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## Adventuring for Digital Love. On the Readoption of Quest-romance in the Romantic Subplots of *Dragon Age: Origins*

**Abstract:** This paper presents a brief examination of the intersections between the literary tradition of quest-romance and digital entertainment. It discusses the readoption of this tradition into the romantic subplots of a fantasy digital role-playing game, *Dragon Age: Origins*. Grounded in theoretical literary approaches concerning the convention of quest-romance and its historical transformations, especially the introspective turn that can be traced to Romanicism, as well as quest-romance's cultural influences on popular romance narratives, the exploration addresses four in-game romances available to the player, with specific focus on their relationship to the main heroic plot, and their intrinsic structure based on constant challenges and eventual rewards. The analysis allows one to conclude that the romantic subplots of *Dragon Age: Origins* not only draw on the literary tradition of quest-romance, but they also engage medium-specific means of expression to accommodate its structural and thematic aspects to the reality of the procedural\*, ludic medium of the digital game.

**Keywords:** digital games, love studies, quest-romance, romance narratives.

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\* Procedurality of games is understood in the present paper as their quality of crafting representations of processes based on rule-based systems.

## Introduction

*Dragon Age: Origins*, a digital game developed by the Canadian studio BioWare in 2009, follows the popular pattern of single-player fantasy role-playing games that combine romantic subplots with a heroic storyline. It undertakes the story of a fantastic adventure, in which the player-character (from now on referred to as the PC) is cast into a whirlwind of events which assign them the responsibility of fighting monsters and saving the world. At the start of the game, the player creates the PC, whose role they assume for the rest of the game; the PC's class and race can be customised to fit the preferred playstyle (they can be a mage, a rogue, or a warrior, as well as an elf, a dwarf, or a human). During the game, the PC traverses a fantastic world, presented from a third-person perspective, and during these travels they perform tasks and fight enemies, primarily through the strategic use of skills, presented as selectable options in the game interface. They can be assisted by pre-determined non-player characters, whom the player can control during combat, but does not influence outside of it; the characters are designed as narratively autonomous from the player, and they often react to the PC's choices within the game. Importantly, *Origins* allows the PC to form a romantic bond with one of these characters. These relationships not only develop against the backdrop of the heroic main plot, but are also often intertwined with it, as the events at large resonate with the specific backstories and preferences of the romanceable<sup>1</sup> characters. That is to say, plot-related events trigger responses and judgments from these characters, generate context for private talks, and even prompt them to ask the PC to perform specific tasks for them. Such tasks become an integral part of the in-game romances – they serve as a show of effort on the part of the PC, and this effort, if performed according to a given romanced character's wishes correctly, allows for a gradual progression of the relationship. Thematically, the tasks often require the PC to help the romanced character deal with past traumas or overcome personal issues, which are further explored in the content of the dialogue. As a result, the privacy of emotional closeness and the actions of heroic adventuring become closely intermingled within the romantic subplots of the game.

The tension between the romantic and the heroic in fantasy role-playing games has not gone unnoticed within the field of game studies. Notably, Leonid Moyzhes refers to it in his study of the “ghettoisation” of love in another

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<sup>1</sup> Understood as possible in romance, as not all the characters introduced in the game can enter a romantic relationship with the PC.

game of the Dragon Age franchise.<sup>2</sup> While noticing the relational character of heroic adventures and romantic content, Moyzhes claims that there is a tendency to divide the two to achieve a certain rhetorical effect, as games time the bulk of love-related content to fit within moments of respite between adventures, following the common Western cultural association of love with a source of comfort.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, however, I would like to present an alternative interpretation of the interconnections between the two thematic areas. Namely, I argue that heroic activities serve as an integral part of heroic subplots, which in turn apply structures characteristic of heroic plots in their presentation of love and courtship, mirroring the heroic storyline on a more thematically intimate level. Furthermore, I explore how, in doing so, *Origins'* in-game romances draw heavily on the literary and cultural tradition of quest-romance and its transformations, particularly in Anglo-Saxon literature.<sup>4</sup>

This article, then, draws on the methodological perspective of literary-oriented game studies, specifically those that study game fictions not outside of, but in reference to the unique means of expression available to digital games, and which focus on the narrative potential of games as powerful mediators of stories.<sup>5</sup> The particular considerations in this paper aim to illustrate the tension between the digital game and a well-established literary tradition, and to therefore trace the potential games have for the recirculation of cultural themes as well as for their novel, contemporary, ludic re-arrangements and re-interpretations.

