

I NOW PRONOUNCE YOU...

Utilizing Critical Gameplay to Question the Institution of Marriage

Alexis Pulos

Department of Communication
Northern Kentucky University
Highland Heights, KY, USA
Pulosa1@nku.edu

ABSTRACT

To explore the marriage-industrial complex and its historical evolution, and drawing from theories of critical play, this project utilizes serious games to actively question the taken for granted or seemingly “natural” social institutions that individuals participate in every day. Through a series of four eras (each designed to elicit a different experience) individuals play a selected set of cards (crafted from historical research on the familial, financial, institutional and traditional structures surrounding marriage) as they try to earn the most points possible. Through each of these era players are encouraged to think about the deeper socio-political structures that are built into and constrain the cultural activity that is marriage.

CCS CONCEPTS

- Interaction Design

KEYWORDS

Procedural Design, Critical Gameplay, Marriage, Education.

ACM Reference format:

Alexis Pulos. 2019. I Now Pronounce You...: Utilizing Critical Gameplay to Question the Institution of Marriage. In *Proceedings of FDG 2019 2nd Workshop on Tabletop games, August 26-30, San Luis Obispo, CA, USA, 2 pages*.

1 Introduction

In 1996 the United States, under the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), defined marriage as the union of one man and one woman, thereby giving states the ability to deny and refuse same-sex marriage licenses. Consequently, the act also barred same-sex partners from receiving federal marriage benefits which included: insurance/survivor’s benefits, bankruptcy, medical visitations, etc.

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Nearly a decade later the United States Supreme Court overturned DOMA to recognize the legality of same-sex marriage as granted under the 14th Amendment. While these court cases illustrate the socio-political significance of marriage as a subject for current civil rights/liberties, these court cases also reveal the control that governing institutions have over cultural practices and, consequently, the lives of the individuals involved in these practices. The governmental control over marriage is not new but rather, another illustration of the ways that marriage is used as a tool of social regulation. For example, marriage has historically involved the selling of women for profit [1], the trading of daughters for property [2], been used as a legal justification for rape and domestic abuse [3,4], spawned a billion-dollar slave industry around diamonds [5], and created the backbone for much of the American Dream [1]. To explore the marriage-industrial complex and its historical evolution, and drawing from theories of critical play [6,7,8], this game prototype utilizes serious play to actively question the taken for granted or seemingly “natural” social institutions that individuals participate in every day.

2 Structure

Following Bogost’s [9] use of procedural rhetoric and Flanagan’s [7] argument for games as tools for social change, this project created a prototype for a serious game to analyze the institution of marriage. Through a series of four eras (each designed to elicit a different experience) individuals play a selected set of cards (crafted from historical research on the familial, financial, institutional and traditional structures surrounding marriage) as they try to earn the most points possible. In the first era players work with a limited number of cards to gain control of the bride card, which is worth the highest value. Play is therefore focused on the manipulation of the board state to gain control, pass and swap the bride to accumulate wealth. In the second era players are constrained by new state and religious rules that are intended to sanction and control the marriage ceremony. Play is therefore constrained by the imposition of these rules and limits the ability of players to participate in the game. In the third era players are encouraged to gain ownership of diamond and ceremonial resources at the expense of the marriage ceremony. Play becomes more focused on the material goods around the marriage, rather than the ceremony itself. Finally, in the fourth era players are constantly trading event and resource cards, drawing and playing more cards to gain sets of resources. Because play is focused on

the tertiary elements of the marriage industry the ceremonial event is lost under the weight of a capitalist framework. Through each of these era players are encouraged to think about the deeper socio-political structures that are built into and constrain the cultural activity the is marriage (see Figures 1-3 for card examples).

2.1 Game Components

I Now Pronounce you... is a competitive card drafting game that is designed for three to four players, is intended for classroom use (ages 14+) and takes 30-45 minutes to play. The games components are: 20 early marriage/middle ages/industrial revolution and 45 contemporary era cards; 4 institutional era cards; 4 meeples; and one game board. To help compliment the analysis and critical experience, there is an extended description of the cards (and their historical grounding) at the end of the rule book.

3 Purpose

The purpose of this project is to take a critical look at the institution of marriage; its role in society, and the implications that it has for (non)participating members. Intended for use in a classroom, the game encourages participants to question their interactions, the cards, and the experiences of each era. To encourage active questioning and critical thinking the game first relies on a set of varying game mechanics that encourage competitive play. By competing against each other, the players are therefore embedded in a zero-sum structure that highlights the institutional and cultural practices of marriage over the relational bonds. Each era then utilizes different game mechanics (as described in section 2) to evoke moments of critical reflection rather than reflecting on it from the outset. The purpose of this design is to highlight the seemingly natural ways in which Hegemonic forms of oppression are subtly woven into social structures and change over time. Both marriage and the meta-level discussion of game play therefore functions to encourage students to pull back from and reflect on their willingness to participate in a system that they may not have questioned to begin with. By extension, the game experience serves as an entry into the discursive analysis of the other seemingly “natural” social practices (i.e. banking, education, social media surveillance, etc.) that individuals participate in.

3 Future Plans

The game is currently in a prototype stage. All the cards have been roughly designed and edited, and the game has gone through several iterative design phases. It is currently being playtested to finalize the balance of gameplay, the historical content, the art, and the development a fifth era to address the shifts in marriage

between the 12th and 18th centuries. The game is currently used to teach students how the basic structures of Ideology and Hegemony function within a communication course. After finalizing the structure of the game, it is my intent to design a twofold analysis of how games and play can be utilized to teach conceptual/theoretical structures within the humanities, and to understand how/in what ways game mechanics can effectively engage the student learning processes.

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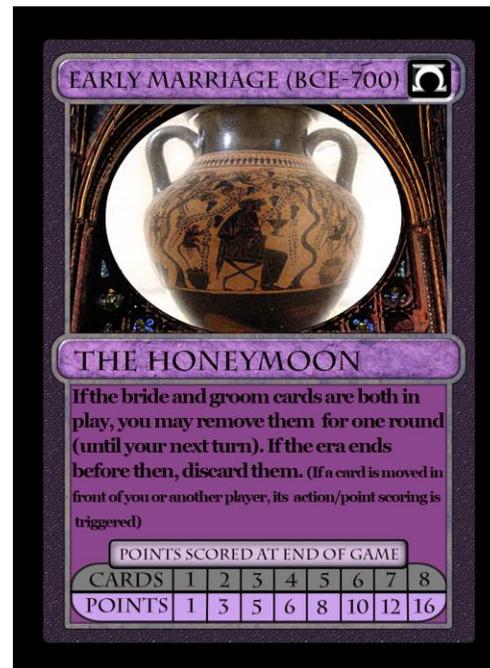


Figure 1: Sample card



Figure 2: Sample card



Figure 3: Sample card