

WOMEN IN GAMES

Demon Girl Power: Regimes of Form and Force in videogames *Primal* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*

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Abstract

'There's nothing like a spot of demon slaughter to make a girl's night'

Since the phenomenal success of the Tomb Raider (1996) videogame series a range of other videogames have used carefully branded animated female avatars. As with most other media, the game industry tends to follow and expand on established lucrative formats to secure an established market share. Given the capacity of videogames to create imaginary worlds in 3D that can be interacted with, it is not perhaps surprising that pre-established worlds are common in videogames, as is the case with Buffy the Vampire Slayer (there are currently three videogames based on the cult TV show 2000-2003), but in other games worlds have to be built from scratch, as is the case with Primal (2003). With the mainstream media's current romance with kick-ass action heroines, the advantage of female animated game avatars is their potential to broaden the appeal of games across genders. This is however a double-edged affair: as well as appealing to what might be a termed a post-feminist market, animated forms enable hyper-feminine proportions and impossible vigour. I argue that becoming demon - afforded by the plasticity of animation — in these games troubles the representational qualities ordinarily afforded to female avatars in videogames. But I also argue that theories of representation are insufficient for a full understanding of the formal particularities of videogames and as such it is crucial to address the impact of media-specific attributes of videogames on the interpellation of players into the game space and the way that power regimes are organised. While theories of gender representation can go some way towards understanding the ideological construction of game characters, they are not developed sufficiently to accommodate the particular nature of player participation intrinsic to playing digital games. The fact that players are interpolated into the game worlds of the Buffyverse and Primal in ways quite different to other media forms is significant and I offer the concept of 'being-in-the-world-of-the-game' to illustrate how theories of representation alone are not sufficient to the task of analysing videogame forms. This paper focuses on the ways in which the interactive and spatial features of videogame formats affect narrative structure, characterisation and themes (particularly agency and power) and I argue that an address of the ways that videogames operate structurally is essential if we are to understand how they take animation into the realms of interactivity and how videogames generate meaning and pleasure.

Introduction

With the rise of the hack and slash woman warrior in popular culture it appears that, in fictional realms and given the right context, women are now sanctioned to be represented as skilful hero combatants. With TV shows such as Xena: Warrior Princess (1995-2001), Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003), Alias (2001-2005) and Witchblade (2001-2002), following the path forged by various comic-book and cinematic action-heroines, the woman warrior has become something of a myth for our time. These fictions seem to embody the demand for iconic strong women heroes as well as recognising the economic advantage of increasing the appeal of the action-adventure format for a female audience. In the main, these television shows are very aware of the politics of gender representation and in mixing the emotional register of melodrama with action-adventure have forged narratives that are designed speak cogently to the life-experiences of a large and surprisingly diverse fan-base. In response to the growing presence of the woman warrior in popular culture there have been a number of academic books focusing on the woman warrior in both film and TV, but none of these address what it is like to play in the skin of the woman warrior in videogames. Despite being sidelined from media studies debates, a large number of videogames feature women warriors. These include those self created warrior-class women of massively multiplayer online games, EverQuest (1998-present), EverQuest II (2004-present) and World of Warcraft (2004-present); in single-player games, Alice in American McGee's Alice (2000), Niobe in Enter the Matrix (2003), and the androgynous avatar of Metroid Prime (2002; 2004). The woman warrior games that are examined here are: Buffy the Vampire Slayer (2000), Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds (2003) and Primal (2003). These are single player, third-person games; each mixes beat-em-up-style action with puzzles and exploration of the game-worlds that are more commonly found in action-adventure. In the course of playing these games I have been delighted, frustrated, puzzled, challenged and enchanted; it is the very specific conditions of participatory play in formal terms, as well as the experience that participatory play offers, that provide the focus of this paper.

