THESIS

CHOOSING LOVE:

PERFORMANCES OF ROMANCE IN MOBILE DATING SIMULATION GAMES

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2022

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ABSTRACT

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PERFORMANCES OF ROMANCE IN MOBILE DATING SIMULATION GAMES

With the launch of the Android app store in 2008, mobile gaming has occupied a surging niche in the video game market. While considerable scholarly attention has been paid to video games, with mobile games enjoying a portion of that attention, the study of dating simulation games is still emerging. Further, almost all existing scholarship on dating simulation games focuses on console- or computer-based games. This thesis aims to fill that gap by analyzing how dating simulation conventions translate onto mobile devices. What changes when a new platform, with its own conventions and affordances, is introduced? Through textual analysis of gameplay mechanics, visual style, and narrative, I examine how popular mobile dating simulation games offered through the Android app store construct and restrict player access to romance on the axes of time and money. Ultimately, I argue that the ways time and money flow on the mobile device afford unique performances of romance while foreclosing others, apart from their progenitors on consoles and PCs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to my committee, especially Dr. Evan Elkins, without whose support this thesis would not be finished. From my first undergraduate course with you to going through this thesis process together, I would not be the scholar I am today without your continued presence in my academic life. Thanks also to Dr. Scott Diffrient and Dr. Rosa Martey, whose expertise and knowledge was vital in the process of sharpening the focus, method, and organization of this thesis. Your continued feedback and encouragement before and throughout this process has made this project what it is today.

Thanks also to Dr. Kit Hughes, who saw an earlier version of the argument in Chapter Three during regular coursework. Much of the inspiration behind the larger theoretical structure of this chapter came from her area of research, and this thesis just wouldn't be the same without her input.

Thank you to my friends and family, especially Maia Zoller and the Martinezes. Many late-night tea breaks, weekend hikes, and dog petting sessions dot the trail I've taken to this thesis. Thank you for keeping me sane and grounded!

Finally, thank you to my graduate cohort, whose support (including much mutual lamenting) made this whole process a little more tolerable.

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CHAPTER ONE

PLATFORM AND GENRE CONVERGENCES IN MOBILE DATING SIMULATION

GAMES

Since the launch of the Android app store in 2008, mobile gaming has occupied a surging

niche in the larger landscape of the video game market (Anable, 2018; Chess, 2017; Feijoo et al.,

2012; Keogh & Richardson, 2018). In his foundational book on casual games, Juul (2010) notes

that games have become normalized in large part due to these downloadable casual games. 85%

of Americans now own smartphones (Pew Research Center, 2021), with Google App Store

grossing 38.6 billion worldwide in 2020 (Statista, 2021). Additionally, according to Balakrishnan

& Griffiths (2018), "It has been estimated that mobile app store revenue will amount to $69.7

billion by end of 2020" (238). With the undeniable popularity of these games, questions are

raised about their place in our lives (Juul, 2010; Keogh & Richardson, 2018), what makes them

enjoyable (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2018; Cutting et al., 2019; Merikivi et al., 2017), and as this

thesis is concerned with, how they track in feelings and the everyday (Anable, 2018).

While considerable scholarly attention has been paid to both video games and romance

narratives, with mobile games enjoying a portion of said attention, the study of dating simulation

games is still emerging. Romance's presence in video games has been characterized as a

secondary concern of players (McDonald, 2015; McDonald, 2016). This genre of games refutes

this assumption by placing romance front and center. Dating simulators, though less popular in

America than in nations like Japan and Korea (Ganzon, 2019), are also enjoying a small surge in

popularity in the United States Android app store: search results such as "romance game" or

"dating simulator" yield hundreds of results with thousands of user reviews for the most popular

among them (Google Play Store). Yet almost all existing scholarship on dating simulation games focuses on console or PC games, that is, games that are played on devices like the PlayStation, X-Box, and laptops (Andlauer, 2018; Hasagawa, 2013; Kretschmar & Salter, 2020; Richards, 2015; Tanikawa & Asahi, 2013). This thesis aims to fill that gap in literature by analyzing how dating simulation conventions translate onto mobile devices. What changes about these games – in both a narrative and mechanical sense -- when a different platform with its own conventions and affordances is introduced?

To that end, this thesis asks: How do platform affordances and their related economic drives blend with genre conventions in mobile dating simulation games to structure performances of romance? By taking seriously how time and industry operate differently on a mobile platform than on a console or PC, I hope to demonstrate that the performances of romance these games afford and encourage are inextricably tied to the conventions of the mobile platform. This thesis will contribute to a growing body of literature that is paying serious attention to video game genres that explicitly target women and queer players, while also expanding understanding of how platform affordances and conventions shape both narrative and generic possibilities. I will achieve this by analyzing a variety of mobile dating simulation games, analyzing how time structures and industrial conventions affect their romantic narrative potential. I examine a total of nine games, while focusing on two of these nine games for an in-depth textual analysis. These games are *The Arcana: A Mystic Romance* and *Lovelink: Chapters of Love*, which have been selected for their North American context and as a representative sample of the various *formats* these games take. Beyond that, I have additionally selected *Choices: Stories You Play*, *Romance Club – Stories I Play*, *Obey Me!*, *Love Story Romance Games*, *Mystic Messenger*, *MeChat: Love Secret*s, and *Soul of Yokai: Otome Game* to be

included in a broader analysis which takes place in the conclusion of this thesis. This analytical strategy, which is described in more depth in the Methods section, is aimed at capturing both the depth and breadth of the mobile dating simulation games offered on the Android app store.

In this chapter specifically, I will first give a brief overview of dating simulation games to contextualize my object of study before moving into an overview of the literature relevant to this thesis. Finally, I detail my critical method, including a justification of the geographical context of this project, before moving into a preview of the remaining two chapters. Ultimately, the study of these games can shed light on a historically undervalued genre, while also granting greater clarity to how these specific performances of romance are played out. This thesis will contribute to research in both video games and romance narratives, as well as the growing field where these two bodies of literature intersect.

A Brief History of Dating Simulation Games

Dating simulation games (also referred to as *otome* games when produced in Japan) are single-player video games where the primary goal of the game is to successfully court, or romance, the player's chosen suitor from a roster of available options. This is typically done through selection of dialogue prompts, which may ask the player character to choose between different outfits, actions, or comments that will affect the outcome of the romance. Emerging in the mid-1990s in Japan, dating simulation games have their roots in shōjo and *otaku* culture, which together formed a space in which women and girls could flex the boundaries of desire and pleasure (Andlauer, 2018; Hasegawa, 2013). Andlauer (2018) notes that, while the term *otome* is archaic, it was historically used to describe "an unmarried young girl, evoking the ideal of her femininity and virginity" (166). As these games are typically marketed towards women

(Andlauer, 2018; Ganzon, 2019; Hasegawa, 2013), representations of femininity track in notions of gender performance and how it relates to the act of romance and coupling.

It is clear that otome games represent a niche in the gaming market, especially abroad (Ganzon, 2019). 2006 saw one of the first entries into the genre in the United States with the localization of several Japanese titles; the following years saw more games localized and released, with games localized specifically for mobile devices released in 2011 (Ganzon, 2019). Now, with the increasingly global market for video games (Ganzon, 2018; Richards, 2015), the dating simulation genre is one that is ripe for scholarly attention. It is also important to note that no longer are dating simulation games produced solely in Japan; entries from South Korea (Ganzon, 2018) and the United States also exist, to name only two of the many nations which now produce these games. Table 1 demonstrates the geographical variety in just a small sample of dating simulation games produced for the mobile phone. This trend demonstrates that the growth of the dating simulation genre is related not just to their export, but to the creation of these games in multiple locations throughout the world.

The roots of the dating simulator game do capture some of the queer dimensions inherent in some of these games, though not in the same cultural context. With its origins in the shōjo aesthetic, which gave young women a safe space to explore homosocial desires (Andlauer, 2018), even the roots of the genre evoke a certain kind of queerness. Hasegawa (2013) notes that while dating simulator games were originally made for men, the early 1990s saw teams of female game designers emerging in the industry. Notions of femininity are revived and revised in the genre, grappling with the complexities of Japanese history and the (female) player's place in it.

However, otome games also tend to "depict conventional idea about heterosexual relationships" (Andlauer, 2018), and normalized performances of gender and courting tend to

correlate to "correct" answers in these games (Kretschmar & Salter, 2020; Richards, 2015). Richards (2015) described this phenomenon as the player competing against herself, putting aside her own preferences in order to win her favored character's heart (and the game) (p. 111). These dual elements reflect the status of dating simulation games as both progressive and regressive (Kretschmar & Salter, 2020) and demonstrate the need for an evaluation of the ways in which these games afford certain performances of romance while foreclosing others.

Literature Review

Because research in the field of mobile dating simulation games is still emerging, this literature review instead synthesizes several key bodies of literature to form the appropriate basis for analysis. Namely, theories from both dating simulation game research and mobile game industry research are combined, supplemented by more foundational video game design theory. This is used in combination with research on romance narratives to understand the context of both the platform and genre that mobile dating simulation games occupy. Overall, this literature review highlights the affordances of the mobile platform and the conventions of the romance genre, and how these elements shape player agency.

Gaming

Narrative and Mechanics

Interactions between narrative and mechanics are part of what crafts the subject positions available to the player. For the purposes of this thesis, narrative refers to the structure of stories and the strategies they use to position and engage readers, while mechanics refers to the rules of gameplay (Bradford, 2010). As previous scholars have noted, simply engaging one or the other is not sufficient as video games engage both in hybrid form (Bradford, 2010; Căşvean, 2015). Further, both narrative and play shape which subject positions are available and what form(s)

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they take, which is essential to understanding which performances of romance are afforded to the player.

Within the narrative element of games, Dubbelman (2011) analyzes how storytelling concepts emerge differently in video games than in other forms of media. They note the limits of the structuralist approach to narrative, where narrative is conceived solely as a *re*presentation of events, and instead proposes a presentational logic to understand how video games address their audiences. While representational narratives address "disembodied observers" (164), in presentational narratives "the user is cast as a character who determines his own fate by acting within the time and space of a fictional world" (165). Understanding the presentational narrative logic helps us to understand how the narrative form ties into both medium and player positionality. The presentational logic of dating simulation games, where the user is indeed cast as a character determining their own fate within a fictional world, also allows us to analyze player agency within the narrative as well as within the mechanics of the game.

Within the mechanical element of games, procedural rhetoric plays a key factor in understanding how games persuade players to take up certain positionalities and make certain choices (in)visible through the course of play. Ian Bogost (2007, 2008) argues that "Video games make arguments about how social or cultural systems work in the world—or how they could work, or don't work" (137). Here he references the mechanics of video games -- what is possible to accomplish in the world of the game, and what the code of the game allows or does not allow – as a key persuasive element. Regarding the dating simulation game, arguments about how dating is or ought to be are made through the options that are presented to the player and the rules that structure play. As their name implies, the genre is meant to simulate courtship and

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romance; thus, it is worthwhile to ask how the rules these games use to simulate these social behaviors make arguments about the act itself.

Bogost (2008) stresses that video games are not empty vessels, nor meaningless cultural productions devoid of meaning. Research has demonstrated that there is a psychological reality to procedural rhetoric; that is, players are aware of when games contain an argument and are aware of the domain in which the game is arguing, though games where mechanics reinforce traditional rhetoric were more persuasive than purely mechanical games (Anderson et al., 2019). Both the narrative and mechanical dimensions games, as well as their impact on the player(s), work together to craft not only the subject position(s) available to the player, but the choices that the player is free to make as well. The intervention this thesis makes is in addressing how they emerge in a specific platform and genre in the gaming industry. Additionally, by examining procedural rhetoric in the context of mobile dating simulation games, this analysis also reveals new applications for procedural rhetoric in expanding our understanding of the persuasive elements of the romance genre and the mobile app platform.

Casual and Mobile Games

Discussions of casual and mobile games foreground the specific and unique spaces they occupy in players' lives (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2018; Cutting et al., 2019; Juul, 2010; Keogh & Richardson, 2018; Merikivi et al., 2017). Since these games have their own distinct properties, including the time investment they demand, the skill level they assume from the player, the hardware a player must own to engage with them, and the industry conventions that surround them, they require their own attention in scholarly analysis.

Juul (2010)'s *A Casual Revolution* examines these trends in the context of what he terms 'downloadable casual games,' which are conceptualized in his book as computer games, but

which can be used to describe mobile games as well. Juul notes that casual games, contrary to stereotype, allow for shorter bursts of play but do not prevent players from indulging for longer periods (and indeed, many "casual" players spent decidedly "non-casual" amounts of time playing). He emphasizes the "fit" of a game into a player's life, which includes elements like time commitment, skill level, and hardware; all hurdles which casual games addresses. By building games which can be meaningful in short engagements, and which do not require special knowledge or hardware to engage with, the games engage different audiences and make different forms of play possible.

The element of time is particularly important, as casual mobile games occupy time in players' lives differently than their console counterparts, as is explored in Chapter One of this thesis. In many cases, mobile games contain elements of idling because of their specific commercial strategies (Dumas, 2019; Evans, 2016), and thus waiting to play becomes an essential part of the gameplay loop. Casual mobile games not only force us to recontextualize what time spent with a game looks like, but what engagement with a game looks like as a result. This has implications for player agency as these games often dictate when a player may engage with them through idling mechanics.

Additionally, as Keogh & Richardson (2018) note, "Mobile phones are taken with us out into the world. They are frequently used in public settings but yet are often also deeply personalized and intimate devices" (17). Thus, while these devices are accessible platforms to a different audience of gamers, they are also deeply personal and intimate devices (Anable, 2018). This thesis aims to examine this intersection in the context of a genre which emphasizes the personal and intimate (Christian-Smith, 1990).

Alongside a discussion of the device itself, a discussion of the mobile gaming industry is also necessary. The mobile gaming industry is ruled by two major tenets: a free-to-play model, where games are free to download but which encourage additional spending withing the game, and the attention economy, where the games compete for our attention among other apps and our busy lives. Mobile gameplay, then, is founded on a complex blend of design and commercial strategy (Evans, 2016; Whitson, 2019). These elements necessarily structure player choice through the gameplay mechanics and narrative techniques which emerge from these design and commercial strategies. This leads me to a discussion of the mobile gaming industry, and how its practices and conventions are reflected in mobile dating simulation games.

Because mobile phones are not complex consoles, and because they are multifunctional, small packets of software sold for little to no upfront cost are the norm. Mobile games are also less expensive to develop than console games (Feijoo et al., 2012). Versus a console game, sold for a higher, flat payment that unlocks all possible content inside, mobile games are sold for no upfront cost, but with microtransactions embedded inside to either unlock content or unlock freer modes of play. Whitson (2019) also notes that the mobile dating industry is not freed from major publisher's model of development, only looped into a new cycle of development that restricts developers along the lines of algorithms and collected data.

Additionally, research by Balakrishnan & Griffiths (2018) demonstrated that the purchase of microtransactions in mobile games are dependent on continued engagement with the game; thus, developers are encouraged to devise and implement mechanics which encourage deep and repeated engagement with the game. However, engagement is not necessarily intuitive or easy to spot. Scholars have identified elements such as 'stickiness' (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2018),

perceived ease of use, design aesthetics, and novelty (Merikivi et al., 2017) as important elements in the continued enjoyment of and engagement with mobile games.

The implication of this model on the dating simulation genre should not be understated; alongside the affordances of the platform, these industry pressures dictate the mechanics that appear in the games. This, in turn, impacts player agency through the choices that can be made by the player, which are structured by the rules and narrative of the game. As a simple example, a dialogue choice in a computer dating simulation game may only be locked behind a partner's total affection, if it is locked at all; meanwhile, dialogue choices in mobile dating simulation games may be locked behind premium currency, which is either bought or painstakingly accumulated through daily interaction with the application. What implications does this have on the emotional labor regularly performed by the player of these games, as is explored in Chapter Three? And what implications does this have on the design of the game in regard to genre conventions such as endings, affection, and art, as will be explored in Chapter Three?

Queer and Women's Gaming

As dating simulation games are often understood as a "female" genre of games (despite being originally created for boys and men [Hasegawa, 2013]), tackling game design from the perspective of "feminine" games is an important one. In her influential book *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity*, Chess (2017) does not examine dating simulation games explicitly but does provide fertile context for understanding video game genres traditionally advertised towards women. She notes that a combination of factors derived from interviews with industry professionals – ranging from platform design to thematic content to mechanics – can determine whether a game is intended for women or not (Fig. 1a, 1b).

This is key in discussing mobile dating simulators, as determining audience is a dimension of understanding imbedded ideological assumptions about the players of the game, and thus, what may and may not be possible within. Chess goes on to discuss the dimensions of labor that are captured within (largely mobile) games developed for women, and emotional labor as a key component related to the mobile dating simulator. Emotional labor is defined by chess as "labor where the worker is forced to sublimate his or her emotions and take on the burdens of another person's emotional state" (95). The dating simulator genre often asks women to perform this type of labor for virtual partners, requiring the player to stimulate personal growth in their chosen love interest to achieve the best possible ending for the storyline. Allowing stagnation – that is, not actively nurturing their virtual partner to grow and pursue their interests – typically results in the worst ending of the game, which may threaten the player with a breakup at its most grounded and character death at its most extreme (Ganzon, 2018). Thus, though these are choices the player *can* make, the game strongly encourages certain *types* of engagement with these characters, and thus, certain performances of romance are privileged over others.

However, the presence of emotional labor in these games should not be understood as wholly negative (though it certainly can be based on how the game affectively charges failure [Anable, 2018]). Chess (2017) notes that this labor can be satisfying for women to perform as they can perform it on their own terms and can 'win' the love of the virtual character by performing simple tasks with clear rules for failure and success. It is worth noting that the term "casual game" is also gendered along lines of labor (Keogh & Richardson, 2018), adding another layer to the complexity of the gendered elements of these games.

Though, that isn't to say that all dating simulators are heterosexual and cisgender; the recently released *Monster Prom* title is a notable entry into the genre that offers explicitly queer

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possibilities for romance. Kretschmar & Salter (2020) note that "The introduction of queer romances into a framework built for heteronormativity does not itself subvert that heteronormativity. Instead, it might simply enforce the same transactional mechanics and assumptions on queer relationships" (3), which is an important consideration for mobile dating simulation games which include opportunities to play with queerness. Just because it includes queer options does not automatically grant it liberatory mechanics and meanings; dating simulation games trend towards normativity and restricting performances historically, as the researchers note.

However, there is also queer potential in the very format of video games and their unique affordances. Chess (2016) argues that "All video games play with queer pleasure" (84), noting that their interruptibility – described here as moments of delay and narrative middle – disrupt heterosexist norms of a narrative traveling neatly towards a single climax. Though these narratives are often considered deviant, failing, or just plain bad, Chess argues that it is in these alternative narratives that alternative pleasures arise; that is, pleasures that are not associated with the reproductive act. Beyond mechanical affordances, this research points to the ways in which narrative structure itself may afford certain performances of romance.

Romance

Queer Theories of Experience and Time

As a majority of these games offer queer options for romance, some grounding in queer theory is necessary. Ahmed (2006), in her book *Queer Phenomenology,* discusses how life paths are restricted along certain (heterosexual) lines that direct the body on a straight line towards the other sex, meaning towards reproduction, to 'pay back' the debts of creation to the family. She notes that "a queer life might be one that fails to make such gestures of return" (21), giving a

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framework for the analysis of a potentially queer narrative. In the context of dating simulation games, this raises the question of if game encourages gestures of return, or is the player allowed to deviate from paths directing them towards marriage, family, and reproduction? Additionally, Ahmed notes that gender, sex, and sexual orientation are kept in line so strictly that *any* deviation produces a "queer effect," which also provides useful grounding for analysis. In what ways do the nonalignments in these games – either intentional or not – produce a queer effect? I want to be clear that it is not my goal in this thesis to judge the quality of the queer representation in these games, but rather, to understand more holistically what *kinds* of queer opportunities arise from these games (Shaw, 2014, 41).

To this end, Halberstam (2005)'s notion of *queer time* will be used to explore how the games in Chapter One of this thesis do or do not conform to this 'straight line.' Halberstam defines queer time as time which does not conform to schedules of family, of reproduction, of adolescence into adulthood. It allows for future which cannot be captured by "paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (2). This concept will be used in concert with Ahmed to evaluate the queer opportunities and potentials available in these narratives.

