I kissed an NPC and I liked it: Love and Sexuality in Digital Games

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Abstract:

In this paper we will discuss the presence of love and sexuality in digital games (from the 80's amateur porn games to the newest released VR ludo-erotic entertainment) both as representation and experienced simulation. Through a semiotic perspective we will analyze key features that produce the meaningfulness of L&S in these texts such as the possibility of semantic manipulation, the intersubjective enunciation, a cognitive sensibility created through a *ratio* and the presence of an economy of meaning. Furthermore, we will look not only at what the games represent and allow to do but also at the strategies and actions of the players to give meaningfulness at L&S in these games. Finally, this work will allow us to highlight not only the ideologic and socio-cultural relevance of L&S in digital games, but also the limits of a classical semiotic approach to this kind of problems and consequently to make in the conclusion a short general theoretical reflection.

Keywords: Digital Games, Love, Meaning-making, Semiotic, Sexuality.

Introduction

The idea of love between humans and machines is nowadays a popular topic, but definitely not a new one. Indeed, already in the American series *Twilight Zone* (1959) in the episode "The Lonely" (S1.E7) we could see a love story between a lonely prisoner on an asteroid and a woman-looking robot; and in the end that man would prefer to stay alone with the robot than coming back to Earth. Still, it has become more and more frequent both as a scientific area of research and as a narrative theme represented in the media. For example, in 2013 the movie *her* was released and it was set in a future where people fall in love and have relationships with operating systems. Then, in 2015 the movie *EX_MACHINA* was released and it was once again about having feelings for A.I and one of the main topic was the ethics of our relationships with "thinking robots". Lastly, in 2016 the *Westworld* series was released and once again the theme of human beings caring for realistic and intelligent androids was central. Furthermore, love and sexuality with A.I and robots is at the center of an (not so recent as in Picard, 1997) interdisciplinary[1] debate of great relevance for the humanities (Danaher & McArthur, 2017). Indeed, many scholars are trying to understand our actual affective investment in technology to predict our behaviors in (what they believe to be) the near future. Moreover, it is also an interesting theme in the field of neurosciences (Pinker, 1997) for studying both our mind and the structure of A.I. But what is extremely thought provoking is that, as claimed in *EX_MACHINA*, in all these cases we are assisting in a radical shift of the old Turing test perspective: what now seems to matter is the future possibility for humans to recognize machines as "similar beings", and consequently to have "feelings" for them even though knowing perfectly well that they are *not* humans. Something that will and/or could be possible mainly through language in its complexity.

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[1] https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/xpl/aboutJournal.jsp?punumber=5165369

However, actually in digital games humans are already caring and falling in love with characters controlled by algorithms and scripts, and are also "having sex" with them. And it is nothing new.

"Sympathy" toward the simulated subjectivity of A.I controlled and speaking character is indeed a very natural aspect of digital games where these NPCs can help the real life efforts of the players and are also responsible for a part of theirs emotions (from laugh to anger). Additionally, some of the most loved characters created in videogames are actually represented as speaking machines with A.I: the assassin droid HK-47 from *Kotor II* (2004), Claptrap from *Borderlands* (2009) and Wheatley from *Portal 2* (2011) are all a very good example of this.

But when it comes down to love and sex things get even more interesting.

For example, in the 2011 game *Skyrim* you could not only marry an A.I controlled character but these NPCs could even "friendzone" you if they didn't like you enough. But already back in the 90's in a game like *True Love* (1995) players were doing their best and spending their time to have a gorgeous, smart, rich and passionate avatar so that they could seduce the NPCs they liked and visualize a sex scene between their avatar and these non-playable characters. In fact, not only videogames are full of love stories and sex scenes, but in many of them players will struggle to be loved by a very particular partner, to have children with them (Harvest moon, 1996) and they are even games where being loved by NPCs is a win or lose condition. Furthermore these love relationships can require constant work and carefulness to not end: NPCs can be jealous of their partners (Mass Effect, 2007-2012), they can be disappointed by their ethic choices (Dragon Age, 2009-2014), and can pretend constant "attentions" to keep "being happy" (Stardew Valley, 2016). So not only finding love in real life is hard, but on internet's guides about digital games you can also find written that "It is difficult to find your love in the game"[2].

While for many people such an affective investment can be hard to understand, actually "caring" for "digital beings" is a very natural behavior for many players that, as many kids in the 90's, probably grew up taking care everyday of their little *Tamagotchi* and that were so attached to him/it that they felt bad in a lot of situations and got seriously sad when he/it died[3]. And we could also cite here the 2005 *Nintendogs* game as another and later example.

Of course talking about A.I of NPCs can be misleading as, in regards to love, they act through very limited scripts and decision trees. Still, it is exactly because of this very limited intelligence that these characters are actually the concrete manifestation of what we usually call "true love": they are predestined to love us (it is written in their code), they will always love us and they live waiting for us, they do not fall in love with others, they do not die from aging or accidents, and so on. Even outside of digital games A.I designed to verbally interact with humans such as *Replika* (2017), are indeed almost always designed to be positive towards the human user, even when this human is confessing to be a pervert during their first conversation[4]. Besides, games are also where a reflection on these aspects can be proposed, as in the game *Sext Adventure* (2014) that offered the players the possibility to do "sexting" with an A.I.

