

ABJECT PLAY

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Extended Abstract

Throughout the last two decades, a vast body of game studies scholarship has examined and critiqued representations of women in video games. It has steadily expanded, incorporating approaches from a variety of disciplines into its ever-growing bulk, proving gaming's pervasive sexism, racism, and heteronormativity. Many pieces in this body of scholarship have drawn connections between the "negative" portrayals of women in video games and the supposed stagnation of women's further involvement in video games and gaming cultures. And in turn, numerous studies have suggested solutions to this problem that involve "better" representations of women (Friman, 2015), often by speculating on or analyzing answers to the question "What might women want to play?" (Brunner, Bennett, and Honey, 1998; Nakamura and Wirman, 2005).

But in response to the preponderance of literature dealing with representation, another body of research has arisen to outline the limitations of such work, its underlying assumptions, and its potentially damaging implications. Some have pointed to the resulting commodification of stereotypical feminine tastes (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998); some have asserted the prospective violence of its identity politics (Shaw, 2014); and some have noted that the overemphasis on representation limits how we understand the experience of actually playing a video game, which therefore overlooks a defining quality of the medium (Daviault and Schott, 2014).

In this paper, I endeavor to complicate the question of "What might women want to play?" by investigating my own affinity for Edmund McMillen's *The Binding of Isaac: Rebirth* (Nicalis, 2014). Representationally, *Isaac* appears as a game that would be outright revolting to both feminine and feminist sensibilities. It's gross-out, gory, and appears decidedly hostile towards women, playing on the well-worn Freudian Oedipus conflict with all its misogynistic anxieties of monstrous wombs and castrating mothers. As discussed in a number of previous analyses (Zachary, 2012; Dwan 2015; Batti 2015), *Isaac* appears closely related to Julia Kristeva's (1982) theories of the abject and Barbara Creed's (1993) related notion of the monstrous-feminine. However, in these analyses, the game's exemplification of abjection relates primarily—if not exclusively—to its representational aspects. The conclusion that *Isaac* is misogynistic would be the product of one way of examining the meanings that the game may generate through its representation of abject femininity—but it is certainly not the meaning of the game.

To interrogate and account for my own engagement with Isaac as a feminist and subversively feminine experience, I suggest that abjection is not only a way to examine a game's representational or mechanical elements. Rather, it can be an approach to play: a subversive way of playing a game that may directly challenge designer-intended meanings and oppose expected readings and audiences.

In *Understanding Counterplay in Videogames* (2015), Meades describes playing abjectly as a form of transgression. Transgressions, he explains, "can be understood as violation of rule or moral principle. These principles often demarcate important boundaries within society, such as between the sacred and profane, the normal and the abject, the compliant and the criminal" (p. 28). While my interest is also in the demarcation and violation of boundaries in acts of play, I do not regard abject play as objectionable or inappropriate, as Meades seems to suggest. Rather, I view it as a playstyle in its own right, as a resistant disposition that players may adopt in their engagements with video games.

Abject play occurs in the spaces between representation and mechanics, between game and player. Kristeva (1982) explains that the abject is that which "does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (p. 4). The abject is thus both what constitutes and threatens borders and order: social, cultural, individual, systemic. It establishes these boundaries even as it destabilizes them. Hence, by playing Isaac abjectly, I threaten and tear apart incoherent patriarchal narratives of feminine bodily order and regulation, even as I recognize and enact them by playing within the game's representational and rule structures. But I do not change the game's rules or representations. I need not materially alter the game to transgress it. Even so, I disturb its order and the order that Western patriarchal culture has imposed on women's bodies.

Through my abject play, I reappropriate and reconfigure what has been simultaneously attributed and denied to femininity. I engage with Isaac's Biblical references to examine how Western patriarchy has connected femininity to sinfulness, evil, and filth at the same time that it has demanded the purification and sanctity of feminine bodies. I recast the figure of the demon and the meanings of sin and good as channels for feminine resistance. Feminine temptation to sin, I conclude, is the temptation to resist and expel hegemonic masculine rules. It is the temptation to not do as I am commanded, to refute my subjugation. It is the temptation to eat the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and then to discover that, under patriarchy, "good" is oppression and "evil" is feminine liberation.

Ultimately, the way that I experience Isaac is not an interpretation of it alone. It is not a counter-reading of the game's representational or procedural systems. Instead, abject play is a gendered performance: playing with the abject, abjectly, from a position of abjection. During every run, I can enact and experiment with femininity in ways that question, destabilize, and subvert the borders, orders, and norms prescribed to me. The meanings of my play emerge in the collisions and interminglings of my ever-unfinished identity formation with the game's structures.

To associate with demons—to be a demon, to be evil—in these spaces is therefore not a condemnation of my femininity or myself. My abject play is a protest against order, a critical action against structures of domination. It is a performance against oppressive perceptions of gender. Abject play issues an acknowledgment of my abject position in Western culture—but it allows me to formulate a position against it. It is an articulation against subjugation, a strategy of struggle.

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