Queer Consumers and Markets

As this thesis engages with both queer texts and the market they are embedded in, research on the construction of the queer consumer is a valuable addition to its context. Again, while I am not engaging with questions on the *quality* of the representation present in these games, an understanding of the economic motivations behind queer representation can move us towards an understanding the *potential meanings* behind this representation. In this vein, Sender (2004) offers a robust and methodologically diverse examination of the history and construction of the

queer consumer base in the United States. She argues that "the gay community... is a construction, an imagined community formed not only through political activism but through an increasingly sophisticated, commercially supported, national media" (5), and that these constructions trend towards the "identifiable, respectable, privileged" gay man (173). Thus, the queer consumer targeted by these games is not a pre-existing group waiting to be tapped, but instead is a community that is called into being by the games themselves; this makes my thesis's goal of examining which performances of queer romance are possible a useful extension of this research. Further, some research regarding queer games and developers within the video gaming sphere has suggested that "value is extracted from this [independent] labor by developers and companies who look to the queer games avant-garde for inspiration, which translates (directly or indirectly) into profit" (Ruberg, 2019, p. 780). Thus, the inclusion of queer elements in these games represents a fraught, complex landscape of labor and development.

However, not all players who will choose to engage with these games will be queer. What function does the inclusion of queer gameplay have on the straight player? Becker (2006), in his research on gay television in the twentieth century, draws compelling conclusion regarding some of the myriad reasons queer media products may appeal to straight consumers. He argues that, for educated Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers, "Celebrating the difference of the marginal was valued as a marker of one's open-minded nature as well as one's social position as a highly educated, upscale (or at least upwardly mobile) cosmopolitan..." (120). The important thread between the queer consumers and straight consumers that are targeted by these marketing tactics is that both are assumed to be financially privileged. As noted previously, mobile games rely most heavily on advertising and microtransactions for their profit; thus, the inclusion of queer

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romance options in these games, in part, targets individuals who are presumed to have disposable income to spend on socially liberal products.

Romance Narratives

Scholars have noted how romance is a culturally derided form of entertainment (Radway, 1991; Christian-Smith 1990; Philips, 2020). However, these texts offer valuable insights into how women articulate their desires (Philips, 2020), understand their place in the world (Radway, 1991), and are constructed as subjects through narrative (Christian-Smith 1990). Besides illuminating women's anxieties about romance, they also illuminate dominant discourses of femininity, through either challenging or embracing said discourses (Philips, 2020). Thus, romance narratives in any form are a worthwhile site for study when aiming to understand larger discourses of femininity, romance, and sexuality circulating in society. What performances of romance are afforded by these narratives? What possibilities emerge, and which are closed off to the consumer?

Radway's (1991) research on the romance narrative in her book *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, though its findings are largely restricted to the specific group she writes about, is still useful for understanding how one subset of readers understands their culture and themselves through their reading habits. One of this book's most valuable contributions is its characterization of romance narrative as a way for female readers to cope with a patriarchal word (75; 139-140). These narratives construct male aggression as the result of misunderstanding rather than structural inequality and provides readers a space in which to both explore their anxieties about and reinstate their hope in male-female relationships (129). Throughout, Radway is careful to characterize the act of reading the romance as neither radically feminist nor wholly patriarchal; instead, careful complexity is required to understand how these

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texts construct their audience (78; 118). Again, though these findings should be contextualized within Radway's sample population, the insight into which possibilities are opened to the reader (and for what purpose) are essential in understanding how mobile dating simulations use narratives to further similar ideological ends.

Christian-Smith (1990)'s discussion of popular tropes in teen romances from 1942-1982 is also useful for understanding how romance constructs its (female) readers as subjects. Christian-Smith is careful to acknowledge that popular fiction does not necessarily *reflect* history but *constructs* it through ideologically charged representations of gender, race, class, and sexuality which are presented as neutral observations of how the world works (117). Indeed, in her ethnographic study of readers, Christian-Smith found that the worldviews of romance's readers are impacted by the tropes they consumed (133-134). Most important to this thesis are the themes of romance as a market relationship, romance as heterosexual, romance as transformative, and romance as personal/private (17). Christian-Smith notes that romance, in these novels, is characterized by an emotional exchange where the transactions are dictated by the different gender qualities each party brings (and, as the second theme describes, these parties are always male and female) (18). The economic exchange inherent in both real-world and narrative romance is, however, only "dimly grasped" by the heroines of these novels (19). These novels pose romance as a transformative experience, one that (largely) turns a weak heroine into a strong, confident, and desirable woman. Though some heroines do contest romance, their empowerment is severely limited and contested throughout (95). Finally, romance is characterized as a personal and private experience, one that discourages collective action and understanding. Because they are characterized as such, any problems the heroines encounter are understood to be individual problems and not problems with romance itself (128-129). These

wider 'themes' of romance structure not only what *types* of romance are possible in these narratives, but which types of romance are *legible* as well. This thesis expands on the findings of these authors by examining romance narratives which target more than just heterosexual women, and which feature more than just heterosexual romances. Do the same patterns emerge, or are different possibilities opened through the inclusion of queer storylines?

Romance and Video Games

Romance in video games has often been described as a secondary concern for gamers (McDonald, 2015; McDonald, 2016; Navarro-Remesal, 2018). However, romance in video games functions in ways distinct from novels or television; as stated by Navarro-Remesal (2018), "In virtual romances, we are not only flirting with a virtual character, we are also testing the limits of the system as a designed discourse with ideology and expressing our own ideas about love and wooing" (187). Because we are encouraged to play with romance, and in the case of dating simulation games, encouraged to shape it through our actions, we are subsequently exposing the *rules* for romance coded into the story.

When players were surveyed about what they define as romance in games, they identified elements such as game mechanics (including dialogue trees and gift-giving mechanics) and dating simulation games as the two biggest 'definitions' of romance (McDonald, 2015). The same survey also discovered that players enjoy experimenting with their genders and sexualities, though women were more likely than men to do so. Finally, several elements that made for *unsatisfying* romances in games were identified; lack of depth, poor writing, lack of 'payoff' for romances, lack of choice, and limited expression opportunities were the largest represented responses. It was also noted that women were more forgiving of "bad writing" than men and, given the previous discussion of video game and romance narrative, it may be that what is

classified as "bad" writing in these cases was simply writing that did not cater to the heterosexist, structuralist narrative mode.

Studies of dating simulation games frequently note how they construct femininity across specific lines, encouraging the player to enact a specific vision of femininity (typically pure, sweet, kind, sincere, sensible, fragile, and anticipatory to men's needs) in order to "win" affection from the chosen love interest (Andlauer, 2018; Richards, 2015). Ideals of both femininity and masculinity are explored, exhibited, and typified in this genre, with the rules you must follow and the performances you must enact to succeed at the game correlating to what is deemed the "correct" performances of gender and sexuality.

Ganzon (2018) has done foundational research on mobile dating simulators specifically, and her analysis of *Mystic Messenger* provides further important insight into how emotional labor and consumptive practices connect. She demonstrates how gender is produced in even simple controls and procedures. In this context, emotional labor is specifically enacted by requiring the player to anticipate the best performance of gender, emotions, and romance for each distinct love interest, augmented with the consumptive practices typical of the mobile game industry. 'Correct' answers in dialogue prompts – that is, answers that will result in the most ideal ending – often require players to demonstrate empathy for the character(s) involved. Though this is perhaps an intuitive way to mechanically simulate the act of courtship, it is also necessary to examine what kind of arguments these mechanics create regarding romance, gender, and sexuality, and what performances of romance are possible because of this. It bears repeating that otome games broadly engage emotional labor (Ganzon, 2018; Chess, 2017), manifesting as women's leisure time being converted into labor. As Ganzon describes, "women can have what they want as long as they have time and money to invest for these desires" (140). Ganzon's

analysis is foundational to this thesis, as it examines a mobile dating simulation game specifically. I hope to expand this budding field of mobile dating simulation game study by including an explicitly queer entry into the genre. Do different practices and narratives arise when the player is not explicitly female, and the love interests are not all males?

Studies of dating simulator consumers note that they are critical consumers, actively engaging with and challenging the narratives, and the individuals playing these games are both regionally and ethnically diverse (Ganzon, 2019). Audiences play these games to fulfil their needs for gratification, social interaction, and escapism, and one thesis found that longer gameplay hours contribute to parasocial relationship development with in-game characters (Qie, 2019). This corresponds to the relationships readers sometimes form to characters in romance novels (Christian-Smith, 1990). One study also found a correlation between the heroine of the game and the enjoyment of the story; the more the player enjoys the heroine's characterization, the more they will praise the story as well-written (Tanikawa & Asahi, 2013).

Notably, and to tie the theories here to the theory of procedural rhetoric, the 'choice' becomes the most important mechanic in the game, as with Choose Your Own Adventure novels; in fact, other mechanics may be nonexistent depending on the complexity of the game. Thus, the choices available to the player in these games are important to examine, alongside the queer (im)possibilities coded into the game. Because choice is the essential mechanic, and because the mechanics make arguments about how romance is or ought to be, the choices that each game affords the players – and how they are subsequently rewarded or punished for their choice – forms the basis of how these games argue for and against different performances of romance. Ultimately, I hope to contribute to the body of literature examining queer dating

simulators by focusing on games on the mobile platform specifically, while also applying

emerging theories to this different platform and the affordances it brings.

Critical Method

To reiterate, my research question for this thesis is as follows: How do platform affordances and

their related economic drives blend with genre conventions in mobile dating simulation games to

structure performances of romance?

Games were selected for analysis based on three factors: firstly, games had to be

downloadable on the English Android app store, with an English language option in the game;

games had to be described by the developer as featuring both narrative choices and romance in

the "simulation" category, or else identify themselves explicitly as dating simulation or 'otome-

inspired' games; and games had to exceed 1,000,000 downloads and had to have at least a 4 star

rating on the Android app store. This is to ensure that I can access and analyze the games, that

the games for analysis are indeed dating simulation games, and that the games are reasonably

representative of what is currently popular and high performing in the genre. As Radway (1991)

notes, the audience reception of romance narratives – that is, the romances that audiences find

compelling and satisfactory – is essential in understanding their function for readers. However,

as my own questions are primarily concerned with texts and affordances, audience reception is

not the focus of this thesis. Still, game ratings as a tenet of sample selection are a way to select

for these narratives that still considers how players may be feeling about these games.

Ultimately, nine games have been selected for analysis: *The Arcana: A Mystic Romance*,

developed in the United States with over 1 million downloads and 4.7 stars; *Choices: Stories*

You Play, developed in the United States with over 10 million downloads and 4.4 stars; *Romance*

Club – Stories I Play, developed in Moldova with over 10 million downloads and 4.5 stars; *Obey*

Me!, developed in Japan with over 1 million downloads and 4.7 stars; *Love Story Romance Games*, developed in Serbia with over 1 million downloads and 4.5 stars; *Lovelink: Chapters of Love*, developed in Canada with over 1 million downloads and 4.0 stars; *Mystic Messenger*, developed in South Korea with over 5 million downloads and 4.7 stars; *MeChat: Love Secrets*, developed in Cyprus with over 1 million downloads and 4.2 stars; and *Soul of Yokai: Otome Game*, developed in Japan with over 1 million downloads and 4.6 stars.

These games will be analyzed in two different depths. The first selection comprises two games – *The Arcana: A Mystic Romance* and *Lovelink: Chapters of Love* – and will involve in-depth analysis of an entire 'story' offered by the game, as scope and time allows. These two games have been selected for their similar development background (both being developed in North America) and for their different organizational strategies. While *The Arcana: A Mystic Romance* offers players one 'story' to play through, with six different characters to experience the story with, *Lovelink: Chapters of Love* offers players multiple characters, each representing their own individual 'story' or route. These two different organizational strategies are representative of the larger sample, and close analysis of these two games will grant some insight into how the other games in the sample may function. The other games in the sample which are not receiving a full analysis will be analyzed based on elements such as organizational format, microtransactions offered, amount of content available, and type of content available, brought together in the conclusion of this thesis. This style of analysis is aimed at the breadth of games available in the United States Google Play Store and is designed to give an overview of the general trends in the content available on the app store. This information will also be used to supplement the deeper analysis of the above noted games.

I am focusing on the North American context in this thesis. This is useful primarily because it allows for more specificity. More depth of analysis can be reached by restricting the focus, especially given the scope and timeline of this thesis. Because mobile dating simulation games are understudied, as previously noted, being specific also becomes necessary. The amount of scholarship that remains to be written about this topic is massive, and thus this project should be understood as one step in investigating this subgenre.

Additionally, much of the research into dating simulation games focuses primarily on games produced in Japan (Andlauer, 2018; Hasegawa, 2013; Qie, 2020; Richards, 2015; Tanikawa & Asahi, 2013), or else games produced in East Asia more broadly (Ganzon, 2018; Ganzon, 2019). This is, in part, because Japan pioneered the genre (Hasegawa, 2013); this does not, however, negate the fact that dating simulation games *are* being produced in North America (Kretschmar & Salter, 2020), and are worthy of study. Though not *all* games surveyed in this thesis are produced in North America, the two games which I will be analyzing in depth have been, and all games are analyzed through their position in the United States app store. Additionally, the mobile gaming industry and app store have a unique and geographically specific history, where the free-to-play model (and the history of onetime purchases it comes into conflict with) is well-established in the West (Consalvo & Paul, 2019, 88, 92). Given the focus of the third chapter of this thesis, this geographical specificity helps to situate the industry more solidly in its history.

Finally, the history of marketing towards queer people in the United States, as well as the economic development of the United States app store, situates the analysis in this thesis in both the Second and Third Chapters. Examining these games in the context of the economic and social histories that informed them is another way to achieve a greater depth of analysis. Queer

markets as both groups of people and industry constructions have some level of national specificity, and thus focusing on one particular national case is necessary given the scope of this project. Important to note is that I use the term "queer" here (as in "queer relationships" or "queer potentiality") to refer broadly to non-cisheterosexual romantic relationships. As I am specifically examining dating simulation games and depictions of romance, focusing on romantic relationships ensures focus and a practical scope in this thesis. Additionally, I define this term broadly (and use "queer" rather than "gay") because I want to capture bisexual and transgender potential alongside the gay and lesbian potential that the term "gay" typically refers to (Becker, 2006; Sender, 2004).

I now feel it necessary to explicitly discuss my positionality as I approach this project, and especially how it informs the way this project has unfurled. This is important not only as an acknowledgement that research is never truly value free (Holmes, 2020), but also because my history with this subgenre of games has had an undeniable impact on this thesis. For example, I first downloaded *The Arcana: A Mystic Romance* during my freshman year of college in 2017. This game has lived on my phone (or, more accurately, several phones) throughout my undergraduate and graduate careers, a duration which spans over five years. The promise of queer possibilities initially attracted me to the game; this was in concert with its fairly aggressive marketing on Tumblr, which was the only social media platform I used at the time. Due to my teenage years growing up in a conservative state, even the *idea* of expressing queer romance in a physical space was daunting. Thus, the dating simulator addressed my queer desire without demanding I leap out of the closet and into the realm of real-world dating.

This, of course, was not the only factor in my decision to play *The Arcana: A Mystic Romance*. The barrier of entry into popular options for queer romance like *Dragon Age* and *Mass*

Effect (McDonald, 2015; Navarro-Remesal, 2018) – both in the assumed skill level of the player and the hardware required to run the games – limited my options. I had never played a 'real' video game before. In addition, I didn't have 60 dollars or so to spend on a video game, especially not a game my hand-me-down laptop would not be able to run. I also cannot deny an affective element to my decision; my laptop felt like an incredibly public device, and not one that I could indulge in queer desire on. Thus, my positionality leads me not just to dating simulation games, but *mobile* dating simulations in particular.

This thesis is not an investigation of the needs these games fill in their players, which would require an audience survey. Instead, this thesis acts as more of an investigation into the functioning of these games, born from an intimate curiosity with the genre. I am invested in mobile casual games as someone who regularly plays and enjoys them at the same time I am invested in the romance genre for the same reason. This investment is impacted by my position as a bisexual person, as a nonbinary person, as middle-class person, and as a white person. Together these elements have guided me towards and through this thesis: as a fan, a critic, and ultimately, as a researcher.

To analyze these games, I will be using a form of textual analysis augmented specifically for the study of games, described by Fernández-Vara (2019). This method involves three arms of analysis: the context, game overview, and formal aspects. The first arm of analysis will include a basic industry analysis in Chapter Three as well as the context of romance narratives and otome games given in the literature review. This will be detailed broadly for all games in the sample, as they share a similar context by virtue of the sampling strategy employed. The second arm of analysis will include a discussion of affordances in these games as well as elements such as narrative and word choice, especially regarding subject position. What is (im)possible in each

game, and what does this say about the ways they articulate romance? The third and final arm encompasses the rules and interface design. Both latter arms will be described for each game and will be documented by transcribing the textual elements of the game and capturing screenshots and detailed visual descriptions of the games.

Consalvo & Dutton (2006) additionally propose a methodological toolkit for the qualitative study of games, which includes object inventory, interface study, interaction map, and gameplay log as areas of analysis. These four elements will act as additional guiding principles for analysis; however, the mobile dating simulation game requires a unique augmentation of these areas, as object inventory is hardly ever relevant in-game and mostly accounts for the acquisition of premium resources (as will be discussed in Chapter Three), whereas interaction maps provide the totality of gameplay (and as agency is a guiding theme of this thesis, this area becomes even more relevant). Thus, this toolkit will be used according to the name; instead of a framework which rigidly structures analysis, these areas will be deployed as relevant, which given the context of the games at hand range from 'very frequently' to 'hardly at all.'

This approach is also inspired by the work of Chess (2017) and Ganzon (2018), whose work on mobile video game analysis informs the methodological framework of this thesis. In Chess's analysis of *Diner Dash,* textual analysis takes the form of description of gameplay mechanics, visual style, and narrative, employed concurrently in order to forward arguments about the game's meaning for its female players. Ganzon, as well, uses a combination of gameplay mechanics, visual style, and narrative to describe how time is utilized as a form of currency in *Mystic Messenger.* These works provide useful examples for how to go about a rigorous and engaged analysis of mobile video games that account for the visual, textual, and mechanical elements in concert.

Given the text of this project, it must also be noted that video games, and especially mobile games, are an inherently ephemeral form (Manning, 2017). In the free-to-play mode, "the more content distributed the longer the 'shelf-life' of a videogame and the greater the profit potential" (199-200). Developers are therefore encouraged to continually update their games with new versions that supersede or erase older versions. This is one factor which makes the full extent of mobile games difficult to grasp. Another factor is the 'branching' nature of the dating simulation genre, where content is "hidden" within multiple branching narratives which cannot be accessed simultaneously. As Consalvo & Dutton (2006) note, it is implausible to attempt to record every single option available in a game; however, given the nature of this project and the questions it asks, it is necessary to grasp at least the overall structure of the romances offered by the games. As this project demonstrates, convergences between the genre and form of mobile dating simulators impact the whole of the game. For these reasons, I turn to fan archives of these video games – namely, fan-run Wiki pages – to supplement my analysis.

These archives have generated much scholarly analysis and discussion surrounding the nature of memory, preservation, gender, and labor (Busse, 2015; De Kosnik, 2016; Manning, 2017). To give a complete overview of this scholarship would be too great a departure from the focus of this project; here, my aim is simply to situate these archives as a secondary source that this project utilizes. De Kosnik (2016) notes that "Alternative archives propose new canons, canons of new types of objects or objects that are ignored by traditional archives" (75), making them an invaluable resource for the study of objects which, historically, have been maligned by both the larger culture and by gamers themselves (Anable, 2018; Consalvo & Paul, 2019). Additionally, the ephemeral nature of these games makes "the prevalence of 'game guides', 'cheat sheets' and 'walkthroughs' hosted on dedicated player-created websites" a useful

supplement to analysis, as they "provide rich, detailed descriptions of the content discoverable within videogames" (Manning, 2017, 203-4). My utilization of this content also acknowledges "the tension between love and labor" (Busse, 2015, 113) present in these archives, which bears a striking resemblance to the tension between love and labor in the games themselves (Chess, 2017; Ganzon, 2018). Overall, I utilize fan-run archives to supplement analysis, using it to pair with my own experiences playing these games and provide a more holistic analysis of the romance routes than I could produce if I played through these games in isolation.

