Demon Girl Power: Regimes of Form and Force in Buffy
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With the rise of the woman warrior in popular culture it appears that, in fictional realms and given the right context, women are now culturally sanctioned to be represented as skilful hero combatants. With TV shows such as *Xena Warrior Princess, Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Witchblade*, the woman warrior has become something of a myth for our time. These are fictions that seem to embody the demand for iconic strong women heroes as well as recognising the economic advantage of increasing the appeal of the action-adventure format for a female audience. The creators of Buffy are very aware of gender and genre issues and in mixing the emotional register of melodrama with action-adventure have forged narratives that 'speak' to a large and surprisingly diverse fanbase. In response to the growing presence of the woman warrior in popular culture there have been a number of academic books focusing on the woman warrior in both film and TV, but none of these books address what it is like to play at being a women warrior in videogames.

(Slide 3 with game titles)

(slide 4) Core to my argument is that if we regard videogames simply in terms of representation we are in danger of leaving out a crucial media-specific aspect of the participatory gaming experience. This is *being-in-the-world of the game* and *doing* things within that world. In using the term *being-in-the-world* I refer to a sense of existential immediacy – the term also has an extra resonance in a game context. *Representation* is a complex term but here I use it to mean a visual image, from which the viewer is separate. I use these terms to describe what I see as two distinctive, yet co-operational, elements of videogames. Consideration of this convergence allows me to bring a games specific

dimension to the analysis of playing at being Buffy or another member of the Scooby gang.

Current academic writing on the figure of Buffy has tended to fall into two camps. Post-feminist celebrationists embrace the inclusion of powerful woman warriors in popular media. While the 'anti-assimilationists' argue that such individualist, masculinised images do nothing but co-opt certain feminist values for consumer culture and sideline direct political action. Both groups are focused on the ways that representation operates in terms of 'role models' and identity politics. I am critical of using representational analysis as the sole mode of analysing games, but such issues *are* important if we are to understand the cultural significance of the games and, in particular, how they intersect with ideologies of gender. Given that my focus in this paper is on the organisation of regimes of form and force in the Buffy games, we have to acknowledge that games are not just representational constructs, they are also about *being* and *doing* things through an avatar in an interactive environment. Videogames are in part 'representation' – as game worlds and the bodies in that world are audio-graphically represented - but we also play in that world, do things, even create things through the avatar, which goes beyond representation. If we simply apply the models currently used to analyse gender representation we miss something important about the formal particularities of playing a videogame.

(Slide 5) The Buffy games actively seek to target the widest possible market– including women, who are not generally considered to be a target market for beat-em-up style games. For Electronic Arts – the publishers of the Buffy games – the Buffy franchise was regarded as having a cross gender market potential. The established fan-based ensured a predefined market that would attract female players. The figure of Buffy, as both an ordinary girl and a kick-ass warrior, is key to attracting women to the action genre. Being-in the-world of these games is aided by the fact that there is an already established buffyverse, which is laced in themes and dilemmas that resonate with the real world

experience of its fans. **(Slide 6)** The Buffy games are single player, third person games (there are now three videogames based on the franchise). This means that you can see the player-character in action throughout most of the gameplay. The games marry an action-adventure mode of exploring worlds with solving puzzles, interacting with Non Player Characters and beat-em-up style fights. Each have a strong narrative and have familiar story arcs which unfold linearly. In the first game, the Master returns in spirit form and possesses various characters. In the second game, *Chaos Bleeds*, the quest is to kill – at least temporarily the First, who also takes the guise of other characters.

(slide 7) The games invite players into the buffyverse, to explore and act within it. For those not familiar with video-gaming, this means that the player controls the actions and movement of the character through pressing various key combinations to facilitate this. A manichean metaphysical system underwrites the moral context of the games and provides the source the player-character's power. This metaphysical system operates at a number of levels to knit together story arc, representational strategies and the player's interaction with the worlds.

(slide 8) As we all know Buffy is chosen by the 'Powers That Be' to become their champion, and, by implication and action, so are players. As with the show, the powers are enigmatic, encountered only by affect. Through Buffy, or other player-characters, players are charged with the power to keep evil and chaos in check. This frames the player's actions in the games and operates to justify player-character violence in the name of the preserving order. It is important to note that the games differ from the show in that moral complexities are somewhat sidelined in order to privilege the action that is core to gameplay. By virtue of the player's contract with the games, we are required to getting on with the required slaying. If actions are not taken by the player the story won't unfold and the preset game goals are not achieved. This process of situating the player as an actor in the game world cannot be taken account of by an analysis of representation alone.