It is core to my approach to the study of videogames that they should not be considered simply as a form of representation. If they are seen simply as representational objects then we are in danger of ignoring the ways that videogames, and the participatory experience of play they construct, are different to other media types. What distinguishes digital-based videogames from other media types is being-in-the-world of the game and doing things within that world. As Espen Aarseth has said, 'nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to

traverse the text' (1997, p. 1). Being-in-the-world of the game and doing are terms that are intrinsic to the approach I take to the study of games in general. In using the term being-in-the-world, I refer to a sense of existential immediacy afforded to the player through play; the game-world responds to the player/character's actions to intensify their sense of being in that world. Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) suggests that the creation of a sense of presence – of being there -- in a virtual environment is a core goal for their creators and this applies to the design of most videogames. Representation is a complex term, here it is used to mean an audio-visual construction, from which the viewer is separate. Suzanne Kappeler argues that representations are 'not just a matter of mirrors...somebody is making them, through a complex array of means and conventions' (1986, p. 3). This also applies to videogames as most that involve players in exploring and doing things a world are intent on shaping actively the player's experience of that world, while at the same time offering some freedom to accommodate different play styles and activities. Social-anthropologist Thomas Csordas notes an important distinction between representation and doing and being in the real life world: 'it is the difference between understanding culture in terms of objectified abstraction and existential immediacy' (1994, p. 10). Within the context of videogames, doing and being-in-the-game-world and representation have important distinctive features, but these elements co-operate to create and construct particular experiences for players in ways that differ from other audio-visual media. Being-in-the-game-world and representational devices work in concert through the way in which players are interpolated into the game-world. This includes prescriptions on player agency – spatially, temporally and texturally (what the world looks, sounds and feels like). As Bob Rehak puts it '[t]he videogame avatar, presented as a human player's double, merges spectatorship, and participation in ways that transform both activities' (2003, p. 203). Consideration of the convergence between representation and doing and being-in-the-game-world also allows me to bring a games specific dimension to the analysis of the woman warrior in popular culture and women's consumption of 'fantasy-based' media.

Current academic writing of the cultural studies variety on the woman warrior in contemporary media has tended to fall into two camps. The post-feminist celebrationists, who embrace the inclusion of powerful woman warriors in prime time mainstream media, and, what I'll call, the 'anti-assimilationists', who argue that such individualist, masculinised images do nothing but co-opt certain feminist values for consumer culture and sideline direct political action. Both groups are focused on the ways that representation operates in terms of role models and identity politics. I am critical of using representational analysis as the sole mode of analysing games, but such issues are important if we are to understand the cultural significance of games and, in particular, how they intersect with ideologies of gender. Given that my focus here is on the organisation of regimes of form and force in *Primal* and the two *Buffy* games, it is imperative to establish that these games are not just representational constructs. Games are in part 'representation' – game-worlds and the bodies in that world are audio-graphically represented -- but we also play in that world, do things, even create things, which constitutes something more than representation. If we focus just on representational issues then we miss something very important about the formal particularities of playing a game and, more specifically, about playing at being a demon power girl.

The pleasure of playing games is in part dependent on the player experiencing a sense of integration into a game and its world. Our being-in-the-game-world may be troubled if the representational qualities of the character we play at being are experienced as somehow problematic. It can be a sticky business being a woman and a dedicated gamer, for example. Sue Morris has said that for a woman to be hailed as Gordon when playing first person shooter *Half Life* is somewhat disconcerting. As a female game-player, I want to be troubled pleasurably by a game's task-set rather than by representations that distances me from a game-world or character. Diane Carr has said that she enjoyed playing *Tomb Raider* but was disturbed by the contours of Lara's woman-as-image construction (2001). But for me, it is not just a case of having 'good' gender representations – a game must play well and have a coherent world within which to do interesting things in fluid well designed ways. I am more likely to play a well-designed game that only offers a male character to play (like *Half Life*), than one with a female character and poor game-play. The payoff with the *Tomb Raider* games is that once the controls are mastered Lara moves so very flexibly and fluidly and I had a real sense of motion-ecstasy when playing her, which by far outweighed the fact that she bears a cartoonishly exaggerated body shape that might be some people's idea of an idealised form. The trouble is that just thinking about the game in terms of representation, rather than in terms of what you can do with Lara, steers us away from an analysis of the delights of playing well and exploring the *Tomb Raider* world with Lara.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds* and *Primal* actively seek to target the widest possible market, including women, who are not considered generally to be the target market for beat-em-up style adventure games. Fox Interactive, the publisher of the first *Buffy* game, clearly regarded the *Buffy*

