

Man-eaters and Fan-dancers: Exploring Gender Representation, the Female “Other” and Geek-girl Alienation

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“An unbridled woman then arises, eager for sex and power, nevertheless a grotesque and sorry victim in her raw violence that extends from drunken revels to murder.”¹

The video game characters Mileena and Kitana, initially, in the 1992 Mid-way release *Mortal Kombat 2*² were created as an example of palatte swapping in game design, an economical alternative to paying multiple character models, and as a solution to technical limitations. Based on martial artist Katalin Zamiar, the two characters appeared identical, but for different coloured costumes and different weapons-choices. This was explained away in the games' storyline as follows: Mileena was created as a mutated clone of Princess Kitana of Edenia. Thus, two of the most popular and longest-standing female game characters were created. Roughly eight sequels and two spin-off games later, these two characters feature as main playable characters in the newest of the *Mortal Kombat* games, released in 2011. As a genre, the one-on-one fighter was, in part, pioneered by *Mortal Kombat*. In arcades in the 1990s, the *Mortal Kombat* machines competed with the Japanese-created *Street Fighter* games for currency. Mileena and Kitana were amongst the first in a long line of female fighting game charac-

ters, and their divergent evolutions from the athletic, though ultimately life-like and, within the realm of life outside games, potentially attainable shape of Zamier to the hyper-sexualized, almost grotesque figures in the 2011 release, are worthy of some consideration within the wider discourse of gender representation in games, the games industry and, particularly, the wider games community.

Representation of female characters is an area of particular interest for both the industry and for games scholars. Female playable characters, from the perspective of the game design industry, are “bimodal” in their potential to appeal to both male and female players, and therefore attract a wider audience than an exclusively male cast of characters. For games scholars, readings of female characters have been ambivalent. Such characters represent physical capability, equal often to their male counterparts, but are portrayed hyper-sexually and appear to be constructed almost exclusively for the male gaze. This is not to presume, however, that such representations lead de-facto to a sense of disempowerment for female players, but that their ubiquitous presence in games is definitely noteworthy. In the case of the *Mortal Kombat* franchise, the physical appearance of the characters has become increasingly exaggerated, particularly their sexual characteristics. While Katalin Zamier, the original model for the characters Mileena and Kitana, certainly appeared to be physically strong and quite slender with a low-body fat, in no regard was she unrealistic; as modelling characters from real actors became less popular and 3D animation became more popular in games as a whole, the characters now appear impossibly idealised. In the first three *Mortal Kombat* games, video footage was taken of actors performing actual (albeit sometimes with the help of wires) martial arts moves, which became the bases for the characters’ own fighting in-game. This is the case for both male and female characters, which is also a point of discussion in this paper.

Here, I seek to look at issues associated with gender representation, avatar-embodiment in games and, moreover, the reception of these characters in the social context of a medium which is seen as almost exclusively a male-coded form of entertainment. The purpose of this is to go beyond binaries of empowerment/disempowerment and look at the social contexts of gamers as a subsection of “geek” subculture, which is largely male-dominated, and look at the issues of the “otherness” of female characters. The “geek” subculture falls within extant sociological classifications of subcultures; it is fundamentally a youth subculture, based often digitally instead of locally, and grounded on common interests. In his 2009 paper (the title of which parodies Dick Hebdige’s 1979 book *Subculture: A Meaning of Style*) “Digital Subculture: A Geek Meaning of Style,”³ McCarthur explores the

idea of geek as a subculture, expanding on Hebdige's definitions. Geek, McCarthur argues, is a subculture based on mutual interest in such media forms as particular movies (*Star Wars*, for example) or comic books and graphic novels or video games. Instead of being based as other subcultures such as goth and punk are on fashion and music, geek is based around interest and is often expressed through participation in games tournaments, science fiction and popular culture conventions, creative outlets such as fan-fiction and art, and web-discussions.

In order to consider gender ramifications in regards to the geek subculture's relationship with the female form, Creed's work on the Monstrous Feminine will be deployed to explore the relationship between characters and the player as a vehicle for "othering" the female body. This is at odds with more utopian theories on game-play and avatar embodiment, such as it is explored by games scholar Helen Kennedy⁴ in a paper that provides textual analysis of computer-generated narratives, through which male players may embody female characters and thus gain a greater understanding of "femaleness."