Ready to Play: A Roadmap

I will now give a brief overview of the chapters present in this thesis. Chapter Two focuses on how time functions differently in mobile games, both in the way the narratives unfold and in the time they occupy in player's lives. Because these games are episodic in nature, with a "life regeneration" element popular in mobile games, play must take place intermittently. Additionally, due to the "ambient" nature of mobile games (Keogh & Richardson, 2018), they become a part of the user's life in specific ways unique to the mobile device. Drawing on literature from queer theory and video game studies, I analyze how these games do (or do not) use 'queer time' as a structure for romantic play, further exploring how elements such as notifications and intermittent play impact the queerness of these games overall. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate how the unique time structures of mobile dating simulation games integrate these romances into players' lives – both in the lives they currently live, and the lives these games argue they ought to live -- in specific ways.

Chapter Three focuses on microtransactions and 'freemium games' as an economic structure popular in mobile games, and how these elements interact with elements of in-game romance. Specifically, microtransactions change the meaning behind dialogue choices in dating

simulation games, affecting both how romance can be accessed and achieved. Ordinarily, these dialogue choices would be freely available to select; however, in mobile dating simulation games, choices are restricted based on locking desirable choices – such as the ability to change outfits, accept romantic advances, or unlock additional scenes – behind microtransactions. Thus, both the player's agency and the player's access to romance are changed through the implementation of microtransactions. This chapter will begin with a brief industry analysis, during which I will give some background into the mobile game industry and the paratexts which surround these games, before moving into a more in-depth analysis of how *The Arcana: A Mystic Romance* and *Lovelink: Chapters of Love* use microtransactions to structure performances of romance. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate how the context of the mobile game economy changes which performances of romance are possible based on capital.

This thesis ends with a brief conclusion, which will explore the additional games not utilized in in-depth analyses to draw broader conclusions about the types of romance these games feature and afford. It will also discuss broader implications from the findings of the two chapters, uniting "time" and "money" as structuring concepts in mobile dating simulation games. The neoliberal subject crafted by these games is discussed, as is these game's characterization of romance overall. Suggestions for future research are also offered as a way to encourage further scholarly investigation into this fascinating and understudied niche.

	Thematic	Collaborative/social	Time positive	Low risk	Creative expression	Lush aesthetics	Nonnormalized	Avatar selection	Low violence	Low harassment	Total
Grand Theft Auto IV											0
Tomb Raider										✓	1
Angry Birds			✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	5
World of Warcraft		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓			5
Wii Fit			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	6
Candy Crush Saga	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	7
Clash of Clans		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	7
Mystery Case Files	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	7
Diner Dash	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	8
Kim Kardashian: Hollywood	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	9
Restaurant Story 2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	9
FarmVille	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	9

Fig. 1a: Chess (2017)'s 10-point checklist for determining a game's intended audience; a score of 0 denotes that a game is masculine, a 5 that the game is gender-neutral, and a 10 that the game is feminine (pp. 53-4).

GTA IV (0)   Tomb Raider (1)

Score under 5

Angry Birds (5)   KK:H (9)

Score above 5 without thematic relevance   Score above 5 with thematic relevance

Clash of Clans (7)   FarmVille (9)
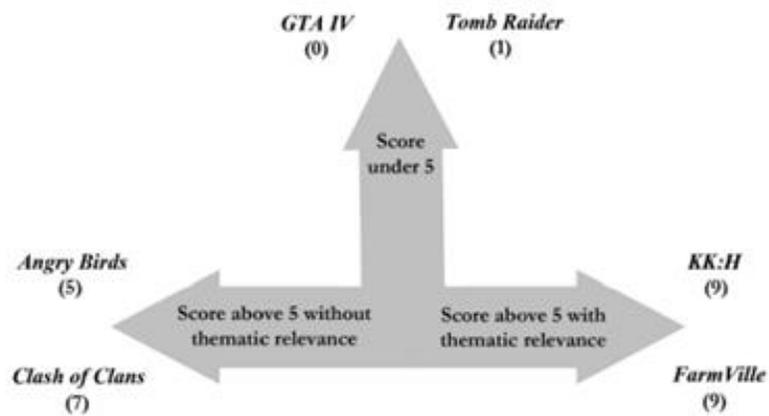
Fig. 1b: Chess also maps games along the axis of thematic relevance.

CHAPTER TWO

WAITING FOR LOVE: QUEER TIME, FAMILY LINES, AND AMBIENT

ROMANCE IN MOBILE DATING SIMULATORS

As demonstrated by Chapter One, the mobile gaming platform affords its own

conventions and mechanics which, as I will demonstrate, structure the performances of romance

that are accessible and desirable to players of mobile dating simulation games. In this thesis I

investigate two specific registers – time and money – and how they function both separately and

co-constitutively to craft an experience of romance distinct from both romance novels and PC-

and console-based dating simulation games.

In this chapter, I use the concept of "time" to explore both how these games structure

their narratives, including which possibilities of romance are considered available and desirable,

and how these games make use of mechanical elements to occupy a player's time in specific

ways. To do this, I use Ahmed (2006) and Halberstam (2005)'s concepts of a queer orientation

and queer time to guide the exploration of these game's narratives. First, I will engage with this

scholarship in more depth, connecting these pieces to the notion of queer narrative structure and

mobile game engagement to deepen understanding of how 'time' is functioning in these games.

Then, through an analysis of both *The Arcana: A Mystic Romance* and *Lovelink: Chapters of

Love,* I will explore how two approaches to mobile dating simulation games structure

performances of romance through both what kinds of romance are available to the player and

how the player is encouraged to spend their time with/in the app. Ultimately, I argue that these

games provide both expansive and restrictive opportunities for the performance of romance.

While the games offer some opportunities for players to explore non-linear relationship

structures, they also frame their relationships as an inevitable march forward, demanding increasing time investment from their players in the process.

Living With/In the Lines

"Sexual love," Ahmed (2006) notes, "is often expressed in terms of directional metaphors" (p. 69). This metaphor is also characteristic of time, as in "time's arrow" or imagining time as "marching forward." Halberstam (2005) also makes this point, noting that the "paradigmatic markers of life experience" often occur in a linear fashion; first birth, then marriage, then reproduction, and finally death (p. 2). The timeline of one's life, then, is plotted upon a linear trajectory in which milestones such as coupling are reached in an orderly fashion, achieved "without any deviation" (Ahmed, 2006). Both queer orientations and queer time deal with deviations from this linear progression, where "nonalignment produces a queer effect" (Ahmed, 2006) and "queerness [is] an outcome of strange temporalities [and] imaginative life schedules..." (Halberstam, 2005). Queer time is also the result of a *collapsing* of time, where there is "a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now..." (Halberstam, 2005, p. 2). In these ways, queer possibilities emerge when linear trajectories are bent, twisted, collapsed, diverged from, or otherwise broken through the lives we choose to lead.

This unfolding of time, whether one travels down an unwavering path towards reproduction or chooses nonalignment, also necessarily reflects how romance and love are depicted in fiction. Radway (1991) notes that "nearly all romances end in the union of the two principal characters," (p. 71), and thus these narratives have the potential to reproduce the path that leads towards coupling, marriage, and reproduction, at least in part. Andlauer (2018) also states of dating simulation games in particular that "These games feature particular tropes and characters and distinctive plot lines that draw from and also influence broader constructions

of love and fantasies of romance..." (p. 166). I am interested, then, in how mobile simulation games do (or do not) follow these paths, especially when queer romance options are offered. When a game explicitly foregrounds its queer romance (*The Arcana: A Mystic Romance,* n.d.; *Lovelink: Chapters of Love,* n.d.) are different possibilities opened? Does the platform (game versus novel, or mobile game versus console game) afford different imaginings of time that flex the normative life path away from the typical markers of a "successful life?"

Chess (2016) makes the point that, in some ways, video games already diverge from the linear heteronormative narrative by virtue of the form. In contrast to a narrative which moves, without deviating, from beginning to middle to end, "queer narrative exists in the never-ending middle that is dependent on alternative pleasures and is unconcerned with the reproductive act" (p. 88), with that "reproductive act" being the climax of the story. Because video games are largely not designed to be played in one sitting, which is doubly true for mobile games (Juul, 2010; Keogh & Richardson, 2018), there is no steady build to a singular climax. Therefore, instead of reifying the heterosexist act of reproduction by traveling directly towards climax, video game narratives are "placed firmly in moments of delay – moments of narrative middle" (p. 85). Combined with literature on the already ambient nature of mobile gaming (Keogh & Richardson, 2018), mobile dating simulation games are uniquely positioned to disrupt the "line of return" normalized both by other romance narratives and society at large.

Of course, the simple inclusion of queer romance does not necessarily mean the game is rigorously questioning, or even dismantling, a normative life trajectory; Kretschmar & Salter (2020) point out that "The introduction of queer romances into a framework built for heteronormativity does not itself subvert that heteronormativity. Instead, it might simply enforce the same transactional mechanics and assumptions on queer relationships" (p. 3). Sender (2004)

also notes that advertising targeted towards queer consumers "represents a set of methods for organizing a group of gay-identified and identifiable, respectable, privileged people—methods that perpetuate the myth of normalcy of professional-managerial class life" (p. 173). These authors point out the ways in which ostensibly queer relationships can still be pulled into normative frames that reinforce, or at least fit, the unwavering trajectory of birth, then marriage, then reproduction, and finally death.

As noted in the first chapter, I am not interested in evaluating the quality of representation in these games. Moving beyond the question of "good" and "bad" representation allows us to draw more contextual, situated conclusions that better reflect how players actually engage with these games (Shaw, 2014, pp. 41-2). Additionally, because "the dating sim... occupies a liminal space between progressive and regressive representation" (Kretschmar & Salter, 2020, p. 2), questions of what counts as "good" or "bad" representation become even less helpful for evaluating *how* these games, exactly, construct romance. Therefore, I will instead be examining which *paths* are offered to players; what trajectories are available and desirable? Which paths are foreclosed, and how does this change which performances of romance are at a player's fingertips? Precisely *because* these games offer non-heterosexual romance options, it is important to examine their narrative arcs through the lens of these timelines to see how they construct coupling as a part of one's life trajectory.

Narrative timelines, however, are only one register time occupies in these games. Time can also be understood quite literally as the time it takes to play and engage with these games; how much time they demand from the player; and ultimately, how they fit into player's lives and free time. At their base, mobile games occupy time in different ways than console games due to the device they are played on, and the design conventions associated with that device (Evans,

2016; Juul, 2010; Keogh & Richardson, 2018). Whereas console games may demand expensive technology and hours of free time from players, mobile games are played on mobile devices which tend to travel with the user throughout their day, and which have a multitude of functions beyond gaming. Consalvo & Paul (2019) also make the point that the length of time it takes to engage with a game is associated with how that game is perceived, namely that games which are "too short" are critiqued for not being "real games," adding a social dimension to the time we spend on and with a game.

For example, players may spend fractured time playing these games. Juul (2010) notes that, while casual games do not *prevent* players from spending extended time with/in the game, they are designed to be paused, put down, or otherwise pocketed at a moment's notice. Players may also spend idle time away from the game to progress it, if the game either restricts how much time can be spent at once or requires the game be closed to move forward. In other words, time that can be spent working, sleeping, conversing, or studying can additionally serve as gameplay (Dumas, 2010; Evans, 2016). When comparing "casual" and "hardcore" games, this division of time is brought into sharp relief; "real" games occupy unbroken, dedicated blocks of time, where "casual" games occupy these fragmented, everyday moments (Consalvo & Paul, 2019; Juul, 2010). However, just because these games occupy time *differently* does not mean they are inherently *worse*. This chapter is interested in taking seriously how games use player's time, both because of the moments and the types of devices they occupy.

This is especially relevant when the context is within the genre of romance. As Keogh & Richardson note, "Mobile phones are taken with us out into the world. They are frequently used in public settings but yet are often also deeply personalized and intimate devices" (p. 17). In a genre that also emphasizes the personal and intimate (Christian-Smith, 1990), these usages of

time will necessarily impact how the narrative is received. A story that is played straight through, as Chess (2016) notes, has different implications than a game which is played intermittently, exploring an ever-widening middle. Therefore, narrative time (how the story unfolds, which performances of romance are available and desirable) and mechanical time (how players can spend time with/in the game, how the game makes bids for player time) work together to structure each game's imagining of romance overall.

Moving forward, I will analyze two mobile dating simulation games in order to better grasp how time is deployed in these games. Through how they present their romances and how they pull the player's attention, these games make implicit arguments about how players ought to be spending their time; both the time that is immediately available to them, and the time they will have throughout their lives. In other words, these games occupy time in specific ways, both in how they encourage players to live their lives and the ideal lives they present to them. This chapter is, therefore, an exploration of time in two registers, and how a game may engage both at once.

The Arcana: A Mystic Romance

Narrative Time

The Arcana: A Mystic Romance (henceforth referred to as *The Arcana*) is described by the developers as an "interactive dating & mystery story" and "otome inspired" (*The Arcana: A Mystic Romance,* n.d.). Taking place in the fictional kingdom of Vesuvia, the player takes on the role of The Apprentice (henceforth referred to as the player character, or PC), a "young prodigy tarot card reader" (*The Arcana: A Mystic Romance,* n.d.) who is called on by the Countess of the fictional nation Vesuvia to solve the mystery of her late husband's murder. The game begins

with a five-chapter prologue introducing the characters, world, and main story, after which the game splits into six routes, each one corresponding to the character you want to romance.

The characters originally offered by the game for mainline romance storylines were Asra, "the wandering magician with a wealth of secrets," Nadia, "the widowed countess whose word is law," and Julian, "the fugitive doctor who hungers for revenge." Three characters who had originally appeared only as non-romanceable background characters were later added to the game as fully-fledged romance options, including Lucio, "the provocative Count whose presence still lingers over the city," Portia, "the trusted handmaiden with a penchant for snooping," and Muriel, "the fearsome outsider who owes an onerous debt" (Nix Hydra, 2022). Each character's route is fourteen 'books' long, with each book varying from one to three 'chapters' each for a total of 27 chapters. Each character then also has an "upright end" (or good ending) and "reversed end" (or bad ending) consisting of two 'books' with one 'chapter' each. Though the focus of each story shifts depending on each character's route, the player character's goals and the major story beats remain similar; solve the mystery of the Count's murder, find the culprit, and expose them before the masquerade ball. The fact that *The Arcana* chooses to use 'books' and 'chapters' as naming conventions specifically points to the ways in which dating simulators remediate the romance novel as a particular generic form, adapting it to a new context while also calling back to them in their aesthetics and tropes.

The main gameplay mechanic in *The Arcana* is choosing dialogue prompts at specific moments to progress the story. These can range from one to three choices and may be timed or include options that are opened by paying with in-game currency, 'coins' (Figs. 2a, 2b, 2c). These choices are represented either by brief descriptions of actions or short quotations, which are then expanded upon by the game's text to reflect the player's decision. The relative

mechanical simplicity of the story-oriented gameplay is common in dating simulation games (Hasegawa, 2013; Kretschmar & Salter, 2020), but *The Arcana* also offers players additional minor gameplay elements with slightly more complex mechanics. These come in the form of daily minigames players can engage in for additional in-game currency and mementos from love interests.

Through these diverse gameplay offerings, and through additional mechanical elements like the currency of "keys," the game itself is structured to encourage players to visit the app often and spend repeated, if brief, periods of time within it. However, if the mechanical element of time in the game is structured around repetition, then the narrative element of time in *The Arcana* is structured around a relatively linear progression of a relationship. First, I will explore these narrative possibilities surrounding queer time and non-linear life trajectories before moving into an analysis of the ways in which *The Arcana* structures its game to encourage specific usages of time by the player.

In *The Arcana*, storylines generally focus on the gradual growing closeness between the player and their chosen NPC. This growing closeness is represented through the progression through each chapter, where the player may either encourage growth in their love interest (which results in the Upright, or 'good' ending) or play into their love interest's vices (which results in the Reversed, or 'bad' ending). Each character has unique vices and directions for growth, and thus the player must assess each love interest's needs independently. Kretschmar & Salter (2020) note that players typically must perform normativity to be successful, and that correct (read: normative) responses to social cues lead to the best ending (pp. 1-2). Because the character's vices are correlate to the 'bad' ending, potential for transgressive romance and relationships is foreclosed in favor of amplifying more normative performances of romance. These performances

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typically mean anticipating and accommodating the character in question (Ganzon, 2018), with Richards (2015) likening these "correct" performances to the player competing against themselves; "If the player... wants to achieve the "good ending" with that character, she will need to put aside her own personal preferences, likes and dislikes in order to accommodate the preferences of her date" (p. 111). These dynamics all emerge, in one way or another, in the ways *The Arcana* constructs its relationships along a specific timeline.

For example, to unlock Nadia's Upright ending, the player must encourage her to open up to and rely on others; to unlock her Reversed ending, the player must push her to remain closed-off and controlling, assuring her she is the only one who can handle the problems presented to her. Conversely, to unlock Asra's Upright ending, the player must demonstrate their independence and capability by proving to Asra they can take care of themselves; to unlock his Reversed ending, they must continue to require care and nurturance from their mentor. Ironically, these routes are almost mirrors of each other, though they deal with a similar theme of (in)dependence. Of note is the fact that the love interests are encouraged to rely on the player to achieve their Upright ending, though the player is not afforded the same option. In Nadia's route, there is an instance where both Nadia and the player are cold and tired, and Nadia begins to tend to the player character. The option "Let her take care of me" contributes to the Reversed ending, and the option "You're shivering too" contributes to the Upright ending *(Nadia/Route,* n.d.; *Walkthrough/Nadia,* n.d.). In Asra's route, when the player sees a ghastly apparition in the forest, the response "... He scared me" contributes to the Reversed ending, while the response "... He didn't scare me" contributes to the Upright ending (*Asra/Route,* n.d.; *Walkthrough/Asra*, n.d.).

Radway (1991)'s findings demonstrated that the romance narratives she studied typically focused on the fantasy of nurturance (p. 55). The ideal romance in *The Arcana*, however, is

characterized not by the fantasy of *being* nurtured, but by the fantasy of *nurturing.* The player is encouraged to act as the active party, inspiring their love interests to open up to them and rely on them, and demonstrates their own independence and strength through the dialogue choices that lead to the Upright ending. When the player character admits weakness or acquiesces to the will of others, it places them on a trajectory towards the Reversed ending. This illustrates the way these games emphasize individual agency and choice. Because they encourage a neoliberal – or individually characterized, economically focused -- subject position from their players, romance is constructed as an individual act, not an act of a collective, which will be explored further in Chapter Three.

At the very least, this marks a shift in the way ideal romance is characterized from the novels surveyed by Christian-Smith (1990) and Radway (though, as noted above, this may be a case of players being asked to compete with themselves and their own desires to most successfully perform romance). However, this reversal does not necessarily *unseat* stereotypes of the "active and passive" parties in relationships. Kretschmar & Salter (2020), Richards (2015), and Ganzon (2018) all note that the most successful performances of *romance* typically correlate with the most normative performances of *gender* in dating simulation games, especially in terms of relationship behavior. Given this, it is notable that the feminine Nadia needs to learn to rely on the player while the masculine Asra is most successfully romanced when the player demonstrates independence to him.

No matter if the player is fostering dependence or independence, romance is constructed as two people (and only two people) becoming close and dedicating themselves to one another. This happens in a linear fashion (the love interest will grow closer to the protagonist as the story progresses without deviations) and is inevitable; players cannot *lose* their love interest, only find

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themselves in a healthy or unhealthy relationship. The Reversed endings, though they are 'bad'

endings, do not see the love interest leaving the player. In this way, coupling is assured no matter

the player's actions. And, importantly, though the player may play through several routes

simultaneously, these routes will not interact, and characters will never comment on a player's

decision to romance multiple characters at once. For all intents and purposes, these routes exist

in parallel, non-interactive timelines.