*Origins* serves as a compelling case study for such considerations. On the one hand, it employs fantasy genre trappings, which draw on mediaeval aesthetics, inviting connections to historical literary romance narratives, such as chivalric romances. On the other, the game exemplifies a broader pattern in fantasy role-playing games, specifically those made by *BioWare*. *Origins* follows the premise of including romantic content in a heroic fantasy game as established by the earlier titles of the studio, most notably by *Baldur's*

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<sup>2</sup> Leonid Moyzhes, "Love Without Consequences. Ideology of Romance Representation in Video Games. Case Study of Dragon Age: Inquisition," in *Love and Electronic Affection*, ed. L.D. Grace (CRC Press, 2020), 157–177.

<sup>3</sup> Moyzhes, "Love Without Consequences," 175.

<sup>4</sup> The subject matter of this paper was inspired by Tomasz Z. Majkowski's review of my PhD thesis, and as such is supplementary to one of the chapters of the thesis, whose theoretical considerations it partially re-states. See: Magdalena Bednorz, *Courtly Love in Digital Games: The Rhetoric of Emotional Labor in Selected Interactive Narratives* (Katowice: Repository of University of Silesia, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance: Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Free Press, 2016), E-book edition.

*Gate II: Shadows of Amn*, in which the player character could also romance several of their companions.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, this design choice not only remains present in the newer games created by the company, but it very nearly defines their brand, as *BioWare* is often regarded as the studio which sets the standards for romance in the role-playing genre.<sup>7</sup> This analysis of *Origins*, then, contributes to the discussion on the broader design trend by shedding light on a specific stage in its evolution.

### ***Dragon Age: Origins* – Game Quests, Quest-romance and Fantasy Heroics**

It seems appropriate to start such a consideration of the intersections of quest-romance and in-game romances by briefly defining the connection between the broader literary tradition and games. In order to do so, it is crucial to examine the concept of the quest as it relates to digital entertainment, particularly to the genre of fantasy role-playing games to which *Dragon Age: Origins* belongs, and to consider how it is rooted in the cultural tradition of quest narratives.

Firstly, within gameplay, the term relates to a unit of gaming activity, a specific task which a playable, player-controlled figure needs to complete in order to progress in the game. Often such tasks involve moving between two or more places within the world presented in the game and facing a challenge during the journey or by its end. These challenges may involve, for instance, fighting adversaries, gathering resources, and searching for or delivering objects. The definitions of quests provided by game scholars emphasise challenge and resulting gameplay progression as dimensions inherent to those tasks. Espen Aarseth discusses questing as the crucial element of the structure of adventure games, and describes it accordingly: “[t]he player-avatar must move through a landscape in order to fulfill a goal while mastering a series of challenges”.<sup>8</sup> Calvin Ashmore and Michael Nitsche claim that “[q]uests consist [...] of several recurrent properties, such as the objective, the task, and success or failure conditions,” while “as a device, the quest transcends game genres, and can be thought of as a means for structuring

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<sup>6</sup> BioWare, *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* (Black Isle Studios, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance: Heidi McDonald, “NPC Romance as a Safer Space: BioWare and Healthier Identity Tourism,” *Well Played*, vol. 1, no. 4 (2012): 23–40.

<sup>8</sup> Espen Aarseth, “Beyond the Frontier: Quest Games as Post-Narrative Discourse,” in *Narrative Across Media*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 368.

play within a virtual environment".<sup>9</sup> Jeff Howard expresses a similar sentiment in his book on quest design – he defines quests as means of structuring and directing game narrative and gameplay activity.<sup>10</sup> In view of these definitions, then, the term “quest” may be used to encompass even the simplest tasks and challenges within games whose primary theme is adventuring and whose structure relies on performing such tasks. In other words, quests can be considered a means to communicate adventuring themes through gameplay poetics.

