

# Only If For a Knight: Romantic Subplots in cRPGs in the Light of Courtly Love Trope

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Romance subplots have become integral to modern cRPG genre, heightening the narrative engagement and serving as a cornerstone of fandom participation. The chosen romance path is one of the main divergences between players' experiences, allowing for exploration of unique storylines and choices, and exertion of control over the narrative. At the same time, the gender-gating of romances, on one hand limits the available choices, and on the other serves the narrative in establishing genre conventions. One of the prevailing romance types within the cRPGs, particularly those with a fantasy setting, is the reworking of the Fin Amour trope, or the Courtly Romance.

This paper aims at content analysis of the selected games in the light of romance tropes of 'Courtly Love', which according to Barbara Tuchman's account, is a modern scholarly term referring to a code of behaviour that gave rise to the modern ideas of chivalrous romance, where a knight of noble blood would love and worship a woman from a distance, protecting her honour and attempting to win her favour by brave deeds (Tuchman 1978). Within the code, the woman would scornfully or chastely refuse the advances in public, while encouraging the behaviour in private. The trope bears associations of nobility (peasants cannot engage in 'fine love'), secrecy, adultery and (perhaps paradoxically) chastity, since the passion can never be consummated within the lovers' social circumstances. As such, 'courtly love' has been perceived as a 'higher love', unsullied by selfish carnal desires (Boase 1977).

The game romances following the trope are filtered through the popular narratives borrowing from the genre - disassociating from both adultery and chastity, but utilising the tropes of quest narratives, lady's favours and gift giving. Quests and gift giving mechanics within the RPG are particularly suited to the trope, incorporating the

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mechanics within the narrative. Significantly, the courtly romance tropes are usually found in romances available for female characters (and usually chosen by female players). This paper will investigate the courtly love tropes, their significance in terms of player agency and narrative engagement, and the ways in which video game mechanics, interactivity, and procedurality result in the adjustment of the trope.

The valourous deeds required by the chivalric conventions are usually represented in personal quests and the affection tokens are conveyed by cosmetic armour changes, iconic representations, or gift giving mechanics. The paper will look at the romances in question, particularly those designed for a female character and/or player, in the terms of the shift of agency; as the lady is the one performing the valorous deeds, and despite the presence of the gift mechanics, she's also the one receiving the tokens of the male NPCs' affections. Another aspect of the analysis will be the ways in which the games uphold the genre trappings - presenting the male romanced character as a knight or warrior with connections to nobility, and reworking the themes of chastity and adultery. The analysis will also concern the evolution of the tropes' throughout the history of cRPGs.

The final aspect of the analysis concerns the audience engagement and fan reactions to the courtly love-inspired romances within the games, drawing on the theories of Henry Jenkins, who associates fanworks with negotiating the interpretation of the extant media (Jenkins 1992), as well as of Patricia Frazer Lamb and Diane Veith, who discuss fandom engagement and analyze equality-seeking practices of sense-making (Lamb and Veith, 1986). The reactions and fan interpretations are visible within the meta discussions, fanworks and modding communities, where the tropes of the chivalric romance are either heightened or subverted in service of individual's control over meaning, as discussed by Francesca Coppa in reference to fandom practices (Coppa, 2007).

## **Keywords**

courtly love, game romances, cRPGs, player agency

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