

12 The Most Intimate Conflict of All

Marriage as Conflict in Digital Games

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Introduction

Familial, and marital conflicts represent perhaps the very smallest type of conflict under consideration in this volume. Nonetheless, their small scale belies their tremendous importance: the influence of marital conflicts on mental, physical, and family health is well documented. Individual mental well-being, higher rates of depression or eating disorders are associated with marital conflicts. The same with poorer health in general, as hostile behaviors during conflict relate to alterations in immunological, endocrine, and cardiovascular functions (Whitson & El-Sheikh, 2003).

Given this importance and the centrality of conflict to the gameplay mechanics of most digital games (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004), one might assume a range of games building their gameplay around marital conflicts. In fact, it seems quite uncommon, and games do not tackle this topic as often as expected. This fact, when considering the prevalence of marital conflicts, may at first seem surprising. However, when the issue is more closely considered, the absence of marital conflicts is unsurprising given the current state of game technology and the risk-aversion inherent to big-budget digital games. Game writers continue to bemoan the relative triteness of game narratives and the unwillingness for game developers to take risks with more difficult topics. When such topics are explored, it is typically not in big-budget 'blockbuster' releases of the so-called triple-A games, but rather in smaller games produced by independent studios where low production costs allow developers to take relatively greater risks (Bateman, 2021). Besides, the complex and intimate, personal nature of marital conflict makes it a particularly difficult subject for digital games to approach. Emotional engagement and depth of player characters are acknowledged as weaknesses in digital game narratives. In his discussion of the player-avatar relationship, Chris Bateman (2021), notes that though there is a range of ways in which the player-avatar relationship can be framed, one of the most common, and most powerful is the avatar-as-mask model. In this model, popular especially in first-person games, players are given a role, but not a defined character. Other models described by Bateman also tend to

sideline or limit character depth. The rule appears to be: the deeper and more defined the player character becomes, the harder it becomes for players to comfortably occupy this role. Without a strong central character, it then becomes difficult to depict marital conflicts except as limited spectacle for the player to observe, but not to participate in.

In this chapter, we examine these challenges of depicting marital conflict in games and examine some case studies of how particular games try to sidestep them. In order to better contextualize this discussion, we first briefly lay out the fundamental characteristics of marital conflicts as such. Next, we examine the broader context of romance in games, along with existing literature around this topic. The picture that emerges from this initial analysis is one of a medium that, much like other forms of entertainment, frequently explores the formation of romantic relationships, but rarely delves into the complexities of long-term relationships. Where long-term relationships do appear, they are all too often employed purely as a gameplay mechanic to provide both a goal (i.e., the formation of marriage) and a reward to the player (the benefits of being married). Very little interest is being given to exploring the actual relationship underpinning the marriage in question.

Additionally, we employ strategies borrowed from textual game analysis to drill down into a selection of case studies involving one aspect of romantic relationships, namely conflict within marriage. Textual analysis as applied to games calls for a holistic, qualitative examination of the object of study (Fernández-Vara, 2015). While most such analyses concentrate on just some aspects of the game, it is critical to examine these aspects in context, providing an overview of the game as a whole.

We chose five titles to study marital conflicts in games. Of these, *Façade* (Mateas & Stern, 2005), *The Novelist* (Hudson, 2014) and *Firewatch* (Campo Santo, 2016), delve deepest into the subject matter, with *Façade* and *The Novelist* especially placing a marital conflict at the center of both gameplay and narrative. In turn, *Firewatch* uses the subject extensively in the first part of the game, but then pushes the issue into the background. The remaining two titles chosen for study, *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013), and *Gone Home* (Fullbright, 2014) are given less attention here, as their depictions of marital conflict are less significant.

Marital Conflict: A Short Characteristic

Considering the topography of marital conflict, its sources range from psychological and verbal, and physical abusiveness to personal characteristics and behaviors, incompatible goals, wishes, and expectations. For example, spouses may complain about perceived inequity in labor division or finances with marital dissatisfaction strongly related to marriage power struggles (Fincham, 2003). Also, problems arise with sexual dissatisfaction, spousal extramarital sex, problematic drinking, or drug use with all of these

being predictive of divorce. The chances of a split-up increase with reports on greater severity of problems (Gottman, 1993). Thus, the sources of these may vary, making marital conflicts a complex issue, especially since problems multiply, and spouses reciprocate negative behavior (Fincham, 2003). At the same time, marital conflicts tend to be frequent and stable, as longitudinal research on overt disagreements shows (e.g., Birditt et al., 2010).