The presence of occult powers don't simply operate at a narrative or representational level, they are also felt directly by the player through the programmed infrastructure that underlies interactivity. This determines the physics and goals of the game, and set the balance between enemies and the provision of helpful power ups. The games' 'powers that be' actively channel and control the player's experience at a profound level, determining what can and can't be done. This affects the agency of character *and* player, operating beyond representation. Being subject to pressures from external forces can be read allegorically: symbolising the real constraints in people's lives. This is underscored in a game context because the programmed infrastructure actively operates to promote or restrict a player's action; shaping, therefore, the conditions of our being-in-the-world.

(Slide 9) Buffy is an ordinary girl who learns to be an efficient and passionate fighter. In *Chaos Bleeds*, Buffy fights joyfully, often quipping when finding a stake that this is her best friend or stating: 'Sharp, pointy, I think I am in Love'. The correlation between fighting and empowerment is one that troubles critics who see fighting as a masculinist trait and sexualised girl-fight-action as another mode of placing women as the object of the gaze. Yet fighting is not simply offered up for the contemplative 'gaze' in games. It is an activity that is absolutely central to *doing* and *being-in-the-game-world*. Players, who may also be ordinary girls, learn the skills of virtual fighting, by learning to work with the games' movement/action capacities. A key source of pleasure is the physical, lived experience of *becoming competent* within the gameworld. When I fight playing as Buffy, for example, I am invited to watch the elegant beauty of her moves. But it is me, as player, that is putting her moves together through regimes of tapping various buttons, dodging blows to keep her alive and skitting around to look for a way in. Audio-visual spectacle *and* personal 'lived' skill are working in tandem to create a rich, participatory, multileveled experience. Obviously this symbiotic

combination is not available in other media. And, it's a combination that challenges and fractures the 'warrior woman' as object-of-the-gaze argument.

(slide 10) The ability to play different key characters in *Chaos Bleeds* acknowledges to some extent the show's emphasis on group dynamics. Each character plays differently – with different abilities that tie into their character and utters characteristic lines. As in the show, different characters have different registers of speech. Buffy's and Xander's is laced with colloquialisms, which differs from the more high-flown speech register of Giles and Ethan (Willow and Tara occupy a place between the two). The Scooby-gangs teen-speak lightens and ironises high fantasy speech and its inherent values. Buffy and Willow's speech often brings into play a gender dimension that often undercuts the traditional male-bias of fantasy rhetoric. As Gwyn Symonds has noted of the show, speech is as much a weapon for Buffy and Willow as stakes and spells, but in the games speech is not available as an interactive feature as is the case with other weapons.

According to game designer Heidi Danglemaier, women are looking for games that afford 'experiences where they can make emotional and social discoveries they can apply to their own lives'. The Buffy games offer the fight-based excitement alongside being-in-the-world of psychologically resonant relationships. The group 'relationship' dimension is not simply present at a narrative and representational level. It also extends into the *doing* and *being-in-the-world* experience of playing the games. Working in tandem with the character lends the player an active experience of force and action as socially contingent.

The games offer player's the chance to be an active part of the buffyverse. But we operate through a character who mediates our experience of being in the game world. Both players and characters have limitations which tend to highlight a distinction between you as player and the character. This is most apparent when the player fails to prevail in a situation and dies. Third person mode also

plays a part in this. Third person point of view presents the player with a body image on screen, which highlights the representational qualities of that body. But once you get stuck into gameplay, however, the image of the game body becomes far less important than doing things with that body in the world. When things are going well the character becomes more of a tool for action than a representation. This complicates the sense that the player-characters are representational objects designed simply for the gaze. What we have here is a complex inter-operation between narrative, representation and active participation.

(slide 11) Buffy might be an ordinary girl, but she is also part demon. In a game context, her 'demon' power affects directly the status doing-in-the-gameworld. At a material level, demon power is 'felt' by the player in the extended reach of 'human' actions. Finding supernatural augmentations allows the player to go about the business of slaying more effectively, lending potentially a greater sense of control. Playing as a demon girl also offers a powerful allegory and hands on experience of transformation that might provide the means of expressing otherwise suppressed energies. Being – playing - as part demon also disrupts a clear division between self and other (the demonic other is 'within' as well as without). The subject/object divide is further compounded by the fact that the player operates in the game world through a responsive surrogate.

