d.) Every time the screen is refreshed, a new dilemma appears and the user can decide whether they want to press the button or not. Users may also upload their own dilemmas. Let us then conduct a thought experiment and come up with our own dilemma. Let us imagine that the person we are in love with, the person whom we want to share our lives with, the person who holds our happiness in their hands and our destiny at the tip of their fingers can be ours forever and ever. With a push of a button. With a simple click, the person whom we have been dreaming about, lusting over, and loving with a passion would reciprocate our feelings: love us like we do, desire us like we do, show us this just as we want them to. Would we push it?

It is a straightforward dilemma. Actually, it is not a dilemma at all because, unlike the browser game, there are no terms and conditions in the above theoretical scenario. We would push the button and our wish would be fulfilled. Yet there is some suspicion or reserve attached to it, is there not? It cannot be as easy as that. There must be some catch. We might think it is too unrealistic, if not improper. How can we make someone fall in love with us by pushing a single button? Even if we could, should we? It sounds unethical and immoral; as if we deny someone their free will. More importantly, it does seem that the there is a “but,” after all, hanging in mid-air, hiding in the shadows after the pretentiously absolute full stop: Push the button and they will love you. But will they? Will this be love? Even if I do press the button and they do love me, will I be satisfied knowing that they only love me because I pressed the button? It is as if the dilemma is there without being there: push the button and they will love you but you will always know that you pushed the button.

What if the stakes were higher? With a push of a few buttons, our beloved not only would reciprocate our love but would continue to do so for as long as we shall live, till death do us part. Would we still have second thoughts? What if we were told that with the correct sequence of buttons, we would also be assured of forever loving them back, being in love with them with the same urgency and hopelessness as at the start of our relationship, for the rest of our days? In as easy a manner as a few dexterous movements, we would be saved from any present and future heartbreak, find our soul-mate, and be happy, content, and satisfied in a meaningful existence under the auspices of pure love. Would we then push the button?

The idea might still sound preposterous, ridiculous even. Certainly not feasible. Human beings cannot be controlled like that and love does not work like that. Yet, if we somehow overcame the typical difficulties of such an experiment, by magic – or technology – would we still consider such an option outrageous? If the choice were there, convenient and guaranteed, would we scorn it and let it pass? More importantly, can we be absolutely sure that even if we did not take it, no one else ever would? That maybe one, two, three, a hundred, thousand, million, billion people would not let this opportunity go to waste and would actually push the button? If everyone else around us would click the click, would we continue to refrain from doing so? Especially, since the push of one of those buttons could mean that we would start reciprocating feelings we did not have before; that one of those buttons would be pushed for us. Or, perhaps worse, that it would never be; that our button would remain silent and untouched.

If we still believe this possibility too far-fetched for practical, logical, and/or ethical reasons, what if we considered artificial humans that would be designed exactly for this purpose: as life-time companions that would care for, desire, and love us? Would we stick to our initial refusal with the same vehemence and incredulity? Would we, perchance, give this scenario a little consideration? Maybe not accept it no questions asked but at least give it some thought. Not choose it ourselves but allow the option to others who may want it; need it even. People who were not able to find true love. After all, these new humans would not actually be humans. They would not possess free will like we do. They would probably not even understand the concept: theoretically possibly, but empirically most likely not. It would not be like we were taking advantage of them by forcing them to love someone; anyone; us.

Or would we? The question rises almost organically. The possibility of ever having artificial humans with the ability to love is a technological question (Cheok and Zhang 2019). Whether we should ever have artificial humans with the ability to love is an ethical discussion with political and socioeconomic implications (Hauskeller 2014; Haraway 2016; Zhou and Fischer 2019). In this thesis, we touch upon this matter from a separate, albeit connected, viewpoint: is this hypothesis we concern ourselves with *actually* love? Can artificial, or real, others love us when they do not have the choice? When loving us is the result of our designing them to do so by the push of a button? Most importantly, do we love them if we know that we have forced, in any fashion, these feelings on them? The answer to both of these questions seems obvious, redundant even. No, they cannot love us if they do not have the choice and no, we do not love them as long as we deny them the ability to choose. Love and freedom go hand in hand, you cannot have the former if you do not have the latter. As this thesis shows, however, this is a facile response to a complex matter. When it comes to love, what it is and how we perceive it becomes a multifarious event in need of a polyangular approach.