The complex nature of the presented conflict is also evident when looking at the investigations of how marriages succeed and fail. The inability to resolve the conflict may result from poor problem-solving behaviors of spouses. However, this behavior cannot be examined in isolation, as researchers agree that it is necessary to consider both personal resources (including people's cognitive processes) and spouses' assessments of problem, for example, perceived problem difficulty (Bell et al., 1982). The marital conflict is thus personal, especially given not all conflicts are overt, and can go undetected by one of the partners or have minimal impact on them (Fincham, 2003). This usually results in marital dissatisfaction of one or both spouses, and hidden problems.

In sum, marital conflict is complex in nature, with many blind spots waiting to be studied. For example, researchers focus on how contextual variables modify conflict behavior and outcomes. The nonmarital and marital context seems to be of equal importance here. Considering only a few examples, one can indicate how external stressors, negative life events (e.g., illness, work problems, etc.), social support received, or patterns in people's attachment or commitment may shape conflicts (e.g., Fincham, 2003). This complexity, as we later show, makes marital conflicts a particularly difficult subject for digital games to approach.

Digital Games and Romance

Romance have always been one of the driving themes in narratives irrespective of medium. Digital games are no exception, with romantic subplots appearing in adventure games (e.g., the *Runaway* series; Pendulo Studios, 2001–2012), action games (e.g., the *Uncharted* series; Naughty Dog, 2007–2017), space shooters (e.g., the *Wing Commander* series; Origin Systems, Inc., 1990–2006), role-playing games (e.g., the *Mass Effect* series; BioWare, 2007–2017), strategy games (e.g., the *StarCraft* series; Blizzard Entertainment, 1997–2016), and even puzzle games, especially so-called hidden object puzzle adventures (e.g., *Hidden Runaway*; Pendulo Studios, 2012). There are also more specifically romance-oriented interactive visual novels (Prósinowski & Krzywdziński, 2018), and so-called dating simulators (Brathwaite, 2006).

While games frequently involve romance, they rarely engage in matters of sexuality (e.g., Brown, 2015). It has thus been argued that romance in games follows a traditional model based on fairy tales, defaulting to heterosexual monogamy (Consalvo, 2003). Much like in fairy tales, the digital

game hero (typically male) usually only ‘gets the girl’ (typically female) at the conclusion of the storyline. Nevertheless, romance in digital games has long been an object of study. These topics can be examined from two very different perspectives, depending on whether the focus of interest are the players themselves and their activities, or game content and player interactions with this content.

Player-Centric Studies

The former perspective revolves especially around relationships in MUD and MMO games, best exemplified by Brown’s (2015) study of erotic role-play. Brown’s focus is not romance narrative or gameplay as written and implemented by the game’s creators. She rather concentrates on the cultural and social aspect of the encounter between players, the mediation of this encounter through virtual avatars, and the place such virtual romances occupy within the broader structures of online game culture. A side branch of the player-centric research approaches are studies of the relationship between players and their avatars (Waggoner, 2009).

Straddling the middle ground between the study of players and the study of game content is research on player-produced content, that is, game mods and the motivations of the players who produce them (e.g., Sotamaa, 2010). Unsurprisingly, some mods veer in the direction of implementing or modifying relationships (Howard, 2019), and large websites exist to aggregate such content (Majkowski, 2019). While these are beyond the scope of the present study, one can indicate player mods do not tend to add any significant complexity to relationships beyond what already exists in games (Howard, 2019; Majkowski, 2019).

Content-Centric Studies

The second perspective is research focused on game content as designed and implemented by the game’s creators. Research in this area uses content analysis or game textual analysis to explore the depiction of romance and sexuality in games. Here, the emphasis is thus on the relationship between the player, again mediated through an avatar, not with other players but rather with computer-controlled NPCs (non-player characters). Also, the focus is on the relationship between NPCs, which shifts the player into the role of a mere witness.

