

Breaking Character: Contesting Marginalisation through Critical Bricolage

Rob Gallagher

Department of English
Manchester Metropolitan University
Bellhouse G.01, Lower Ormond St.
Manchester UK, M15 6BX
r.gallagher@mmu.ac.uk

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Keywords

Character design, artgames, bricolage, agency, gender and sexuality

INTRODUCTION

This paper considers how characters from mainstream videogame franchises have been appropriated by artists to articulate perspectives on marginalisation and the limits of gamic agency. It shows how *Street Fighter*'s (1987-present) Cammy figures in Cassie McQuater's browser game *Black Room* (2018) and Tabitha Nikolai's artwork *Character Select Screen* (2015). Both works use collage to highlight gaming culture's long history of misogyny and cisheteronormativity, while demonstrating how characters who emerged from these contexts can be resemiotised.

CHARACTER CAMMY

Introduced in *Super Street Fighter II: The New Challengers* (Capcom, 1993) Cammy was the second female fighter in the series. She was herself a collage of sorts, with creator Akira Yasuda confessing to lifting elements of her design from then-popular manga series (Yasuda qtd. in Capcom, 2012: 90). A secret service agent, Cammy is revealed in the game's ending to be a former operative - and, in the American translation, former lover - of the villainous dictator character Vega (M. Bison in Anglophone territories). Subsequent games would reveal her to be a clone created from Vega/Bison's DNA and brainwashed into working for him. They would also make her one of a squad of young female bodyguards known as 'the dolls'.

Cammy's story and design testify to the marginalisation of women, and of queer and trans subjects, within gaming culture. As Nikolai (2015) acknowledges, Cammy is 'gratuitous[ly] sexualiz[ed]' to the point of essentially being a character 'made of fanservice', pandering to everything that is 'tacky and tawdry' in gaming culture. If *Street Fighter*'s appeal hinges on the 'reward-spectacle' (Surman, 2007: 206) - the thrill of entering complex inputs and watching the resulting animation - then in Cammy's case this spectacle assumes an explicitly erotic inflexion. Her status as one of a squad of 'dolls', meanwhile, speaks to patriarchal culture's fondness for 'serial girls': 'harems, stables, teams, gangs, groups, cohorts, troupes' of young women 'all alike and moving in unison, arranged to look pretty' (Delvaux 2018, n.p.). But if Cammy embodies gaming culture's regressive cisheteromascularity, McQuater and Nikolai demonstrate that she is also open to feminist, queer and trans reframings, using her to show how questions of agency and control are gendered in videogame culture.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2023

© 2023 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

BLACK ROOM

Part of McQuater's goal in *Black Room* was to take female videogame characters 'out of their demoralizing environments and giving them new ones, where their sexualized animations could be more about themselves and less about their relationship to the men playing and designing their games' (Couture 2019). In McQuater's giant animated collages, characters like Cammy are freed from the control of presumptively cisheteromasculine players. Their attack animations become ornamental gestures, performed for the sheer pleasure of it. At the same time, this translation from playable to non-playable character could be seen as its own form of objectification. This, I would argue, is not a failure of the work, but part of how *Black Room* uses characters like Cammy to link issues of gendered representation to questions of agency – a strategy that becomes clearer in relation to Nikolai's use of the character.

CHARACTER SELECT SCREEN

Character Select Screen comprises a series of collages foregrounding videogame characters can be read as 'genderqueer', continuing a rich tradition of collage in trans artmaking (Nikolai 2015; Crawford 2021). As a trans woman, Nikolai is acutely aware of the normative prejudices, attitudes and desires that inform the design of these characters, but asserts that she 'would rather see genderqueer characters represented problematically than not at all' (idem.). Her framing of Cammy's backstory - as part of 'a cadre of brainwashed, all-female bodyguards for the villainous M. Bison... designed as a vessel for Bison's consciousness' (Nikolai 2015) teases out its trans resonances, helping us to see how videogames use hyperbolically gendered character designs to mediate gendered anxieties stemming from the fact that even as players 'actively participate in the creation of the game... at the same time we passively submit to rules which limit our possible behaviours' (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, 26).