The difference between the Upright and Reversed endings demonstrates the ways in

which *The Arcana* assures coupling to the player by virtue of presenting 'good' normative and

'bad' non-normative representations of coupling. Upright endings are fairly tame in the material

they deal with; the player may see themselves ruling Vesuvia by Nadia's side or becoming a

traveling merchant with Asra *(Asra/Route,* n.d.; *Nadia/Route,* n.d.)*. The Reversed endings, by

comparison, seem fantastical and outlandish; Nadia becomes the literal Devil and you her

supernatural servant, or the player and Asra become trapped in a nightmare dimension with only

each other for companionship *(Asra/Route,* n.d.; *Nadia/Route,* n.d.). Thus, the ideal romance is

characterized as both more normative and more realistic than its non-ideal counterparts. The

options for failure are so outlandish in comparison to their successful equivalent as to not even

seem relevant. In this way, the player is assured subtly that success is the 'true' ending of

coupling, and failure is only a distant, nightmarish possibility. Because "dating simulators

encourage players to find the "good" or "true" endings" and "The rewards in dating simulators

most frequently correspond to successful courtship" (Kretschmar & Salter, 2020, p. 2),

performances of romance in these games characterize the most desirable romance as romances

that move towards the consummation of the narrative and the relationship, whether as co-rulers

of a nation or as a pair of traveling magicians.

The Arcana also offers examples of both implicit and explicit queer representation throughout the game, adding texture and complexity to the landscape of the narrative. All romanceable characters are "playersexual," or have an unnamed sexuality where they are attracted to the player character regardless of the player's own gender identity (Kretschmar & Salter, 2020), and thus are implicitly queer. Shaw (2014) calls this a sort of "optional representation," which "places the burden of representation on players themselves" (Shaw, 2014, p. 35). That is, a character like Lucio is not necessarily a queer character unless you, the player, are a man or nonbinary person romancing him. This kind of implicit representation is less a commitment to actual representation, Kretschmar & Salter argue, and more a result of developer laziness, where "game developers and writers don't see any reason to cut off any possible Romance Sidequests just because of gender selection, plus it would be more work to put in these limitations anyway'" (Kretschmar & Salter, 2020, p. 5). However, this implicit queer representation is balanced with more overt queer representation in the game. For example, Asra has been confirmed to be nonbinary (The Arcana, 2017) alongside other side characters (*Nazali*, n.d.). Further, characters are written as entering and exiting queer relationships outside of the player's influence on the world. Two of the romanceable characters, Asra and Julian, are ex-partners and reference this fact both within and outside of their specific romance routes. Importantly, they stay ex-partners even if the player is pursuing either character, and can even re-couple if the player does not pursue either of their routes. Similarly, Portia and Nadia are implied to couple if the player does not pursue either of their routes. This combination of implicit and explicit queer representation creates multi-layered opportunities for the player to both experience and observe queer relationships unfold, where the burden of representation is not placed solely on players.

Mechanical Time

Though there are some opportunities for players to freely explore queer relationships, the linear progression of the relationships, with coupling an assurance to the player (and more normative instances of coupling preferred over the fantastical), does not give many opportunities for the player to explore queer *time,* or queer *trajectories* through the narrative. In foreclosing opportunities for the player to fail in romancing the characters, for the player to romance multiple characters in the same narrative arc, or for the player to experience a delay in coupling as the preferred ending, for example, the player is instead given instances of queer *representation* that do not penetrate deeper into queer narrative *structures.*

How, then, does *The Arcana* track time from a mechanical perspective? And importantly, how do these mechanical structures give some opportunities for queer time where the narrative does not? Like other mobile games, it uses a currency called "keys" to restrict how much time players can spend in the game at once (Evans, 2016; Keogh & Richardson, 2018) (Figs. 3a, 3b). In this way, time is directly commodified, as is the ability to freely control or "unlock" freer modes of play. Players must spend keys to read chapters, and though players can gain keys beyond the threshold, they typically start with 3 keys which then must "regenerate" once spent. Thus, players can only read 3 chapters at a time before they must wait to read more. In this way, engagement with the app is regulated, where players *cannot* simply rush through their chosen love interest's route; instead, they must engage with the app incrementally, spending overall more time within it than if they were simply allowed to read as many chapters as they wanted in one sitting.

Here, one can see Halberstam (2005)'s notion of queer time emerging. While it is true that other mobile games use these tactics liberally (Evans, 2016; Keogh & Richardson, 2018),

the register of this tactic changes when in the context of romance. Namely, this practice shifts the focus away from the consummation of the relationship and narrative, and towards "the here, the present, the now" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 2). Because the future of the relationship can only be distantly grasped, and barriers to its arrival are placed upon the player by the game, the player *must* focus on the present. As Ahmed (2006) notes, "postponement or 'delay' threatens the line of heterosexuality, insofar as it risks 'uncoupling' desire and reproduction..." (p. 78). As this game postpones the "climax" of the narrative, it simultaneously tracks in queer time and trajectories by uncoupling desire and (narrative) reproduction.

However, this does not change the fact that time becomes commodified through its association with currency in these games (Ganzon, 2018). This monetary element, which will be explored in much greater detail in Chapter Three, is nonetheless still a piece of how the game structures time and engagement. This can be seen most clearly in the daily minigames which reward players with coins, the currency used to select premium dialogue options (among other things) in the game. If players wish to both select these premium dialogue options *and* play through the game without spending money, they must engage daily with the game to meticulously accumulate this premium currency. This currency can be accumulated in a variety of ways: players may spin a wheel daily for a chance to accumulate either coins or tokens from love interests, which then may be redeemed for "secret" scenes to play through; players may watch advertisements for free coins; players may sign into the game daily for 10 coins and praise from a random love interest (Fig. 4), gaining a tarot card reading from a love interest on the seventh day; or, players may play the Heart Hunter minigame, a randomized "strategy" game which sees players attempting to accumulate four hearts in six rounds to win a postcard with a message from a love interest attached.

In other words, players must "spend time" if they wish to avoid "spending money." This transactional bent is a noted feature of the dating simulation game (Ganzon, 2018; Kretschmar & Salter, 2020), and one which is brought into sharp relief in the context of the *mobile* dating simulation game specifically. When players are spending fractured time – that is, play time which is interrupted by other tasks and activities rather than dedicated play time – and when that time is used to gain premium currency as is popular in the free-to-play model (Keogh & Richardson, 2018), performances of romance are tied to the work it takes – time, effort, engagement – to gain access to additional opportunities for closeness and connection. That is, extra time with love interests must be bought with the player's own time investment throughout each day; spending time *with* becomes spending time *for.* In Ganzon (2018)'s words, "women can have what they want as long as they have time and money to invest for these desires" (p. 140).

It is important to note that players will already be spending time in the game playing through routes, where they are spending time with characters and on the actual gameplay itself. The additional dynamic of earning currency, combined with time restrictions, is where this spending time *with* a character is augmented with spending time *for* a character. Because additional performances of romance are tied to premium currency, and because premium currency is tied to spending the necessary time to gain it, romance is linked to this time the player uses *beyond* simply playing the game itself. In other words, you spend time *now*, so you don't have to spend money *later*. Through this practice, the game asks players to perform romance not just in the act of talking with each character, but also in the act of logging in, watching advertisements, playing minigames, and waiting for currency to regenerate. The performances tied to romance expand, permeating even the act of waiting to play the game again.

Just as mobile games occupy an ambient, diffuse time in player's lives (Keogh & Richardson, 2018), so do these games turn romance into an ambient, diffuse *act* in the player's lives.

Research on mobile games and engagement demonstrate that in-game purchases are motivated by sustained and long-term engagement with the app, which is in turn facilitated by increased time spent with the app (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2018, p. 239). Though long-term engagement translates to addiction for only a small minority of players (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2018, p. 239), games which foster repeated, daily interaction are intelligently taking advantage of the connection between sustained engagement and spending on in-game purchases. It should be noted that enjoyment is a strong predictor of continued mobile game use (Merikivi et al., 2017, p. 418), so while a game can *encourage* players to return daily to encourage in-game purchases, it is unlikely players will continue to engage with the game if they are not enjoying themselves. It is possible that the minigames players can engage with to earn premium currency are designed with this point in mind; if players enjoy playing these minigames, they will be more likely to continue engaging regularly with the app, and if they engage regularly with the app, they will be more likely to purchase in-game currency. Again, the monetary element of this game will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, which explores the implications of these encouragements to spend money in a dating simulation context.

Overall, *The Arcana* tracks in a fairly linear imagining of narrative time, while emphasizing repetitive actions in its mechanical structure. The narrative elements give players options to see NPCs acting queerly outside of and because of their input, offering different structures for living and relationships than a strictly cisgendered, heterosexual representation of love and relationships. However, the relationships the game offers also normalize (and indeed, insist upon) standard coupling at the end of each relationship and encourage players to shoulder

the burden of independence in 'ideal' relationships. The mechanical elements encourage frequent engagement with the app, through non-storyline minigames and a 'push and pull' present in the time-based currency, meaning that players are encouraged to engage with the game within the flow of their lives, not necessarily needing to "make time" for it; instead, it utilizes the empty time that already exists.

Lovelink: Chapters of Love

Narrative Time

In contrast to *The Arcana's* relative mechanical simplicity, *Lovelink: Chapters of Love* (henceforth referred to mononymously as *Lovelink*) reflects a newly emerging format in mobile dating simulation games. Specifically, *Lovelink* takes the form of a dating app like Tinder, where gameplay comprises swiping through profiles (Fig. 5a) and then chatting with subsequent 'matches.' Players choose how to respond through a 'text box' where they can select from between one to three responses (Fig. 5b). Players may also react to the character's messages with emojis, which increase the "relationship meter" at the top of the text interface (Fig. 5c). Increasing this "relationship meter" rewards players with small amounts of premium currency, occasional extra conversations with love interests, and new information about that NPC's interests. Players also go on "dates" with the characters, where the app adopts a more standardized dating sim format that sees the player interacting with characters and choosing dialogue prompts to progress the story.

Another notable difference between *The Arcana* and *Lovelink* is that, instead of focusing on only six characters, each with a distinct storyline, *Lovelink* offers a total of 101 characters (though only 85 are available to match with). However, not every character represents a completely unique story as in *The Arcana*. *Lovelink* functions in what I refer to as "archetypes."

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Here, archetypes are short descriptions of the general concept behind each love interest: a tattoo artist, a delinquent, a sentient AI, or a vampire, for example. Each archetype represents a single storyline but may have anywhere from one to three characters associated with it. When multiple characters are associated with a single archetype, those characters are referred to as "counterparts" of another. The 85 currently available characters represent 48 archetypes, and 32 of those 48 archetypes are represented by two to three characters. This means that players have a choice regarding the character's physical appearance in roughly two-thirds of currently available archetypes. The story remains unchanged no matter which counterpart a player chooses to pursue, including the CGs that players receive; the only difference will be the character's physical appearance (Figs. 6a, 6b). Mechanically, players may only match with one counterpart at a time (and thus will not risk experiencing the same story multiple times). Information on the characters *Lovelink* offers, including their associated archetypes, can be found in Table 3. These differences comprise the basis of *Lovelink'*s alternative approach to time, in comparison to *The Arcana.* Though there are some similarities, both narrative – playersexual characters, a linear growing closeness – and mechanical – advertisements and "selling one's time" -- *Lovelink'*s approach to game design sees both an increasing diversity in the kinds of characters and relationships that players can experience and an increase in the time commitment it asks of the player, in the form of aggressive notifications and multifaceted monetization options.

Speaking broadly, *Lovelink* follows *The Arcana* (and indeed, most romance narratives) in that it tracks a growing closeness between the player and their love interest. This is nowhere more apparent than in the "relationship meter" mechanic, which at its base gamifies the experience of growing closer to someone. Because players are rewarded when their relationship "levels up," granting them the currency necessary to perform romance in the game (as will be

discussed further in Chapter Three), this linear progression becomes a key element in the cycle of gameplay. "Correct" or "favored" responses, which vary by character, are tied directly to a greater increase in "closeness" with the character through the relationship meter. Once again, these favored responses are typically tied to normalized performances of gender and romance, where players must sublimate their own desires in order to "win" a character's affection (Ganzon, 2018; Kretschmar & Salter, 2020; Richards, 2015).

Furthermore, characters have universally positive reactions to "leveling up," which is the in-game language for the filling of the relationship meter. There is also no way to *reduce* the relationship meter through gameplay. The meter can only increase, no matter how the player responds; the only variation is in how *quickly* it increases. Again, relationships are characterized as progressing, never regressing, traveling forward on a fixed path that always leads towards increased emotional (and physical, given the Mature +17 rating of the game) closeness. Once again, as Ahmed (2006) describes, the heteronormative line of return is one which proceeds, without deviation, to the point of reproduction. That this game does not offer opportunities to deviate – either in reducing the relationship meter, pausing the relationship meter, or doing away with the relationship meter altogether – solidifies this line as one which cannot be deviated from, even if the player tries.

However, due to the episodic nature of these stories, this linearity is less solidified than in *The Arcana* and results in more "pauses" in play. As demonstrated by the current update status of each archetype, the conclusion of pre-existing storylines in *Lovelink* is suspended in favor of launching and developing new characters. This results in the (eventual) conclusion of the relationship being incredibly distant, if even in sight for the players. Here, a brief description of the three "modes" of storyline progression is necessary. *Lovelink* storylines can be sorted into

three categories, representing their current update schedule: "Found Love," "In Progress," and "To Be Continued." Those storylines in the "Found Love" category are fully complete and can be played through in their totality. Three of the available 48 archetypes have "Found Love." "In Progress" marks storylines that are not completed but are currently being updated. Six of the 48 available archetypes have a story that is "In Progress." That leaves 39 of the 48 stories in the "To Be Continued" category, where stories are not complete but are not currently being updated. The status of each archetype in the game can be found in Table 3. This means that, for roughly 80% of the archetypes players can romance, players will eventually find themselves waiting for an unknown amount of time for the character to return. This protracted waiting tracks, though perhaps unintentionally, in Chess (2016)'s notion of queer narrative pleasure, as it does in Ahmed (2006)'s notion of "deviations" from the direct heterosexual line of reproduction. Faced with no other alternatives, even the game itself encourages players to match with other characters while they wait for their paramour to return (Fig. 9).

Because the premise of gameplay in dating simulation games is a romantic relationship, players are assumed to be attracted to the character(s) they choose to romance. This necessarily means that player sexuality becomes one of the determining factors in which characters are *available* to the player as options to pursue (and, when characters are written as "playersexual," the player's sexuality is the *only* one that becomes a factor). Though Kretschmar & Salter (2020) make the point that dating simulators tend to erase individual preference by making "all characters... available to everyone based on successful interactions" (Kretschmar & Salter, 2020, p. 5), it should not be understated that the individual preference of the *player* is still a factor in which options are available and/or desirable. Not every player will choose to pursue every character, in part because not every player will be attracted to every character. Of course,

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attraction is not the only determining factor in a player's decision to pursue a certain character's route; they may want to experience the character's story or use the game to explore different personas and ways of being. This does not negate the fact, however, that making as many options available to as many players as possible would only serve to bolster these alternative modes of play.

Game design ethos also factors into this design element. Game designers may not *want* to provide as many options to players as possible, and instead may choose to focus on crafting specific characters with specific preferences and backgrounds. However, given the fact that there are so many characters available in *Lovelink* compared to *The Arcana,* and given the fact that they prioritize introducing new characters over developing current characters as demonstrated by the update schedule, providing many options to players is evidently of *some* concern to the designers. Providing players with multiple aesthetic options that cover a range of genders could be an opportunity to provide as many players as possible as many options as possible for romance. If there is no difference between the story arcs provided to players, no matter the aesthetic differences of the characters, who is to say that both male *and* female characters cannot represent the same archetype?

Indeed, this is the case for 6 of the archetypes in the game, where players have a choice between either a male or female character to romance. However, one will recall that there are a total of 48 archetypes available to players. Of these 48, 32 of them represent archetypes with multiple characters available for the player to choose from. This means that only around 18% of archetypes are mixed gender, with the remaining 82% of archetypes being single-gender archetypes. Of these single-gender archetypes, the majority (65%) are male-exclusive archetypes, meaning that all characters representing that archetype are male. Female-exclusive

archetypes represent 31% of the single-gender archetypes, with only 4% -- or one archetype –

being nonbinary-exclusive.

From this, it can be inferred that the options for romance are most diverse for players

who are attracted to men. This is not only by numbers; whereas female-exclusive archetypes

include "nurse," "cam girl," and "model," male-exclusive archetypes include "virologist,"

"chef," "rockstar," "photographer," and "tattoo artist." Female-exclusive archetypes are also seen

remixed in the mixed-gender archetypes; "animal lover" becomes "veterinarian," and "gamer"

becomes "game designer" (note how hobbies in the female-exclusive archetypes become

normative professional careers in the mixed-gender archetypes). *Lovelink,* then, gives players the

most opportunities for performances of romance when they are attracted to men, and also gives

those attracted to men the most options. Given the fact that the dating simulation genre has

historically been targeted towards and populated by an overwhelmingly female player base

(Andlauer, 2018; Ganzon, 2018; Hasegawa, 2013; Richards, 2015), this choice is situated within

the larger matrix of the heteronormativity of the genre, especially given that "Homosexual desire

in a woman... challenges the family line ..." (Ahmed, 2006, p. 74). When framing counterparts

and archetypes as an opportunity to provide as many players as possible with as many options as

possible, *Lovelink* falls short of this potential by locking much of its content into single-gender

archetypes, favoring those attracted to men over those who are not.

As far as divergent life paths are represented in *Lovelink,* the fairly linear nature of the

game circumscribes the narrative possibilities. Despite the nature of *Lovelink* as a dating app

where you are growing multiple relationships with multiple characters, non-monogamy is rarely

(if ever) addressed, and it is never addressed as a serious option for the player. Most of the

stories surveyed for this project saw the characters professing their total commitment to the

player early in the story, and for those who do not, it becomes a *part* of the storyline to change their minds (the "BDSM billionaire" archetype and the "tattoo artist" archetype are examples of this; note that these are also male-exclusive archetypes). It should be noted that this is a larger trope within romance novels, where the heroine must "[exact] a formal commitment from the hero" in order to "[provide] for her own future in the only way acceptable to her culture" (Radway, 1991, p. 81). That this is the hallmark of a *successful* romance (and romances which do not accomplish this formal commitment were considered failures by Radway's focus group) (p. 162) is notable. Within the framework of life trajectories, these narratives make implicit arguments about sexual coupling and the line of return; a man hesitant to commit to a relationship is threatening the institution of marriage, which is a necessary step in the linear trajectory of birth-marriage-reproduction-death.

However, because of the nature of the game, the player will most likely be dating multiple characters at a time, becoming deeply involved with them and thus making multiple commitments throughout the course of their time in the game. Therefore, even if it does not explicitly explore opportunities for non-monogamy, and still largely frames its relationships in monogamous, normative terms, it must still implicitly engage with these ideas by virtue of its format and the vast number of characters it offers to romance. This may give players opportunities to explore these kinds of relationships in a "safe" arena, where they are not asked to directly confront questions of coupling, monogamy, and normative relationship trajectories but can still engage playfully with the idea of a different way of romancing others.

Mechanical Time

This "push and pull" is made more tense by the mechanical structures which characterize how player are encouraged to spend their time in and with the app. As Bogost (2008) argues,

"video games can make claims about the world… with processes" (p. 125). This notion of procedural rhetoric illuminates the ways in which video games – and mobile dating simulators specifically – make arguments about "how social or cultural systems work in the world – or how they could work, or don't work" (p. 137). Given this, the mechanical elements of mobile dating simulation games make arguments about romance just as much as the narrative elements do. They structure which performances are at a player's fingertips, and both support and influence the narrative.

With this in mind, *Lovelink*'s mechanical structures encourage players to perform romance regularly through aggressive bids for the player's time. Multiple mechanics in the game are designed to make players prioritize *Lovelink* over other apps and other uses of free time. One of these structures is the game's ghosting mechanic. Upon opening the app, the player must open every message they have received since closing the app. If the app closes or reloads without opening a message, the character will comment on the player "ghosting" or ignoring them before re-initiating the storyline. This promise of a negative social interaction encourages players to, once within the app, spend time (and money) playing through all available updates in one sitting. Urgency characterizes these performances of romance, where the player is no longer able to close the game at a moment's notice; a hallmark of mobile gaming has been erased in favor of demanding players engage uninterrupted or face the (social) consequences (Juul, 2010; Keogh & Richardson, 2018).

