

**From Saloon and Into Space:  
An Analysis of Feminine Identity on the Space Western Frontier**

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Anthony Burch was lead writer for *Borderlands 2* (2012), a space western, first-person shooter videogame published by Gearbox Software for the XBox 360 console and PC platform. He was largely responsible for designing character dialogue and (with others) the visual representations of playable and non-playable characters. Early on in his career, through journalistic interviews and self-published comments and articles, Burch described himself as someone committed to making “inclusive spaces” in videogames. Following the release of *Borderlands 2* in October of 2012, Burch defended his design of non-playable characters who happen to be gay by saying,

“I included numerous homosexual relationships in the script [of *Borderlands 2*] because, honestly, there was no reason not to. There’s no downside to making a game that is more inclusive, with characters that appeal to MORE different [sic] types of people.

Every gender, race, sexual orientation (not ‘lifestyle choice’) and body type is welcome in the universe of *Borderlands*, and why not? Everyone should have the same opportunity to shoot psychos in the face with a rocket launcher.” [original emphasis maintained] (Anthony Burch, 2012).

In February 2013, Burch faced criticism on Twitter for his design of Tiny Tina, a young, caucasian girl with a reputation for being macabre and vulgar. Game designer Mike Sacco tweeted at Burch, “@reverendanthony Hey. I really like BL2’s writing, but Tiny Tina’s trope of ‘white girl talkin’ like them urban folk!!’ has got to go” (@MikeSacco, 2013a). Sacco wanted to draw attention to her adoption of words and phrases “badonkadonk,” “crunk,” and “do I gotta

shank a bitch?” The tweet surprised Burch, who admitted in conversation with his Twitter followers that he had never before considered the possibility that Tiny Tina could be considered a racist character (@reverendanthony, 2013a). Burch also asked his followers to comment on the matter, and the criticism sparked a larger debate about what constitutes racist game design, and whether or not the intent of a designer can inoculate their work from being offensive (ibull, 2013). He revised his opinion of Tiny Tina’s design and promised to revisit her character in future downloadable game content (DLC) (@reverendanthony, 2013b). Almost one year after the release of *Borderlands 2*, Burch published another note about his attempts to make the *Borderlands* universe an inclusive space (Burch, 2013). He acknowledged Anita Sarkeesian’s recent criticism of *Borderlands 2* in her *Tropes vs Women* YouTube series (Sarkeesian, 2013). In May 2013 Sarkeesian argued that the game recreated the “Euthanized Damsel” trope wherein a woman is written into a game for the express purpose of needing to be killed by the player (Ibid). Burch vowed to improve upon his writing and design in the game, and he cited recent progress on representing a wider diversity of characters (Burch, 2013). Since the launch of the game in 2012, he argued, a handful of playable and non-playable characters have “come out” as bisexual; a quest was published in Tiny Tina’s DLC that interrogates the misogynistic logic behind the “fake geek girl” internet meme; and, one of the non-playable characters was conceptually redesigned with a permanent stutter after a fan communicated to the Gearbox team the positive impact of including a stutterer in the game (Ibid). For Burch and the rest of the Gearbox team, the notion of inclusivity has become a frontier of its own in *Borderlands 2* as they struggle to continuously redraw boundaries of what inclusivity looks like.

As an articulation of how inclusivity might appear in virtual worlds, the *Borderlands* universe exemplifies the difficult task that game designers face when trying to be mindful of a heterogeneous audience. In particular, Burch's confession, that some of what people love about *Borderlands 2* was a complete accident on his part, speaks to the challenge a person faces in the manufacture of complex, characteristically diverse characters and structure of open, inclusive spaces (Ibid). When treated like a frontier in and of itself, inclusivity becomes a material, moving target, something aesthetically defined by certain a particular population of visual representations. In this paradigm, inclusivity is measurable by how well a game represents a number of "traditionally invisible identities," namely white women, people of color, distinctly queer people, and "overweight" bodies (i.e., "Every...body type..."). An intersectional and postcolonial analysis of inclusivity, however, demands a different way of thinking about material communities and defined community boundaries. To demonstrate the structural limitations of inclusivity in the *Borderlands* universe, this paper articulates through critical discourse and textual analysis the ways in which design and genre function to police the boundaries of inclusivity in both games.

