

# She makes me brave: The emergence of intimacy in gameplay

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the complex relationship between intimacy and play, and offers an empirical analysis of how intimacy emerges in a playful digital environment (i.e., *Audition*). *Audition* is a non-violent, non-fantasy dance battle Multiplayer Online Game (MOG) that has many Asian and female players, and provides a sophisticated in-game marriage system. Based on players' self-reports posted on public online forums and in-depth interview data from 35 *Audition* players, this study shows that *Audition* marriage is more than a playful game feature for many players. Instead, players experience genuine, meaningful intimate relationships there, and consider their in-game marriage an emergent learning process to satisfy their social and emotional needs. This study contributes to understanding interpersonal dynamics forged around technological objects in digital environments, which is important for designing Intimate (Ubiquitous) Computing and the next generation of ICTs.

## Keywords

Play, intimacy, Multiplayer Online Games, in-game marriage

## INTRODUCTION

With the increasing interests in Intimate (Ubiquitous) Computing (Bell et al., 2003), it is important for information scientists to explore how ICTs can "address and account for people's embodied, lived experiences," and to study "the ways in which computing technology could and should be more intimate" (p. 3). As Ross (2005) points out, the Internet has brought "a new dimension to intimacy, both by permitting intimate contact electronically over a distance and by, through that same contact, permitting intimate discussion shorn of most of the social cues present in face-to-face interactions" (p. 342).

In such a "convergence of technology and our social world" (Rooney, 2014, p.882), intimate experiences and relationships have penetrated and mediated virtual worlds – For

example, Multiplayer Online Games (MOGs) "have evolved into places for people to meet up, find romantic partners and maintain relationships" (Huynh, Lim, & Skoric, 2013, p. 251). One example is in-game marriage: Players can get married in a game and collaborate as a couple, through which a genuine intimate relationship sometimes emerges. The question becomes: Why and how can genuine intimacy emerge in a playful or ludic online environment?

To explore this question, this paper investigates the complex relationship between intimacy and play, and offers an empirical analysis of how intimacy emerges in a playful digital environment (i.e., *Audition*). *Audition* is a non-violent, non-fantasy dance battle MOG that has many Asian and female players, and provides a sophisticated in-game marriage system. This study contributes to our understanding of "the origin and experience of human intimacy" (Bell et al., 2003, p. 3), and of the impact of human-centered computing on interpersonal relationships.

## INTIMACY AND PLAY

Intimacy has long been seen as "one of the best aspects of our social existence" (Pace et al., 2010, p. 240), as one of the most important social relationships involving experiences that range from the mundane to the aesthetic (Rooney, 2014), and as a specific sort of knowing, loving, and caring for a person (Jamieson, 1989). Usually intimacy is closely related to distance and relatedness, either physical distance or emotional/spiritual distance; it is also tightly bounded to issues of identity, pleasure, and sociability.

Many researchers have studied what elements give rise to intimacy and how to characterize intimacy. Especially, previous studies show that "[p]lay provides a mechanism to experiment with, enter into, and share intimacy" (Bell et al., 2003, p. 5). According to Sutton-Smith (2009), play could be states of mind, activities, or events. Baxter (1992) proposed that play should be an index of intimacy because play is characteristic of synchrony, closeness, low risk, conflict management, interpersonal communication, inter-dependent relationship, and meaning construction. HCI designers also regard intimacy as a set of experiential values including curiosity, enjoyment, resonance, play and self-awareness (Blythe et al., 2004), and as a key for socio-cultural computing that can create emotional and embodied experience (e.g., Schiphorst et al., 2007).

In MOGs, play could be mental or subjective play (e.g., dreams, fantasy, imaginations, Dungeons and Dragons), playful behaviors (e.g., playing tricks, playing up to someone, playing a part), informal social play (e.g., joking, parties, language game), vicarious audience play (e.g., fantasy lands, virtual reality), performance play (e.g., being a play actor), contests (e.g., games and sports), and so forth. It is the great diversity of play forms that makes MOGs "domains of contrived contingency, capable of generating emergent practices and interpretations, and are intimately connected with everyday life to a degree heretofore poorly understood" (Malaby, 2007, p. 95). So far little research has been done to understand intimate experiences "as they are developed in or mediated by virtual worlds" (Pace et al., 2010, p. 234); or to provide empirical evidence to study how genuine intimate relationships can emerge in the game worlds.

## METHODOLOGY

**Study game** *Audition* is the study game. *Audition* was released in South Korea in 2004, launched in the U.S. in 2008, and now attracts more than 300 million players worldwide. *Audition* is a non-violent, non-fantasy MOG with a popular marriage system that mediates and facilitates couple-related collaborative behaviors (e.g., Players can find available dance partners in virtual "dance rooms," then dance as a couple to compete with other couples by synchronizing their keyboard strokes). For example, during a dance battle (Figure 1), couples press the arrow keys and spacebar on their keyboards in accordance with arrows on the screen, which are synchronized to the rhythm of a song being played. The greater accuracy and coordination they exhibit in pressing the right keys with their partner, the higher their scores. To officially get married in *Audition*, players need to practice together and complete a "wedding party" dance task (Figure 2). After that, they will get a love license, and a virtual wedding ring.



