ROLE-BOUND

Gender roles and their place in EarthBound

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At the forefront of feminism philosophy remains the fission between the female sex and the cultural woman. The embodiment of nature versus nurture, this debate is only recently becoming the subject of mainstream scientific analysis. While feminist philosophy has moved beyond its original goals and embraced epistemology and ethics, among other topics, the nature of gender, sex and the self will forever be retained as one of the core considerations of feminist philosophy. For this writing, I will be using the cult hit video game EarthBound as a stark exemplar of the forcefulness of gender identity.

EarthBound is a 1995 Japanese RPG[1] from designer/producer Shigesato Itoi. It is the second in a three-part series and the only one to be released outside of Japan. The game centers on the adventures of four young teens from Eagleland[2] who, armed with psychic, mechanical and martial arts powers, quest from local town to town to defeat the evil crazed alien Giygas. The simplistic graphics and largely outdated battle system conceal heady subtext and sophisticated themes. The EarthBound series has garnered unparalleled support from fans; the community at Starmen.net and Fangamer.net have put out multiple fan-created books along with a complete fan-designed clothing line out of their devotion to the series.

EarthBound is remarkable for a number of things—its quirky humor, its memorable characters, and also its strikingly overt misogyny. From the game's beginning to its memorable finale, gender roles are awarded inalienably, and prejudices and stereotypes define both the male and female characters at every opportunity. To compile a comprehensive list of every example

1 Role-Playing Game: A genre of video game that stars a small number of characters, who go on adventures and gain power by leveling up. Term comes from pencil-and-paper RPGs like Dungeons & Dragons that introduced the format.
2 A parody of the United States; the first game in the series explicitly takes place in America.

the game provides would require that I play through it again. In typical RPG form, it is a very long game, and would require tens of hours to complete. Thus, I will have to cull examples from memory. I am certain, though, that a full scene-by-scene exploration would turn up the same results as this cherry-picked synopsis will. It feels fitting to start scrutiny of the game by exploring its title. I call it "EarthBound" because that is how it is known to western audiences, but the title that Shigesato Itoi selected for the original Japanese version is MOTHER 2, the second in the Mother series. Although the game provides no explanation for this unusual title (little wonder it was changed for western audiences) Itoi has explained its significance in interviews; it was named after the John Lennon song. Lennon's "Mother" paints a portrait of a family in which the father has left and the mother is assumed to have full responsibility over a child. This portrait of gender role expectation is what Itoi apparently wanted to use to introduce his game.

The bulk of any role-playing game is its characters, and it is in their overt gendered characterization that the bulk of EarthBound's sexism is displayed. Male characters in EarthBound are the movers and shakers of the world. Three out of four of the main characters charged with saving the world are male. The corporate leaders, the gang leaders, the cult leaders, the mayors, the scientists—all men. Men in EarthBound are expected to leave home and conquer.

Left to right: Ness, Paula, Jeff and Poo.

Ness, the main protagonist, is the Johnny Everyteen of the game. He is portrayed in a Leave It To Beaver-style striped shirt and baseball cap. He is the embodiment of a proper young male; he leaves home to pursue greater things, he saves a girl in trouble, he is good with a

baseball bat (which he uses as his primary weapon), and he is obedient, although rationally capable of making moral decisions.

The other two main male characters, Jeff and Poo, exemplify other male traits. Jeff is a science genius who is good at repairing machines; he attends an all-boys academy. Poo is a martial artist from the Far East. Poo is also the single object of sexual desire for all the female NPCs[3] in his home village.

All three of these male main characters are given traits that make them strong, independent, rational, and disciplined. They all leave home willingly and with a sense of duty and purpose. All three of their primary weapons (baseball bat, laser gun, sword) may be considered phallic symbols, and are certainly instruments of masculine force.