franchise as having attributes that might appeal to women/girl gamers. The established fan-base of Buffy ensured a predefined market for the games, sufficient to warrant the large investment in the games' development, including building the game-engine from scratch (most games that remediate existing films or TV shows are inclined to purchase franchised game engines, which cuts down on development time and cost but means that the engine is unlikely to offer innovation at the level of game-play, game-physics or structure). The success of other woman warrior titles, notably the ill-managed but lucrative Tomb Raider franchise, lead to the development of Primal, and unusually for the games' industry the lead-designer was a woman (Katie Lea). With the creation of visually arresting environments that reflect the supernatural themes of the games, alongside female characters who are active agents in the game-world and more than simply ciphers of action, a concerted attempt is in evidence to make these games relevant in various ways to the life experience of potential players (to which I will return). The characters whom we play, Buffy and Primal's Jen, are ordinary girls who have acquired extra-ordinary powers, providing an analogue of the gaming situation, as well as offering, potentially, the pleasure of agency to both male and female players. As third-person games (a common strategy used in games based on existing franchises), the player/character is seen throughout most of the gameplay (the economics of which are discussed in more detail below). Primal and the Buffy games ask players to explore the available space, solve puzzles, and fight – all of which occurs in real-time. They each have strong narratives and are organised quite linearly; to use Jesper Juul's terms, these games have a largely 'progressive' rather than 'emergent' structure, meaning that the player's trajectory through the game is quite heavily prescribed (2002). The Buffy games draw on the Buffyverse, created by the show, and thereby have the advantage of using a world that is stuffed with pre-established meanings and history for player's acquainted with the show. Primal has more work to do to create its world as it is not a direct remediation of an existing, established, world. In the Buffy games it is likely that players who have purchased the game are already familiar with the Buffy and her personality, whereas Primal's Jen is an entirely new character who needs to be established through various textual and branding devices to attract and enchant players. TV adverts were used to sell the game, and helped to set Jen up as a compelling character. These adverts targeted those with an interest in fantasy-based fiction by slotting the adverts between fantasy-based TV programmes, such as *Angel* and *Alias*, broadcast on Sky and Channel 4 in the UK. The use of Hudson Leick to voice Jen, who played a tough woman warrior figure in *Xena: Warrior Princess*, also provided a touchstone for fantasy-literate game players. Both games make use of gothic-style imagery.

The first Buffy game is set mainly in urban Sunnydale (contemporary California), which is troubled by the manifestation of demon and vampire activity. The Master, the main antagonist and who Buffy killed at the end of Series One, returns in spirit form, acting as the game's main boss. In the last stages of the game Buffy meets and does battle with her 'dark' self, which accords with the show's regular pre-occupation with split characters. In the second game, *Chaos Bleeds*, the quest is to kill The First Evil, who as an embodied force adopts the physical form of others to create greatest suffering and pain to those it menaces. In both Buffy games, the player/character does battle with characters from the show – Angel, Spike, Tara, Ethan Rayne etc – who are either possessed by The Master or guises adopted by the First Evil; an effective device to ensure everyone's favourite character appears in the game and providing a means to reward players for their knowledge of the show.

The four different elements of Primal's game-world are explored in turn; the environmental and cultural terrains of the Ferai, Undine, Wraith and Volca are quite different (in structural terms these constitute 'levels' in certain respects). In each Jen acquires a new demonic form, with various powers and built-in weapons. The aim of the game is to defeat the forces of chaos, restore the balance between good and evil, and save Jen's boyfriend who has been kidnapped. Jen is aided in her mission by a gargoyle named Scree, and to complete certain tasks the player must switch to using him as their agent in the game-world. For anyone who is not familiar with playing such games: players control the actions and movements of their character through pressing various key combinations. You let your character die and the game forces you to go back to an earlier stage in the game (a common feature of most standalone action-adventure games).

