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

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Playing an Avatar

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Fairytale Transformation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A Fairytale Ending?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Love and Marriage

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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