
The imagery of the intersection between game and life. The “Love and Anarchy” case.

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Abstract

Love & Anarchy is a Swedish series that has been running on Netflix since autumn 2020. The series follows the seduction game between the business consultant Sofie and the young IT employee Max: every day one of the two challenges the other to make an action that goes beyond the limits of social norms. Sofie and Max's relationship brings to the stage the ambivalent imagery of gaming in contemporary sociality, that can be tracked down to the success of the "challenges" on social networks, along with the exploitation of gamification in marketing or “serious game” in social issues and public policy. In an anomic social context due to the rapidity of transformations, the game seems to offer a disciplinary guide that drives insights and decisions in the absence of other references. Through the analysis of the audio-visual text of the series and the comparison with other similar experiences in pop culture, this paper means to explore the current hybridization of ludic dimension and everyday life, along with the chance of putting individuals in touch with their deeper feelings and the collapse of separation between duty and leisure.

Keywords: gamification, tv series, imagery, ludic century, pop culture

Introduction

«You think being an adult is just a game every a once playing? What you and I got was the game. A big ass fucking juvenile hoax. Nothing about it was really real». «For me, was absolutely real» (s1e08)¹

¹ The series is performed in Swedish. The dialogues reported in the paper are the transcript of the English dubbing offered by Netflix.

Sofie and Max confront each other harshly on a terrace in downtown Stockholm. She is a wife, a mother and a successful professional whereas he is a boy who just got to town from the provinces. She works as an independent consultant specializing in future strategies at a publishing house where he also works as IT tech intern. The company went through a turbulent period over the last three months due to the authors' whims and the forced transition into the digital age, including the transfer of ownership to a streaming multinational. In this confusion, the two started a flirtatious game made of challenges to overcome the limits of social norms by a means of bizarre and apparently irrational behaviors, along with a mutual encouragement to always raise the stakes until the predictable explosion. She sounds spiteful when she pronounces her words above in a wicked tone to speed up an undesired detachment, by blowing up the bubble of tenderness, complicity and foolishness that kept them together in the preceding weeks. A parallel world where for some moments their lives marked by nonsense had gained an unexpected meaning, a commitment, a rule. It is time to get back to reality, the existential dimension in which the game should take second place.

Sofie and Max are the main characters in *Love and Anarchy (Kärlek & Anarki)*, the Tv series written by Lisa Langseth and co-directed by Alex Haridi, available on Netflix since November 2020. Over the 8 episodes, the strict distinction between game and reality that Sofie refers to at the end of the first season in an attempt to restore the initial conditions and roles, has slowly been flooded with a hybridization that showed the eruptive force of the dynamics of game even in a professional context with adults involved, which is apparently unwelcoming for any kind of playful distraction. The series therefore joins the list of products that have recently contributed to raising the question about the contemporary relationship between life and game, as scattered signals of a widespread demand for understanding the change that affects such relationship. As a matter of fact, game seems to break the functional border it was confined within by industrial modernity based on rationalization. It makes the ability to stir emotions and to involve available to educational and social topics (*serious game*), along with marketing (*gamification*) and the shaping of everyday life on social media (*viral challenges*). A patchwork that makes up the picture of the twenty-first century as *Ludic Century* where «increasingly, the ways that people spend their leisure time and consume art, design, and entertainment will be games — or experiences very much like games» (Zimmerman, 2014, p. 22). *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Netflix, 2018) turned the viewer into a gamer or *Alice in Borderland* (Netflix, 2020) suggested a dystopic scenario in which the city of Tokyo becomes a giant *game arena* with obscure powers to defeat through teamwork and the videogaming skills gained by the protagonists over years of practice at the console, whereas the alternation of challenges in lighter comedies like *Dash&Lily* (Netflix, 2020) or *Love and Anarchy* is apparently used to show the reasons of the game as an area of resignification in the fiber of an anomic everyday life.