As a vehicle for exploring character representations, the one-on-one "beat'em'up" genre of games is useful for a variety of reasons. The contemporary game industry is built largely on financially successful franchises. *Mortal Kombat*, for example, has nine "core" games (released over a twenty year period) and two "spin-off" games (games including the characters, but not part of the meta-narrative of the series). This is indicative of the wide popularity of the *Mortal Kombat* games, and of the wider fighting-game genre as a whole. It is of particular use in analysis of character design due, primarily, to the large amount of playable characters in each game. The most recent *Mortal Kombat* release has sixteen playable characters (up from five playable characters in the first *Mortal Kombat* game in 1991). The other reason these fighting games are useful to look at is the volume of playable characters, and that it is not necessary to be tied down into gameplay mechanics (how the game is played—for example, controls and structure) in order to analyse the game, which can be problematic for scholars exploring a multi-tangent, nonlinear storyline as a text, because player experience may vary from play-session to play-session. This is interesting, however for the purposes of considering only character design, it is methodologically more challenging than analysing a simply constructed fighting game. Furthermore, fighting games are interesting to analyse because of the stylised nature of the violence, and this way they borrow heavily from other narrative tropes, particularly cinematic genres. This will be explored further later in the piece.

The characters that will be considered here are, as stated above,

Mileena and Kitana from the *Mortal Kombat* franchise. Without explaining too much of the back-story to the games, it is still necessary for this analysis to have some context: Kitana is a princess of a utopian alternative universe called, in a nod to the Old Testament, “Edenia.” She is married to the male character Liu Kang, an “Earthrealm” warrior. Mileena is a clone of Kitana created by the male villain Shang Tsung. She serves the emperor, and series arch-villain, Shao Kahn. Mileena, while identical to Kitana in almost every sense, is deformed as she was created partially from the DNA of a monstrous race; in every aspect she appears as Kitana does, except for her mouth, which bares the teeth of a shark. She is portrayed as hysterical, hyper-sexual, shrill, and violent. Kitana, on the other hand, is portrayed as feminine and capable.

In order to continue with an exploration of *Mortal Kombat*, it is necessary to explore some of the social contexts in which games are played and created. It must be demonstrated why discussions on gender in the games community are still relevant, because without this context any discussion of gender is disconnected from the social and becomes mere conjecture and at best textual analysis of one particular case. Although textual analysis for its own sake can yield interesting results, in order to consider the ramifications of particular uses of imagery for the games’ intended audience, it is important to consider the social context in which games are created and played, and by whom they are created and played. Textual analysis tells us what discrepancies and issues there are in gender representation in games. The social context of gamer culture may tell us why.

While there are plenty of classic textbook examples of sexism within game creation and game play, two publicised incidents from 2011 demonstrate why issues of gender and representation are still important. The first example of sexism occurs in the game-play community and was reported on by the Australian games blog *Kokatu.com*. In this instance, the organisers of a games event in Texas (USA) publicised their decision to block women from attending their Local Area Network (LAN) game-play event, writing on their website:

“Nothing ruins a good LAN party like uncomfortable guests or lots of tension, both of which can result from mixing immature, misogynistic male-gamers with female counterparts.... Though we’ve done our best to avoid these situations in years past, we’ve certainly had our share of problems. As a result, we no longer allow women to attend this event.”⁵

In this case, it was decided (in a perhaps unintentionally ironic fashion) that to combat sexism among players an entire gender should be excluded from

the event. This is far from an isolated incident among participants at conventions or game events, with one female blogger writing on her experience in the following way:

The message then becomes that the only female nerds worth talking to/about are the “hot” ones. Even in the one subculture that supposedly values intellectual pursuits and the socializing doesn’t (ostensibly) revolve around sex or dating rituals, looks are still the only thing that matters about a woman.... A startlingly and not-at-all-coincidentally high number of feminine-coded things are enough to get you tossed out on the curb as not a True Nerd. The ever-present threat of being outcast-even-from-the-outcasts is a scary thing, especially for the younger ones among us.⁶

Here, there are two issues at play. Firstly, in the case of the Texas LAN event, there is the removal of women from subcultural events entirely. This is the negation of an entire gender’s right to participate in events and thus the removal of the need for gender-role policing on the part of the (male) organisers. In the second case, there is the overt privileging of “hot” female nerds (or geeks, the terms being used interchangeably) by male participants, and the gender-coded nature of geek interests as a whole. While these are two separate issues, they both serve as evidence of the high degree of sexism that predominates in this particular subculture. It is clear that within “nerd” circles, or gamer circles to be specific in this case, the reality for female players is an environment of ostracism, or acceptance, depending on one’s looks. The message here, quite clearly, is that within the gamer subculture itself there is plain misogyny. This is not, of course, to suggest that this gender inequality exists uniquely or only in the geek subculture, but that the sexism in the gamer and geek subcultures is reflective of wider social attitudes to women.