To conduct an analysis of gender and sexuality in the *Borderlands* universe, I have delineated two broad categories to interrogate the complex rhetorical social structure constructed by designers. I explore the different subject positions of playable and non-playable characters because this distinction allows for a reading of the *Borderlands* universe that simultaneously recognizes the inclusive and exclusive nature of represented identities in both games. While I would like to explore more broadly the ideological treatment of identity categories other than gender and race, I reserve those discussions for others to champion at a later date. Rather, this

paper focuses on articulating a framework that troubles the perceived inoculative nature of representing traditionally invisible identities in videogames. I argue that such notions only serve to obfuscate decisions made by designers and producers about who or what constitutes as play-worthy characters. Playable characters not only constitute who producers and designers assume players want to *be*, but stock characters also police ideas about the privileged constitution of heroism.

The design of playable characters has historically privileged white, heterosexual, masculine bodies over all other possible articulations of personhood in the videogame genre. Jeroen Jansz and Raynel Martis's work on the Lara Phenomenon offers an extensive review of literature on the representations of gender and race in videogames up to 2007; the prevalence of white supremacist ideology and hegemonic masculinity was also documented in large-scale content analyses of both videogame magazines and videogames themselves in 2007 and 2009, respectively (Jansz and Martis, 2007; Miller and Summers; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, and Ivory, 2009). David Dietrich's analysis of race and character creation in online games further demonstrates the prevalence of white supremacy in game design (2012). Jessie Daniels and Nick LaLone demonstrate how videogame design can teach and reinforce racist cultural ideology through "procedural rhetoric," a theory of persuasive argumentation developed by Ian Bogost (Daniels and LaLone, 2012). Procedural rhetoric describes the articulation of persuasive arguments through various structures and policies written into the computer programming of any given game (Bogost, 2007). For example, players form different relationships between playable and non-playable characters; those relationships can render values and meanings that normalize and refract social and institutional inequalities outside the game world (Ibid). Representations of

gender in games may largely reflect different ideological approaches to understanding how masculinity and femininity are defined (e.g., for feminist and cultural-studies based approaches, Cassell, 1998; Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; for psychological approaches, Bem, 1981; Crane & Markus, 1982; and for overviews, Bussey & Bandura, 1999; deCastell & Bryson, 1998). For the purposes of analysis this paper adopts the cultural studies approach, which recognizes gender as a cultural construct “conceived of differently in different cultures, historical periods, and contexts” (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998, p. 4). This definition best informs the player behavior of “gender-swapping,” a well-documented phenomenon wherein players adopt gendered characters that do not correspond to their cis-gender (Turtle, 1995; Cherney & Wise, 1996; Kolo & Baur, 2004; DiGiuseppe & Nardi, 2007). This understanding also allows for an articulation of gender (i.e. femininity) that is divorced from the material body, and it allows for broader understandings of how people might experience and practice gender. I borrow from Judith Butler and Donna Haraway’s understanding of biological sex as separate from the performativity of gender; “There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women. There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices” (Haraway, 1991, p. 155). To negotiate how identity categories are privileged differently between character classes, I borrow Arturo Escobar’s understanding of identities as “articulations of difference” that are both historically contingent and fixed in an economy of power (2008, p. 203). Escobar’s argument that identities cannot be reduced to articulations of difference, that they are “dialogic and relational,” compliments my understanding of character classes as differently privileged, that can be inclusive and exclusive subject positions at the same time (Ibid).

Of the playable characters initially released with the game *Borderlands 2*, one of the four original characters—Maya—is a phenotypically white female. Axton and Salvador are phenotypically white males, and Zero (alternative spelling: Zer0) is fully masked in a head-to-toe form-fitting suit—it is unclear as to whether or not he even a human. Gearbox published two additional characters as DLC after the initial release of the game that players can download for a fee. One of those characters, Gaige, is a phenotypically white female; the other, Krieg, is a phenotypically white male who suffers from an extreme manifestation of schizophrenia. In terms of sexuality, Axton is marked as bisexual—originally an accident but later underscored more permanently when players expressed disappointment to Gearbox that his bisexual character dialog wasn't intentional scripted (Burch, 2013). In terms of representational customization, players can change the color scheme of their character's clothing and outfit their character with a wide diversity of guns and other items. Despite the relative limited selection of avatars players have to choose from, players can find more than 17.75 million different kinds of guns in the *Borderlands* universe (Yin-Poole, 2012). This level of variety is possible because designers at Gearbox chose to implement a procedural generation system whereby guns are randomly generated by the game and assigned characteristics from a large pool of possible attributes. Alternatively, the design of playable and non-playable characters is structured by the narratological signs, axioms, and meanings that Gearbox game designers draw from the space western genre. Rather than articulate a possible matrix that reduces the space western genre to a pool of formulaic conventions, game designers chose to manually constitute characters to satisfy and control a particular storyline for characters in the game. This isn't to say that the manual constitution of genre conventions is antithetical to Burch's project of creating an inclusive game

space. Examples of genre are historically contingent phenomenon, and highlighting patterns of discourse within specified genres can interrogate genre itself as a site for writers and readers to transcend formulaic conventions that might otherwise be exclusionary (Slotkin, 1998, p. 6; Devitt, 2000). However, in choosing to police the boundaries of how players experience the space western genre, Burch overlooks the ways in which players are unable to interrogate the procedural rhetoric that both shapes the *Borderlands* universe as a hostile frontier and dictates how characters and players move through that space.

