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Playing with Game Theory II: Parks and Recreation: Experiencing Medieval Games

## Designing Women: Feminist Game Design in *Doon*

### Introduction

<1> The text I'm going to talk about for the next 20 minutes is entitled *Doon*, and it is a Breton lai, or short verse narrative, written most likely in England sometime in the mid-13th century. And by short, I mean that this text contains only 286 octosyllabic lines. But within this brief, rich text, the main character, the Lady of Edinburgh, designs a game to navigate the various, mostly patriarchal expectations of the citizens of her city. The Lady, which is the only name the narrator provides for her, inherits an estate and lives there as *seigneur*, or Lord, really, in the *Chastel as Puceles*, the Castle of Maidens. Such a space serves as a popular trope in medieval French romance and is found in the Arthurian universe, the Tristan Legends (Léonois), and one of my personal favorites, *Floire et Blanchefleur*.

<2> The Castle of Maidens is such an ubiquitous place in Western medieval literature that it appears in the 1975 cult classic, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, when Sir Galahad spends an hour or two at Castle Anthrax in search of the Grail. It's here in Castle Anthrax that we see 60 women tempt Galahad into staying there with their sexual agency after luring him in with a Grail-shaped beacon. The knight is rescued by Lancelot, owing to the Castle's reputation as a perilous place shortly after his arrival. Lest I stay too long in the '70s, let it suffice to say that despite its dated and sometimes cringeworthy presentation, Castle Anthrax serves as a useful

counterpoint to the Chastel as Puceles in *Doon* because they both, to varying degrees, reveal the importance of such a homosocial space for women in the medieval imagination and beyond. In *Doon*, the Lady and her Castle of Maidens allow us to see possibility of feminist game design.

<3> Rejecting a life of subservience masked by matrimony, our Lady consistently refuses all marriage proposals from the men of Edinburgh. Ultimately, however, to appease the outraged citizens of her land, and realizing marriage seems inevitable, the Lady crafts a game to her advantage, one that demonstrates a commitment to the values and wishes of her citizens, while simultaneously fulfilling her own wishes to avoid if not marriage, then to get out of a match with an ill-suited husband. For the lady, the stakes of the game are high; she is designing a game that will allow her to keep her freedom, her material wealth, and her sovereignty. The text is clear about what the Lady risks by marrying:

She scorned all the men of her land.  
 Not one of them was worthy enough  
 For her to wish to love or marry him,  
 Nor for her to be courted by him.  
 She did not want to enslave herself  
 On account of marriage. (ll. 19-24)

<4> The Lady defies social convention by filling and altering a literary trope normally reserved for the old, rich men of Old French literature, and those around her—even the narrator—criticize her for not choosing to take a husband. Yet, in this position of power, the Lady reveals that women are stripped of their rights and freedoms through marriage. Our text reinforces this notion through the strong rhyme of Old French “servage” with “mariage.” This

coupling of the institutions of marriage and slavery for women clarifies the true reason the Lady does not want to marry. Her independence and wealth bolster her agency, but are ultimately not enough to save her from the pressure put on her by those around her. It is her wealth, in addition to her location in the Castle of Maidens, that positions the Lady to design a game, which is her last defense against marriage.

<5> Before I jump into describing the Lady's game, I would like to share that I've been leaning into Jack Halberstam's idea of "low theory" lately, perhaps an insight you gleaned from my Monty Python citation earlier. So, instead of providing evidence for how medieval marriage might have been a form of slavery, or how historically accurate a narrative representation like *Doon* is, I would like to instead leave it at this: the Lady didn't want to get married, and so that's a good enough basis for a feminist game as any.

### **The Game**

<6> And, so, what is a feminist game? Feminist game theory does not exist as a unified set of ideas or definitions, but in building on the work of scholars like Kishonna Gray, Amanda Phillips, Bonnie Ruberg, and Adrienne Shaw to name just a few, I conceive of feminist game design as the blueprints to any game that attempts to or successfully changes patriarchal systems through the implementation of new rules of play. I'll get into that more in just a bit, but I wanted to share how I think of feminist game design so that you can hold it in mind as I describe the game at hand. If the Lady must get married, at least she is able to create conditions for the marriage through her game. As any good designer ought to, the Lady implements rules to set the parameters of gameplay: first, whoever wishes to marry her must complete the journey from Southampton to Edinburgh in one single day. Second, the player must survive the night at the