One of the first studies of relationships and sex depictions in game content was Brenda Brathwaite’s *Sex in Video Games* (2006). This wide-ranging study explores the depiction of sex, design issues and controversies around sex; it falls short, however of exploring relationships in games outside of their sexual aspect. Indeed, one of the notable aspects of research in this area is a tendency to focus on sexual content rather than relationships. This tendency was already visible in early game studies (e.g., Consalvo, 2003)

and remains popular today (see, e.g., Wysocki & Lauteria, 2015). Nonetheless, some studies have also emerged that explore relationships, including marriage, beyond the merely sexual aspects, delving more deeply into the role and nature of romantic relationships in games (e.g., Howard, 2019; Prósiniowski & Krzywdziński, 2018; Waern, 2010).

One of the first book-length studies exploring relationships in games is the Polish-language work *Cyfrowa Miłość: Romanse w Grach Komputerowych* (*Digital Love: Romance in Computer Games*) by Prósiniowski and Krzywdziński (2018). This study can best be described as an exploratory overview, with the authors reviewing a range of games across a broad spectrum of game genres. They cover adventure games, visual novels, mobile games, and simulations, and finally the role-playing game (RPG). The RPG is a genre that stands out in this area, providing numerous examples – so much so, that the authors further break this genre down into several subgenres as well as game series. The RPG game, and especially its subgenre, the open-world RPG, typically grants the player significant agency to create and develop their own character, as well as building their relationships with the rest of the game world (Majewski, 2018). This can include or in some cases does include the possibility of entering a romance, sexual relationship (e.g., the *Mass Effect* series), and in some cases even forming a marriage (Prósiniowski & Krzywdziński, 2018). Among games that allow players to enter marriage or a long-term relationship, Prósiniowski and Krzywdziński mention *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015), and the *Fable* (Lionhead Studios, 2004–2017) series. Marriage and long-term relationships are also possible in *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000–2021) series of life simulators.

Ultimately, none of the romances Prósiniowski and Krzywdziński identified across different genres devote any significant attention to marital conflict. For most of the examined games, romance is either an immutable part of the game's plot, or an option the player can choose to engage into in order to spice up the game's narrative, or to expand upon the relationships between the player and other characters. The games that do allow marriage or other long-term relationships consider such relations primarily as a gameplay enhancement. For example, in *Skyrim* marriage ultimately only means that when the player occasionally returns to his or her home-stand, the typically stay-at-home spouse can provide various benefits from additional income to extra food and a 'well rested' bonus for sharing a bed. Conflict between the player character and the spouse is at best abstract and non-verbal (e.g., *The Sims* series), but most typically literally nonexistent. This is perhaps most remarkable in the *Fable* series, which allows the player to divorce their spouse, but not to engage in a marital conflict.

Aside from the examples cited by Prósiniowski and Krzywdziński, the 'marriage as an in-game benefit' model is also visible in the Paradox Interactive game series *Crusader Kings* (Paradox Development Studio, 2004–2020). This grand strategy series puts the player in control of the successive heads

of a dynasty over a four-century timespan, and the marital aspect of medieval dynastic politics is a vital game mechanic. For the dynasty to thrive, gain prestige, and arrange beneficial treaties with other feudal lords, the player must carefully arrange marriages not only of their own direct heir, but also of other eligible candidates from their dynasty. These relationships do incorporate conflict, as the game procedurally simulates the ups and downs of the most important relationships at any given time. The game presents the player with role-playing decisions that may even lead to the possibility of assassination by a jealous spouse. However, ultimately, given the repetitively procedural nature of these conflicts and the emotional distance between players and their successive characters, these marriages remain a gameplay mechanic engaged in for direct gameplay benefits, rather than complex relationships. Likewise, conflict is not a genuine clash of characters, but a randomly triggered challenge for the player to overcome.

