

Mortal Kombat: Guts, Girls, and Gore

Jonathan Gros

March 8, 2020

Mortal Kombat, a fighting game series well-known for its focus on gory and brutal deaths and fatalities, is experiencing a shift in its ideals and executions of character designs. When people normally hear about *Mortal Kombat*, the first thing that usually comes to mind is extreme violence and women fighters in skimpy clothing.¹ NetherRealm studio, who currently develops the series, is trying to get past this way of thinking. The two most recent titles in the series, *Mortal Kombat X* (2015) and *Mortal Kombat 11* (2019) have started a new shift into the feminist territory. These particular titles have introduced women fighters in a more “realistic” style in character design, and the female characters in these games have had a larger impact in the story than previous titles. Kronika sets into motion events that would never transpire without her actions. The introduction of Kronika into the *Mortal Kombat* series creates a shift in power in which empowered female characters have greater influence on plot and lore than previously; due to this, *Mortal Kombat 11* focuses on female power, which ultimately gives the series a fresh start and the freedom to focus on female characters, as opposed to the traditional male gaze-dominated route the series has taken in the past.

The male gaze is a theory that often is accused of being prominent in the *Mortal Kombat* series. This theory is all about the male perspective:

The Male Gaze is a term from Gaze theory that describes the tendency of works to assume a male viewpoint even when they do not have a specific narrative Point of View, and in particular

¹ The first *Mortal Kombat* game was responsible for the parental rating system ESRB.

the tendency of works to present female characters as subjects of a man's visual appreciation. (TV Tropes, 2019).

The *Mortal Kombat* series, until recent titles, has always had female characters in skimpy clothing and male characters who were walking masses of muscle. Though there is no narrator in the story sections of the games, the character design is obviously targeted to heterosexual male audiences. However, NetherRealm attempted to change this way of design to minimize backlash, but ultimately received more backlash due to the changes.

Despite NetherRealm attempting to change its games to appeal to a more feministic audience, there is still backlash that it has received for making changes in the realm of character design. Flashback to 2011: *Mortal Kombat 9* was released, and its female fighters had on clothing that basically resembled lingerie. The body proportions of these characters were over-sexualized;² female characters had large breasts, thin waists, and the costumes left little to the imagination. Female characters were more or less treated as eye candy for a male-dominated audience. Due to this, the game received backlash from some audiences for over-sexualizing women. NetherRealm studios responded to this backlash and attempted to fix this with their next game, *Mortal Kombat X* (2015). The female characters had more clothing on them, and their character design had more realistic proportions: smaller breasts and realistic body curves.

In the near-present day, the *Mortal Kombat 11* (2019) female characters now look even more realistic (as do all characters), with very realistic body proportions³ and even more clothing. The backlash about this design choice, however, is that the female characters are deemed “ugly”⁴ and have too much clothing while the male characters show more skin this time

² Thin waists, large breasts; little clothing.

³ Smaller breasts, realistic body curves.

⁴ Many Twitter users have complained about the design changes.

around. This perceived ugliness comes from the separation of true reality and the reality of the male gaze:

(often preceded by the) the assumption in visual and creative arts that the default or desired audience consists of heterosexual males, and inclusion of women in narrative or art should seek to please this audience with the objectification or sexualization of these depicted women (Dictionary.com, 2020).

What the main critics of this design choice are saying is that NetherRealm's decision to de-sexualize the female fighters is actually under the standards and thought process of what a male considers to be "sexy;" the standards of desirability are primarily from the male perspective. While the female fighters get more clothing, the male fighters reveal more skin. However, it must be stated that the majority of the "male" characters that are shirtless are not technically human.⁵ Also, *Mortal Kombat 11* introduces a new way of customizing fighters. All fighters now have unique gear variations that alter their appearances, and every character has six variations of skins that alter the full body appearance. Both male and female characters now have skins that vary the amount of clothing that all characters wear. The backlash is due to the base or main skin that each character receives⁶. Many critics complain that the old ways of female character design are actually more feministic, as the female characters are not subjugated to censorship by standards produced by the male gaze. Feminism has many different groups and views within this particular literary theory, so whether or not the new character designs are truly pro-feminist really depends on what kind of feminist a person is. Despite the controversy of actual character design, the importance and centrality of female characters in the new stories is undeniable.