Primal and the Buffy games invite players to explore the terrain of fantasy worlds. Freedom of movements and agency is not unlimited, however. In order to make exploration into purposeful investigation 'cookie crumb' trails -- cues as to where to go and what to do next -- are structured into the game to lead players to objects important to progression through the game. Importantly, these game-worlds also have metaphysical systems that lend moral logic which operate thematically (the struggle between good and evil), as well as at the level of structure (actions are programmed into the mechanics of game-play according to moral logics, you can only kill enemies, for example). In addition, the operation of these Powers That Be provide the source

of Buffy's, Jen's and the player's warrior power. The dual-level metaphysical system operates at a number of levels to knit together story arc, representational strategies and the player's interaction with the worlds.

Both Buffy and Jen are chosen by the Powers That Be to become their champions, and, by implication and action, so are players. In the Buffy games the diegetic powers are enigmatic and hidden, encountered only by effect. Whereas, in Primal Jen encounters them as embodied gods. Through Buffy and Jen players are charged with the power to keep evil and chaos in check; thereby justifying violence in the name of preserving order. Jen's motivational goal is explicitly stated as keeping the two forces in balance. The game's story arc involves her coming to accept altruism over personal aims. While the Buffy games make no direct play on the emotional difficulties of accepting the role as champion, those with knowledge of the show know that Buffy has experienced something similar. I would argue that in both Buffy games the moral complexities that characterise the show are sidelined to privileged what game media is best able to do: action. By virtue of the player's contract with the games, we are forced, as it were, in tandem with the characters, to get on with the required slaying or die and make no progress. Without such action the narrative will not unfold and the game goals, guided by the resonantly over-determined Powers That Be, are not achieved. This process of situating the player as an actor in the game-world is an angle that cannot be accounted for by an analysis of representation alone.

The presence of occult powers do not simply operate at narrative or representational levels, they are also felt directly by the player through the games' programmed infrastructure. This infrastructure determines the rules of the game, setting the balance between enemies, providing helpful power-ups, and crafting the games' rhythmic organisation. In other words, the games' Powers That Be actively channel and control the player's experience at a profound level, determining what can and cannot be done. This affects both character and player, a form of manipulation that exceeds representation. Being subject to pressures from external forces can be read allegorically, in terms of symbolising constraints in people's lives. This is underscored in a game context because the infrastructure actively operates to promote or restrict a player's action; shaping therefore the conditions of their doing and being-in-the-world. While such regimes of restriction and determination are felt equally by players of whatever gender, they may, however, carry different cultural and emotional resonances.

Jen and Buffy are ordinary girls who learn to be efficient and passionate fighters. Buffy fights joyfully, quipping when finding a stake that it is her best friend, or 'sharp, pointy, I think I am in love'. The correlation between fighting and empowerment is one that troubles critics who see fighting as a masculinist trait par excellence and sexualised girl-fight-action as another mode of placing women as the object of the gaze. In these games, however, fighting is not simply offered up for the contemplative 'gaze', as we might say of cat fights in exploitation films. Rather it is an activity that is absolutely central to the doing and being-in-the-world component of the games. Players, who may also be ordinary girls, learn the skills of virtual fighting, by learning to work with the movement/action capabilities programmed into the characters. An important source of gaming pleasure is the physical, lived experience of becoming competent within the game-world (typified by that epiphanic 'aha' moment when you get how to do something new). When I fight playing Jen, for example, I am invited by the game to watch the beauty of her animated moves, emphasised by the candescent glow of her weapons and the adrenaline inducing music. But it is me as player that is putting her moves together through regimes of tapping various buttons, dodging blows to keep my character alive, skitting around to look for a way in which to do most damage to my opponent and manipulating my position in the space in which the fight takes place. Audio-visual spectacle and personal lived skill work in tandem to create a rich and engaging multileveled experience. This symbiotic combination is not available in other media; and it is a combination that challenges the 'warrior woman' as object-of-the-gaze argument.

