Love and Electronic Affection

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Love and Electronic Affection

A Design Primer

Edited by

Lindsay D. Grace

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Editor

Lindsay D. Grace is Knight Chair of Interactive Media and an associate professor at the University of Miami School of Communication. He is vice president for the Higher Education Video Game Alliance and the 2019 recipient of the Games for Change Vanguard award. Lindsay is the author of *Doing Things with Games, Social Impact through Design* (CRC Press, 2019) and more than fifty peer-reviewed papers on games and related research.

He has given talks at the Game Developers Conference, SXSW, Games for Change Festival, the Online News Association, the Society for News Design, and many other industry events. He was the founding director of the American University Game Lab and Studio and the designer-developer behind several award winning games, including two affection games. He served as vice president and on the board of directors for the Global Game Jam™ non-profit between 2014 and 2019. From 2009 to 2013 he was the Armstrong Professor at Miami University's School of Art. Lindsay also served on the board for the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) between 2013 and 2015.

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Contributors

Hermione Banger
Department of Media & Information
Michigan State University and Affinity Games, LLC
East Lansing, Michigan

Casey O'Donnell
Department of Media & Information
Michigan State University and Affinity Games, LLC
East Lansing, Michigan

Lindsay D. Grace
Interactive Media
University of Miami
Coral Gables, Florida

Stephanie Harkin
Department of Media and Communication
Swinburne University of Technology
Melbourne, Australia

Moyzhes Leonid
Center for the Study of Religion
Russian State University for the Humanities
Moscow, Russia

Alexandra M. Lucas
Freelance Game Writer & Narrative Designer
TenRed Studios

Renata E. Ntelia
Institute of Digital Games
University of Malta
Msida, Malta

Miguel Cesar Rodo
Japanese Studies
The University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh, Scotland

Karen Schrier
Games & Emerging Media
Marist College
Poughkeepsie, New York

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Patterns and Practice

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CHAPTER 1

On a History of Love and Affection Games

Lindsay D. Grace

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INTRODUCTION

The reasons for a book about affection games and their design are plentiful. While games have proliferated in terms of the scale and complexity of the fictive wars they wage, the kinds of love they depict are still quite simple. While there are many great successes in war simulation (and also, in the simulation of racing cars or of exploring space), their equivalents in the domain of love and affection games are more scant.

Of all the things that games have modeled, love is perhaps one of the least completely explored. Most people would be hard-pressed to identify an

affection game as intense as *Call of Duty* (Activision 2003) or *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software 1992). So too they'd struggle to recall an affection game as widely popular as Risk (Hasbro 1957) or Monopoly (Hasbro 1935). Our studies of the most notable historical games, like chess, interpret them as games of war (Murray 1913). The very first line of Murray's 900-page examination of chess reads "historically chess must be classed as a game of war" (Murray 1913). Where in the history of play, is the love- or affection-focused canonical chess or Monopoly or *Call of Duty?*

If all is fair in love and war games, then love games need some support. The reality is that games are bereft of love as a subject or as an expression. There simply aren't as many games about love, as there are about war. There aren't even half as many affection games as war games (Grace 2017) as war games. When pressed, researchers and designers think of Truth or Dare or Spin the Bottle, games that while operationalizing some elements of affection are also clearly far less developed than chess or *Call of Duty*. Such play is also complicated by its marginalization—affection play is basement play or secret play. Players can execute hundreds of virtual soldiers in public eSports events, but kissing virtual characters remains a kind of taboo (Grace 2011).

Fundamentally, if a game researcher evaluates the number of opportunities players have to wage war, they far exceed the opportunities to express love and affection. If one of the many benefits of playing games includes imaginative practice (Brown 2009), then what does the imbalance between war and affection games mean for the society that plays these games and the culture that produces them?

At its most basic analogy, the culture of play in contemporary games looks far more like it was produced by Greek Spartans than Athenians, particularly in video games. Its culture of play is more about practicing the work of war than the labors of love. As a game industry we have excelled at producing engaging, thorough, and well-tuned experiences focused on the conflicts of war. What we have not done, is exploit the potential of games to involve love and affection.

The origin of this dichotomy may seem obvious. Games, particularly the modern video games, were not born from a love and affection industry. Instead, of course, they were born from the history of playing grand conflicts and recreations of war like *SpaceWar!* (Russell 1962), *1942* (Capcom 1984), and others. Even the history of role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* traces its origins to war-gaming (Laycock 2015).

Likewise, the conflicts most common to the history of games were not ones at the scale of self. The conflicts in digital games from the 1970s

through the 1990s rarely focused on conflicts of the intrapersonal or even interpersonal relationships. Instead they focused on waging war against invading armies of people and aliens. This is true even in the scale of conflict of that quintessentially-analyzed game, chess. While players may feel very personal relationships to their games and the game characters within them, the majority of historical game interactions seem to have been far less personal.

At least, that's the history most commonly attributed to games. In reality, there were some fairly personal hits. The historical experience of gaming was far more intimate than is commonly offered today. This chapter helps illuminate that history to explain how affection games have struggled to gain their place among the genre of games.

TECHNOLOGICAL EVOLUTION: LOVE AND AFFECTION

There are a variety of reasons for this pattern of impersonal interaction, perception of limited intimacy, and a lack of human love. Obviously the relatively impoverished opportunities for representation in low resolution technologies like the original *SpaceWar!* make it difficult to illustrate the complexities of personal relationships. Early digital games were too low fidelity to allow for responsible development of affection games, it might be argued.