⁵ Several of the male fighters are from different species that inhabit the *Mortal Kombat* universe.

⁶ Default appearance.

In order to understand the impacts and importance of female characters in *Mortal Kombat 11*, and somewhat in *Mortal Kombat X*, one would need a very brief background in the lore. All of the lore can be found within the games themselves, so this is a brief summary I have created: The *Mortal Kombat* universe is created by the One Being. From this One Being (who is sexless and genderless) came the Elder Gods.⁷ The Elder Gods overthrew the One Being and divided it into different parts that extend all throughout the different realms. *Mortal Kombat 11* introduces Titans⁸ who appeared some time before the Elder Gods. The *Mortal Kombat* universe is split up into different realms.⁹ Every realm has gods and goddesses that protect them from each other. For example, Earthrealm has the thunder god Raiden. Each realm is unique and has different qualities: Earthrealm, Outworld, Edenia, NetherRealm, Chaosrealm, Orderrealm, and Osh-tekk.¹⁰ The Elder Gods exist in their own realm called the Heavens, but this area is not mentioned often in the series. Every realm has access to the other through the use of portals. To maintain balance throughout the realms, the Elder Gods created the Mortal Kombat tournament. If one realm wanted to conquer another, they would have to send fighters to participate in the tournament. Whoever's fighter won the tournament would determine the outcome of the events to follow. The tournaments in the *Mortal Kombat* series focus on the interactions between Netherrealm, Outworld and Earthrealm.

The topic of time itself in the series is a bit tricky, especially now that Kronika has come into the spotlight. The series has actually reset itself twice. To sum things up quickly, the first time is during the apocalypse of the *Mortal Kombat* universe during *Mortal Kombat: Armageddon*. Right before he dies, Raiden sends visions to his past self, which ultimately

⁷ Similar to Greek and roman gods and goddesses.

⁸ Similar to the Greek titans.

⁹ Similar to Nordic mythology.

¹⁰ Each realm has unique qualities that separate them from each other.

changes the events of the second timeline. In *Mortal Kombat 11*, Kronika, the Titaness of Time, is disgusted by Raiden's actions, claiming he has brought an imbalance to the universe. She plans to reset history and start it over in her New Era, one without Raiden ever existing. By doing this, she brings the past versions of the characters in this game to the present. So effectively, older characters now walk with the younger version of themselves. It is a very complicated matter but by knowing these things, character references will now make a bit more sense. It is best to view the timelines in three phases: the original timeline will be called the gold timeline; the rebooted timeline will be silver; and the new, broken timeline will be bronze (its brokenness will be explained later).

The end of *Mortal Kombat X* marks the beginning of female characters having more important roles in the lore. Traditionally, in both the gold and silver timelines, a male fighter who is viewed as the main character that beats the end boss; normally either the thunder god Raiden, or the Chosen One fighter Liu Kang. In *Mortal Kombat X*, the focus is now on Cassie Cage, the daughter of the fan favorite superstar actor-turned fighter Johnny Cage. Shinnok¹¹, an Elder God of darkness that wants to destroy all realms, was originally beaten by Johnny Cage back in the beginning of the game. Shinnok later returns, and after a series of events, he kidnaps Johnny Cage and transforms himself into an all-powerful monster. Cassie Cage leads a small team of Special Defense Force members (SDF) and eventually makes it to Shinnok. Cassie, like Johnny, comes from a line of warriors that have abilities that can counteract Gods and Elder Gods, so she ends up defeating Shinnok. This was a big deal for the *Mortal Kombat* franchise as not only was Cassie a new character created for this game, part of the new era of characters, but

¹¹ Shinnok is an elder god of darkness. He was cast out of the Heavens by the other elder gods.

also she was a female fighter who beat an all-powerful boss. Flash forward to 2019's *Mortal Kombat 11*, this focus on female character importance is further expanded.

