Castlevania:

Harmony of Gender Roles

Troy Johnson

November 2010, updated January 2011

It is no secret that mass media has significant influence on the way we see our environment, the people around us, and even ourselves. In particular, gender roles have been represented in countless ways through the media we interact with every day. Newspapers, television, feature films, and music all spew messages at us in regards to how men and women should act on their own and in what manners they should react to one another. As video games have evolved over the past few decades, they have come to reflect and perpetuate many of the same messages that other media send. Naturally, considering that common storytelling involves relatable situations between men and women, a hefty part of these messages revolves around gender roles. Unfortunately, many of these are not entirely healthy. It comes as little surprise that "(f)eminist researchers have started to systematically explore images of women in mainstream video games, and have found that representations of women and girls in games reapply many stereotypes of femininity and vulnerability found in more traditional media" (Consalvo, 172). The same habit holds true for presenting men and boys in stereotypical ways.

On one hand, there appears to be an attempt at balancing the types of messages that are being perpetuated about gender roles. Though the "rescue the princess" formula will likely never be eradicated (who doesn't love a straightforward hero story now and again?), a surge in video game heroines has certainly livened up the scene. Lately, it seems that for just about every Peach, Zelda, or Guinevere, there's a Lara, Bloodrayne, or Bayonetta to keep things interesting. On the other hand, no matter the message, there is potential danger in pushing one view too strongly, regardless of counterpoint. Because of the interactive nature of video games, a "human being is manipulating a character (or multiple characters) in a game, and is thus performing actions, and assuming a

gender...for an avatar" (Consalvo, 173). The assuming of a role through direct interaction can potentially have more impact than when read through other media.

However, there are video games that, though seemingly straightforward at first glance, manage to offer the player a variety of messages about gender roles for both men and women. Though some messages will inevitably perpetuate stereotypes, they are often simultaneously balanced with a number of expanded views with which the player can choose to identify. The remainder of this essay will be an analysis of one such video game: *Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles—Rondo of Blood*.

Originally released in 1993 for the PC Engine Super CD-ROM 2 in Japan only, *Akumajō Dracula X Chi no Rondo* quickly became a favorite among *Castlevania* (the English title of the video game series) fans. With its branching level designs, anime cutscenes, and multiple playable characters (one male and one female), players were allowed to make deeper choices and more significant role assumptions than ever before in a *Castlevania* title. Due to its worldwide cult following, Konami finally re-released *Rondo of Blood* (the game's English title translation) as part of *Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles* in 2007. Not only did they include the original 1993 game, but they also remade the entire experience with upgraded 2.5D graphics, re-mastered sound and voice acting, new boss fights, and deeper interactions between player-characters and NPCs. The new features and personalities given to the NPCs, in particular, make the game stand out as one that offers the player significantly deeper readings of gender roles than many other games.

From an initial peek at the plot and purpose of *Rondo of Blood*, it would be easy to write the game off as just another "damsel in distress" story. Yes, in the majority of

video games "the hero is traditionally male with females largely cast in a supporting role" (Kennedy), and this game begins no differently. A lone man, Richter Belmont, sets out to free four abducted women from the clutches of Lord Dracula. One of the victims is his betrothed, Annette Renard. Indeed, such a dark and deranged place as this is no place for a "typical" woman—when "women do appear within these masculine spaces their role is usually that of love interest (often in need of rescuing) or victim" (Kennedy). However, it is in the progression of the game and the interaction between characters that unexpected gender roles can be found through both narratological and ludological readings.

As Richter (and, thus, the player) begins his siege on Lord Dracula's mystical fortress Castlevania, it is evident that he fills a traditional male role: the fearless warrior out to save the day. Within the appropriate historical context (late 1700s), he appears to fit the part. He wears a dashing blue and white soldier's uniform and sturdy leather boots; he is certainly not one of those "Pretty Boys that Wear Lace" (Consalvo, 178) that star in so many other modern games. Richter wields a magical whip called the Vampire Killer, along with myriad other knives, axes, and explosive bottles of holy water. Despite his arsenal, the first potential rescue he makes (the player must first find the secret chamber in which the victim is held captive) immediately puts into question his impenetrable toughness.

