LOVE IS A BATTLEFIELD: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF LOVE AS A GAME MECHANIC AND SARTRE'S BEING AND NOTHINGNESS

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Abstract

This piece uses a semiotic textual analysis to discuss love-based mechanics in particular games, namely *Fire Emblem: Awakening*, *Persona 3* and *Persona 4*, and the *Harvest Moon* series. These games' love-based mechanics share an archetypical construction that posits a problematic discourse of love that revokes subjectivity and agency from the (usually non-player) characters who serve as objects of love for the player character. That rhetoric of love is then compared to that of Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* in order to explore how these games' mechanics of love undermine the diversity of games' narratives and people's actual experiences of love.

Introduction

A point often missed by the contentions and tensions in the current climate of the gaming community, diversity does not only lie in sex/gender and skin tone. Indeed, diversity is more usefully considered a difference in experiences, differences that sometimes accompany those more physical markers but mean much more for people's interactions with others and the world.

One such kind of experience is that of love, a ubiquitous, historied, and multifaceted theme that has been represented and investigated in many media forms, including games. Although narratives of love and the discourse of those narratives in games vary widely, the use and discourse of love as a mechanic or set of mechanics (i.e. the actions performed by the player to interact with a game; Sicart, 2008) does not show this range and depth. In this paper and the accompanying presentation, love-based mechanics will be discussed through an archetypical representation, traceable through several well-known video game franchises. These games' generalizable love-based mechanics posit a problematic discourse of love that revokes subjectivity and agency from the (usually non-player) characters who serve as objects of love for the player character, who gains power over others without repercussions or resistance from any agent other than the player and also embodies the extreme and usually unfulfilled desires described by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*. To investigate the dynamics at hand in these mechanics, I will be using a semiotic textual analysis to collect instances of discourse, i.e. moments or fragments of meaning-making, to then contextualize these elements in the structure of the text and amongst taxonomic precedents across texts. Through deconstructing the rhetoric of love in these mechanics, I will compare that rhetoric to Jean-Paul Sartre's work on love, the self, "the Other," and the violence enacted between these in *Being and Nothingness* (1993) to further scrutinize the relationship between power and romance in games, exploring how the dominant portrayal of playable love does not reflect a diversity of experiences and instead invites a space for deeply embedded, structural forms of violence.

As games' narratives and audiovisual presentations grow in complexity, verisimilitude, and artistic depth, games' representations of love as an emotionally nuanced and significant theme have been able to interact with a large range of love stories that can be both profoundly moving and challenging.

However, in the actual mechanics, the procedural, operational rhetoric of games, love has primarily been either absent or simplified. Even in many well-known, best-selling, and critically acclaimed games and game series, love-as-mechanic can be reduced to a simple template: the player character has a choice of potential love-objects; the player character initiates courtship via time spent with or goods given to the chosen love-object; the love-object falls in love with the player character; and the love-object produces benefit for the player character. This situating of love is an archetype in the sense used by Umberto Eco (1985), as "a preestablished and frequently reappearing narrative situation" that perpetuates an emotional response when the audience reencounters that situation in other texts (p. 5). In this case, that emotional response is the dynamic, or the experienced affective effects of game mechanics (Sicart, 2008), here the mechanics of love.

In order to deconstruct and closely examine this "intertextual archetype" (Eco, 1985, p. 5), the games *Fire Emblem: Awakening* (Intelligent Systems, Nintendo SPD, 2013), *Persona 3 Portable* (Atlus, 2010) and *Persona 4* (Atlus, 2008), and the *Harvest Moon* series (Marvelous Interactive) will be presented as case studies from which to tease out how this archetype works, indeed, intertextually. Although other games do use love as a mechanic (and arguably also adhere to the proposed archetype of love), the current case studies were chosen for deeper analysis due to love's pivotal role within each game's or series's narrative and mechanics. In *Fire Emblem*, the pairing of characters (units) during battle results not only in much stronger and more resilient units, but these pairings also result in marriage and, at a certain point in the game, in the appearance of their children, who have traveled from the future to rectify devastating events before they can occur. These children become some of the most powerful units in the game, thus imbuing them with great mechanical as well as narrative power. In *Persona 3* and *Persona 4*, the main/player character teams up with groups of fellow

high school students to solve mysteries and fight evil entities in worlds connected to but apart from the characters' own. The conceit is that the power to fight these entities is gained through the strength of heart found through close bonds of friendship (including romance), and the game consists mostly of players balancing spending free time with people in the main character's life and battling alongside some of those people. In *Harvest Moon*, the player is an up and coming farmer who restores a farm from some sort of ruin, building a role for him- or herself in the neighboring village and in the romantic life of a neighboring villager. Player characters must marry to produce a child (which occurs automatically after marriage) for the game to consider play successful and thus allow the player to progress past deadlines for these actions. These games are narratively and aesthetically different, yet their mechanical progression through love mirrors the archetype defined above, so I will use these games to closely read how that archetype works, but the case studies' specificity is less important to my argument than their structure.