Importantly, even while discussing quests with an emphasis on their gameplay function, researchers address the broader cultural tradition from which questing in games derives. Howard’s aforementioned book, *Quests: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives*, provides a good example. He argues that game quests, understood as an element of gameplay and story structure, fit within a broader cultural definition of the quest as a long, arduous search for something, and thus reference a broader literary tradition of heroic quest narratives.<sup>11</sup> Howard is primarily interested in how in-game quests adopt the basic template of stories which involve a hero venturing forth on a journey, overcoming internal struggle and external challenges, and returning victorious but transformed by the experience – which is consistent with the definition of the cultural tradition of quest-romance as provided by literary scholars. Northrop Frye, perhaps the most prominent scholar of romance, defines the genre as follows: “the essential element of plot in romance is adventure, which means that romance is naturally a sequential and processional form [and] an endless form in which a central character [...] goes through one adventure after another”.<sup>12</sup> He adds: “the complete form of the romance is clearly the successful quest, and such a completed form has three main stages: the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both, must die; and the exaltation of the hero”.<sup>13</sup> The echoes of quest-romance, so defined, are present in games, because, according to Howard’s perspective, a similar template is ap-

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<sup>9</sup> Calvin Ashmore and Michael Nitsche, “The Quest in a Generated World,” in *Proceedings of the 2007 DiGRA International Conference: Situated Play*, vol. 4 (DiGRA Digital Library, 2007), 504.

<sup>10</sup> Jeff Howard, *Quests: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives* (Wellesley: A K Peters, Ltd., 2008), xi.

<sup>11</sup> Howard, “Quests,” 1–28.

<sup>12</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 186.

<sup>13</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 187.

plicable to in-game quest structures, making them a bridge between literary tradition and procedural expression.<sup>14</sup>

Howard's work seems applicable to one genre of games in particular, as his understanding of the quest heavily relies on the heroic epics, such as *The Odyssey*, and mediaeval romances, such as *The Quest for the Holy Grail* and *Parzival*, often serving as the most culturally recognisable implementations of quest narratives, the references to which are commonly employed within the questing tradition of fantasy role-playing games.<sup>15</sup> This is further supported by the research of Eddo Stern, who, although he does not reference quests specifically, discusses the narrative structures and game design of massively multiplayer online games, and the inspirations they draw from mediaeval motifs, especially when employing fantasy genre trappings.<sup>16</sup> Such an employment of questing themes and structures is quite prominent in *Origins*. As a role-playing game set in the fantasy world of Thedas, it presents the story of the Grey Wardens, an order of legendary warriors tasked with fighting creatures called the darkspawn. At its core, the game encourages the player to engage with a heroic adventuring plot and with a gameplay structured around moving through game space while facing and overcoming challenges. As previously explained, at the beginning of the game, the player creates the PC, whose role they then assume, as they control them throughout the game in gameplay tasks, movement, and dialogue options. The PC, narratively, fits into the role of a questing hero, who is recruited to join the Wardens early in the game and who, when a battle against the darkspawn wipes out most of the order soon thereafter, is tasked with gathering allies to stop the upcoming darkspawn invasion. Like sir Galahad they undertake a perilous journey with a near-impossible task, like Odysseus they are continuously subjected to tests of skill and cunning. Their role in the main plot, therefore, fits with that of the archetypical hero in quest-romance, according to Frye's definition, mentioned previously. That reference is strengthened by the poetics of gameplay. As the PC traverses the space of a fantastic world, they battle monsters, gather allies, and develop their skills. The challenges they face are employed in gameplay through rules of combat, puzzles, and even approval calculations in dialogue structures. The journey is depicted through spatial progression on the game map and takes place as the player guides the character through their environment. The rewards for

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<sup>14</sup> Howard, "Quests," 1.

<sup>15</sup> Howard, "Quests," xi–xii.

<sup>16</sup> Eddo Stern, "A Touch of Medieval: Narrative, Magic and Computer Technology in Massively Multiplayer Computer Role-Playing Games," in *Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference Proceedings*, ed. Frans Mäyrä (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2002), 257–276.

the performance of tasks within the ongoing struggle involve, for instance, useful items and experience points. These points translate to character progression based on a levelling system, which allows for the PC to gain new talents and skills. In their adventures, they face choices, the sum of which shapes the final outcome of the game – which cannot be, outside of failure in combat, lost, but can have, in turn, several different endings. In other words, *Origins* fits into the previously discussed pattern of the reinterpretation of quest-romance tradition within fantasy role-playing games, as its quest structures not only reference the broader cultural pattern of fantastic heroic adventuring, but they also direct player engagement through the use of medium-specific poetics in communicating themes associated with cultural depictions of heroic adventuring, such as journey, challenge, and reward.