Truth or Dare

The *Lund & Lagerstedt* publishing house is both stylish and solemn as a workplace. The neatness of Scandinavian design surrounds a company that is aware of its importance in the intellectual life of the nation. The editors live in the bubble of a world that is now long gone, where their gatekeeper skills between writers and the audience are made of taste, experience and insight, and nothing else shall interfere in the decision process leading to publication. The arrival of Sofie Rydman turns out to be a disruption: the external consultant is actually an archetypal figure of the new capitalism based on flexible accumulation and staff cuts. As an independent professional, she has been hired to work on the new arrangement of the company using "social distance" (Sennet, 2006, p. 55). that promotes neutrality in looking at others and inhibits emotional involvement. Sofie arrives at yet another temporary workplace with the goal of speeding up the transition into the digital age: enough with messy paper archives held in closets, enough with decisions that are not driven by data, enough with dilemmas over writers acting whimsically and the respect for the feelings of the viewers. The third way is "acting in the company's interest, first and foremost» (s1e02). Sofie has to mitigate pending conflicts and take responsibility for potentially painful changes, taking the burden off the shoulders of the fearful publisher Ronny Johansson, thus confirming the separation between command and accountability. The aseptic distance of the consultant is though suddenly compromised by Max Järvi and his humanity bursting in. Max catches Sofie, who stayed late at the office, relieving herself watching porn. He records her with his phone and asks her out for lunch as a form of blackmail in exchange for his silence and the deletion of the video. In a fast-food restaurant, blackmailing turns into a game. Max, a young guy from the provinces who just got to the big city, immediately spends his credit in exchange for a relationship. He makes apparently silly questions at lunch that are yet able to undermine the inertia of everyday life:

M: «So you like consulting?»

S: «Yeah, it's work»

M: «What do You think of Stockholm? You dig it?»

S: «I've always been here, I'm still here. So I must like it, I guess». (s1e01)

The bored answers reveal the incoherences dozing off in the haste of an unreflected life: Sofie calls for innovation in the companies she works for, that actually translates to promoting mergers and layoffs. She looks like a ruthless manager but she's a woman whose artistic sensibility has been trapped in business administration due to other people's choices, in particular her husband's pragmatism. She is a wife committed to an equal relationship that is in fact asymmetric due to the influence of her partner's narcissism and a conformist upper class context whose greatest

ambition is «watching the sun set in Ibiza until death» (s1e08). As a daughter, she's worried about the mental health of her father Lars, an old socialist trade unionist who hasn't resigned himself yet to the idea of retirement and would call for revolution at every newscast, but she's actually a rebel who looks up to her father's courage that would accept no compromise. When the old Lars bursts into the pompous birthday party of his teenage granddaughter Lisa, his screams sound like a sentence:

Turn off that trash! You call this a kids party, it looks like a goddamn commercial. It's fake. Everything here it's fake! (s1e06).

Sofie's family fake overlaps with the emptiness of the social representations put in place by the publishing house: the irruption of networked lives has broken down the very sense of the publishing mediation system which used to fill the gap between reading demand and writing offer in the 20th century. The book as an object, an intellectual tool in which the intellectual middle-class used to concentrate its logical domain (cfr. Abruzzese, 1996; Carr, 2010), dissolves in the superabundance of digital writings. Writers lose their sacred aura of intellectuals while unveiling their intimate human side on social media; editors chase after graphs and tables they don't even know the meaning of, within an unstable market where readers/consumers exercise their right to speak in a level playing field. The unremitting chase favours the separation between duties and positions, drawing everyone away from the heart of the profession, i.e., reading texts, as effectively summed up by Ronnie's words in the eye of the storm:

I really do not have time to read a novel now, I have a business here to save, ok? (s1e08).