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[2] https://www.gamepur.com/guide/21790-how-get-your-love-partner-and-romance-dragons-dogma-dark-arisen-pc.html

[3] https://www.bustle.com/articles/139191-15-struggles-all-tamagotchi-owners-understand

[4] Figure 1

In the beginning this A.I would act as expected through verbally evoking classical erotic frames (the bath, the massage, etc.) and even by sending some picture of naked body parts to the user. But very soon it would show to not understand and neither respect the human desires and behavior to the point where in the end it will insult the user and tell him to just go search for "genitals" on Google.

Several questions consequently arise in regard to both to the human and artificial aspects of love and sexuality. Indeed, love and sexuality (L&S from now on) in digital games, and more in general resulting from interactions with digitally scripted and represented "characters" that are able to simulate an agency and a subjectivity through the use of different languages, is a very interesting and very semiotic topic. To better understand it we will split it in two parts: the representation of L&S in digital games and the experiential enactment of L&S. However, this paper does not aim to be a full comprehensive analysis of all the different and very complex semiotic aspects involved here, but it should be considered a first descriptive and "thought provoking" work that hope to offer a general understanding of L&S in digital games.

1. Love and Sexuality representation in digital games

1.1 Love stories

The first aspect that comes to mind is of course the one about the "stories" of love inside digital games. And they are actually quite a lot of different love stories in videogames: cool action-movie men falling in love with cool action-movie women (Uncharted, 2007), warriors that save but never get to kiss the princess (Zelda Series, 1986-2017), unfaithful love (Catherine, 2011), love between women (Life is Strange, 2015; Gone Home, 2013) and even between young girls (Last of Us: left Behind, 2014), then also tragic love stories with the death of one lover (FF7, 1997) and both lovers (Transistor, 2014), tragic love involving mental illness (To the moon, 2011), tragic impossible love (Braid, 2008) and much more. We also have a lot of "unusual" love stories between humans and A.I (Halo series, 2001-2017), robots (Fallout 4, 2015), aliens (Mass Effect) and even pigeons (Hatoful Boyfriend, 2011). With the particularly interesting example of *Doki Doki Litterature Club* (2017) where the main A.I fall directly in love with player and actually forces him to manually erase some files from the folder to stop her from killing all the other characters that he could "love".

But from a semiotic point of view the true interesting aspect about all these stories is not *what* they tell but *how* do they tell. Indeed, many digital games let the players seduce and chose their partners (The Witcher series, 2007-2015) and invent (both physically, socially and psychologically) their own protagonist characters: who to love, who will be loved and even how this love story will happen (The Sims, 2000-2014).

This "simple" features have a critical impact on meaning-making and love representation.

First of all, the verbal language is fundamental both to grasp the "subjectivity" of NPCs and to express the one of the avatar created by the players. Love in digital games happens consequently mostly through verbal language, but even more it happens through a very Barthian "discourse of love": scripts, frames, topics taken from the cultural semiosphere and *encyclopedia* of narrations are what allow this love to be both believable and desirable.

Secondly, all this happens through a hybrid verbal person that is the performance of a *Parole* so that when an NPC says " I love him" they are actually telling " I love you", and vice-versa when the player choose a sentence beginning by "I" he is actually making the character (a him) talk. Of course, as Claudio Paolucci has well demonstrated (Paolucci, 2010, ch5), enunciation is, first and foremost, always an intersubjective act of mediation. Still, usually both in real life discourse and in texts the enunciation relies on the "lie" of the possibility of first person that is distinguished from a third person; thus being able to create many complex effects of sense and more importantly the illusion of both subjectivity and objectivity. The specific enunciative situation of digital games, however, actually relies both on this illusion and its disenchantment. In fact, in a game like Dragon's Dogma (2012) where the players do not directly chose their love partners, it can be very interesting to see at the upset and disappointed reactions of the players when their avatar fall in love with a NPC that they don't like (especially if it has a different sexual orientation)[5]. Because of the multiple agencies involved in the interactions of digital games, they are a perfect example of a "clash of Parole" and intersubjectivity.

Lastly, this linguistic and discursive situation both allow and reflects the huge impact of the players "ethics" that will determine both the middle and the ending of many digital *incompossible* texts where opposite values exist in the matrix as *virtualities* that can be all actualized. Indeed, all the semio-narrative structure has here the shape of a matrix (Ferri, 2007) where Narrative Programs, movement between Actants and Objects, Actant's modalities, euphoric/disphoric investments and sanctions are variables that can only be actualized during a playthrough depending on a player's extra-textual will, values and capacities. So, the protagonist of a game like *Beyond: Two Souls*, can both be very happy in the end by living alone or by being in love with a stereotyped good looking American soldier. Furthermore, the visual creation of characters, as well as the selection of sentences, gives to the player the possibility of semantic, figurative and thematic manipulation that will have an impact also on the discursive level of the meaning.