The same principle can be seen in other games not covered by Prósnowski and Krzywdziński, such as in *Mount & Blade: Warband* (TaleWorlds, 2010). The reason is not difficult to surmise: procedural relationships between the player and a non-player character must necessarily be simple. In *Skyrim*, there are more than 50 characters available to the player to marry, and the players enter these relationships with a character of their own creation, varying in race, ethnicity, personality, and profession. Sexual orientation is up to the player and the game mechanics allow same-sex marriage. The combination of numerous player configurations on one side, and numerous marriageable characters on the other means that from a production perspective, the only way to implement marriage is in a stilted manner that plays out identically regardless of who is involved, with the same dialogues leading up to the marriage, and the same dialogues and interactions between spouses after marriage (The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages, 2021). In such circumstances, marital conflict would inevitably be abstract and incomprehensible. It would not be feasible to prepare especially written dialogues for every possible relationship variant, while procedural generation such as was employed in the *Crusader Kings* series, would necessarily get very complex at this high level of granularity of individual character interactions. At the same time, *Skyrim* did incorporate a system for dynamic quest randomization and the semi-random generation of pre-prepared events to dynamize the game's social fabric (Majewski, 2018). This system could have conceivably been used for marital relationships. The fact that even this very limited level of procedural dynamization was not employed suggests marital relationships are not limited primarily by technology limitations, but by developer priorities.

Overall, most games avoid conflict in their romantic relationships. In RPGs, as noted, marital conflict is an unnecessary and undesirable complication. In other games, where romance is purely a narrative contrivance, conflict is even less desirable, as the challenge for players is to enter a relationship rather than to maintain it. In this model, even if broadly

understood marital conflict does emerge, it will not be a key focal point of the game. Nonetheless, in recent years several games have emerged that do place more emphasis on marital conflict as such. These are now examined as case studies.

Marital Conflict in Games: The Case Studies

Façade (2005)

Billing itself as an ‘interactive drama’ rather than a game, *Façade* was an experimental collaboration between PhD student Michael Mateas and game developer Andrew Stern. The title is considered an important landmark in artificial intelligence research, while also regarded as a notable game, winning awards and gaining media attention at of its release (Thompson, 2020). As an experiment, *Façade* was released for free and never commercialized (it remains freely available today: www.playablstudios.com/facade).

Fundamentally, *Façade* is an attempt to use artificial intelligence to drive an interactive drama structure (Mateas & Stern, 2007). The game is structured similarly to a small-scale theatre play and the story unfolds over the course of a single evening, within a single location and just three characters. The player is a (male or female, depending on player choice) character visiting his longtime friends, the married couple Trip and Grace, after a break of several years. The game takes place entirely within Trip and Grace’s apartment, and the core gameplay affords the player only three basic possibilities – to move and look about, to touch items using the mouse cursor, and to converse with Trip and Grace. The latter option is deeply developed using a word parser, that is, software that interprets the player’s textual input, allowing the game to respond to a much wider variety of keywords than a typical graphical user interface would allow (for more about parsers, see Aarseth, 1997). Also, the conversations are dynamic, as the three characters are free to move about – e.g., Grace may join, and thus interrupt a conversation between the player and Trip, or a three-way conversation may splinter when someone walks away.

The game does not provide the player with objectives, but as the evening progresses, the player may discover through conversations that Trip and Grace are on the verge of divorce. The player’s interactions with the couple are structured in what the developers describe as social games (Mateas & Stern, 2007) that shift as the evening proceeds. The early part of the evening is organized around two simultaneous games. Firstly, the zero-sum affinity game in which the couple seeks to interpret which side the player is on. Secondly, the hot-button game, where commenting on volatile ‘hot-button’ issues triggers the characters to reveal more information about the underlying conflict while affecting the outcome of the affinity game based on player behavior. Eventually the story may transition into the therapy game, in which the player may or may not help Trip and Grace better understand

their marital problems and potentially achieve a breakthrough. The player's deep capacity to influence the ongoing story is notable: the player may set Trip and Grace on the path to reconciliation, or catalyze a final breakup.

The dynamics of the situation are made more complex by the aforementioned affinity game – Trip and Grace can react to the same action or phrase in different ways depending on how they perceive the player's sympathies at a given point. From the player's perspective, much of this process remains intentionally opaque. Although the game's internal systems tally affinity and therapy points for Trip and Grace as well as tracks the player's misbehaviors, these tallies are never exposed to the player. This results in dramatic, unpredictable conversations that are difficult to understand unless the player makes the effort to comprehend the personalities of the interlocutors. However, it must be noted that the limitations of the artificial intelligence and parser capabilities lead also to a different, less desirable unpredictability. As Thompson (2020) notes, the game has become an unexpected favorite among YouTubers, as its sometimes awkward drama can lead to unintentional hilarity.