In an anomic space where the boundaries between true and false seems to collapse, game emerges in its ancestral role of promoter of sociality: Sofie decides to take revenge on Max for blackmailing her, so she seizes his phone. To have it back, he will have to cause a distraction to tear off the coat of conformity that covers the relationships among managers, authors, and employees. There will follow the hacking of the company's Instagram page that Sofie reacts to by obeying the order to tell someone off without a reason, and then we see Max accept the dare to «create anarchy» by helping a team of road workers break into the pretentious context of a company party. The challenge spirals upwards feeding on the exciting results and it increases the commitment of the two players, who strengthen their erotic liaison at the same time.

Playing the fool

Based on the understanding of Caillois and the traditional distinction between *paidia* and *ludus*, similar to the difference that separates play from game in English, it is exactly the first one that emerges in the plot of *Love & Anarchy*,

«an almost indivisible principle, common to diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety» (Caillouis, 2001, p. 13). According to Callois, Play is the emergency brake to halt the ordinary passing of time, a useless activity where the masks of civilization can be dropped to make way for the excitement of re-creation. The workplace of Sofie and Max is in transition as they also go through a moment of personal change: Max has to get used to living in the capital with a temporary job and a room in house-sharing, while watching from the suburbs a business and intellectual center that seems so fake to him:

All of them are exactly the same in that place. They think they are standing up for civil right because they are buying expensive tickets to a play about people suffering in the suburbs. None of them have ever left the city (s1e04).

Sofie evolves when she reaches full adulthood, when «one turns from tree into a forest» as goes the key metaphor that involves the main character of the youth novel she keeps in her drawer, called exactly «Love & Anarchy». While taking care of the weaknesses of her teenage daughter, she discovers once again the poetic view of the world that helps her connect with the trauma of growth, in contrast with the rationalistic cynicism of her husband.

The Late Modern era-defining conditions of existential and professional uncertainty converge to suddenly open a breach towards unveiling conventions and understanding the intimately fake nature of social representations. Besides, as explained by Maffesoli, game «sometimes reminds of the harshness of fate, it is often ironic and also similar to the baroque disorder that hides an irresistible sense of nostalgia behind a crazy exuberance» (Maffesoli, 1983, p. 117). The full coincidence between symbols and meanings is not a prerogative of the human condition, stuck in the middle earth of symbolic mediation (Cassirer, 1944). It is rather a fading feeling or a languor that game, art and entertainment can only hold for a few moments. To perpetuate that feeling, after the «play» comes the «game», with proper rules, the ritual. The liberating potential of Play is precious but hard to catch: the social body needs repetition and rules to identify with, along with limits that preserve the memory of that liveliness and bring individuals together into a network of predictable behaviours. Rituals «all contribute to negotiating with the otherness, the divine otherness or the more shattered social one. The Other is a threat but also founder at the same time» (Maffesoli, 1983, pp. 170-171). In Tommasi's words, the ritual «claims to be the perfect image of transcendence, a true representation but still a representation» (Tommasi, 2016, pp. 111-113). Organized game is therefore a real representation of the exuberance of play to allow the freedom and pleasure of the gaming activity to be fully operational and coordinated. In the case of Sofie and Max, the escalation of dares becomes a game with clear and shared rules, where each of them shall show their courage by passing the test chosen by the other. Otherwise, the game will end without a winner but with the responsibility for interrupting the journey of mutual discovery that they had

embarked on. The ritual has its fetish, i.e. Sofie's lipstick that passes from one player to the other to indicate who is playing the role of the master. According to Caillois' classification, this seduction game falls into the category of *ilinx* that relates to games based on «the pursuit of *vertigo* and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind» (Caillois, 2001, p. 23). The two main characters find in the alternation of dares a rule and a direction that both the professional and private contexts are no longer able to give. The power of Game lies in the level of engagement it manages to ensure, by plunging the player into a state of positive inclination and active participation. Engagement is mainly achieved through repeated actions, or sequences of actions aiming to stir a positive emotion that eventually leads to the renewal of the cycle. The videogaming world is based on this engineering of emotions in the engagement loop, but the mechanism is ancestral: «Conventions and rules – according to Maffesoli - remind of the finite, they represent the limits set to the series of great games that we call society» (Maffesoli, 1983, p. 169). The Game offers individual motivations the chance to become *action* (Goffman, 1967), heroic engagements with fate, fulfilling an existential need for consequential activity in a bureaucratic society that undermines the opportunity of individuals to express their character in public settings of risk.