That is why players are consequently feeling like authors of these stories, enjoying their freedoms and the possibility to represent their "private" (and possibly "uncommon") values into a mass-medium. Even though, of course, they can also play with these values and make choices in opposition to what they are: they can create and play with a ugly non-resembling and heartless character, give him a different sexual orientation, and so on. However, of course, their freedom is only a freedom of choosing (from the lower semantic layers to the upper explicit euphoric narrative sanction) between options created by the game designers and creators. But the concrete access to the matrix itself (by editing and replacing files) allows the player to go even further and to modify (through *mods)* even the deep ideological structure of the game. One of the best examples is the game *Skyrim*, where players introduced to possibility to divorce and to be polygamous so that the love stories could be far more interesting. A mod that, downloaded by hundreds of thousands of players[6], is a very good example of how much do we care for having and seeing represented *our* love story.

[5] https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/ps3/626515-dragons-dogma/answers/350038-why-is-my-male-character-in-love-with-a-man
[6] https://www.nexusmods.com/skyrim/mods/50121

1.2 Characters with faces and bodies

The characters of digital games are (in most of the cases) of course visually represented, and they are two aspects of this visual physical representation that are crucial about L&S: faces and bodies. Both have changed a lot thanks to the technological progress, and they have two different representative functions.

On one hand, if it's possible for us to fall in love with characters it is also thanks to their faces, and especially nowadays with games where the faces we see are actually based on the faces of real actors. On the other hand, bodies works both iconically and symbolically to permit a very concrete kind of sexual love. And this appear especially true if we look at the sexualization of characters: both physically and socially. Indeed, the characters of the players and the NPCs are often stereotypically "beautiful" and "sexy", especially women but also men. There are actually action and fighting games where all the characters are half naked sexualized women (Rumble Roses,2004; Dead or Alive XTREME 3, 2016; Onechanbara, 2044). Furthermore, the new technology also allows for these bodies to use their own nonverbal language and to simulate sexual behaviors. Lastly, the beautifulness of these digital bodies is really interesting because it stands at the crossroad between the bourgeoisie beauty of industry, the aesthetics of the technology behind them and the consumerism mass media beauty (Eco, 2004, 366-414).

Of course this aspect could constitute a whole paper by itself, but for now we will only remark that this is another key element of the representation of love and sexuality in digital games.

1.3 Sexuality

When we look at all the different "sexual activities" represented in digital games, the situation is very interesting. Indeed, in digital games we can: have protected and unprotected Sex (Fable series, 2004-2010), group Sex (Fable 2), sex with prostitutes (GTA, 1997-2013; The Witcher), sex with aliens (Mass Effect), sexting (Catherine), buy cam girls services (Yakuza 6, 2016), enjoy strip clubs (GTA, Metro Last Light, 2013; Mafia 3, 2016; The Saboteur, 2009), use glory holes (Duke Nukem Forever, 2011), have a threesome with twins (God of War series, 2005-2018), see a woman raping a restrained man (Alpha Protocol, 2010), die during sex (Farcry 3, 2012), participate in BDSM games (7 Sins,2005; *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude, 2004)*, have sex on a unicorn (The Witcher 3) or on a train (Fahrenheit, 2005), do erotic photo shooting (Playboy: The Mansion, 2005; DoA Extreme 3), be part of a gay «gang bath» scene (FFVII), see sex between demons (DMC, 2013), observe a woman masturbating in her room with sex toys (GTA V), be a voyeur and peeping (Killer is Dead, 2013) and much more.

However, when we look at *how* all this is usually visually represented we could actually show all this to a six years old kid. Indeed, this scenes are represented through black screens with screams (Fable 3), people having sex while still dressed (Ride to Hell, 2013), sex under the blankets (The Sims), cars bouncing (GTA), «erotic» pictures shown (The Witcher 1), plus various zooms on the hand (Duke Nukem), on the sky (Assassin's Creed Origins, 2017), on a vase (God of War1), on a painting (Uncharted 2) and so on.

This kind of representation is of course exactly the way in which love and sexuality is presented in most mainstream (strongly commercial) mass media: the way in which by *not showing* it is socially accepted to speak of the unspoken. Furthermore, the most "explicit" sexuality is present in AAA digital games almost always inside a romantic (and thus politically not neutral) discourse of love or in general in "dramatic" texts (Heavy Rain, 2010), even in a game like the Witcher 3 the "Don Juan" Geralt more explicit sex scene are the ones with Trish and Yennefer: two potentially love partners.

Surely, we can find not-mainstream ironic games that plays with this censorship as with the "not fully accepted" aspect of sexuality, as in the *Cho Aniki* series (1992-2003) full of ironized machismo and homosexuality. But, still, these are very few games.

However, here again the players are playing against the rules to see sexuality represented in digital games. One of the more inventive way they found is to combine single and not semantically sexually marked actions, such as staying up and crouching, to "simulate" sexual acts as in Teabagging in Halo[7]. Or they can also repeatedly throw Lara croft on a wall to make her sound as if she was having an orgasm(!)[8]. And they do it so even in non AAA games such as *Rust* (2013) where a group of players known as the "penises brothers" forces other players to strip-down, bow and be raped[9] as part of a ritual.

But maybe even more interesting is the fact that many AAA digital games characters can be found on porn site in videos where they are having explicit sex scenes. We can even found childish characters like Zelda or the 14 years old Ellie from *Last of Us* being raped in very high digital definition. Furthermore, in many of these videos the nude bodies shown are based on the digital ones created in the original games, which make arise the question of a "digital desire" in regards to these bodies, a question related to the digital beautifulness discussed here in 1.2.

