

“Nothing’s Ever Felt This Way”: Love as an Embodied Response to Video Games

Mickey Randle

In late October of 2024, indie-pop artist Sophia Allison, better known by her stage name Soccer Mommy, released a love song entitled “Abigail”. The song is a beautiful ode to a lover, containing lyrics like “but what I’d give for something new/I’d get down on my knees for you/to hear you say I’m not a fool/and that you feel it too.” To the unsuspecting listener, the song is a catchy, fairly standard love ballad. To the informed viewer (perhaps one who has seen the song’s music video) the song has a different context: Abigail is not a real person, she’s a character from the Stardew Valley video game. Despite its unusual subject, Soccer Mommy’s love song drips with genuine emotion. Her described experience playing Stardew Valley can tell us something significant about the way video games present emotional experiences for players. This paper attempts to answer the question: how do video games inspire romantic love in the player?

I use the love mechanism/gameplay Stardew Valley (and Soccer Mommy’s artistic expression of love) to both join and narrow existing scholarship in game studies, emphasizing that video games are particularly well suited for the expression of romantic love. To demonstrate the potential for feeling romantic love in gaming, I use a phenomenological method (Crick, 2011) as connected with game aesthetics, structures and mechanisms.

There is a distinct and important difference between the field of fan studies and the type of love I attempt to interrogate here. Fan behavior can certainly be viewed as an expression of love, but the goal of the argument is not to discuss the love/fandom of video games, Stardew Valley, or any particular video game character, though these things may intersect with the feeling of romantic love like that described by Soccer Mommy. Instead, this paper attempts to demonstrate the ways that romantic love appears via the game body’s interaction with the player’s body (Anable, 2018) , forming a genuine physical, emotional reaction. I focus the processes that impact the physical body and psyche unique to gaming so as to explore the nature of video games as specific purveyors of emotional response (Keogh, 2018). While this may be considered a fan-centric process, fan culture is not the primary focus of this paper.

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Abstracting Austen: Playing with the Possible in Good Society: A Jane Austen RPG

John Sanders

In an attempt to better understand the unique ways game adaptations work, this paper will examine a crowd-sourced tabletop roleplaying game – the Jane Austen-inspired Good Society (Storybrewers 2018) – to theorize the ways that characters are instantiated across multiple texts independently of any given source’s plot. The first half of the paper is primarily invested in establishing the concept/structural metaphor of what I call abstraction, a term borrowed from computer science to refer to the process of creating a personal mental model of a literary character or world from observations of multiple iterations of that character/world. Using the many varied iterations of the Austenian hero “Mr. Darcy” as a touchstone, I argue that understanding adaptation as the hidden “first step” in adaptation (or any act of textual transformation) can help us better analyze adaptations that seem to deviate wildly from one’s expectations of a given text. After illustrating the concept of abstraction via analyses of game adaptations of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), the second half of the paper presents a more sustained analysis of Good Society, emphasizing how its abstraction of its source material deviates from the conventions of the tabletop roleplaying game genre in ways that resonate with Austen’s oeuvre as well as her ethos as a writer. In particular, I argue that the game’s proximity to the genre of tactical war games encourage us to think of Austen’s role as a strategic thinker, its focus on structured collaborative storytelling calls attention to Austen’s role as a narrative designer, and its non-random conflict resolution system reflects Austen’s allegiance to the contemplation of the possible over the mere acceptance of the probable, a tendency which is core to the ironic resistance to convention that undergirds all of her work. Throughout this analysis, I draw heavily upon innovative works of Austen scholarship by Michael Chwe, Mike Goode, and William Galperin (respectively) to emphasize how the study of game adaptations can be as useful to literary scholars as it is to those who study games and adaptations.

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More than just fun: Reciprocity and Romantic closeness Drive Entertainment Outcomes in Otome Games

Intro

The rising popularity of otome game highlights the romantic gaming experiences where players are encouraged to “fall in love” with non-player characters (NPCs). While previous research has primarily viewed these experiences through the lens of parasocial relationships, emerging studies suggest these digital relationships are not one-sided interaction, but as real, reciprocal relationships. Through the lens of social exchange theory, the current study investigates how reciprocity—a key feature of romantic relationships—shapes players' entertainment outcomes (both enjoyment and appreciation) through the development of perceived romantic closeness with gaming characters.

Otome games and gaming engagement

Video game is a unique form of entertainment with its interactive nature (Shinkle, 2008). Otome games, although they can be played by anyone, are specifically designed for developing romantic relationships between female players and male NPCs (Song & Fox, 2016). This unique genre creates an intimate romantic experience for players, is impactful through lifelike character behaviors, emotionally authentic reactions and consistent character development based on player's choices (Schumann et al., 2016).

