

McDonald, Heidi (ed). *Digital Love: Romance and Sexuality in Games*. CRC Press, 2017. Pp. 314. \$69.95 (paper). ISBN: 9781482237986

Review by Pauline Suwanban and Joshua Temblett

Published online: November 2022

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

Digital Love is the first comprehensive introduction to the relatively new field of romance in video games. It is a collection of essays contributed by scholars, writers, designers, and developers who are all prominent within diverse areas of the games industry. While it primarily caters to games academia, it is an ideal starting point for literary romance scholars who have little knowledge but are intrigued by how themes of romance, sexuality, love, pleasure and intimacy are treated in games.

Editor Heidi McDonald was formerly a communications professional before becoming a games designer at Schell Games. She independently researches on the topic of romance in games and created the foundation for this book at a game developer conference in 2012. Her paper identified a lack of discussion on sexuality and the popular franchise, *Dragon Age* (2009-2014) and from there, she received popular support from the community to publish.

This book is divided into four sections: “Representations of Gender and Sexuality,” “Romance and Sexuality and Game Design,” “Otome: Romance and Sexuality in Eastern Video Games,” and “The Future of Romance and Sexuality in Games.” Each part covers a wide range of games, from well established, big-budget developers such as BioWare to *Stardew Valley*, a smaller, independent publication. While addressing current issues of sexual representation, the sections call for more inclusivity and opportunities for further discussion.

The first section examines unseen and established gender stereotypes, and the opportunities to remove them. In Chapter 1, “Sexualization, Shirtlessness, and Smoldering Gazes: Desire and the Male Character,” Michelle Clough argues that most “Western’ male characters do not conform to a desirable, ‘appreciative gaze’, but instead, a display of ‘masculine power and physical prowess.’ Utilizing Laura Mulvey’s film theory of the ‘male gaze’ as her framework, Clough proposes that “Eastern” games create more sexually appealing men. In Chapter 4, Alexandria M. Lucas praises the portrayal of a unique, feminine alien race in BioWare’s *Mass Effect*, but also reveals how they conform to the “green-skinned space babes’ trope, which perpetuates highly sexualised, humanoid characters that ‘seem to exist primarily to satisfy the objectifying male player gaze.’ There is also a valuable interview

with the creator of *Stardew Valley*, Eric Baron, in Chapter 3, “Love on the Farm – Romance and Marriage in *Stardew Valley*,” by Amanda Lange. The game is positioned as a forerunner for modernizing old mechanics for newer audiences; Barone sets himself apart through his decision to gather feedback from the player community and create open options for characters to date and marry.

Section two focuses on creation process and game play, especially the act of receiving sexual pleasure from games. In Chapter 7, “It’s Time for This Jedi to Get Laid, about Bioware’s *Star Wars: The Old Republic (SWTOR)*,” Jessica Sliwinski analyzes the integration of sex and relationships within storylines, arguing the depth they add to worldbuilding. She sources informative input from the writers, making this chapter an insightful resource to designers and writers of the field. Sabine Harrer’s chapter “Intimate Games: Facing Our Inner Predators” introduces an emerging concept called intimate Nordic-larp style games which rely on “collaboration and bonding.” Harrer summarises three explicit, multiplayer games that offer unashamedly and playfully sexual experiences. Combining digital and real-life objects (e.g. stones), they experiment with the shuffle and synchrony of bodies and space. However, Heidi McDonald’s chapter, “Naughty Bytes: The Western Complications of Genitalia in Non-Porn Video Games,” proves that the environment in which games are exhibited and played must be considered with utmost sensitivity. According to McDonald, the use of hardware and physical interaction can lead to a reduction in the safe, intimate spaces that games are known to provide.

Section three is dedicated to Otome Games, Japanese and Korean games and visual novels specifically designed for a certain female audience. The essays convey the limitations of the genre as well as its close connection to popular romance literature. In Chapter 11, “‘Sweet Solutions for Female Gamers’: Cheritz, Korean Otome Games, and Global Otome Game Players,” Sarah Christine Ganzon argues that Otome games continue a prescriptive way of representing gender roles, even for Cheritz, which is a Korean all-female company and “claims to cater to women and women’s desires.” In Chapter 13, “Love Transcends All (Geographical) Boundaries: The Global Lure of Historical Otome Games and the Shinsengumi,” Lucy Morris proposes that historical Otome games are a form of historical romance fiction, briefly using Kristin Ramsdell’s definition of the latter.

Digital Love ends optimistically. For Marc Loth, in the last chapter of the final section, “Digital Love: Future Love – VR and the Future of Human Relationships and Sexuality,” emotional and erotic games pave the way for how VR will transform interaction, with progressive rather than damaging outcomes, but only if the audience is open to having sensitive discussions.

In conclusion, *Digital Love* clearly reveals engaging possibilities for further interdisciplinary collaboration between romance and games scholarship. This is available, not just in direct comparisons between the Otome genre and novels but the ways in which both mediums can influence each other to create diverse, pleasurable storytelling. There is an issue with the use of the term ‘Eastern’ to describe Japanese and Korean games, which is overly broad and omits the nuances and differences of specific cultures.