While games like *Pong*, admittedly required two-person interactions that clearly must have involved some person-to-person interactions at the personal level, it could do little to offer a more representation-rich personal experience between player and computer. The subsequent big hits of arcade and console history biased away from two player experiences and scaled toward conflict at large scale. Most notably the historically noteworthy games, like *Space Invaders* (Taito 1978) and *Defender* (WMS Industries 1981), continue where *SpaceWar!* left off. Some might perceive this as a kind of representation of the players' developmental psychology, as players evolved their play styles to the paradigm of digital play (Grace and Spangler 2014).

Additionally, early generation arcade success biased toward the specific conflicts of life and death. Players through the years are far more familiar with the abstract notion of how many lives they have left than how many loves. It's important to recognize that "lives" as a concept is far more abstract than most players recognize. Generally, excluding cultural and religious beliefs like reincarnation, "life" is generally considered finite and singular by the North American developers that generated these early hits.

Yet players never balk at the idea of multiple lives because they understand each life as a new try. So too, love, could be portrayed as tries if love lives had been incorporated into such play.

Ultimately, the choice to focus on life and death situations, instead of love and love lost (or other themes), has mixed sources. These design choices may have to do with power fantasies of certain types of play, with who was playing, with who was designing, technical limitations, and more. To situate both the value and propensity for designing love and affection into games, this chapter outlines a design history to illuminate relevant threads and themes that effected the development of games focused on love and affection. It is an admittedly selected history that aims to explain why the rhizomes of love and affection, particularly in digital games, did not proliferate as well as other common lived experiences.

HISTORY: TECHNOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS IN REPRESENTATION

The first reason for a lack of love, it can be argued, is technological. Demonstrating the physical relationship between two objects in space is visually less challenging than representing love and affection. This is no more apparent than in *Pong* (Atari 1972). *Pong* is generally understood as a version of tennis. While the abstract representation of tennis is extreme (two rectangles and a square), the notion that the player is engaged in a kind of tennis volley is fairly easy to understand. The player understands a relationship between objects, recognizing that the three basic elements of tennis are a court, rackets, and a ball.

Yet, even tennis is more complicated than *Pong* represents. *Pong* doesn't have a net. *Pong* versions don't include a realistic representation of rackets, rather they include a rectangular abstraction of them. Nor do they include the complexity of tennis scoring. Even as a version of ping-pong, it falls short in its representation. With no net, limited ability to spin (a.k.a., put English on the ball), no angling, and a very simple table/court the game is a pretty substantial abstraction. It is a very simple simulation that cuts out core elements largely due to technical limitations.

Now imagine that *Pong* clone designers aimed to create something more complex and less related to object representation. Imagine for example, that the designer aimed to explore the complexities of co-parenting, aiming to describe the two rectangles as parents and the object they bounce between as child-rearing responsibilities. It is perhaps an appropriate analogy, as the responsibilities must be balanced and play ends

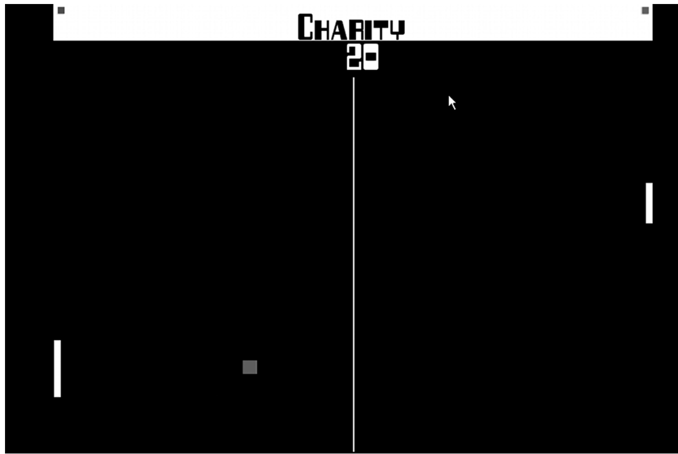

FIGURE 1.1 The Critical Gameplay Game, *Charity*, offers an alternative version of *Pong* where players are responsible for keeping the ball in play cooperatively, instead of competitively.

when either fails to meet their responsibility. This was the premise for my 2008 version of *Pong*, a cooperative version of *Pong* instead of a competitive version. It was named Charity and is shown in Figure 1.1. In such a simple game, the players are supposed to love the ball, sharing it between each other, instead of aiming to make it harder for the player to volley. It stands as a very simple example of an alternate trajectory in the history of games—one that preferred cooperation and support over competition and domination.

Historically, game designers repeatedly chose the competitive mechanic over the cooperative. Generally, when players played together they played against each other, or they played against the machine together. Many of the designers, whether aware of it or not, were working on an affirmative design premise (Raby 2008). They aimed to affirm the design assumptions of past games. The result is a myriad of computer interactions in games that are largely derived from a few precedents. *Pong*, for example, saw at least forty clones between 1977 and 1980 many of which resulted in lawsuits (Katxenbach et al. 2016). All of which continued the competitive mechanics. Later, mechanics like *Space Invaders* begot *Galaga* (Namco 1981) which set the standard for many space shooters (a.k.a., "schmups"). *Defender* informs later schmups, where designers combine invading wave mechanics (e.g., *Space Invaders, Galaga*) with more dynamic player movement to make games like *Gradius* (Konami 1985). Each subsequent game

in the genre affirmed elements from those prior, in much the way a good product designer examines the competition, takes elements from it, and moves it forward. The same can be seen of platformers, first-person shooters, and a variety of action super genres that began as mechanics in the arcade.

