Why can’t the next Assassin’s Creed be about queer pirates?

My Mom the gamer: ‘Not just decoration’

Roberta Williams

Women’s histories in games

Issue one

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Memory Insufficient

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About the Editor: Zoya Street is a freelance video game historian and writer working in the worlds of design criticism and digital content business strategy.

Memory Insufficient is a celebration of history.

First and foremost, it is an attempt to promote and encourage historical writing about games; social histories, biographies, historically situated criticism of games and anything else.

It is also a place to turn personal memories of games past into eye-opening written accounts. It is a place to honour the work of game developers who have influenced the path of history. It is a place to learn what games are - not as a formal discipline, but as lived realities.

Like all historical study, Memory Insufficient is fundamentally about citizenship. It’s not enough to just remember and admire the games of the past. History is about understanding our place in the world; as developers, as critics and as players.

The power of history is to reveal where the agents of change reside, and empower us to be the change we want to see. Memory Insufficient is a celebration of history, not just as fact but as action.
Contents

Equality and Difference: queer pirates and Assassin’s Creed

Gender studies scholar Samantha Allen issues a powerful call-to-action: it’s time for AAA game developers to invest in stories about women. As an example, she tells the story of Anne Bonny and Mary Read, famed partners in crime and in love during the golden age of piracy: the historical setting of the next Assassin’s Creed game.

My Mom the Gamer

Blogger and creative Fred McCoy reflects on his mother and sister’s love of video games during his childhood in the 1990s. For them, gaming was not gender-transgressive: it was a way for a mother to educate her children.

‘Not just decoration’

Editor Zoya Street takes a critical look at how Pac-Man targeted women, as part of the social engineering of games arcades in the early 1980s.

Bio: Roberta Williams

Game developer Joseph Hocking explains how the work of entrepreneur and designer Roberta Williams contributed to video game design history.
In a recent editorial on The Border House, I bemoaned the fact that game developers are still trotting out the same tired excuses for failing to create female protagonists.

According to Ubisoft, there are too few female pirates in world history to justify having a female lead in the nautical-themed *Assassin’s Creed IV*.

And, according to Epic, a female-driven *Gears of War* wouldn’t sell well enough to meet expectations.

In this follow-up essay, I want to use the historical figures of Anne Bonny and Mary Read (two female pirates I only mentioned in passing in my Border House editorial) in order to think through issues of equality and difference in the portrayal of female protagonists. In other words, I want to ask what shape games would take if female protagonists could be commonplace? What would an Anne Bonny game look like? How would a Mary Read game play?

But, in order to have this conversation, I first need to introduce a crucial distinction between equality feminisms and difference feminisms.
On Feminisms
Broadly speaking, different varieties of feminism can be categorized as an equality feminism or a difference feminism. Equality feminists want men and women to be regarded as equals. The push for equal pay is a classic equality feminist gesture. Difference feminists, on the other hand, highlight perceived gender differences and argue that those differences need to be revalued. For example, some difference feminists believe that the power of emotion has been undervalued in a patriarchal culture and want to reclaim emotion as a markedly feminine asset.

Equality feminists and difference feminists get into all sorts of arguments with each other and with themselves. Equality feminists worry that difference feminists perpetuate outdated and even stereotypical concepts of “woman” while difference feminists are concerned that equality feminists want to erase the specificities of femininity in order to pursue masculine ideals.

But what does this distinction between equality and difference feminism have to do with the increasingly urgent call for more female protagonists in games?

Simply put, depending on which feminist approach we prefer, we might want to see different kinds of female protagonists and even different kinds of games featuring those protagonists.

An equality feminist, for instance, might want a female protagonist who is just like a traditional male game protagonist: a fierce lady who can shoot just as many baddies and kick just as much ass. There have been a fair number of women in action games (*Bayonetta* leaps to mind), but they are often overtly sexualized in a way that would make an equality feminist bristle.