Paula, on the other hand, is the sole female main character. She is depicted wearing a pretty pink dress and a red bow in her hair. Rather than pursuing education like Jeff or training like Poo, Paula is the only main character who works for a living—in the field of childcare. She is the paragon of femininity, a quiet, subservient, childrearing blonde. Paula first meets Ness when she is kidnapped; signifying man's superiority, Ness saves her. Later on in the game, she is kidnapped again. Nevertheless, Paula is never anything but kind, even to her kidnappers. In fact, she shows no anger or hostility whatsoever. Even in the final battle of the game, Paula's sole role is to passively pray for help. Paula, being the epitome of femininity, is meant to wait passively while the men around her continue their business, even if the circumstances call for her to be kidnapped by cultists or crazed businessmen. Even at the end of the game, while Jeff goes back to school and Poo goes back to his home country, Paula has to be walked home by Ness. This serves no purpose other than to demonstrate her dependence on him (and, I suppose, to make

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3   Non-Player Character: Characters controlled by the computer, rather than by the player. They form the bulk of the fictional world, but are generally less important than main characters.

sure she wasn't kidnapped again).

While Jeff's primary weapon is a laser gun and Poo's is a sword, Paula's primary weapon is a frying pan. After all, what else could a woman wield proficiently other than a kitchen tool?

In addition to the four main characters, other characters are also included in respect to their sexes. Rather than run through all of them, I will focus on Ness's family. Ness's mother is a stay at home mom who serves no purpose other than cooking for her son and his friends when they come home. Ness's father, conversely, is never home. He is perpetually away at work, and can only be reached by phone. He is also the only source of money in the game. Together, they are the ideal family. Ness's mother is the ever happy homemaker, and his father is the acceptably absent provider. Ness has an older sister too. Although she has a job (unskilled white collar labor, just like Paula), she works from her cell phone, and can always be found in the home. It seems that women in Ness's family, no matter what their employment situation, cannot seem to escape their house. In this family, the woman's place is literally in the home.

No examination of EarthBound would be complete without a word about its final confrontation, the battle with Giygas, and it is especially relevant to this particular topic. At the end of the game, the four heroes are transported back in time to when Giygas was weak enough to defeat. The party travels down a long dark tunnel and into a strange structure called the Devil's
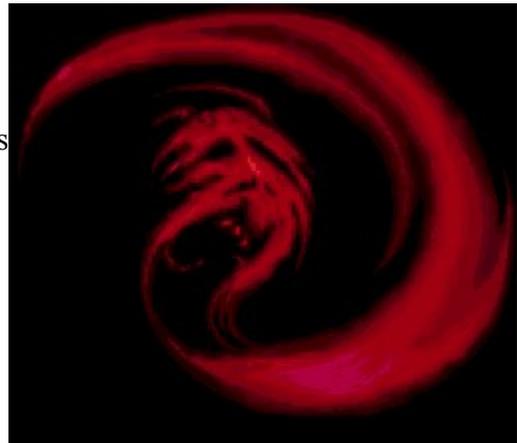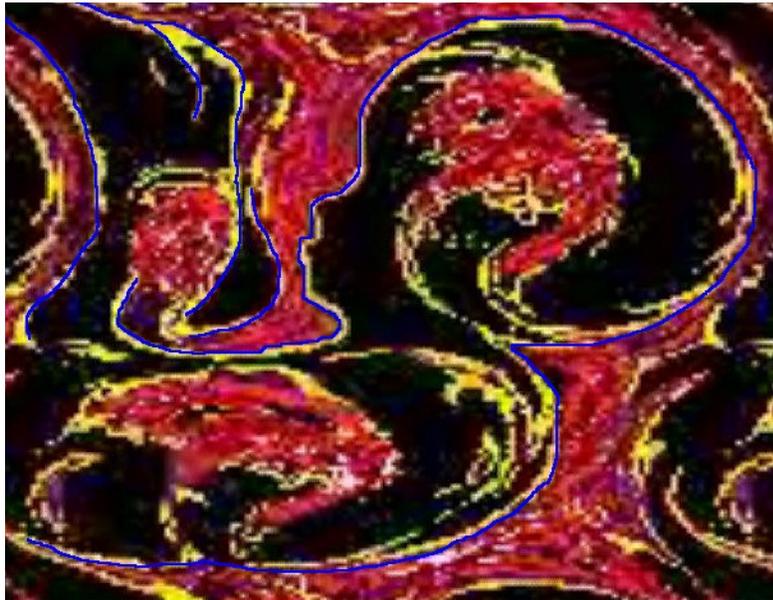

Giygas as he normally appears.