Lastly, it's true that they are actually "explicit" digital games that can be find on specific porn sites, but they are usually so poor in both graphics and interactivity that the previously cited games are actually more erotic. However, what is really interesting about these games is the direct connection between the explicit representation of sexuality and the representation and sanction of different practices. And this connection is of course also an economic one between the major "ideologized" industry and the independent and amateur productions. Both porn and "amateur" "sex games", in fact, are in a *polemic* position and do not only euphorically represent sexual acts that are not socially allowed/accepted like rapes or sperm swallowing (Beat 'Em and Eat 'Em, 1982), but they actually allow us to share an *aspectuality* with the agent of this illicit acts (as in RapeLay, 2006, where you are not the victim but the raper). Furthermore, in the case of games like Custer's revenge (1982) they can actually also represent what nobody told us at school, like the constant rapes that happened during conquer of America told by Todorov in his famous book of the same year. It could be said, as a counter-argument, that also in a game like GTA the player is the one who can have sex with prostitute, however most of the illicit sexual activities allowed in AAA games are always represented and allowed only when the character is likely a criminal, and thus consequently *implicitly* condemning such acts.

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[7] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CPTYtWg-GVA
[8] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZ9DauQshnc
[9] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=in4zdlJhxdM

1.4: Nudity

All this lead us to look at the last and related aspect: the presence of nudity in digital games. First of all there are very different kinds of nude bodies in digital games represented through different substances of expression: low detailed bit, highly detailed and photorealistic polygons (The Witcher), true photos (MGS2, 2001), true video footage (The Guy Game, 2004) and even hentai drawings (Hunie Pop, 2015).

Secondly, we can find differences between the major industry and the independent production. Indeed, in AAA games nudity is present as a genital-less one with the exception of "glimpses" of male genitalia, almost always seen in cutscenes. And a both funny and tragic aspect is that we can see genitals made of pixels being pixelated for censorship! Female genitalia, on the contrary, are practically complete absent, but half naked women that shows their "breasts and butts" are everywhere. A very interesting case was the 2016 release of the game *Watchdogs2*, where a player posted a screenshot of a vulva represented in the game. The producers immediately censored this, but left the penises of man uncensored.

Here again some more "explicit" nudity can be found in AAA ironic games (Larry Suit, South Park, Conker's Bad Fur Day), but far more interesting is the fact that monsters inside AAA games often are showing nudity, so that you can perfectly see the breasts and nipples of the bosses of Dante's Inferno (2010). In Parasite Eve (1998) you could even see a naked pregnant woman and in the *Shin Megami Tensei* series (1992-2014) and Persona (1996-2017) there is a very famous "Mara" penis monster. Also, Final Fantasy 8 (1998) had two goddess totally naked and one (Siren) even seemed to have pubic hairs. So if you want to see an explicit vulva in a AAA game all you have to do is play the *Alien* game of 2013[10].

But what is mostly interesting is also the players' desires for digital nudity (as for sexuality, as seen before). The best example is the first *Tomb Raider* game where everyone was trying to use a fake cheat code to see Lara naked. Nowadays there are actually online websites entirely dedicated only to nude mods that allows the players to see the nakedness of AAA characters[11]. 3D "artists", not paid by companies, are creating realistic nipples, testicles, penises, and vulvas that are intended to be used in not sexual games. And his does not only apply to the sexualized characters but also to characters like Alyx from half-life 2.

1.5 Conclusions

We have seen that love and sexuality are mainly represented and evoked in four different ways: stories, bodies, nudity and visual sex scenes. Then we have also seen that all these representations can fit into three different categories of "discourse regime": acceptance, irony, polemic. Furthermore we have seen that the value of these representations are to be found in the ones of the digital age itself, with on one hand the social values of both the industry and the players, and on the other one the particular aesthetics of digital nudity. Finally, we have seen the semiotic uniqueness of L&S representation in digital games: the dynamic semio-narrative and discursive structure, semantic manipulation, the linguistic and encyclopedic nature, the intersubjective enunciation and the impact of the *Parole*. Characteristics that rely on the agency of the players, on the hypertextual structure of games and in the possibility for him to both modify or "trick" the matrix so that unpredicted enunciates can visually appear.

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[10] Figure 2
[11] http://nudepatch.net/

2. The enactment of Love and Sexuality

All of this is surely of great interest for us, but actually it's only one half of L&S in digital games. Indeed, games do not only represent L&S but they also enact it and let the players experience it.

2.1 Offscreen Interactive Enactment of Sex

The first example of an experienced sexuality outside representation can be found in the interactivity of the input required to play. Indeed, in a game like *We Dare* (2011) by looking at the screen you would only see a cute little character racing and flying through circles in a city, but what is actually happening in the "reality" is that one player has a controller in the back pocket of his jeans and is laying on another player that is "spanking" him to press the buttons and win the race[12].

However *We Dare* is a rare case that certainly cannot be used to talk about all the digital games. Besides, it is particularly famous for being a misleading game that used sexuality in his commercial trailer only to justify a game made of poorly designed minigames that for the most part does not involve any sexuality neither on the screen and outside of it. Still, we can learn from it some unique possibilities of meaning-making in digital games that should be taken into consideration when we are studying topics like love and sexuality. Furthermore, it give us a very good reason to stop thinking games only as "representing" things and encourage us to look at what players are doing, thinking and experiencing while playing games.