### ***Dragon Age: Origins'* Romantic Subplots – the Intimacy of Quest-romance**

As the PC of *Dragon Age: Origins* traverses the fantastic world on their heroic adventures, they can simultaneously form and develop relationships with their travelling companions. There are several predetermined non-player characters (NPCs) who can join and assist the PC and, out of those, four are “romanceable”, which means the game offers the opportunity to explore a romantic relationship with them. The initiation of a romance happens through specific dialogue lines, if picked. The selection of possible romances is determined by the PC’s gender – two NPCs are bisexual, and two heterosexual. The romances happen mainly through dialogue structures within in-game talks with characters, consisting primarily of NPC lines to which the PC must respond by choosing from a set of options. These can determine the NPC’s overall impression of the PC, as the selected dialogue lines are evaluated through an approval system. Points of approval can be gained or lost when a specific dialogue option is picked, based on the preferences of a particular evaluating NPC; the NPC’s reaction is predetermined by the game and assigned to a given dialogue line. The net total of these approval points determines a given character’s disposition towards the PC. Maintaining high approval with a specific character allows for the romantic subplot to progress, without ending prematurely. Several romances can be pursued at the same time, although if the progression of two or more goes far enough, the characters will ask the PC to choose between them, following the traditional patterns of monogamy in popular romance narratives. The narrative structure of the romantic subplots also fits within the larger patterns of ro-

mance narratives, as it prioritises slow progression throughout the game (the approval points accumulate gradually), and does not allow for casual relationships – each of the narratives emphasises eventual deep love and devotion. In turn, the implementation of dialogue choices and approval system causes a feedback loop, in which the favour of a lover serves as a reward for a correctly performed action. This seems to echo the association of love as a reward present in traditional quest narratives.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, a closer examination of in-game romances allows several further areas of overlap between their content and the structure of narratives in the quest-romance tradition to be discerned.

Firstly, the overarching adventuring plot serves as an integral context against which the romantic relationship between the characters develops. All four romanceable characters in *Origins* have personal stakes in the unfolding of the events of the main adventure. Alistair, a soft-hearted, armour-clad warrior and the only other remaining Warden, eventually confesses to being the bastard son of a late king, which renders him one of the possible heirs to the throne and a key character in the game's main political intrigue. Morrigan, the rather inconsiderate daughter of an ominous ancient witch, is not only personally tasked by her mother with helping the PC after saving them and Alistair at the early stages of the game, but she also hopes to accompany them during the final confrontation, with the intention of performing a black magic ritual for personal gain. Leliana, an unassuming ex-spy and now-cloistered sister, claims to have religious visions, which have prompted her to help the PC, while, at the same time, travelling with them provides her with a degree of protection from her past adversaries. Similarly, Zevran, a flirty elven assassin, finds safety from his associates in the PC's party, which he joins after a failed assassination attempt on behalf of the game's main antagonist. In all four cases, then, the events of the main adventure bring the characters together, provide them with the motivation to stay so, and direct the unfolding of each romance. The link between the heroics and the relationship dynamics is emphasised further in gameplay terms by the employment of the approval system. As the PC ventures on quests and makes decisions within them – such as how to resolve a political conflict or whose side to take between factions – their companions react, and similarly to the aforementioned case of dialogue choices, the romanceable characters' evaluations of the PC's actions translate into awarding or retracting points of approval. The romantic progression, then, is inherently related to the heroics performed during the game, as the structuring of choices translates directly into the status of the relationship. Heroic adventure thus becomes an inte-

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<sup>17</sup> Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 189.



gral element of courtship, as the progression in the romance both accompanies the progression in the main plotline and is determined by the PC's actions and choices within it.