Castle of Maidens (SPOILER ALERT all but one of the countless players who undertake the challenge die because of a special murder bed the Lady prepares for them). Third, if successful, the player must make the journey a second time while racing against a swan in flight. If a player meets all these conditions, then they complete the objectives and win the game. Video game and analog design are exceptionally complex, but the three main terms I'll be juggling for the remainder of this talk are: rules, mechanics, and objectives. **Rules** are simply the parameters of the game—the can dos and the can't dos of play. **Mechanics** are a player's actions and interactions with the gaming environment. **Objectives** are the goals and necessary requirements needed for the player to win, as established and regulated by the rules and acted out through game mechanics

<7> Let's look briefly at one example of rules and mechanics in the Lady's game. As I mentioned just a minute ago, some rules of this particular game would be that any player: 1.) must travel from Southampton 2.) arrive at Edinburgh 3.) in the span of a day 4.) must not die 5.) must repeat 1-4 but this time while racing a swan. The mechanics of the game differ slightly, and they include actions like 1.) riding on a horse 2.) sleeping and subsequently 3.) not dying in a bed and 4.) racing a swan. Together, all of these elements, and more that I don't have time to discuss today, serve as a system within which the gameplay occurs, eventually leading to a player's win or loss.

<8> Despite these neat and tidy categories, gameplay is rarely based on skill or chance alone. One of the very few rules the Lady creates, and one that is worth repeating, is that a challenger must win a horseback race against a swan in flight. I could tell you that as the crow, *or swan*,

flies, the distance between Southampton and Edinburgh cities is approximately 350 miles.

Assuming that a horse, mounted by a knight, can maintain a constant speed of 25 mph, then the fastest possible time it would take for the journey is roughly 14.5 hours. I could also tell you that a swan flies on average about 30 mph, so not that different from a horse, but with a tailwind, they can reach significantly faster speeds, upwards of 50-100 mph (80-160 kmh). A swan could make the journey at the fastest in 3.5 hours with favorable tailwinds. I could tell you all of these calculations, but that would be a circuitous way to say that a horse and a swan can impact the game's outcome beyond a player's skill level. Racing an animal with such variable speeds brings chance into the mix, and that is of course, by design. This lady wants her game to be unwinnable for all but the worthiest suitor. Again, she's not giving up her freedom without a fight . . . or a flight.

<9> The eponymous knight of our lai, *Doon*, certainly has equestrian skill because he successfully completes the first challenge. The Lady, having seen this before, is confident her bed, the second and normally final challenge of the game, will eliminate this player. As a symbol, the bed may represent the ultimate goal of playing and winning the game, which is unbarred access to the Lady's body. Doon, however, sleeps on the floor having his suspicions about the bed. His choice—which is what the rules-mechanics-objectives system provides for players—pays off and he survives the night. If the bed is a site to access the Lady's body, then Doon has postponed or forgone the need to have access to her. He has instead demonstrated that part of his motivation for enlisting in the game is out of the satisfaction of winning the challenge, rather than necessarily sexual or lustful in nature. In recognition of this, and perhaps spurred on

by a combination of wanting to remain unmarried and the excitement of the challenge herself, the Lady designs a new level.

<10> In gameplay, and especially in video games, not all of the rules are immediately available to the player. Whether this next stage of the game was preconceived by the Lady is left to the imagination, but Doon must now return to Southampton to complete the journey a second time, only now he has to race the swan. The game now requires Doon to level up. In video games, and myriad other games, leveling up occurs when a character has accumulated a sufficient amount of experience or acquired enough points to temporarily or permanently improve their abilities and performance. More importantly, perhaps, leveling up is required in order for gamers to progress through the game, and in this instance, it is necessary if Doon still wishes to marry the Lady and win the game . . . .

<11> Which he does! So Doon wins the race against the swan, rather anticlimactically marries the Lady, leaves her in Edinburgh, and runs away to France in search of more tournaments and games, but not before he prophesies the birth of the child, their future son they *just* conceived. He gives the Lady a ring and tells her to give it to their child who will recognize his father because of it. This moment reveals the magic of possibilities that I find in reading medieval literature and playing video games. There's no reason a human should need to or be able to race a swan or foretell the birth of their own son. The combination of narrative and game at hand, however, allows us to adopt a **lusory attitude**, which is the gaming theory term for suspending our disbelief. Similarly, this moment also reveals the possible failure of the Lady's game to protect her from marriage. Not only is she married when she doesn't want to be, she's now a

single mother, which is of course not a failure in itself, but it does make me ask whether the game as designed is a failure, and if so, what exactly is it failing at?