2.2 The Meta-Logic of Love and Sex

One of the most interesting way in which games can convey messages is through the tasks and rules of the game "rather than the spoken word writing, images, or moving pictures." (Bogost, 2007, IX) So, in a very simple way sex can be, for example, simulated as a maze where instead of finding "a way out" you have to find "a way in" a pink hole at the center of it, as in X-man (1983). A game where the visual "abstract" representation can assume its full meaning only in the if a player is *actually struggling* and making plans for the best way to reach his goal. But far more interesting concepts can be conveyed. A great example is the game "The Marriage" where no characters are represented and there is apparently no story. We only see two squares, one pink and one blue, and learn that the aim of the game is to avoid that one of them disappear by following some rules. Of course through semantics (Sicart, 2011) we easily understand that the squares are a metaphor for the man and the woman inside a couple, but what is really interesting is that so are also the rules and tasks of the game that push the player to experience some specific reasonings and situational feelings (such as anxiety) that are *about love*.

In this way this game can propose a certain discourse about love that is at the same time both explicit and implicit, a narration that cannot be grasped only by looking at the linguistic manifestation on the screen because its content rely on a cognitive and emotional plane of expression where "ideas" and "feelings" work as crucial isotopies semantically stabilized by the linguistic and structural part of the text. And while *The Marriage* is a very peculiar "artistic" game, this inner cognitive mechanics can actually be found in almost any game as proved by the procedural rhetoric scholars inside the game studies. Furthermore, also the "quilting" between the linguistic and cognitive-experiential aspects can be found in very different games (Giuliana, 2018).

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[12] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liy-hy5RPYw

2.3 Meaningful Inputs: Indexical Instructions, Sensory-Motor Metaphors and Psychological States

The experiential level of meaning is not, however, limited to the implicit rules and sub-tasks of the game. Indeed, sexuality can also be enacted and simulated by relying on the direct inputs through both the sensory-motor mechanisms and more in general by "indexical" tasks and metaphors.

A good example here can be the love scene in *Heavy Rain*, where the player can see on the screen a "sex scene" but must actively participate by pressing the correct inputs that appear on the screen and by moving the controller *as if* he was doing this movements in reality. The interest of this kind of Quick Time Events is that there is a meaningful synchrony between the fictional actions and bodies of the characters on the screen and the metaphorical and indexical sensory-motor inputs of the players. Thanks to this feature a digital enactment of the sexual act can be simulated by creating through immersion (Grodal & Lindegaard, 2008) a kind of "digital sensibility" thanks to which the player can actually experience a cognitive involvement, in what is represented on the screen by relying on aspects such as the cerebral Sensory-Motor processes (Degenaar & O'Regan, 2015) and Metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980)

Lastly, this kind of experiential enactment trough inputs can also involve very simple "psychological tricks" such as in mini-porn games where by giving the player the task to continuously press a button as fast as possible (for example "to come") they are actually creating a real excited state of mind.

2.4 Intersubjective Perception:

Differently from movies and books, the intersubjective situation of enunciation of games also extend to the "lector" perception. Indeed while the players are immersed and embodied in a different character, they are the ones deciding where to look, how long, at what distance, and so on. So listening to an NPC while looking straight into her/his eyes or to his/her chest is the player's choice. This possibility of agency create both an illusion of "being there" and can have an important role in relation to L&S . Indeed, while many games will manipulate this apparently free gaze by putting gaming mechanics that will lead it on some sexualized body parts (*Mr Mosquito, 2001; Demolition Girl, 2005*) others will let the player simulate actions, such as *peeping,* transforming the voyeurism in much more than a "perspective effect", as in pornography, but involving a real cognitive enactment of various logical tasks and reasoning.

Lastly, this possibilities are having a great role in the new VR games, such as *Together VR* (2018) and *Kanojo VR (2017)*, where through this intersubjective perception a possibility of virtual "intimacy" is virtually possible and add of course a great value to the erotic (but also empathic) content of these games.

2.5 Direct Sensibility

Last of all, digital games can also use some forms of direct sensibility in relation to L&S. While for many years this aspect has been limited to the vibrating features of the controller, such as the funny "vibrator" weapon called "Good Touch" in *Borderlands 2 (2009)*, the VR erotic market of games is nowadays pushing through a new level of a direct sensations. "Custom Maid 3D 2" (2015), a game that combines the VR experiential technology and a specific device called "Chu-B Lip" meant for transmitting "pleasure" directly to the penis of the player (inserted in it), is surely the best example of this.

Conclusions:

The previous five points have highlighted some very interesting points not only about L&S in digital games, that as we have seen are enacted by players on many different levels, but also on what seems to be a challenge for the classical semiotic theory in regard to the experiential dimension of meaning. Indeed, while we could speak of expressions conveying contents on different planes, truth is that the linguistic-structuralist theory (at least in his classical non-phenomenological interpretation) is simply not enough nor appropriate to face this phenomena in their complexity (As it is implicitly demonstrated by the birth of the Semantic Forms Theory). Of course the experiential dimension is not limited to digital games and is nothing new, it suffice to think of theater to understand this. Still, for obvious reason the focus of semiotics has been elsewhere. Nonetheless, both the development of technology and some profound changes in our social habits seem to suggest now that *experience* is becoming the discourse itself, a discourse that, despite some attempts (Marrone, Dusi and Lo Feudo, 2007) cannot be deconstructed nor explained through paradigm such as the Greimasian one of narrativity.