Secondly, in-game quests, understood as tasks and units of gaming activity, are integrated within the structure of the romances. Within the game, the PC performs specific tasks; these tasks usually involve facing opponents in combat, resolving conflict through dialogue, and exploring areas of the game map. These tasks – deemed 'quests' – divide both gameplay and the game narrative into smaller units, while at the same time their completion awards the PC with rewards, such as useful items, new narrative possibilities, or experience points used further to develop their skills. Several quests involve the romanceable characters. Each of the characters either asks the PC to perform a task for them, or triggers such a task through their very presence in the party. Notably, while these tasks are not unique to the romance, and can happen outside the romantic context, they heavily influence its outcome and are crucial for the romantic progression. For instance, Morrigan's quest involves a confrontation with her murderous mother. Morrigan, after realising her mother intends to kill her, asks the PC to travel to her home and challenge her mother, which potentially results in a difficult combat encounter with a dragon. The quest, then, directly mirrors the classic structure of traversal, challenge, and exaltation of the hero mentioned above, especially since upon their successful return the PC is rewarded with Morrigan's appreciation both in dialogue and approval points. In contrast, Alistair, plagued by familial abandonment issues, asks the PC to accompany him during a visit with his estranged sister. While the quest that follows is not particularly lengthy or grueling, it does require game space to be traversed and support to be provided, especially as the sister does not want to reconcile. As there are several moments in which the PC can gain or lose Alistair's approval through the dialogue choices, the quest follows the same pattern of journey and challenge as Morrigan's, but the challenge concerns emotional support and skill in addressing his issues correctly, rather than literal combat. Leliana, similarly, needs help in confronting her past mentor, which turns into a lesson in self-acceptance. In turn, Zevran's quest presents a break from the general convention, since it is triggered in the form of his previous associate's attempt to assassinate the PC, the events of which are determined by Zevran's approval score. Nonetheless, in each case the events of the personal quest determine the potential future of the romance as a whole, because the PC's choices determine the character's approval, and in some cases even prevent the very possibility of continuing the romantic subplot. Additionally, all of these quests require some degree of effort to be performed by the PC both

in the story and through gameplay, since they involve combat or dialogue choice calculations. Moreover, the difficulty of the challenge is communicated through gameplay, as either the difficulty of a combat encounter or the necessity to navigate dialogue choices. Thus, questing becomes an integral part of the romantic subplot, as well as a means of courtship, and the challenges it involves serve as a way for the PC to prove themselves to their chosen paramour. In addition, these trials of love function as elements of the gameplay; they are communicated to the audience with the support of gameplay poetics, enhancing the emphasis on the challenging nature of forming and developing the romantic relationship. The use of quests in romantic content, then, along with the relationship between the romantic subplots and overarching heroic narrative, clearly references the tradition of quest-romance narratives, borrowing from them aesthetically and structurally, while at the same time accommodating the theme to the realities of the medium.

### ***Dragon Age: Origins'* Romantic Subplots – the Emotional Challenge of Quest-romance**

While quests as such comprise only a small part of *Origins'* romantic subplots, these subplots are fundamentally concerned with the themes of challenge, progression and transformation, characteristic of the quest-romance tradition; the evidence thereof can be found upon closer inspection of the dialogue content and structures. The talks with the romanced NPCs concern, primarily, the emotional turmoil and traumas of the romanced characters, which the PC must address by choosing one of several dialogue options. Alistair, for instance, traumatised by the repeated loss of friends and family, needs the PC to show unwavering support and provide him with comfort. Morrigan's harsh, almost unfeeling nature requires the PC to be both respectful of her attitude and insistent on building attachment, leading to her placing her trust in them. Leliana, torn between her religious beliefs and fascination with brutal spy-work, needs the PC to help her determine what path to follow. Zevran, initially unwilling to forge any meaningful connection, presents an exercise in gradually forming a deep attachment and overcoming trust issues; his romantic dialogue consists of minor displays of empathy towards the PC, for instance by gifting them things he might have mentioned in passing. Not only, then, do the romance dialogues require the PC to follow the patterns fitting the individual needs of a given character, but in doing so they also engage the themes of processual change through introspection and reassurance, and contextualise them as a calculation of gain and loss against

the approval system. Thus, they encode love as a series of challenges, primarily emotional and empathetic ones, which the PC must successfully navigate to prove their worth to their lover, and which (if undertaken successfully) lead to eventual transformation, mutual character development, and exaltation in consummated love – mirroring the heroic adventure themes, as outlined by Frye, in the more private, emotional sphere.