To explore my case studies, each stage of the archetype will be taken as its own unit, or as "frames," to use Eco's (1985) terminology for "stereotyped situations" recurring recognizably but still satisfyingly across texts (pp. 4-5). Here I consider frames as subsections of the archetype, as distinguishable from how Eco defines archetypes as the "magic" or personally/culturally fascinating version of an intertextual frame. The archetype is here a system that arises from the use of multiple frames that interact with each other predictably and meaningfully in the texts, much like how game mechanics interact with each other to produce a system of rules and thus create a world through limitations and delineations.

Framing the Archetype

The first frame of the archetype is the choosing of the love-object. During this stage, the player is often at the mercy of

the game creators; few games have the capacity for players to choose any other character or object in the text as an object of performed love, likely due to the manual work needed to materialize such actions through dialogue (written or spoken), animations, and narrative branches.[1] Thus, the player's scripted choices of love-object tends to reflect certain cultural assumptions, usually limiting players to heteronormative in-game relationships. However, once this is accepted by the player, the love-object shows no resistance. In *Fire Emblem: Awakening*, certain character pairs have the option to achieve S-Rank Support, or the last of four potential ranks, achieved through interactions during battles and demarcated by narrative interludes in which the characters involved converse with one another. As long as that S-Rank Support is achievable (marked for the player as present or absent on a menu), eventually reaching it guarantees that the characters will declare their mutual love and marry. Though the narrative between each pair was chosen by the game's creators, the only mechanical choices to be made are those of the player: which characters to pair, how to achieve higher rankings, and whether or not to watch the scenes between those characters.

In *Fire Emblem*, these choices are repeated, and in the archetypical love-as-mechanic, repetition is integral in every in-game relationship as the key to courtship. In fact, the archetypical courtship is in totality the repeated performance of specific actions in the "right" way. For *Fire Emblem*, the player repeatedly pairs the intended couple in combat so they might break through the enemy ranks together, thus raising their own Support ranks with each other. The *Persona* games require players to choose how to spend their in-game time, so as long as the player chooses the right timeframe to spend, in which the love-object is "available" for spending time with the player character, then that relationship (in the games' terms, the Social

1. The role of the creators and the forces acting upon their choices are interesting subjects, but these sociocultural aspects are outside of the scope of the current study.

Link) will succeed, climbing from Social Link Rank 1 to Rank 10. In the *Harvest Moon* series, player characters give material goods to the love-object, who has a scripted set of liked and disliked goods. As the player character continues to regularly give the love-object his/her favorite goods, the interactions between the two characters become more amorous, and the love-object's "heart levels" rise along a given scale until reaching maximum. Usually during this time the player character needs to make adjustments to their farm and farmhouse in order to accommodate a spouse and family.

When the courtship succeeds, there is a moment that love is declared, leading either to dating (*Persona* games) or marriage (*Fire Emblem* and *Harvest Moon*). This marriage is an end goal of sorts, as there are rarely scenes and conversations between characters after their declaration, and those scenes that do exist suggest that all is well in their perpetual garden of love. In *Harvest Moon*, the beloved character is in large part defined by their relationship with the player character, moving from bachelor/ette, spouse, and finally to the other parent of the player character's child. *Fire Emblem* labels characters as bound to one another, marking the beloved's name in the same space that marks the character's statistics as used for deciding their role and power in battle. During certain scenes amongst the Social Links of *Persona 3* and *Persona 4*, the player character can enter a relationship with characters of the opposite gender. Indeed, the player character can enter multiple relationships. In *Persona 4*, this can be done with no mechanical consequences (i.e. losing Social Link points), but *Persona 3* does allow Social Links to drop rather than rise if the beloveds discover each others' relationships, but this too can be remedied.[2] Thus, the player characters in these games are bound to some extent to the love-object once love is declared, but not to the same extent that the

2. This information has been gathered from various forms and wikis about the games, as I am unfortunately not able to access these scenes for the purposes of this paper.

love-object becomes a facet of the player character's existence rather than any independent existence.

