

# Hobby Horse Anatomy: Bawdy and Body in The Binding of Isaac (Ch. 3)

written by Jace Brittain | June 21, 2015



In the [first installment](#) of Hobby Horse Anatomy, I proposed *The Binding of Isaac* as a kind of repository for the repressed and excised content from *The Legend of Zelda* and other games. In the [second installment](#), I examined Isaac's identity and the game's drag elements through a Kristevan lens.

*Isaac* creator Edmund McMillen seems poised to make a case for the possibilities of video games' uniquely accessible psychic and phantasmagoric realm. The "it was all a dream" reveal/cop-out is relatively rare in video games, and almost no one ever asks whether *Super Mario Bros.*<sup>1</sup> is "realistic." More importantly, this phantasmagoric access allows video games to more subtly investigate the imaginary boundaries of the body and the abject extrusions that violate those boundaries.

An awkward new trend in video games couches mechanical instruction in the plot of the game. The spirit who resides in Link's sword in *Skyward Sword* makes specific references to buttons on the controller, and in the most recent *Tomb Raider*, Lara Croft remembers how her father trained her as an archer to "Hold L1 to draw an arrow." The clumsy efforts to smooth over the essential mechanical interaction of video games reveals the form's own discomfort with its innate facets of lowness: repeated death of the overtly virtual embodiment.



Player death, like instruction, breaks the fabric of reality and acknowledges video-game-ness. The basic controls of *Binding of Isaac* are written on the floor of the first room, but the player really learns the rules of the game through trial and error. Put more directly, you learn what kills you in *Binding of Isaac* by getting killed by it. The beauty of the game is in how its grotesque ideas mold themselves around the video game model of *Legend of Zelda*, evoking Jack Smith's praise of Maria Montez's filmy acting:

The acting was lousy but if something genuine got on film why carp about acting—which HAS to be phony anyway—I'd RATHER HAVE atrocious acting. Acting to Maria Montez was hoodwinking. Her real concerns (her conviction of beauty/her beauty) were the main concern—her acting had to be secondary. An applying of one's convictions to one's activity obtains a higher excellence in that activity than that attained by those in that activity who apply the rules established by previous successes by others.

I am nominating *The Binding of Isaac* for the most apposite expression of video-game-ness in the medium. The excessive poop as an expression of

Bataillian positive loss (making up for the implied constipated lack in *Zelda* and other games) and the fulfillment of the basement-dwelling dungeon-monsters' potential as bestial representations of the abject are not excessive flourishes against the grain of video game norms; rather, these are facets of the form's grotesque identity, appropriately expressed outwardly. The excess of poop is the first indicator of the game's obligatory self-acknowledgement, which points us toward its grander, more expansive images.

Indeed, *The Binding of Isaac's* most shocking images are its rarer expressions of absurd grotesqueing: the emergence in late plays (having unlocked the percentage possibility of their appearance) of the Four Horseman of the Apocalypse, here personified as rotting flesh monsters riding grotesque hobby horses. What a portrait of the uncanny: the accepted and simple toy hobby horse<sup>2</sup> made strange in its essential form, a horse's head on a stick. Again, this leads to a broaching of the topic of video games' inherently sticky identity question. In a form that demands empathic embodiment (players are almost always asked to identify with their avatar protagonists, even or especially ones who commit grotesque atrocities), it's a fair assumption that many players will be inhabiting a body that is other than their own.



This formally concocted identity transcendence may explain the kind of hobby horse anatomy—a generic head atop an often indistinct or featureless body—common to video game avatars. Consider the androgyny of Link in *Legend of Zelda* (not to mention that perennial titular confusion, the question being: So who's Zelda?). Fair-skinned, blonde-haired, elven- (read: feminine-) faced Link, who wears a long skirt-like tunic, often over tights that betray few distinctly masculine or feminine features, is an iconic hobby horse of a character, one fairly embodied by both male and female players. (As long as they are white-skinned; although his fictional race changes, Link's skin and hair color rarely do.) In games with less androgynous leads, females cross the gender boundary most often, considering that the avatars of most major games are male.<sup>3</sup> Isaac's unstable, inherently trans- identity is, ultimately, a more honest expression of the full spectrum of players passing as Isaac during gameplay.

The most biting satirical statement is not what the game designers are being asked to censor by the politically correct powers of the industry but what the players are being asked to ignore by the designers: their own identity's submersion. Isaac hews at least a little closer to a Carnavalesque identity, which puts all players on equal footing, an example of the unprecedented and underexplored, revolutionary access potential in the lowly art form of video games.

<sup>1</sup> McMillen's prior game was an indie-grotesque homage to *Super Mario Bros.* called *Super Meat Boy*.

<sup>2</sup> Of relevance: Wikipedia suggests the French word for hobby horse as one of the potential inspirational nonsense source words for dada.

<sup>3</sup> Nintendo's major exception, of course, is female intergalactic bounty hunter Samus Aran, whose gender isn't revealed until the end of the first *Metroid* game when she removes her space armor, a moment often mentioned among video games' great "twists."

### Works Cited (for all 3 chapters)

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### Referenced

Most games in *The Legend of Zelda* series could most sensibly be credited to Shigeru Miyamoto, the designer, producer, CREATOR of *Super Mario*, *Zelda*, *Metroid*, etc (thus his undisputed status as Nintendo's god). Games most specifically referenced in this essay would be the NES original and the Wii entry *Skyward Sword*.

The newest *Tomb Raider* game (which is ultimately pretty enjoyable and more filmic and impressive than many works of art which met with the approval of Roger Ebert) was produced by Square Enix and has the feel of a massively collaborative project. Nevertheless, it lists as Directors: Noah Hughes, Daniel Chayer, and Daniel Neuburger. I played it on a PC.