

The Visible Female: Rape Culture and Horror in Starcraft and Warcraft

By Jolie Mandelbaum

Increasingly, the dialogue in computer games produced by Blizzard Entertainment are using the epithet “bitch” with regard to their female character.” The term has most recently been applied to Sylvanas Windrunner from World of Warcraft—the offending phrase was added in their Cataclysm expansion, launched December 7, 2010, and was used in the Starcraft: Wings of Liberty expansion, released July 27, 2010, to refer to Sarah Kerrigan. Both women have a long history in Blizzard games (with Kerrigan appearing in the original Starcraft, released in March of 1998, and Sylvanas making her first appearance as Banshee Queen in Warcraft III). These characters also have large and somewhat vocal fan bases.

There was immediately a blog firestorm in response to the use of the epithet. Female, queer and minority players were already shocked when Blizzard mentioned that users would have to publish their full, real name on their forums (that plan has now been scrapped and in no small part to the above mentioned groups insistence that they were not disposable people) and were sent further reeling when scenes from the upcoming Cataclysm expansion were released with Garrosh Hellscream (a male orc) referring to Sylvanas as a bitch. The exact quote is “Watch your clever mouth, bitch.” Sylvanas is again referred to as a bitch at the end of a quest chain that leads players into Shadowfang Keep, as

castle beset by ghouls and ruled over by Lord Godfrey. Both quest lines occur at a low level, so it is possible for characters of maximum level to miss them, but newer players questing in the Silverpine region of the famous MMO cannot miss these references. Indeed, the word “bitch” opens and closes the entire story of Silverpine and Sylvanas; Garrosh calls her a bitch at the very first quest and Godfrey is final boss/concluding episode of the area. Both of these scenes went live in the Cataclysm expansion. Three days after videos of the finished Warcraft animations hit the blogs, Starcraft: Wings of Liberty (Starcraft II) was released. About an hour into Starcraft: Wings of Liberty, after Kerrigan had exactly forty-five seconds of screen time, one of our heroes refers to her as “that bitch” and then intones that “with a woman like that, there’s only one thing you can do,” as he puts his cigar out onto a picture of her. At the end of Starcraft: Wings of Liberty she gets the slur leveled at her again, this time from Archturus Mengsk, who is arguably the “bad guy” of the Starcraft universe.

I think it’s germane to this discussion to note that this kind of language was not present in any of their previous expansions, and both World of Warcraft: Cataclysm and Starcraft: Wings of Liberty were released in 2010. Feminist¹ blogs have given the issue the most amount of coverage, due in part to a blog’s innate ability to enter a discourse immediately, and they have made great points on both sides of the discussion. Those in favor have noted that the word is being used by characters that are unlikable to begin with and their use of the term is

¹ While citing them would be difficult, I feel like I should at very least give credit to the fantastic WoW_Ladies livejournal community for being the most vocal about these issues.

Blizzard's way of further vilifying and by extension, showing what kind of people use gendered slurs. On the other side is the fact that Blizzard's development team is overwhelmingly male and what we have is a group of men deciding where, how, and who gets to use a slur directed specifically at women.

I, however, am more curious as to why these are the two women, specifically and now, having the term used against them. There are quite a few women with quite a few enemies in the Warcraft universe and Sylvanas and Kerrigan are so far the only two to be branded as bitches. I propose that their particular horror has very little to do with their acts or their personalities, but more to do with being a visual representation of the inflicted horror of a rape culture.

Putting video games under the microscope of academia is a relatively new concept; in general video games are an area of culture widely ignored by traditional studies. As Schleinner states in her analyses of the Tomb Raider games, "the lack of research in the field of...games can be attributed to two factors, the first being that notion that games are merely toys for children...and that computer games are violent and unhealthy forms of entertainment and therefore do not merit as much exploration as potentially utopian technologies such a virtual reality" (Schleiner, 221). However, it's possible that video games suffer from a level of genre confusion not present in other art forms. Is this a film? Is this interactive media? Self guided? Clearly someone wrote these games; are they a work of literature? Perhaps they fall under the category of graphic novels?

What about the player and the level of creation and involvement given to the user? Can these be taken apart by social critics when the action happens in a world that simultaneously exists and doesn't exist at the same time?

This article will examine these games using the same language used to interrogate literature and feminist theory, so it is not an exhaustive analysis. However, this analysis will begin to bring to the forefront some of the issues present in the conception and then launch of female villains and especially the significant amount of language centered on their bodies.

