Coding Gender, Modding Games, and the Struggle for Identification

CODING GENDER

After *Mario Bros.* and *The Legend of Zelda* captivated gaming audiences, Nintendo

released another game that would one day join its legendary library, the Science Fiction side-

scrolling shooter simply titled *Metroid*. *Metroid's* success came from its combination of *Mario*

Bros. style platforming, where the player progresses through 2-D environments via running,

jumping, and rolling to traverse various hazards, and *Zelda*'s non-linear open world that

encourages exploration. Using this strategy, and despite the limitations of the hardware,

Metroid's designers allowed gamers some modicum of freedom to play the game the way they

chose to. Although they still had to trigger programmed events to progress through the plot, the

strategic implementation of choice gave the game some replay value. But more importantly than

the freedom to run around and shoot at whatever you want whenever you want, *Metroid*'s legacy

is the identity of the main character. Rewarding players with the removal of the Samus Aran's

helmet, a task that is accomplished by completing the game under six hours, the game's ending

credits reveal the supposed robot bounty hunter to be a woman.

Who would have thought?

Apparently, Yoshio Sakamoto, one of the game's directors, did think, that revealing

Samus to be a woman would be a unique twist at the end of the game. "It is true that in

developing the original *Metroid*, we were partway through the development processes when one

of the staff members said, 'Hey, wouldn't that be kind of cool if it turned out that this person

inside the suit was a woman?'" And while it's true that Samus can be considered one of gaming's

foremothers and a prototype for all female heroes to come, we should acknowledge that her

creation was done on a lark to *surprise* (and maybe even confuse?) the game's audience which at

the time consisted mostly of adolescent boys. Another thing to note was that the development

team did not stop at simply removing Samus' helmet. No, no, no. They programmed even more

rewards for their audience. While beating the game under six hours rewarded gamers with a

helmetless Samus, if they were able to beat the game under three hours, they were rewarded with

a suitless Samus wearing a leotard. And if players really wanted a challenge, completing the

game under one hour treated them to an 8-bit rendition of Samus in a two-piece bikini-like outfit.

Be still

my little gamer heart.

The reveal of Samus'

identity as a woman reflects pre-determined notions of femininity and beauty, even if the

medium's limitations could only allow an 8-bit pixelated image of these ideologies. Designing

Samus in what looks like a swimsuit pigeon-holes her into the concept of how a woman must

look, although the game's mechanics did not reflect any of these ideologies regarding femininity

during actual gameplay. As one blogger recalls his experience as an elementary school student

playing *Metroid*, we can see how different ideas of a game hero are (bolded) coded in contrast to

pre-conceived beliefs of female femininity (underlined).

> The game's yellow and orange main character was **not a totally ripped and gnarly dude**... [but] a <u>leotard-toting</u> Samus <u>waved coyly</u> at me <u>from the screen</u>, just after **trouncing** Mother Brain and jumping vertically through a painfully sparse obstacle

course of miniscule platforms. The experience of learning *I had been a woman the entire time* did not leave my manhood emasculated, but *I was surprised* nonetheless.

An argument can be made that Sakamoto was queering the archetype of what a game hero should be at the time of *Metroid*'s publication. The blogger was surprised to not see a "totally ripped" dude at the end credits, as many of us were, and indeed, Sakamoto did turn that concept on its head, but that isn't enough. It needs to do something as well; not just surprise us. Unfortunately, all he managed to do is perpetuate feminine stereotypes and begin what would become the traditional undressing of Samus at the end of each *Metroid* title. I would also like to posit that having Samus wave to the player, distancing the connection between player-avatar and distorting the shared gaming experience, undoes the shared embodiment both had so far been participating in throughout the game. "I had been a woman the entire time," notes the player's separation at the end of the game, as he "had been" and no longer *was* a woman, especially as Samus waves to him "coyly".

Is this a moment of disidentification? I don't think so. While the player is not identifying with his avatar, he is also no longer desiring to. Samus becomes a sexualized object, and the game encourages players to see her this way thanks to the coding of the game which rewards them with images of her in sexy clothing. Disidentification only works when the subject, as Jose Esteban Munoz describes in *Disidentifications*, "practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to... normative citizenship" (4). A better example of disidentification is when young women play a game like *Tomb Raider*, which stars a female hero protagonist the female gamer might not be able to identify with due to unrealistic standards of beauty and affluence. *Metroid*, while perpetuating the stigma of female beauty, was still a step towards the acceptance of female action heroes, and Samus is still respected and idolized by many women who play video games.

However, as I will continue to explain, Samus is also the genesis of the gaming community treating these women as sexual objects outside of their in-game environments.