While quest-romance has always engaged with the themes of love, especially while presenting it as the motivator for the hardship of the adventure and its final reward,<sup>18</sup> such a close intersection of the inner, psychological and emotional dimensions with the structure of the quest-romance in the romantic subplots of *Origins* is reminiscent of a specific reformulation of this literary form – namely, the internally-oriented iteration of quest-romance traceable to the literary conventions of Romanticism. To specify: literary scholars notice a certain shift in how English Romantic and post-Romantic literature, when evoking the themes and traditions of quest-romance, uses them to address more internal, psychological journeys of self-discovery and self-actualisation. For instance, Harold Bloom, while discussing English Romanticism in terms of a revival of romance, discerns the following pattern of Romantic poetry: “[t]he poet takes the patterns of quest-romance and transposes them into his own imaginative life.”<sup>19</sup> Bloom continues by describing this tendency in psychoanalytically inspired terms as the internalisation of quest-romance, in which the journey is oriented internally, into the self, of which he finds examples in the works of Blake, Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth. Fredric Jameson observes a similar change in the Romantic tradition, but attributes this reappropriation and deviation from the traditional structure to social transformation and changing sensibilities.<sup>20</sup> Jameson discusses the degree of secularisation and demystification of the traditional magical elements of romance, as well as the resulting interest in the psychological aspects, including the rationalisation and internalisation of the hero’s struggles.<sup>21</sup> Notably, the Romantic alteration of quest-romance inspires Catherine Gimelli Martin, who, developing this discussion further, demonstrates the “persistence” of quest-romance in reference to the proto-Romantic senti-

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<sup>18</sup> Frye mentions the figure of the bride, saved during the quest and won as its reward, giving, for instance, the Sleeping Beauty and Brunhilde as examples; Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 193.

<sup>19</sup> Harold Bloom, “The Internalization of Quest-Romance,” in Harold Bloom, *The Ringers in the Tower. Studies in Romantic Tradition* (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 15.

<sup>20</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London, New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 115–117.

<sup>21</sup> Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 118–120.

mental novel, discussing the case of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*.<sup>22</sup> In doing so, she demonstrates fundamental analogies between the patterns of the novel and quest-romance structures and themes, as she argues that Richardson's novel includes motifs such as allegorical search, virtue rewarded, and social and individual redemption through sacrifice, as well as a chain of events structurally referencing that of quest-romance narratives.<sup>23</sup> However, she also affirms the transformed character of these motifs, adjusted to the gender identities of the characters and the socio-emotional conflict of the novel.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Martin both pronounces the influence of quest-romance on the *de facto* prototypical popular romance novel,<sup>25</sup> linking the modern genre with the broader romantic tradition, and emphasises the crucial transformations of the form. Pamela Regis presents a similar argument, as in her seminal study on the characteristics and history of the popular romance novel she identifies its roots in the broader romance genre.<sup>26</sup> When she lists common, core elements of the contemporary popular romance novel, they include the trials and barriers that the lovers have to overcome to be together, a sacrifice, the eventual overcoming of the previous troubles, and even eventual transformation through the healing and redemptive power of love,<sup>27</sup> thus loosely following the adventuring quest-romance structure in reference to the romantic relationship. Initially, Regis provides *Pride and Prejudice* as the illustration – with societal expectations, familial transgressions and personal miscommunication constituting barriers and resulting trials for Elizabeth and Darcy<sup>28</sup> – but frames these structural elements as core to the entire genre of the romance novel. Importantly, Regis notices a historical shift within popular romance narratives themselves, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She addresses the internalisation of the conflict between the hero and the heroine, whose struggles become increasingly entrenched in their personal and emotional troubles and differences, rather than societal causes.<sup>29</sup> This internalisation does not, however, change the core structure of the romantic narrative. Much as in the case of the proto-Romantic

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<sup>22</sup> Catherine Gimelli Martin, "On the Persistence of Quest-Romance in the Romantic Genre: The Strange Case of Pamela," *Poetics Today* 12, no. 1 (1991): 87–109.

<sup>23</sup> Martin, "On the Persistence," 102–104.

<sup>24</sup> Martin, "On the Persistence," 104–105.

<sup>25</sup> As indicated by Pamela Regis in her study of the contemporary romantic form (see: Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 63–74.)

<sup>26</sup> Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 19–22.

<sup>27</sup> Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 30–45.

<sup>28</sup> Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 31–38.

<sup>29</sup> Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 110–111.

rendition of quest-romance, the transformed narratives remain mostly faithful to the structure of their original genre, but present a more internally-oriented, affective and individualistic rendition of its themes. In doing so, they refer to the traditional structural patterns of romance, but adopt them in the depictions of the intimate and emotional trials and tribulations of the lovers' courtship.