Since love is a mechanic in these case studies, there is a greater mechanical use for love in each game's system of rules, and in all three cases that greater use is tied to the games' primarily dynamic modes. In *Fire Emblem* and the *Persona* games, this is strength and efficiency in battle; in *Harvest Moon*, this is running your farm into perpetuity. Thus, love-as-mechanic provides the means in each game to the best and fullest experience of the game's key dynamic systems. The children from the future of *Fire Emblem*'s main characters are amongst the most powerful units of the game, and the children in *Harvest Moon* continue the legacy begun by the main player character as the latter ages and eventually dies with this heir in place. For the main characters of the *Persona* games, their inner strength is somewhat literally boosted by each friendship or love, as higher Social Links with each character result in better battle statistics (e.g. strength, magic, and defensive power) for the player character's Personas, or the collectible beings that manifest the power to fight evil. Furthermore, love (*eros*) does not achieve anything more mechanically powerful than friendship (*philia*) does (Cassin, 2014, pp. 602-605).

For the Love of Sartre

When these case studies and the surrounding archetype are put into conversation with Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1993), serious problems and tensions in love-as-mechanic emerge. In Part III, Chapter 3, "Concrete Relations With Others," Sartre discusses how love structures the interactions (physical and metaphysical) between the lover and the beloved, or the self and the Other. The relations laid out in Section I, "First Attitude Toward Others: Love, Language, Masochism," around the subjective freedoms of the self and the Other as engaged by "the look" is most useful for my purposes (pp. 365-372). Here Sartre dives into the problem posed by love, namely that there

is conflict between the lover's retaining the freedom to be a being-for-itself, a consciousness (for a person is fundamentally not a being-in-itself or an essence) and that lover's attempt to sublimate and possess the beloved's own freedom, by means of the beloved's freely chosen allowance of this. Were this possible and the ideal of love reached, then the lover (the self) becomes transcendent, safely, and ultimately free/conscious. The problem, Sartre continues, is that the Other is also a being-for-itself, whose consciousness and subjectivity posits the original self as an object, thus alienating his/her freedom (p. 375). Now the ideal of love is shown to be impossible, since the attempt to sublimate the freedom of the lover/beloved is circular, and thus both lovers' freedoms are alienated (p. 376). The question that I will pose in relation to love-as-mechanic in games, then, is how the work of love would change when freedom is unequal, when the beloved can be reduced to a being-in-itself, for the beloved has no agency or consciousness of its own? That the archetype of my case studies' love-as-mechanic allows an unproblematized experience of love is a metaphysical problem of power dynamics, especially when enacted repeatedly for the player, as will be shown in my close readings of the case studies and their archetypical construction.

Sartre's conceptualization of choice in relation to others is the choice of the beloved, that the self is the one who is to be "freely chosen as the beloved." To be so is to assimilate the beloved's freedom, or, in other terms, the ability to make choices. But in the archetypical love-as-mechanic, the choice is always that of the self, the player/player-character. The only look (objectifying, reductive gaze) that is present is that of the player towards the love-objects. In this way, the player does indeed "escape the *look* of the beloved," or at least is met with "a look with another structure," which allows the player to transcend the status of "a 'this' among other 'thises'"(p. 369). This passage has fascinating implications for the medium of gaming, as the player's presence and interaction is the contingent upon which the gameworld

relies. Although the written code of the game is present regardless of the player, the gameworld and the characters within are only rendered and only perform their functions when the player chooses to engage them. In this sense, "the world must be revealed in terms of" the player. Sartre continues, "In fact to the extent that the upsurge [i.e. the meeting of consciousness and the world] of freedom makes a world exist, [the player] must be, as the limiting-condition of this upsurge, the very condition of the upsurge of a world." Here I have replaced the referent "I" with the player, the self that is involved when a game is undertaken, but the meaning is merely contextualized rather than modified. The choice of the player in not only choosing a love-object but indeed in choosing to play a game at all creates the world within, including the love-object, which is ultimately a being-in-itself, which little complexity outside of a predetermined, prewritten, and preanimated personality, even in the case of seemingly life-like/plausible characters.