Female Commander Shepard, though, is an equality feminist’s dream: most of her dialogue is identical to Male Shepard’s lines and she, too, can pull a Renegade sucker punch at just the right moment. A difference feminist, by contrast, might argue that FemShep is nothing more than a “re-skinned” MaleShep and that the masculinism of the story has been left unchallenged.
A difference feminist, on the other hand, might prefer a less violent female protagonist, someone who uses words rather than bullets to achieve her aims. Role-playing games tend to be the most accommodating genre in this regard; this genre often allow players to resolve conflicts through conversation rather than bloodshed.

I don’t think it’s a coincidence, then, that RPGs have tended to be more popular among women than first-person shooters. But, even as I observe this correlation, the equality feminist in me does not want to claim that women are somehow inherently more nurturing than men.

I can’t stake a claim for one of these approaches over the other, especially because my own feminism does not neatly fit into one of these camps. In light of the current dearth of female protagonists, I’ll take anything! An ass-kicking, gunslinging (but not ridiculously sexualized) woman would be fine with me as long as more female protagonists start to gain visibility.

On the other hand, I do think that, if more game developers tried to model phenomena beyond violent collisions between objects, we could someday play through more nuanced stories about both men and women.

Enter the Pirate
Anne Bonny, for instance, would make a fantastic Assassin's Creed IV leading lady. Bonny (1702-1782) was a fiery-haired Irish woman who left her husband to set sail on the Revenge with the notorious Calico Jack.

She fought ferociously alongside Jack’s crew but, in the end, the long arm of the Empire brought their treasure-hunting days to an end. They were captured, Jack was executed, Bonny was released and returned to a quiet life on land.

Bonny is also a classic equality feminist’s game protagonist. The basic structure of Assassin's Creed IV would not have to be altered in order to accommodate her. Because Bonny’s life of adventure involved plenty of swashbuckling, swordplay and
treasure-hunting, the developers wouldn’t have to fundamentally change *Assassin’s Creed* in order to turn her story into a game.

But what about Bonny’s partner-in-crime, Mary Read (???-1721)? Read’s mother dressed her as a boy in order to secure her deceased brother’s inheritance. But she grew accustomed to this disguise and took her new male identity to sea. After a sojourn with the military and a short-lived marriage, Read, still dressed as a man, was conscripted into piracy and ended up on the Revenge with Calico Jack and Anne Bonny.

And that’s when things get even more complicated. Jack lusted after Bonny but Bonny’s erotic attentions were focused elsewhere: she thought at first that Read was a dashing young man but later, when Bonny discovered the truth, she promised to keep Read’s secret. But when Jack’s jealousy began to endanger Read’s life, Bonny and Read confided in Jack. But this wasn’t the end to the romantic intrigue on board the Revenge. Read coupled with a prisoner on the vessel and, when a crew member threatened to end their relationship, she killed him and carried on.

While Read apparently saw her fair share of video-game-ready violence on the high seas, how could a game capture her complicated, ever-shifting negotiations of identity and romance on the Revenge? How could those negotiations be represented mechanically?

**Beyond collisions**
This is the problem facing a difference feminist approach to changing game design: most games, as I once heard Ian Bogost observe, are designed around object collision, around things hitting into other things. From *Pong* to *Tetris* to *Mario* to *Call of Duty*, we have all basically been engaging in more or less sophisticated versions of playing the woodblock. Conversation-driven games like *Mass Effect* or *Dragon Age* or *L.A. Noire* are taking steps away from object collision, even as they all keep one foot firmly in more traditional territory.
I’m excited by the possibility of a new age of game design, an end to the dominant era of object collision. We may not be able to palpably experience jealousy through crashing pixels. We may not be able to sense what it was like for Read to pass as a male pirate through a conversation wheel.

We certainly can’t navigate the nuances of Read’s relationships with Anne Bonny and Calico Jack by staring down the barrel of a gun.