In light of this tradition, it seems feasible to argue that the very structure of the romantic subplots in *Origins* – with their focus on overcoming internal challenges through ongoing emotional struggle, on the hero(ine) proving themselves as trustworthy to the chosen paramour, and on the psychological and emotional transformation – fits well within the post-Romantic and popular-romantic renditions of quest-romance, although no purposeful references are drawn within the game. Alistair's personal quest, mentioned previously, is a good example. Throughout the short questline, Alistair establishes his reliance on the PC's presence and his expectation that they will take charge and guide him through the experience of meeting his sister. For instance, when asked if he would rather meet Goldanna on his own, Alistair quickly explains that he is too nervous and refuses to go alone. It is possible to argue, then, that Alistair tasks the PC with the responsibility of shouldering his distress and providing comfort, thus translating the challenge of the quest into an exercise in emotional management. That management is further contextualised as an act of service in supporting Alistair, as the relationship between him and the PC is strengthened afterwards. Moreover, the quest leads to Alistair's personal transformation, because the confrontation with his sister leaves him disillusioned enough to address his naivety, which becomes the theme of several subsequent conversations.

Thus, the reappropriation of the themes of quest-romance in the particular case of *Origins'* romances concerns the journey through the psychological and emotional barriers, overcoming challenges rooted in a traumatic past, and emerging victorious in love – as Alistair overcomes grief and creates a new family, Morrigan opens herself up to trust another person, Leliana accepts her past through the PC's guidance, and Zevran allows himself to feel true attachment, all while the PC is rewarded with their affection and devotion. *Origins'* romantic subplots, then, seem to follow the post-Romantic tradition of adopting and reappropriating the convention of quest-romance in stories of intimate love, whose conflict stems from the internal turmoil of the characters. This turmoil is, moreover, adjusted to gameplay poetics, as it is encoded in dialogue-based calculations of approval, rendering the emotional, psychological quest gamified. Such gamification contributes to the overall interpretation of romantic love as gained through a gradual, transformative process, a series of challenges, in which love serves as a reward

for making an effort for the beloved. It also encourages audience involvement, as the player is asked to evaluate dialogue options and in picking them interacts with the quest-romance patterns as they actively shape the outcome of the romance story. In doing so, *Origins* loosely and seemingly unknowingly readopts the already transformed post-Romantic version of quest-romance. It does this in order to explore the struggles and challenges of love, while the game's purposeful heroic, adventuring background, as well as the procedural, gameplay-based employment of the relevant themes, seems to strengthen that connection and cultural association. Furthermore, it engages the audience in the reproduction of the patterns of quest-romance within the romantic content, as the players interact with dialogue choices.

## Conclusion

Questing for love manifests itself in *Dragon Age: Origins* in several ways. As the player character of *Origins* traverses the game world on a journey to save the world and slay the monsters, they do so together with their chosen beloved, who both helps them on their quests and judges their actions. The very possibility of romance between adventuring companions already combines closely the romantic with the heroic within the game. As the PC ventures forth to slay the monster, confront the estranged sister or a scorned lover, that tight link between questing and courting becomes even tighter. As these actions become contextualised within the romantic subplot, whose main focus is on continued empathy, understanding, and support, the task-quests themselves become an integral element of that emotional struggle. And, as that emotional support in itself is presented as a struggle, both in terms of thematic presentation and the procedural conditions of the loss and gain of approval in dialogue structures, the romance in itself inherently becomes a quest into the emotions and psychology of the lovers, whose final reward is the healing transformation of the world, the PC, and their paramour, when they reach emotional peace while establishing a relationship.

While to claim that the romances in *Origins* fully implement traditional quest-romance structures would be an overstatement, the thematic and structural implementations described above allow one to claim that the romantic subplots readopt elements of the previously transformed, romanticised tradition of communicating stories of the search and struggle for love, achieved through a series of challenges and proofs of devotion. Moreover, the procedural means of expression participate in this adoption of quest-romance references to the realities of the digital and ludic medium. The division of in-game activity into questlines with clear objectives helps establish