Machine, which looks like a fleshy pyramid. This machine houses Giygas and tethers him to the corporeal world. Inside the machine, Giygas appears as an endless red and black swirl design that vaguely looks like a screaming face. As Ness and his cohorts attack the strange being,

Giygas elicits dialogue that make it sound crazy, offended, scared, and unaware of what is happening. He is eventually defeated.

Although the following theory has not received unanimous acceptance in the fan community, the predominating explanation is this: Giygas is a fetus. This is based on several pieces of evidence. The first is, in an interview, Shigesato Itoi admitted that Giygas's creepy dialogue came directly from the victim of a rape scene in a movie, of which he was the unfortunate witness when he was a young child. Secondly, when Giygas's image is zoomed out, the distinct image of a fetus appears (see image). It seems far fetched, but the theory holds water. After all, the heroes did go back in time to a point when Giygas would be weak enough to defeat. The whole final battle could just be an abortion.

Giygas zoomed out; fetus outlined in blue.

The reason I bring this up, besides being sort of weird and interesting, is this: if one is to take the metaphor fully, what does that make the Devil's Machine? It houses and protects Giygas; it is the cervix. The game gives no explanation as to what or why the Machine is, nor why it is called the "Devil's Machine," so there is little room for coincidence. The machine serves no purpose in the game other than for Shigesato Itoi to vocalize—consciously or unconsciously—the oldest form of sexism, that the female reproductive system is something evil. The misogyny in EarthBound runs deeper than simple role institutionalization.

Treating Shigesato Itoi as a philosopher, I have to wonder what he would think about the question posed earlier, regarding the distinction between cultural woman and biological female. By naming the game MOTHER in after John Lennon's song, Itoi is already acknowledging the assumption that the inherent responsibilities of male and female parents are different. This rift widens with each character he adds that conforms to a standard role.

In video games, unlike real life, people cannot be what they are not. Everything that *is* about Paula or Ness is already imbued in the coding of the game. Thus, by depicting his characters confined to certain roles, he is in effect saying that they *are* those roles. By constructing Paula as the 1950s stereotype of womanhood, he is defining her as woman. Ness's parents don't even have names; they are explicitly defined by their roles. Itoi's EarthBound world is fundamentally superficial.

Superficial until, that is, the final fight with Giygas. Giygas is the first character that does not conform to a role. He has no physical body, much less a sex. He is called evil, but then again he is called a lot of things, none of it proven. Giygas is the first character who is not defined by his coding within the game. Indeed, we would hardly know what he is at all were it not for the interviews with Itoi. Ness and Paula exist as game coding and appear as bland archetypes. Giygas, though, exists outside of what he is defined by the game; the game never calls him a fetus, and yet he breaks that wall.

One has to remember, at this point, that Shigesato Itoi is not a philosopher. He is a storyteller. By taking the player through a world where people inherently *are* their programmed roles, it makes it that much more striking to finally encounter, at game's end, a character whose true nature is beyond what the game's code dictates. Such a character comes off as infinitely more real, and the player is hit with this suddenly real character. The experience becomes more

significant without the player even knowing why. It is a trick of storytelling.

Even though Itoi has created a world of stereotypes, he does so to demonstrate how unreal it all is. The traits of cultural woman are not programmed into the DNA of females like the pink dress is programmed onto Paula. That's not how the real world functions; that's fiction.

It might be worthwhile to mention EarthBound's sequel, MOTHER 3, which functioned as a commentary on globalization and capitalism. MOTHER 3's cast of characters was infinitely more multidimensional, often breaking archetypes and even blurring the line between genders (see picture). MOTHER 3 is considered by many to be the most emotionally powerful video game of all time.

Doria, a member of the magical Magypsy tribe.