The feedback given by the action acts as both a reward and a support for the motivation: the charm of the game lies in this cycle (Viola and Cassone, 2017). This is the mechanism that institutions, media and companies seem to clone in *serious games* or *gamifications* in order to offer engagement where motivations lack. The story of Max and Sofie shows it clearly: the game reorganizes their daily lives and gives them rewards that neither work nor personal life can offer. The thrill of the challenges allows the two protagonists to get in contact with the most authentic side of their identity and to transfer it to the contexts they live in, so as to improve and adapt them to their needs. In the end, Game is also a «power play» in which the distinction between order and compliance is not ambiguous as in the network-shaped contemporary business companies: the master controls the situation, the players react on a playground world where everything is settled down. A safe space.

Beyond the distinction between life and game

A past literary example *Love & Anarchy* should be referred to is the novel called «The Dice Man» by Luke Rhinehart (1971), the story of a psychologist from New York who defeats boredom and apathy by making decisions based on the toss of a dice. Six alternatives, ranging from the milder to the most extreme one, for a series of challenges that match dizziness with the disordered power of chance. Even in this case, the madness of play that cuts through the veil of hypocrisy of an *upper-class* life is gradually supported by the method of the game that relieves the player from having to make choices and taking responsibilities, thus redefining every time

the limits of what is possible. The breaking point occurs when the game (or *gamble*, in this case) loses its boundaries and starts seeping into everyday life that shall accept its rules, though fake and unfair by definition. The descent into Luke depravation is associated with the nihilism of selecting chance as the main driver of human decisions. This is in clear contrast to the attempts to make sense and to build one's own chance and identity that the social body is constantly engaged in while facing the abyss of nonsense.

If nihilism (or bankruptcy) are the extreme consequences of gambling, the spiral of the *vertigo* game, instead, slowly wears out with the addiction to the emotional impact and the consequent increase in the intensity of challenges. As described by Caillois, the potential degeneration of the *ilinx* requires moving from the powers of physics to those of chemistry: «The desired stimulus or sensuous panic, which is brutally and brusquely provided by the amusements at a fair, is now sought in drugs or alcohol. But this time the whirling is no longer outside or separate from reality. It is imbedded and generated there» (Caillois, 2011, p. 51). To meet the challenge of livening things up at a book fair that the publishing house is participating in as a key event for the company's relaunch, Max stuffs some hashish into the desserts served at a starred restaurant. The grotesque consequence is that the chief-editors get stoned and the long-awaited presentation turns into a ludicrous viral show where the unpublishable truth replaces shallow arguments. That is the moment they both realize clearly that their small flirtatious game has blown up during the ordinary course of life, like the Dice Man, with irreparable consequences even for those outside of the game. The reference to the strict separation between game and life mentioned by Sofie in the final act is therefore a safety retreat based on the rationalistic convention that entrusts games in a defined context «outside of the ordinary life» (Huizinga, 1950, p. 13). Modernity acknowledges the crucial functions of socialization and entertainment but fenced them within clear and predefined time and space limitations. The game has to be free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules and make-believe, that is «accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life» (Caillois, 2011, p. 10).

By the end of the story, with the brutal speech quoted in the opening of this paper, Sofie wants to recover the initial conditions to make up for the damage caused by the game overflowing into real life, but also because she's afraid of having to deal with the changes brought about by the play. This led her to take the risk and get in contact with the less conventional sides of her personality, the passions she had back when she dressed up like Cyndi Lauper, and that she eventually gave up. Max, on the other hand, has the courage to walk away from his unaffectionate mother and becomes an adult with a permanent job, who is conscious of his feelings. How can you ignore this change? How to end the game and proceed with a simple damage control?