Issues of gender also become problematic in the modes of production of games. In 2011 a version of the Techland electronic game *Dead Island* was accidentally released, featuring a female character possessing an action move called “feminist whore,” allowing her to inflict additional damage on male enemies.⁷ While the publisher apologised, claiming it was an “in joke” written in poor taste by an individual developer, this variety of gender-slurs and alienation of women, even if it is intended for comedic value, when taken in the context of a wider gender division in both the industry and gamer subculture becomes deeply problematic. This attitude towards women is endemic in the games industry, which is known to promote products through uses of “booth babes” at conventions (attractive, scantily dressed women designed to promote game consoles and releases to male

players). Regardless of whether this *does* or *does not* specifically alienate individual females within the subculture, it is indicative of a male-centric subculture which will form the contextual background for this discussion of one specific franchise, *Mortal Kombat*.

There is a large body of academic work on the interrelated questions gender, avatars, and game-play. Regarding the gender relationship between male players and female avatars, Helen Kennedy writes: "there may be something of interest in the fact that it is typically a male player who, at least for the duration of the game, is interacting with the game space as a female body." This statement raises the interesting issue of trans-gender identification through game-play. Kennedy, however, is referring to Lara Croft in this statement. Lara Croft, from the Sony Playstation release *Tomb Raider*, is a character who has been discussed by a number of games scholars in relation to the duality of her character; it is this duality that will form part of the analysis in this paper. On one hand, Lara Croft, among other female game characters, was portrayed in the game as being strong and capable: she "re-works a male-dominated genre."⁴ In this re-working, Croft, while having a hyper-feminine physique, was arguably one of the first female game protagonists to, for one, have a game (then franchise) entirely based around her as a character. Croft was also given traits that, in games particularly, are generally male-coded, such as physical aptitude, and she performed them in a manner equal to male characters. In other words, she was a female character who appealed to a male player-base. This can also be extended to the characters of *Mortal Kombat*; Mileena and Kitana perform their gruesome tasks with as much finesse as their male counterparts. The action in *Mortal Kombat* is aggressive and violent arena-style gladiatorial battling, traditionally seen as male-coded behaviour, and yet in this case infiltrated by a number of strong, capable women. This reading would indicate that there is a strong feminist message in *Mortal Kombat*.

However, there is an alternative approach to analysing video game characters, which Kennedy⁴ points out. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay on the male gaze, a counter-argument is made that indicates that Lara Croft, as a hyper-sexualised female character, "operates as an eroticized object of the male gaze and the fetishistic and scopophilic pleasures which this provides for the male viewer." In this interpretation, female game characters might interrupt this phallogentric domination of the genre by being equally as powerful as the male character objects, they are still manufactured to appeal to the sexual desires of male players. Reinhard,⁸ similarly, describes the role of women in video games: "Female characters continue to be participants rather than competitors and to be less physically aggressive than male characters.... They are more likely to be depicted as

partially nude and even engaged in sexual behaviors ... and there continues to be a preponderance of buxom women whose cleavage is very evident due to low necklines or very little clothing. In other words, they are hypersexualised.”⁹ Reinhard also extends hyper-sexualised representations of female characters to sexualised actions. It is this, the concept of hyper-sexualisation that is particularly relevant to an analysis of *Mortal Kombat*, given the consistent exaggeration of female sexual attributes in each of the franchises’ instalments.

Kennedy’s analysis, of course, refers to Lara Croft and the *Tomb Raider* games, and there are a number of points of difference between the games *Tomb Raider* and *Mortal Kombat* that deserve attention. In *Tomb Raider* there is only one playable character choice, Lara Croft, and she remains static throughout the game, which progresses (by and large) in a linear narrative fashion. As a result, the player has more of an opportunity to interact with the world through the character. In this instance, the relationship between the player and the character object may be stronger due to the embedded nature of the character into the narrative. In the case of *Tomb Raider*, the player experiences the game through Lara Croft and, therefore, may come to empathise with her through the complexity of the narrative. The player controls Croft’s actions and, as the character, experiences the consequences of those actions.