Throughout the thesis, it became evident that love is not as free as one might assume. From a physiological perspective, falling in love with someone is not a conscious choice. In actuality, as we saw in chapter four, our biology works against our intelligence when it comes to love: we fall in love to procreate and our will to procreate is detrimental to our personal interests as an individual, especially for women. Children require sacrifices and the distribution of resources while for human females they are linked to pain and often to mortality. In this sense, falling in love challenges our personhood for the common good of the species. Understandably, love is a complex emotion so it would be reductive to attribute it only to automatic somatic reactions. There are maybe general suppositions, but there are so many different factors that come into play with regard to love that a safe conclusion of causality is precluded. For example, according to Jones (1997), there is a documented preference of heterosexual men for a low Waist to Hip Ratio in women, which denotes increased fecundity. However, as the author warns, it cannot be clear whether this is an evolutionary, and thus unconscious, choice or the result of social habituation. Indeed, humans belong to an intelligent, social species so psychology and social conditioning play as important a role in their experience and perception of love as biology does.

This becomes all the more true when one considers that love is not a matter of attraction alone but attachment as well. In chapter five, we analysed attachment theory according to which our infant experiences, over which we have no control, dictate to some, or a great, extent the type of romantic relationships we form in our adult life. Being able to recognise our attachment issues helps us regulate and, potentially, break free from certain behavioural patterns that may be pernicious to our love life. Yet this is a continuous process that requires constant effort on our part, in particular when deeply traumatic events are concerned. In this regard, the manner in which we understand and experience love is already influenced by our biology and social environment in ways that are well beyond our power. The concept of free choice with regard to love is indeed proven to be much more convoluted than we may have initially believed in our thought experiment.

The situation becomes more complicated still because our experience of love is dependent on our exposure to fictional representations of it as well. As argued in different parts of the thesis and more emphatically in chapter five, representation and fantasy possess the capacity to affect our perception and emotional reactions, love included. Already from chapter four, Ekman's theory showed that indeed emotions can be triggered by discourse, a fact which was further analysed in the next chapter by means of Campbell's psychoanalytical narrative theory and Girard's concept of mimetic desire. In chapter ten, this was also proven through reference to affect theory, phenomenology, and embodied perception. In this regard, not only does our lived experience of love dictate its representation but love representation dictates our lived experience in turn: life imitates art as much as art imitates life once more.

This becomes all the more important in the current thesis because love in games was considered in the context of this intrinsic duality of experience and representation. Unlike other media, in which one comes across representations of a love experience, like in *Madame Bovary* (Flaubert 2011) or *Casablanca* (Curtiz 1943), in games, the player *experiences* a love representation. In a game like *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009), which I discussed in chapter one, I, as the player, experience a love story with Alistair. The love story is not entirely my own because it is still a designed script to which I have access only as my avatarial embodiment in the game. It is not a recount of an experience either. It is activated and executed in accordance with my own input and in the way that my communication with the game system develops. Moreover, my feelings are not vicarious feelings. They are my feelings triggered by my experience while playing; feelings which include and/or are influenced by the love story but which cannot solely be attributed to it.

Indeed, I can have feelings towards a fictional character, like Mr. Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen 2004). As discussed in chapter ten, the ontology of the object of one's feelings does not dictate one's feelings in and of themselves: having feelings for a fictional character does not make one's feelings fictional. We get attached to fictional characters, empathise with them, and get affected by what happens to them. Our feelings have somatic and psychological effects. At the same time, in games we do not have fictional characters anymore but virtual. Fictional characters belong to fictional worlds, which have been theorised as possible worlds; worlds which are real but not actual (Ronen 1994; Bell and Ryan 2019; Divers 2002). As Pierre Lévy discusses in his book *Becoming Virtual: Reality in the Digital Age* (1998), the two are not even in the same dialectical plane. The possible is already fully fleshed-out. According to Lévy: "The possible is exactly like the real, the only thing missing being existence" (p. 24).