The game also uses its mechanical elements to ensure that the player will be opening the app often. Premium currency can be gained by logging in every 6 hours versus every 24 hours with T*he Arcana,* and additionally, players may watch an advertisement to increase the amount of currency they gain (15 gems for no time commitment, or 25 gems for an additional 30-second

time commitment watching an advertisement). This means that, instead of engaging with the app once daily, players are encouraged to engage anywhere from one to four times minimum (depending on how frequently they redeem this currency). Again, as with *The Arcana,* this frequent engagement is part of what fosters desire to purchase microtransactions (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2018; Merikivi et al., 2017). However, whereas *The Arcana* was encouraging engagement only once daily with its options to earn extra currency, this app does so at a much greater frequency (and thus encourages sustained engagement with the app at a much quicker rate. Though this practice gives players opportunities to revel in narrative middle and ambient time, it also has implications for the monetization of the game when the mobile gaming industry structures these time elements, as will be discussed in Chapter Three.

Outside of the game itself, *Lovelink* employs an incredibly aggressive notification scheme to draw player attention. *Lovelink* sent a total of 461 push notifications over the course of four weeks (or roughly 16.5 notifications per day) during research for this project; the app with the next most frequent notifications sent only 20 over the course of four weeks. These notifications were formatted like a notification for a text message or instant message from each character and were received any time the player could progress their storyline (typically 2-3 times a day per character). Interestingly, the more frequently the player engaged with the app, the more frequently the app sent notifications; the story would progress more quickly, thus more messages from characters prompting the player to progress further, thus more notifications pulling the player's attention (and ultimately, their time). Thus, perhaps paradoxically the more time the player spends in the app the more the app demands of the player's time. Again, this frequency can be explained in part with the economic motives of the mobile gaming industry and how loyalty to games is fostered through repeat interaction.

These frequent bids for the player's time are only reinforced by the monetization options within the game. As with *The Arcana,* romance becomes a diffuse act through watching advertisements and spending additional time to gain the premium currency needed to facilitate acts of romance; however, in *Lovelink*, this is taken a step further by offering players premium currency for playing other games or signing up for partnered services. For example, players may sign up for Hello Fresh, a meal kit delivery service, to gain premium currency. They may also download Candy Crush, a popular mobile puzzle game, for an allotment of gems. Romance becomes more than an act performed in the idle time between gameplay; it becomes an act that permeates everything from playing other games to buying other services. Where *The Arcana* emphasizes the idle, ambient time players may use to engage with it, *Lovelink* is primarily concerned with engulfing as much of the player's time as possible, idle or otherwise.

Lovelink, even more so than *The Arcana,* emphasizes the competing forces present in mobile dating simulation games; that of narrative and mechanical time, and of progressive and regressive representation. Through its unique format, *Lovelink* is able to offer players – even implicitly -- the opportunity to explore coupling that is not guided by reproduction, occupying queer narrative space that is preoccupied with the middle and the now. That being said, many options for romance are still foreclosed by virtue of the gender diversity in the game's characters. Additionally, the game still frames relationships as linear experiences which can only progress forward, unendingly marching towards greater closeness and intimacy. And, as will be demonstrated in Chapter Three, *Lovelink's* aggressive notifications and monetization bring the transactional dimension of dating simulation games to the fore, buttressed by the mobile gaming industry's conventions of free-to-play models and the ambient nature of mobile devices.

Intersecting Lines: *The Arcana* **and** *Lovelink* **in Conversation**

As demonstrated by the above analyses, advancement is a key feature in both *The Arcana* and *Lovelink*. Whether this manifests as players endlessly advancing a relationship meter, or as an inevitable union between player and love interest, the mobile dating simulation games evaluated here placed a large emphasis on "involving that reader vicariously in the gradual evolution of a loving relationship whose culmination [they are] later permitted to enjoy… through a description of the heroine's and hero's life together after their necessary union" (Radway, 1991, p. 66). As discussed above, this has implications for the ways in which queer imaginings of time are (not) afforded to the player; however, I would also argue that this constant advancement forecasts the neoliberal subject position advanced through these game's monetary strategies. It bears repeating that, for players who do not wish to spend money on the game and wish to access moments of intimacy, care, and affection with their chosen love interest(s), repeated (and often painstaking) interaction with the game is necessary to slowly accumulate this currency for free. Players must budget both their time and their premium currency, weighing the amount of effort it takes to accumulate it (making time for advertisements, daily sign-ins, and minigames) with the potential cost of missing moments of intimacy. As will be further explored in the next chapter, this concept of budgeting and advancement, especially when connected to individual choice and agency, can be understood within the matrix of neoliberal selfhood.

Despite this focus on advancement, these two apps demonstrate how the mobile format itself affords a 'flexing' of time that ultimately results in non-linear play experiences. As players are caught in "the here, the present, the now" (Halberstam, 2005, p. 2) and are concerned not with the conclusion of the story but with "moments of narrative middle" (Chess, 2016, p. 85).,

the very affordances of the mobile casual game as interruptible and imbedded (Anable, 2019; Juul, 2010) lend themselves to a queer imagining of narrative time. As Chess argues, video games themselves afford this queer narrative time by virtue of the medium. Specifically, "The pleasure of gaming isn't in a singular moment, but in the anticipation and release of many singular moments, perhaps even moments that do not infer the productivity of reproduction" (p. 88). The queer nature of all video games, in comparison to novels, affords them a different imagining of time not constrained to a linear march to climax. My contribution here is that *mobile* games, with the specific affordances and conventions of the platform, queer time *further* in ways specific to the mobile device. By encouraging play which is concerned primarily with narrative middle, and by structuring interaction around pauses, interruptions, and the "spaces and moments… [that] form the closest thing we know to 'everyday life'" (Anable, 2019, p. 114), the mobile device queers time in ways that other types of video games cannot. Ultimately, the guiding tension in these apps is a 'push and pull' between elements which encouraged new imaginings of time, and elements which restricted them.

Conclusion

These findings have two major implications for the performance of romance in mobile dating simulation games. Firstly, dating simulation games *themselves* may be understood as a deviation from Ahmed (2006)'s "line of heterosexuality," as they "[risk] 'uncoupling' desire and reproduction" (p. 78). In dating simulation games, players derive pleasure and romantic, sensual fulfillment not from reproductive union, but from fiction and playful performances of romance. They uncouple desire and reproduction in the strictest sense of the term, in that these fictional characters can never and will never reproduce the "father's line" (p. 77) as heterosexual union does. Again, returning to Chess (2016)'s assertion that video games are an inherently queer

medium, I believe that further research may couple these two scholars and investigate the inherently queer format of dating simulation games (as Hasegawa [2013] argues). Secondly, and more revealing to the larger ideology of these games, are the ways these games utilize empty time to engage with romance. This is a departure from Radway (1991)'s book clubs, where time was made specifically for the reading of romance novels as a distinct leisure activity (p. 58). Ganzon (2019) notes an explicit connection between Radway's book clubs and otome communities (352), and further, Andlauer (2018) describes the ways in which dating simulation games, like books, construct "Fantasies of love and heterosexual relationships" (172) for their consumers. Through these fantasies, romance narratives construct an ideology of love and coupling that argue – both implicitly and explicitly – for how relationships should be understood and enacted by the consumer.

Though these games occupy a similar social function to romance novels, their engagement with the consumer's time is much different. Instead of experiencing romance in private moments made specifically for this activity, these games make romance something that can be performed anywhere, anytime, as long as one has their mobile phone and a few minutes to spare. By utilizing a personal device that can be brought into the public sphere, players are *physically* performing romance as they play the game. Anable (2019) notes that "Intimacy, the importance of touch and proximity, is a key factor in how we understand digital interactivity" (p. 55). The mobile device, as Anable discusses, is uniquely intimate in the ways it foregrounds touch as the primary form of interaction, describing it as a "sensual surface that functions within a larger affective system" (p. 85). It is not difficult to imagine how the very mobileness of the device – the way it is held and touched, in contrast to a game controller or mouse – heightens the intimacy of the game genre.

The mobile device also straddles the divide between the public and private (Keogh & Richardson, 2018); it can be brought into public places, and indeed, is expected to go with its user wherever they go. All of this leads to the ideology these mobile dating simulation games construct; or, in other words, these elements reveal how capitalism restricts and shapes the ways we imagine romance can be in these games. As they demand more of the players time, and as players must manage resources in order to 'win' the affection of their chosen love interests, intimacy is absorbed into the matrix of capitalism as work that must be done, and capital that must be managed and spent wisely. Thus, romance is not framed as an act that can be done freely; instead, it is something that must be earned, spent, managed, and carefully curated, just as capital must be in a capitalistic society.

Looking forward, I move to questions of *money* as a guiding factor in mobile dating simulator's construction of romance. I examine these monetary elements in conjunction with Hardin (2014)'s theory of neoliberalism to illuminate the ways in which these games imply certain gender and class performances in their players.

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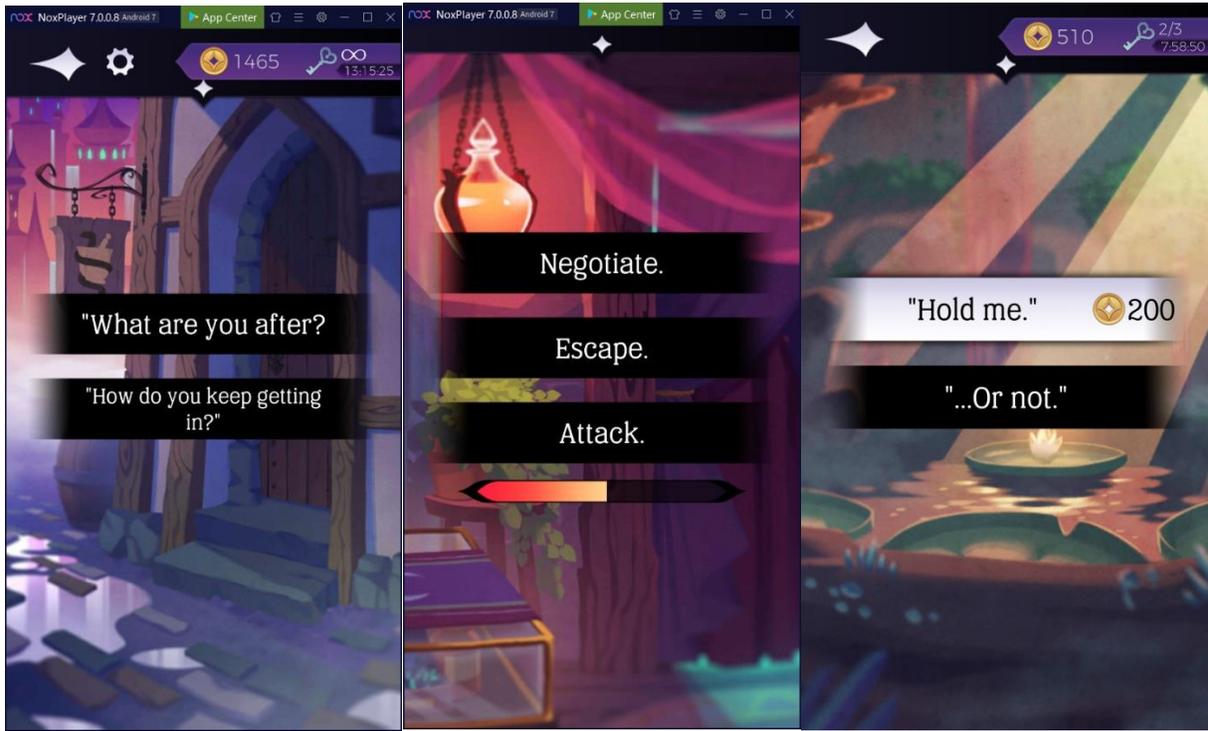
Fig. 2a: Free Choices   Fig. 2b: Timed Choices   Fig. 2c: Paid Choice
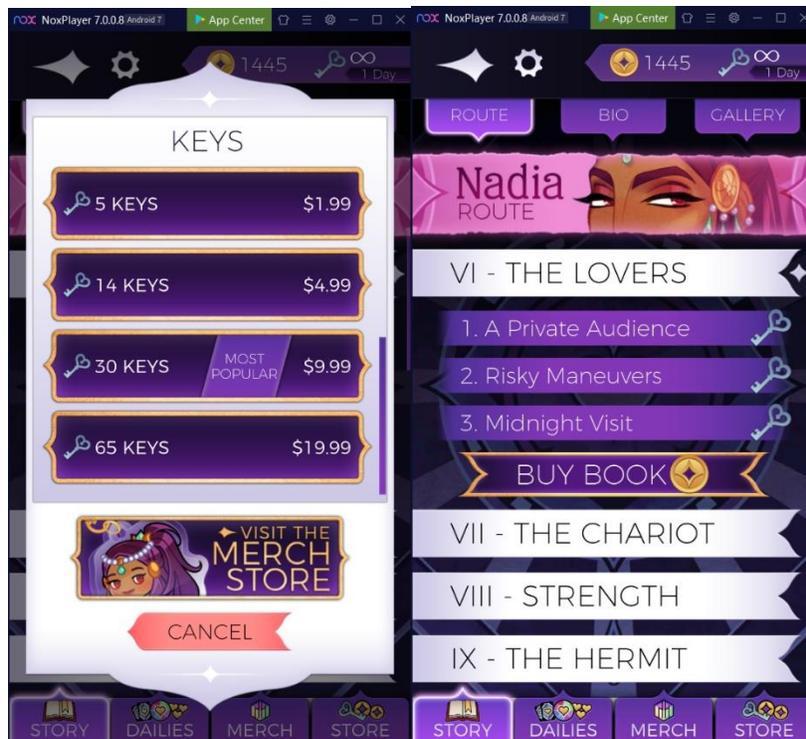

Fig. 3a: Buying Keys   Fig. 3b: Keys and Chapters

Fig. 4: Praise in the Daily Sign-In

Fig. 5a: Lovelink Profile UI   Fig. 5b: Chat UI Fig.   Fig. 5c: Message Reaction UI

Fig. 6a: Brett O'Hara CG   Fig. 6b: Susan Sheridan CG
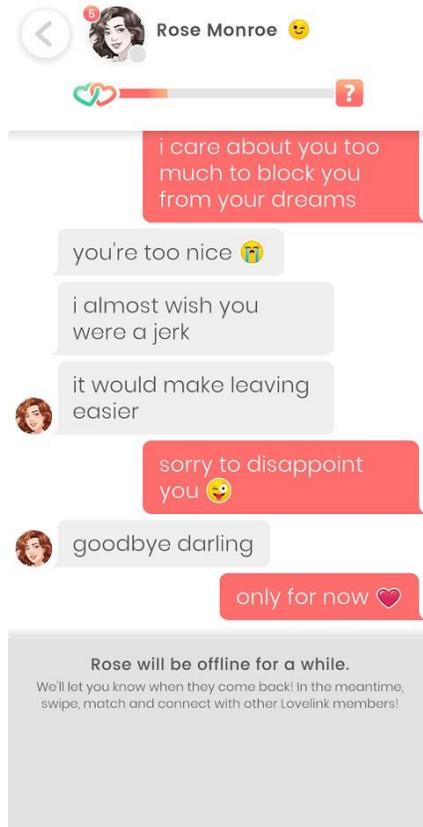
Fig. 7: 'Continue Matching' Message

CHAPTER THREE

P(L)AYING FOR LOVE: MICROTRANSACTIONS, AGENCY, AND THE NEOLIBERAL

INDIVIDUAL IN MOBILE DATING SIMULATORS

In Chapter Two, the concept of 'spending time' was discussed in-depth in regard to how these games fit into player's lives. Time, as a resource and a concept, structures these games in specific ways that afford certain linear performances of romance, but foreclose and restrict other performances based on both their time-positive structure and the types of narratives they offer. Time, however, is not the only currency that mobile dating simulation games function on. What happens when players do not have an abundance of time to spend? If these games are free to download, how are developers recouping the cost of game creation, distribution, and maintenance?

The answer to these questions comes in the form of microtransactions; that is, small purchases attached to virtual goods that players access in-game, most popularly seen in free-to-play games. As console and PC games are sold for an upfront fee, they typically do not employ microtransactions; once players purchase a game, all content within is technically free to access (though may be restricted based on a player's choices and selected routes). However, in mobile dating simulation games, microtransactions comprise a large portion of the game's economic model. In a way, time and money can be understood as ends of a spectrum, or axes in a chart; how successful a player can perform romance depends, in part, on how much free time and money they have (Fig. 7).

In this chapter, I will investigate the practice of microtransactions in mobile dating simulation games. By restricting opportunities for intimacy, both emotional and physical, behind

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microtransactions, I argue that these mobile dating simulation games make players pay for the opportunity to 'say yes.' While the neoliberal fantasy of individual choice in marketing paratexts primes players with a fantasy of complete control, this fantasy is not realized in actual gameplay. Strategic monetization implies a preferred class position of the player as someone who can afford to spend free time and money on their games, tying back into Sender (2004)'s analysis of the preferred queer consumer as "identifiable, respectable, privileged" (p. 173). In *The Arcana* and *Lovelink* alike, the player is invited to act out a fantasy where they embody a person who has every (material) need met, while their choice is simultaneously restricted by the presence of microtransactions. Ultimately, these games characterize romance as an individual act that the player alone is in control of, instead of an act that inherently involves the ceding of control to another party.

To forward this argument, I first describe in brief detail the history and conventions of the Android app store, as well as give an overview of Hardin (2014)'s theory of neoliberalism and Gray (2010, 2017)'s theory of paratexts, to contextualize the analysis of these game's economic strategies. Following this, I present an analysis of advertising materials distributed by each app which, as a player's entry into each game, frames the player's choices as ultimate and endless. Then, I analyze each game's economic strategies and how they impact the mechanical and narrative experience of, paying special attention to how these economic strategies restrict player choice and agency. Finally, I synthesize these findings into several broader discoveries about how these games, as products for the mobile device, foreclose and offer distinct opportunities for romance which are characterized by the individual, not the couple, as the preferred unit for romance.

Contexts and Paratexts

As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, the mobile game industry is a unique site for game development and marketing, and its embrace of the free-to-play model affects the gameplay mechanics that are included and popularized in mobile games (Evans, 2016; Consalvo & Paul, 2019). Prior to 2008, when the Android app store was launched, mobile games were incredibly simple pieces of software due to hardware limitations (Feijoo et al., 2012). However, with the launch of the Android app store, and the increasing capabilities of mobile devices, developers could exclusively focus on mobile game development, with a more stable distribution model and wider demographic appeal (Feijoo et al., 2012).

The Android app store, versus the Apple app store, functions on an open innovation model, reflected by the relaxed standards for app approval. This model fuels internal innovation as well as the external market for these products (Feijoo, 2012), contributing to the mobile gaming ecosystem of creation, distribution, and consumption. As the Android app store is multinational, with a low entry barrier for smaller companies, the Android app store (and specifically the Google Play storefront) is an ideal site to evaluate a niche gaming subgenre which is largely multinational in nature.

Feijoo et al. (2012) and Evans (2016) both note the prevalence of the 'freemium' mode of monetization in the mobile gaming industry, as this form of monetization becomes increasingly successful and lucrative. Initially sold for no upfront cost (but allowing the player to spend on premium assets within the game), freemium games "highlight the dichotomy between digital culture as open access and increasingly commercial" (Evans, 2016, p. 574), where they are at once accessible to any who can download them while also using commercialization as a guiding gameplay design principle. Whitson (2019) further notes that metrics guided by these

commercialization strategies often take precedence when making decisions about game design (p. 797).