As Maria Renard is rescued (whom Richter and the player discover to be Annette's 12-year-old sister), a scripted conversation ensues. After introductions, Maria insists that she accompany Richter on his quest. In his manliest tone he instructs her to flee back home, pointing out that following and helping him is "out of the question." Suddenly upset, she accidentally summons a dragon, which Richter narrowly ducks as it

propels over his head. Following this display of power from an adolescent girl, he changes his mind and allows her to join him on his adventure. No longer is Richter the sole hope for humanity; he's a partner and a teammate. He has somewhat of a softer side, willing to succumb to the wishes of a little girl as the occasion calls for it. And the alarm in his voice as he dodges the dragon suggests that there may be a hint of worry in his attitude after all. (The most meaningful gender role reveal from this encounter, however, comes in the form of Maria being an optional playable character from this point on— more on that later.)

The next woman that Richter can rescue takes place as early as the next level. After locating the secret cave where she is being held, Richter strikes up a conversation with Sister Tera. As a nun, Tera is quite pious, continually offering her thanks to deity and complimenting her rescuer. This is one of the several roles portrayed by women in the game. She is not noticeably weak or frail (though her voice actress might give of an air of that), but she is clearly not a physical fighter. However, she still intends to do her part in helping Richter fulfill the rest of his game-long goal. With a resounding "Smite the wicked, Lord God," she offers Richter a special necklace imbued with a holy power of purity. While this may seem to reinforce some stereotypes of women, the necklace obtained from Tera unexpectedly grants new *destructive* powers to Richter. Throughout the levels, the player will often encounter blood-red skeletons and blood-red barriers of bone (rather than the yellowing white of the more common skeletal obstacles). Up to this point, any time the red skeletons or bones are smashed apart by player attacks, they quickly regenerate, reconstructing themselves as if they had never received any prior damage. Thus, the walls of red bone continue to obstruct whatever path lies beyond, and

the red skeletons continue to terrorize the player in any attempts to complete the task at hand. After obtaining the powerful necklace from Tera, though, the player has the ability to permanently destroy red bones just like any other enemy. As most gamers could probably guess, this allows for a more complete game experience, as red-bone-obstructed paths can now be accessed. Not only does it allow the player to experience more environments, enemies, and secret collectibles, but it also gives Richter a key ability required for saving Annette later on. Though unassuming, Tera is clearly no pushover. According to the narrative and the procedural organization of the game, Richter simply cannot finish his quest without her.

Continuing on, the player next has the opportunity to rescue Iris. This time, Richter finds himself in a cavern laden with crystals and other jagged rock formations. Upon finding the entrance to the iron cage where Iris is being held, another cutscene of dialogue is cued. Immediately, Iris's appearance stands in contrast to gender norms, especially of the period in which the game takes place. Rather than wearing some sort of dress or skirt, her outfit features leather boots, pants, a button-up coat, and a high collar similar to Richter's clothing. In addition, her hair is cut short and slicked to the side, resembling more of a man's than a lady's style. To round out her ensemble, intelligent-looking spectacles ensure the player that this is no ordinary 18th-century woman. As the two begin talking, Iris notices that Richter is wounded (his vulnerability is once again apparent). Her spectacles are definitely coming in handy; she is already more observant than the females Richter has previously encountered. When he insists that his injury is only a scratch (another masculine moment), Iris rebuts, "A scratch like that, in a place like this? And what if it gets infected, eh?" It is then revealed that Iris is the daughter of a

doctor, and, proving to play the role of a doctor herself, she then binds up Richter's wounds. Interestingly, this interaction offers both an uncommon and a common perception of women's roles. Iris is a doctor, a role that is typically played by men—especially in the late 1700s, but also commonly today. In this regard, Iris is a symbol (Kramsch, 22) for women who break out of traditional educational and occupational patterns. Despite breaking from one social norm, as a doctor she still fills the role of the caring woman, an attribute that female players tend to look for when selecting games to invest time with (Nakamura). Finally, like Tera before her, Iris offers Richter a token of her gratitude. This time, Richter receives a good luck charm, but it also has mystical powers that give him new abilities. Now he is able to destroy crystal walls that previously kept him from accessing certain areas of various levels. Again it can be noted that women are not fringe characters in this game, only to be rescued to fuel an ego. Without their powers, it is impossible to actually complete all the game's objectives.