Whatever the flaws of its artificial intelligence and drama systems, *Faade* integrates marital conflict into its gameplay structures. By leaving it up to the player to extract information from Trip and Grace via conversation and other interactions, *Faade* creates the impression that the player is being drawn into an emergent, dynamic argument, while also slowly revealing information about the deeper, underlying conflict that has divided the couple. Several factors have contributed to the conflict, including criticisms and even outright non-acceptance of each other's hobbies and career choices, family issues, and ultimately personality incompatibilities. These can potentially be resolved, but have been allowed to fester too long in hiding. In this way, *Faade* highlights the long-lasting and complex nature of marital conflicts, which often can stew under the surface – indeed, *faade* – of a seemingly happy marriage, only to explode as if by chance over something trivial. For example, the player making a chance remark about art brings to the fore a fundamental disagreement between the somewhat anti-intellectual Trip, and his artistically-minded wife.

The complex conflict in *Faade* would present a significant design challenge if the game were to cast the player in the role of one of the spouses, namely the requirement for the player to not only take on a new personality, but also to gain an awareness of the spouses' extensive histories. Such knowledge gaps between the audience and the lead characters are common in films and books, where a lead character will often suddenly reveal facts about their own past, shedding a new light on their earlier actions in the story. While knowledge gaps in non-interactive narratives only pose difficulties if the gap becomes too wide for the audience to understand the story world, in games the knowledge gap is a more formidable challenge, as typically the gap interposes itself between the player and the player's own character. The implication is thus that players cannot fully immerse

themselves in their character, as they lack sufficient information about the character's personality and past to properly play the role. Many role-playing games work around this problem by casting the player in the role of an amnesiac character, who is excusably ignorant of the story world (Whitlock, 2012). Other titles reduce the player character to a 'cipher' – a relatively blank persona that players can easily overwrite with their own personality (Heussner et al., 2015). However, such solutions do not easily allow the player character to be party to a marital conflict.

Apart from the knowledge gap, there is also going to be an *affective gap* – the distance between the experience of the player character living through the emotional rollercoaster of marriage and marital conflict, and the player, who is being asked to suddenly step into, and feel a situation that had been years in the making. A game like *Façade* could cast the player as Trip or Grace but could not easily evoke in the player such complex emotions towards their virtual spouse. *Façade* avoids this conundrum by making the player a relatively ignorant bystander. And by noting the player character hasn't seen Trip and Grace in many years, the game actively encourages players to ask questions without feeling that these are questions their character should know the answer to. The problem of the knowledge and emotion gaps is a crucial one to games that engage deeply in marital conflict. *The Novelist* and *Firewatch* employ a different strategy to work around this issue.

The Novelist (2014)

The Novelist tells the story of Dan Kaplan, his wife Linda and son Tommy, as they go on a vacation in an isolated house. Kaplan is the titular novelist, struggling to meet the demands of his literary agent to write his next novel in time, while at the same time juggling his familial responsibilities. If *Façade* makes the player a bystander, *The Novelist* goes a step further: here, the player is almost completely separate from the game world and its inhabitants, playing a disembodied presence. It is implied the player is a ghost of some sort, but ultimately this is not referenced in any way in the narrative. As the player moves around the house, it is possible to read diaries, notes and drawings from Dan, Linda and Tommy. It is also possible to hear selected thoughts from each of the Kaplans, as well as view playbacks of their memories. The player does not directly interact with the Kaplans, and they are supposed to remain unaware of his presence.

When the Kaplans arrive at their holiday retreat, Linda reveals they are on the verge of divorce ('the d word'), and Tommy is desperately trying to gain his father's attention. The game, whose complex narrative structure was later described in detail by its creator Kent Hudson (2018) is divided into nine semi-randomly arranged chapters. In each chapter, the Kaplans face a conflict revolving around Dan's limited time. Each conflict is fundamentally structured in the same way: Dan may either concentrate on his

novel, his wife, or his son. It is the player who determines what choice Dan will make in the given chapter. In each case choosing one means neglecting the others. However, if the player spends enough time exploring the given chapter, it becomes possible to discover a compromise solution to the dilemma, whereby one additional character's wishes are partially fulfilled. The game's systemic rules thus convey the message that juggling work, marriage and parenthood commitments requires repeated compromises and attention-shifts. If Dan neglects his wife in one chapter, he can make up for this in a later chapter; but repeatedly neglecting her results in disaster.

