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BEYOND BAYONETTA'S BARBIE BODY

Todd Harper

Abstract

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.

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