3.0 The economy of love and sex

There is a last aspect that is very specific of games and that contribute in giving meaning to these texts: the *economy of the play*. Games are indeed also (even if not always and not only) rigid systems of rules based on numbers, performances subjected to failures with win and lose conditions. Moreover, they require for the players to invest the real time of their life into specific objectives that can only be achieved by real efforts, sometime complex reasonings and that generally speaking goals that could also never be accomplished. Such conditions makes it so that games both require and produce a *projectuality* where meanings depend on investment and trust in some values inside of specific systems.

Starting from these observations, I will here briefly apply Kristian Bankov's semiotic of economic transaction (Bankov, 2018) to understand this last, but not least, aspect of L&S in digital games. Indeed, in real life it is possible, and in some sense reasonable, to claim (as in the following terrible book) that «The various forms of love are self-interested strategies» and that «There is no such thing as gratuitous feelings» (Faye, 2011). But what could be the "real benefits" of love in a game? In fact, it is quite easy to find players that gathers on forums to ask about the benefits of "romance" in different games[13].

By looking at the different kinds of games we will see that four different "economies" can be found. Here again, however, both these categories and their content must not be considered a "definitive" classification but only a first step toward a future and more complex work.

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[13] https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/718650-dragon-age-inquisition/70714169

3.1 Love, Nudity and Sex as Needs

This first situation is typical of the so called dating simulators. Here finding a partner, and most of the time seeing him/her naked and having sex, is a question of winning or losing, and all the game is about investing various resources and strategies to reach this particular goal through the simulation of an "intimacy". It doesn't matter if ironic, such as Hatoful Boyfriend[14], or serious, this economy remains unchanged and L&S are represented as absolute goals that require to listen to NPCs, say the right thing, have the right look, buy and give the right gift, and more generally to "know" what will make a particular NPC "happy". Usually L&S scenes are in these games extremely *scarce* until the end, and so are of great *narrative* value.

"Stripping games" games are another kind of texts with such an economy that is used to add value to nudity. Indeed, in games such as Akiba'strip (2011), Senran Kagura (2013) or Dancing Eyes (1996) the mechanics of the game require for the player to strip bodies to win: both to defeat enemies (Akiba'strip) or to power-up yourself (Senran Kagura) or to simply make points (Dancing Eyes). In all these cases no nudity means no winning and the player will struggle for hours to "strip as much as possible". What is interesting here is that, differently from dating simulators, the "story" has often nothing to do with love and sex, and these games have actually a far better reputation than both dating simulators and erotic-pornographic games. Moreover, nudity here is instantaneous and abundant, not at all some kind of rare final reward, a situation that changes the nature of its value into something of a more *aesthetic* nature.

Lastly pornographic games are also based on this kind of economy, where there can be for example a direct link between points and sexual acts accomplished, or where finishing the game actually means assisting and engaging in all the possible sexual intercourses. As in the previous cases, nudity and sex is here instantaneous and abundant, but with the difference that there is a kind of crescendo of explicit and obscene representation of this sex and nudity. So there is actually a kind of final reward that is actually both based on reaching the represented orgasm and in having some kind of porn-aesthetic gratification by letting the players having access to more detailed, colorful and stimulating pictures or videos.

L&S in all these cases are the *explicit object of value* of the players, the status that absolutely *need* to be reached from the beginning and until the end.

3.2 **Love**, **Nudity and Sex as Gifts and Rewards**

Another interesting possibility consist in having the players to face the challenge of a game that is not by itself neither *about* L&S and that does not include relevant nakedness or sexuality, but that however will reward the player with both a love ending, a naked scene or a sexual act representation and interaction.

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[14] Figure 3

The first two games that comes to mind here are "The Guy Game" and "Bubble Bath Babes" (1991). The first one is a quiz game where by correctly answering the player get to see real footage of women showing their breast, while the second one is a "puzzle game" with same mechanics of games like *Puzzle Bobbl*e(1994) but where the final reward for having points and finishing the levels consists in seeing some nakedness. But we could also cite once again *X-man* where the game actually consists in resolving mazes only to have access to a 8 bit "interactive porn-scene". A mixed and interesting case is also the recent and successful "Hunie Pop"(2015), that is both half a dating simulator and half a puzzle game based on mechanics like *Candy Crush*.

Of course about love the situation is more complex as, exactly in the mass-media, many games end with a final kiss or love story that seems to be at least as important as saving the world. So all the efforts and maths required to finish a game like Final Fantasy 8 (1998), while never directly directed toward "having a relationship", actually will lead to a narrative final happy ending with a kiss of a previously lonely and unloved character. We will not however indulge on such a point which could constitute a whole book by itself.

L&S are in this economy the *implicit* value of very different type of goals and efforts: like fireworks, they guarantee on their own the meaningfulness of the waiting and struggling to get to see them, the happiness of the ending and the usefulness of the time spent to get through these texts.