Like *Façade*, *The Novelist* is fundamentally an experimental game, with Hudson's goal being to explore a form of dynamic storytelling where control over the story is to some extent handed over to the player. The chapters are randomly rearranged in each playthrough, but each chapter will play differently depending on past choices, with Hudson paying special attention to providing systemic exceptions to 'edge cases' (Hudson, 2018). For example, if Dan has been neglecting Tommy for a while, the player will find Linda signaling that she does not wish Dan to fulfil her needs in this chapter – as one might expect from a concerned mother, she wants him instead to concentrate on fatherhood.

The Novelist's procedural story has been criticized as somewhat unconvincing and sometimes poorly written (Franklin, 2014), with the situations faced by the Kaplans at times being contrived and cliché based. At the same time, Hudson recounts many positive messages he received from players who claimed the game allowed them to meditate through the time-relationship-based dilemmas they faced in their own lives. *The Novelist* thus seems to show how games can provide the players with a systemic, reactive framework to work through and meditate on the issues involved within marital conflict. This is due to observing how the game's system reacts to their different choices and despite lacking the narrative and emotional depth to properly convey the complexities of such a conflict.

Firewatch (2016)

Façade and *The Novelist* resolved the problem of engaging the player in a marital conflict by sidelining the player, allowing them to explore the roots and resolution of the conflict without having to struggle with a knowledge or emotional gap. *Firewatch* instead tries to provide the player with a deep past for their character, Henry, matching Bateman's (2021) *avatar as invitation to role-play* model of player-avatar relationship. As the game begins, Henry has just set out for a summer job in an isolated tower in a Wyoming national park. Fire lookout towers serve to provide advance detection of forest fires in American national parks (Luckhurst, 2021). Each tower is manned by just one watcher, and in the 1980s when the game is set, their possibilities of contact with the outside world were limited to a walkie-talkie radio set.

At the outset, the game intercuts scenes of the player travelling to his assigned tower, with text-based flashbacks of Henry's relationship with his wife Julia, from their first meeting in a bar, through to her breakdown into early-onset dementia, and finally their separation, when Julia's Australian family decide to take her back home to Australia. Each of the flashback texts typically involves a choice for the player to make, thus making the player an active participant in the formation, development, and difficulties of Henry's marriage, reducing the knowledge gap and providing some sense of emotional buy-in for the player. For example, it is the player that determines how Henry behaved when Julia became ill – whether he exerted all possible effort to take care of her, or if he chose to run away from his problems spending more and more time in bars. Julia is taken back to Australia by her parents regardless of the player's choices, but it is the player that determines whether this was because Henry couldn't take care of her well enough, or if he *didn't want* to take care of her. Consequently, when the player finally arrives at his post and the game begins in earnest, there is a sense of *being* Henry. Having had some control over Henry's choices over several years of his life, players can better identify with the character, and attempt to behave in accordance with their vision of who Henry is.

It is at this point that Julia disappears from the picture. However, while she remains absent, Henry's marital conflict remains a deep influence over the story, that is forming a sort of relationship with Delilah, the occupant of a neighboring lookout tower. If the player allows him or herself to become emotionally immersed in the story, the choices Henry makes will inevitably be based on how the player sees Henry's emotional state. Does Henry still consider himself married, or does he consider the illness-induced conflict between himself and Julia's family to have effectively ended the marriage? Does he seek consolation by getting closer to Delilah, or does he reject her flirtations? Apart from dialogue choices, *Firewatch* provides the player with other, smaller opportunities to grapple with this dilemma. For example, as Henry gets up in the morning in his tower, the player may notice Henry's wedding ring on the table. The ring's removal may potentially be deeply symbolic – did Henry simply remove it for the night, or is he making a statement about his marriage? Though the game never comments on this, the player does nonetheless have a choice – as Henry, the player may pick up the ring and put it back on. Such reactivity is one of the key narrative strategies in *Firewatch*, with the game's dialogues frequently providing alternative lines depending on small choices made earlier in the story (Remo, 2021).