It might also be claimed that being part demon challenges notions that gender attributes are 'natural', particularly the one that goes women are passive rather than active (a regime that is regularly pointed to by feminist critics in many media representations of women). However, it is significant that the power Buffy and Willow acquire is at least in part derived from supernatural sources. The implication is that such power is less 'natural' for female figures, even though the powers of some male characters (Spike; Ethan; Sid) are also presented as the result of supernatural supplementation. The supernatural enhancement device also permits the reconciliation of physical prowess with the use of figures who

remain otherwise pretty and petite. While some feminist critics argue that the recent flourishing of 'post-feminist' action-heroines plays entirely to the male-gaze and objectifies or fetishizes women, others have embraced representations of women heroines as a relief from the traditional western male hero that has dominated myth and fiction. Being embodied as a demon girl in a game-world is very much framed, therefore, by the experience of being 'gendered', with all its pressures and conflicts. This also means that the actual and the virtual come together through our interaction with the female avatar.

Buffy is chosen by the Powers That Be, yet she chooses to enact her power and players are implicated in that choice through their contract with the game. This may not be the collective political action called for by the anti-assmilationist critics, but transformation and magic has become a potent myth for expressing and enacting prowess and power. The supernatural basis of the games can be understood in the same context as the contemporary flowering of magic-based films and television shows with central female protagonists, aimed primarily but by no means exclusively at a female audience. Magic is used as a way of signifying power, desire and activity within a feminized register in an often positive and empowering way. In the game context of *Chaos Bleeds*, magic extends to the abilities afforded to the player. When playing as Willow, the player must activate spells through various key press combinations to defeat evil, rather than using physical fight skills that might be more commonly associated with male characters. This is not simply a negative alternative to physical power, but a way of articulating agency that is derived from other spheres; bookish study, imagination, and the forces of nature rather than through more body-honing disciplines. (**Slide 12)** The occult powers do not only operate at the level of representation or story – they are also felt directly by the player in terms of regimes of agency and restriction. The player has, in effect, a hands-on experience. That the player might be unable to defeat a monster that the character is able potentially to vanquish brings in a dimension not present in other media. The player might aspire to the status of women warrior, but only be

able to achieve a sense of this if committed to the task of mastering the game controls. Power in these games is not straightforwardly pleasurable but configured as a form of 'otherness' that disturbs the order of the Scooby gang's 'ordinary' lives (something more rarely seen in other games that feature male characters). For some female players this may be homologous with the way that they experience the gaming arena. With perhaps less experience of beat-em-up style games than men or boys, some female players may have to take a steeper learning curve in learning the rules and skills of the game and entering the arena may come with a variety of gender-expectation baggage. Learning to fight may provide women an opportunity to express the type of aggression that is often repressed in accordance with dominant gender expectations.

(slide 13) To sum up. The traditionally macho-coded qualities of fight-based games is challenged and subverted in some respects by the games. This includes playing as female heroine and the presence of interpersonal aspects. The use of items such as water-pistols (filled with holy water, of course), brooms and pieces of broken furniture shifts the domain of weaponry – often subject to macho-oriented fetishization – into a more playful and female-coded domestic arena.

(slide 14) The organisation of force is inseparably linked to the interactive form of the games, yet we are able to play with and through the power regimes inherent in the game. The representational aspects are central to the creation of a well defined mythic context, which is constitutive of buffyverse and its potential meanings. This context provides a fictive space in which I can act *as if* I were a woman warrior and it is crucial to my pleasure in playing the games. It's a context of and for action, which carries a wider set of meanings and experiential resonances. As agents, Buffy and Willow in particular represent me in the games, they 'speak' through my experience of being gendered female in 'real' world. They provide me with agency and offer an image and active experience of force that has often been denied by ideological regimes of femininity as naturally

passive. Buffy quips 'There's nothing like a spot of demon slaughter to make a girl's night'. With such ironic distancing from traditional gender stereotyping, including that which is found in many male action adventure fictions, these games acknowledge and reference the ambiguity of conventional gender alignments. Buffy and the gang gain strength not simply through physical prowess but through their relationships with others. In playing through these relationships, we are offered heroines that are more than simply objects of the gaze or men in drag. Willow and Buffy are not just idealised super-girls as each struggle with the meaning of their power in a social and gender conditioned context. Being and acting powerful in these games, joyful in its way, also comes at a cost. Agency is contingent and autonomy is bounded by predetermination, something that is felt in the very act of playing the games. This speaks meaningfully, in mythic terms, to my everyday experience and my requirement that we don't buy exclusively fight action in traditional 'masculinist' terms or in over-idealised ones. The **doing** aspect of games therefore brings a new and highly relevant dimension to the woman warrior format, which cannot be understood by theories of representation alone.