Critics, myself included, have been yearning for a renewed focus on AI, on modeling interactions that do not always end in murder.

But, as we stand at the cusp of another console cycle, we seem to be headed down the same road we’ve been on since the 80s: the same kinds of games, just with more textures, more polygons, better animations and more realistic character models.

David Cage thinks that we’ll be able to feel “emotions” by looking at a perfectly-rendered face, but I want to ask: What is that face doing in the context of the game? How am I interacting with it? What stories can it tell? If this perfect face is just a showpiece during a cutscene in a murder-simulator, I’m not sure how many new “emotions” I’ll be feeling.

I think games can do better. I think that we can have our cake and eat it too: badass female protagonists can work their way into the cash cow franchises while creative developers take risks on new stories and new mechanics that might be better able to capture non-masculine spheres of human experience.

I hope that we can avoid another decade of simple graphics lust. And as more and more developers bet on female protagonists, I hope that both the equality feminist and the difference feminist in me can be happy.

Read original post at the Borderhouse

Image from General History of the Pyrates as cited on page 2.
My mother no longer games, but recently my youngest brother (12) asked my mom “Is *Pokemon* an action game? Or a roleplaying game?” My mom said, “Neither. It’s a strategy game.” Then went into detail explaining why.

* * *

I’m super lucky. I have an amazing family. I have lots of siblings (too many we’d all agree) and a set of wonderful parents (though my father is no longer with us). They did a spectacular job raising us and today I’d like to highlight my mom for something great she did for me as a child: she taught me how to play video games.

Our first system was the Atari. My older sister and I played *Pac-Man* and some weird running game; hell I can’t even remember what it was called. I was too young to remember what my interactions with the console was beyond the knowledge that it was my mom who figured out how to play then taught myself and my sister. The Atari was short-lived. My father woke up one morning and accidentally stepped on it. Again, it was so long ago I can’t remember how I reacted but I can assume there were tears.

Our next system was the NES and the first game she purchased for us was *Super Mario Bros & Duck Hunt*. The three of us took
turns; each of us would play a different level. If we died the control would get cycled to the next person. As my sister and I failed again and again my mom taught us basic video-game physics. Press and Hold the jump button along with the direction you want to go in to jump further. Common knowledge now but back then it blew my little mind. It was during this time period my mom bought my sister and I *Battletoads* to teach us teamwork. After the two of us trying to murder each other for killing the other in the game we finally established some level of respect for one another. My older sister was no longer just the brainy-bookworm; she was my partner, my Player 1.

When we received the SNES my mother got us a game that would become my all-time favorite: *Super Mario RPG – Legend of the Seven Stars*. Every Saturday morning my sis and I would wake up, turn on our black and white T.V. and enjoy the hilarious antics between Mario, Bowser, Peach & some other new characters to the franchise. This was also my first real interaction with Princess Peach. She wasn’t a damsel in distress but instead a hero that not only rescues herself from being married off, but induces a hilarious moment where Bowser & Mario Kiss. My sister was insistent that we keep Peach in our final line-up against the Big Bad and instead of using her for her healing properties we used all of her insane-damage skills to triumph.

Later in life I asked my mom why she was so insistent on buying us video games. Was it just a way to keep us out of her hair? Turns out she thought it was a great way to learn. She reminded me that at one point people thought books were evil, and then television became the next big bad thing.

She knew that video games offered a creative outlet for children and hoped we could have fun and learn at the same time.

I wrote this as my way of saying thank you to my mother and older sister. You taught me how to play video games. You taught me (beat it into me) that women are in no-way inferior to men when it comes to any type of game. You also taught me that video games have educational benefits as well as being another tool for expanding a child’s imagination.
In only a few years, online social games targeted at adult women have became a multi-billion-dollar industry. In the euphoria of an industrial boom, it is tempting to forget the past.

Since around 2010, it has became routine to imply that this new era of social, casual and mobile is the first time that games for women have become a lucrative proposition.

