BEYOND BAYONETTA'S BARBIE BODY

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Introduction

In recent history, there have been few video game characters as divisive, hotly contested, or controversial as Bayonetta, the star of the game series of the same name from developer Platinum Games. Following in the footsteps of predecessors like *Devil May Cry*, *Bayonetta* is a "character brawler;" a third person action game of over the top violence where the iconic main character is a significant selling point.

Bayonetta herself, at first glance, seems to be everything wrong with the design of women main characters in video games today: her physical proportions are highly exaggerated, emphasizing traditionally sexualized characteristics such as a large bust and a long, thin, slightly S-curved body that's mostly leg. Platinum character designer Mari Shimazaki has discussed the ways in which she tried to make Bayonetta "more appealing as an action game character by adjusting her proportions and extending her limbs" (Shimazaki, 2009). A recurring in-game gimmick for Bayonetta is that she magically conjures giant fists or feet to attack her enemies that are formed from her long hair, which also forms her outfit; the result is that, when she uses such attacks, she is left mostly naked.

Unsurprisingly, both the character and the games have come under fire from critics for this sexualized representation, particularly from some feminist critics who argue that she is yet another in a long line of problematic women characters served up for heterosexual male consumption. Anita Sarkeesian of *Feminist Frequency* has said that Bayonetta is at the center of her forthcoming "Tropes vs. Women in Video Games" series video, the "Fighting Fucktoy," as the "quintessential example of the trope" (https://twitter.com/femfreq/status/521788400538370048).

However, critiques of Bayonetta that restrict themselves to her sexualized body are potentially missing a rich and interesting range of critiques from both feminist and queer points of view. Women players inhabiting Bayonetta as an avatar may have more complicated relationships with her than might be imagined at first glance. Similarly, more expansive reads of Bayonetta's style and depiction suggest that she may be easily read as embodying the performative aspects of drag and camp, relying on excess, spectacle, and ironic subversion for some of her impact and charm.

Sexualized heroines

Bayonetta, the character, is an example of what Jansz and Martis (2007) referred to as "the Lara Phenomenon." A reference to *Tomb Raider*'s Lara Croft, they described this situation as "the appearance of a strong, and competent female character in a dominant position" (p. 147). Their work predates the appearance of the first *Bayonetta* title by three years, and was an exploration of the question: do women occupy a greater and more prominent space in video games as heroes and player characters than they had to that point in history? Their answer was yes… to an extent. Jansz and Martis found plenty of evidence of "the Lara Phenomenon" but also noted that while women were appearing with greater frequency as the main characters of games, women players might experience what they called "contrasting consequences" when playing said characters. Sexualized bodies – still a dominant occurrence – could contribute to an already-existing problem culture with mediated representations of women, but playing as women who were confident and powerful may present a feeling of empowerment.

The gender politics of the female action hero in both games and cinema have a long history, one that frequently deals with the cultural coding of violence itself as masculine and how that impacts the ways in which the gendered bodies of those characters are read and inscribed (see Gilpatric, 2010; Brown, 2011). Gilpatric in particular notes, on violent women action characters in American cinema, that they:

> "are not empowering images, they do not draw upon their femininity as a source of power, and they are not a kind of 'post woman' operating outside the boundaries of gender restrictions. Instead, they operate inside socially constructed gender norms, rely on the strength and guidance of a dominant male action character, and end up re-articulating gender stereotypes." (pp. 744-745).

At first glance Bayonetta seems to be an open and shut case along these lines. Certainly, critiques of Bayonetta as just another sexualized video game doll for men to play with are not off base. Her physical parameters and sexualized character are decidedly in line with existing, problematic representations of women as video game heroes. In many ways, Bayonetta appears to be a perfect example of Mulvey's oft-cited concept of the "male gaze," where women on screen function "on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" (as cited in Durham and Kellner, 2006, p. 347). Put reductively, Mulvey argues that women characters in screen media often become objects onto which a dominant, hegemonic heterosexual gaze is imprinted for the pleasure of an assumed viewer coming from that very viewpoint.