Firstly, it's important to situate these two women in their narratives, which, unlike self contained films or literary works, are fragmented over a number of years and take part parallel to hundreds, if not thousands, of other stories. Both women have strikingly similar back stories. Sylvanas was, in life, the ranger general of the Elven capital, Silvermoon, and a very nondescript elf, albeit a military genius. After falling in battle to a rather nasty character named Arthas (who is the focus of the Wrath of the Lich King expansion), he yanked her soul out of her body and turn her into a mindless banshee who could only serve him. Arthas then puppeteered her into attacking her beloved homeland. After his control on her and other undead beings began to weaken, she broke free, found her old body and reinhabited it. She then gathered an army of zombie-like creatures who were also regaining control of their own minds, staged a military coup, and installed herself as queen of this new, sentient undead race and branded them

as the Forsaken. She currently rules the Forsaken from her home in the Undercity (which is the destroyed kingdom of Lordaeron where Arthas was crown prince previous to his fall) and her honorific is The Banshee Queen. Sylvanas spends her time waging wars and, arguably, developing a new plague to wipe out the living and raise them as Forsaken as she searches for a way to spend her energy after Arthas's destruction.

Kerrigan, in her first life, was a ghost operative and telepath who eventually joined up with a rebel alliance lead by Archturus Mengsk. In an effort to overthrow the ruling federation, Mengsk sent Kerrigan down to a planet with a beacon that would attract hostile, hivemind-controlled alien beings called the Zerg. He then betrayed Kerrigan, pulled his ship off the planet, and left her there with the beacon to be devoured by those very Zerg. Instead of killing Kerrigan, however, they infested her and enslaved her to the hivemind; when the hivenind's control began to weaken, Kerrigan broke free, and manipulated the situation in order to take control of the Zerg swarms. Her honorific is The Queen of Blades. Kerrigan spends her time terrorizing the universe and devouring planets as she searches for a way to destroy Mengsk.

To date, there is little scholarship done in the realm of Blizzard Entertainment and their massively popular games, and virtually none about Sylvanas or Kerrigan. It is therefore necessary to draw parallels between more common subjects of analysis. What research has been done is done predominantly with

static game series (games with a set world and plotline, usually console games) and there is an extraordinary amount dealing with Lara Croft, the idealized female protagonist of the Tomb Raider series. In her paper, "Does Lara Croft Wear Fake Polygons?" Schliener discussed Lara Croft as a "monstrous offspring of science; idealized, eternally young female automaton, a malleable, well trained techno-puppet created by and for the male gaze" (222). One could argue that Lara Croft (and subsequently any hyper-idealized video game heroine) is not monstrous; perhaps uncanny in the way that only a marionette can be. One could say that Lara's idealized female body is as unnatural as is a Barbie doll's. However, Lara Croft is built to be infinitely desirable, sexually available and non-threatening to the player character who is, as it were, wearing Lara's clothes. Lara is not in the same utterly confused category as Sylvanas and Kerrigan, however, the Lara Syndrome might, in fact, explain why two other powerful, troublesome female characters are not labeled with the term "bitch."

Neither Tyrande Whisperwind, Alexstraza, nor Jaina Proudmoore, other major females in the Warcraft universe², have the term "bitch" directed at them, even though all three are powerful and troublesome women. While they are not directly "villains," technically neither is Sylvanas due to the choices that players can make in regards to where they will put their allegiance. If a villain is defined by

² It seems valuable to note, by the way, how few women leaders actually exist. Sylvanas and Tyrande are the only two faction leaders out of twelve; the other ten are men. Jaina and Alexstraza are not faction leaders, though they are major players in the world and extraordinarily powerful entities. The player fueled Trade Princess movement, in which a large segment of the playerbase flooded the forums with requests to make the newly added goblin faction leader a female character, ended in vain with the Cataclysm release. For the time being, the goblin leader is also male.

his/her ability to “elicit feelings of fear and loathing” (Nelson 1), a player who has chosen to make a Forsaken character would see Sylvanas as an entity to worship since she has saved countless from the fate of being the mindless undead. Kerrigan’s status as a villain is also shaky; she’s usually read in the role of a victim who is now working with what she’s been given.

Alexstraza, Jaina and Tyrande, however, are visually attractive and nothing about their physical bodies attempts to disrupt or alter the male line of vision. Tyrande and Jaina are unproblematic mirrors for the male characters and players and, like Lara Croft, offer over a femininity without complexity, personality, or reality attached.