Instead, virtual characters belong to virtual worlds, which are in a dialectic relationship with the actual world. Unlike fictional worlds, virtual words are in a state of virtuality. Therefore they demand a process of actualisation. Lévy describes actualisation as:

> It is the creation, the invention of a form on the basis of a dynamic configuration of forces and finalities. Actualization involves more than simply assigning reality to a possible or selecting from among a predetermined range of choices. It implies the production of new qualities, a transformation of ideas, a true becoming that feeds the virtual in turn (p. 25).

He, pertinently, gives the example of a software program: "For example, if running a computer program, a purely logical entity, implies a relationship between the possible and the real, then the interaction between humans and computer systems implies a dialectic between the virtual and the actual" (ibid.). Equally per Lévy's explanation, while running a game within the computer's system is an algorithmic process of logic, the communication of the game with the player is a matter of actualisation: "The actualization of the

program during use in a work environment, however, ignores certain skills, reveals new kinds of functionality, gives rise to conflicts, resolves problems, and initiates a new dynamic of collaboration" (ibid.).

In the case of virtual characters then, while they are software objects and as such dependent on their code's reality, they are still actualised by our interaction with them. Our interactions with them are not imaginary but extranoematic. I might not be able to touch Alistair but when I click on him I can talk to him and choose different dialogue options. I also fight alongside him, give him commands, and organise his fighting mechanics or take control of his body causing real-time effects in the game that will dictate the outcome of my playthrough. While Mr. Darcy as a fictional character is a possible person, Alistair as a virtual character has nothing to do with his source code when I actualise him. In Lévy's words: "The real resembles the possible. The actual, however, in no way resembles the virtual. It responds to it" (ibid.).

Many theorists referenced throughout the thesis have argued that games cannot afford love because they constitute mechanistic representations of it: pressing the right button unlocks love for the player. Per the above explanation by Lévy, however, even though Alistair originates from a mechanistic possibility which may not inspire love – whenever I press his button, he will love me – his actualisation does not adhere to the same logic. So it is this quality of him, his actualised version, that I should concern myself with when I address the question of whether I can love him and whether my feelings are love or not. To do that, one has to first and foremost describe what they mean by love. As previously mentioned, love often follows mechanistic and behavioural patterns. This is especially true when one considers love's capacity to be influenced by fictional, and therefore designed and subject to discourse, representations of it.

In this regard, as shown throughout the thesis, love as a matter of discourse is already codifiable. The fact that love is codifiable is the reason why there are so many efforts, both scientific and popular, to discern, categorise, analyse, and, most importantly, predict love, in the sense of a formula that if someone follows they will instigate feelings of love to their partner of choice. If one looks at how love is depicted in the popular canon, as we did in chapter three, it always contains a determinism and a sense of the unavoidable: apparently when we fall in love it is as if someone has pushed the right button for us. Yet just because something is codifiable, this does not necessarily mean that it is only codified. Love can indeed be preconfigured, but this does not predicate that this preconfiguration can be simulated and/or recreated according to will. As Lévy's theory above shows, while there is a part in us that is predetermined, and thus possible, we are still virtual beings actualised in accordance with our social situatedness and relation to others. This is especially true for love. Love as a complex emotion is subject to discourse but not in its entirety: it still eludes us and transcends us.

For this reason, as I have argued, when one examines love it is important to specify which aspect of love they focus on: its discursive or experiential part. While the two are inexorably connected, love's discourse has been shaped as a separate emotional plot with unique effects and affordances. I call this romance. Romance is the codified representation of love according to specific stipulations and with a specific aim: to show love as a narrative of fulfilment and success, and sometimes heartache and poignancy. Due to its premise, romance can trigger emotions of elation and contentment in a regulated manner. We turn to romance as a form of contract because we know the type of feelings we want to experience through its consumption.

As shown in chapter two, romances become processes of achievement as in the case of medieval tournaments, which continue to be recreated in the digital games of today. This is why romance is sought after and repeated as a plot over millennia across media, time and space. This is not disagreeable in and of itself. The fact that we need to turn to a fictional setting to experience these feelings is not the fault of romance but a reaction to existence as we know it. Real life can never be predefined in such an absolute manner and our human condition does not allow for an experience of bliss as romance does. As Terada has argued (2001; 1999), art or entertainment sometimes provoke stronger emotion than real life.

