= Digital : A Love Story =

Digital : A Love Story is an indie visual novel by video game designer Christine Love , released for free in February 2010 . The game 's story is linear , with the player 's actions unable to significantly change the course of the plot . Set " five minutes into the future of 1988 " , Digital tells the story of the protagonist 's online relationship with a girl and their attempts to solve a mystery surrounding the deaths of several artificial intelligences . The game is presented entirely through the interface of a 1980s computer with online bulletin board system posts and messages from other characters ; the protagonist 's own messages are implied but never shown . The game was received positively , with critics especially praising the game 's writing and plot , and it was noted in lists of the best indie games of 2010 .

= = Gameplay = =

Digital : A Love Story is a visual novel , or interactive fiction game , where the game 's story is told primarily through text . The game is presented as if on a computer from the late 1980s running the Amie operating system (the name and visual appearance a reference to 1.x versions of AmigaOS) . The player logs into bulletin board systems , or BBSs , where they read and reply to messages from other people . Messages received from other characters in the game are displayed through a different program on the computer screen . Accessing a BBS requires the knowledge of the telephone number for that board , which the player must type in manually . Boards that require a long @-@ distance telephone number to reach require the player to use illegally obtained long @-@ distance calling card numbers found online . Accessing boards also requires the player to either set up a user account for that board or to know the password necessary to enter the system .
Many of the messages sent by the player and the replies back to those messages have no effect on the game . The messages that the player sends are never explicitly revealed , though their contents can be inferred from replies received from other characters in the game . The player , therefore , is unable to send a " wrong " reply or message , and the game cannot be lost . The player does not have a choice in the direction that the story takes , though the game requires the player to correctly decipher what actions to take before the plot can advance . A single playthrough of the game takes around one hour .

= = Plot = =

The game , set " five minutes into the future of 1988 " , opens with the silent protagonist , whose name is given by the player , having just obtained a computer . When the player checks their messages , they learn the telephone number to the Lake City Local BBS , a local board , and can then log on to there . One of the topics posted to that board is some poetry by a girl named " * Emilia " ; when the player responds to her message , the two start up a conversation . While this conversation is ongoing , the player learns of another BBS and of a board whose telephone number is in another area code . They also learn of an illegal method to get access to boards like that , which would otherwise require the purchase of long distance calling cards . The conversation between the player and * Emilia , which is inferred to have taken place over a much longer duration of time than has transpired in reality , begins at this point to show * Emilia forming an attachment to the player . Soon after , * Emilia confesses to the player that she loves them ; however , the host computer for Lake City Local breaks down , leaving the player unable to contact her .
Soon afterwards the owner of Lake City Local contacts the player with a garbled message that * Emilia had tried to send to them . This message implies that * Emilia is in danger , asking the player to contact someone named * Paris , and provides a mass of binary code . The player has no context for this message ; but after hacking into another BBS , The Gibson , the player finds a cryptic message reposted from another board saying that there are several artificial intelligences (AIs) around the world that have been recently " killed " , naming * Emilia as one of them . The player hacks into the source board for this message , and finds a history of artificial intelligence posted

there by * Blue Sky , a " historian " AI .

 According to * Blue Sky 's records , the American government created an AI at the same time it created ARPANET in the 1970s . This AI , * Mother , in turn created child AIs , but its first attempt spread out of control and had to be destroyed by a virus that spread after it ? later officially explained by the government as the real @-@ life Creeper and Reaper worms . * Mother 's later attempts , which could only exist on one system at a time , were more successful , and these AIs left the ARPANET in favor of the Internet when it was developed . * Reaper , however , continued to spread and destroyed any AI it found , such as * Emilia . The player finds * Paris , another AI and * Emilia 's brother , on an ARPANET node , who explains that compiling the binary code in * Emilia 's message can recreate her . The player compiles * Emilia onto their system , and the two learn of a " payload " that the other AIs have developed , which can cause * Reaper to self @-@ terminate ; however , infecting * Reaper with it requires that an AI be recompiled with it as living bait , meaning permanent deletion . Realizing that they have no other choice , * Emilia becomes the payload carrier . After a final conversation , the player allows * Emilia to sacrifice herself , saving the AIs and ending the game .

 = = Development = =

 Digital was created and released by Christine Love in February 2010 . Although it was not her first game , it was her first successful one ; Love noted in January 2011 that her previous titles were played by " less than a dozen " people , while Digital had been played by " countless thousands " , gotten onto the reading lists of university classes , and became " a defining point in [her] writing career " . It was also her largest game to date ; prior to its release she thought of herself only as a writer , not as a game developer . She made Digital as a visual novel rather than just prose because she felt that immersing the player into the game would allow the story to resonate with them more than just reading the text . Love chose to set the game in the 1980s rather than more recently because she felt that the computing systems and number of people online then created a sense of isolation , which she felt was more conducive to both the romance and mystery aspects of the story . One of Love 's influences on the gameplay was Uplink ; she initially intended to reference more of its gameplay mechanics but eventually " streamlined " much of the hacking elements of Digital away .

 Although * Emilia is explicitly female , Love purposely ensured that the protagonist 's gender is never stated , as she wanted them to be a blank slate that the player would project themselves into , rather than a character that the player would control . She intended this , combined with never showing what the protagonist actually says , to create more immersion in the story . Unofficially , however , Love thought of the relationship as " queer " , both in respect to the player 's gender and in respect to * Emilia as " a confused adolescent falling in love with someone she 's not supposed to " ; Love has stated that this did not come across as strongly as she intended . Love has said that one of the intended messages of the game was the importance of love and relationships , though not necessarily romantic love ; as an example she specifically referenced * Emilia valuing saving her " family " due to her love for them over her adolescent love for the player .

 = = Reception = =

 The writing and story of the game were especially praised by reviewers . Kieron Gillen of Rock , Paper , Shotgun said that after playing it , he " can 't think of a better love story in the Western medium " , and that the terse and minimalist prose worked well to create clearly defined characters . A reviewer from The Economist called the story " engaging " , saying that it provided a " memorable and thought @-@ provoking experience " . In an analysis of the game 's story , Emily Short of Gamasutra called the decision to leave the protagonist blank rather than making a viewpoint character " brilliant " , saying that it made the entire game work much better than it otherwise would . A reviewer from The A.V. Club , grading the game as an " A " , called the story " moving " . The majority of the criticism for the game was in regards to the interface used to navigate the online world ; while The Economist found it quirky and realistic , Gillen felt that it made it easy for the player

to miss a key message , leaving the player stuck with no direction as to where to turn .

Gamasutra gave Digital an honorable mention in their " Best Indie Games of 2010 " list . It was chosen as a " freeware game pick " by Tim W. of IndieGames , Gamasutra 's independent games site , who said that it was " an absorbing experience that no other game from this day and age can offer . " IndieGames also named it number two in their " Top Freeware Adventure Games of 2010 " . PC Gamer listed it as number seven in their " 20 Free PC Games " feature in May 2011 , saying that it was " an hour of gorgeously crafted , personality @-@ imbued indie gaming . "

Love later made a " spiritual sequel " , don 't take it personally , babe , it just ain 't your story , and then another game " that further extends the non @-@ linear style of Digital " , Analogue : A Hate Story .