**Figure 1: A couple dance battle in *Audition***

*Audition* was chosen primarily on account of its simulation and gamification of the concept of "marriage" as part of a playful or ludic digital environment. *Audition* was chosen also because of its player groups. *Audition* has a balanced gender distribution and ethnicity diversity among its players. According to Redbana.com (The company that runs, maintains, and manages *Audition* in North America), 48.6% of *Audition* players are female, while 48.1% are male and

3.3% are unknown. *Audition* also has many Asian and black players: They account for more than 70% of the players, while Caucasian account for 30%. Studying these unique player groups can contribute to improving game design by well understanding different players' needs and desires.



**Figure 2: A wedding party (left), and a love license with ring (right) in *Audition***

## Data collection

The author collected data in two ways. *Audition* players often publicly self-document their gaming experiences, and how the gameplay impacts their offline lives on these game-related forums. Thus, the author collected players' self-reports (e.g., textual posts and threads, posted images and videos) regarding their game-related intimate experience from two biggest and most active public English-language forums for *Audition*. One is the Redbana Forum (forums.redbana.com), which has been the official forum for *Audition* in the U.S. since 2008. The other is Tgforums (<http://forums.jordanrudgett.com>), a popular gaming community started in January 2013 by gamers themselves.

In January 2014, the author posted threads on the above-mentioned forums to recruit *Audition* players who had used the marriage system and were willing to be interviewed. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted via text chat in Skype (which participants preferred over voice or video chat) in order to investigate players' attitudes and behaviors that were not included in the self-reports, e.g., the implicit psychological and social reasons why they got married in *Audition*.

The author interviewed all *Audition* players who responded to the threads within a month (N=35, including 25 females and 10 males). 16 were aged 14-17 (46%), and 19 were aged 18-22 (54%). The average age of the sample was 17.5 (SD = 1.9). The age distribution of the interviewees is consistent with the general age distribution information provided by Redbana (13-17: 42.4%; 18-24: 46.2%). Most participants were Asian (72%, N=25). Five interviewees (14%) reported that they were homosexual or bisexual. Most interviewees (N=31) located in North America (U.S. and Canada). Regarding gaming experience, 49% of all interviewees (N=17) had played *Audition* for 6 to 8 years, 46% (N=16) had played for 3 to 5 years, while only 6% (N=2) had played for 1 to 2 years. Thus, the interviewees were serious, veteran users of *Audition*. Interviews lasted for 90 minutes on average, with a median word count of 3822.4 words (Max. = 12773 words).

Since all interviewees were volunteers recruited from online forums. There is a potential bias in a self-selected convenience sample. At the same time, despite this limitation, the interview population represents demographic diversity and experience with the game and can provide valuable insights.

### **Analytical Procedures**

The author used phenomenological analysis (PA) to analyze the data. This type of analysis attempts to explore how an individual constructs his or her unique personal experience, perception, or account of an object or event, not to "produce an objective statement of the object or event itself" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 53). Thus, PA, which emphasizes people's unique experience and perception, is especially appropriate to study *Audition* players' personal experience of intimacy.

PA has been widely used in studying intimacy (e.g., Register & Henley, 1992), online intimacy (e.g., Bardzell, Bardzell, & Zhang et al., 2014), and MOG-mediated relationships (e.g., Huynh et al., 2013). In this paper, the author conducted PA as the following steps: Read and annotate players' narratives (as derived from self-reports and transcripts of interviews) to acquire a sense of the whole picture for their intimate experience; identify themes and sub-themes in their intimate experiences; group cases and examples of the same theme and subtheme to generate a rich description; synthesize these themes to summarize the fundamental aspects of their intimate experiences.

### **FROM PLAY TO INTIMACY**

**An emergent process** At the first glance, *Audition* marriage system is a straightforward score/point mechanics to attract players, keep them play longer and make them spend more money in the game, since a couple needs to spend real life money (1 US dollar = 1000 Bana cash) on buying all virtual items required for the marriage and on leveling-up, including Wedding Party tickets (5600 bana cash), Love Party tickets and rings (price varies). The main goal of this rule-based and goal-oriented game feature is not to foster genuine intimate relationships, although it incorporates some social components (e.g., dancing with others) to attract players. But for many players, *Audition* marriage is more than a game feature. They re-interpret their in-game marriages as a way to learn from others, to grow up, to gain friendship, emotional support, someone to talk to, and in general, a way to satisfy their social and emotional needs. They usually referred their re-interpretation to an "emergent" process. For example:

