

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Affairs of the Court - Choice of Romance

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**Genre:** Choose Your Own Adventure / RPG / Dating Sim

**Release Date:** August 19th, 2010

**Developer:** Dan Fabulich

**Publisher:** Choice of Games LLC

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## Overview

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*As you are about to enter the house, a bright purple butterfly flits right across your path. They bring good luck, so the saying goes.*

*The butterfly will go and grant you a wish if you wish quickly-*

*So what are you wishing for?*

*I hope the butterfly grants your wish, whatever it may be and whomever you are. After all, you could have wished for anything- money, fame, the romance of a lifetime. Whatever the case, a cunning court fantasy awaits you.*

*Affairs of the Court: Choice of Romance* is a choose-your-own-adventure dating simulator set in the Spain-inspired country of Iberia. Death and Light Mages from different hailings and families fill the cast of nobles and royalty- politics lie at the intersection of it all. You attend a coming-of-age ball, where you receive the attention of the Monarch. From there, your power to influence the court emerges.

Fight for your life,  
Fight for your status,  
Fight for your family,  
Fight for romance-

A country, a people, the public; when they are after you and your power, what other choice do you have but to choose wisely? Utilize and choose options that play to your strengths, or you may find yourself out of your depth in the most unpredictable scenarios.

## Characters

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### Main Characters

- **Protagonist** – The character that the player controls. A young fresh face attending the coming-of-age ball for the first time. Born in an upper-middle class family, their aunt and uncle accompanies them to the ball to help them find a suitor. There, their future is determined by their choice of fate.

- **King Augustine / Queen Augustina** – The ruling Monarch Iberia. A great deal older than the protagonist. They have a great sense of justice, but an even greater distaste of being wronged. Is immediately enamoured with you, your youth and charms; abandoning their Consort to have you sit across from them on the throne. They pass one fateful day due to illness, and you find you must fend for yourself for your family.
- **Gabriel/Gabriela Mendosa** – They claim they ‘did not have to play the game’ and neither do you, if you do not wish to. They are right, in a way. You don’t have to court the older and less exciting characters at the ball. Mendosa is charming. They look to you with eyes of passion. They will tell you of their many career ventures, brimming with equal hope as naivety. A romance with them will never be boring, if you do not care too much for the finer things in life.
- **Carlos/Carlotta Torres** – Nouveau riche on old bones. Torres is hardly the most charming suitor that you meet at the coming-of-age ball, they bore you to pieces, but Aunt Leonor insists. She tells you to think further ahead in life- Torres can provide you with so much more than any momentary passion. Torres is obviously enamoured by you. Romance with them is peaceful, but peacefully dull.
- **Luis de Vega** – Advisor to the Crown. He is a figure with unimaginable political influence, but ultimately wishes the best for Iberia. Dedicated and skillful in the art of manipulation, de Vega also hates to love you. You, who causes trouble in court for your own desires. It is a sudden matter, but should you catch onto his feelings for you, you may have a secretive affair with Luis de Vega. How you deal with this affair in the public eye will determine your future.

### **The Royal Family**

- **Consort King/Queen Agulair** – House Agulair is a powerful house, backed by all of the influential Life Mages at court. The Monarch’s spouse- at least for the beginning of the game, heads the Aguilar house. You know how they look at you, very aware of how they are losing their influence in the Monarch’s heart. It’s all because of you- everything. They have a lot to lose and they don’t plan on losing it if you are the easy target they have pinned you to be.

- **Princess Juanita** – The Monarch and Consort Agulair’s Death Mage child. She is bitter towards you, for taking your rightful place on the Monarch’s lap. It is good that she isn’t exactly subtle... she can be killed for uttering such words!
- **Tomas de Reyes** – The Monarch’s illegitimate Life Mage child. He is a man of mystery, and your efforts to uncover the mystery are in vain. One day, he comes bearing his talent in Life Magic to force you in uttering all the terrible deeds you have been responsible for- all except the one that will cost you most dearly. Choosing to save this sorry deed for last will allow you to escape a death sentence.