While most research examines these romantic relationships through parasocial relationship theory (e.g. Gong & Huang, 2023; Kreissl et al., 2021; Song & Fox, 2016), this perspective is limited as it describes one-directional imaginary relationships (Hartmann &

Goldhoorn, 2011). Relationship with a video game NPC, however, is interactive and reciprocal. In the interactivity-as-demand model, social demand of video games is not limited to interacting with human, but to avatar, and NPCs (Bowman, 2018). NPCs are the social agents that we psychologically adventuring with in the digital world (Bowman et al., 2024). From the game design perspective, “social” is one of the key components to make NPCs believable to human players (Ochs, 2009; cf. Bartle’s 2004 typology), and players are expecting to “socialize” with NPCs.

Take a closer look at the otome gaming community, one can easily find how deep the player-NPCs relationship is. Players refer to NPCs as their “boyfriend” or “husband,” (Li & Meng, 2024), invest significant amount of money in NPC storylines (Meng, 2024) and dedicate lots of screen time to otome games. Recent research suggests otome gaming interaction should not be viewed as a “mere gaming experiences,” but rather be seen as a “real romantic relationship” (Lei, et al., 2024).

Social Exchange theory - reciprocity

Social exchange theory has primarily been used to explain human relationships (e.g. Jahan & Kim, 2021; Stafford & Kuiper, 2021), suggesting that people form and maintain relationships based on what benefits or resources those relationships can bring them (Blau, 1946). Among different principles of social exchange theory, reciprocity is the central feature of romantic relationship (Couture et al., 2020), generating positive affect, a sense of closeness and commitment (Moss & Schwebel, 1993). Traditional intimate relationships are formed through mutual exchange of support, physical and emotional presence, and the state of emotional security (Fagundes & Diamond, 2013). In games, players can develop emotional attachment to NPCs

with meaningful and consequential interactions (Waern, 2011), and the relationship deepen when interactions are beyond basic gameplay mechanics (Mallon & Lynch, 2014). Specifically, in otome games, the game narrative and gameplay designed for facilitating the reciprocal relationship and offers romantic experiences (Bopp et al., 2019; Ntelia, 2020). The design mirrors real-world relationship development through mutual benefit and establishing emotional bonds via shared experiences.

From this logic, we predict that (H1) Player's perceived reciprocity will be positively associated with self-reported sense of romantic closeness toward gaming NPCs.

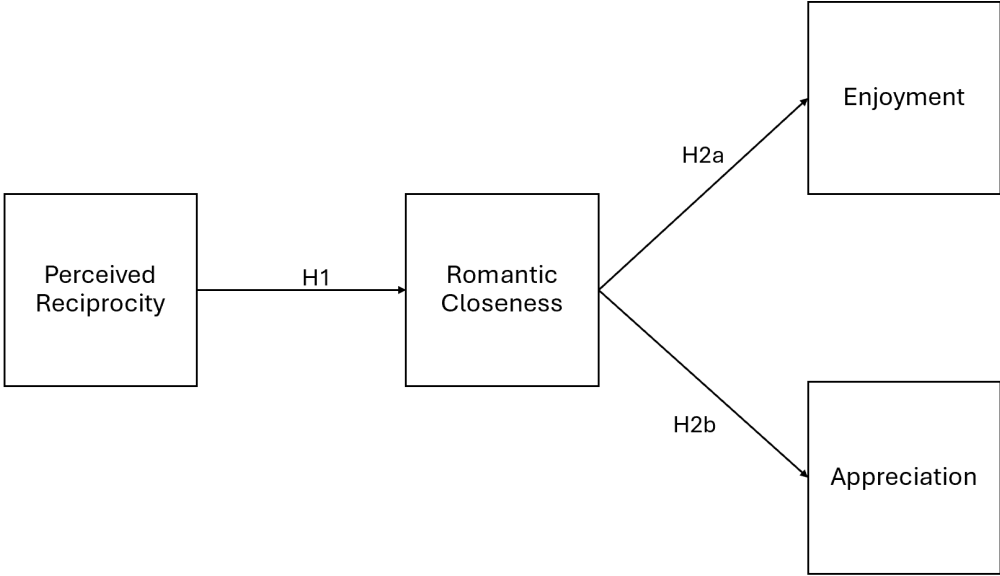
Entertainment and otome game

Video games are generally capable of providing both hedonic enjoyment and eudaimonic appreciation in players (Tamborini et al., 2011; Daneels et al., 2021). These mechanisms are especially compelling in otome games, where intimate and romantic relationships are a key component of the gaming experience. For example, Oliver et al. (2016) found that feelings of relatedness were predictors of appreciation, usually stemming from connections to characters and their narratives.

The development of romantic closeness in otome games may enhance both entertainment dimensions by providing immediate pleasure through positive interactions and fostering long-term meaningful connections that lead to appreciation. Therefore, we hypothesize that H2: Players who experience a stronger sense of romantic closeness with otome game NPCs will report higher levels of a) hedonic enjoyment and b) eudaimonic appreciation from playing the game.