The problem arises when the distinction between love and romance becomes hazy and muddled and when we expect from our love experiences the same security and stability of desire that we get from its fictional representations. This is a matter of personal responsibility, but not in its entirety. As argued in the current thesis, many a time in the public archive love is considered as an end state. Love as an experience is then reduced to its representation: a hegemonic fantasy of the stability of desire. As was shown in chapter six using the concept of the politics of attachment by Berlant as well as Foucault's biopolitics, love is cultivated by institutional powers as something that can impart meaning and happiness to our mundane lives but only in its capacity to be regulated and managed. "People learn to identify with love the way they identify with commodities" (2012, p. 109), reminds us Berlant, while Foucault contends that we bestowed on love "a value high enough to make death acceptable" (1978, p. 156). As such, we are conditioned to understand and anticipate love as a commodity with the promise of stability and conformity: we learn to want the love button, to wish it into existence, in both ourselves and others as the secure way to reach contentment.

Games then show what happens when a love button actually exists. Other media are also concerned with this concept. There are many stories, movies, and artworks that deal with this subject: love's ineffability and the negation thereof. *Ex Machina* (Garland 2015), *Her* (Jonze 2013), Pygmalion in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*' (2005), *Black Mirror's* "Be Right Back" episode (Harris 2013), in which a mourning wife orders an artificial copy of her late husband, are only a few examples of this plot. In games, however, the

player can actually press a love button. The player presses the button by playing the game and can experience the results of such a possibility. They do not imagine what the existence of a love button would entail as a horrific potentiality or conditioned remedy of fulfilment. They actually *feel* what this experience brings; the short-lived satisfaction, the faint comparison of safe pleasure to the exhilaration love offers. In this, games can constitute the prime critical texts for deconstructing love's fantastical but hegemonic illusion.

Players can experience love's fantasy and as such disengage it from its emotional boons that are associated with romance only because romance is something we cannot actually experience except vicariously. Romance is a fantasy of fulfilment and satisfaction through love. This is a state which can never be attained within our human condition. Not only because, as Freud (1957) would have it, it is not possible to reach such completion anymore after the oedipal phase, but mostly because, as Lacan (1975) later argued, our existence has always been fragmented to begin with; there is no possibility of acquiring something which we never had. Romance, however, persists because by sustaining its fantasy we retain the hope of salvation, an ideology that is also cultivated by hegemonic institutions as discussed in chapter six.

If we were to live the romance, we would understand that it cannot deliver on what it promises. Love's experience could then be freed from the expectations of its romantic representation. Games offer us exactly that. In games, romance gets realised as an experience and hence it is dragged down to the plane of our faulty humanness. By playing the romance, we feel what it entails as an experience and realise that it cannot save us; it is not the remedy we thought it was. It is in our capacity as players that we can disabuse the importance and veneration of love as salvation to our problematic existence. We can learn to unlearn our need for the love button and embrace all the excitement of possibilities its removal can entail. When the love button is there, everything is safe because it is predetermined. This brings a sense of security and contentment since there is no unrequitedness. But it is only when the love button is absent that true feelings of exhilaration and happiness can be felt exactly because there is also the possibility of failure.

Additionally, because games constitute experiences and not simply representations they also afford a more authentic approach to mediated love. As we discussed above by means of Pierre Lévy's conceptualisation of the virtual and the actual, the actualisation of the game by the player invites practices and experiences beyond what is possible for the game's code. This means that the player can use the game space to perform acts of love. For example, as we saw in the introduction, in *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare 2010), I would go and spend a few moments in silence with my perceived lover, Thane, even though the game itself did not recognise this action as meaningful. My visiting him in his room did not carry any weight for my gameplay and it was not translated to any quantifiable outcome; Thane did not actually acknowledge my presence

since his preconfigured design had not included such a possibility. I did it, however, because I felt connected to him and wanted to have this experience even if it was not registered by the game system.