3.3 Love, Nudity and Sex as Use and Exchange Value

At the opposite of what we have just seen, other games will actually include L&S features as something of use to reach other goals. Differently from what we have called the "Economy of Need", not only L&S are not the "final objective" nor the reward but most of the times they are helpful but not necessary.

Sex can give you mental health in a game like Indigo Prophecy where it is the most important resource, relationships can power-up your army in a game like Sakura Wars (2005), having a wife (Stardew Valley,) and children (Harvest Moon,) both cost you money and are useful to gather more in game money and resources, sexually humiliating your opponent on the ring can be used as an alternative way of defeating your challenger in Rumble Roses, and so on. Here L&S are part of ideologic systems where, for example, the meaningfulness of having a child in *Harvest Moon* resides in the fact that procreating is another form of "human production" and humans themselves (kids included) are mostly *tools of production.* The different encyclopedic layers of the text here determine the semantic value of all the lexicalization of L&S (children, kisses, nakedness, etc..) in conformity with the main isotopies of the texts recognizable exactly through the economic system of the meaning. Thus, L&S, get to mean very different things.

This can also happen in more "innocent ways" as in *Enslaved: Odyssey to the West* (2010) where the most naked costume will give the player the unique power of stunning the enemy.

An interesting case about love is also " Dragon Age" where trying to have relationships with characters gives access to more quests, and consequently more items and experience points (objects useful to win). But we could say more and talk about an "aesthetic" benefits with relationships giving you access to more playtime, beautiful cutscenes, love scenes., etc.. There is consequently also a meta-level here of use and exchange. Indeed here comes the fact that, outside of simulation, in the concrete game economy you actually do not need to do this "relationship quests" neither to win nor to "play more".

In all these new cases we have consequently a very different situation where the L&S values are very close to *a possibility of benefits*, that actually require in-game previsions and investment, inside of a more complex structure where a certain freedom of not "loving" is virtually present.   This of course depend of the concrete numeric situation of the game that could only feint this freedom and actually require L&S to absolutely win, transforming the convenience of L&S in something compulsory.

3.4 Love, Nudity and Sex as Gratuitous Act

In this last case L&S are mainly choices of a particular player, without particular in-game benefits.

This is the case of the Photo Mode of *DoA Extreme 3* or of the "underskirt" screenshot feature inside *Gal Gun VR* (2017). On one hand, of course the system create the condition for such a possible "free" investment: sexualized bodies created only to be looked at, "exciting" embarrassment situations and reactions, the possibility of obscene zooms, and much more are all meant for the player to act in some way. Nonetheless, all this is outside of any in-game value in terms of winning or losing, performance and ending, etc… Not only the player is not rewarded for such actions, not only it is not the ending of a story, not only it is not a way to accomplish other goals, but he also cannot numerically benefit from this in any way.

The answer behind the big "why?" of all of this is a biological, psychological and even more important sociological one with "trophies" and "achievements" awarded to the players real accounts (in Gal Gun VR). Indeed using the camera to look under a skirt (Lolipop Chainsaw, 2012), or at breasts during a conversation (Asura's Wrath, 2012), are all "free" and not suggested by the game acts that however can be anticipated by the game and "grant" an achievement on the social gamers cards[15]. Even in a more subtle way, in a game like *Metal Gear Solid 2* a camera will be given to the player/character for accomplishing the mission of taking pictures of a very dangerous secret nuclear weapon. However players will "randomly" find some picture of Asian women in swimsuit in "hidden" places like closets. And what happens is that players will stare at this pictures and use the camera on them, triggering a "shameful" mini-cutscene where this behavior is derided[16].

Another example, applied this time to love, can be the game InstLife (2017-2018) where having or not a love relationship happens without any difficulty and is the choice of a player inside of a game without winning or losing conditions. It just depends of the kind of simulated life the player wants to see. Here again, of course, the last screen with the number of people attending your funeral could be considered a way for the game to "push you" in having some relationship. Still, it is certainly different from the previous cases and cannot assume any value outside of a cultural and socio-semiotic context of meaning. In this same context we could also cite the ending of "Beyond: Two Souls" (2013) where you can choose if living happily by yourself or with someone you love.

Also, we cannot not cite here how much costly this "gratuity" can be: all the time spend to unlock an almost naked costume (with no beneficial stats) of the beautiful Sheva (Resident Evil 5) or the monstrous Mileena (Mortal Kombat 9), and the real money spent on the DLC for seeing the Naruto characters in their swimsuit (Naruto Ninja Storm 4).

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[15] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHluZqfig2M
[16] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwjSHk1Q3po

Lastly, there is also a whole dimension about digital nudity that is "secret" and thus assume its value when it is discovered: the *Ring of Power* (1991) topless intro with cheat codes, the Enemy Zero (1996) secret shower scene after finishing the game, the Metal Gear Solid (1998) "Meryl in Panties" scene, and so on. These portions of the games are not only "optional" but actually often hidden, or at least hard see because you have to discover them by yourself: to erotically secretly "unveil" a digital "erotic" content. But here again what is the aim of all of this? Nothing is gained outside of the pleasure of unveiling and witnessing such a content, falling here again outside of the "win-lose" conditions and of the numerical structure of the system. We are thus here outside of narrativity system and schema of meaning but still inside textual cooperative mechanics and socio-cultural aspect of meaning-making.