Taken together, this picture of the mobile gaming industry demonstrates the ways in which the platform itself, and the economic conventions behind it, structure which gameplay elements are included (and thus, which narrative elements emerge to support or compliment them). Dating simulation games that are developed for and played on mobile devices will necessarily look and play differently than dating simulation games developed for and played on consoles or PCs. This chapter aims to investigate the ways in which these economic conventions afford and foreclose certain performances of romance, constructing player agency in specific ways consistent with the economic imperatives of the game. Though the games are free to download, not every choice the player may make is *free* to make, in both senses of the word. In order to investigate this relationship between romance and capital, and to contextualize these games within the larger matrix of American capitalism, this chapter draws upon Hardin (2014)'s theory of neoliberalism and corporism as a guiding factor in these games' characterization of choice.

Using Foucault's definition of liberalism as a grounding point – where "American (neo)liberalism 'is a whole way of being and thinking'" (as cited in Hardin, 2014, p. 207) – Hardin advocates for the 'neo' in neoliberalism referring to the growing role of the *corporation* in structuring society. In other words, "Individuals are refigured as corporations or entrepreneurs and corporations are treated as individuals. Rights are refigured as corporate rights, freedoms as corporate freedoms and even apparatuses of security are aimed at corporations" (215). This definition of neoliberalism is key to my analysis of this mobile dating simulation game as these games ask players to make financial *and* emotional decisions about love in a single dialogue

option; the needs of the self (for connection, kinship, and nurturance) have blended with the needs of the corporation (to make smart business decisions, to spend and hoard capital, and to weigh risks).

This concept nicely builds on Foucault's *homo economicus* to reveal the ways in which individuals are asked to not only act as entrepreneurs of the self, but also as corporations planning for an uncertain future. In this way, the private and public have blended together, where individuals are asked to hedge against an uncertain future by making smart individual choices (instead of pointing to the larger structures at play which make true financial success increasingly impossible for the average citizen). As romance has been tied explicitly to the private sphere (Christian-Smith, 1990, p. 17), and as the mobile device has been tied to "a mobilisation [sic] of private space" (Keogh & Richardson, 2018, p. 19), I will argue that these games model domesticity through microtransactions which ask the user to conceptualize private decisions as business decisions.

However, these games do not exist in isolation. As Gray (2010) notes, we are living in an increasingly saturated media world (which, in the twelve years since his book was published, has only become more saturated). To analyze these games as if they only existed within themselves would be a mistake; both Andlauer (2018) and Ganzon (2019) note the ways in which fan's interactions with these games changes their interpretive meaning for those who play them. My interest, however, is earlier in the circuit of culture than consumption; namely, that of the advertising material that surrounds these games. For these reasons, I would now like to move into a discussion on paratexts in anticipation of their analysis. As paratexts are a part of the industry (occupying the 'distribution' portion of the mobile gaming economy) and inform how players approach games through a building of expectations, I think it important to discuss how

these mobile dating simulation games construct themselves when trying to initially 'sell' themselves to players. Because they are games with no upfront cost, their advertising strategies are formulated not to convince players to spend money initially, but to attract them to the game enough to download it (so that the actual monetization can take place).

In his book *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts,* Gray (2010) defines paratexts as those texts that we "consume... on our way to consuming the '[text] itself'" (25). He states that paratexts "tell us about the media world around us, prepare us for that world, and guide us between its structures, but they also fill it with meaning, take up much of our viewing and thinking time, and give us the resources with which we will both interpret and discuss that world" (p. 1). For Gray, paratexts are imbued with their own meaning and significance within and beyond the text. It is not simply that these paratexts supplement their associated media; they work to create its meaning, sometimes in conflict with the text itself (p. 71). Thus, these advertisements are not simply supplementing the meaning of these games; they are co-constructing their meaning, and ultimately reinforce the neoliberal emphasis on individual choice that the games themselves operate in.

Gray (2010) specifically notes that advertisements "aim to create new, metaphysical meanings for a product..." (p. 27), where actual information about the product is not the focus; instead, elaborate semiotic chains are created in order to link concepts like familial cohesion, satisfaction, and happiness to the product. Advertisements "erase much information of what a product and where it came from" (p. 27) so they may instead craft their own narratives, their own characters, and their own meaning for the product. Therefore, though outlandish advertisements with little to no resemblance to actual gameplay may seem counterintuitive, they may actually be creating these complex semiotic chains in order to accomplish this.

In their dialogue on paratexts, Brookey & Gray (2017) also describe an instance where the film poster for the film *W.* was misleading in nature; "We expect the film to be goofy, a brutal attack, or both. But in fact, it played it seriously. The [poster artist]'s point was that he did not care because his job is to get you into the theater" (p. 103). This point is reminiscent of the argument I make regarding mobile dating simulation app advertisements; that their goal is not necessarily to advertise a product accurately, but to convince potential players to download the game. The paratext has its own agenda, its own meaning, and indeed, may not even be made by the same people making the game (p. 71).

But what do these advertisements – these paratexts – have to do with the game's *economy*? I argue that, through semiotic chains rather than accurate portrayals, these games advertise the player's absolute ability to control the world around them through choice. As will be discussed in the analysis section, these dreams are not realized in actual gameplay; however, through the game's advertisements and Google Play descriptions, the player is primed to envision themselves as a neoliberal subject in complete control of their destiny through smart choices and individual actions. Gray (2010) notes that "paratexts often tell us how producers or distributors would prefer for us to interpret a text" (p. 72), and here, the preferred interpretation is clear; you, the player, are the master of your romance.

I will first begin with a brief analysis of video advertisements from each game. Due to the nature of these advertisements as ephemeral – that is, they are meant to be consumed intermittently on third-party platforms, aren't typically posted on a developer's official social media accounts, and often won't appear if an app is already installed on a device – I have sourced these advertisements instead from fan-run communities, the justification of which was detailed in the first chapter of this thesis.

Across ads for the two games discussed here, the major theme of non-normative romance and intrigue appears in all advertisements for the games. Gameplay elements are also often featured in each video (though these gameplay elements are not always reflective of actual gameplay mechanics in-app). As mentioned, the goal of these advertisements is not necessarily to sell the player a game at a cost, but to convince them to simply download the game for free. Thus, generating intrigue is a viable tactic to curry interest in a potential player. Notably, because this intrigue is connected to non-normative relationships and characters, these advertisements target a specific market of liberal cishets and respectable queers "looking for an affordable politics of social tolerance" (Becker, 2006, p. 110). Advertisements feature narrative elements such a 'surprise transgender' partner in the case of *Lovelink* (SensorTower, n.d.) and implied threesomes in the case of *The Arcana* (CloudRoses, 2021).

It is important to note that these narrative elements are not reflective of actual narratives that play out in the games; in the *Lovelink* advertisement, two entirely separate characters, Jaime and Eve, are made to represent a single character, and though the characters in the *Arcana* advertisement are indeed ex-partners, you cannot simultaneously romance them. Using elements of nonmonogamy and queerness to market the game encourages a potential player to "[consume] cultural difference" (Becker, 2006, p. 121) while simultaneously marketing the app towards queer consumers. Because advertisers often presume that "gay men and women's disposable income [is] even greater than their straight counterparts" (p. 127), and that cishetero audience's "economic security often translates into progressive attitudes towards sex, gender, equality, and the environment…" (p. 112), the inclusion of this material also implicitly targets fiscally privileged players.

Gameplay mechanics are also misrepresented in these advertisements, though they are represented more accurately than narrative elements. In the case of *The Arcana*, where the only major gameplay element is choice selection, advertisements typically demonstrate a disembodied player making a choice (usually one that relates to the scandalous narrative of the advertisement) (CloudRoses, 2021). This serves the dual purpose of informing the player of the major gameplay mechanics in play, and additionally encourages the player to imagine which choices *they* might make in the game. Still, gameplay elements are sometimes misrepresented. For example, *Arcana* advertisements feature such diverse (and false) gameplay mechanics as a Mad Libs style fill-in-the-blank and a bizarre tactile minigame where a disembodied player wipes steam off of the phone screen to reveal the characters in bathrobes (shortycakey, 2022a, 2022b). For a game like *Lovelink,* where mechanics are more complex, advertisements represent the mechanics in a more straightforward manner. Key elements of gameplay like swiping, matching, and chatting with characters form the bulk of the featured elements in advertisements (Apkpure, n.d.). This could be because, as the mechanics for gameplay are more complex, they must be more thoroughly explained to potential players to attract them to the game.

Ultimately, these paratexts serve as a 'primer' for the texts themselves; they give the player information about the game, and as Brookey & Gray (2017) note, "Interface is part and parcel with paratext. It is one of the gateways we enter through to get things" (p. 104). Here, these paratexts are not necessarily demonstrating to the player how a game *will* be played, but attempt to evoke how it will *feel* to play the game. Note how all of these advertisements, though the gameplay mechanisms are diverse, attempt to 'sell' absolute control to the player; that one tap, one swipe, or one choice will completely warp the world around their desires. In the 'Mad Libs' style advertisement for *The Arcana,* the disembodied player changes a singular verb from

'kiss' to 'slap' and the NPC is dealt with accordingly. These advertisements sell to the player a vision of their playing experience as completely and utterly in their control, priming them through paratexts to accept individual action as the preferred reading of romance in these games (Gray, 2010).

I will now move into an analysis of the app store page for each game analyzed here, as this is another important paratext which influences the player's perception of the game before it is even installed. Once again, the theme of intrigue arises, though it is primarily accomplished here through titillation. The language of 'choice' is also frequently employed, again emphasizing gameplay elements through visual and textual description. Verbs like "choose", "customize," "pick," and "control" are used (*The Arcana: A Mystic Romance,* n.d.), as well as phrases like "make the right choices" (*Lovelink: Chapters of Love,* n.d.; *The Arcana: A Mystic Romance,* n.d). While this wording foregrounds the mechanics of choice in the game, they also construct player agency in very specific ways; namely, that the player will have ultimate authority and unlimited choice within the game.

Titillation, both visual and textual, also serves to build intrigue and construct romance in specific ways. Adjectives such as "steamy," "sultry," and "stunning" evoke lush, heart-pounding eroticism, which is suggestive in nature, not explicit (*Lovelink: Chapters of Love,* n.d.; *The Arcana: A Mystic Romance,* n.d.). As Radway (1991) noted in her study of romance novel consumers, explicit eroticism is often not the focus of these narratives and can even repel readers if material is too pornographic (p. 70). Here, risqué or non-normative forms of romance are used to thrill the potential player, but their very presence in advertising material also speaks to a promise of the *kinds* of romance offered by the games. Beyond offering standard (or, in Ahmed's words, linear) options for romance, this advertising material promises players taboo romance

which is thrilling precisely *because* of its taboo nature. Thus, these games promise a socially acceptable outlet (or at least, less socially risky than engaging in these practices in one's material social life) for these nonlinear desires. Further, this can be understood as a marketing of queer desire. Becker (2006) notes that "Celebrating the difference of the marginal was valued as a marker of one's open-minded nature as well as one's social position as a highly educated, upscale (or at least upwardly mobile) cosmopolitan..." (p. 120). Thus, the inclusion of this material in marketing paratexts serves to capture financially privileged audiences who are attracted to multicultural stories.

Beyond occupying a place in the mobile gaming industry overall, these paratexts also do work to prime the player for the game's narratives and mechanics. Thus, much like the games themselves, they function in two channels simultaneously; the advertisements must do practical work to 'sell' the game to the players, fulfilling an economic imperative, while also conveying distinct ideas about how romance can or ought to function. These functions are necessarily intertwined, informing and supporting each other throughout and beyond gameplay. I will now dive into these functions in more depth through analysis of three specific apps, and how the economic imperatives of each afford and restrict certain performances of romance.

The Arcana: A Mystic Romance

The interface design of *The Arcana* is a useful starting place for this analysis, as the aesthetic elements serve to emphasize both the economic dimensions of the game and the rhetoric of 'choice' employed in the advertising material. Several elements of the design nod to otome conventions, while also combining affordances of the mobile platform and the industry it's based in. Ganzon (2018)'s definition of otome games involves, as a key element, their relationship to other multimedia products. Further, Evans (2016) notes the ways in which

freemium games often use apps as a way to build developer brands. One tab on the Home screen

of *The Arcana* is dedicated wholly to the merchandise the company sells related to the game.

This generic convention dovetails nicely with the ways freemium games "work within branding

logic... work[ing] to promote their developer's brand within an increasingly competitive market"

(Ganzon, 2018, p. 570). This strategy forecasts the ways in which genre and industry meshes in

The Arcana, crafting a gameplay experience that is at the same time concerned with emotions

and consumption.

Slotted neatly aside the Merch tab are the Dailies and Store tabs, which both deal with the

premium currency in the game; coins. Coins are the main currency the game operates on,

associated with purchases of premium dialogue options, side stories not associated with the main

romance routes, more attempts in the two minigames, as well as greater choice in minigames (for

example, buying power-ups or selecting which characters appear in the mini-games). Players can

purchase coins in several bundles; the smallest amount of money they can spend is $1.99 for 150

coins, and the greatest amount they can spend is $99.99 for 11,250 coins. "Bonus" coins are

advertised for all purchases above $1.99, where players are advertised a 10% bonus for a $4.99

purchase of 414 coins, a 20% bonus for a $9.99 purchase of 900 coins, and a 25% bonus for a

$19.99 purchase of 1,875 coins (which is their most popular deal, as advertised by the app;

according to SensorTower, the most popular deal is actually the $4.99 coin pack, followed by the

$1.99 pack [SensorTower, n.d.a]).

Players may also accumulate coins for free through engagement with the app. Players

may spend their time watching ads for coins, which has been discussed in depth in the previous

chapters. The 'Dailies' tab is where one can sign in daily for an allotment of coins, spin a wheel

of chance in an attempt to earn coins, and play a chance-based minigame in order to earn coins

and postcards from love interests. It is notable that two of the three opportunities to earn coins are based on chance; while the wheel of fortune is a straightforward spin of a wheel for a random prize, the 'Heart Hunter' minigame is built on multiple random elements; the love interests that appear on the board are randomized (of course, one can pay 100 coins to choose which love interest will appear), the player is given a randomized amount of moves per turn, and further in the game the player can even decide to spin a wheel to either gain two or no hearts from an encounter. Even the postcard that a player receives from a successful game is randomly selected from a pool of four.

Given that the game boasts choice (choosing one's name, pronouns, love interest; "your choices and who you choose to romance impact more than just yourself" [*The Arcana: A Mystic Romance,* n.d.]), the *lack* of choice within the (free) ways to earn premium currency relates to the ways in which choice is constructed along economic lines in this game; that is, you must pay for the ability to choose. Hardin (2014) notes the ways in which the neoliberal subject is asked to act as a corporation, and in *The Arcana,* this means making smart business decisions which are directly tied to acts of romance. To make a choice, a player must budget their premium currency, considering the (monetary) cost of microtransactions against the (time-based) cost of accumulating it for free. In light of the findings of Chapter Two, this practice amounts to "The poor work[ing] long hours, while the rich spend money so they do not have to" (Keogh & Richardson, 2020, pp. 14-15). The player is thus defined as an individual striving for class prestige through the accumulation of premium currency, which facilitates both their ability to make choices as well as their ability to fully control the narrative. This control characterizes romance as the result of one individual's actions instead of the result of multiple parties

connecting and coming together, thus obscuring opportunities for connection and nurturance in favor of romance's economic valences.

This practice – paying for the ability to choose – is no more apparent than in the monetization of dialogue options. Players spend coins primarily on premium dialogue options, which result in additional scenes with chosen love interests, which are sometimes paired with a CG, or computer graphic. These are detailed art pieces of a love interest, typically rewarded at key moments in the story, that the player can then return to later and view (Fig. 8). In *The Arcana,* each character has 12 CGs, six of which are achieved through selecting paid dialogue options. Again, in a platform-based dating simulator game, CGs are typically granted after successfully romancing a character, completing a story beat, or overcoming a challenge (Hasegawa, 2013; Richards, 2015); you do not have to pay to unlock them beyond the price of the game. However, because of the way freemium game practices mingle with otome game conventions, these images that represent important beats of intimacy become tied to consumptive practices. One must pay to access these moments of intimacy, and thus intimacy becomes commodified by the game.

The opportunities these premium dialogue options afford are primarily associated with affirmative answers, or 'saying yes' to opportunities when they arise. In Asra's route, premium options include exploring a magical oasis (where the free option would see the player leaving) (The Arcana Wiki, n.d.) or getting a love reading from a fortune teller (where the free option would see the player "walk briskly past the booth") (The Arcana Wiki, n.d.). These options are also associated with greater physical intimacy with the character, including paid options like "Hold me" and "I'll keep you company" versus rejecting Asra's attempts at physical intimacy (The Arcana Wiki, n.d.). Premium dialogue options also unlock paid choices – that is, dialogue

options that are nested within the unlocked paid scene – and thus paying for the ability to 'say yes' also means gaining access to additional agency to make choices. Nadia's route shows similar trends, where paid options include joining her for tea on the balcony (where the free option is "I'd better not") and 'making a move' on her instead of saying goodnight (The Arcana Wiki, n.d.).

The very wording of the free options compared to the paid options – which are typically statements in the negative, or outright rejections of romantic acts suggested by love interests – add an additional dimension to the social, psychological, and monetary costs of selecting these options. Though characters do not tend to react negatively to free options, the harsh wording may go against a player's personal characterization of themselves. Because the player character *is* the player in these games, the cost of poor characterization is all the greater; it is not just the player character being rude to a love interest, but the player themselves. Ganzon (2018) especially notes the ways in which dating simulation games require the player to perform emotional labor through anticipating correct choices and "fixing the problems of those who cannot help themselves" (Chess, 2017, p. 106). However, this mobile dating simulation game takes this a step further and connects acts of *emotional* labor to the labor of the workforce. In other words, the accumulation of monetary capital through day-to-day work can be exchanged for social capital in the form of emotional intimacy with one's chosen love interest. Once again, the act of romance is connected to the corporate self, where hard work and individual choice 'pay off' in the form of love, validation, and intimacy.

Lovelink: Chapters of Love

Given that *Lovelink* takes its major interface elements almost entirely from Tinder, and further, that it advertises itself *as* a fictional dating app, I will be using scholarly research

on Tinder to guide my analysis. Multiple scholars have noted Tinder's utilization of gameplay-like design elements (Duguay, 2017; Krüger & Charlotte Spilde, 2020), which in turn support uses of the app for fun or entertainment (Bryant & Sheldon, 2017; Krüger & Charlotte Spilde, 2020). Thus, the translation of this format into a mobile dating simulator is a logical move which utilizes what is already gamified about the platform for the purposes of actual gameplay.

It should also be noted that this interface in particular has connections with the neoliberal self and the emphasis on individual choice. Chan (2018) makes the point that "consumption logics—including efficiency, attractiveness, novelty, variety, practicality, instantaneity, and disposability—have permeated online dating. This is reflective of the neoliberal culture, where an individual is treated 'as an active agent of decision and choice'" (p. 2569). Further, "underlying the crafting of one's profile is the issue of self-branding" (p. 2577). Here, we see connections to Hardin (2014)'s notion of the corporatization of the self, where individuals are asked to function as corporations through appropriate self-branding. Microtransactions connected to avatar customization are most notable here, as players must *pay* to brand themselves in more cases than not. The Tinder format thus supports the neoliberal construction of the self in *Lovelink*.

Additionally, whereas "a left-swipe cannot be taken back and a person that is rejected is rejected for good..." (Krüger & Charlotte Spilde, 2020, p. 1403) in Tinder's interface, *Lovelink* sees characters that have previously been rejected appearing multiple times in the 'pool' of potential matches, even after the initial rejection. Indeed, even after unmatching with a character, they may still reappear in the pool of matches. In this way, *Lovelink* reinforces the player's control over the world; if they happen to change their mind, the character is still available to them despite any past rejection. This change is notable, as one of the paid features on Tinder is

the 'undoing' of an accidental left-swipe. *Lovelink* thus diverges from Tinder's monetization strategies through its emphasis on choice, and instead places monetization options within the actual chat features themselves.

Therefore, in *Lovelink,* the interface itself supports the paratext's foregrounding of individual and infinite choice. Sobieraj & Humphreys (2021) note that "affordances can be seen as invitations to use technology in certain ways and not others" (p. 3). In this way, they function similarly to paratexts by suggesting preferred uses and interpretations of the material. With its massive slate of characters, formatted like a deck of cards to play with (Krüger & Charlotte Spilde, 2020, p. 1396), the player is given the impression that this is a game over which they have total mastery. This kind of control is not reflected in gameplay *beyond* the initial matching stage, as my analysis of microtransactions will reveal. However, it is important that, upon first contact with the app, the player is assured that their choice is the only one that matters.