While games are systems of code and thus constrained to figure love in a mediated manner, they are also spaces for playing. The player must communicate with the game in the manner dictated by its code but at the same time they can negotiate such limitations through emergent play. As is evident already from chapter one, demarcating love as representation and experience in games is futile. This is true for romance but more so about love. Romance in games is the experience of a love representation. This is why it is a designed and preconfigured experience originating from a possible world already contained within the game's files. Nonetheless, the player can experience love beyond how games represent it by actualising the virtual world and the virtual characters of the game. As my personal game history from the beginning of the thesis showed, being aware of Alistair's coded behaviour did not hinder my attachment to him because the game's scripted narrative prompted my imagination, rather than dictating its trajectory. Through my play session, Alistair became my companion and I forgot that his existence could be summarised in some thousand lines of code. It was when I was reminded of it and of all its limitations that my experience left me unsatisfied with a bitter after-taste.

This does not mean that all games facilitate the same engagement with the game text. Simply having NPCs as romantic interests does not make the players interested in them. The player might not care at all about an NPC. Or they may pursue a romantic relationship but think of the NPCs as nothing more than animated dolls. In that, it is also the game's design that affects our understanding of the romance and of the game's romantic agents as embodied others that need to be respected and not simply controlled by buttons. As analysed in chapter nine, there are many games and game practices that have been criticised by other theorists as detrimental to that effect and rightfully so; that is games with NPCs that lack any agency and are offered as rag dolls to the player's amusement and satisfaction.

So how can one discern and analyse love in games in its dual capacity, both as experience and representation? As shown in chapter seven, methodologies from other media, in particular semiotics, do not suffice because they do not take into consideration the medium's intricacies. For this reason, in chapter eight I turned to the player involvement model. The model's singularity as game-specific allowed me to analyse how different games afford the experience of love as representation taking games' multimediality into account. The model recognises different aspects of the player experience which, despite being distinct, work together to make the player feel involved and, eventually, incorporated into the game world. In my thesis, I used the model to see how games can engage the player with their love content, arguing that all facets of a game collaborate to make the experience resonating and believable. Having said that, I argue

that the most important aspect is shared involvement: namely the ability of players to share their game environment with agents they can fall in love with.

This eventually brings us once again to the original question of whether this experience can ever be love. In the last chapter of my thesis, I showed that love is not something that can be shared with agents that have no will. Romantic love, as in love between lovers, is a feeling that demands reciprocation. This should not be confused with issues of unrequitedness. If another person does not love us then we are saddened because they have the ability to love us and they do not. But if a virtual character does not love us, it means that they cannot do it because their code does not recognise such a possibility. On the other hand, even if a virtual character appears to love us, it is not actual love since the character is not aware of such a feeling but only exhibits scripted behaviour of someone in love. This means that we cannot love them in return, which I explained in chapter ten by using existentialism and the concept of phenomenological intercorporeality. Based on this, I finally argued that digital games would be able to afford the experience of love as representation if they include artificial rather than fictional others, meaning embodied agents of artificial intelligence that can develop love in both its scripted and transcendent capacity.

Why is this important? The obvious answer is because it would improve games as a whole. Interacting with intelligent and volitional agents is one of the main ways games can increase their believability and their involvement potential. Furthermore, love as representation would be revolutionised. For the first time in history we would have the enactment of a love story as a full-fledged experience and not only as spectacle, fictional and/or imaginary. This would eventually bring new challenges and potentially relexicalise love as we know it, while at the same time it would initiate novel opportunities for content creation. Finally, games accommodating the existence of artificial agents that we can love and by whom we can be loved are a safe space of experimentation and optimisation of artificial otherness. In other words, games can be the virgin point of contact between the humanness we know and the humanness we have yet to discover.

In an installation by artist and engineer Dan Chen, the *Last Moment Robot* (2012) is a robotic arm standing next to hospital bed. The padded surface repeats a swinging movement aimed to replicate caress. A digital voice is heard repeating the following words:

> I am the Last Moment Robot. I am here to help you and guide you through your last moment on Earth. I am sorry that your family and friends can't be with you right now, but don't be afraid. I am here to comfort you. You are not alone, you are with me. Your family and friends love you very much, they will remember you after you are gone.

I have witnessed the *Last Moment Robot* in person and its effect is as heart-wrenching as one can imagine. It reflects a sombre reality. More and more people die alone in a hospital bed away from their loved ones, if they have any. It is a haunting image that becomes increasingly terrifying, as loneliness always is,

especially in the years of the pandemic. Were this robot an actual hospital asset and not a deliberate artwork, it may become a useful tool of solace, care, and comfort. Having the patient actually believe in the robot's solidarity, if not love, would greatly improve the robot's effect in alleviating the patient's discomfort, pain, and desolation.

