

Of Strong Women and Terrible Writing in Games: Toxic Masculinity Strikes Back

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Pronouns: They/Them, She/Her

SLIDE 1

-Hi Everyone! Thanks so much for coming. My name is Cody Mejeur, I'm currently Visiting Assistant Professor of Game Studies in the Department of Media Study at University at Buffalo. -I'm not an anthropologist by training, but a lot of my work has drawn on anthropologists' work on narrative and digital cultures, so I'm excited and honored to be here.

-My work examines narrative in games using queer and feminist lenses, and argues that we should think of narrative not just as a linear progression of events but rather as an embodied process of making sense of our experiences and realities that is always situated in particular social and cultural contexts.

-My presentation today draws on this work to examine a bit of how narrative has been used to construct virtual worlds in gendered ways, how that has changed in the past decade, and what we might do about it.

-The research I'm presenting here is in its early stages of data collection. Feel free to tweet about it, but please, please do not use #GamerGate or any other hashtags that could serve as dog whistles for attracting shitty gamers.

Narratives Build Storyworlds in Games

- Settings, backstories, quests
- Lore and worldbuilding, Krzywinska 2008
- Determined narrative: the narrative developers provide that contributes to the realities of the game
 - Connected to: personal and collective narratives



SLIDE 2

-A familiar point: narratives build worlds in games. By providing backstory or lore, the main reason for the gameplay, or context and content used in the gameplay. Juul 2008, Krzywinska 2008, etc.

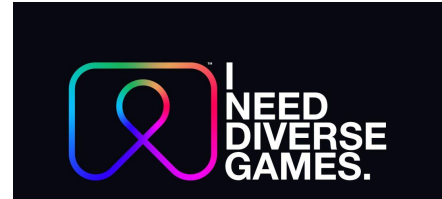
-In my own work, particularly my work with Pokémon Go, I've talked about narrative in games as the confluence of Determined, Personal, and Collective narratives that construct our realities in a given game.

-EXPLAIN BRIEFLY, use map.

-What I'm talking about today focuses primarily on determined narrative and players' responses to it. So there are bits of personal and collective narrative here as well, but highlighting the determined narrative.

Worlds for Cishet White Dudes

- Issues with narratives and representation well documented
- Stories centering men, erasing queerness, making people of color just really tan white people
- Organizations, scholars, and devs fighting to change this
- Violent pushback from GamerGate and similar groups in games



SLIDE 3

-Another familiar point: these virtual worlds and their narratives have been exclusive for quite a long time. Narrative is most frequently about some form of a white dude out to save the world. “Mythical norm” that Lorde talks about

-If you’re not the mythical norm, then you’re a side character or not there at all. Tan white people comes from history of MMORPGs and characters of color—while you could technically be a black or brown character in World of Warcraft prior to this year, it was a white character model with different skin tones. Get to more of this in a moment.

-Many have been fighting to change that for a long time, including scholars, developers, and activists: From Barbie to Mortal Kombat to Feminist Frequency to I Need Diverse Games to LGBTQ Video Game Archive

-Gamer movements aiming to prevent games from changing, targeting those who want them to change or critique the way games are. #GamerGate and similar blacklashes.

-This is where we’ve been, and especially where we were in the early 2010s.

Yet Worlds Also Change

- Hyperdiegetic cycle (Hills 2002)
- Narrative of improving representation (Elliman 2017; Greer 2018)
 - Most of these claims are with offline games
- So where are we at? What's changed?



SLIDE 4

-World change over time. The games aren't the same as they were in the late 2000s and early 2010s when a lot of this work was published.

-Narratively, we have the hyperdiegetic cycle (Matt Hills): worlds expand, add new characters and places that change the world. Filling in gaps in the map, or just completely making new stuff up.

-This gradual change keeps (or should keep) virtual worlds feeling fresh so the franchise continues and makes more money.

-Hyperdiegesis also works with representation: improving representation over time by adding new characters and stories. Issue here is whiteness is still at the center, the core. Other races, genders, and experiences are the addons.

-Interesting note: a lot of the games used as examples of improving representation are offline games. Not often with MMOs. Recent WoW: Shadowlands debacle as one example.

-Goal of presentation: so if things are changing and improving, what has that looked like? We're entering a new decade and have some distance from the late 2000s and early 2010s. What's worked in changing the narratives of virtual worlds? What hasn't? Focusing on gender in Guild Wars 2 and WoW BFA

Guild Wars 2: Scarlet Briar



SLIDE 5

-In particular, I'm focusing on several strong women characters in recent MMORPGs. These characters represent a step forward in terms of gender representation—they're central characters who can stand on their own—but they also highlight a number of issues.

