The Guild Comics and Other Female-Authored Experiments in New Media

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In this paper, I want to propose that Felicia Day's incredibly innovative transmedia franchise, *The Guild*, presents us with an exciting meta-narrative of media-in-transition from a feminist perspective. By feminist, I don't mean that *The Guild* is metaphorically empowering, a la *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, but rather that it tells a women-centered story about a male-centered world, that of gaming, within a male-dominated medium, first in comedy web video, and then in comics. Because my space is limited, I will focus on the prequel comics, which tell the background story of how Day's protagonist, Cyd Sherman, created her in-game avatar, Codex, and thus, how she carved out her own space within the famously male troll-filled universe of *World of Warcraft* and other MMOs.

In a February blog post, Dana Sterling argued that fandom represents a high context culture, meaning one in which "History, relationships, subtext, symbolism, [and] connotation [are] not extra decoration that can be efficiently stripped away from the message. They are part of the message." She goes on to confirm that this complexity constitutes one of the major barriers to outsiders seeking to understand what fandom is, or why fans do what they do, noting that "In fact, [fandom] can be almost incomprehensible to someone from outside, because it's so thickly woven with inside jokes, references to past stories, past fandoms, fandoms next-door, past relationships. To ignore all that and focus only on literal, explicit, written messages is to miss a great deal." There are, of course, barriers to entry into any subculture, as well as any storyworld, and the process of our reading lives is one of navigating the worlds into which we are welcomed,

and in which we feel we can flourish. But sometimes, the barriers to entry reproduce recognizable social hierarchies, and, when members of a subcultural community take note of this fact, they have the opportunity to reconstitute their metaphorical doorways in order to accommodate a greater range of potential members. However, if their work to refashion the doorways is too slow or seems not to have been taken on in good faith, members of the excluded group might decide instead to fashion their own space to conduct their related activities in parallel to the more mainstream group, and wait a generation or two to see if the activity itself can come to be understood as encompassing these multiple and parallel forms of engagement, minus the hierarchy. I would argue that *The Guild* represents just such an attempt to create an "alternative" narrative of gaming, one which creates space for fannish engagement with the world of gaming apart from actual MMO subscription, as well as an alternative to mainstream news narratives about gamers as (implicitly male) outcasts and pitiable addicts.

As a parallel from the history of another medium, I offer female-authored underground comix from the 1970's, specifically as these are compiled and curated by Aline Kominsky-Crumb in her 2008 memoir, *Need More Love*. Kominsky-Crumb's still-evolving role in comics history offers, I think, a nice model with which we can contextualize Day's role as authorial powerhouse within digital culture, particularly in New Media Narratives, including web video and gaming. But before I outline the connections, allow me to offer the very abbreviated, mainstream version of comics history, strategically privileging male authors. Comics were published primarily by men from the dawn of time (or, as far as I'm qualified to talk about, 1900), and they were published, under the watchful eye of editors, in newspapers and in glossy, superhero-oriented comic books. Both of these major forms were heavily censored, particularly after the comics scare in the

1950s, although as any hardcore comics fan will tell you, much of note slipped past the censors and deserves a place in the history of graphic narrative, whatever the terms by which archivists compose that history in the years to come. But in the mid-1960s, a few male artists decided to circumvent the censorship that they found restrictive in the comics publishing sphere, and, influenced by generations of fans and self-publishers, they initiated the underground comix revolution, using the medium to tell stories about sexual freedom, fringe psychology, psychedelic experimentation, blasphemy, and other activities of enduring interest to youth culture. To offer a slight twist to the mainstream historical narrative, I would argue that the main shift that incited this revolution was not the taboo subject matter, but rather the autobiographical impulse -- it's not so much that R. Crumb and other early innovators wanted to document their acid trips (although they did), but rather that they wanted to document their own lives at all, rather than using the comics medium to tell stories about master criminals, flying superheroes, or talking animals (well, talking animals remained important, actually, particularly to Crumb and Spiegelman, but I fear I'm getting away from the point.) This minor shift in focus from content-level subversion to the autobiographical impulse is fundamental to the feminist narrative of media history that I am working with in this paper.