In all of these games, it is guaranteed that if all requirements have been met, the love-object will be successfully courted, or in Sartre's words, seduced. In Sartre's figuration, seduction is a response to the beloved's look, which "apprehends the lover as one Other-as-object among others" and is thus able to transcend and use the Other, or the original self (p. 371). But as discussed above, the beloved in my case studies cannot have a look and can only be subject to the player's look. Thus, the love-object is just that— the "Other-as-object." Whereas in Sartre's discussion the process of seduction is meant to bring nothingness into the consciousness of the Other and recognizable fullness into the consciousness of the self, as the self "present[s] the world to the beloved and […] constitute[s itself] as the necessary intermediary between [the beloved] and the world" through acts that are "infinitely varied examples of [the self's] power over the world (money, position, 'connections,' etc.)" (p. 372). This correlates with the presentation of objects or the decision to spend time in one place rather than another that effectively makes the player

character's beloved "feel"— or, better yet, trigger prewritten and preanimated expressions of feeling— special in the eyes, the look, of the player character. Through the repeated actions of courtship within love-as-mechanic, the player is held above the game characters, or in Sartre's terms, "through these different procedures [the self] propose[s itself] as unsurpassable" (p. 372). Although normally this would not have value without being authorized by the freedom of the Other, even if made to be nothingness, in the love-as-mechanic archetype, the freedom of the Other does not exist, and there is no resistance to the self's proposal of its "plentitude of absolute being" (p. 372). Thus, the player character's courtship must succeed, for there is no resistance to it.

As noted above, that courtship leads inevitably to a declaration of love and a binding of two characters, sometimes as a marriage. This binding is, for the most part, unbreakable, as it does not need further attention to continue. Instead, love-as-mechanic is soon shifted from the site of work to the site of reward; it achieves its maximum status long before other struggles are resolved, becoming a tool to leverage towards those struggles rather than itself being a site of work, tension, and navigation of the self and the Other. Love here is thus indestructible, as there is no "deception and a reference to infinity" that comes from love as the relation between two being-for-themselves, nor can the Other ever render the self as a love-object, and there is no other agent to disrupt love "as an absolute axis of reference" and to shame the self by making the self relative (p. 377). This is a love that rewards without the consequences of work, insecurity, or shame, which would seem to be the perfection of love's ideals. However, it only that embodies that perfection for the one, the self, the player/player character who is able to assimilate the Other, who has no agency and consciousness or even bodily presence. This would be a problem indeed for Sartre's metaphysics. When the self "experiences himself in the face of the Other as pure transcendence," as the player does, the result

is a need to use the love-object as simply an object while also seeking to validate the self's transcendence through the non-existent transcendence of the Other (p. 399). This paradox leads to the use of sadistic methods to resolve it via the effort to incarnate the Other through violence, and this incarnation "by force" must be already the appropriation and utilization of the Other" (p. 399).

Conclusions

This seems to be a dire result of an archetype that, when again particularized in the originating games, is surrounded with uplifting, sweet, and otherwise extremely positive textual, visual, and aural discourses of love. Yet, as mentioned above, it is crucial to the study of games to plumb their arguments beyond their narratives and audiovisual presentations. Mechanics and their resulting dynamics are what a player feels when playing a game, and oftentimes those feelings are connected to those of agency and capability, which can inspire the motivation to continue through the tasks presented in a game. In many cases, the player can gain incredible power within that gameworld, which may be able to ignite longer-lasting feelings of power, even superiority and exclusivity. These are then connected to the violent actions players perform in many games and the violent actions people perform in real-world situations, thus landing games a sordid reputation within mainstream media discourses. Yet, for the work done on explicit violence in games, there is much less done on structural violence in games, the violence latent in performances of actions and situations other than inflictions of physical harm and, as shown, have the potential to become ultimately much more problematic.

For games to progress as a medium, it is fruitful to recognize mechanical archetypes as stereotypical, and therefore easily designed and read/played, systems that may be the source of issues still unsolved by more innovative approaches to narrative and audiovisual art in games. The mechanics of love and love-

as-mechanic could be a particularly beneficial place for further research into design tropes so that love in games, even if a source of conflict, is not a source of power that is answerable only to and by violence. Less immediately dire but just as important in the long term, critical and reflective design, such as that discussed and modeled by Mary Flanagan (2009), is also the way towards better and more diverse representations of experiences in games and thus a more inclusive games landscape, and perhaps even more inclusive game communities.

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Acknowledgments

This work has been repurposed from a paper submitted to fulfill the requirements of Comparative Media Studies 796: Major Media Texts at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, taken in Fall 2014. This course was taught by Associate Professor Eugenie Brinkema, whose gracious advice helped shaped the paper and indeed my approach to the critical analysis of games.