*Honestly, I didn't really take game marriage seriously since it was just a game. But after meeting my current partner, I began to take it seriously because our relationship isn't just about rings. We do other things together besides audition as a couple and have emotional attachment like lovers do.* (Interviewee 4, Female, 17, Asian)

*I did not expect a relationship from online marriage. It was just a fun game. But the feeling just came naturally.* (I20, Female, 20, Asian)

*It just happened. I never used the game as a form of finding romance. I just chill in game and end up finding someone who shares the same interests as I do. And one thing leads to another.* (I21, Male, 19, White)

For these players, at the very beginning *Audition* was not different from any other "fun" games, and *Audition* marriage was just a necessary mechanism to play this "fun" game. Seeking romance or any type of emotional connections is not a pre-existing goal for players. Instead, an instrumental mutual goal for having the pretty rings may be the actual driven motivation for coupling. But their subjective experiences gradually diverged from the original external motivation for having rings and leveling up, as they realized that someone shared the same interests as they did, and "*the feeling just came naturally.*" They started to reflect on their gameplay experience and redefine what in-game marriage meant for them. They associated *Audition* marriage to deeper social meanings such as connectness, warmth, and love ("*have emotional attachment like lovers do*"), and considered *Audition* couples more than just teammates dancing together in a virtual world.

**A learning process** Another intriguing finding is how players experienced *Audition* marriage as a learning process in which they had many life lessons. I7 (Male, 19, Asian) said, "*I'm learning about other people, realizing their routines in life, the society they are exposed to and how they are different from mine. They are actual people that are divided from a screen. It has allowed me in a way to seek romance and learn each time a heart is broken.*" Similarly, I15 (Male, 19, Caucasian) described his experience as:

*You learn so much through so many experiences about relationships. I learn from the bad times, rather than mourn over them. If I didn't have these experiences I wouldn't be who I am today. The thing about Audition is through every avatar, there is a person behind that monitor. These are all real people with real emotions. When two people begin to like each other, it's real. It doesn't matter if it's on a game because it's 2 individual people. From my experience, I've learned many things through the relationships I've had with people through this game, and it's real as it gets. The things I've learned about relationships through the women I've been with online can easily be applied to real life. And that's why it [*Audition marriage*] is not just a game.*

Both I7 and I15 told the author that they had multiple serious relationships in *Audition* but they all ended not well. For them, *Audition* marriage was not about playing a game (e.g., rings, scores or levels) but all about people – how to know people ("*their routines in life*"), how to appreciate their differences ("*the society they are exposed to and how they are different from mine*"), how to learn from both good and bad relationships with people ("*learn each time a heart*

is broken," "learn from the bad times"), how to grow up from such experiences ("I wouldn't be who I am today") and how to use such experiences to improve offline lives ("can easily be applied to real life"). For these players, the importance of *Audition* marriage is not to provide a playful gaming experience or a sense of achievement and success. It is important and meaningful only because it allows them to learn and experience what genuine emotional connections are, which help them mature in the offline world.

In general, most *Audition* players the author encountered in this study considered their *Audition* marriage experiences "positive." But this positiveness has nothing to do with the marriage system as a playful game feature. Players had positive experiences because their attitudes towards the marriage system changed (i.e., an emergent process) and they got emotional benefits from their *Audition* marriages. Sometimes, such intimacy can even develop into offline romantic relationships, as this typical love story shows:

*Just like all of you, we don't expect to meet our someone on Audition. At least for us we didn't. We started off as friends during winter break of 2011 and we coupled only as friends. We are on the opposite sides of the United States so we definitely didn't want a long distance relationship. We became best friends, partners in crime, then lovers. We've had a lot of struggles as the days go by, but we still love each other. (posted on the Redbana forum by two Asian players who developed their in-game marriage into a serious relationship offline, age unknown)*

## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This study has shown how *Audition* players' intimate experience emerges as "learning" in a playful environment. From players' perspective, play can generate an enjoyable, pleasant and engaging environment that provides a highly positive experience (Mathwick & Rigdon, 2004, p. 324), which can facilitate the emergence of intimacy by adding qualities of happiness, relaxation, and curiosities and expectations for others. However, when players experience the emerged intimacy, they tend to attribute their positive feelings to intimacy, not to play. Thus, play may lead to intimacy but intimacy may overweight play. These findings shed light on how ordinary people find emotional fulfillment in online social spaces, and what the relationships are between technology and "some of the deepest and most meaningful dimensions of human experience (Bardzell & Bardzell, 2008, p. 11). This would be important for designing and understanding the next generation of ICTs – to acknowledge the sensory, affective, poetic and corporeal qualities of the moment of lived experience (Koefoed Hansen & Kozel, 2007).

This study is a part of a larger study of MOG players' intimacy-mediated collaborative behaviors. In an extended study, how *Audition* players' in-game marriage can affect their collaborative behaviors and emotional connections will be further analyzed.

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