In other words, oh, and then there were women. Sexual freedom etc. happened to them, too, and arguably affected their lives much more dramatically, and so, they started to talk about it as well, and make their own comics. Some traced their expression back to Brenda Starr, reporter, while others traced it to their diary-keeping habits as children. Most proclaimed a multivalent structure of influence, proclaiming to have been inspired by their male contemporaries as well as other factors, including popular culture in other media, university coursework, and the political news

of the day. Aline Kominsky-Crumb offers a particularly detailed account of her own experience of the origin moment of women in underground comix in *Need More Love*. In particular, she talks about the gender schism that happened in the undeground in the early 1970s, which led to the founding of *Wimmen's Comix*, in which she and other women writers, like Roberta Gregory and Trina Robbins, published some of their earliest works. Kominsky-Crumb was happy for the opportunity to publish her work in *Wimmen's Comix*, but she was then, and still remains, reluctant to perpetuate antagonism against her male contemporaries, not least because she of course ended up marrying one of the most prominent among them. Again, the shift is subtle but important: the book is not framed as "the underground comix revolution your pop culture professor never told you," but rather, in keeping with her authorial mode of the past four decades, it is a story of Kominsky-Crumb's insider experience of subcultural history. The work is incontrovertibly feminist, as the author makes her alliance to the general principles of the women's movement clear, both explicitly and through her work, which undeniably humanizes her gendered experience in rare and significant ways throughout. However, she saw a lot of "hypocrisy" in the antagonism between men and women artists during the orgin moment, and prefers now simply to tell their shared story as she remembers it, rather than trying to locate the precise sociological reasons for disproportionate gender representation in this subcultural sphere. (139) There are plenty of individually reprehensible men, as well as women, in her story to tell the "real" truth about beyond generalizations.

In this way, I would compare Kominsky-Crumb's approach to a subcultural history undeniably affected negatively by gender inequality to that of Felicia Day in her web series (and comics prequel to the web series), *The Guild*. Protagonist Cyd Sherman is not Felicia Day, of course,

and therefore, this universe is not anchored in autobiography in the same explicit way as Kominsky-Crumb's, but because it is Day's actual star power within gaming/geek subculture, as well as her authenticity as a female representative of this culture that invites her core audience through the diegetic door, I would argue that the analogy is fairly continuous. Day was a *Buffy* fan before she was a potential slayer, and a *Warcraft* addict before she cast herself as Cyd Sherman, and in this way, she cements her role as authoritative commentator on a woman's experience of these worlds. Like Kominsky-Crumb, she has been uniquely successful, but, also like Kominsky-Crumb, she conveys a palpable loyalty to the truth of her experience and the value of the artistic endeavors she's created, as well as to their multivalent original sources of inspiration. Day and Kominsky-Crumb both realize that emotional honesty and vulnerability are not incommensurable with a high-context, authoritative history of their subcultures, and that, in fact, their personal histories of social ambivalence and impulsive decision making are central to any narratable experience of subcultural investment.

But before I get into my readings of those wonderful in-story moments of impulsive decision-making, I will propose my general thesis on the way these stories reach out in the current media landscape, so I can distinguish between their immediate appeals to contemporary readers, and their more sustainable narrative innovations. On the meta level, that is, in implicit address to an audience, I would argue that both *Need More Love* and *The Guild* comic function as invitations to potential fans and fan-artists. In realizing that women are at the center of crafting the 21st century narrative of where geek culture (comics and gaming respectively) has been and where it might go, young proto-geeks can look here to arm themselves with evidence that "experimental media" or "experimental storytelling" are not first the domain of male

computer programmers, and then their own works, merely derivative of that original innovation. Rather, there are multiple points of origin for any subcultural history, and we have the opportunity and obligation at our present moment of unprecedented archival access and literacy, to take all of these into account as we tell ourselves the story of our moment in cultural history. One reason I like this comics analogy, particularly, is that it serves as a reminder that experimental media does not also necessarily mean new apps on iPads, but rather, at the core, at the originary moment, means maximizing the storytelling potential of the materials at hand, in terms of production, distribution, as well as acknowledgment and appreciation of fans and fan practices. I think that Day offers an exciting model of this kind of distributed authorial attention, and she builds this multiplicity into her stories in a way that ensures that they will consistently engage readers at the level to which they are accustomed in the age of the Internet, in hard copy comics as in web video.