In fact, games for women are as old as the games industry itself. Women have been targeted by games companies not just as gamers, but as unpaid brand representatives that made gaming accessible to a mass audience. Arcade gaming was social, and women were vital to its golden age.

Perhaps the first game to be targeted at women was *Pac-Man*. Not *Ms. Pac-Man*. The original *Pac-Man*. This essay is about how and why Namco tried to get girls into games arcades.

* * *

In 2003, Japan's Game Archive Program, an initiative to preserve materials that will allow for the study of video game history, hosted a symposium on the history and future of game design. 2003 doesn't seem like so long ago, but it was four
years before Zynga was founded, and before major Japanese social network service companies DeNA and GREE had hit on the idea of making casual games as a revenue stream. Video games were still seen as a boys-only activity that happened inside whirring black boxes under the TV.

The first speaker at that symposium was Toru Iwatani, the creator of 1980s hit Pac-Man. Iwatani’s talk was entitled ‘The past and present of game development.’

He was careful to remind the audience that when he began working in the industry, video games were not primarily associated with the home. They had begun in science laboratories, and moved into commercial spaces, and by 1980 games arcades were the most significant spaces for video game play.

‘At that time, games arcades were places that women didn’t really go to. Nowadays they’re quite clean so women or couples can go there. I set my mind to turning those dirty places that women didn’t go to into places that women could enjoy, or that couples could go to enjoy together.

I thought that if women went to games arcades, they would become glamorous places, and therefore if women went to games arcades more men would go there too.’

It wasn’t just that he wanted to improve arcades so that women could enjoy them too. Iwatani believed that women would freshen up the games arcades and improve their image. Women were a customer acquisition tool as much as they were customers themselves.

Arguably, women were being drafted into games arcades to perform unpaid emotional labour that would improve the brand in the eyes of other men, just as in the early 2000s they have been targeted as important drivers of virality in online social gaming. It almost seems as though Iwatani had trouble imagining women as active game players, and instead he thought of women in close association with base physical needs.
'So if you think of women as your main target, then perhaps this is a little rude, but when it comes to women it’s reasonable to attach the key verb “eating”, right? So I set about with the mental picture of the keyword “eating”.'

It is curious that Iwatani described the association of women with food as both impolite and also perfectly reasonable. He later said in an interview with Tristan Donovan for *Replay: The History of Videogames* that he specifically thought of ‘the image of them eating cakes and desserts’. *Pac-Man* was targeted at women, insofar as they existed as images in Iwatani’s head.

Women continue to be overwhelmingly the primary providers of domestic care in Japan, responsible for domestic hygiene and feeding the family. Perhaps just as women were to be tasked with spiritually cleansing the games arcade, Iwatani also associated them with spiritually feeding its patrons.

Not long after he decided that he would be making a game about eating, Iwatani ordered a pizza. The protagonist of his game for women was formed from what remained on the table after he had taken a slice for himself.

‘As I took a piece of pizza I looked at the shape that was left, and that shape became the shape of Pac-Man. I thought, I can attach eyes to this, and this round body can be made into a game that is associated with the action of eating. In about 24 hours I was able to go from that conception of the game to proposal-level details such as the shape of the maze and what kind of enemies would be good.’

* * *

In 1982, two years after Iwatani first set his mind on women and pizza, American games journalist Joyce Worley celebrated the transformation of games arcades into spaces amply populated by happy, skilled female players.

‘Want to see something new and exciting? Take a trip down to your favorite arcade and look around. If you can tear your eyes away from those rows of throbbing, pulsating machines, check out some of the players. Women have officially arrived in the world of electronic gaming.'
They’re not just there for decoration, either. These females can zap a centipede or blast an asteroid as well as—and sometimes even better than—any man.’

Arcades had changed from being ‘shabby, even downright dirty establishments situated on the backstreets of town or in neighborhoods so dangerous that few women would risk visiting’ to ‘sleek and polished coin-op emporiums.’