In *Mortal Kombat* there are a wide range of playable characters and the game progresses in stages, with the player able to swap characters between rounds when not successful. The action takes place in a series of arenas. The player is required to interact with the game only in the context of arena battles, in which the only real outcomes are winning or losing the round, based on the series of violent attacks. From a ludological perspective, this differs from the *Tomb Raider* games in a significant way; the *Tomb Raider* games reward exploration, puzzle-solving and innovation. *Mortal Kombat*, as a game, rewards only simulated violence, which is achieved through quick reaction time and familiarity with the game’s controls. The only two courses of action in *Mortal Kombat* are violence or inaction, with inaction punished by the cessation of the game. Violence is the only way to progress. In this way, control of the avatar object is arguably more comprehensive in the *Tomb Raider* games than in a fighting game such as *Mortal Kombat*, as the player in the former is able to explore their environments, solve puzzles, “talk” with non-player characters, and interact with other aspects of the environment in a number of ways. In *Mortal Kombat*, the player has no real reason to identify with their avatar on more than a superficial, mechanic level. There is no interaction with the game world beyond violence as a means of winning a round (or, losing, through inaction or lack of

skill). From this perspective, transgender identification does not seem as possible in a game such as *Mortal Kombat* as it does in a game such as *Tomb Raider*. The character, then, remains an “other,” rather than an extension of the self.

Kennedy and Reingard both indicate, however, that it is important to note the existing cinematic tropes that games borrow. In the case of fighting games, this is of particular importance because it leads us to an exploration not only of the characters, but of tropes peculiar to particular genres that may lend themselves to somewhat different readings. In this case, issues of both spectacle and horror are invoked as they relate, respectively, to the genre of one-on-one fighting games and *Mortal Kombat* specifically. David Surman¹⁰ identifies the intense intertextuality in one-on-one fighters and says the text he elected to analyse, *Street Fighter*, has parallels in forms such as “action blockbusters, Indian Bollywood cinema, and contemporary music video.” Surman identifies these genres as the basis for the spectacles in *Street Fighter*, a similarly structured game to *Mortal Kombat*. If considered from the same perspective of intertextuality, *Mortal Kombat*, given its depictions of extreme violence, coupled with the grotesquery of the “fatality,” seems to be borrowing less from action blockbusters or contemporary music videos than it does from the horror genre. The “fatality” is a piece of gameplay for which *Mortal Kombat* achieved its initial notoriety in its early days, an option where, when victorious, the player enters a combination of buttons in order to have their avatar object perform a grotesque finishing move, a combination of decapitations, removals of internal organs and all manner of elaborate and, sometimes imaginative, vivisections and dismemberments.

If *Mortal Kombat* does, indeed, borrow from horror cinematic tropes, it becomes necessary to look at the treatment of women in this genre and draw parallels between these and *Mortal Kombat*. Barbara Creed,¹¹ in her 1986 essay applies Julia Kristeva’s theory on the abject and femininity to horror movies. This can be extended to horror-themed games. Kristeva refers to the horrific in literature; she utilises the term “abjection,” revulsion towards the other, the horrific and the profane. Pus, blood, faeces—all bodily fluids qualify as abject in Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror*.

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.¹²

In this passage, Kristeva argues that the bodily remains remind us of our own mortality. This is abject. *Mortal Kombat* utilises the demonstration of bodily fluids most adeptly; when a particular attack is deployed, for example, the body of the opponent appears as if it is under an x-ray, its bones and internal organs portrayed as rupturing in a bloody and exaggerated fashion. Creed writes on the fixation on women within the horror genre in particular, disclosing the maternal figure as a source of abjection. She does, also, make reference to the body of the “foul” woman, making reference to the horror movie *The Exorcist*:

... where the world of the symbolic, represented by the priest-as-father, and the world of the pre-symbolic, represented by woman aligned with the devil, clashes head-on in scenes where the foulness of woman is signified by her putrid, filthy body covered in blood, urine, excrement and bile.¹³

In the case of the female *Mortal Kombat* characters Mileena and Kitana, the monstrous feminine and the abject is most evident in the finishing moves, the fatalities; the female characters' *coups de grâce* are, to say the least, highly sexualised. Mileena, upon tearing the head from her victim, mauls and “kisses” the character with her grotesquely deformed mouth. She then smears herself with their blood while laughing in a shrill, hysterical fashion. The hysterical, monstrous, overtly sexualised character represents, quite clearly, this monstrous femininity. As in Creed's analysis of *The Exorcist*, an analysis of Mileena demonstrates woman at her vilest: sexual and covered in the blood of her enemies. To tie this back to the central premise of this article, which is an exploration of the role of women as both players and characters within the text, it seems that the issue of otherness is central. The abject woman, the monstrous feminine, is, because of her abjection, the vileness of her action and the grotesquery of the man-consuming mouth on Mileena, the ultimate other.