-First, Scarlet Briar.

-New villain introduced in Guild Wars 2's Living Story Season 1--narratives that get rolled out over time with different content releases and are meant to keep the world fresh and alive.

-Based on forums, blog posts, and social media posts: widely despised by the player base because she was viewed as unbelievable. Too strong of a character with too many resources and abilities and too many hidden motives. She attacked Lion's Arch, the main player hub in the game, and was the central figure throughout the first season and setting up the first expansion. Her true motives weren't revealed until end of Season 1.

-Was this because she was a poor attempt at writing a strong female character? a Mary Sue with too much left unexplained?

-Or does this speak to sexist biases in narratives and stereotypes? We can believe men can be this strong but women can't be? We give affordances to male characters we don't give to female ones?

-Or a combination of both?

-Led to accusations that she was an example of the game becoming "SJW Wars 2", just there to be politically correct

-This rhetoric and narrative is extremely common: any character that isn't the

Mythical Norm, i.e. male, straight, white (or coded as white), protagonist gets marked as deviant (Gray 2014), must be part of SJW agenda

-Exemplifies a current trend: strong female characters aren't attacked for being female--that would be too obviously sexist. Instead, attacked as "bad writing"--the sexism is masked/veiled by complaints about quality, authenticity, etc.

WoW: Battle for Azeroth (2018)



SLIDE 6

-This trend is also present in the strong women characters in recent World of Warcraft, particularly Battle for Azeroth. Prior to the expansion release, they made a series of three animated shorts called Warbringers that highlighted the major characters of the new expansion: Jaina, Azshara, and Sylvanas. Wish I could show these but can't due to time.

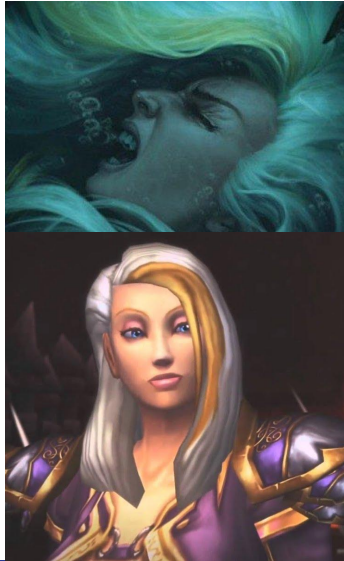
-Response to the shorts was initially mostly positive with lots of speculation
-However it wasn't long before accusations of bad writing became increasingly prevalent in the community, and now the videos have many negative responses and comments, especially the Sylvanas one. Slightly different from GW2: some cases were about the characters being too strong, but more so it became that the characters were crazy and/or evil, and therefore were uninteresting bad writing.

-Stereotypical association between strong women, ambition, and craziness--being a bitch, "dark bitches" as one forum post put it.

-And with these examples, the accusations of bad writing got sinister: led to lead writers on the game, especially Christie Golden, being harassed on social media with death and rape threats.

-Taking a closer look at characters will help trace the threads

Jaina Proudmoore



SLIDE 7

-Jaina has been in Warcraft universe for a long time, since Warcraft III. She has an extensive backstory and has been developed a lot through the years. Lots of ground to cover, so synopsis.

-Overall arch: Peaceful diplomat->Everything she loves is destroyed->Furious warmonger->Repeated betrayals->Distrusts the Horde and believes they need to be stopped/dismantled

-Yet for many players, especially male players, this all gets reduced to: she's crazy/she's a bitch/her writing makes no sense. Aided by the fact she's an Elsa ice sorceress—she's a cold, ice bitch.

-Part of this may be because her story got spread across different warcraft media, including novels, comics, etc. Some players may think the writing is bad because they don't have the whole picture

-Yet many players posting on the forums comment on how Jaina was "so much better" when she was a peaceful diplomat. Could be nostalgia, but could also be more: her character was much less developed then, and fit better with gender norms of domesticity, tranquility, kindness

-It's hard to draw a 1 to 1 correlation between sexism and claims of bad writing with Jaina. It's warcraft writing, so it's all campy genre writing. Yet it's conspicuous that the claims of bad writing don't dog the male characters the same way, and that one of the most developed and nuanced characters is a woman and is also one of the most common targets for "bad writing" claims.