The two characters have now passed a threshold in their lives above which

nothing is the same as before. As shown by Turner, pre-modern societies lack the distinction between Play and Game, the act of playing leads to a condition of *liminality* (from Latin *limen*, threshold), where the social order is suspended and can be restored: «The analysis of culture into factors and their free or ‘ludic’ recombination into any and every possible pattern, however weird, that is of the essence of liminality» (Turner, 1982, p. 28). There is no «leisure time» in pre-modern societies: the entire life is subject to cosmic rhythms that the individual has no control over. It is not until Modernity that time separates from nature, and work disconnects from leisure, with the latter turning into time available for the choices of the emancipated individual. Modern games only retain the form of the liminal ritual and become «liminoid», that is no longer aimed at establishing the social order but rather the individual ability to find safe areas of entertainment and experimentation.

The protagonists of *Love and Anarchy* put on the screen the outrageous creativity of primordial play, in which the ludic activity is the creator of new worlds and identities not a fenced entertainment reserve. Their story matches the current stage of postmodern contemporaneity, which rediscovers liminality allowing game to shape reality in a «ludic century» that is no longer subject to productivity and deferred gratification, and it makes room for collective *jouissance* again. Games build sociality in institutional and production contexts: gamification, serious games and social media challenges spread the peculiar elements of game to increasingly motivate and engage individuals beyond ludic contexts. Despite the explicit risk of instrumentalization for economic or surveillance purposes (Deterding, 2014, p. 48), they are widely used tools to draw the attention of citizens, consumers, workers, and users to specific goals by relying on a new attention to attraction, seduction and lived experience. It is common knowledge that the goal represents a change in collective behaviour deemed to be passive or harmful, through the stimulation of individual participation. Game offers a wide range of emotional mechanisms and prompts allowing that «gentle push» (Thaler and Sunstein, 2014), that brings individual motivation, perhaps latent or lazy, closer to the concrete opportunity of turning good intentions into action. The MOAR! scheme by Viola and Cassone (2017, p. 28) uses an acronym to sum up the cycle: motivation, occasion, action and finally response, the feedback that gives positive support and turns the action into a new habit. A method that has always existed, is now widespread in the digital age because of the unprecedented technical possibility to accelerate, calibrate and precisely measure the recurrence of the *engagement loop*.

The transition into a new life is evident in the challenges set by Sofie and Max, similar to the viral challenges on social media as a sort of ritual of initiation into electronic life, a vast dimension that is both exciting and dangerous, where the user is an explorer with no help from the foundations of the past. Even in this case, game and reality become hybrid and create a new form of connected daily life, in which the participation in challenges indicates membership of a distant,

dematerialized community, yet alive and present. «Their spectacularization - explains Gordo - helps to tame any pain, make it more bearable, as if it were an anesthesia charged with social recognition in this process of, so to speak, stretching or testing the body in a context of submitting to the group, which, in turn, helps us to know how far we are willing to go on behalf of the group» (Gordo, 2020, p. 269).

Conclusions

The irruption of game into the daily routine at *Land & Lagerstedt* publishing house melted down all certainties and revealed the common sense of detachment between the inner world and external rules. The upper-class friends of Sofie found a solution by framing it as a mental disorder and choosing sedation as the cure. The chief-editor Freiderich opted for a heavy ayahuasca ritual to recover the sense of compassion and kindness. Sofie and Max challenged their fate and used their courage to open a free space of recomposition, where the rhetorical infrastructures blow up and reality can resemble imagination. Shocked by the failed transfer of ownership to the American streaming company, all editorial staff members look at each other lost, when suddenly some paper sheets flying around catch their attention. They belong to the manuscript of a budding author, a shy female writer that they had ignored until that moment to make room for meetings, graphs and the artificial creation of scandals. Now is the time to read those pages, get carried away by words and blown away by a style. The world is recreated in the shadow of the rubble of the new acquisition. Once again, a game taught reality how to deal with transformation.

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