CONCLUSION

As an empty vessel awaiting commands from a masculine master, Cammy thematises the player-avatar relationship, while embodying stereotypes of feminine passivity. As Nikolai and McQuater show, however, the fact that this 'master' is dependent on a feminised proxy troubles also troubles these stereotypes, while inviting us to reflect on the irony that it is only by painstakingly internalizing games' rules that gamers can attain the kind of mastery masculinist gaming culture venerates. Who is subject and who object here? Film critic Laura U. Marks has remarked that 'what is erotic is being able to become an object with and for the world, and to return to being a subject in the world' (2002, xvi). By this measure, she contends, films can be 'erotic even though they have nothing to do with sex' (idem.). With Cammy, the sex is there on the surface. What Nikolai and McQuater bring out is the possibility of reading flagrantly sexualised videogame characters as acknowledgements of the erotic character of gameplay. Their reframings of Cammy emphasise that digital play is as much about the 'pleasures of lack of agency, of being controlled, of being acted upon' as it is those of total control (Giddings and Kennedy 2008, 30). Through collage, they reaffirm what Carr, in an early feminist analysis of female-coded avatars, describes as their ability to function as 'the fulcrum of... subject/object flux between player and avatar' (2002, 176).

Inherently modular, videogames lend themselves to such forms of 'bricolage' and 'recombination' (Werning and van Vught 2021, 108; Boluk and Lemieux 2017, 187). With the right software it is relatively simple to transplant models and sprites 'ripped' from commercial games into new contexts. Such practices are however destined to remain marginal, with their use of copyrighted characters ruling out commercial sale and leaving creators in a 'precarious' legal position (Küchlich 2005). And yet, as transmedia crossovers featuring long-running characters continue to dominate popular culture it remains crucial to supplement analyses of commercial projects with accounts

of more marginal works that use popular characters to expose and stretch the limits of hegemonic imaginaries.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Boluk, S. and LeMieux, P. 2017. *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Capcom. 1987-present. *Street Fighter* series. Arcade and console games. Self-published.
- . 1993. *Super Street Fighter II: The New Challengers*. Arcade game. Self-published.
- . 2012. *Street Fighter X Tekken: Artworks*. Richmond Hill: Udon Entertainment Corporation.
- Carr, D. 2002. 'Playing with Lara'. In *Screenplay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*, edited by Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, 171-180. London: Wallflower Press.
- Couture, J. 2019. 'Road to the IGF: Cassie McQuater's Black Room'. Accessed 28 November 2019. /view/news/336846/Road_to_the_IGF_Cassie_McQuaters_Black_Room.php.
- Crawford, L. 2021. 'Trans Formations: Control and Freedom through Collage.' *Architectural Review*, 11 August. <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/gender-and-sexuality/trans-formations>
- Delvaux, M. 2018. *Serial Girls: From Barbie to Pussy Riot*, translated by S. de Lotbinière-Harwood. Toronto: Between the Lines.
- Dovey, J. and Kennedy, H.W. 2006. *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Giddings, S., and Kennedy, H.W. 2008. 'Little Jesuses and *@#?-off Robots: On Cybernetics, Aesthetics and Not Being Very Good at *Lego Star Wars*.' In *The Pleasures of Computer Gaming: Essays on Cultural History, Theory and Aesthetics*, edited by M. Swalwel and J. Wilson, 13-32. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Küchlich, J. 2005. Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry. *Fibreculture* 5 <https://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/>
- Marks, L.U. 2002. *Touch: Sensuous Theory & Multisensory Media*. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press
- McQuater, C. 2018. *Black Room*. Browser game. Self-published.
- Nikolai, T. 2015. 'Character Select Screen.' *New World Unlimited 1: Northern Equinox*. Portland: GWC/Social Malpractice publishing.
- Surman, D. 2007. 'Pleasure, Spectacle and Reward in Capcom's *Street Fighter* Series.' In *Videogame, Player, Text*, edited by B. Atkins and T. Krzywinska, 204-221. Manchester: Manchester University Press
- Werning, S. and van Vught, J. 2021. 'Taking Playful Scholarship Seriously: Discursive Game Design as a Means of Tackling Intractable Controversies.' *Eludamos*. 12(1).105-125.