Generally speaking, the space western genre borrows ideology from American frontier mythology, and motifs—symbols, situations, and character motivations—iconic of western and science fiction stories. Subgenres that borrow from the frontier myth, westerns and science fiction settings—i.e. space westerns, space operas, science fiction westerns, and steampunks—unilaterally construct power through violence, but supply different instruments, negotiate different outcomes/consequences, and pedestal different goals for characters in each story. Heroes on the western frontier are traditionally defined by arbitrary measures of masculinity. In her 1992 book, *West of everything: the inner life of westerns*, Jane Tompkins writes that most western tales defined their actors on a sliding scale of masculinity:

“[Westerns] create a model for men who came of age in the twentieth century. The model was not for women but for men: Westerns insist on this point by emphasizing the importance of manhood as an ideal. It is not one ideal among many, it is the ideal, certainly the only one worth dying for. It doesn’t matter whether a man is a sheriff or an outlaw, a rustler or a rancher, a cattleman or a sheepherder, a miner or a gambler. What matters is that he be a man” (p. 17–18).

The essential constitution of masculinity serves as a literary device to constitute cultural attitudes toward socio-political ideas and ideals. The sexist attitude of patriarchal society is obfuscated by the necessity of representing cultural discourses—assumedly for audiences that would not be

offended by the overt characterizations (Folsum, 1966, p. 88-90). In most westerns, idealized men are contrasted by materialistic women for rhetorical discourse;

“Indeed, women are not absolutely necessary to the presentation of these two differing points of view, but the attitude which they are conventionally made to represent is required. The values represented by a stable society must in some way be introduced into any fictional exploration of the significance of the frontier, if only to throw into greater relief the contrasting values which the frontier represents” (Folsum, 1966, p. 88-90).

In western saloons, women are not named or vocalized; their livelihoods and their stories are not represented nor reflected in western mythos (Butler, 1985; Riley, 1988; Namias, 1993; Lewis, 2011). Instead, their bodies function as a reminder of what civilization has to offer cowboys after a period of wrangling on the frontier (Folsum, 1966). As literary devices, the social relationship between men and women necessarily stratifies, and both identities are denied “true equality... regardless of sex or gender” (Murray, 1995). Although there have been prominent or leading heroines in space westerns like *Alien* (1979), *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995-2001), *Firefly* (2005), and *Borderlands 2*. These representations—most being *phenotypically white, heterosexual* women—are almost always cast in rhetorical dialogue with their own perceived masculinity.

There seems to be no such thing as “feminine violence;” for, in the structuring and reinforcement of patriarchy, Western civilization necessarily universalizes hegemonic masculine identity as constituted by violence, war, and athleticism, among other activities (Confortini, 2006). On the frontier, this relationship between masculinity and violence is especially old. In an analysis of Abigail Scott Dunaway’s suffrage speeches between 1834–1915, Tiffany Lewis discovered that Dunaway’s empowerment of women on the Western frontier invariably came at the degradation of femininity and other marginalized identities (i.e. Native Americans and people of East-Asian lineage):

“As Duniway implied that only the women who could “prove their manhood” had the right to political equality, she encouraged women desiring suffrage to become more like men and less like traditionally weak women” (Lewis, 2011, p. 144).

