



# Portrayals and Pitfalls of Fatness in Games

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# DISCLAIMERS ETC.

- Trigger warning: this presentation includes a few examples of fat-shaming rhetoric and the like
- While a lot of these issues are universal, many examples are drawn from my life (that of a white, cis, abled person who identifies as a gay man)
  - Their impact can and does change for people who fall in different areas of those spectrums



# Hi there





# What do you even mean by “fat”?

- In general, for this presentation: “Obese” as opposed to simply “large”
  - While muscular can also be read as “big,” there isn’t a similarly attached level of stigma to being muscular within a certain range
- Remember: cultural ideas about fatness impact people of *all* body types



# What is this talk *not* about?

- Changing your views on:
  - Your own body
  - What bodies you are attracted to
- Shaming or blaming any specific dev/game



# What are you talking about, then?

- Cultural attitudes
- Common mistakes and problems
- Potential remedies/outlook changes



# The entire talk in one slide (spoilers!)

Everyone, regardless of their body type, deserves to feel good about their body and not be the victim of abuse and shame -- intentional or otherwise -- about it.



# Why are people LIKE this?

- I googled “why is it okay to make fun of fat people?”
  - <http://themattwalshblog.com/2013/07/18/no-you-shouldnt-be-proud-of-your-obesity/>
  - <http://tribune.com.pk/story/93807/10-things-i-hate-about-fat-people/>
  - <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/01/a-case-for-shaming-obese-people-tastefully/267446/>
  - <http://slog.thestranger.com/slog/archives/2011/02/10/ban-fat-marriage>





# Pervasive problem attitudes/myths

- [Fat is always ugly](#)
- [Fat people deserve anything they get](#) ("you did it to yourself")
- [Fat people need you to intervene](#)
  - See also: [This](#), [This](#), and [This](#)
- [Shaming fat people helps them](#)
- (All links from blogger Melissa McEwan at Shakesville)



# Problem associations from those myths

- Fat =
  - Gluttonous/selfish/insatiable
  - Lazy
  - Delusional (esp. about attractiveness)
  - Considered ugly/unattractive by others
- Media portrayals reinforce these over and over
  - Fat characters are frequently villainous/evil
  - Fat characters are usually the "punchline" or victim
  - Most common goal of fat character: not being fat anymore



# Fat characters in video games

- Let's just say, not always the best history...





# SERIOUSLY NO MORE OF THIS

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xX0kh5gcaLA>





# What About Bob

**MAY CONTAIN CONTENT  
INAPPROPRIATE FOR CHILDREN**

Visit [www.esrb.org](http://www.esrb.org)  
for rating information



# Bob and Rufus

- The good:
  - Highly skilled martial artists, and not in “big body required” styles (like wrestling, sumo, etc.)
  - Not “joke characters”
  - Seem comfortable/okay with their bodies
- The bad:
  - Rufus is basically seen as delusional and gross
  - Bob “got fat on purpose” because he needed a handicap
  - Bob’s moves are named after food (SIGH)



# Fat women in games

- Fatness and body image/policing for women dovetails significantly
- Cultural focus on women's bodies as sex objects or things men possess/own = "women must be hot (read: thin), always"
- Fat women reduced to their "need" to be thin
- Men can "get away" with being fat in a way women usually can't
  - i.e. "the Sitcom Effect"



# Fat women in games

- [Doing literally everything wrong in \*Shadows of the Damned\*](#)
  - Story of minor character Justine Divangelo
  - Fat shaming/self-hate
  - “Comedic” use of eating disorders
  - Fat auto-equals “ugly”
  - Fat attraction = delusion or aberration
  - Validates self-harm in pursuit of beauty





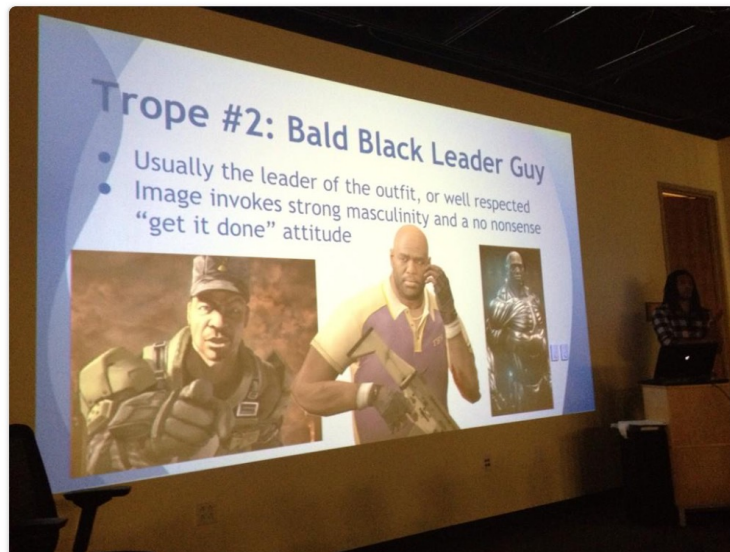
# Fat women in games

- Fat Princess
  - She's "the ball"
  - Link between "make her fat" and "make her undesirable/difficult" underscored by the mechanics
  - Defused somewhat when she gets some agency in *Playstation All-Stars*
    - HOWEVER: many of her attacks aren't "her" (summoned allies etc.)