From the perspective of this chapter's topic of marital conflict, *Firewatch* is a borderline case. The story of the marriage depicted in the early stages of the game is not really the story of a marital conflict, but rather the story of a marriage maturing and progressing, only to be disrupted by a major external factor in the form of a debilitating illness (though this illness does result in a conflict between Henry and Julia's family). Overall, the game's

narrative strategy of presenting the player character with a deep past and thus facilitating the partial closure of the knowledge–emotion gap between player and character is very notable in the context of the broader depiction of marital conflicts in games. Where a game would like to immerse the player directly in a marital conflict as one of the spouses, the narrative tools employed by *Firewatch* provide one method of doing so in a convincing manner. However, the game also shows the limits of this approach, with the deep history section of the game being told perfunctorily through text screens – a necessity, given the game’s small development budget (Remo, 2021).

Grand Theft Auto V (2013) and Gone Home (2014)

While the previously discussed titles placed some form of marital conflict at the center of their story and gameplay mechanics, other games use such conflicts in a lesser manner, as one element in a bigger story. Two such cases will now be briefly discussed, one is *Grand Theft Auto V* (*GTA V*), to signal that marital conflicts can be present in high-budget AAA games, and the second *Gone Home*, to indicate that marital issues can merely serve as a background.

GTA V can best be described as a crime heist film turned into a game. *The Grand Theft Auto* series is one of the longest-running, and most financially successful digital game series (Statista, 2021). Situated in a sort of satirical mirror image of America, *GTA* games revolve primarily around cars and violence, pushing such content to the extreme. Such a setting does not require more than a perfunctory storyline, and this is certainly the case for *GTA V*. The narrative is conveyed using a model where non-interactive cutscenes (Klevjer, 2002) are interspersed at key points in-between much lengthier gameplay sections. The cutscenes provide establishing incidents and an explanation for the player regarding whatever the next mission is, and then leaving the player to play the game.

The narrative of *GTA V* revolves around Michael De Santa, a bank robber who some years prior to the game retired to live under a false name. Michael, already experiencing a mid-life crisis, is pushed to take on one final job, and the rest of the game exploring the consequences of this action, leading the player progressively through bigger and bigger missions. The establishing incident is Michael discovering that his wife is cheating on him. In theory, Michael’s relationship with his wife and coming-of-age children is the core of the game, with cutscenes time and again returning to these characters and the perennial conflicts between them. However, it is impossible to treat this narrative seriously as an exploration of marital conflict – the marriage of a retired bank robber and a retired stripper is played here for satirical value, as are the problems faced by their physically adult, but mentally teenage children. The root causes that lead both spouses to cheat on one another are barely signaled.

If *GTA V* turns marital conflict into little more than a satirical joke, *Gone Home* treats the subject seriously but leaves it firmly in the background. The title was developed by an independent studio, Fullbright, which had been established specifically to create personal, narratively driven games. The game casts the player as a character who enters the stage after all the action had already ended – a daughter returning home after a year in Europe, and finding both her parents and her younger sister absent

As the player character, Katie, explores her family's recently inherited new home, the notes and other items she finds necessarily concentrate on her family. The material evidence presents her with a variety of hints concerning a crisis in her parents' marriage. Her mother's hair salon bill ahead of a meeting with a male co-worker suggests at least the possibility of an extramarital affair, while her father's carefully hidden pornographic 'Gentlemen Magazine' suggests he is also sexually frustrated. Conversely, a pamphlet for a marriage counselling retreat with the word 'booked' scribbled on it, serves both as an explanation for Katie's parents' absence in the house upon her return, and as a hint they are determined to work through their marital difficulties. Players do not learn definitively what happened nor what the deeper root causes definitively were. They are left with hints only, such as a backlog of communications between Katie's father and his publisher, suggesting his writing career has been bordering on the edge of failure, and that perhaps his wife was currently the household's primary provider.

Gone Home uses marital conflict not as a core theme, but as background dressing, to flesh out its characters. The same is true of *GTA V*, where marital conflict is shallow and non-interactive – mere motivation for the lead character. Other games not examined here, such as *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* (The Chinese Room, 2015) and *Tacoma* (Fullbright, 2017), similarly use marital conflict as background dressing. It is indeed likely a range of other similar cases of background marriage and marital conflict could be found, and certainly should not be dismissed. There is a case to be made that even such limited, non-interactive use of marriage as a narrative theme opens digital games up to the possibility of exploring narratives otherwise rarely observed in games (including conflicts much more intimate than others explored in this volume).