Problematizing the critique

The major complication, here, is that Bayonetta is a video game avatar. Rather than engage the tortured and gnarled thorns of if games are "special" or "interactive" compared to other media, it is enough to say that the character's relationship to a player, who controls her actions, has a demonstrable impact on the interpretive process. In addition, we need to reconsider the coding of violence (and the consequent enjoyment of violent gameplay) as inherently masculine, *and* the ways in which some games are seen as "for" women or men depending on their content (see Taylor, 2003; Jenson & de Castell, 2010).

Speaking on the subject of player/avatar identification, Adrienne Shaw makes an additional excellent point in her book *Gaming at the Edge* about complicating our understanding of player sense-making when it comes to characters:

> "Part of what scholars (and game makers) must be more willing to embrace is that the text alone does not define how the player interacts or connects with the characters or avatars. Subjective reasons for play and personal preferences drive the very personal experience of identification much more than textual elements can." (2014, pg.109)

Which is to say that players engage with game content for a variety of reasons, not all of which involve the fictional elements of the game. Similarly, we cannot simply reduce considerations of identification with a playable character to a list of characteristics to be matched or not between the character and the player.

Appropriately, many games critics currently looking at Bayonetta have noted the ways in which applying the "male gaze" idea to the character often elides their experiences actually *playing* as her, particularly women critics who find her body politics and character design to be more complicated than first glance might suggest. For example, games writer and critic Maddy Myers compares Bayonetta to another sexualized "character brawler" heroine, Juliet Starling of *Lollipop Chainsaw*. Myers writes, "[Starling]… is insulted, mocked and sexually harassed by the men around her… and she often apologizes and downplays her own superpowers" (Myers, October 2014). She goes on to contrast Bayonetta to that situation, discussing the ways in which Bayonetta owns her own power, refusing to be beholden to anyone (even the player). Myers discusses how the "dueling influences" of producer Hideki Kamiya and the aforementioned character designer, Mari Shimazaki, produce a sort of tension in Bayonetta: she is built as a sex object for her (male) creator but given a feeling of confident power by her (woman) designer. As she puts it, "If I wanted to argue that Bayonetta was made to be a sex object for a man, I'd point to Kamiya's quotes. If I wanted to argue Bayonetta is a power fantasy for a woman, I'd point to Shimazaki's writing. But, of course, Bayonetta is both—and then some."

Similarly, games critic and feminist scholar Katherine Cross talks about the tension between Bayonetta's body as an object on the screen, and as a thing the player inhabits during play. In particular, she references this in terms of those moments when Bayonetta is nude (or near-nude) on screen, citing John Berger's distinction between

nudity and nakedness in his 1972 book *Ways of Seeing*. Cross uses this distinction to ask: if nudity means being "placed on display" as Berger argues, then "is Bayonetta enchained to the pseudogeneric male player?" Cross's answer is: no, because the act of inhabiting Bayonetta's body during the game's primary combat gameplay – and the aesthetic notions of that combat, which I'll return to shortly – present "less a dance of battle as such than one of dominion. It is the quintessence of that performance that ends with a leg propped upon your conquest's back." For Cross, the aesthetics of combat problematize the notion of Bayonetta as someone onto whom sexual desire is voyeuristically imprinted; through play, she becomes something more, toying with and inverting that relationship.

Research structure

In this paper I argue for more nuanced approaches to critique of the *Bayonetta* series and character that extends beyond examination of her sexualized body, drawing on a textual analysis of the *Bayonetta* series games, as well as the cloud of paratexts and intertexts related to those games: reviews, critical reception, advertising materials, developer interviews, and the like. In particular, this work focuses on how gameplay elements have an impact on the interpretation of the character, as well as narrative elements beyond the character's sexualization.

Bayonetta as drag queen: camp, excess, and performativity

One way in which Bayonetta can be interpreted is through the lens of drag, specifically the ways in which drag's use of exaggeration, camp, and performativity to reflect and comment on existing systems of representation. Viewing Bayonetta as a drag-like parodic recreation – and perhaps even as a drag queen herself – opens up avenues for viewing the character in a new light.

Drag as a performance of gender is often viewed from the perspective of parody and pastiche. It's a type of parody that is both replicative and (re-)iterative. As Butler (1999, p. 75) puts it, "[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency." This is an extension of Butler's broader view of gender itself as performative, a "stylized repetition of acts" rather than any elemental or essential quality one has. For Butler, drag represents a performance that both parodies and critiques our notions of gender, but is also dependent on not just our knowledge, but our internalizing of them; she says the "pleasure" of drag is contingent on our understanding of gendered norms.

