Gender Roles and Women in Power: An Uncomfortable Fiction

I know an indie game designer who is working on an rpg with a surprisingly radical premise: that women are the dominant force in a fantasy society.[1] It is not that I personally found this so surprising, or even so radical; rather, I describe it this way because the very concept quickly became a lightning rod for criticism. A certain proportion of men reading about the game designer's project simply could not get past the underlying premise of power-reversal in the fantasy setting.

The sharpness of that reaction, and indeed the vitriol in many of the remarks made, is what truly surprised me. But then again, it shouldn't have. This designer unwittingly touched one of the third rails in game design - and for that matter, an unspoken rule in the construction of fictional settings in general, be it rpgs, books, or film. Namely, he blundered into the forbidden territory of power balance between the genders.

This designer proposed altering the power balance and some of the gendered expectations of behavior into the inverse of contemporary culture, where traditionally men hold most or all of the power. In his setting, it would be women in the power-dominant position. This concept, it turns out, was profoundly disturbing to a small but not insignificant percentage of men reading about this game. The negative reactions were varied, and when expressed, were often more harsh than not. There was curt dismissal ("I'd never play a game like that" - a declaration made on the basis of the premise alone, without knowing any other details about the game). There were ~~rabid~~ rapid flights of fancy down some 'inevitable' slippery slope to abuse of power ("Men are being forced against their will to be subservient and women will take advantage of having them in that position"; "Women would have to abuse men because men would never stay in that position willingly"). And the most red herring of dismissive attacks of all, ad hominem questioning of personal motivations and sexuality ("There's something wrong with you if that you want to play a game like that. It could only be for personal fetishistic reasons.")[2]

I thought the designer's premise was an interesting thought experiment. As a sociologist and student of cultural anthropology, I consider gender roles largely socially constructed. The concept of challenging them, of altering power dynamics at this basic human social level, raises interesting questions and carries many intriguing possibilities. Not the least of which would be this question: *what would it be like* to live in (or play, in the gaming sense) in what is essentially a comprehensively matriarchal society? That is the beauty of casting this in a game-able form: it simply hasn't been done before in the gaming genre, and is very rarely touched upon in fiction.

Yet there was a strong and argumentative outcry against this fascinating notion ("OMG, that would be terrible! Men would be treated like second-class citizens based on their gender! It would suck, and you're a freak for even thinking it up!") - a reaction from a small but vocal minority that went well beyond a simple "I don't like your game concept." From a sociological perspective, the backlash spoke to threatened identities - or the perception of threat - embedded in how people thought of themselves, and how they projected they would feel

(comfortable, or not) in a game setting that challenged basic identity frameworks such as power privilege associated with gender.[3]

I am glad to note that the designer handled the criticisms with grace and poise. Encouraged by others who, like myself, are intrigued by the concept, he seems to be carrying on with development of that game setting. So in this case in point, perhaps a creative effort was not doomed to a stillbirth by outraged reactions before it even got off the ground.

The underlying issue, though, does not go away just because this one project is proceeding.

If some men think it would be abhorrent to live as second-class citizens in a world where the opposite gender holds all the power - well, I can only say, "welcome to the world most women live in." By 'most women' I mean women all around the world. Certainly power is more equitably distributed in a place like America, relatively speaking, than it is someplace like Afghanistan. (See the movie *Afghan Star* for an eye-opening dose of restrictive gender roles and life-threatening backlash when they are transgressed.) And yet it was predominantly American men having the largest conniption fits about altered gender norms and the power-reversal concept in a game.

Do not misunderstand me, here: I am not saying, "Put the shoe on the other foot and see how you like it." I **am** saying that in a game world, at least, we can do what we cannot do in the real world: turn these paradigms on their head, and see how they might play out if differently imagined. I think it is a great opportunity to play with and examine these all-but-invisible pieces of social encoding by challenging them in a fictional environment. For surely it is not new news that gender roles are deeply ingrained in us. Most people are relatively unaware of how gender messaging and assumptions color their thoughts on virtually every aspect of social life and personal identity. We are like fish in water, unaware of the water because it is the very air we breath. Yet threaten that environment, and the outcry sounds like an armoring-up, a stance reflexively taken to protect the core self.

As indeed, on some level, it is.

I guess I'm writing this commentary because I want to encourage people to be *aware*, to be *mindful* of the gender roles they have ascribed themselves and those around them, and how this translates into their creative works. If it feels "wrong" that women as a class run everything in a fantasy setting, the mindful person will ask him or herself **why** that is so. In the process of self-examination we garner more personal insights than we ever do by simply declaring that scenario anathema, and flailing at the one who dared to envision such a transgression.

The designer I mention in this post may not have been squelched by those negative reactions, but this is the kind of invisible social conformity pressure that helps keep other artists and writers in check.[4] We don't play much with the broad social implications of gender assumptions in most of our fiction and games, and certain approaches to this delicate terrain can obviously evoke strong backlash. Critics may not intend to "keep someone in line" with mainstream gender-think, but that is, in the end, very often the result of that process.

To anyone who thinks of creating gender-transgressive content, I can only encourage you to plug your ears to the (un)spoken mainstream expectations, and create the vision that drives you, however quirky it may be. If it is disturbing to some, then they're obviously not the market for that work, but there are plenty of others who will be. As to the "disturbance" factor, I think the best art is the kind that unsettles and makes the person contemplating it feel moved, even if "moved" sometimes equals "downright uncomfortable." Many of us never question our assumptions until we're challenged in just such a manner. So go on. Challenge.

The ones who are disturbed by your work are the ones who need to be.

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1 rpg="role-playing game", in case you don't follow the field and its shorthand.

2 These are not literal quotes from the exchanges referred to. I am summarizing and paraphrasing, rendered in a narrative form. To the best of my recollection this is the gist of what I read.

3 The text and assumptions about gender roles and power dynamics that are packed into these protests are so incredibly dense I will leave it to a women's studies, sociology, or anthropology grad student to tease them out and offer a fuller critique on the issue. Such a level of analytical discourse is beyond what I'm prepared to get into right now for a humble blog post.

4 I'm not naming the designer because I want to keep the focus here on the underlying issue, not personal details in an internet exchange. Although, if he would like to identify himself and his project, I think it would be great to give his intriguing work more exposure, and from that viewpoint I encourage him to consider commenting on this post, since the aforementioned kerfluffle now lies somewhat distant in time.