the adventuring character of the game and guides player engagement to face and overcome heroic challenges. The combat system, puzzles, and even the meandering character of the various game maps, all encode the difficulty of these challenges through gameplay-based means of expression. Finally, most relevant to the romances, the poetics of choice and the employment of approval calculations within dialogue structures add the degree of difficulty which mirrors the heroic challenges in the romantic conversations. Notably, the inwardly-oriented, psychological and emotional aspects of such a quest for love are also presented through the use of gameplay mechanics, including a choice system and its rewards. The psychological struggle of and for love, the internal conflict that must be overcome for the lovers to unite, becomes gamified as it is encoded in the rules of the romance. The resulting interpretation of love as an arduous, gradual process and a result of emotional efforts is thus reinforced through the interactive, goal-oriented, and progression-based nature of the game, while the audience engages with the references to the quest-romance tradition on the level of both story and gameplay, participating in the reproduction of these themes and structures in the process of play.

In doing so, *Origins* does not only engage with the established literary tradition, but it also adjusts it – or rather, in the case of the romantic subplots, its existing post-Romantic re-working – to both contemporary sensitivities and novel storytelling practices. The gamified, ludic and procedural version of internalised quest-romance for love illustrates how the old and the new can entwine in the digital forms of storytelling, and how the medium of digital games re-arranges the established traditions in appropriating them. As a result, *Origins* serves as an example of the circulation of the established literary themes in more novel storytelling outlets as well as their constant re-interpretations within (in this case love-related) cultural landscapes.

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## **Poszukiwanie cyfrowej miłości. O wykorzystaniu tradycji romansu poszukiwań w wątkach romantycznych w *Dragon Age: Origins***

**Abstrakt:** Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia krótką analizę punktów przecięcia między literacką tradycją romansu poszukiwań a rozrywką cyfrową. Omówiono wykorzystanie tejże tradycji w wątkach romansowych w fabularnej grze cyfrowej *Dragon Age: Origins*. Wychodząc od literaturoznawczych ujęć konwencji romansu poszukiwań i jego historycznych przemian, zwłaszcza introspektywnego zwrotu wywodzącego się z romantyzmu, a także jego wpływów na popularne narracje romansowe, analizie poddano cztery romanse dostępne w grze,



a w szczególności: ich związek z głównym wątkiem przygodowym oraz ich wewnętrzną strukturę opartą na niustannych wyzwaniach i nagrodach. Przeprowadzona analiza prowadzi do wniosku, że wątki romansowe w *Dragon Age: Origins* nie tylko czerpią z literackiej tradycji romansu poszukiwań, ale również, aby dostosować jego strukturalne i tematyczne aspekty do proceduralnego ludycznego charakteru gry cyfrowej, angażują specyficzne dla medium gier środki wyrazu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** gry cyfrowe, *love studies*, romans poszukiwań, narracje romansowe.

## **Die Suche nach der digitalen Liebe. Über die Wiederaufnahme der Tradition der Quest-Romantik in romantischen Motiven in *Dragon Age: Origins***

**Abstract:** In diesem Beitrag wird eine kurze Untersuchung der Überschneidungen zwischen der literarischen Tradition der Quest-Romantik und der digitalen Unterhaltung dargestellt. Er erörtert die Wiederaufnahme dieser Tradition in die romantischen Nebenhandlungen eines digitalen Fantasy-Rollenspiels, *Dragon Age: Origins*. Auf der Grundlage literaturtheoretischer Ansätze zur Konvention der Quest-Romanze und ihrer historischen Veränderungen, insbesondere der introspektiven Wendung, die auf die Romantik zurückgeht, sowie der kulturellen Einflüsse der Quest-Romanze auf populäre romantische Erzählungen, befasst sich der Beitrag mit vier Romanzen, die dem Spieler im Spiel zur Verfügung stehen, mit besonderem Augenmerk auf ihre Beziehung zur heroischen Haupthandlung und ihre inhärente Struktur, die auf ständigen Herausforderungen und möglichen Belohnungen beruht. Die Analyse lässt den Schluss zu, dass die Romantikmotive in *Dragon Age: Origins* nicht nur auf die literarische Tradition der Quest-Romantik zurückgreifen, sondern auch medienspezifische Ausdrucksmittel einsetzen, damit ihre strukturellen und thematischen Aspekte an die Realität des prozessualen, spielerischen Mediums eines digitalen Spiels angepasst werden.

**Schlüsselwörter:** digitale Spiele, *love studies*, Romanze, Quest-Romantik.