# Fat characters of color/queer characters

- These characters are already relatively rare in the AAA space, fat or not
- What do we see?
  - "Sumo guy"
  - "Big Bald Black Guy"



raghav raghaav

@raghaav



On the Nick Fury type: he's kind of cool. - Austin Drexler

5:17 PM - 20 Feb 2015

2 RETWEETS 3 FAVORITES





# Fat characters of color/queer characters

- The VERY few examples of fat women of color I did find tended to be older women:
  - [Old Lady Shiroku](#) (*Persona 4*)
  - ["Little" Plum Kitaki](#) (*Apollo Justice*)
- These are "safe" fat designs for women
  - Mothers/elderly – stepping away from need for them to be openly/publically sexual



# Fat characters of color/queer characters

- *World of Warcraft* pandaren
  - “Vaguely pan-Asian” race
    - Species-as-stand in
  - Gluttonous drunkards
  - “Jolly fat guy” stereotype



# Fat characters and disability

- Like queer and PoC characters, rare enough in the AAA space that finding intersections there is a challenge.
- Common link between big characters and stereotyped portrayals of developmental or mental disability
  - Combination of size + perceived mental problems used to dehumanize these characters



# The potential to improve

- Three case studies
  - Ellie from *Borderlands 2*
  - Tierno from *Pokémon X/Y*
  - The *Saints Row* franchise



# On Ellie

- Has many great qualities:
  - Smart and self-sufficient
  - Freely sexual/flirty
  - Has no issues with her bodytype
  - Is “defined” by her body but not *limited* by it





# On Ellie

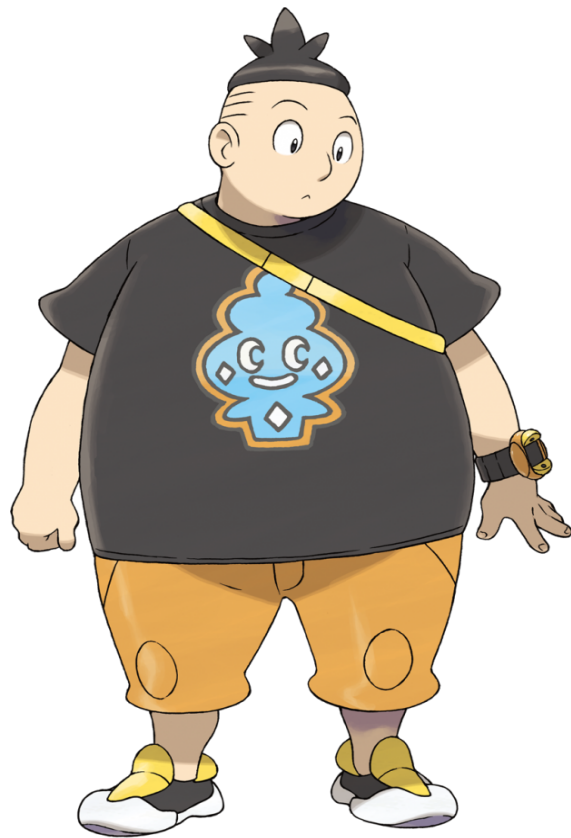
- Where Ellie suffers is *context*
  - Lack of in-game support can cue us to think of her self-esteem as “delusional”
  - Comedy game means her weight is often the punchline, even when not intended to be hurtful (see: *Tiny Tina* DLC for *BL2*)
  - Juxtaposition with/connection to series sexbomb [Moxxi](#)





# Not So Tiny Dancer

- Clearly okay with his body
- Body not commented on by his friends
- Into a “physical” thing that might be a challenge for a bigger person (dancing) and is clearly good at it
- Being fat isn’t his defining characteristic





# The Lady Boss

- *Saints Row* character creation lets you build an avatar of (almost) any shape, size, color, etc.
- Created avatars have their downsides – players aren't "forced" into the experience – but they can be pretty great for other reasons
- They let you play around with the body you inhabit on a lot of levels



# The Lady Boss





# Living the dream

- Basically: SR4 lets me live out a lifelong dream – wearing anything I want to
- Being fat means
  - Shopping at “speciality places”
  - Having a very limited range of styles/colors/etc.
  - Paying 150% or more for many articles
  - Usually being uncomfortable/“making do”
- In Steelport I can wear whatever I want and it will always fit and always look fabulous and I never have to worry about anything and that is *fantastic*



# Living the dream





# Living the dream?





# Summing up

- A lot of what we see of fat characters in games just reinforces bad stereotypes about fat people: that they're lazy, greedy, food-obsessed gluttons and if they like themselves, they're "delusional" in some way



# Summing up

- What can games do?
  - Give us a space where our body type doesn't *matter* for five seconds
  - Tell a respectful or even supportive narrative
  - Don't reinforce our negative cultural ideas
  - Don't make us "the lone magical unicorn;" support us in the game world
- If this sounds an awful lot like the way games could better represent *any* part of someone's identity: NOT A COINCIDENCE





# Summing up

- Remember: body image ideas about fatness hurt thin people, too
  - Fat being “the worst thing you can be” = fear that leads people into harmful self-policing
  - Focus on “thin = beautiful” can contribute to disordered eating, body dysmorphia, and other problems
- THIN PEOPLE/THINNESS AREN'T THE ENEMY. BODY IMAGES/ CULTURES THAT PUNISH US FOR NOT BEING THE IDEAL ARE.



# Thanks for coming!



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