To offer a specific example from *The Guild* prequel comics, protagonist Cyd is "originally" drawn to the MMORPG in the game store because the female character on the front cover is "stacked," and Cyd is feeling less than beautiful as a result of her neglectful (and, it turns out, possibly gay) boyfriend. Offered as an isolated anecdote, this fits every stereotype about a certain brand of girl gamer, as well as girls in general. After all, isn't this kind of body image insecurity more the domain of a *Cathy* comic than a story that's supposed to tell me something about people who play a super sweet MMO and pwn everyone somehow? Kind of a comics version of *Galaxy Quest*? Allow me to contextualize. For one thing, readers of the comic had already gotten to know Cyd for three seasons of the incomparably dense webseries, and the topic had rarely been Cyd's breast size. The major relationship insecurity storyline was ascribed to a

male character, Zaboo (real name Sujan Balakrishnan Goldberg), who is portrayed as being just as much a prisoner of arbitrary gender norms as Cyd. But perhaps even more significantly, if a fanboy's authenticity alarm went off at this anecdote, it would be misplaced, for we know that Cyd (avatar name Codex) has in any case become a formidable player in the time between the origin story and the series, and so the fact that her motivations for picking up the game can be attributed to stereotypical feminine insecurity is irrelevant. Even within the comic, there is a much more complex origin story for Cyd's eventual decision to turn to MMOs: we learn from the first few pages that she is clinically depressed, a professional musician, part of a circle of friends via her boyfriend, who are trying to make it in popular music, an avid reader, a tetris player, etc. There are all kinds of reasons that she might enjoy the game.

In an even more specific narrative context, this moment is offered as a kind of solution to Cyd's negative experience with a therapist, who, frustrated by her depression, manifesting as ambivalence toward modern life, shoos her away with medication. Cyd fears the side effects of the anti-depressants, and so throws them out, taking refuge instead in the game store, which seems to offer an alternate, parallel path out of her current feeling of stasis. Again, we have a stereotypical reading that takes the anecdote out of its context -- ah, gamers are pathetic losers (mainstream America's kind term for people suffering from serious mental illness, such as depression), who have to seek pseudo-enjoyment of life, because they're unable to find the real kind. Or, we have the in-context, in-story take, which is, "ah, here we have a multi-talented young person, who's rightly suspicious of her therapist's dated understanding of what kind of social engagement is available online, and she takes matters into her own hands. Awesome."

I take this as a modern version of Kominsky-Crumb's famous panel from the first installment of "Goldie," published in one of the first issues of *Wimmen's Comix*: in the panel, the title character, a Kominsky-Crumb avatar, represents the anxieties occupying her mind over the course of her life thus far: it's a picture of a brain, divided up into sections. Years 0-17 were constituted by pressure from her parents, in the form of praise, demons, brainwashing and values. Years 17-22 were rife with pressure from her first husband, in the form of dependence, paranoia, and despair. The next years, "me now," are merely a "void of fear and uncertainty," but one which ultimately sends Goldie off in a car to San Francisco, where, as we now know, Kominsky-Crumb will find great artistic success and, eventually, happiness. (144) Just to make the parallel explicit, Cyd, too, feels inadequately cared for by her dad (who has sent her to therapy), and her boyfriend, who not only neglects her emotionally, but actually uses her creative interests to advance his own music career, without crediting her except with occasional scraps of affection. The parallels are plenty, and classic to 20-something coming of age narratives, particularly for women, who are in terms of the general population under, I think we can all agree, greater pressure than men to conform to norms of sexual and emotional expression. These norms have been generally policed since the 1950s by ubiquitous psychological establishment as a supplement to the already-significant social policing. (Of course the psychological establishment dates back much further than that, but with the advent of "pop psychology," its influence spread significantly to the general population.) One reason Zaboo in *The Guild* is a significant counter-example to this trend is that he is doubly oppressed by confusion about non-white masculinity.

In opposition to the story of Cyd, the dominant masculine narrative of getting into gaming is, well...not a narrative at all. It's taken as fact. "We are the fanboys, we are here, and we are

awesome." But Cyd's story, which I suspect speaks to their stories as well, is one of happenstance, the kind of weird confluence of events and historical possibilities that introduce us to our friends, true loves, and our paths. Certainly, my equation of this transparency with women writers is an oversimplification, but I can't help seeing a productive connection between this kind of honesty, so familiar to women's autobiographical writing across media, and new media possibilities for rhizomatically archiving our era of media in transition.