In actual gameplay, however, this choice is quickly restricted through microtransactions. *Lovelink* is monetized in a variety of ways; with 'gems,' the premium currency, players may buy premium dialogue options both in chats and on dates (Figs. 10a, 10b), 'selfies' or CGs, more matches, as well as cosmetics for their avatar (Fig. 11). These premium dialogue options are often not inconsequential choices; the ability to confess one's love to a character, to accept a character's profession as a sex worker, and even learn more about a character are all examples of paid options in *Lovelink*. Here, Richards (2015)'s notion of "playing against yourself" comes back into frame, but in a different register than before. Whereas Richards used this concept to note how players were expected to ignore their own preferences and beliefs in order to win the heart of their love interest, here the "playing against yourself" becomes an act of playing against one's own *class position*. That is, a player is not expected to fight against their preferences and

beliefs in order to win the heart of their love interest; they are expected to fight against a monetary barrier. If a player truly does wish to express support for sex workers, or love for their chosen love interest, they are expected to spend time or money accumulating the premium currency necessary to facilitate these acts.

Free options are often dismissive, uncertain, or passive in comparison to paid options, and character will even react negatively to selecting free options in some cases (Fig. 12). It is notable that a negative reaction is not guaranteed; characters will sometimes react neutrally or even positively to free dialogue options (for example, when a player refuses a kiss from an NPC, the character will often not disparage them for it). However, as a result, there is no way to know whether free options will induce a negative reaction in a player's chosen love interest(s). This uncertainty could further motivate spending, as the precarity caused by the situation demands resolution. At that moment, the player must weigh the social and psychological cost of acting against their own personal beliefs and foreclosing intimacy with their love interest with the monetary cost of a premium currency pack. Radway (1991) notes that, for the readers she surveyed, romance "must chronicle not merely the events of a courtship but *what it feels like* to be the *object* of one" (p. 64). With this in mind, these negative reactions run exactly counter to the desire to feel like the object of romance, meaning that the act of romance itself is something players must pay (whether with their time or money) to access.

Another facet of *Lovelink's* monetization strategy is that it will sometimes provide players with multiple premium dialogue options, each at different costs; in this way, *Lovelink* further stratifies performances of intimacy by class position. For example, in the case of Karnam, a figure skater, the player has an opportunity to learn more about him when his figure skating partner steals his phone. The player may either reject this opportunity for free, pay 120 diamonds

to ask more about figure skating generally, or pay 150 diamonds to ask about Karnam specifically. Here, opportunities to get close to a character are 'tiered,' and more specific information is of higher value in comparison to other choices the players may have. Another example is with chef character Mamoru Ito; after the player character has spontaneously bought a plane ticket to visit him in the fictional nation of Pallay, the player can either ask him to stay the night for free, ask him to cuddle and watch movies for 180 diamonds, or can kiss him for 210 diamonds. Not only is specificity centering on the NPC at play, but there is also a dimension of sensual desire present as well; the game presumes that kissing Mamoru is worth more than simply cuddling with him. Thus, performances of sensuality and bodily agency – whether it be kissing a character 'right now' or skinny dipping with a new love interest -- are not afforded to the player for free and are presented to the player in a way that implies their inherent value over other more 'chaste' choices. The ability to choose and 'say yes' to experiences is commodified, but the ability to act on desire becomes commodified as well. If a player does not have enough premium currency, these opportunities for closeness and romance are foreclosed to them.

These elements connect to avatar personalization in-game in that players are asked to pay more for certain kinds of performances and aesthetics. Ducheneaut et al. (2009) note that players are more likely to be highly attached to their avatar if they are a more physically ideal version with similar psychological traits (p. 1159). In *Lovelink,* as is the case in many games with avatar personalization, cosmetic options are sometimes locked behind additional purchases, thus potentially tying these idealized physical elements to monetary transactions. In *Lovelink,* this specifically manifests as both an expression of *class* and of *gender,* oftentimes tied together. For example, eye makeup is universally locked behind microtransactions, as are all dresses, more elaborate hairstyles, dyed hair, and all accessories. In fact, all but the simplest shirts and leggings

are associated with an additional cost. In this way, the class position of the player is reflected not only in the dialogue options they select, but the clothes they are allowed to wear. Pace et al. (2009) notes that hair and makeup variations are strongly associated with femininity in avatar customization. Again, considering that dating simulation games have historically been played largely by women, this locking of a more feminine gender performance behind microtransactions polices the ways in which players can perform their identities, ultimately asking them to pay more to perform as a beautiful, feminine, upwardly mobile individual.

Conclusion

Though these games do offer opportunities for gameplay that fit into player's lives in unique ways, their usage of microtransactions restricts player agency along economic lines for the purposes of generating revenue. For games which advertise their abundance of choice – choice that is rhetorically tied to romance – the actual opportunities for performances of romance are severely circumscribed for those players who will not (or cannot) pay for premium currency. These games ask players to conceptualize courtship as a market relationship, framed through and with capital. Thus, ideologically, intimacy is absorbed into the realm of capitalism through the game mechanics (namely, microtransactions).

Firstly, these games imply that the player occupies a certain class position, both in the narrative and in the mechanics. The player receives lavish gifts from love interests, and questions of being able to afford certain items are neatly avoided. For example, in *The Arcana*, the player is gifted expensive outfits by The Countess and, despite their place of work being a key element of the plot, their class position is never discussed. In *Lovelink,* the player character similarly receives expensive gifts, including clothes and artwork, from love interests, and the question of

visiting far-off love interests is answered through the purchase of national and international plane tickets.

This fantasy is common in the romance genre; Christian-Smith (1990) describes the ways in which "Cultural products such as romance fiction provide both an escape from and reconciliation to modern life" (p. 127), where "The well-appointed homes and abundance of consumer goods in the novels appeared out of thin air, thereby mystifying the fundamental economic and social reasons behind such affluence" (p. 128). In part, the romance genre argues for capitalism as the primary lens through which romance should be understood. In mobile dating simulation games specifically, microtransactions place this narrative fantasy in direct conflict with the material reality the mechanics construct. Whereas the narrative invites players into a world where they need not worry about the cost of plane tickets or the next day of work, microtransactions which cordon off certain performances of romance demand the player confronts their own class position each time they play.

This tension creates a state in which the player *wants* to escape further into the fantasy – to forget the worries of jobs, rent, mortgages, bills, insurance, advertisements, private property, and labor – but in order to do so, they must pay the cost of the microtransactions, or else 'go to work' to meticulously accumulate this currency for free. Speaking of my own experience playing these games, this crafts an incredibly stressful atmosphere of play. Each interaction with the love interest, while being exciting, also becomes an exercise in dread. *How much will the premium dialogue options cost? Do I have enough? If I wake up precisely at 6am, and open the game first thing, I can get the maximum number of free diamonds. If I watch a few ads during breakfast, I can recoup the losses I took by choosing to go on the date last night.* Ultimately, these games are

no longer about *love;* instead, they are about *capital,* and how one can gather it, spend it, and leverage it to perform the privileged dialogue options presented to them as a player.

Thus, there is also an implicit connection between gender and class performance. This connection is not a new one; Christian-Smith (1990) notes that, in romance novels, "romance is organized as a market relationship" (p. 18) between individuals. As much literature on the dating simulation genre has noted, normative performances of gender are foregrounded and valued in these games (Ganzon, 2018; Kretschmar & Salter, 2020; Richards, 2015). These normative performances can involve anticipating your partner's needs (Ganzon, 2018) and acquiescing to your partner's desires and opinions (Richards, 2015), among others. Players of mobile dating simulation games are still encouraged to perform within these normative gender lines, but these elements are now monetized. Now, when players cannot select these options (either through an inability or unwillingness to accumulate premium currency), they are both failing to perform *gender* and *class* correctly according to these game's logic.

It is also worth noting that these microtransactions gain a particular affective charge because of their association with acts of romance and intimacy. It matters that these microtransactions exist where they do, because it implies a very literal social economy where greater material wealth translates to a greater agency to perform acts of romance. It also matters that the player's desire for kinship, intimacy, and romance – versus simply impatience, as is the case in many other mobile games (Evans, 2016) – is being used to facilitate spending on microtransactions. Though an affective analysis of these games is beyond the scope of this project, it is fair to state that the emotional impact of being unable to access these performances is absolutely a part of how these games convince players to spend money, and thus, participate in their economy.

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I would now like to interrogate the concept of *agency* more fully in relation to neoliberalism and romance. 'Agency' traditionally has a positive connotation, especially when concerned with individual capacity and actions. Dating as a practice, however, is a fundamentally interpersonal relationship, one that is other-focused and connection-based. That these games restrict player agency along economic lines matters because it invokes specific class positions through play. However, the fact that individual agency is privileged by the app *at all* (remember that the player's choices are the only ones which affect the relationship's success) characterizes the ideal player as an individual focused solely on themselves, their actions, and how both can be leveraged to effectively do romance. Hardin (2014) notes that part of neoliberalism is "the injunction to be an entrepreneur of oneself or an individual enterprise. Individuals must plan for their financial futures as corporations would, making calculations about future needs and current expenditures" (p. 216). The ideology these games forward, then, is that romance is an act of individual entrepreneurship.

These microtransactions also change the way romance unfolds compared to console or PC dating simulation games, or even compared to other media types like romance novels or romance movies. In the case of mobile dating simulation games, even if developers insist that paid options are only supplemental to the story (thearcanagame, n.d.), players are still missing essential pieces of relationship development. Though *plot* elements may not shift when consuming free options versus paid options, the plot is only a piece of what readers find satisfying about romance narratives (Radway, 1991); the development of a relationship, and seeing a hero (or love interest, in this case) gradually come to care for and appreciate the heroine (or player), are some of the major elements which romance readers find satisfying and

compelling in these narratives (p. 66). When access to these scenes of nurturance and intimacy is restricted, it may very well create a less satisfying narrative experience as a result.

As the inclusion of microtransactions makes clear, romance in these games is first and foremost a financial act. Players are expected to smartly budget the premium currency necessary to perform acts of romance, with the personal choice between different dialogue options being the thing which moves the relationship forward. They argue that players must continue to weigh the 'costs' of personal choices about clothing, hairstyles, and actions in the context of what will best 'raise their value' (and the value of their relationships), making them a more 'lucrative asset' through smart purchases. These mobile dating simulation games ultimately teach spending on outfits and the 'correct' choices in order to model an individualistic selfhood concerned only with how the player's own value can rise; after all, that is the way the game has constructed parameters for success. In other words, to play for love, one must first pay for love.

Player enters game

Player spends **LITTLE TIME** and **LITTLE MONEY**:
- Choice is restricted, preventing the player from experiencing intimacy and romance .
- *Thus, the player is encouraged to travel along one of the two ends of the spectrum.*

+ TIME   MONEY +

Player spends **SURPLUS TIME,** thus **LITTLE MONEY**:
- Accumulation of premium currency through regular interaction with the app.
- Because they do not have the money to purchase microtransactions, players must *make time* for minigames, watching ads, and daily sign-ins to accumulate premium currency.

Player spends **SURPLUS MONEY,** thus **LITTLE TIME**:
- Accumulation of premium currency through frequent purchase of microtransactions.
- Because they do not want to wait, or do not have the time to accumulate it for free, players must *spend money* to obtain the premium currency needed to facilitate agency and romance.

Fig. 8: An Original Model of the Time-Money Spectrum

Fig. 9: One of Nadia's Paid CGs in *The Arcana*

Fig. 10a: Paid Options in Messages   Fig. 10b: Paid Options on a Date
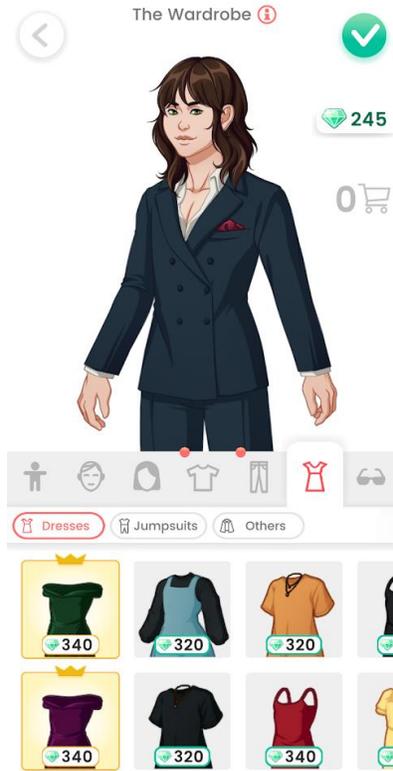
Fig. 11: Paid Cosmetics in *Lovelink*

Fig. 12: Negative Reaction to Unpaid Choice

CONCLUSION

SEARCHING FOR LOVE: CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER

RESEARCH

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that mobile dating simulation games construct

performances of romance along the lines of time and money due to the platform of the mobile

phone. In Chapter Two, I demonstrated the queer potential embedded in the disruptions of time

inherent in mobile games and how the mobile phone uniquely occupies players' lives, changing

the reception of the romance narratives contained within. In Chapter Three, I demonstrated how

the industry conventions of the mobile platform constructed a neoliberal subject whose

individual choice was both emphasized and constrained by the microtransactions present in the

game. Taken together, the ways time and money flow on the mobile device afford unique

performances of romance while foreclosing others, apart from their progenitors on consoles and

PCs. This thesis, therefore, contributes to our understanding of how platforms influence

gameplay, narratives, and affordances, while further enhancing our understanding of an

understudied subgenre of game. It also contributes to understandings of queer romance in the

digital era by shedding light on the ways in which the mobile platform can both queer time and

target queer markets.

In this conclusion I would like to broaden my focus beyond two specific apps, and

beyond the two specific tenets of time and money, to examine the larger sample of apps surveyed

by this project. Doing this can afford a more comprehensive picture of the industry; additionally,

by examining a larger sample of mobile dating simulation games, it is possible to offer more

incisive suggestions for further research. I will first discuss the full sample of games surveyed for

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this thesis by discussing star rating, premium currencies, and game formats. In light of these larger conclusions, I make suggestions for future research in the hopes that this thesis can provide a springboard for further scholarly analysis of this subgenre. Finally, I will move into a synthesis of the 'time' and 'money' concepts to demonstrate how mobile dating simulation games construct an ideology of individual choice and capitalism as the ruling tenets of relationships.

Playing More: Broader Conclusions and Implications

Though I will be including *The Arcana* and *Lovelink* in the sample, I will also be including the remainder of the apps noted in the first chapter of this thesis. These include *Choices: Stories You Play* (henceforth referred to mononymously as *Choices*), *Romance Club – Stories I Play* (henceforth referred to mononymously as *Romance Club*), *Obey Me!, Love Story Romance Games* (henceforth referred to as *LSRG*), *Mystic Messenger, MeChat – Love secrets* (henceforth referred to mononymously as *MeChat*), and *Soul of Yokai: Otome Game* (henceforth referred to as *Soul of Yokai*). It bears restating that the narratives of these games will not be analyzed in this section. Here, I am looking at the information collected in Table 1 to draw wider conclusions about the industry. Through this broader analysis, three general trends emerge in the sample. Firstly, audiences show a preference for games which focus on a single story, and which do not include explicit mature content. Secondly, these games universally include microtransactions and characterize them in ways that track in notions of coupling and scarcity. Finally, these games flex time in diverse ways, including phone calls and the presence of a unique premium currency tied to time.

Through examining the larger sample, an apparent correlation between star rating, story type, and content rating of each app emerged. This implies that players prefer games with one

focused story over games with multiple stories hosted on the platform (like *Choices, Romance Club,* and *LSRG*) and 'dating app' games (like *Lovelink* and *MeChat*), which were the lowest rated of the sample. Higher star ratings were correlated both with 1-story games (that is, games that give players one story, but multiple love interests) and games with no mature content. This correlation can be seen in apps like *The Arcana, Obey Me!, Mystic Messenger,* and *Soul of Yokai* which represent the highest-rated apps in this sample, and which universally provide players with one story rated between 'Everyone' and 'Teen' (indicating some suggestive content, but no explicit content [Google Support, n.d.]). Though speculation as to *why* this is the case is not possible without a content analysis of all these games, it nonetheless points to some of the preferences players of mobile dating simulation games have. These findings support Radway (1991)'s assertion that consumers of romance are more interested in the sensual and suggestive than the overtly erotic (p. 70). It is notable that all apps, except for the four highest-rated apps, had a "Mature 17+" rating. This demonstrates the pervasiveness of mature content in the subgenre, though simultaneously demonstrates that this is not necessarily something players are moved by or interested in.

However, it is notable that three of the four highest-rated apps are from East Asia, with two originating in Japan and one originating in South Korea. Therefore, developer pedigree could be an additional factor. The dating simulation genre originated in Japan (Hasegawa, 2013), and the culture surrounding these games is much more robust in East Asia than elsewhere in the world (Andlauer, 2018). Having more experience writing, producing, and distributing these games could give them an additional sense of 'polish,' while also appealing to aesthetics (such as the 'bishounen' love interest [Hasaegawa, 2013]) that fans have come to expect and prefer.

Another notable finding was within the overall practice of microtransactions and premium currency. Firstly, though the amounts of both minimum and 'popular' microtransactions varied, maximum quantities were relatively similar across all apps. With exception to the apps which originated in the East Asian countries, all apps set their maximum microtransaction at $99.99 USD. Though research did not generate any definite information about why this is the case, it at least suggests the ceiling for microtransactions is set at this amount due to regulatory practices (either on the app store or legally). Additionally, all apps were universally free to download, and universally contained microtransactions, demonstrating the pervasiveness of the 'free to play' model identified by Evans (2016). Because this is a payment model that all these apps are structured on, the minute differences between amounts of payment matter less than the fact that they're *all* using capital to restrict access to romance, coupling, and closeness, as analyzed in Chapter Three.

Additionally, almost all games used some item which evoked value and trade for their premium currency. Overwhelmingly, some kind of precious gemstone – be it diamonds (as in *Choices, Romance Club,* and *LSRG*), rubies (as in *Soul of Yokai*), or just a nondescript 'gem' (as in *MeChat* and *Lovelink*) -- was the preferred type of premium currency. Only *Mystic Messenger* (of which the implications have been covered brilliantly by Ganzon [2018]), and *The Arcana* deviated from this practice, with 'hourglasses' and 'coins' respectively used as their premium currency. The currency of gems in and of itself has implications for how these apps are constructing romance in that they culturally connote wealth and (manufactured) scarcity, implying a sort of rarity with these glamorous stones. The diamond, as the (presumed) most precious gem, also tracks in notions of marriage and coupling; thus, it is notable that three of the apps in this sample used diamonds specifically as their premium currency of choice.

Finally, both the presence and type of time currencies in these games, as well as other time-based mechanisms which did not appear in the two apps for deep analysis, demonstrates how certain aspects of mobile game monetization manifest in gameplay. That is, the mobile gaming industry supports certain kinds of gameplay over others, which influences which performances of romance are accessible and desirable to players. Namely, not all apps use a *separate* currency to regulate time spent on the app, though all apps did have some currency-based regulatory measure in place to prevent players from spending endless time in the app. For example, both *Lovelink* and *MeChat* use 'gems' for all purchases in the app. This may be because, as these games are formatted like dating apps, a division in premium currency does not effectively track in this specific format. By using one currency to structure all microtransactions, *Lovelink* and *MeChat* emphasize the connection between these elements; that the amount of matches you can access at once, the clothing you can buy, and the dialogue you can select all tie into one overarching 'game' of romance (Duguay, 2017; Krüger & Charlotte Spilde, 2020). For games which do have a dedicated currency related to time, it is clear that players are meant to view time as a separate commodity to be spent wisely in the game. For those lucky players with disposable income, more time can always be bought.