### Supporting Cast

- **Uncle Pedro** – He’s a bit of a risk taker, but the person who supports your relationship with the Monarch the most. His suggestions feed into your greed for power. Your Devil’s Advocate.
- **Aunt Leonor** – She wants the best for you, and would die to see you make a fool out of yourself in the public eye. Before you establish your romance with the Monarch, she insists and begs you to take Torres’ hand instead.
- **Mateo/Magdalena** – Your cousin, child of Uncle Pedro and Aunt Leonor. No matter your own opinion of their company, they are sweet and loyal to you. They eventually wed into a family that you must sacrifice in exchange for a Life Mage child. No matter how many times they have helped you, at what cost do you hold for the possibility of birthing an heir?

### Breakdown

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What is interesting about *Choice of Romance* is that the length of the gameplay or the route you take has no correspondence to how ‘well’ the player did in the game- unless of course, the protagonist dies. To simplify the analysis process, I have taken the liberty to sometimes assume that all three acts are connected, and that the player experiences all three.

### Act I - Choice of Romance

The first choice that the player makes at the beginning of the story is arguably the most important choice they make. The game immediately tasks the player to declare what your desire is, what your goal is.

*I hope the butterfly grants your wish*

The general status of the background is mostly the same: The Don or Dona of an upper-middle class family, a young and new attendee to the coming-of-age ball in Iberia. This process involves choosing your strengths and weaknesses. The stats are as follows:

- **Booksmart:** Knowledge of the affairs in court
- **Charm:** Particularly helpful for gaining others' trust
- **Subtle:** The ability to act whilst going unnoticed
- **Magic:** How well one can wield their Death Magic talents
- **Wealth:** Better to have to buy a way out of a sticky situation
- **Reputation:** How the court and public perceives you.

While charm may not be your strongest suit, you capture the attention of the Monarch.

How the player thinks they can play to their strengths are now put to the test, now that said strengths have been established. Through the narrative, the player is met with praise or disdain from the Monarch as a result of choosing an action that may or may not play to their strengths. The player is shown that should they be daring to the Monarch, they will struggle to see you as the enticing young enchanter in his court. The Monarch is not the only one with eyes on you. The story writes that being in the circle of a powerful admirer means being in the eye of the public. Their character's reputation resource, as told by the narrator, will be affected by their choices. The way this information regarding the player's resources is relayed is intriguing because it does not require the player to open the stat window.

In the midst of it all, you obtain both the favor of a rich older admirer and a younger charming admirer. How much they matter to the player whilst they are busy courting the Monarch is up to them- but no matter for now. Your Uncle Pedro says all of other suitors should pale in comparison to the opportunities the Monarch can bring you. And so, the player is presented with a myriad of choices concerning the way you present yourself- about your attire, the item you wish to adorn to the Monarch in their joust, the manner in which you speak and declare your opinion at court. All of the prior mentioned activities deepen the player's understanding of the gameplay mechanics.

South of Iberia, the country of which your royal admirer rules, resides the neighbouring country of Sahra. Of recent years, Sahra claims to have been invaded by sponsored banditry. The borderlands of Iberia, who are put off by this claim and the

animosity that Sahra is presenting, demand the Crown to take action against their neighbouring country. There are people who gain and lose from the situation. Mendosa and the borderlands wish for the Crown to seize Sahran lands, as it will open more opportunities for growth. Meanwhile traders like Torres wish to keep conflict with Sahra low so that their international trades are not negatively affected. Luis de Vega wants what's best for the Crown, effectively being to seize the Sahran threat, but also punish the borderlords into giving up some of their land and power.

The fact is, the choice is a rather trivial matter. No matter which side the player sides with, it has no direct effect on your safety in the slightest. Through the way this exchange is designed however, the player learns to be methodical in their greed to please the correct people; to read between the lines instead of taking the narrator's words at face value.

Having learned this, the player is promptly encouraged to now choose their suitor. Should they choose the Monarch, they are then tasked with a conflict that involves their safety. The conflict is a sprout of your own greed to seize power in Iberia; to be the Monarch's lover.

You dispose of the Royal Consort with whatever means possible, which brings the player to the end of the first act.

The player has earned the comfy seat next to their royal lover. They stare at you affectionately whilst not batting an eye that their previous Consort is no longer in their life. The player was given the chance to not be so... harsh. But here they are.

Their reputation however, suffers accordingly. The only reason a player moves onto the second act is their greed. This will come up again.