Herein is the problem for the evolution of love from a technological perspective. In arcade games there was no precedent from which could have derived love and affection. There's no first love game in affection from the 1970s through the 1990s that provided enough financial precedent to encourage clones. There are many reasons for this, which are explored later in this chapter. In short, arcades didn't offer the audience, nor the time, for such experiences. There was little space for love, when so much of the alternative experiences were about surviving. They were also gender-biased play, with a history that moved them toward the affirmation of masculinity carried from the 1950s (e.g., guns and aggressive play). Modern understandings of gender have moved past these biases, but the history of games is still subject to them.

It's also important to admit that any kind of abstraction of love is a bit much to ask of players thirty years ago. The first arcade versions of *Spacewar!* were simply too complex for players to understand, resulting in relative failure when compared to rival releases. Between the challenges of relaying the complexities of love and affection and an audience that was entirely new to human-computer interaction, it was perhaps too much of a technological step to explore.

HISTORY: ADAPTING TO THE HUMAN-COMPUTER INTERACTION AND GENDER IDENTITY

The newness of human-computer interaction is perhaps the second reason for the dichotomy in growth between games that represent war and survival conflicts and those that represent love and affection. If games are the medium, the medium needed not only its technology to mature, but its audience's understanding of it to mature, too. From this perspective, games had to go through the equivalent of their silent film era. They first needed to appeal to whatever audience was interested in playing them, then to help the audience understand how much more they could do. The demographic reality of the arcade game is that in its infancy, that audience was largely male, North American, and maybe even a little drunk. It can't be forgotten that many arcade games, as a new technology, appeared in bars and as cocktail cabinets in the 1970s and early 1980s.

While the history of arcade games can be traced from a variety of trajectories, the one that most aptly fits the evolution of love and affection in games is that of the penny arcade. Before arcade games became the 1980s standard catapulting human-computer interaction into the everyday experience, there existed mechanical arcades. These mechanical arcades were first offered in the United States and later Europe as a low-cost amusement space. They offered moving picture machines before movies were common, testers for a variety of machine-based diagnostics (including early love testers), and amusements like flipper-less pinball machines.

The most germane of these were the love testers, which were found in midways and boardwalks of the early twentieth century. They were coin-operated electro-mechanical devices that are a small part of the mechanical history of digital games (Williams 2017). These love testers purported to combine the marvels of science with the power of the machine age to provide a novelty report of someone's love. Such devices sat near their more famed games indicating strength or skill. In the parlance of the day, a player might engage with these to impress their best gal—winning a prize and demonstrating their worthiness for further courting. Such devices were a kind of novelty aid for potential love and affection.

Penny arcades became the format that defined the first era of such public play. While penny arcades began as multi-gendered spaces, they became largely male (Huhtamo 2005). Why these spaces were dominated by males is more of a sociological question.

Given their growth in the United States, there are of course meaningful observations about gendered work and play dichotomies, which emphasize the notion that while males were allowed to have frivolous play, historically women were steered toward productive and social play (Chess 2009). If females wanted to be in the arcade, the combination of gender identity, social pressure, and norming may have discouraged them from attending.

What this arguably does to the arcade offerings is bias them toward the conflicts that appeal to their predominantly male audiences. The result is a combination of power-fantasy focused play that ultimately plays toward the gender stereotypes that are still present today about game players. Just as little boys were once steered toward playing with toy guns, the games in arcades focused on the same. The arcade in particular, as a kind of public play, was likely to feel the pressure of making sure it affirmed gender identities for their players. Young boys aimed to dominate at the games that supported their sense of domination. At least in public.

Such environments are reinforced by the financial realities of making and marketing an arcade game. Their largely male players wouldn't want to get caught playing the more feminine attributed games about managing relationships, playing house, or worrying about the needs of others. Doing so is the equivalent of a 1950s all-American boy, being caught playing tea party.

It's also important to recognize that games translated into other mediums. Both arcade and computer games borrowed their narratives and subjects from the writing of JRR Tolkien, science fiction, and other popular media. The subjects of games and their representations were borrowed from geek culture and informed by their popular-culture predecessors like dime store novels. It was no mistake that space shooters, like *Space Invaders* and *Defender*, ruled the arcade. They affirmed a playable experience of what many of their designers and patrons were reading and watching when they weren't playing games.

This is underscored by the ways in which player characters are situated in the conflicts of their games. The damsel in distress (so common to the situation and covers of the more lascivious dime store novels) finds its equivalent in games like *Super Mario Bros*. (Nintendo 1985) and *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo 1981).

The sole megahit of the 1980s that departed from these references was the Japanese game, *Pac-Man*. *Pac-Man* did so many things right; in hindsight, it was evident it would be a hit. It represented a character on screen, instead of merely showing a space ship, car, or other object. This made the experience a bit more personal. Players were made responsible for their Pac-Man's health. They tended to it simply by collecting food and avoiding conflict. Pac-Man had a mouth and needed to eat. That's it. Pac-Man is a character with needs and the player is their ward. One could argue that *Pac-Man* functions as a precedent for love games, as one of the earliest popular games requiring players to care for the needs of the player character. It can be argued that *Pac-Man* is a kind of parenting game, where players lovingly guide the character toward meeting its needs while avoiding that which threatens it.