However, it's important to note that drag is also highly contextual, and while it is generally seen as transgressive, Butler mentions in *Bodies That Matter* that this is not always the case: "I want to underscore that there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of… gender norms" (1993, p. 125). In essence, Butler identifies drag as a format for *potential* subversion, but one which has equal possibility to reaffirm existing frameworks. In fact, it can and often will do both of these at the same time.

This vision of drag certainly fits Bayonetta, who embodies the tension between "sex doll for male players" and "empowering playable woman" that has been discussed previously in terms of existing research. That her sexualized body plays directly into an existing framework for such bodies is not in question. However, such a reading is dependent mainly on a number of assumed imaginaries, primary among them being a default heterosexual male player.

Bayonetta as a series also has a strong aesthetic of excess, of "larger than life," that has a similar relationship to drag, specifically to the issues of irony and style endemic to camp (see Babuscio, 1978). In terms of scale, Bayonetta is massive; the enemies are frequently huge, screen-filling monstrosities. Bayonetta exercises her power through "Wicked Weaves:" huge fists, weapons, and other fighting implements magically conjured through her hair. The game is filled with quicktime events where our heroine creates a gigantic dragon, and the player is asked to repeatedly jam a button at high speed to control the dragon's consumption of a helpless enemy, with each new plateau of success ranked in terms of "megatons" (as in a measure of force).

This excess is notable because it is often intensely performative. For example, Harper (2014, November) discusses the ways in which Bayonetta's relationship to the camera is dependent on an aesthetic of performativity in the titles: "Bayonetta is a performer. Her fighting style is based on dance-like movements and they are filled with excess. Her movements are huge and dramatic when they don't need to be; she is highly vocal and playful … the combat is characterized by excess and being over the top through things like Wicked Weaves. This is the essence of combat in the Bayonetta games: it is as much spectacle as it is combat. In fact it might be *more* spectacle than it is combat" [emphasis in original]. He goes on to discuss that combat in the series is as much about showmanship as it is about violence; the title character has a clear and distinct relationship with the camera and, by extension, the person on the "other side" of it… namely, the player.

More importantly, the game's aesthetic of excess can be a cue to reading Bayonetta outside that framework. The sort of violence and action that the *Bayonetta* games feature, both in terms of fictional style and mechanical execution, is more commonly associated with male playable characters. Indeed, sometimes the very visuals of Bayonetta's action make this deliberate, such as an early scene in the first game where she stands, legs wide, above two enemies, firing a pair of pistols downward at said enemies while the guns are held directly in front of her crotch, evoking distinct phallic imagery. But beyond this example, there are plenty of others that are less dependent on gendered imagery. She uses giant hands to play literal volleyball with a defeated enemy, deploys pro wrestling-style techniques on enemies ten times her size, and so forth. The result is a contrast between the masculine coding of violent acts and the sexualized, "hyperfeminine" character of Bayonetta, the sort of "incongruous contrast… drawn between an individual/thing and its context association" (1978, pg. 119) that Babuscio says is a critical element of camp.

Then, of course, there's the issue of gameplay. As previously discussed, *Bayonetta*'s genre is broadly conceived of as "character brawler." The core gameplay loop of the series involves traversing 3D maps which are typically linear, intermittently strewn with

battles that take place in "arenas" of a sort; Bayonetta's enemies will "trap" her inside barriers or fields until defeated, preventing the player from roaming around the entire map during combat. In terms of style, this borrows heavily from the "beat 'em up" games of yore, titles like *Final Fight* which involved a flow of "stop and fight, move along" that repeated. In examining other games by Platinum's designers, such as *Okami*, *God Hand*, or *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*, this structure is one that the studio uses consistently.

The games also employ a mechanic known as "Witch Time." Bayonetta has the ability to dodge enemy attacks, typically backflipping away with an elegant cartwheel… provided the player employs the dodge with good timing. A "good" dodge will merely allow the player to escape unscathed, but a *perfect* one will activate "Witch Time:" a bullet time-like slowing effect where the player is moving at normal speed. The end result is that perfect dodges give the player a tactical advantage, where they can briefly attack their foes with impunity. The proper use of Witch Time is critical to gameplay, as some in-game events are impossible to move beyond without it.