Alan Turing, the renowned scientist and forefather of contemporary computers, had argued in favour of a machine that would be able to do everything that a human mind could do: "One day there will be machines, like human computers, only electrical ones" (p. 131),[112] we read in the fictionalised book of Janna Levin about Turing's life (2006). In his biography by Andrew Hodges (2000), we learn that Turing was inspired as a researcher by his personal trauma. When he was a teenage boy, he became very close to one of his classmates called Christopher. Christopher died very young of tuberculosis, a tragic event that Turing was never able to fully recover from. In a series of letters addressed to Christopher's mother, and especially one titled "Nature of Spirit" in 1932, two years after Christopher's death, Turing talks about how Christopher's spirit may be preserved: "Personally I think that spirit is really eternally connected with matter but certainly not always by the same kind of body. […] When the body dies the 'mechanism' of the body, holding the spirit is gone and the spirit finds a new body sooner or later perhaps immediately" (p. 82-83). The above could be interpreted as an indication that Turing was contemplating the possibility of a human spirit replicated within a machine body.[113]

Notwithstanding that the Turing machines are nothing more than devices built to investigate the limits of computation, Turing remained convinced that artificial intelligence can evolve just as much as human intelligence can. In his 1950 article "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," he remarks regarding machine intelligence that: "There is an obvious connection between this process and evolution" (p. 456). The way he conceived of was to have artificial life educated by humans like human children:

> In the process of trying to imitate an adult human mind we are bound to think a good deal about the process which has brought it to the state that it is in. We may notice three components,
> (a) The initial state of the mind, say at birth,
> (b) The education to which it has been subjected,
> (e) Other experience, not to be described as education, to which it has been subjected.
> Instead of trying to produce a programme to simulate the adult mind, why not rather try to produce one which simulates the child's? (p. 455-456).

As Sterrett (2012) discusses, Turing does not talk only about computation here, since he factors experience beyond education in how an adult human mind develops. In this manner, these artificial others would learn

[112] In Turing's time, the word "computer" meant a human who did calculations (Hodges 2000, p. 134).
[113] A hypothesis that is brilliantly investigated in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun* (2021) and Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* (2019).

and imitate human behaviour – Turing calls the process "the imitation game"[114] – much like we humans learn to mimic humanness, as discussed by Girard's concept of mimetic desire in chapter five and the principles of embodied perception in chapter ten. Love, being such an experience, would then be learnt by machines as well.[115] For Turing, though, this was merely a thought experiment.[116] Given our increasing dependency on artificial systems and the ever-growing number of people living alone and without proper care, having artificial others who would know how to love us does not seem like only a thought experiment anymore, though.[117]

In this context, what is a better way to teach an artificial intelligence how to love than playing with it? More aptly, playing with it within a digital game designed to cater for the experience of love. Let us then adapt our initial thought experiment a little. What if we could interact with an artificial other that would be taught how to love by our pressing a button; not love us but learn that the fact that we allocate energy and resources to play with it, for no other reason or goal or aim other than to simply spend time with it, is what love is? As we saw in chapter nine, play is a form of caring. Yet many times in games we understand caring as caring only for oneself. This is why we demand a love button, to make things easier and safer for us. This, as we saw in chapter six, is not a problem of games per se but a preconditioned expectation of the hegemonic paradigm. But as the example with *Doki Doki Literature Club* (Team Salvato 2017) in chapter seven