The player's ability to act in the world of Primal is dependent on our relationship with Scree, a deep-voiced stone gargoyle, with some slightly old fashioned ideas. In talking to him, we hear Jen's feelings about her situation. As with Buffy and Giles (her mentor), their speech repertoire is markedly different. Teen-speak lightens and ironises archaic or high fantasy speech and its inherent values, making these fantasy worlds more accessible to a wider range of people. Because teen-speak is tailored in these games to girl culture, a gender dimension is in play that undercuts the traditional male bias of fantasy rhetoric. Importantly, in these games speech is as much a weapon in the fight against gender stereotyping as glowing claws or stakes. Throughout Primal the player switches between playing Scree and Jen, utilising their different skills and powers to make headway through the game. Jen boosts her power (needed to keep her alive and fighting) by drawing it from Scree. Sharing labour and indeed power is a central feature of gameplay here, echoed more faintly in the Buffy games through her relation with her mentor, Giles, and the Scooby-gang (her friends).

Game designer Heidi Danglemaier argues that women and girls are looking for games that afford 'experiences where they can make emotional and social discoveries they can apply to their own lives' (Weil 1997). The Buffy games and Primal offer fight-based excitement alongside relationships with others that are important to gameplay and progress, a combination not found in Tomb Raider or Metroid Prime. This dimension is not simply present at a narrative and representational level. It extends into the doing and being-in-the-world experience of playing the games. Working in tandem with the character, and with the mutual help between Jen and Scree, lends the player an active experience of force and action as socially contingent.

Part of the pleasure of these games is being active in a fantasy world, but in third person games we act through a mediating character. This sets up an interesting polarisation between the positions of character and player. There are times in both games when the marked presence of the character's 'subjectivity' might appear to detract from the player's illusion of being immersed in an unmediated world. When Buffy speaks directly to me, I am reminded of my status as player. Yet, this apparent interruption to immersion in the game-world – to my sense of being there -- is also felt when there is a failure to live up to the characters' warrior image when a fight is fumbled and death ensues. Third person mode also plays a part in this as it presents the player with a body image on screen, which inevitably highlights the representational qualities of that body. But once you get stuck into game-play, however, the image of the in-game body becomes far less important than doing things with that body in the world. It is more a tool or technology for action than a representation. This complicates the sense that player-characters are simply representational objects designed for the gaze. Instead, what we have here is a complex operation between narrative, representation and active participation.

Jen and Buffy might be ordinary girls, but they are also part demon. In the logic of the games this operates as the basis for their exceptional fighting skills. In terms of representation, being part demon brings spectacle (particularly Jen's spectacular metamorphic transformations) and as well as carrying a sensational disruption of conventional binary-based gender coding. Becoming demon also affects the condition of our doing and being-in-the-world of the game. Demon power is felt by the player in the extended reach of character actions. When Jen transforms into demon, the surge of power that rocks her body, seen on the screen, is also felt kinetically in the vibration of the handset. Finding supernatural augmentations allows the player to go about the business of slaying more effectively, increasing the sense of control and facilitating progress through the game. Playing as a demon girl also offers a powerful allegory and hands-on experience of transformation, expressing, in the nexus of doing and being-in-the-world, the energies that might be seen as suppressed by current ideals of socially-acceptable femininity. The rendering of both characters as demonic also disrupts a clear division between self and other (the other is 'within', signified by the tagline used for Primal that goes 'civilisation is only skin deep'). The subject/object divide is further compounded by the fact that the player operates in the game-world through a responsive surrogate.