Again, an examination of Platinum's other titles shows this to be a common device. *Metal Gear Rising* relies on a hair's breadth "parry" system to produce a similar effect, while the *Legend of Korra* game made for Nintendo's breakout animation IP instead gives the player (as Avatar Korra) a chance to defeat a weak enemy in a single blow with proper defensive timing.

The critical aspect of this core mechanic, however, is that with excellent timing, the player can be – and is encouraged to attempt to be – "untouchable" (for more on the possibilities of this design element, see Bee, 2015). This emphasis on being "untouchable" takes on new dimensions given the character of *Bayonetta* and her sexualized presentation, however, because it presents an interesting point of critique with regards to her being a doll onto which player desires are etched. Enemies in the *Bayonetta* games are continually attempting to hurt or capture her, yet she emerges from these encounters largely unscathed because she is, in a word, untouchable. Mechanically, the character's critical ability is *denial*; she does not simply avoid being hurt, she weaponizes that avoidance. She doesn't simply defeat her enemies, she interrupts and subverts their attempts. Bayonetta's most important ability is, speaking as a gameplay mechanic, disruption: of time, of expectation, of her enemies' plans.

Taken together, these three elements – the parody/performance of drag, camp style, and the performance of denial through gameplay – construct an image of Bayonetta that stands in contrast to an interpretation that sees her *solely* as an unironic sexualized doll. Instead the player is invited to strike back against those who would view her as such, through the proxy of the game's enemies. By taking feminine sexuality and, through exaggeration and style, turning it into what amounts to a martial art, Bayonetta represents the rare attempt for a powerful woman character to "shut down" the leering gaze in the most literal way possible. A more "realistic" and less stylized presentation makes this interpretation far less likely.

Discussion

The purpose of this analysis is not to say that readings of Bayonetta as a problematic reflection of sexualization and the illusion of agency. I agree with Gill (2008) in the sense that celebrating texts like the *Bayonetta* games as giving "agency" to women players through her free sexuality and relative power within the text is complicated, as that supposed agency can sometimes be just another disciplinary tool for the regulation of gender. Rather, I offer this alternative reading to emphasize that through gameplay and other narrative elements, these seemingly exploitative characters can and do move beyond being *solely* problematic.

However, it's important to consider the above claim in the context of quotes from both Butler and Shaw, as noted above. Bayonetta can and does exist in the flux state of drag performance, simultaneously reasserting notions of sexualized and gendered bodies while offering a way in which they might be critiqued or reinterpreted. More importantly, I think it's critical not to make pre-judgments about what any given woman player might *do* with the character of Bayonetta. As Shaw says, identification is not as easy as we might think and a player's context and goals do a lot of work during the meaning-making process.

My own position as researcher and player complicates my interpretation of the game as well. As a cisgender gay man, I am already primed to view media through lenses like drag and camp, and I have somewhat reduced stakes when it comes to representations of women's sexualized bodies compared to women. Yet the writing of critics like Maddy Myers and Katherine Cross suggests that some women can and do share this sort of interpretation of the character, her style, and execution. More research on what influences intersect to suggest different interpretations of such characters and their sharply divergent readings, particularly research which focuses on players other than cisgendered men, is desirable.

What is clear, however, is that Bayonetta represents a clear site of tension between problematic aesthetic representation, and how digging past that surface level presents interpretive opportunities that focusing solely on "is this sexy or not" critique might miss. It also emphasizes that such characters can be multivalent in ways they are not often afforded the chance to be. Again, this is not about shutting down critique of her problem elements – for there are many – but instead about emphasizing that her problem elements are not the *only* way in which she can be interpreted. More to the point, the assumption that said interpretations are the only "reasonable" ones helps to foster problematic associations about women consumers, their desires, and our understanding of who the video game audience is.

Perhaps what is needed, above and beyond examination of player reception of such content, is research onto the rhetorical stakes that surround this content. Why do characters like Bayonetta become such flash points for discussions of what is appropriate or not in terms of sexuality in games? What are the qualities that make some game heroines the focus of intense public debate and others to be, comparatively, footnotes? In examining this we may learn much about our cultural

expectations of when and how sexualized women's bodies are considered "appropriate" and when they are not, in video games (and potentially beyond).

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