## **Act II - Choice of Intrigues**

There is a subtle shift in the tone that the narrative uses to address the player. It is a bit more accusative- as if it knows of the player's greed. The player can attempt to act like they did all of it out of their undying love for the Monarch, but that is no longer true. They are met with sarcasm from the narrator. At this point, the player's protagonist can always be categorized into at least one of the following;

a liar,

homewrecker,

or a murderer.

Whether the player realizes the weight of their actions or not, the narrator is quick to remind them. By doing this, it hints to the player that they will be required to read even deeper in between the lines; that the narrator, while generally amicable, cannot always be trusted. The player begins their second act of the story with this understanding.

Your first child with the Monarch is a Death Mage, and Death Mages cannot rule. The Monarch has two other children; Princess Juanita who is a Death Mage as well, and Tomas de Reyes, while a Life Mage, is an illegitimate child. The only viable way for your child to rule Iberia is to produce a Life Mage heir. However, the only mage which can make that dream possible demands the heads of your cousin's family in exchange.

At this time, a young girl from the coming-of-age ball has caught the Monarch's attention. Adelita is everything you were once, fresh and beautiful. She clearly eagerly wants what you have, you fear the Monarch wants nothing more than to give her that honor.

Not only this, but the Sahran threat reappears. Iberia's southern neighbours had decided to seize the lands near the border in the midst of the political chaos. To resolve this problem, the Agulair family had proposed to marry Princess Juanita to the Duchess' son. If they are to be wed, their influence over the court (and over the player) will rise.

The player is tasked to weigh the importance the three different threats against each other. This time the stakes are higher- to do anything 'permanent' to resolve these issues require putting your own life on the line. Of course, doing anything 'permanent' in any of these scenarios also means that the player must actively decide to kill another character for their own selfish desires. As this is a major theme in the game, every choice from here on out is dedicated to greed. By doing so, the game makes the goals of the player very clear. To produce a Life Mage heir, they will be tasked to kill innocents. To eliminate the threat Adelita represents, look no further than to poison her. To prevent Juanita from rising to power, they can simply frame her for treason.

At the end of it all, if greed has consumed the player, lives are now just a means to an end. What makes it all very interesting is how the narrative presents all of these actually innocent sacrifices as 'threats'. At times, even if the player wishes to choose a 'pacifist' option, there are none. The game forces the player to act on any greed they can, and in turn, perpetuates the theme of their game to be stronger. The more they act on these desires, the greater they are rewarded.

It is then when one Mendosa reappears in your life.

*"Your Majesty" they say, "I do thank you for giving me an audience.  
I hope you are well."*

- *I am delighted to see him, and I make sure he knows it.*
- *I greet him with the formality appropriate to my station and his*
- *I greet him with appropriate formality, but with a warm smile on my face.*
- *I greet him coldly*

They look to recruit your help with their ridiculous invention- Magic Rods, as they call them. They say that anyone can wield either kinds of magic with them. With Mendosa's resurgence in the court, and the passing events coming to a close, the second act ends.

### **Act III - Til Death Do Us Part**

Time is but a fleeting thing, the player really ought to notice when the narrator mentions that Tomas de Reyes had his 16th birthday and then... he recedes into the background of the story once more. In the third act of the story, the player needs to pay the utmost caution to avoid their demise. Death is at every corner, and the subtleties make or break a situation.

As the act begins, you are presented with a more nuanced and detailed description of Mendosa's plans. They intend to make the Death Rods first- supplying these to the royal army will surely strengthen Iberia's forces against the Sahran threat. However powerful the Death Rods may be, they are also equally dangerous. Luis de Vega tells you he is very much opposed to this idea, and very much in love with you also. On the other hand, should you help Mendosa, you find that they too have not forgotten you in the years you have been apart. The player is presented with the opportunity to find love with one of these suitors once more- or neither, if they wish.

Not long after, the Monarch is faced with a deadly illness. They do not die. Once recovered, they show insurmountable fury for some innocent cooks who are being blindly blamed as the cause for his illness. The player is presented with a Monarch that is erratic- it is clear his temperament is not as it was before. 'He could turn on you next', the player is told.

As time passes once more, an emergency strikes at the castle.

*BOOM.*

Sahran assassins show up at the castle's doorstep. You learn they are here to take your children, who anchor your position in the court. It all comes falling apart, you should save them, you should go to them. If you are gifted in magic, you and your children have been saved.