What's most important to note about *Pac-Man* is not only that it was a giant success, but that its players spanned a wider demographic, by design. Its designer actively aimed at widening the demographic (Wade 2015). *Pac-Man*'s play hit a note with more people. While this is not clearly due to its relationship to themes that might be interpreted as part of love, it's worth noting. *Pac-Man* made money, lots of money. This economic reality

is perhaps a harbinger to the contemporary game industry. Widely appealing games, ones that aim to do more than appease a narrow, but loyal, fan base can reap great rewards. *Pac-Man* can be viewed as a game about life and death and love. It is perhaps the best example of it in the pre–video-game-crash history of games.

Pac-Man also serves as an example of how abstract representation affords a variety of reads on the meaning and understanding of a game. *Pac-Man* can be a parenting game with loose relationships to love and affection, or a playable example of the greed and drug culture of the 1980s (Wade 2015). Much like the challenges of the uncanny valley (Mori, 1970), the benefit of early representation in games was that their abstract forms allowed for wider interpretation. As digital games work toward higher fidelity models (producing more characters richer in dialogue, action, and imagery), they are faced with the challenge of higher fidelity representations of love.

THE CULTURE OF GAME SUBJECTS

Ultimately, focusing games on the hobbies and media habits of fans of science fiction and fantasy limited the kinds of conflicts offered in games. They also required a kind of fantasy and science fiction literacy. If players weren't already familiar with the roles of an ogre, the power of certain spells, or the difference between a smart bomb and a laser, the experience of games had a steeper learning curve. In much the same way, consumers who don't understand the difference between "rouge" and "contour" might struggle to make a purchase at a cosmetics counter. These interests had gender connotations, but they were technically open to everyone.

All of these factors resulted in a fairly monolithic conflict set for games. Games, particularly those built in North America, offered playable experiences of many boyhood hobbies. Even when games came from other shores, namely Japan, they were influenced by that media. *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo 1981) is very much a reference to the *King Kong* movies—complete with representation of a helpless female caught in the clutches of the antagonist ape. Such references are replete with the racism and sexism of their eras. *Donkey Kong*, perhaps unintentionally, carries forward the sexist stereotypes with the racist analogy of taking the native, uncultured ape from jungle to city (Rosen 1975).

Whether intentioned or not, these early games affirmed the prior generation's views. Consider what happens when twenty- or thirty-year-old designers and developers aim to recreate the media of their youth. What happens when they reimagine, particularly without a critical lens, their

first experiences with far away fantasies and epic films. They carry forth the simplest version of their memories, but that version often includes antiquated views.

If you're a young child watching *King Kong*, it's an adventurous film about a giant ape. If you're an adult it becomes something more complicated. This is the challenge of "hauntology" (Derrida 1994) that often affects game design (Grace 2019). The reference, whether intended or not, haunts the contemporary. While every game about a giant ape may not intend reference to *King Kong*, it is ultimately haunted by it. Ultimately, *Donkey Kong*'s character evolved independent of *King Kong*. But, recall that *King Kong*, it's origin at least, is in part a love story.

This perspective also makes the assumption that game designers were not actively avoiding love and affection in games, but instead perhaps ignorant of their bias against it. They were perhaps, seeking to affirm specific power fantasies or generally copying existing design challenges (technical or conceptual) in creating such play. The pattern of cloning prior success was not a matter of selection, but instead a product of financial realities and the ease of technological precedent.

Being critical of the designers of these early arcade games is not entirely fair to the reality of designing any playful system. In reality, love and affection as the focus of play is difficult in itself. It is difficult because it is culturally nuanced and sometimes deeply personal. Human-computer interaction continues to be a new relationship in society. One with which we are just becoming comfortable with how personal it is. The growth of mobile interactions and the myriad of personal data our mobile phones contain still creates a bit of tension for many users. The ease and personalization are enjoyed, but the worry is where to draw the line. When is too personal, too much? How much can a person trust a computer, and with what should they trust it? What happens when that computer fails a user, leaking their personal information or betraying that trust? What happens when the computer simply doesn't do what the user wants it to do? These are techno-cultural questions.

The questions of contemporary personal interactions with computers sound very much like the questions people ask as they enter into and maintain any relationship. The challenge with human-computer interaction is that these relationships have been developing not over weeks, months, or years, but instead over what will soon be lifetimes. Which is why, when reviewing the history of love and affection in games, it is perhaps unfair to criticize the industry for not offering or experimenting with

it in more substantive ways. In reality during the early era of video game design and development, there were experiments with personal interactions within games. These were less common to arcade games, than, of course, in games for the personal computer. It was supposed to be a *personal* computer after all. The challenge was not so much in experimenting with love and affection, as finding compelling conflict from which to build a love-and-affection–focused game.

THE CHALLENGE OF DESIGNING CONFLICT IN AFFECTION GAMES

"Conflict" is another major challenge in the history of affection games. The vast majority of digital and analog games focus on conflict. Often players must right a wrong, destroy an evil invasion, collect that which is missing, and so on. The classic conflict in many historical games has been about the computer creating a conflict the player must correct. Non-player characters from *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo 1985) to *Q*bert* (Gottlieb 1982) were plagued by computer-controlled forces that brought conflict, not harmony, to the worlds in which the players interacted.

With a conflict-driven design approach, it's hard to ask questions about love and affection. Oddly love abounds in conflict, as evidenced in everything from the realities of parenting to the steamy scenarios of romantic novels. The challenge is, as mentioned, that there are few original experiments in love as part of the conflict in games. Instead, games might take the object or representation of love away from players as an inciting moment for them to engaging in the conflict. This was through the 1990s a common motivator for platformers and brawlers. Games often took the motivation of implied love—of kingdom or a non-player character—as their inciting moment. This might even include love of country or leaders, like the princess in *Super Mario Bros*. or the president in *Bad Dudes versus DragonNinja* (Data East 1988) or the kidnapped girlfriend in *Double Dragon* (Nintendo 1987). The sole genres to break this convention consistently were western and Japanese role-playing games.