Finally, with abilities acquired from each previous rescue, the player can then access the holding cell of the final abducted woman in the game. This time Richter actually has the chance to save Annette herself. As the initial goal from the outset of the game, this encounter predictably perpetuates the same gender roles that one would expect from the basic plot. Annette squarely fills the basic role of "damsel in distress." The conversation that she and Richter engage in flows without surprises for the player, other than perhaps when she begins to chastise him for allowing Maria to accompany him in such a dangerous place. Annette even concludes the conversation with, "Richter… Please don't die. Come back to me in one piece." Once again playing the common role of the warrior-savior, Richter replies, "Sure. Leave this to me." With an air of heroism, he then

departs; classic masculine hegemony is kept firmly in tow.

When playing as Richter, the player experiences a few varying readings of gender roles for both men and women, but they remain relatively straightforward. However, when the player chooses instead to play as Maria, the 12-year-old who suddenly learns to summon dragons, the readings for female roles expand significantly.

Some of the more significant roles are evident in merely playing through the adventure as Maria. First, playing the game as a female gives a new role to females that was previously unexplored. Besides the lessons this mechanic has for male gamers, females may suddenly become more enticed to play the game or relate to the story for the first time. To put it simply, some scholars maintain that it may be "easier to identify with the game's character if it represents one's own sex" (Nakamura). This statement may seem obvious to some, but how much good can constructive portrayals of gender roles do if the associated gender(s) never experiences those readings? Giving the player the option to control a female, to act as a heroine, is an empowering design decision in many regards.

There is still more to be found in the portrayal of girls within Maria's character. Those "who are investigating the portrayal of gender roles, for example, might rather be interested in the different combat possibilities female and male characters have" (Malliet). As it turns out, Maria is no slouch on the battlefield. When it comes down to it, she is a warrior with the abilities necessary to complete the adventure. But just how does she compare to Richter in this aspect? What do the differences between their abilities say about males and females as cooperative fighters? As previously mentioned, Richter wields typical period weapons: daggers, axes, a whip, fire, etc. There are no real surprises there. Maria, on the other hand, throws doves, cats, bird eggs, turtle shells, and, of course,

dragons. Though a somewhat strange arsenal, the hefty weight of forest creatures fits her nicely into the "little girl" character box. This is acceptable in that girls will likely want to "use the given set of rules to match their preferences into the defined themes and actions" of the game (Nakamura). This is exactly what is offered in Maria's character, albeit that her adventure still unfolds in a typically male-framed environment (Kramsch, 27). If a young girl has to destroy hordes of undead, she might as well do it with what she is comfortable with. So how does Maria compare to Richter in terms of sheer demon-slaying ability? Can a kitten really be as effective as a sharpened blade at sending hellspawn back from whence it came? In *Rondo of Blood*, the answer is definitely "yes." It has come to be expected in most video games that female characters are faster than their male counterparts, while males are typically more physically powerful. Here, Maria takes the prize in all categories. Not only is Maria considerably more nimble than Richter with her double-jump, slide ability, and increased speed, she also attacks faster with her doves than he does with his whip, allowing her to deal far more damage at a constant rate. Also interesting is the fact that Maria has the two most powerful abilities in the game— one that allows her to summon a doppelganger to deliver a flurry of supernatural punches, and another that calls forth a massive dragon to decimate any enemies on the screen. Rarely in media is it expressed that women are more capable warriors than men. *Rondo of Blood*, however, makes it clear that little girls in pink are meant to save the world, even if all they have at their disposal is a house pet and an attitude.

More than just powerful in terms of gameplay, the abilities that Maria possesses also put into question many other normalized female roles in media. She is a mystical acrobat who can take severe physical damage and still continue trekking through a

haunted castle. As such, she falls into a limited group of feminine figures who, "through their performance of extraordinary feats, undermine conventional understandings of the female body" (Kennedy). In short, Maria shows that beyond just the fantastic element of saving the world, females exhibit significant physical endurance and mental fortitude.