<12> The metrics for failure and success are tricky here, but in thinking about the design of the game as a failure, I turn again to Jack Halberstam who argues that “from the perspective of feminism, failure has often been a better bet than success. Where feminine success is always measured by male standards, and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures” (4). From the beginning of the lai, the Lady is met with constant pressure from her citizens to marry. Because living as a wealthy, single landowning woman already places her outside of her prescribed social role, and because the game is her way to mitigate that pressure to live up to exact patriarchal ideals, from Halberstam’s shadow feminist perspective, the game would always be a failure. Its creation relieves the pressures placed on the Lady to marry, only because she has the design skills necessary to influence the outcome of the game. So, the game design itself is not a failure because the game already exists as a compromise for its designer. In this sense, the “unexpected pleasure” Halberstam mentions seems to appear when the social obligations of marriage for the Lady disappear along with her husband, Doon. So, too, does Doon’s and the Lady’s child seem to be an unexpected pleasure. The narrator tells us that “at the time of the child’s birth / all of the maidens rejoiced. / The Lady raised and cherished the child / until he could ride a horse (ll. 190-3).

<13> At this point, the Lady’s son travels to France to enter into tournaments—a gamer at heart like both of his parents—and eventually jousts against his father, whom he unhorses and defeats. In what may be a bold claim, I suggest that the son’s victory in the tournament constitutes one of

the final, hidden rules of the game; it is another point where Doon must level up, but this time fails. The Lady had influence, if not control, over her son's well being from before it was a child to when he voyages to France. Of course, I'm not arguing that the son *only* exists as a gaming object or rule; instead, I believe that 15 years later, the Lady's son extends her game into the next generation as a product of her design. Despite the game being a failure when considering Halberstam's shadow feminism, the Lady's game is successful in that it's challenging enough for only the right knight to win—and Doon fulfills the Lady's desire to be unmarried in practice when he leaves. It's also successful in that the offspring from their union allows the Lady to defeat Doon in battle by proxy. This is not to say that reproduction is inherently feminist—I don't think it is. Rather, in this instance, I argue that the Lady's design might have included this generational failsafe, just like her swan, that would allow her to win in the end. I think that the Lady is a skillful game designer, and a successful feminist game designer, to boot, even if some of that success contains inextricable, built-in failures mentioned before. The game's rules, mechanics, and objectives create what gaming industry professionals call the "sweet spot": the balance between challenge and enjoyment. This sweet spot between challenge and pleasure is also the mode of play in courtly love. In this way, medieval French relationships, at least what remains in the extant literature, are gamified systems themselves.

<14> Speaking of fun, I'd like to return finally to the murder bed that magically eliminates countless players from the Lady's game. In their book, *Gamer Trouble*, Amanda Phillips writes about two characters and the risk of violence in feminist games:

GLaDOS and Bayonetta offer a fantasy version of feminism that is empowering in its imagination of the violent end of patriarchy, but this is also the fantasy

feminism that lies at the heart of misogynist backlash: the fear of a matriarchy just as brutal and oppressive as its masculine counterpart—a violent white supremacist matriarchy that women of color have long warned about (132).

This resonates with me because the Lady's game functions in a similar way; in avoiding the pressures placed on her, she offers further violence to those who successfully rise to her challenges. I don't think the Lady's game is necessarily as brutal or oppressive as possible "masculine counterparts," but what Phillips' points out, works like Audre Lorde's, "Master's Tools"; Hazel Carby's "White Woman Listen!"; Aida Hurtado's, "Reflections on White Feminism"; and Chela Sandoval's "U.S. Third World Feminism" underscore unifying problems in both gaming and medieval studies with regards to race. So in the Lady's violent attempt to end pressure on her to marry, her game stands in opposition to important work done by modern feminists of color.

<15> And so, I revisit my definition of feminist game design, which I argue is "the blueprints to any game that attempts to or successfully changes patriarchal systems through the implementation of new rules of play." Indeed, the next step for me is to see how the Lady's game and my definition of feminist game design could be adapted to consider and embody all forms of feminist thought. Until that point, I am grateful to you for your time and feedback. Thank you.

Works Cited

Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke UP, 2011.

Phillips, Amanda. *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture*. NYU Press,  
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