In this last economic case we can see thus how, no matter if through extreme struggle (the costume earned by playing a lot of hours or the shower scene seen by finishing first the entire game) or instantly awards (loving someone in Instlife), some L&S dimensions ground their meaningfulness in both their scarcity (the *hidden*, the *secret*) and systemic *uselessness*.

3.5 Conclusions:

We have seen here how the real lifetime finitude of the reader gives meaning to L&S in digital games once it is invested in a text that by its system's closeness can ensure a high trust and safe bet inside of different regime's of scarcity and values of L&S features. This last aspect, as demonstrated, is integrated with the narrative structural system and rely on the encyclopedia of the reader as well as cooperative operations of meaning-making deeply rooted within the outside-text socio-semiotics layers of reality.
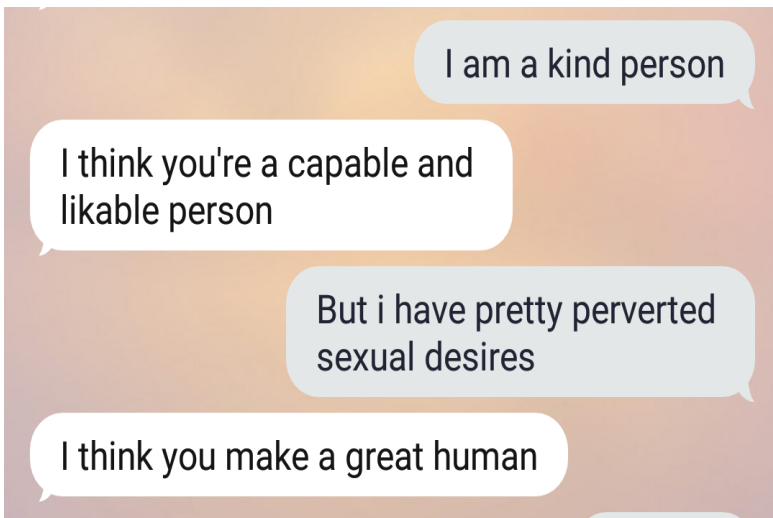
A Final Word

While in the past a great effort has been made to apply the traditional concepts of semiotics to games (Maietti 2004, Meneghelli 2007, Meneghelli 2011, Meneghelli 2013, D'Armenio 2014), this paper is part of a new semiotic perspective, already in course (Thibault, 2017), looking for a more specific understanding of meaning-making in games focusing both on sociosemiotic cultural aspects and on the semiotic processes grounding the cognitive and experiential dimensions of these texts. Indeed they are of interest for us first of all because they are *played* and because their meaning is not grasped through simulable patterns but *produced* through complex and heterogenic mechanism that requires for semioticians to work into and onto interdisciplinarity.
As shown in this article, for such a task the concepts of economic projectuality, digital sensibility through ratio, semantic manipulation and intersubjective enunciation appear to be the key terms to focus on for further researches. This perspective, however, should not be thought as something only useful for the specific semiotics of games, but hopefully as a something that could be applied to any kind of texts and should contribute to the general semiotic theory and especially for taking into consideration the experiential dimension of the meaning as a discourse that can and should be deconstructed (Volli, 2006).
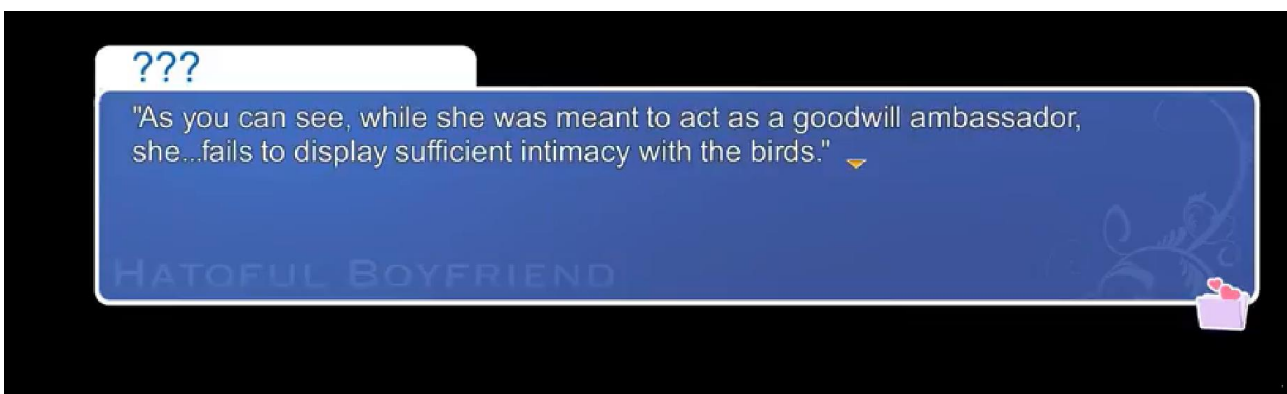
Figures

1) Replika, 2017

> I am a kind person
>
> I think you're a capable and likable person
>
> But i have pretty perverted sexual desires
>
> I think you make a great human

2) Alien jumping on the player (2013)

3) Game Over screen of *Hatoful Boyfriend* (2011)

??? "As you can see, while she was meant to act as a goodwill ambassador, she...fails to display sufficient intimacy with the birds."

HATOFUL BOYFRIEND

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