The dressing of women with masculinity to escape from their subordinate position may constitute the possibility of a violent or seemingly active female subject, but this gendering—too—reifies the subordination of femininity to masculinity (Halberstam, 1998). In *Borderlands 2*, the experiences of violence between characters are simulationally, ludologically indistinguishable. All playable characters experience the same missions, the same prompts, the same conclusion in the story. The voice-recordings players may experience in the game have minimal variation, but nothing so significant such that the relationships between characters are noticeably different. Non-playable characters in the game do not treat players differently in the context of violence, and neither do the playable characters themselves seem to live through any uniquely feminine experience, despite living in a delineated Western civilization. As a consequence, Maya and Gaige appear more akin to token representations of femininity—constitutions of masculinity with cleavage—rather than people who have experienced the subjugation of patriarchy, who have experienced discrimination for their representational lack of masculinity. In this framework, characters are homogeneously equal because violence is homogeneously masculine in an imperial way, and game designers overlook the possible heterogeneous nature of how violence is experienced by both provocateurs and victims. The representations of their bodies suggests that Maya and Gaige are mere appropriations of the sexual female body, which allows for any player to “play” feminine without actually experiencing any of the real-world consequences of being or having a feminized body. Certainly, females and women experience violence differently than males and men in a patriarchal society;

while perhaps most often on the receiving end of violence, gendered females who experience institutionalization for committing violent crimes like murder and assault *both* do so in ways different from their male counterparts *and* experience different social and institutional treatment for their violence (Farrell, Keppel, and Titterington, 2011; Jordan, Clark, Pritchard, and Charnigo, 2012). Further, Lee Fitzroy's research into the relationship between violence and women suggests that women's choices emerge "...out of their experiences within a generally oppressive and often extremely personally abusive context" (2001, p. 9). Although Burch scripts non-playable women extracting vengeance from other misogynistic characters for reasons of personal abuse, the ways in which revenge is pursued in these side-show missions is not characteristically different from other violent acts. Consequently, the homogenization of how women experience violence functionally bounds all articulations of violence within a single framework for understanding it. Violence is appropriated within a cultural structure, a social construction of masculinity such that *all* expressions of it are naturalized as expressions of masculinity—culture appropriates alterity into itself (Carbado, 2005). In this way, identities are not constituted separately from other structures that shape experience in the game. As simulations, videogames like *Borderlands* and *Borderlands 2* model behavior so that players react to particular stimuli according to a set of predetermined conditions; as representational media, these games construct ideas and messages through the sequences of cause and effect (Frasca, 2003).<sup>1</sup> Put another way, players reproduce notions of what a space western is and how heroes are constituted through repetitious play; the genre setting is constituted through the

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<sup>1</sup> Apperley also describes other categories akin to genre that games have; *platform*, *mode*, and *milieu*.

procedural rhetoric that logically defines symbols and relationships, cause and effect, in the game.

*Borderlands* and *Borderlands 2* is set on Pandora, a wasteland “frontier planet,” and the narrative around it evokes the frontier myth (*Borderlands: Information*). The Myth suggests and signifies a “formative experience” on an ever-fluid landscape that constitutes an imaginary “wilderness” (Stoeltje, 1987, p. 250; Slotkin, 1998, p. 11). On Pandora, the creation and management of civilization is a central struggle; people are constantly competing for ownership of the planet and its resources through the practice of colonization. The violence that threatens the civility of people on Pandora is paradoxically co-opted by those people for the sake of survival and preservation. In the famously blunt and revolutionary *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire argued that an “infinite distance” exists between colonization and civilization, and that time has demonstrated relentlessly that the colonial project has not improved the health of civilizations involved in and affected by it (1972). For Césaire, colonization is an infection that reduces civilization to savagery; it is *not* a project that ever intends to cultivate inclusivity and cooperation (Ibid). Indeed, in the *Borderlands* universe, the player constantly kills in order to control creatures and other humanoids that may inconvenience her. In the narratological context of killing enemies, completing quests, and ultimately “winning” the game, colonialism legitimates a way of thinking about violence and progress that ultimately recreates the harshness of the setting itself. In other words, Pandora is a perpetual, space western wasteland because its inhabitants only reproduce the procedural rhetoric that makes it so.

When players take control of a character in *Borderlands 2*, they do so after their character wakes up from the explosion of a train car. The rail car is destroyed, laying on the side of a