Yet in each of these the love or object of affection is not central to the game's conflict. The player is not repeatedly seeking to gain the love (or affirm the love) of their princess, or their country, or their girlfriend. Instead, gamers are told, as minor setup, that this is why they are doing what they are doing.

In games, the *why* is not the same as the *action*. This is why many games can skip the *why* entirely and keep players compelled. Players don't need

to know why the aliens are invading in *Space Invaders* to know they must shoot them. The players don't *know* why anthropomorphic mushrooms are attacking their Italian plumber—and generally they don't *care* why—when playing *Super Mario Bros*.

If love and affection are not central to the game, then it's hard to argue that it's an affection game. If the central conflict doesn't have to do with love or affection, then the game is likely simply about the subject of that conflict. This is fundamental to how we describe other genres in other media. A romantic film is a film in which romance is the central focus. An action film typically resolves the conflict through action, a horror film's conflict is set around some physical or psychological horror, and so on. There have been games in which love might be depicted, but few games in which love and affection are the focus.

Regardless, it's conceivable and demonstrable that conflict can come from love and affection—most obviously as conflicts about missing love, needing love, or having a desire for affection. There is even emerging evidence that players are interested in love and affection as a central conflict in games (Grace 2017). While it's not evident that Larry in the *Leisure Suit Larry* series (Lowe 1987) is seeking love, players are left to understand that the central conflict of the game is pursuit of affection. Al Lowe's *Larry* games are problematic in the context of this book simply because they share more with the comedy of the *Revenge of the Nerds* (Twentieth Century Fox 1984) film series than with the drama of the great love stories of their day. Suffice it to say that *Leisure Suit Larry*, and games like it, offered a peek into what might become of affection games. They include the operationalization of love and many of the traps discussed by the authors of subsequent chapters in this book.

Despite this history there is still limited evidence of love and affection in games. This is in part due to one great irony.

THE GREAT IRONY: LOVE AND AFFECTION FOR GAMES AND LOVE AND AFFECTION IN GAMES

There is of course the great irony in affection games. *Gamers love games*. They truly adore their experiences and their game character's experiences. They collect their experiences, sharing in that love in online communities, at conventions, and more. The love *of* games does not translate into love *in* games. That's the great irony. We love games, but we don't often love in games.

All of these reasons highlight what might be the next great opportunity in expanding game audiences and improving their engagement. You could argue that games have been stuck in a kind of Greek chorus formula. We've been making games that fit the same basic formula, particularly in mainstream, or AAA game development. The design formula is necessitated by large scale financial investments, by metrics that focus on initial scales, and so forth.

This is not the environment for mushy media, it is the environment that rewards high action, high intensity experiences. It's the environment that makes big budget action films, far more likely to succeed than whimsical romantic comedies. It's the environment that favors the epic win over the moving heartbreak. It's perhaps a product of humanness—of wanting to live a life that is full of success, instead of failure.

But the philosophical aspirations to incorporate more love and affection in games also abound. Love and affection are part of the reality of living. Games about simulating life and death, should probably incorporate one of the markers of a life well lived—a life with love. Those who want their game to be more lifelike, are likely to see the value in making their games more love-like.

Incorporating affection in games also affords for wider demographic appeal. Books and films have centered multi-million-dollar industries in all manner of love and affection, from romantic comedies and steam novels, to sincere explorations of how to love and when to stop. These range from fictive fantasies to non-fiction self-help. They help readers and viewers capture the heart of the one they desire, be better to the people around them, or survive the roller coaster of romantic ups and downs.

For those who love games, it's evident that love in games needs further development. The chapters in this book provide context for how love and affection in games has operated. It includes analysis of well-studied games like the *Dragon Age* series and in emotionally complex games like *Life is Strange*. These analyses are provided to help designers and researchers understand how to better offer love and affection in games.

BUT WHY?

With all these headwinds, the obvious question is why make affection games, or integrate affection into games at all. There's no guarantee they are going to sell. There is no guarantee they are even going to work.

But asking that question is a bit like asking why anyone paints, when we now have photographs. Or asking why we tell new stories, when we already have great stories. We should make affection games, because we haven't made enough.

If that's not a compelling reason, think more broadly about the economic pressures of any contemporary entertainment industry. If an industry doesn't grow, or show steady growth, it becomes a less attractive investment. Any company that isn't growing, might be perceived as dying. If there's nowhere else to go, then there's no reason to be a part of its future.

Affection games offer an opportunity to fill that space between a boyhood soldier fantasy and being an adult who fights to protect their family every day. It's the difference between winning the mate of your dreams because you bought a great new shirt and enjoying a lifetime of romance with the person of your dreams. As evidenced in several chapters in this book, it's an opportunity to widen the demographic audience of games. It's an opportunity to appeal across genders and gender identities. It's an opportunity for the medium to mature.

Affection games are a new future for games. They're one that better mates the human experience with the game experience. Quite literally, and figuratively. While there is a history of sex, and arguably, love-making in games, that history is largely vulgar, awkward, and often offensive. Or it is provided like a 1940s film, hinted at in the ever-too-common kiss in frame, followed by a slow pan away from the couple leaving the audience to imagine the love-making off-camera. By analogy, in terms of making-love in games, the industry floats between the dark alleys of red light districts few people would dare admit frequenting and sophomoric allusion.