Time-based currency, minigames, and 'spending time' to accumulate premium currency are not the only way these games encroach on player's time. An emerging format seen in two of the apps in this sample (*Mystic Messenger* and *Obey Me!*) is that of the 'phone call,' where characters 'call' the player and pre-recorded lines from a voice actor are played. If a player misses a call from a character, the character may react negatively; thus, players are encouraged to make themselves available to answer calls at all times, as one never knows when a call may come through. Ganzon (2018) notes the ways in which phone calls from characters, in addition

to the other time-based mechanics described throughout Chapter Two, are used to regulate the player's time. She notes that "While [these games] are designed to play for short bursts of time, they imply that women do not really have time for themselves and they function to further convert women's leisure time into labor" (p. 146). Further, these mechanics encourage a postfeminist and neoliberal subject position, where "this notion of choice and agency functions to alienate feminism and reinforce the patriarchal status quo" (p. 147).

This snapshot of the mobile dating simulation genre illuminates how its terrain is shaped by the mobile gaming industry. Elements like the free-to-play model and 'ambient time' were universal in these games, demonstrating how pervasive these conventions of the mobile gaming industry are. The mobile device is unique, apart from consoles and computers, because its size and additional functions allow it to travel with the player throughout the day, in ways that dedicated gaming devices typically do not (Evans, 2016; Juul, 2010; Keogh & Richardson, 2018). As a result, the gameplay experience changes to accommodate the mobileness of the device. This will be further discussed in the 'Synthesis' section of this conclusion. Now, in light of the findings in this section, I will move into a discussion of further suggestions for research.

Playing On: Suggestions for Future Research

As Consalvo & Paul (2019) note, there is an impulse – both in popular culture and in academia – to write off certain games as being shallow or unworthy of study (xxv). Anable (2019) and Chess (2017) further support this, asking scholars to resist that initial impulse to discover how these games are truly functioning. At the time of writing this thesis, the field of game studies has begun to consider seriously the impact of mobile games and of romance in video games more largely. However, analysis of dating simulation games, and mobile dating simulation games in particular, is still a niche in which more remains to be discovered than has

been uncovered by current scholarship. Therefore, I end this thesis by providing several directions and suggestions for future research, hoping that this can provide a springboard for fellow scholars to continue investigating this subgenre in earnest.

Firstly, following Andlauer (2018) and Ganzon (2019)'s examples, more audience research needs to be conducted. Because this research can go beyond the games themselves to discuss the fan culture and reception of these games, especially critical reception (Ganzon, 2019), audience research is an essential element to clarify exactly *how* players engage with these games. Specifically, research investigating why players engage with these games (similar to Radway [1991]'s study of why Dot's group reads romance novels) would clarify what about the game's narratives are compelling, which may provide larger insight into how ideals of romance circulate in society and culture. On that note, interviews with industry professionals (including developers and marketers) *about* these games would provide illumination regarding the intent behind these games. Here, I am thinking about Chess (2017)'s interview of industry professionals in *Ready Player Two.* Essentially, I recommend studies which continue to fill out the circuit of culture, from production to text to reception. These will provide more full-bodied visions of the dating simulation genre, and the mobile dating simulation subgenre.

Secondly, I recommend more research into the paratexts surrounding these games, especially fan-made paratexts. These include fan wikis, fanfiction, fan forums, and fan discussion hosted on websites like Tumblr and Twitter. Paratexts may also include a larger content analysis of mobile game advertisements and app store descriptions. For example, how might fanfiction consider the diffuse nature of these games? Because they are ambient in nature, and because routes may branch (thus providing multiple 'canons' to pull from), the fanfiction produced about these games may function differently and serve a different purpose than

fanfiction written about other media types. Again, fans are critical consumers of these games, and discussions of their consumption can give researchers a better understanding of how the games are *actually* played.

Finally, I recommend research into a greater selection of games. Even the analysis provided here demonstrated the diversity in the subgenre, from format to storylines to queer representation to tropes. Selection of games for this thesis demonstrated the variety provided even by the Google Play store in isolation, and the nine games here are by no means representative of the totality of mobile dating simulation games. Audience research may reveal other games to researchers which are ripe for analysis, or which players regularly celebrate (or denigrate). When a field of research is as young as this one is, it is easier to describe what has already been uncovered than what has yet to be researched; nonetheless, it is my hope that these recommendations provide researchers interested in this fascinating and understudied subgenre a place to begin building out a greater understanding of the intersection between dating simulation games and the mobile platform.

Obey Me! demonstrates this need for further research nicely, as the format of *Obey Me!* defies many of the classificatory schemes used in this thesis. Despite its marketing as an otome game, *Obey Me!* involves elements from rhythm games, card trading games like *Hearthstone*, and solo RPG games like the *Persona* series. Though *The Arcana* also includes minigames for players to engage with, in *Obey Me!* these minigames supersede the romantic element of the narrative. Routes are not necessarily *romantic* routes, and do not end with players coupling with one of the seven demon brothers. The game was included in this sample for both its popularity and its marketing as an otome game, but the game itself bends (and defies) many conventions of the genre. Researchers may consider a full analysis of this game in the future to parse exactly

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what the implications are of this departure. At the very least, some of the findings for the minigames in *The Arcana* may illuminate *Obey Me!* and its choice to include so many disparate mechanics within the label of an otome game.

Playing Together: Synthesizing Time and Money

This thesis explores two ruling themes: time and money. Here, I would like to briefly synthesize these concepts and bring them into conversation with one another. As mentioned previously, 'time' and 'money' should be considered connected, not disparate, tenets of play; oftentimes, the time a player can freely spend in a game can be flexed with in-app purchases, and these purchases can be circumvented or avoided through longform dedication of a player's time to the app. In this way, 'time' and 'money' are two parts of a whole, blending to form the whole of the game's influence over players.

Anable (2019) notes that "Casual games function in the times and spaces between the myriad tasks we perform on digital devices: between domestic tasks and social obligations, and between solitary private activities and public/private social networks" (p. 113). That you can play these games any*time* means that, instead of dedicated moments of gameplay, *any* free time in the player's day can now become time to play these games. That is, free time is no longer free while you engage with these games. In order to successfully accumulate enough premium currency to perform acts of romance, one must spend their free time *working towards* accumulating currency and building the most successful relationships. When these games are built on anticipating emotional labor and spending time and/or money to do so, the possibilities for more diffuse, community-oriented aspects of relationships are left behind.

As the analysis in Chapters Two and Three demonstrate, these conventions also shape narrative possibilities and gameplay opportunities for the player. Because these games are

designed to be played for shorter periods of time, the story becomes serialized, designed to be

consumed over many smaller instances of play. This is reflected in *The Arcana*, where players

must pay with regenerating currency to access the story, or in *Lovelink's* strategy of having love

interests go 'offline' mid-conversation. Perhaps more pressing, though, is that the inclusion of

microtransactions ideologically links the preferred romantic interactions with a monetary

charge.

Research on the dating simulation genre demonstrates that developers embed ideas about

what they consider to be good and successful romance in the interactions that are available to

players (Chess, 2017; Ganzon, 2018; Richards, 2015). The 'best' dialogue options often reflect

conservative ideals of how players (and specifically women) should perform romance for their

(presumed male) partner. However, in mobile dating simulation games specifically, these

preferred interactions are often monetized. Because the free-to-play model is so popular in

mobile gaming, and because this model relies on microtransactions to recoup the cost of

development (Evans, 2016), microtransactions have become a necessary part of the landscape of

mobile games. But, in mobile dating simulation games, these microtransactions carry an

additional ideological heft.

This can be seen in the *kinds* of interactions that are monetized, as discussed in Chapter

Three. Developers make assumptions about which interactions are the most valuable, and thus,

are the interactions players will pay money for. In other words, developers place additional

monetary value on the presumed most valuable interactions. This monetization places additional

value on those interactions which the developers deem the best (or most correct) performances of

romance; they are literally worth more than free interactions. Thus, players are asked not only to

consider which options will lead towards the best ending but are asked to then value those

interactions more highly than others. Performing emotional labor and individual agency are placed above other kinds of interactions, and thus privilege a neoliberal understanding of romance where intimacy is achieved through the spending of capital. Ultimately, this results in monetary elements – and the matrix of capitalism more broadly – restricting the ways we imagine romance can be.

In other words, *time* is used to diffuse the app through the player's lives. No longer is the romance in these games a contained event, isolated in an expensive laptop or gaming console. Instead, the experience of romancing a character is moved into the everyday. *Money,* then, is used to facilitate these acts of romance. In many cases, these acts would not be accessible to players for free; they may only be obtained with additional currency, which may only be obtained with credit card transactions or painstaking accumulation. Together, *time* and *money* move beyond the level of a contained gaming experience and place these fictional romances in public spaces, in the movement of day-to-day life, and in the neoliberal matrix of a capitalistic Western society.

In *Reading the Romance*, Radway (1991) notes that Dot's group read romances because "Not only is it a relaxing release from the tension produced by daily problems and responsibilities, but it creates a time or space within which a woman can be entirely on her own, preoccupied with her personal needs, desires, and pleasure" (p. 61). However, as Ganzon (2018) notes, many of these games are concerned with the player "determin[ing] how emotional labor should be performed according to each character type" (p. 151). It would be incorrect, then, to suggest that mobile dating simulation games occupy the same private realm of personal pleasure that romance novels do. Given the ways in which these games play with time and money, it

would also be incorrect to suggest that they create a time or space where the player can be entirely on their own.

Through a collaboration between time and money, these games forge a connection between romance and 'hard work,' and the resources that are accumulated through that work. The longer one plays these games, the less they start to feel like narrative games and the more they begin to feel like *resource management* games. Instead of prompting the player to ask how they might respond to their love interest, forge a relationship with them, and weather the challenges that might appear together, the games instead prompt the player to ask how they will budget their limited resources in order to succeed at those goals.

It is through this process that these games shape and restrict the ways we imagine romance can be. When care is characterized as a market relationship, romance is thus conceptualized as an exchange of resources; a transaction between mutually interested parties. In these games, one spends time and money in exchange for love and care; the human desire for companionship and community has been monetized and absorbed into the matrix of capitalism. These games do not imagine a world where love is free to give and receive. Love is something to be bought, sold, haggled, and traded for, instead of an opportunity to nurture, build community, and grow.

TABLES

Table 1

	Version	Developer	Country	Downloads	Rating
The Arcana: A Mystic Romance	2.20	Nix Hydra	USA	>1 million	4.7
Choices: Stories You Play	2.9.1	Pixelberry	USA	>10 million	4.4
Romance Club -- Stories I Play	1.0.11510	Your Story Interacti	Moldova	>10 million	4.5
Obey Me!	5.1.8	NTT Solmare Corp.	Japan	>1 million	4.7
Love Story Romance Games	1.5.0	Webelinx Games	Serbia	>1 million	4.5
Lovelink -- Chapters of Love	2.0.53	Ludia Inc.	Canada	>1 million	4.0
Mystic Messenger	1.18.1	Cheritz Co.	Korea	>5 million	4.7
MeChat -- Love secrets	2.14.1	PlayMe Studio	Cyprus	>1 million	4.2
Soul of Yokai: Otome Game	2.1.10	Genius Inc	Japan	>1 million	4.6

	# of Stories	Routes per Story	Content Rating
The Arcana: A Mystic Romance	1	6	Everyone
Choices: Stories You Play	55	1 to 2	Mature 17+
Romance Club -- Stories I Play	23	1 to 2	Mature 17+
Obey Me!	1	7	Teen
Love Story Romance Games	49	1	Mature 17+
Lovelink -- Chapters of Love	*Dating app format*		Mature 17+
Mystic Messenger	1	5	Teen
MeChat -- Love secrets	*Dating app format*		Mature 17+
Soul of Yokai: Otome Game	1	3	Teen

	Intl. Cost	Currency Type	Min. Purchase	Max. Purchase
The Arcana: A Mystic Romance	Free	Coins	$0.99	$99.99
Choices: Stories You Play	Free	Diamonds	$1.99	$99.99
Romance Club -- Stories I Play	Free	Diamonds	$1.99	$99.99
Obey Me!	Free	*Various*	$0.99	$79.99
Love Story Romance Games	Free	Diamonds	$0.99	$99.99
Lovelink -- Chapters of Love	Free	Gems	$1.99	$99.99
Mystic Messenger	Free	Hourglasses	$0.99	$45.99
MeChat -- Love secrets	Free	Gems	$0.99	$99.99
Soul of Yokai: Otome Game	Free	Rubies	$1.99	$39.99

	Ads?	Currency Type	Daily Reward Mechanics
The Arcana: A Mystic Romance	Yes	Keys	Currency (calendar); minigames
Choices: Stories You Play	Yes	Keys	Currency (fixed)
Romance Club -- Stories I Play	Yes	Tea	None
Obey Me!	Yes	*Various*	Currency (fixed); minigames
Love Story Romance Games	Yes	Tickets	Currency (calendar)
Lovelink -- Chapters of Love	No	*Gems*	Currency (fixed)
Mystic Messenger	No	*Hourglasses*	None
MeChat -- Love secrets	Yes	*Gems*	Currency (calendar)
Soul of Yokai: Otome Game	Yes	Tickets	None

Table 2.1

	Character 1	Character 2	Character 3	Archeytype	Story	Status
1	Ana Samarine [f]	Milena Sarafian [f]	Ruby Thomas [f]	Sentient AI	Avaliable	TBC
2	Anoine Dawson [m]	Noah Cruz [m]	Nina Hawk [f]	Veterinarian	Avaliable	FL
3	Jake Gonzales [m]	Zayn Kassab [m]	Charlie Nyygard [m]	Film Student	Avaliable	TBC
4	Jamie Grant [m]	Seth Evans [m]	Julia Green [f]	Hacker	Avaliable	TBC
5	Sage Foster [f]	Vitoria Voznesenky [f]	Emerson Grey [m]	Werewolf	Avaliable	TBC
6	Adam Johnson [m]	Dominic Wright [m]		Photographer	Avaliable	FL
7	Aesha Nora [f]	Samantha Clark [f]		Gamer	Avaliable	TBC
8	Albert Bishop [m]	Johnathan Hayes [m]		Soldier	Avaliable	TBC
9	Alex Frederik [m]	Calum Keys [m]		Body Painter	Avaliable	TBC
10	Alice Martin [f]	Eve Rockwood [f]		Bartender	Avaliable	TBC
11	Angel Reed [f]	Emmalyn Roberts [f]		Animal Lover	Avaliable	TBC
12	Austin Russo [m]	Damien Jones [m]		Convict	Avaliable	TBC
13	Blake Bailey [m]	Keanu Hale [m]		Tattoo Artist	Avaliable	TBC
14	Brett O'Hara [m]	Susan Sheridan [f]		Astronaut	Avaliable	TBC
15	Clementine Hill [f]	Grace Kim [f]		Lit Student	Avaliable	TBC
16	Dahlia Vince [f]	Rose Monroe [f]		Nurse/Surrogate	Avaliable	TBC
17	Daniel Anderson [m]	Ryan Byrne [m]		Virologist	Avaliable	TBC
18	Dider Laurent [m]	Mamoru Ito [m]		Chef	Avaliable	TBC
19	Eveline Van Dyke [f]	Jade Adisa [f]		Cam Girl	Avaliable	TBC
20	Fei Wu [f]	Jay Perry [m]		Game Designer	Avaliable	IP
21	Franz Jorgensen [nb]	Ingrid Holm [nb]		Punk Rocker	Avaliable	TBC
22	Garrett Brown [m]	Rory O'Brien [m]		Single Dad	Avaliable	TBC
23	Hugo Hornsby [m]	Marco Bottazzi [m]		Engaged Man	Avaliable	TBC
24	Jaden Bower [m]	Skylar Quinn [m]		Delinquent/Heir	Avaliable	TBC
25	Jasmin Medina [f]	Kayla Summers [f]		Model	Avaliable	TBC
26	Julien Alexandre [m]	William Crome [m]		Vampire	Avaliable	TBC
27	Michael Evans [m]	Sam Knight [m]		Basketball Forward	Avaliable	TBC
28	Min-Jae Lee [m]	Liam Park [m]		K-Pop Idol	Avaliable	TBC
29	Nicholas Adley [m]	Eliabeth Baker [f]		Time Traveler	Avaliable	TBC
30	Oliver Black [m]	Stefan Silver [m]		BDSM Billionaire	Avaliable	TBC
31	Raphael Becker [m]	Wyatt Moore [m]		Rockstar	Avaliable	TBC
32	Sheng Zhao [m]	Tomas Antol [m]		Foreign Prince	Avaliable	TBC
33	Bex Michel [f]			Carnie	Avaliable	IP
34	Cianan O Faolain [m]			Headless Horseman	Avaliable	TBC
35	Cpt. Muffin [n/a]			Cat	Avaliable	TBC
36	Dr. Vile [m]			Supervillain	Avaliable	TBC
37	Felicia Fatale [f]			Secret Agent	Avaliable	TBC
38	Gabe Scott [m]			Comedian	Avaliable	IP
39	Guillaume Zamboni [m]			*April Fool's Match*	Avaliable	FL
40	Hazel Terringrove [f]			Witch	Avaliable	TBC
41	Karnam Singh [m]			Ice Skater	Avaliable	IP
42	Makoa 'Aukai [m]			Surfer	Avaliable	IP
43	Nick Klaus [m]			Son of Santa Klaus	Avaliable	TBC
44	Nori Cove [nb]			Merfolk	Avaliable	IP
45	Phillip Percht [m]			Son of Krampus	Avaliable	TBC
46	Salvatore Luciano [m]			Mob Boss	Avaliable	TBC
47	Tiros Darkmane [m]			Centaur Prince	Avaliable	TBC
48	Theo Onasis [nb]			Cupid	Avaliable	TBC
49	Cain Angelus [m]			*Unknown*	Unavaliable	Unavaliable
50	Chase Harding [m]			*Unknown*	Unavaliable	Unavaliable
51	Ian Spier [m]			*Unknown*	Unavaliable	Unavaliable
52	Joao Becker [m]			*Unknown*	Unavaliable	Unavaliable
53	Kelsey Madison [f]			*Unknown*	Unavaliable	Unavaliable
54	Kev Miller [m]			*Unknown*	Unavaliable	Unavaliable
55	Kevin Legros [m]			*Unknown*	Unavaliable	Unavaliable
56	Matteo Heinrich [m]			*Unknown*	Unavaliable	Unavaliable
57	Nico DeLuca [nb]			*Unknown*	Unavaliable	Unavaliable
58	Pamela Riley [f]			*Unknown*	Unavaliable	Unavaliable
59	Patrick Darcisse [m]			*Unknown*	Unavaliable	Unavaliable
60	Phil Gardner [m]			*Unknown*	Unavaliable	Unavaliable
61	Queen B [nb]			*Unknown*	Unavaliable	Unavaliable
62	Robert Perreault [m]			*Unknown*	Unavaliable	Unavaliable
63	Roy Fennel [m]			*Unknown*	Unavaliable	Unavaliable
64	Skye Oakley [f]			*Unknown*	Unavaliable	Unavaliable

Table 2.2

Archetypes	
# Available	48
# Unavailable	16
Total Archetypes	64

Story Completion	
"In progress" (IP)	6
"To be continued" (TBC)	39
"Found Love" (FL)	3

Archetypes by Gender	# Available	% Available
Female-exclusive Archetypes	8	25%
Male-exclusive Archetypes	17	53%
NB-exclusive Archetypes	1	3%
Mixed Archetypes	6	19%

Gender Diversity in Characters	Total in-game	# Available	% Available
Female-identifying Characters	30	27	32%
Male-identifying Characers	64	53	62%
Nonbinary-identifying Characters	6	4	5%
Non-Gendered Characters	1	1	1%
	101	85	

Characters	
# Available	85
# Unavailable	16
Total Characters	101

Gender Diversity in Archetypes	
Single-Gender Archetypes	26
Mixed Gender Archetypes	6
	32

Female-exclusive archetypes: sentient AI, pro gamer, bartender, "hippie"/animal lover, literature student, nurse/surrogate, cam girl, model

Male-exclusive archetypes: film student, photographer, soldier, body painter, convict, tattoo artist, virologist, chef, single dad, engaged man, delinquent, vampire, basketball forward, K-pop idol, BDSM billionaire, rockstar, foreign prince

NB-exclusive archetypes: punk rocker

Mixed-gender archetypes: veterinarian, hacker, werewolf, astronaut, game designer, time traveler

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