-It's further concerning that a narrative of intense emotional trauma gets reduced to: she's an irrational bitch. It indicates that no matter how the story is told, if it's about a

woman, it will get minimized/disregarded if it doesn't fit certain gender expectations. -It's also indicative of how strong female character narratives are almost always a gauntlet of suffering. The way to make their stories meaningful seems limited to be making them painful.

Sylvanas Windrunner



SLIDE 8

-Skipping Azshara due to time, though many of the points for Jaina and Sylvanas apply to her too.

-Sylvanas similar, synopsis narrative: an elf was killed and raised into undeath as a banshee against her will. She leads the Forsaken, a group of human undead in the same boat. Her arch: Protector of her people->Violated and seeking revenge->Loses will to live, kills herself->is brought back with a secret agenda->becomes Warchief of the Horde-> in BFA, burns down Darnassus, the elven city in a giant tree. Claims this is in order to crush the hope of her enemies, make them give up faster.

-What Sylvanas does in BFA is evil. It's genocide and the killing of thousands of civilians. Yet player commentary and feedback on her character focuses predominantly on two things: her gender, and the "bad writing" of her character.

- "crazy bitch" comments, just like Jaina

- "bad writing" comments that claim there is no reason for what Sylvanas does, even though the narrative provides reasons for what she does repeatedly.

-Why the unwillingness to accept those reasons/willings to disregard them? Seems to be: Sylvanas' character does not match what some players expected her narrative to be. So they go to a gendered narrative that helps them explain away her narrative: she's crazy. She's irrational. She's overly emotional.

-Sylvanas' hidden agenda exacerbated this, similar to Scarlet in GW2: because all of her motives were not revealed, it left extra space for players to write their own interpretations of her, usually decidedly negative.

-Beyond her character and narrative, Sylvanas has been a lightning rod for accusations of SJW agendas because her character model has changed in recent

years to be less revealing. Went from a “plate-kini” to actual armor, and some gamers viewed this as Blizzard attempting to be politically correct. Her character was no longer for the male gaze—this pissed some gamers off.

-Sylvanas is the same as Jaina: there isn't a 1 to 1 correlation between claims of bad writing and sexism. Yet the trends in which characters get targeted with these claims and why suggest there is a strong connection between the two. And the fact that the writers for these characters, especially the women writing them, are getting targeted and harassed suggests this is the latest chapter in misogynist gaming culture.

So where are we?

- Representation in virtual worlds is getting better in some ways
 - Hyperdiegesis has meant more characters and narratives for folks who aren't cishet white men
 - These characters and narratives are being centered to some extent
- Yet reasons for pause
 - Often intense, violent, sexist pushback
 - Having more characters/narratives seems to lead to new ways to ignore/minimize them
- Characters alone cannot resolve deeply rooted cultural issues

SLIDE 9

-Representation has improved—there is more representation now than there was 10 years go.

-More characters and more main characters. More women who aren't just supporters. Openly queer narratives.

-Activism is working. Hyperdiegesis is working, even if it's just to spur profits.

-Yet, causes for concern.

-Often intense, violent pushback to these developments still, small as they are.

-Having more characters seems to lead to more/different ways to dismiss them.

-Also, all of these characters are either white humans or other fantasy races—no women of color here.

-Characters alone cannot solve deeply rooted cultural issues. Increasing representation is important, but it alone isn't solving the problem. More characters is changing the heterosexism and racism, not making it go away.

Conclusions

- How we represent women, LGBTQ folks, and people of color has always only been part of the issue
- Need more than strong female characters, need ways to resist, uproot, and transform toxic masculinity in virtual worlds. Need accountability.
- “Bad Writing” is a way sexism is masking itself in virtual worlds
- If the last 10 years have been the surfacing of hidden racism and heterosexism, we’re now seeing new attempts to submerge them again

SLIDE 10

-Representation is only part of the issue. In other words, how we represent women has only ever been part of the problem

-Similar to problems with “lean in” strategies: how women act has never been the issue, the systems limiting and excluding us are the issue

-Need more than strong women characters. Need understanding and accountability, ways to resist and transform toxic masculinity.

-Narrative can help with this! Confronting narratives people use to dismiss and attack women, people of color, queer folks. Having more narratives of different masculinities.

-“Bad Writing” is, at least in some cases, sexism masking itself.

-Indirect and oblique angles by which racism and heterosexism are operating, finding new ways to hide and mask themselves. Seek



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