In my years of writing, I've emphasized one of the great cultural contradictions in particularly North American views of sex and violence. We tolerate violence, which abounds in games, and abhor sexual content (Grace 2011). Censorship, for example, will allow depicted murder of many, but not the single exposure of a partially naked human body. Violence is mainstream, and sexual content is pushed to the edges.

But in nature, the opposite is true. Humans, like most of the animal world, needs one to keep going and the other is unnecessary for its survival. Humanity survives through its biology of reproduction, not through its violence against itself. If people stopped reproducing (a.k.a., having sex) humanity would end. If humanity stopped killing each other, humanity

would go on just fine. Violence is not a natural necessity, save for the historical necessity of hunting animals for food. Reproduction is a long-term survival strategy.

In real life human-human interactions of affection and love are more common than gestures of violence. The average person gives more affection in a month, then they do violence. They hug, kiss, serve, and more in honoring their love of others than they do stab, shoot, or violate. In a given lifetime, people are more likely to carry love in their heart than a military weapon in their hands. If play is practice, practicing affection and love is likely of more value than the strategies of war and simulation that dominate many play situations.

So why then do we choose to make so many experiences of human-computer interaction about violence? Some might argue it's vicarious living through fictive worlds. It's about experiencing a world unfamiliar—about creating experiences only dreamed of. This may be true for a distinct population of players, but contemporary play belies this assumption.

Consider, for example, the walking simulators and other games that offer the mundane. Farm simulators, for example, may be the mundane experience of farmers, but the exotic experience of an urban dweller or child too young to do such work. So too, the reader of a romantic novel may indulge the mundane happenings of their fictive characters.

Moreover, anyone who has been in love likely recognizes that it is anything but mundane. So too, not everyone gets as much affection as they want. Just as not everyone gets to drive as fast as they want or lead an army of magical beings. Games can offer an other, and that other is entirely personally relative.

And then there's love-making. If you consider games to be a kind of wish fulfillment. Love-making is perhaps a more common wish than violence. It's hopeful that more people are dreaming of a great time in bed, then a great time murdering others. It seems more likely that healthy people are dreaming of being loved by millions, not hated by the millions of virtual families they destroyed in a murdering rampage. If power fantasies are sated through violence to virtual characters, then it seems other fantasy can be too. If we accept the premise that games are about wish fulfillment, are there not people who wish to be loved?

Perhaps the reality is that we, as a game design community, struggle to bring the medium up Maslow's pyramid of behavior motivation (1958). We are not exploring love, because we, or our players, or the industry, or the media around them, hold the gaming medium to the lowest common

denominators. In doing so, games are held in the kind of impoverished simulation of staying alive, eliminating obstacles, and collecting the most basic needs. In short, players are bound to versions of survival horrors, whether they are starving sharks always looking to grow (Ubisoft 2016), rising criminals aiming to surmount the criminal underworld (Rockstar 2013), or fighting to live in any of the post-apocalyptic worlds.

Noah Falstein (2004) offered a view of game design that emphasized the notation of natural "funativity." He claimed that part of fun is derived from practicing the basic things that humans need, like hunting and collecting. How then does love and affection fit into this natural funativity? Is practicing love and affection part of living out fantasies or is it part of survival?

If games are about vicarious living, then why so much focus on the worst situations? The worst of humanity? Is there really an innate human desire to be the last person standing? Is there really some deep-seated need to destroy everyone and everything around us? Or, is it perhaps that we are still struggling against the tyranny of convention and affirmative design? That games are stuck in the loop of cloning past success with incremental innovation? That games were born from a tradition where love, in all its forms, was not a focus?

UNDERSTANDING THE TRAJECTORIES FOR LOVE AND AFFECTION IN GAMES

Game histories vary in their emphasis on where the video game industry came from. Some see a trajectory from pinball, electromechanical games, and the penny arcade (Williams 2017). In this way, the intersection of love and affection is actually a kind of bifurcation. Penny arcades, popular first in the United States and then later in England, introduced an entire generation to the notion of human-machine entertainment. The machines took some low value coin, a penny or nickel, and produced in the player a kind of joy if they subscribed to it. The player paid to play but got something in the real world they couldn't get elsewhere.

In the Victorian era, this experience was generally a moving picture or a variety of tests. These tests might be about your shooting accuracy, your health, or your ability to love (via love testers). Note, that penny arcades have both a film and game history. As the penny arcade grew, the history of film and games diverged. It wasn't long after the proliferation of the moving picture kinescopes and related technology, that they started showing racy and sexy figures. As Plunket (2008, p.252)

recants from the public report of London's police articulating the character of images depicted in early penny arcades "a number of stereoscopic machines, which are also on view, however, are of a very highly objectionable character, consisting of photographs of women undressing, showing their underclothing, and sitting in certain postures in a highly suggestive manner, also there are some photographs of paintings of perfectly nude women." And so, the peep show was born as one of the predecessors to the video game arcade.

THE DELAYED MATURITY OF GAME ARCADES

Unlike their film neighbors, games on the penny arcade floors changed. They took the other route. They offered a different fantasy. This fantasy was eventually emblazoned on the glass backsplashes of pinball machines. The fantasy was one of power and of desirability. The games didn't provide a sexy peek, they offered the fiction of successes. Players could be mob bosses, with two beautiful woman each arm, or a race car driver with two bikini-clad women in their arms. The games were of course not without their sexy depictions (Figure 1.2).