Method

We will recruit participants from online otome gaming community. Participants will complete an online survey regarding their otome gaming experience. Perceived reciprocity will be measured using an adapted version of the Traupmann-Utne-Walster (TUW) Scales (Traupmann et al., 1981); Romantic closeness will be measured by Relationship Closeness Inventory (Rubin, 1970; further validated for romantic closeness in Gachter et al., 2015); Enjoyment and appreciation will be measured using validated scales (Oliver et al., 2016; Bowman et al. 2024). We will use path analysis via AMOS to test relationships between reciprocity, romantic closeness, and entertainment outcomes (see Figure 1), testing global and local model fit against indices shared by Bowman & Goodboy (2020).



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The Fabled Play of Gender: Female Representation in Video Game Adaptations of Fairy Tales

Caighlan Smith

Fairy tales as we know them today come from a long history of adaptation. Originating in oral storytelling (Le Clue and Vermaak-Griessel), fairy tales were adapted into print (e.g., Grimms' Fairy Tales), and later film (e.g., Disney's Cinderella), television (e.g., ABC's Once Upon a Time), and video games (e.g., Starbreeze Studios' Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons). During the adaptation process, the gendered messages in fairy tales were skewed and solidified in print towards the patriarchal (Harkin), a heritage which later fairy tale mediums inherited (Austin; Harries; Kliś-Brodowska). Many fairy tales in the oral tradition featured women who were rewarded for their curiosity and adventurous spirits, however, the early adaptations of fairy tales into print erased this history, as seen particularly in the works of the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault (Harkin). Such early print adaptations replaced the positive oral representation of female inquisitiveness with warning stories of naïve girls, who stepped too far outside their feminine roles and were punished for it. In her review of the game *Jenny LeClue: Detectivú* (2019) and the girl detective archetype's connection to inquisitive female heroines of oral fairy tale tradition, Stephanie Harkin shows how video game fairy tale adaptations can perform a "deauthorizing" of the patriarchal messages in their print predecessors.

Building on Harkin's argument for the potential of deauthorization in video games (see also Whatman and Tedeschi), I review how video games that are adapted from fairy tales variously reject, fulfil, or trouble this potential. For example, Dimfrost Studio's *Bramble: The Mountain King* (2023), based off Nordic fairy tales, tells the story of a little boy on a quest to find his missing older sister. The player's male protagonist is empowered over the course of this quest, but his previously brave and inquisitive older sister ends the game traumatized. The sister's narrative treatment, as foil to the brother, alongside the gendered representation of various enemies in *Bramble*, reiterates the patriarchal messages found in early print adaptations of fairy tales. However, games like Emberstorm Entertainment's *REKA* (2024) and Alientrap's *Wytchwood* (2021) deauthorize patriarchy's hold over fairy tales. *REKA*, inspired by the Slavic fairy tale of Baba Yaga, positions players as a witch's young apprentice, who is empowered by exploring – rather than fearing – the woodlands around her and growing her witchcraft. Meanwhile, in *Wytchwood*, player's take on the role of an older witch, who aides the characters that come to her hut with their gothic fairy-tale

inspired requests. Wytchwood, through the casting of an old woman as empowered protagonist, challenges patriarchy's usual sexist ageism in print fairy tales (Henneberg), to reinstate the wise woman archetype of oral tradition (Abrams). My final example, Black Tabby Games' *Slay the Princess* (2023), offers not a straightforward patriarchal adaptation nor a deauthorization of patriarchy's longstanding control of European fairy tale canon. Through its use of multiple endings and fourth-wall breaking references, *Slay the Princess* troubles the standard "damsel in distress" fairy tale structure. Yet in maintaining heteronormative romantic and sexual nuances between the NPC "princess" and the masculine player-character, *Slay the Princess* does reiterate some of the gendered messaging found in "damsel in distress" fairy tales, in which the male protagonist is the subject and the princess is the object (Sarkeesian; see also Boehm et al.; Sherman).

Through a review of the above video games, my presentation shows how fairy tale adaptations can perpetuate patriarchal inequality, through both overt and innocuous design choices. However, I also identify the design choices made in the more counterhegemonic of these games, which enable these adaptations to deauthorize the patriarchal messages of our print fairy tale heritage. Video games, as a medium, give us the chance to revive some of the fluidity of oral fairy tales, through both the fluidity offered by in-game narrative choice mechanics and the fluidity of gender roles through in-game female representation. Fairy tales are an ancient cultural device for passing on knowledge, shaping ourselves, and shaping our present and future societies. In a societal milieu still rife with patriarchal oppression and other forms of social marginalization, inspecting how we shape, reshape, and pass on fairy tales to children and adults alike is more important than ever.

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