While the spaces of arcade gaming may have been prohibitively masculine in the past, Worley argued that gaming itself was not a gendered activity at all. ‘Liberated ladies are rapidly discovering that electronic gaming is one activity in which the sexes can compete on absolutely even terms.’

According to Worley, this demographic shift was in part due to the huge popularity of Pac-Man among women. ‘Oh, it does well among men too, but it was heavy play by women that that enabled Pac-Man to set earnings records in 1981.’ Worley also interviewed female tournament champions in Mattel’s Baseball and Atari’s Centipede, which was co-created by Dona Bailey.

A growing female market for coin-op games was associated with the transformation of arcades into pleasant, safe spaces. Women played a vital role in the transformation of gaming into a public activity that was accessible to the masses. Long before online social networking, gaming was already social, and women were already important drivers of traffic.

Sources
Translation by the author.


Bio: Roberta Williams

About the Author: Joseph Hocking is an interactive media developer, game programmer and teacher at Columbia College living in Chicago.

When Roberta Williams was 26 she and her husband Ken Williams co-founded On-Line Systems, which later became major developer and publisher Sierra On-Line. *Mystery House*, which she wrote in 1979, is generally considered the first graphic adventure game.

She later created *King’s Quest*, a game that is both Sierra’s most iconic series and one of the first big hits in the then-new genre. Her career spanned around 20 years before she left Sierra On-line in 1999 and retired from designing games.

*King’s Quest* was a critical milestone for the industry, and it continues to influence games nearly 30 years after the original came out in 1984.

The game introduced many technical innovations, such as an environment with visual depth and moving objects that could pass in front of or behind each other.

Williams insisted on lush and appealing visuals to pull players into her games, and that insistence earned the *King’s Quest* series a beloved place in the history of gaming.
Before *Mystery House* and *King’s Quest*, games that had graphics and games that had complex narratives were considered separate, with the latter represented by text adventure games and known as ‘interactive fiction’. Williams moved the medium forward by using graphics for narrative effect; this hybrid genre of games became known as ‘graphic adventure’.

Williams wasn’t just a facilitator of the marriage between visuals and storytelling. She also worked to build narrative principles that are now fundamental to game design.

Techniques such as the “string of pearls” model of interactive storytelling were refined in *King’s Quest*. Acclaimed designer Jane Jensen described learning this non-linear narrative technique from Williams when working on *King’s Quest VI*. The “string of pearls” is a visual metaphor for the branching and closing of the players’ range of options around key plot points:

“*Inside each pearl the player can do things in a nonlinear fashion. They can do whatever they want, whenever they want, in whatever order they want.*”

The string of pearls model has become a basic pillar of game storytelling. Developers use it to allow player choice to determine how they experience each major plot point, while controlling the overall direction of a game’s story. Modern games with engaging stories, from open-ended action to sprawling RPGs, all owe debts to Roberta Williams’s pioneering work.

**Sources**


Memory Insufficient began in women's history month, and Issue 2 takes up another heritage month: May is Asian & Pacific American history month in the US, and South Asian Heritage month in Canada.

Every issue’s topic title can be read with the words jumbled up. That means you can write a historical article about a game in an Asian country, a critical analysis of an Asian culture in a game about history, and any other permutation imaginable.

‘Asia’ is a difficult term to pin down. It has its roots in European texts exoticising lands to the East of a blurry, shifting cultural boundary. Memory Insufficient prefers the particular over the general; please do write about any person, place or thing that might conceivably be identified as Asian, but please don’t try to look at ‘Asia’ in its entirety.

As with Issue 1, any kind of history will be accepted: social, biographic, documentary, personal, descriptive or polemical. Submissions are unlikely to be rejected for being ‘not history,’ because nobody has the authority to decide what that means.

Feel free to get in touch with any questions or suggestions. The deadline for submissions is 15th May. Send them to rupa.zero@gmail.com or tweet @rupazero.