Otherwise, the player is presented with a situation where (if not after multiple attempts to not die) their only salvation lies in seeking help from Luis de Vega or Mendosa. If the player had played without forming allies up to this point (as was I), then they were quite severely reminded the necessity of one. This served as a major turning point in the tone of the narrative, as well as a warning to what comes next.

Naivety to the warning deserves consequence, and the Sahran threat re-emerges as a national issue this time. If the player pays a blind eye to the Sahran threat once more-wistfully thinking that they would be presented with leniency as they were in the beginning of the game, then they were met with death. If they were lucky enough to still have children following the assassin encounter, then they would be avenged, but still dead all the same.

The player is reminded once more of the Monarch's mortality, but this time they are really dying. In the meantime, the Monarch has been enamoured with another young beauty. This time, it is Lucio de Vega, Luis de Vega's nephew. He is truly a beauty, and undeniably smart for his age. He even shares many of the same interests as the Monarch. The season passes however, and you are invited to his wedding with another young lady in the court. The threat eventually neutralized without having the player to do much at all.

This revelation grows the player soft, not preparing them for what follows the good news. Some time goes by again, you hardly notice.

Tomas de Reyes is before you. Your mind goes numb-

*"Look into my eyes," says Tomas. "Look into my eyes and obey me."*

- ~~*What? What are you doing?*~~
- ~~*No! I quickly look away from his deep blue eyes. His deep blue eyes.*~~
- *"I... am yours to command."*
- *"Yes, I will do anything you ask of me."*
- *"Yes, Tomas. Yes, I obey you."*

He has cast mind control Life Magic on you, the player learns. For the first time, the player truly feels they have no control. While they technically never did, given that their choices have always been curated, the blatant visual cue that there are options they cannot choose drives the message stronger.

To break the mind control, time is of the essence. The story wraps up to a fever-pitch when the player finds the narrow way out of the issue. Cueing the player in on the only smallest hints, the narrator's text becomes shorter and shorter. Putting players on the edge, they essentially feel that they are walking on a tightrope with each choice. One life-determining choice after another, they eventually are saved.

The Monarch dies peacefully of old age some time after. The player reflects on the world they have carved out of the setting given to them, and their protagonist has the honor of living in it.

*Did the butterfly grant you your wish?*

## **Strongest Element**

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Due to the novelistic nature of the game, many of the mechanics were tutorialized diegetically through the story itself. Every piece of feedback is immediate, and ties the game seamlessly from choice to text. While a player can check their stats at any given moment to help them execute their decisions, it is never a necessity. With enough attentiveness and understanding of their own decisions, the player can roughly gauge where they stand at any point in the game. For example, if a player spends a great deal of money, then they know that their wealth should logically decrease. Similarly, if they show up to a public event wearing scandalous clothing, they know that their reputation will decrease. Not only does this make for a more immersive user experience, it also allows a lot of non-gamers to easily pick up this game. People who are not familiar with the concept of stat bars or underlying numeric resources can still deduce their next best choice, and that is powerful because that makes this game infinitely more accessible.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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The main intrigue of this game derives from the spontaneous and cunning decisions one must make when they can only use their tact and wit; reading between the lines. At times it seems that this aspect has been momentarily forsaken because it had to make way for a mere plot contrivance. For example, there were a plethora of situations early on in the game where the protagonist was skilled in magic, and thus, they did not have to confront anybody. Not only was the player unpunished for first handedly attacking someone after the confrontation, they also missed out on many of the more interesting narrative beats that they would've otherwise encountered had they not used magic. However, because our protagonist is an upper-class noble, and all the nobles in this setting must have a natural affinity for magic, it only made sense for one of the skills of the main character to include magic. This trivializes options up until the final act. It also acts as a harsh turn for players who used magic as a crutch up until that point. This sudden change in play style can make the player believe that their choices never mattered, that the ending is more linear than it actually is. For a game that allowed the protagonist to be whomever they wanted, this thematic dissonance can severely damage a player's lasting impressions of their gameplay experience.