Conclusion

Given the preoccupation games have with conflict, one might justifiably expect nuanced portrayals of marital conflict to be present in digital games. This chapter has argued this is far from true – the complex, deeply emotional nature of marital conflict in fact makes such conflicts difficult to convey in games, while their personal, small-scale aspect makes them poor subject matter for high action and adventure. Some games treat the commencement of relationships as narrative or gameplay rewards for players,

sparing little attention to depicting the effort required to maintain romantic relationships in the long-term.

With the enormous volume of games available, there are certainly other titles available that contain marital conflicts, for instance the aforementioned *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* and *Tacoma*. Nevertheless, we find the subject remains rare in games. It is also striking that with the notable exception of *GTA V* – one of the most expensive video games to date (Villapaz, 2013) – the games examined as case studies are indie games. These are a loose category that lacks a single definition, but they can be best described as games developed by small, self-funded teams with the aim of independent publication outside of the more conventional developer-publisher relationship (for more about conventional game development structures, see Kerr, 2006). One of the chief hallmarks of indie games is their unconventionality. They not only tend to employ unique visual styles enforced by the need to make themselves stand out despite a small budget (Juul, 2014, 2019), but also display a great willingness to experiment outside of the usual narrative structures (Bateman, 2021).

Façade, *The Novelist*, *Firewatch*, and *Gone Home* are a diverse group of games, but all can be described as experimental, focused on conveying a strong narrative in a unique way within a low budget. Such games choose to stand out not only through gameplay and narrative mechanics, but also through narrative themes, more readily choosing esoteric topics unattractive for big-budget productions. Consequently, while big-budget games will undoubtedly touch upon marriage and marital conflict, for more complex explorations of marital conflict that attempt to best leverage the affordances of the interactive medium, we would do well to pay attention to indie titles. It seems likely that if further mainstream titles containing marital conflict could be identified, they would do so in a manner similar to *GTA V*, limiting the conflict to a purely narrative element beyond the influence of player interactions.

Unusual themes are well served by unusual gameplay mechanics. Thus, the games analyzed in this chapter, apart from the mainstream *GTA V*, employed unique mechanics tailored towards exploring the complexities of marriage and marital conflict mentioned in its short characteristic in this chapter. *Façade* is thus built around a dialogue engine oriented toward the gradual and difficult unveiling of the hidden tensions, and their deeply buried causes. In *The Novelist*, the player becomes a sort of a 'ghost' to surreptitiously explore the needs and thoughts of the protagonists. In both cases, the gameplay concentrates not on action, and not on player development, but on gaining deep understanding of the other characters and helping them resolve their problems. The mechanics thus reinforce the theme of appropriate words and behaviors having the power to resolve marital conflicts, conditional to understanding their causes. Games can also increase awareness of the external context of a marital conflict. For example, in *Firewatch*, the actions of the player make the protagonist reminisce a negative

life event as the primary source of the marital conflict. In *Firewatch* it is the illness of one of the spouses, in other games external problems relate to work or sexual life. Notably, *Firewatch* allows deeper exploration of its subject by enabling the player to determine how the protagonist had behaved prior to the game, effectively setting up a bank of memories common to the player and the player character.

Despite indie games touching marital conflicts in more detail, developers face challenges (the mentioned gaps) resulting from the complex nature of such conflicts, as discussed earlier. Resolving these challenges seems crucial not only for entertainment purposes, as games could potentially educate on managing problems marriages face. However, apart from the educational value of the game, a significant issue is the way this kind of conflict pushes at the limits of the game form, posing questions about what kinds of narratives are suitable for digital games. The unusual game mechanics employed by the experimental games described here provide interesting avenues to explore the topic of marital conflict. It also seems, however, as though mainstream game developers at the moment are largely content to limit marital relationships and other romances to achievement-like features, where the successful ‘tying of the knot’ effectively concludes its in-game utility. Furthermore, it is hard to find any indications that the players of games like *GTA V*, *Skyrim* or *Crusader Kings* perceive the shallowness of marriage mechanics as a problem in need of a solution. The scope of these games makes it questionable whether any potential solution would be sufficiently complex and subtle. Perhaps, then, ultimately the intimacy and intensity of marital conflicts is best left to the tailored efforts of the indie developers?

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