It might also be claimed that being part demon challenges notions that gender attributes are 'natural', particularly the one that goes women are passive rather than active (a regime that is regularly pointed to by feminist critics in many media representations of women). But before I get too carried away, the significance of the fact that Jen and Buffy's power is acquired from supernatural forces needs examination. I am very partial to magic, but this carries the unpalatable implication that because women lack power they need to be 'augmented'. The supernatural enhancement device also reconciles physical prowess with the use pretty and petite figures. Being embodied as a demon girl in the world of a game is therefore connected to the experience of being 'gendered'.

Both Buffy and Jen are chosen by the Powers That Be, yet they choose to use their power to act upon the world. We, as players, are implicated in that choice through our contract with game. This may not be the collective political action called for by the anti-assimilationist critics of woman warriors, but transformation and magic are potent mythic formations through which prowess, power and conflict can be expressed. The supernatural basis of the games can be understood in the same context as the contemporary flowering of magic-based films and television shows with female protagonists, particularly those aimed primarily at a female audience such as *The Craft* (1996), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Charmed* (1998-), *Sabrina*, *The Teenage Witch* (1996-2003), *Hex* (2004) etc. Magic is used as a way of signifying power, desire and the relationships between self and pre-determination within a feminised register that some find positive and uplifting. When playing as Willow (a witch) in *Chaos Bleeds*, magic extends to the abilities afforded to the player. This is not simply a negative alternative to physical power but a way of articulating agency that is derived from other spheres: bookish study, imagination and utilising the forces of nature. Occult powers do not just operate at the level of story or representation, they are felt by the player in terms of regimes of agency (what can be

done) and restriction (what cannot). That the player might be unable to defeat a monster that the character they play is able potentially to vanquish, is a dimension not found in any other media. The player might aspire to be a woman warrior, but only be able to achieve a sense of this if committed to the task of mastering the game controls. But, learning to fight virtually may provide women and girls an opportunity to express the type of aggression that is often repressed in accordance with dominant gender expectations.

To sum up. The traditionally macho-coded qualities of fight-based games is challenged and subverted by these games. This includes playing as a female heroine and the presence of inter-personal dimensions that are rare in beat-em-up adventure games. The use of items such as water-pistols, brooms, and pieces of broken furniture shifts the domain of weaponry – often subject in games to macho-oriented fetishisation – into a more playful and female-coded domestic arena. Dusting takes on a whole new meaning.

The organisation of force in *Primal* and the *Buffy* games is inseparably linked to their interactive form. As players, we are able to play with and through the power regimes set up in the world of the game. The representational aspects are central to the creation of a well-defined mythic context, which is constitutive of the game-worlds and their potential meanings. This context provides a fictive space in which I can act as if I were a demon power girl and it is crucial to my pleasure in playing the games. These games provide a context of and for action, which carries a wider set of meanings and experiential resonances. *Buffy* and *Jen* provide my agency in the games, and they speak and act through my experience of being gendered female in the 'real' world. The games offer an active experience of force that has often been denied by ideological regimes of femininity as naturally passive. *Buffy* quips 'There's nothing like a spot of demon slaughter to make a girl's night'. With such ironic distancing from traditional gender stereotyping, including that which is found in many male action-adventure fictions, these games acknowledge and reference the ambiguity of conventional gender alignments. This in terms of both representation and doing and being-in-the-game-world; being an enactor rather than a spectator. *Buffy* and *Jen* gain strength not simply through physical prowess but through their relationships with others. In playing through these relationships, we are offered heroines that are more than simply objects of the gaze or men in drag. The untroubled 'macho' approach to power is also undermined. Power in these games is not straightforwardly pleasurable but configured as a form of 'otherness.' It is 'demonic' (more rarely the case in games that feature male avatars). Being and acting powerful in these games, joyful in its way, comes at a cost. Player/character agency is contingent and autonomy is bounded by moral predetermination, something that is felt in the very act of playing the games. This speaks meaningfully, in mythic terms, to my everyday experience and to my requirement that we don't buy exclusively fight action in traditional 'masculinist' terms or in overly-idealised ones. The doing aspect of games therefore brings a new and highly relevant dimension to the woman warrior format, which cannot be understood fully by theories of representation alone.

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