

Bride, Demon or Alien? Undressing Stigma in Catherine: Full Body

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper presents a work in process and aims to examine how digital games can facilitate affective engagement in order to explore social stigma (Goffman 1963; Link & Phelan 2001) in romantic relationship roles. The paper will in particular look at the stigmatic topic of being unfaithful in a romantic relationship, via a textual analysis of the Japanese cross-genre game *Catherine: Full Body* (Atlus, Studio Zero 2019). The methodology is based on reader-response theory, adapted to suit the ergodic structure of digital games to account for critical play experience as well as the gameplay experiences of empirical players (Rosenblatt 1938; Barthes 1977; Eco 1979; Iser 1978; Aarseth 1997; Mortensen 2003; Jørgensen 2012; Østby 2016; Jara and Torner 2018). By using the experience of empirical players, this paper addresses the gap in empirical research on affective engagement with commercial game characters, focusing on the emotional experience of gameplay.

According to John Frow (2018), affective engagement with fictional characters is a process of recognizing others as more or less like ourselves (110). Fictional characters present a figural pattern of personhood, and through recognition of this pattern, consisting of speech, bodies, and pronouns, characters invite us to partake in its reconstruction (109-111). Affective engagement thus improves the reader's understanding of what fictional characters are, and it can play a significant role in games alongside other modes of engagement (e.g. Calleja 2007; Lankoski 2011; Leino 2015; Schröter 2016). Olli Leino (2010) suggests for example that the emotionality experienced in this process of gameplay is a "highly subject-dependent property" of the game (4). His argument aligns with Frow's conceptualization of affective engagement with fictional characters as a process that springs from the acts of recognition and reconstruction of characterizations and not from the fiction itself.

Affective engagement is a relevant concept for tapping into the broader discussion of how players use fictional characters to make sense of their play experience. As argued by Henry Jenkins (2013), studies on media use in general has developed tremendously over the last couple of decades. Research on fans and fictions is no longer limited by a

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researcher's critical distance, and does not singularly assume that people engage with fictions unreflectively because they lack academic insight (ibid.). Scholarly works from both the West and Japan reflect on the importance of users' affective engagement with fictional characters to describe the meaning-making processes in participatory cultures to open up interpretative space consisting of a variety of different meanings (Jenkins 1992; Azuma [2001] 2009; 2007; Allison 2004; 2006; Saitô [2000] 2006; 2014; Vermeule 2010; Shaw 2014; Harvey 2015; Thomas 2019). Affective engagement in games is a phenomenon that facilitates player experience, with the play aspect prioritized over the ontology aspect of a game. In a sense, this phenomenon can be boiled down to the "investment" in the game (Yee 2006, 30-32; Leino 2010, 255-262) that simultaneously motivates and enables play experience, where games function as "structures of feelings" (Anable 2018, xvii). Recent works on the experiential focus of emotions and values in relation to games particularly draws the attention to how affective engagement connects gameplay practices to everyday practices (Anable 2018; Flanagan & Nissenbaum 2014; Isbister 2016). Since affective engagement with game characters functions similarly to, if not interchangeably with, engagement with real people (Calleja 2007, 86; Lankoski 2011, 296), players' experiences should be contextualized within wider social practices.

Catherine: Full Body playfully touches on the topics of interpersonal relationships, power dynamics, and stigmatized gender roles through puzzle-based gameplay. In between solving puzzles, players face a series of dialogue options that allow the protagonist, Vincent, to pursue intimate relations with the three female-presenting characters Catherine, Katherine, and Rin. In the original version of the game (Atlus, Persona Team 2011), only Katherine and Catherine were included, representing the stability of marriage and the lustful allure of a more carnal relationship, respectively. In *Full Body*, the developers added Rin as an updated representation of diversity in current times¹, opening up for a more nuanced look into the stigmatization of female-presenting bodies. Via the game's *system of affection* (Blom 2020), players are encouraged to affectively engage with the three female characters while facing internalized tropes or simply trying to disentangle Vincent from the intricate conflicts caused by his own actions

By facilitating affective engagement through a *system of affection* (Blom 2020), *Catherine: Full Body* encourages players to reflect on social stigmatization of the game's characters by playing with stereotypical notions of individual character traits as desirable or undesirable. Stigmatization and othering play an important role in *Full Body* as these topics dictate how players are allowed to interact with the characters as *dynamic game characters* (Blom 2020), meaning that player choices determine not simply which character the protagonist courts, player choices also demonstrate the consequences of the player's engagement. According to Goffman (1963), stigma is a "special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype" (14), meaning that stigmatization does not occur in the person alone, but occurs in the relation between person, attributes, and the preconceiving characterizations of others. For the purpose of this paper, Goffman's second category of stigma, derived from personal character flaws, are relevant. It is necessary to investigate empirical players' experience because stigma forms in social contexts as a reflection of social power dynamics, meaning actions and attitudes in combination (Link & Phelan 2001). By investigating the process of labeling, stereotyping and othering (ibid.) of the game's characters, the paper can trace how power dynamics can be expressed in gameplay choices and discuss how this process is negotiated.

The paper uses open-ended interviews, constructed by drawing on phenomenological inquiry (Giorgi 2009), in order to investigate the felt experience of relating to and acting on the relation to game characters with one or several social stigma attached. A small

sample of empirical players is adequate for discussing player experience of characters' social stigma in relation to the *system of affection* (Blom 2020), since the paper focuses on individual player experience over generalized effects.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 See interview of the game’s developer Katsura Hashino in Dengeki Online (Terumoto 2018).