There is, on the other hand, something somewhat more complicated about the representation of Kitana, the template for Mileena. She is as violent in her actions as Mileena, but she is beautiful in appearance. She is masked and when she is victorious she giggles girlishly from behind a fan. In this way, however, her feminine attributes are exaggerated. Moreover, she represents the East in its eroticised, revered form; the fan as a signifier denotes a stereotypically Eastern object, and thus the entire image of Mileena with such a fan can be read as Orientalist, that is the fetishised femininity of the East so extensively written about by Edward Said.¹⁴ It is no coincidence, however, that Orientalism has been deployed by feminist scholars as a useful praxis not only to discuss the relationship between the

Occident and the Orient, with Orientalism as a means of othering, but the othering of females by males. If Mileena is the monstrous female, Kitana represents the exotic other.

Moreover, the characters themselves represent a binary opposition. They demonstrate a duality that is indicative of women's representation both in horror and in games with horror themes: one is vile and abject, the other untouchable and beautiful. This is in line with both Kristeva's and Creed's analysis of horror in literary and cinematic tropes; and it is unsurprising considering the borrowed nature of many cinematic and literary elements in game design. To tie both the Oriental aspects of Kitana and the abject elements of Mileena back to the central premise of this article, exploring the role of women as both players and characters within the text, it seems that the issue of otherness is central. Female characters are either monstrous ("man eater") or eroticised (the "fan dancer"). In this, the characters of Mileena and Kitana seem not so much actual characters as ideals of femininity: one beautiful and eroticised, one monstrous and vile.

This is problematic, however, when the representations of female characters are considered within the context of a subculture of players and industry that is already reputed to subjugate and alienate females. The relationship between the text, the players and the industry is problematic. The tropes and themes, however, demonstrated in the game *Mortal Kombat* as indicative of a contemporary game release are certainly not new in popular culture—as Creed and Kristeva both indicate—but the perpetuation of them certainly do not help the cause of women seeking to be regarded as peers within the games industry and game-playing community, rather than with opposition or as objects of simultaneously fear and desire.

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NOTES

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 168.

² *Mortal Kombat series*, computer game (Midway, 1991–2011).

³ J. A. McCarthur, "Digital Subculture: A Geek Meaning of Style", *Journal of Communication Enquiry*, 33, no. 58 (2009): 58-70.

⁴ Helen Kennedy, "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis," *GameStudies* 2, no. 2 (2002): pages!!

- ⁵ Owen Good, "Well, That's One Way To Combat Misogyny In Gaming," *Kotaku*, 24 July 2011, accessed 4 December 2011, <http://www.kotaku.com.au/2011/07/well-thats-one-way-to-combat-misogyny-in-gaming/>
- ⁶ 'Zaratha,' "On Femmephobia and Geek Subcultures," *Cultural Inappropriation Blog*, 4 May 2011, accessed 7 December 2011, <http://mullenkamp.wordpress.com/2011/05/04/on-femmephobia-and-geek-subcultures/>
- ⁷ Chris Pereira, "Dead Island 'Feminist Whore' Skill Prompts Apology," *1Up*, 9 August 2011, accessed 7 December 2011, <http://www.1up.com/news/dead-island-feminist-whore-skill-apology/>
- ⁸ Carrie Lynn Reinhard, "Video Games, Hypersexualism, Gender," 2009, accessed 7 December 2011, http://rudar.ruc.dk/bitstream/1800/4061/1/Reinhard_2009_HSIDN.pdf
- ⁹ Reinhard, "Video Games, Hypersexualism, Gender," 22.
- ¹⁰ David Surman, "Pleasure, Spectacle and reward in Capcom's *Street Fighter* series," in *Video Game, Player, Text*, ed. Barry Atikins and Tanya Krzywinska (Manchester: Manchester University Text, year!).
- ¹¹ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1986).
- ¹² Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection*, 121
- ¹³ Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, 52
- ¹⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Penguin Books, 1978).