In fact, Tyrande, Jaina, and Alexstraza, while exceptionally powerful, are all presented as heteronormative mirrors, with unproblematic, available sexualities. Tyrande was the love interest of the brothers Malfurion and Illidan Stormrage. Currently heterosexually partnered with Malfurion, it is widely regarded that Illidan (the final encounter in the Burning Crusade expansion) went mad because Tyrande refused to love him and consequently played upon his love for her in order to protect or advance the Night Elf faction. Jaina was romantically linked to Arthas previous to his reign as Lich King and began to rekindle her relationship with him just previous to the invasion which would turn him forever. She indeed spent the majority of the Lich King expansion mourning her relationship with him. Alexstraza, not being a humanoid character, is more difficult to pinpoint, however, she is known as the “The Life Binder;” her job, specifically, is the biological

creation of life. She is also linked to Korialstrasz, who is her current prime consort (they are drawn and animated as female and male respectively). None of these three characters offer any form of complicated sexuality; they conform completely to normative gender and sexual preference standards.

While it would be easiest to assume that Sylvanas and Kerrigan offer to the games a threatening sexuality, what is actually so disturbing about them is that they offer no sexuality at all. They are, in fact, taken out of the realm of the sexually dangerous woman and very quickly. These characters are intended to be attractive to the viewer. Indeed, most women in video games are. Smith (2005) concluded that women in video games, when present at all, were hypersexualized, however, I propose that Sylvanas and Kerrigan do not hold onto that “murderous female sexuality” that is so prevalent in media featuring deadly or villainous women, where the women are dangerous because “it is their wish to castrate man” (Delyto 6). Sylvanas and Kerrigan are so horrific, so beyond human, as to be past the realm of sexual desirability. This is not to say that they don’t conform to gender norms or beauty standards; both are humanoid and symmetrically beautiful, but they are, without fail, horrors and abominations. This is also not to say that they could not be found sexually attractive, but for the majority of people, corpses and roaches would not be selected as sexual partners. Perhaps if they were sexually available in the ways that Tyrande or Jaina are, their locus of horror would be around the Freudian idea of castration,

but one cannot not ignore the fact that Sylvanas and Kerrigan are not participants in the sexual economy any longer.

Sylvanas's coin in the game's Dalaran fountain (a city site where users can fish for various coins thrown in by Non-Player Characters) states, "I hope my sisters and I can grow up and get married together³," a very clear signifier of her desire to participate in the heterosexual economy. However, the flavor text written underneath her wish is "This coin appears to be very old." Only Sylvanas's coin bears the designation of very old, which is significant in itself. After all, plenty of the coins in the fountain are old or have some other special quality about them. The writers of the game have both deliberately chosen a heteronormative wish and then designated just how far removed Sylvanas's ability to participate in a sexual economy actually is from the reality of the rotted Sylvanas we know today. Her exchange with Garrosh where we first hear the term "bitch" used in game is, appropriately enough, about the Forsaken, and by extension, Sylvanas, being unable to reproduce. Sylvanas does not have a sexuality to speak of, and while that might be striking, it does not seem to be enough to render her as a threat to the male gaze. In fact, presenting her as neutered might make her less threatening, as she cannot people the world with zombies on her own, much the way Alexstraza can.

³ For contrast, Jaina's coin states "Arthas, my love, come back to me."

Kerrigan's heteronormative speaking position is also far removed from her current position. Our first introduction to Kerrigan in the original Starcraft has her calling Raynor "You pig!" after she reads his mind. Right away she takes herself out of the sexual economy, and then proceeds further away from any identity that could be construed as castrating or sexually dangerous. However, the fact remains that Kerrigan and Sylvanas are dangerous. If they were not dangerous in some way, no one would be calling them a bitch. The question remains only as to why these two women and why now. This author would like to posit that it is their disruption of the female body as a blank text to be read that makes these two women troublesome enough to be designated bitches.

What strikes me most about those two stories is the similar level of violation and their immediate call to the tradition of rape narratives. The imagery of Sylvanas' turning has her strapped to an altar while she screams and Arthas looks down on her while he manipulates her soul out of her body. This is a horrific image on its own; when coupled with the idea of bodily violation it becomes even more significant.

Kerrigan's story is similar, and while the player does not see what happens to her in Starcraft until she appears later, she is then referred to as Infested Kerrigan. In fact, players never see her infestation and when it happens in a flashback in Starcraft: Wings of Liberty, which doesn't shy away from showing bodily violence, she drops her gun, falls to her knees, and is then swarmed as the scene fades in

a common fade-to-black movie trope. However, by being referred to as “infested,” the player is given a clear picture of what they are looking at; her boundaries are disintegrated, there are creatures taking up residence in her body that she does not want there and there is not a singular thing she can do about that. Kerrigan is also enslaved to the hivemind, forced to launch attacks she does not want to launch, destroy things she does not want to destroy, and have her body used in any way the swarm sees fit.

