P(l)aying for Love: Capitalizing on patterns of contemporary romance fiction in PlayMe Studio's *MeChat*

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The presentation aims to analyze the ways in which PlayMe Studio's mobile dating simulator, *MeChat* (2021), engages with popular tropes and narrative structures of contemporary romance fiction, and how it utilizes them to encourage the player to perform loving behavior according to the popular patterns of romance, and in order to do so—purchase and spend in-game currency.

MeChat is a free-to-play, online mobile game, which combines the premise of a story-based dating simulator with the design reminiscent of popular dating apps, such as Tinder or Bumble—the player can scroll through a selection of fictional characters, "match" and chat with them through an in-app communicator. The chats include text and voice messages, cartoonish "photos," and "dates," which depict in-person encounters. The variety of characters that *MeChat* offers is impressive—the game includes over 200 storylines available to play. The stories draw heavily from the tropes and themes of contemporary romance fiction, with the characters representing a multitude of popular sub-genres (romantic comedies, BDSM erotica, mafia- and monster romances), and with storylines following both specific conflicts characteristic of these sub-categories and the general pacing structure of romance (i.e. gradual build-up of romantic tension based on the characters proving their affection in regular intervals).

Importantly, *MeChat* incorporates choices within these storylines. Often, during either the texting or dating portion of the game, several reaction options will show up on screen to be selected by the player—most of them, however, have no impact on how the story unfolds, as they offer two very similar reactions to the situation at hand, and only some impact how the scene plays out. The latter happens when one of the choices is a premium one, which the player has to purchase using purchasable in-game currency. These choices usually allow for the development of the scene at hand—often involving sexual encounters, moments of affection, confessions, enacting high-stakes action by the main character, or simply learning otherwise unattainable details of the main plot. The satisfactory outcome in the narrative is further strengthened through procedural means, as selecting the premium options rises the relationship strength index.

This particular design choice of placing the satisfactory elements of a romantic narrative behind a paywall serves as a particularly interesting interpretative and critical case for academic consideration. On the one hand, as it uses the player's

emotional literacy and knowledge of romantic fiction to encourage affect, which simultaneously guides the player's toward purchasing premium options, it an illustration of the link between players' emotional experiences and consumer behavior (see: Chou and Wang 2017) and presents a case for the under-studies hedonic motivations for in-game purchases (Marder et. al. 2019). On the other, since it encourages the performance of loving behavior according to the patterns of romance, thus presenting love as based on a constant trial and satisfaction circle, *MeChat's* showcases not only that games draw heavily from other types of romantic fiction (Grace 2020), but also that they can mediate ideas of what love is (Enevold and MacCallum-Stewart 2015; Enguix and Roca 2015). Moreover, by drawing a close link between the purchase option and romantic behavior, *MeChat* engages the basic principles of affective capitalism (Karppi et al. 2014) by both targeting the emotional capacities of the player and providing emotional satisfaction as a commodity (Illouz 2017, 7, 11-14).

Interpreted through the lens of these theories, *MeChat* serves as an example of how games can utilize and reproduce principles of love as deeply entangled in capitalistic ideologies (see: Macfarlane 1995). By linking the abovementioned perspectives in a critical investigation of *MeChat's* use of micro-transactions in choice-based romance stories, this presentation aims to shed light on the relationship between the economic and the romantic in PlayMe Studio's game, and on the economies of love in games in general. As such, the presentation seeks to contribute to the sparse existing research on the commodification of the romantic aspects of play and the strategies of capitalizing on game love (Ganzon 2018). In addition, by focusing on the emotional implications of the relationship between the player and a game's romantic narrative, it should offer an alternate, but complementary approach to the existing research on parasocial relationships with fictional characters in games (i.e. Blom 2023, 125-132; Elvery 2022).

Keywords

love studies, popular romance, microtransactions, affective economy, mobile games

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