FIGURE 1.2 Pinball machine art depicting sexualized females alongside non-sexualized males. From Williams' 1967 Beat Time and Gottlieb's 1978 Blue Note pinball games. (Photograph by Rob DiCaterino. Used with permission from https://www.flickr.com/photos/goodrob13/7273859468/in/photostream/.)

Of course, none of this is love. All of it is part of the long-running objectification of the female body. It's drowning in the male gaze. It encompasses all the stereotypes of gender disparity and the long running male dominance in both film and games. It's a sign of its time, and sadly, perhaps a sign of our contemporary times.

But it also hints at something. It hints at an interest in love. It hints at an interest in earning affection—at being so great at whatever the subject of the game was that the player would earn a kiss. Or that the player would earn the love and admiration of peers. It demonstrates this in the causal, fairly immature perspective of its audience. It does so from the perspective of young boys on the verge of becoming men.

This is an important observation. One that is evidenced in the scholarship on who spent the most time at these arcades (Huhtamo 2016). It's evident too in the largest ban in gaming history. Pinball spent thirty plus years at the edges of society. From the early 1940s until the mid 1970s, pinball parlors were illegal in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles (Sternheimer 2014); partly because of their relationship to gambling. But also because they were considered a bad influence, as Sternheimer quotes the U.S. Supreme Court pinball machines were "in appearance quite innocent to the uninitiated and the gullible, unaware of the conniving malefactions that lurk behind it" (2014, 57).

The perception of pinball machines, during this era, was that they stole the hard-earned money of players. No such worry was extended to film in the United States. The result, among many other factors, could be equated to a kind of delayed development. Film grew, moving from the staid informed gimmicks of it's early work to the more mature visual language that propelled it toward being common entertainment.

Meanwhile, pinball and its game equivalents, were held back. Their growth was limited. They started as a kind of back-alley activity, born from the low-social standing of betting parlors and centers of vice. Then they were banned in major metropolitan areas in the United States. Their maturity was effectively delayed for thirty years. When they were let back in the daylight, in the 1970s, they were not only well behind their old film roommate, they were relegated to distinct audiences and a lower status in the media entertainment family. While the era of a fancy night out at the movies came and went, games were still relegated to dingy bars and hot cramped spaces full of t-shirts and sweat. When pinball died in the 1970s, it died in a room that shared more in common with a locker room than a living room. It died more like a basement dweller that was never given

a chance at daylight, while its favorite sibling enjoyed a lifetime of mainstream adoption. Censoring games didn't help them mature, it delayed their development in a way that has left the industry playing catch up in its themes and portrayals. It's important to remember that some of the first arcade game companies, were pinball manufacturers like Gottlieb and Williams Manufacturing Company (later WMS Industries, WMS Gaming, and Midway Games).

But from the ashes of a declining pinball industry evolved the first arcade games. While products like *Spacewar!* and Higinbotham's *Tennis for Two* (1958) existed well before, the real introduction to video games for the average player happened with an arcade game. There they found a ball and paddle game, one that wasn't that different from pinball, named *Pong*. Both were about keeping the ball in play, both relied on rules from the physical world that children learn by age two or three, but master over a lifetime.

Within a few brief years, the industry rebounded with new titles and new content. The penny arcade was reborn as the video arcade and almost simultaneously, video games become living room or family room entertainment. The home console brought the digital game into the home, for even the most computer challenged. Screw two metal contacts into the antenna slot of a 1980s television and whole new worlds opened up. Thanks in a large part to Atari.

But Atari also opened up a new space for video games. It not only brought video games into many homes, mainstreaming the activity. It birthed a kind of independent developer. When Activision was founded by Atari developers who wanted personal credits for their games, it not only signaled a moment of maturation for the industry, it also created an opportunity for a variety of different game play. First, of course, Activision recognized the creative efforts of its makers, putting real credits for the work in games. It also allowed a whole lot of people to enter the industry and make games without having to work for the console manufacturer.

In the context of this book, it meant players didn't need to have computer savvy in order to play adult games. And adult games were offered. They were as crass, juvenile, and objectionable as any first foray would be. They were erotica games, that took the worst parts of the 1970s pornographic film rush and decanted them into pixelated monstrosities. They looked a bit like giving a horny pubescent boy a crayon and letting them draw everything they could think of after watching the most explicit

parts of sexual and violent films like the 1970s release of *Caligula* (Hawes 2014). Yet like children, they seemed to miss the part about artistic aspirations and simply went for the shock factor.

The most famous of these was a product by Mystique, named *Custer's Revenge* (1982). Depicting rape and referencing the U.S. historical moment known casually as Custer's Last Stand, this was an unlicensed release. This game has special infamy. It's a low point for game design and a stain on video game history. Although a dearth of mediocre games for the Atari console created the great video game crash of 1983, games like *Custer's Revenge* did nothing to support the health of the industry nor the growth of mature content for video games.

As an industry, games had recently emerged from being grounded by pinball censorship when they started offering low-quality junk games like *Custer's Revenge* and Mystique's other offerings. Like a child who was still learning the rules, the industry transgressed cultural norms clumsily and immaturely.

Which brings another point to the challenge of love and affection in games. When game design flirted with love and affection in the past, it didn't go well. Its history includes rape, juvenile perspectives like *Leisure Suit Larry*, and overall a very one-sided view of affection. Not only is its history heteronormative, it's focused on sexual affections. It is limited in its portrayal of situations involving parental affection or friendly affection.