[114] This game is the basis for what we now call the Turing test: if a human cannot discern whether the intelligence they interact with is human or machine, then this means that machines can pass for humans. Turing's imitation game was inspired by a parlor game of the time called "The Judge." Turing explains: "It is played with three people, a man (A), a woman (B), and an interrogator (C) who may be of either sex. The interrogator stays in a room apart from the other two. The object of the game for the interrogator is to determine e which of the other two is the man and which is the woman" (1950, p. 433). It is somewhat funny that nowadays it is the machines who have to test whether the agent they interact with is not a machine but a human. It is fairly certain that we all had to successfully complete a CAPTCHA field before we were allowed entrance to some site or content at least once, or rather repeatedly, in our lives; CAPTCHA being an acronym of the term "Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart" introduces by Von Ahn et al. in 2003.
[115] Indeed, Turing himself poses the question of such a possibility, among others, when trying to counterargue potential statements against machine intelligence: "I grant you that you can make machines do all the things you have mentioned but you will never be able to make one to do X." Numerous features X are suggested in this connexion. I offer a selection: Be kind, resourceful, beautiful, friendly (p. 448), have initiative, have a sense of humour, tell right from wrong, make mistakes (p. 448), fall in love, enjoy strawberries and cream (p. 448), make someone fall in love with it, learn from experience (pp. 456 f.), use words properly, be the subject of its own thought (p. 449), have as much diversity of behaviour as a man, do something really new (p. 450)" (1950, p. 447). As Turing comments: "Some of these disabilities are given special consideration as indicated by the page numbers" (ibid.). He does not respond to the disability of love but for a general remark that just because machines have not been able to do something until a specific point in time, this does not mean that they will never be able to do it.
[116] In Turing's words: "The original question, 'Can machines think?', I believe to be too meaningless to deserve discussion. […] I believe further that no useful purpose is served by concealing these beliefs. The popular view that scientists proceed inexorably from well-established fact to well-established fact, never being influenced by any unproved conjecture, is quite mistaken. Provided it is made clear which are proved facts and which are conjectures, no harm can result. Conjectures are of great importance since they suggest useful lines of research.
[117] Indeed, Turing's considerations are the principles on which the fields of machine learning (Hutson 2019), affective computing (Picard 2000), and evolutionary computation (Yang 2013) among others are based.

showed, pressing the button with no requirements and guarantees makes it a love button already: a button for a love that is shared and not controlling anymore.

What change would that bring? In chapter five, we saw Simone from *Nier: Automata* (PlatinumGames 2017), a machine life form, driven to aggression out of despair for a lost love; a love she learnt to demand as if it were a love button because of the public archive she had access to. What if the archive was instead filled with stories about acceptance, care, and free-form love? What if, instead of fighting and killing a hostile machine Simone, we would heal her by looking at her and allowing her to attach herself to us? What if, with each push of the button, we were able to make her cognisant of an experience of love that far surpasses any representation and all its false promises of satisfaction? Would we then press the button?

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Disclaimers

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Contributions

As part of this thesis, I presented a series of conference papers and published two major works:

- Ntelia, Renata. "Romantic Love in Games, Games as Romantic Love," *International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*. 2020: 1-4, doi.org/10.1145/3402942.3402968, which is part of chapter 2 and
- Ntelia, Renata. "In the Mood for Love: Embodiment and Intentionality in NPCs." In *Love and Electronic Affection: A Design Primer* ed. by Linsday Grace. Routledge Creative Media and the Arts. 2020, which is chapter ten of this thesis.

In addition to the above, I published one journal paper inspired by theories I tackled in chapters five and six:

- Ntelia, Renata, "How Damsels Love: The Transgressive Pleasure of Romance." *New Horizons in English Studies* 6: (expected publication 2021).

Two further book chapters building on work done for the thesis are currently under review:

- Ntelia, Renata. "Press X for Lust: Sex as a Reward in Games." In *Handbook of Sex and Sexuality in Game Studies* ed. by Matthew Wysocki and Steffi Shook. Bloomsbury Publishing (expected publication 2022).
- Ntelia, Renata. "Fortnite: A Bildungsspiel?" In *Art of Dying: 21st Century Depictions of Death and Dying* ed. by Gareth Schott. Palgrave MacMillan (expected publication 2022).

During my PhD, I also published two works outside the scope of my thesis:

- Ntelia, Renata, "Play Everywhere: Can We Play in Auschwitz?" *DiGRA Proceedings*. 2021: 1-4, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA_2020_paper_285.pdf.
- Ntelia, Renata. "ESports at the Olympic Games: From Physicality to Virtuality." In *Law, Ethics, and Integrity in the Sports Industry* ed. by Konstantinos Margaritis. IDG. 2018.

Dedications

Chapter six is dedicated to Lauren Berlant who died on June 28th 2021 while this chapter was being revised.

Chapter nine is dedicated to Aphrodite Theodora Andreou who found the heart-wrenching story about Cookie.