

# Can modding change game culture?: Reflections on the Femme Pyro mod

**Max Frankel**

Murdoch University

+61 8 9360 2236

m.frankel@murdoch.edu.au

**Tael Harper**

Murdoch University

+61 8 9360 6587

tael.harper@murdoch.edu.au

## Keywords

modding, culture, Rule 34, gender, resistance, circuit of culture/cultural software

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper we consider the ability of mods to influence gaming culture by reflecting on the cultural impact of the Femme Pyro mod. Created by the lead author, the Femme Pyro mod was an attempt to playfully insert a female version of the ‘heavy’ pyro character class in *Team Fortress 2* (2007). While the mod was incredibly successful, and has become one of the most popular and well-known *TF2* mods of all time, in this paper we examine whether the mod has encouraged others to mod or develop female game characters, particularly of ‘non-idealised’ body types, or led to an embrace of ‘non-idealised’ female bodies in gaming culture more generally.

The ‘circuit of culture’ model advanced by du Gay et al. (1997) suggests that communities of consumption can influence cultural production, and modding as a practice is based in essence on the principles of ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins et al. 2009), with a ‘countercultural’ ethos and a spirit of audience agency. However, as Nicolls and Keogh have argued that ‘freemium’ production tools present a ‘democratic dispositif’ to obscure the homogenisation of the production process (Nicoll and Keogh 2019), we argue that the reception and appropriation of the Femme Pyro mod suggests modding practices that may seem ‘countercultural’ may be similarly impotent in addressing the homogenisation of game culture.

For while we know that the authorial intent of creating Femme Pyro was to address the under-representation of non-normative, practically geared women in games, it has only managed to ‘intervene’ in games culture in a very limited way. While the body type and gear of the Femme Pyro mod was intentionally designed to resist the tendency of character designers to represent female characters as largely unclothed, with faces exposed and very idealised bodies, these aspects of the mod design have not led directly to an awareness of the absurdity of the generic representation of women in games. Instead, the Femme Pyro model has been sexualised, fetishised and appropriated as a porn trope, a living embodiment of two of the ‘rules of the internet’; ‘Rule 34: If it

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2025

© 2025 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

exists, there is porn of it. No exceptions’; and ‘Rule 43: The more beautiful and pure a thing is—the more satisfying it is to corrupt it.’ The elements that made Femme Pyro an element of resistance – the larger build, the full suit and the gas mask – all heavily feature in the fetish material.

The fetishisation of Femme Pyro is not necessarily a corruption (as it is inclusive, in a sense) and should highlight that there is demand in the market for these forms of characters and representations. However, the clear popularity of Femme Pyro has not resulted in a proliferation of non-idealised bodies in game development. Examples of heavy set women are as rare and exotic as the mutant ‘Lily’ in *Fallout New Vegas* (2010), and Hanako Ohtani from *Persona 4* (2008), along with games where the treatment of fat characters sits somewhere between fetishisation and ridicule, such as *Fat Princess* (2009). This rarity contrasts markedly with the amount of well regarded heavy set male characters in games, with a number of listicles of cool ‘fat guys’ in games highlighting that there are many<sup>1</sup>. In a marginal exception that proves the rule, the character of Abby in *The Last of Us II* (2020) was more muscular than typical representations of women in games, and this representation led to an outcry from elements of the gaming community (Tomkinson 2023); suggesting there is still resistance toward non-idealised representations of women in games.

We argue that the fact that the Femme Pyro mod was so successful and so fetishised demonstrates that there is space for representing non-idealised female characters in game culture. However, the experience of creating Femme Pyro illustrates that while masculine characters can be all sizes and still have agency, non-typical representations of women tend to be reduced to fetish objects and not playable characters with their own story. This finding suggests that there may still be some intractable elements of game culture – and that modders may need industry or audience help to act as agents of change.

## BIO

**Max Frankel** is a lecturer of Games Art & Design at Murdoch University and a modder. His primary research focuses on modding as a practice and modder culture, and representation within videogame art.

**Tael Harper** is an Associate Professor of Communication at Murdoch University. He has previously published on resistance in games culture, the affective rhetoric of game play, the emancipative potential of play, the (limited) value of the Australian game classification system, and the role of gender in games culture.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, [https://screwattack.fandom.com/wiki/Top\\_10\\_Fat\\_Guys\\_in\\_Games](https://screwattack.fandom.com/wiki/Top_10_Fat_Guys_in_Games)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Altus. 2008. *Persona 4*. cross platform: Sega.
- du Gay, Paul, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh McKay, and Keith Negus. 1997. *Doing cultural studies: The story of the Sony Walkman*. London: Sage Publications in association with The Open University.

- 
- Jenkins, Henry, R. Purushotma, M. Weigel, K. Clinton, and A.J. Robinson. 2009. *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Naughty\_Dog. 2020. *The Last of Us Part II*. Playstation 4: Sony.
- Nicoll, Benjamin, and Brendan Keogh. 2019. *The Unity game engine and the circuits of cultural software*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Obsidian\_Entertainment. 2010. *Fallout: New Vegas*. Cross platform: Bethesda Softworks.
- Titan\_Studios. 2009. *Fat Princess*. Playstation: Sony.
- Tomkinson, Sian. 2023. "'She's built like a tank': Player reaction to Abby Anderson in *The Last of Us: Part II*." *Games and Culture* 18 (5):684-701.
- Valve. 2007. *Team Fortress 2*. cross platform: Valve Corporation.