Kerrigan and Sylvanas must be named as bitches because of their literal bodies; as they are now a representation, inescapable and inevitable, of a rape narrative that is usually invisible to the eyes. Imagine a second, what it would be like to physically see evidence of bodily violations on everyone woman who had ever suffered one. Assaults and rapes are understood in a statistical way; it is understood that over the course of a lifetime at least 25% of women will suffer some kind of sexual assault, domestic violence, or combination of the two. This is a removed statistic; after the fact there is no way to ascertain whether one is viewing a member of that 25%. One must be told that an individual has suffered this violence.

Sylvanas and Kerrigan disrupt this discourse; they render this speech unnecessary. This is not to say that sexual and domestic assaults never leave scars and bruises, because they certainly do, but what if these events were readable on every inch of the body, providing visible proof of the frequency and

pervasiveness of this kind of gendered violence. If a woman's body truly became a readable text, what kind of horror would that call into being? How disruptive is this forced knowledge to the ignorance afforded by male privilege?

Sylvanas and Kerrigan are both monsters. Admittedly, they are somewhat conventionally attractive, humanoid monsters, but they are monsters none the less. Kerrigan is twisted almost past recognition, with bone, muscle, and carapace clearly visible all over her body. Her skin is green and pocked and her hair resembles segmented insect legs. There is no way to make her the object of one's gaze and ignore every horror inflicted on her during her infestation. The same goes for Sylvanas, now one of the walking dead; her skin is blue and gray, her bones are visible in some places and the pieces of her that are not blue and gray are very clearly rotting away from her.

If a woman is meant to be an unproblematic mirror for a man, as Woolf so well puts it in *A Room of One's Own*, "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size," then what horror is then transferred back to the male when they look at a woman and don't see a simple, flattering reflection of themselves. Instead they are given a vision of the horror they are capable of and encouraged to inflict. Furthermore, if the horror of the Uncanny is intimately connected to "the idea of being robbed of one's eyes," then these women are absolutely horrific figures (Freud 7). They rob the male of their expected visions.

Men are confronted with horrible reflections where they expect to see a differentiation or a simple screen that they can project upon (Felman 5). They are simultaneously shown versions of themselves in the faces of the monsters and are also cut off from their own line of expected vision. If the truly grotesque “keeps us aware of the connections between the alien world and our own” perhaps that is where the monstrosity of Kerrigan and Sylvanas is situated (Steig 266).

Sylvanas’s reinhabited body, forcibly taken back from her tormentor, sounds very much like a rape or abuse survivor story. The idea of being “uncomfortable in your own skin” is not unfamiliar to women who have been the victim of bodily atrocity and Sylvanas is no different. She has her body back, but it’s a twisted version, somewhat like what she used to have but very different. However, unlike in reality, her body is not only different to her, but different to everyone around her. No one can look at her and see anything unproblematically, let alone at twice it’s natural size. The same for Kerrigan, with her jutting carapaces and infested body; her horror is centered in the visual representation of her victimhood.

Even at the end of *Starcraft: Wings of Liberty*, when narrative hero Raynor finally saves the girl (to note, the idea of the hero saving the poor woman from her torment is not a construct without its issues, but that’s outside the scope of this writing) and un-infests her, the Kerrigan that remains is naked, unscarred and

human—except for her hair, which is still the segmented, vaguely insect like protrusions from her skull. There is a note of sadness in Kerrigan’s salvation; Kerrigan has come through her suffering and yet at the end things are still not the same as they were. No one can look at her and see anything but the inflicted pain, and those of us situated in the real world can see nothing but the remnants of a rape narrative. She cannot even be seen as an uncomplicated redemption for Raynor, who lives haunted by what he failed to prevent, due to the pervasive and painful reminder that is her hair.

There is no escape, not from their personalities, but from the reality of what, exactly, was visited upon them as victims. While men in positions of power are afforded the privilege of ignoring the existence of a rape culture, Sylvanas and Kerrigan ruin that for everyone.

The player does even need to hear them speak. Simply looking gives the viewer access to every horror visited upon their bodies by someone else, someone who didn’t bother to ask if this was okay. Sylvanas and Kerrigan, then, center the locus of their horror purely in the visual realm and by doing so, they disrupt, merely by existing, the male privilege of being unaware, generally, of the horrific things that happen to women and minorities.

Just looking at them is a slap in the face to privilege, the radical removal of an incredibly comfortable set of blinders, a set of blinders that relegates abused women to the realm of “Surely, no one I know.”

That is why they are bitches. That loss of privilege (and of ignorance) calls into question that entire notion of a masculine state of being. The question remains, of course, whether any of that is deliberate on the part of Blizzard and, sadly, I think not. But I think in a company staffed by men, it's incredibly telling that the two worst monsters they could think up were ones who destroyed the idea of the silent and invisible victim.

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