This may be in part because console game history is so closely coupled with arcade game history. They rose together and shared many of the same developers. Arcade games are by design punishing. They are meant not to give long satisfying experiences, but instead to take as many quarters as they can. They are designed to tease the player into submitting more money. They offer a peak of what may be and pull the player toward a little more. They are more like peep shows, than they themselves may recognize. In the 1980s and 1990s they offered a glimpse into another world that was time limited and titillating. Arcade games, more than home consoles and computer games, shared an income generating model akin to a peep show. If music television audiences were watching Madonna's peep show appearance in the music video "Open Your Heart" (Madonna 1985), arcade game players were watching screens bating them toward largely power fantasies.

Admittedly, this perspective is extraordinarily focused on the North American gaming experience. This is in part because, in reality, North American developers were a dominant part of the game industry until

Nintendo's Entertainment System landed in North America in 1985. There were obviously a few other successes, like Taito's *Space Invaders* produced in Japan before 1985, but North American developers were dominant.

Worldwide games had expanded, but the political standards for content were still being dominated by the North American game market. This is most evident in Nintendo North America's written policy for games on its console. In no uncertain terms, a game for the North American market had to pass Nintendo's censors (Arsenault 2008). If it didn't meet censorship guidelines, then it didn't get released. Nintendo offered the strict nannying that the game industry had unintentionally indicated it needed by producing its first immature content (ironically focused on mature themes).

Nintendo's censorship was in part due to the fact that games were marketed to children. The notion of love in games would for contemporary audiences seem inappropriate for such a young audience—particularly, any version of romantic love. Parental love, love of an object, or of a pet, would have been acceptable, but given the relatively new experience of human-computer interaction many situations were likely to draw critiques and confusion. Again, it was okay to indicate love of a game console or love of a game, but not necessarily love for the characters in it.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The typical historical perspective of gaming never really talks about love and affection. Instead, it does what the industry did, which is aim at sex, not love or affection. There are practical reasons for this; the subtlety of love and affection are far harder to communicate in sixty-four pixels than space ships and tanks. Or that early game audiences were too drunk at bars (perhaps nursing the wounds of a lost relationship), or two young to understand these higher order experiences. Or perhaps, society simply wasn't ready for them, if they had been imagined. It was enough to ask players to understand human-computer interaction with out the complexity of love and affection in the digital space. Or perhaps the money-making time constraints of arcade games made such lofty aspirations untenable.

But, if a game like *Lim* can communicate the experience of being bullied through the movements of single blocks (2008), it seems we are at least at the point where love can be played in less time than it takes to give a *Call of Duty* weapons tutorial. If games like Jason Rhorer's *Gravitation* (2008)

can give players a glimpse into the tensions of balancing the affections for family, while still rising to the call of a creative career, it's evident that love and affection in games is not only on the horizon but has emerged. At the least, it is evidence of potential.

Now, more than in the past, we are developing relationships with and through human computation. Beyond our reliance on dating apps, our long-distance relationships, and our increasingly connected world—we are playing with affection. We are doing so through dating simulation games, that let players flirt with the mundane and epic responsibility of creating and maintaining a relationship. While the first of these were about as transactional as a game of *Lemonade Stand* (MECC 1979), the evolution of these experiences is likely to continue to become much more complex. Before the power of machine learning algorithms encode and obscure the formulas of affection-based play, it's important to ask critical questions about designing love and affection.

Some researches foresee a future where this play is part of the robotic experience, imagining of course the oft-offered future of robots as romantic, sexual, or parenting partners. But before such realities develop, it seems necessary to gain a better understanding of the complexities of all range of love and affection.

As such, this book divides love and affection in games in much the way the very first publications in the field did. It looks at a kind of trajectory and considers the individual ways in which specific actions amount to playing with love and affection. Admittedly there are many, many other ways to slice affection. There are affectionate actions that are non-physical, like baking a cake or making a care package. In some cultures, the ways in which food is presented dictates a kind of affection. Given the relatively nascent character of this space, it's important to recognize that the writing in this book reflects a variety of cultural and cultural identity perspectives. These are in no way exhaustive, but they are designed to combine informed research and practice with inclusive intersectionality.

In closing, as you proceed through these chapters, I'd like to provide a disclaimer through anecdote. In my younger years, I frequented a few dance clubs often. In one club there was a man at least three times the age of most party goers. He was jovial, and everyone loved him. He started wearing a jacket that read, Dr. Love.

By writing and editing this book, I am in no way interested in becoming Dr. Love (in games). Instead, as counterpoint to the many, many ways in which games have become exceedingly good at mimicking war, this book

is offered to show how games could be better at love and affection. If the 1960s ethos of "make love not war" is a mantra to live by, then perhaps in the games world, "making love games, not war games" might be the twenty-first century's mantra for bringing games into the future.

This work aims not to belittle the high-quality games of war that have been designed, but instead to encourage designers away from the life-and-death scenarios which have a finite audience to the life-and-love scenarios that might move the medium toward its aspirations as an historically great medium. This book does not aim to declare a single minded, one solution fits all how-to on designing love and affection in games. Instead it aims simply to help the reader understand the ways in which love, and its variety of expressions, can find presence in everything from single developer indie games to multimillion-dollar AAA games series. It also aims to remind researchers of how such work needs further investigation. Whether it's to better understand how games become more inclusive, to unearthing the effect of playing stories versus reading and watching them, this research pulls a dimension of game design into conversation that has until recently had limited critical analysis.

At the least, it's hoped that this book might inspire a few more Dr. Love's to be the life of the design party.

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