

LOVE IN THE DUNGEON

by

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Ah love! Andrew Lloyd Webber warns us that "Love changes everything, but not always for the better." His adage is certainly true in the realm of roleplaying games. Love can: spice up an encounter, add motivation for a session, or bring the gaming table crashing down around the gamemaster's ears. In this article, we will examine some ways to spice up a Campaign using love as a motivation and some guidelines for love's introduction to avoid potentially embarrassing situations and maximize both the players' and the gamemaster's enjoyment of the game. We will consider love from its broadest definition and include items ranging from pure lust (e.g. sexual orientation) to platonic (e.g. adoration). There are many factors which should be considered when determining if and when love should rear its idyllic head in the Campaign; these include: the composition of the playing group, the genre of the Campaign, and the personality of the gamemaster. [Warning: this article contains mature themes which may be inappropriate for children.]

The most important factor for determining how and when to introduce love into a Campaign is the make-up of the playing group. The maturity level of the group is a driving factor in determining the range of ways love can manifest itself while the mixture of players and their interpersonal relationships point to likely Player Characters (PC's) for a romantic interlude. For example, I am currently conducting roleplaying sessions with my three children (ages 8, 6 and 6); it would be grossly inappropriate to introduce notions of carnal lust into our sessions. On the other hand, while GameMastering (GMing) at MIT, I had no compunctions about introducing a gamut of love related complications and rewards into the Campaign ranging from platonic relationships and love of the gods to same sex carnal entanglements.

The interests and maturity level of the group determined what is germane and interesting. In session wrap-ups, I typically ask the players what they liked and what they would like to see done differently in future sessions. During one such wrap-up a player stated "let's see something different to spice things up; things are too much like a fairy tale. We want to see some variation in your sexual stereotypes!" The comment was half in jest, but it led to the group's interaction with a gay prince and cross-dressing duchess. These became two of the group's staunchest allies, and it sated the appetite of the more politically correct members of the gaming group. ;-) (I have a caution about blind insertion of outre situations into your Campaign later.)

No matter what emotional or age level the players are at, it is possible to introduce love into the Campaign to add diversity. But, the particular aspects of love should be tailored to the gaming group. Even the youngest players recognize some forms of love. Children can identify with the love they feel towards their parents, and the love the children feel toward their pets. Adventures which involve kidnapping children or rescuing parents are very effective at the early ages. A potential reward involving love for younger players could be gaining an unusual or interesting pet.

Older players can understand the deeper and less obvious forms of love. Love toward their nation or their love of God. The players may be able to identify with their own love of their children. As the players become more mature, you can introduce complications which embrace a conflict between two valid loves. The PC loves his spouse, but to save the town, he must let her die. This can involve some great moments of roleplaying.

Even with the most well grounded and mature groups, it is best to pre-screen your love related notions before springing them on the unsuspecting party. The good GM knows his or her party members. It works best for the group and the GM to avoid situations in the Campaign which closely mirror incidents in the players' lives. (Discard this advice at your own peril.) What would happen if an uncaring GM decided to have a whole scenario revolve around the death of a PC's father only to find out that the player had lost a parent in a grisly car wreck? The GM is well served to ask questions about potentially embarrassing or incendiary issues before opening them up on the gaming table. I always asked the players before I introduced a love interest for them; almost always they agreed. In one example though, a player confided they had been raped by a person matching the general description of the NPC! :-O (You can bet I immediately backed off from that option!!!)

Love does not have to involve just NPC-PC interactions. Love triangles solely involving NPCs can provide great fodder for party interactions. Another excellent Campaign ploy is to have the party act as matchmakers for a pair of pining lovers. A truly enjoyable experience is to have the party STOP a romance involving unsuitable parties. :-) "Love is blind!"

When introducing love, try to bring it up in a way that is realistic and sincere. It does not make sense for the princess to immediately fall madly and deeply in love with the random rogue (i.e. PC) wandering half-bathed through her court. (She might fake such a love for a variety of nefarious reasons.) Likewise, the prince might confess his love to a PC in order to bed such a person. Love takes time, and it is even more rewarding for the players to see their characters building up a nurturing, loving relationship over an extended period. I have literally seen players in their late twenties jump for joy at having an NPC return their PCs' love; it was a cool moment at the gaming table. :-)

It is not only the players who need to be comfortable with the topics raised. Ultimately it is the GM's game, and the GM must be comfortable with the subject matter at hand. I call this being consistent with your own moral and political "comfort zones". If the subject matter is offensive to you then reject it and plan something else. There is no shame in this. You are the GM afterall. It would be the height of arrogance for a gaming group to ask you to devote dozens of hours preparing a scenario you are not easeful with. Likewise, make sure that you are objective on the particular issue. If you've recently gone through a devastating divorce, it is probably just as well to avoid any major love involvements in the Campaign for a bit.

Once you introduce a love interest, let the players take the lead on it. One of my parties had a hard time maintaining henchmen. The group got a very bad reputation, especially with halflings who rarely returned after signing on with the party. One particular halfling named Myrtle did survive though due in large part to the repeated intervention of one of the PCs, Tremir. Now, Tremir was elvish, and the PC wanted nothing to do with Myrtle which was all well in good until one of the other PCs (playing Tremir's brother), Granth, dropped a love potion into Myrtle's canteen while she and Tremir went out on a recon. Tremir continued to politely rebuff Myrtle, but Myrtle was nothing if not persistent. Eventually, Tremir received a wish and used it (with Myrtle's permission) to transform her into an elf. Tremir and Myrtle ended up founding a line which lasted over a millenia in Campaign years. It was actually quite a touching session.

Happy gaming, and may Uleria smile on you and your players!

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