At the same time, her physical appearance and wardrobe do exude girlishness. Within the environments of the game, she "[takes] up space within a particularly masculinized landscape—the desert, dark urban landscapes, caves and tombs—and in doing so [offers] a powerful image of the absolute otherness of femininity within this space" (Kennedy). The facework Maria employs throughout the game allows her to remain a symbol for traditional femininity as well as hold herself outside of many of the stifling boundaries imposed on the same concept (Kramsch, 46).

Once the player has a chance to rescue the remaining three captives using Maria instead of Richter, many of the presented female roles thus far are both challenged and reinforced. During their conversation upon meeting, Tera surprises Maria by comparing her to the Holy Mother. For many, this is the quintessential referent for womanhood. Despite her obvious destructive abilities, in this light Maria can be seen as one with power to save and bring peace. By that token, she fills a caring, nurturing, and gentle role of females.

When the player saves Iris, the tomboyish doctor, as Maria, Iris exclaims, "Saved by a little girl…?" The surprise inferred by the line itself and the voice actress's inflection challenge the notion that girls are capable of being adventuresome rescuers. This is unsurprising, based on the situated inferences that the player is intended to make (Kramsch, 27). Clearly, when the older women are surprised that Maria saves them,

players are supposed to understand because of what common culture has traditionally dictated about the role of little girls—they just do not go around slaying monsters and rescuing captives. Yet here Maria is doing just that.

Once discovered by Maria, Annette takes the idea even further than Iris did. When Maria explains how she has been fighting demonic minions alongside Richter, rather than merely being surprised, Annette exclaims, "You can't! It's much too dangerous!" Once again, the role of a girl as a competent warrior is being downplayed. Of note is the fact that it is a female telling another female that it is not appropriate for girls to be fighters. However, not being one to let another tell her what roles she can and cannot play, Maria replies reassuringly, "No, no, I'll be fine. Really, it's okay!" Without being abrasive or argumentative, this girl confidently presents herself as a capable warrior, holds her position as a skillful ally, and concludes to battle Lord Dracula to the bitter end.

In conclusion, common cultures have typically defined specific gender roles throughout human history. While some of these roles may, in fact, have naturally become widespread, many gender role perceptions are generally accepted primarily because of mass media messages. As highly interactive media artifacts, video games have a unique ability to invite player interactions at a far deeper, more connective level than other traditional forms of media. One danger that this concept holds is that it is easy for game developers to consistently perpetuate the same tired gender stereotypes in yet another form of massively communicated messages. For this reason, it is important that "we…encourage the production of a broader range of representations of femininity [and masculinity] than those currently being offered" in video games (Kennedy). Luckily,

some game developers and publishers are heeding this advice, consciously or not. They

are creating games that present players with a number of ways to define themselves, or to

at least come away with alternative insights on what it means to be both masculine and

feminine. As one example of this type of game, *Castlevania: The Dracula X

Chronicles—Rondo of Blood* is framed in a fairly gender-stereotyped fashion while

simultaneously suggesting myriad roles that both men and women can fill in their

interactions with each other. What makes this game even more effective is probably the

most important aspect of its design—regardless of whatever messages it may or may not

contain, *Rondo* is bloody fun.

Works Cited

Consalvo, Mia. "Hot Dates and Fairy-Tale Romances: Studying Sexuality in Video Games". In Wolf, Mark J. P. & Perron, Bernard (Eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader* (171-194). New York, NY: Routledge. 2003.

Kennedy, Helen W. "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?". *Game Studies*, 2(2), December 2002. Retrieved 30 October 2010, from http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/.

Kramsch, Claire. *Language and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Malliet, Steven. "Adapting the Principles of Ludology to the Method of Video Game Content Analysis". *Game Studies*, 7(1), August 2007. Retrieved 27 October 2010, from http://gamestudies.org/0701/articles/malliet/.

Nakamura, Rika & Wirman, Hanna. "Girlish Counter-Playing Tactics". *Game Studies*, 5(1), October 2005. Retrieved 30 October 2010, from http://gamestudies.org/0501/nakamura_wirman/.

References

Konami. *Akumajō Dracula X Chi no Rondo*. Tokyo, JP: Konami. 1993.

Konami Digital Entertainment Co., Ltd. *Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles*. Tokyo, JP: Konami. 2007.