glacier, and everyone else who was with the player's character is presumably dead—save for a partially-damaged, self-serving CL4P-TP steward robot named Claptrap. Claptrap insists that the first task at hand is to join a resistance force in Sanctuary, a city built on top of one of the colonizer's first mining ships. The design of the game opts the player into fighting for a resistance force called Crimson Raiders—a group of Vault Hunters, bandits, and ex-military soldiers—in the pursuit of peace on Pandora. Unquestioningly, the constitution of a “peaceful” Pandora is never situated in a context *other than* some place devoid of the dictatorial rule of Handsome Jack, the leading antagonist in the game. Killing Handsome Jack becomes the overarching goal for the player—one of the many instances in which killing is the reward in and of itself. On the frontier, killing is a convention of the Myth; it is the mechanism by which colonialism regenerates the spirit of the individual (Slotkin, 1998, p. 12). *Regeneration through violence* is a legitimizing logic that necessitates the “othering” of subjects and the extermination of the unequal (Ibid). “Others” on Pandora are uniformly hostile and dangerous, but unquestioningly designed to be harvestable. To move forward and work through the narrative a player must kill creatures native to the environment, people with psychological brain damage, and humanoids who have literally lost their humanity in various ways (zombies, scientific experimentation, etc.). When the player does successfully kill an enemy, the corpse “drops loot”—money, medical kits, guns, shields, grenades, etc.—like a piñata drops candy after it has been beaten. In the event that a player's character is about to perish at the hands of her enemies, she is rewarded automatically with a health boost if she can successfully kill a nearby foe. In the event of her death, a player's purse (should it have more than \$7 in it) is taxed as a penalty for

regenerating her character.<sup>2</sup> As rewards for perpetuating imperialism and colonialism, these acts and processes, causal relationships and symbols imitate the constitution of modernity, a project of Western civilization that is distinctly hostile to practices of inclusivity.

Modernity constructs governmentality on the basis of reason, secularization, the individual, expert knowledge, and administrative mechanisms (Escobar, 2008, p. 165-167). As a system of establishing civil orderliness, modernity “is an alterity-generating machine that, in the name of reason and humanism, excludes from its imaginary the hybridity, multiplicity, ambiguity, and contingency of different forms of life” (Castro-Gòmez, 2002, p. 269). As a project reproduced in the *Borderlands* universe, it also informs ideas about how peaceful civilizations are developed and who gets to construct them on Pandora. The game design constructs alterity (i.e. “otherness”) as a binarism; a good-guy/bad-guy dichotomy that marks the identity of legitimate enemies. The imperial and indiscriminate annihilation of alterity—even if that Other is throwing axes at you—reproduces the social and institutional paradigms that are predicated the need for inequality. Without inequality, who would players get to shoot with their bazookas? How would players be able to discern who to shoot bazookas at? Ultimately, this framework distributes power to a select few citizens of the peace-seeking, rebel State, and they construct hierarchal frameworks that privilege ways of being. In 19th century Latin America, the “Other” was an identity delineated from citizenship, and citizenship was dictated by constitutions, manuals of etiquette, and grammar manuals (Castro-Gòmez, 2002, p. 271). In Western culture, constitutions of subjectivity—who gets to be a citizen, so to speak—are Eurocentric and has privileging white, heterosexual, property-owning males for a long time

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<sup>2</sup> though, the character is identically reconstructed if she is poorer than \$7

(Escobar, 2008; Castro-Gómez, 2002). On Pandora, the “Other” delineates from a more basic system—are you with or against Handsome Jack?—and subjectivity is predicated similarly. Ultimately, the inclusive nature of the *Borderlands* universe is limited by a player’s willingness to assimilate into the citizenry.

In this analysis I articulated *some* of the ways in which social and ludological structures undermine the nature of the *Borderlands* universe as an inclusive space. While no single cast could possibly anticipate the desires of every conceivable player, Burch and other game designers at Gearbox assume responsibility for the design of playable characters in the game. In policing the boundaries of their primary cast, they make assumptions about the categorically similar abilities, motivations, and desires of their player base. The assumption, for example, that players do not desire a playable woman of color in the game (made apparent because there isn’t one) speaks to the boundaries of the assumed *Borderlands* community and the limitations of a fixed cast of playable characters. Consequently, the game space is unable to reflect or be informed by the identity politics players bring to the community, although it seems feasible that Gearbox could develop a procedural generation interface for avatar customization in the future. As a site that builds upon the social and cultural infrastructure of Western civilization, the *Borderlands* design team must also address the oppressive, imperial order of modernity. Perhaps they would do well to read into María Lugones’s suggestion of abandoning dichotomous binary systems that enact the colonial processes of oppressive subjectification (Lugones, 2010, p. 749). The adoption of Krieg into the cast is a step in this direction, as Krieg’s backstory casts him as a redeemable psychopath who Vault Hunters would otherwise brutally murder without a passing

thought. His character, tormented by schizophrenia, seems to be locked in a constant process of becoming, an assembled identity that grapples with the body as a prison and place of liberation (Puar, 2005, p. 128). Of course, adopting a more fluid constitution of identity as something that exists for a person between the points of identification on which culture confers necessitates a heterogeneous universe that allows for multiplicity and hybridity. Inclusivity isn't marked by access to an artillery range, it is constituted by structures that delineate possibility around the necessity of a gun.

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