

Sympathy for the Villain: A Queer Memoir of Online Video Game Fandom – Kathryn Hemmann

It's no secret that many villains are coded as queer. Consider the terrible wizard, resplendent in his fine robes at the top of his tall and phallic tower, or the evil queen, with sharp cheekbones and even sharper eyes, gazing into the depths of her yonic mirror. There is the vampire who emerges from his closed coffin at night to satiate an unspeakable desire, and the werewolf who shifts from one form to another with the phases of the moon. Is it any wonder that so many queer people sympathize with monsters?

Mainstream pop culture has no shortage of fabulously over-the-top villains, even in stories ostensibly intended for children. There is the devious usurper Scar in *The Lion King*, catty and intellectual in the face the stolid patriarch-king and his many wives, or the slinky and seductive sea witch Ursula in *The Little Mermaid*, modeled on the legendary American drag queen Divine. For better or worse, even *Harry Potter* didn't miss a beat in coding its main villains as gay, from two men magically sharing the same body in the

first novel to two men magically locked in a fatalistic failed romance in the prequel movies. When a group of *Harry Potter* fans on social media attracted mainstream attention by reading the caustic potions master Severus Snape as a transwoman, they were celebrated in online news outlets for reclaiming the queer coding that was already readily apparent within the text.

There is something about queerness that reads as devious and upsetting to people who live the majority of their lives in normative society. To some of us, however, that very strangeness serves as the appeal of queer characters, villainous or otherwise. How delightful it is to encounter a fictional character who looks and talks like you but vehemently refuses to be boring. Villains are confident and proud, and they clearly aren't afraid to be disruptive. As an added bonus, villains are often fascinating and unique. Any kid with a sword can become a hero, but it takes a special type of person to become the final boss.

In a perfect world, queer people could express our identities in all aspects of our lives, but the real world isn't so simple. Even as many societies have become steadily more progressive, queer identities and sexualities are still considered transgressive. It can be extraordinarily difficult to navigate the world as a queer person, especially when something as mundane as using the bathroom or simply washing your hands can feel like stepping onto a battlefield. For the sake of our own survival, we learn to keep our heads down and follow the rules that dictate what it means to be normal. Pride is fantastic, but someone still needs to pay the rent.

Fantasies are important to queer people, both as a means of dealing with the frustrations of daily life and as a way to imagine what a different world might look like, and video

games are a key medium for fantasies of queerness. Even if a game doesn't allow you to customize your character and pursue the relationship of your dreams, many games allow the player a degree of direct agency that isn't present in other forms of entertainment media. There's no need for anyone, queer or otherwise, to play any given game "straight," with modding and speedrunning communities breaking down and redefining how a game is "meant" to be played and what story it tells. As gaming scholar Bonnie Ruberg has argued, video games have always been queer.

The contemporary medium of video games has grown up alongside social media, and game designers and journalists such as Anna Anthropy and Leigh Alexander have chronicled the explosive formation of queer-friendly gaming communities in online networks and venues. Some of these communities express queerness through the celebration of imagined relationships between characters in fanfiction and fancomics, while some queer fandoms revolve around antiheroes and outright villains, from the cartoonish Bowser of the *Super Mario* games to the sinister Queen Nashandra of the *Dark Souls* franchise. The appeal of an impossibly strong and gleefully subversive character who can't be defeated until the very last second is undeniable, and the queer subtext of such villains is often brought to the forefront by fans who incorporate these characters into their shared fantasies and online rituals of identity formation.

Fandom is a beautiful thing – or rather, fandom can feel that way until you get your first anonymous message urging you to schedule a lobotomy or informing you that, if you're a fan of a certain character, then you are *literally* Hitler.

The internet has never been a safe space. When anyone can say anything, someone inevitably will. Nevertheless,

the #Gamergate campaign of targeted harassment directed at young women during the summer of 2014 marked a horrifying moment not just in the visibility of online violence, but in its intensity as well. The online message boards that generated festering resentment against female game developers and gaming journalists also incubated the rise of the political movement now referred to as the alt-right, which played a key role in the 2016 American presidential election, as well as elections (and resistance against elections) in Europe.

The rise of the alt-right is complicated, especially in an international context. What was perhaps less complicated was the backlash from progressive communities, especially in the online spaces that provided homes for young creators to post their fanwork, the fannish social network Tumblr first among them. In response to the harassment campaigns of the alt-right, community leaders in progressive communities doubled down on their own rhetorical aggression. The language of political and cultural feminism was weaponized, with terms such as ‘abuse’ and ‘pedophilia’ being used to describe anyone whose interest in fictional characters was perceived to be politically or ideologically impure.

The intensity of such discourse on Tumblr became so pervasive that, at the end of 2017, the site was compelled to change its terms of service to state that adult content would be deleted from the site, presumably after the app was removed from Apple’s App Store after being flagged as a conduit for ‘abuse’ and ‘pedophilia.’ In the end, the people who ended up being the most affected by Tumblr’s new policy were young people with queer sexualities who had found a haven in the site’s relaxed and progressive

atmosphere. Ironically, although fictional characters can't be hurt, real people most certainly can, and the most vulnerable people on the platform had the most to lose.

None of this was new to those of us who have always felt sympathy for the villains. A group of 'heroes' adamantly insists on misunderstanding you and treating you as an abstract concept while refusing to listen to you as a person. Queerness, in its refusal to conform to normative social standards, has a long history of being interpreted as 'evil' and somehow 'harming the children.' To be queer is to receive constant social messages that you're at fault for existing as yourself in public, after all.

Self-confidence is easier said than done, so what happens when you're treated as a monster even by other monsters? Many people in queer online communities have found solidarity in their outsider status, but many others have lost the only community they had because they weren't queer in a way that was considered to be trendy or socially acceptable. Community rejection stings even more fiercely than broad social discrimination, especially when it's tied to personal hobbies and creative expression. It goes without saying that online harassment can have severe effects on a person's wellbeing, no matter which end of the political spectrum is sending anonymous hate messages.

Well-intentioned people might advise members of the digital generations to just log out, but such an extreme response isn't a viable solution. A creative person who shares their work online may as well be told not to create, or not to exist at all. In the end, that's what 'just log out' advice amounts to: a reminder that existing as a queer person is bad and harmful, even to your own self. The message seems to be that the fault lies not in the prevailing social atmosphere

that facilitates and excuses harassment, but rather in *you* for being so, you know . . . queer.

Is it any wonder so many villains are coded as queer, then? And is it any wonder that so many queer people love and sympathize with villains? Without the sort of difference of identity and perspective that results in conflict when it challenges the status quo, how interesting can a game or story be? If the status quo insists on treating you as a villain, why *not* destroy the world?

The anger of villains is real, and there is power in anger. There is power in solidarity too, and strength in banding together with a brave party of fellow adventurers to form a supportive community. Perhaps, however, it's not always the villain who needs to be defeated at the end of the game. After all, the best type of story is when the heroes learn to see their world from a different perspective.

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Kathryn Hemmann is a Lecturer and Research Associate at the Center for East Asian Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, where they study contemporary Japanese fiction and video games. Their book *Manga Cultures and the Female Gaze* advocates for the practice of looking at popular entertainment media from a queer perspective.