## Highlight

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The highlight of this game was definitely when Tomas de Reyes had hypnotized the protagonist. The buildup to his appearance had been hinted from the beginning, but only subtly so that only the most attentive players would suspect that he would make such a violent reappearance. From the beginning of the game, when the player had nothing to lose, Tomas was simply another child of the court. He was favored by the Monarch, yes, but an illegitimate child nonetheless. The easy assumption is that he may never pose a threat to you, he has no reason to as he could never rise to the throne. He marks the player's progress into their character arc. The further the player makes in the game is reflective of how manipulative they are- a pacifist would not make it to the third act, their story would've been cut short as soon as they were satisfied. As Tomas grows, so does the player's fixation on their goals. Just as the player has established their place, after a moment of peace, he appears.

The manner of which he does is **terrifying**. Unlike the Sahran threats, the man is standing right in front of you. For the first time after three whole acts, the player is met with a choice which visually convey that some options are off-limits. Choices that the player would logically choose in rebuttal are faded, inaccessible by the player. The only options they have are all terrible and demeaning. For the first time, the player feels like they are picking at scraps, focusing only on their immediate survival. The protagonist had always been punching up the social ladder until that moment. To escape this situation acts to humble the player before the ending. It forces the player to reflect upon what they had gained on their journey, and come to a realization that, as Aunt Leonor insisted in the first act, the protagonist should live in peace with what they have.

## Critical Reception

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There is limited critical reception of this game, as it is seen more as an interactive novel than it is as a game. A lot of the more in-depth analysis comes from players who write about it on their blogs.

Emily Short, a game narrative designer, writes in her review that she thoroughly enjoyed the attention to detail the authors paid into creating a world which supported the much-appreciated gender and sexuality freedom- as she puts it, the “young-trophy vs. older-powerful-person division”. However, she found that because the player can simply be a passive courtier, they will miss out on most of the court intrigue. Thus, she states that

perhaps it would have been more structured had the game funnelled the story so that every player had to participate in those situations. The political exposition could also be more comprehensive for easier reading. In addition, she comments on how she felt the intro of the game does not reflect the game very well as a whole. Because it starts on an action scene with romance at the forefront, the player does not get the same intrigue that's presented across the rest of the game. She does not give a score rating, but says she enjoyed the game despite its minor flaws.

Dora from Jayisgames.com writes in her analysis of *Choice of Romance* that she appreciates the accessibility provided for people of all genders and sexualities to play this game- especially since 'Romance' is in the title, the vast breadth of different romances that are possible makes sense. She does mention that the player might find themselves in a situation where they are unable to participate in the plot if they specced their protagonist in a certain way. However, she also states that this can open a lot of replay value for the player to more fully explore the world of the game. She rates the game a 4.8 out of 5.

## Lessons

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### **1. Narrative is just as viable as GUIs.**

As the game is text-exclusive, it couldn't rely on GUI as other games commonly would to relay resource information. Having narrative driven feedback for in-game resources can be helpful for people who are not familiar or comfortable with constantly gauging their stat info. Without this feedback, someone who is not inclined to check stats would not notice the change in values. In addition, this also makes for less interruptions in the narrative experience for the player, and thus more engaging.

### **2. Thematically incorporated verbs accomplishes more.**

The player is never tasked to choose something that does not have to do with their own personal gain. Because greed in particular is such a prevalent factor of the story, having each of their actions reflect this theme can help in solidifying the message it wants to impart without being too blatant in its delivery. In addition, by constructing the game this way, the player always feels that they are advancing towards the game's goals.

### 3. Freedom of expression is powerful.

A power fantasy usually relies on the player's suspension of disbelief that the character who *should* be all powerful *is actually* all powerful. By allowing the player to construct their own character with as much detail as they can, the amount of strength they can feel with each triumph can be paramount. Even if the choices the player can make are limited, knowing their character is personal to them can change their overall experience of the game by virtue of being allowed to control someone whom they identify with.

## Summation

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*Affairs of the Court: Choice of Romance* is a highly unique case study and sets a precedent for games to come. It is a game that at times, breaks the rules on how to write exposition to a player. It does not follow the age old rule of 'show don't tell' and to fault it for being exposition heavy would be a disservice to its narrative genius. Narrative does not have to serve as a passive aspect of a game; this is shown in *Choice of Romance* by simply prompting players to read between the lines of the 'tell'. The player can 'show' themselves what they wish to see, and that is the beauty of interactive fiction. By prioritizing the player's active speculative engagement in the narrative experience, the story comes off very personal in this game. I believe that games in the future can utilize this concept to open up opportunities for building more personal narratives in other game genres.

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