Mortal Kombat 11's story mode is split into twelve chapters, each having the player play as different characters in the game for about three to four fights each. Right out of the gate, chapter one focuses on Cassie Cage. Already, players are introduced to three female fighters: Cassie Cage- daughter of Johnny Cage and Sonya Blade, Sonya Blade- one of the original fighters in the *Mortal Kombat* universe who is also the general of the Earth Defense Force, and Jacqui Briggs- who is the daughter of Jax Briggs. All three female characters are high ranking officers and have positions of power. Cassie is seen leading an all-male combat strike force several times throughout the game. The very first fight to take place in the game is between Cassie and Sonya, as Cassie must beat her in a fighting practice to obtain the rank of Commander. Also, during this time, the player learns that Raiden has obtained Shinnok's amulet,¹² which gives him immense power. However, this amulet has somewhat corrupted him, leaving him very unforgiving and ruthless, but still an ally. The once caring and forgiving thunder god has almost become a tyrant. For the sake of not confusing the reader, there needs to be something addressed. During *Mortal Kombat 9* and *X*, several of the main characters have died and are resurrected as evil versions of themselves (zombies) called Revenants.¹³ Revenant Liu Kang (the fallen Chosen One) and Kitana are now emperor and empress and rule from the Cathedral of Shinnok in the Netherrealm as equals. Raiden has decided that the SDF should attack them in their realm and finally get rid of them. After a series of events that happen, Sonya Blade becomes trapped under some rubble in the Cathedral. She sacrifices herself by activating

¹² Shinnok's amulet contains the elder god's powers. Whomever wields the amulet has immense power, but also is highly susceptible to becoming corrupted.

¹³ Revenants are corrupted versions of characters. They are strictly evil, and serve exclusively either Shinnok or the sorcerer Quan Chi.

the countdown that will trigger the SDF bombs planted in the Cathedral, destroying the entire thing. Later, when Kronika combines the past with the present, young Sonya forms a relationship with Cassie. This mother-daughter bond that forms is very strong and unique. Young Sonya is essentially the same age as Cassie is. Young Sonya has not wedded Johnny Cage yet, so the relationship she has with Cassie is uninterrupted by male influence. During the story, Sonya gets kidnapped by both versions of her arch-enemy Kano. Cassie leads the assault and rescues her parents (young Johnny was captured as well). Before they can escape, amidst the fighting, older Kano holds young Johnny hostage at knifepoint while Sonya holds young Kano at gun point. The rule of this game is that whatever happens to the young version of each character affects the older version. Kano reminds Sonya that if he guts young Johnny, older Johnny will die and Cassie will cease to exist. Kano is basically boasting that he has the upper hand, but because of his boasting, he reminds Sonya how things work. Sonya calmly pulls out her gun and shoots young Kano, which instantly kills both versions of Kano at once. Sonya, a female character, kills two male characters at once with the single pull of a trigger. Cassie Cage and Sonya Blade are both strong female characters who represent the unity and bond of mother and daughter. This relationship is rekindled as both females learn how to navigate the confusing times together.

The next major female influence on the story is the bond between Kitana and Jade, and Kitana's influence on Outworld. In all three timelines, Kitana and Jade come from Edenia; Kitana is the princess of Edenia while Jade is her servant. Shao Kahn, a ruthless Outworld emperor who serves as a major antagonist for several of the games, captures Edenia. He kills the king, Jerrod, and marries the queen, Sindel. Shao Kahn raises the two girls and trains them up to be warriors. Shao Kahn also clones Kitana and attempts to make the ultimate female fighter¹⁴.

¹⁴ Shao Kahn attempts to create what he deems the perfect female fighter should be.

Both women are considered protagonists in the series, and they eventually side against their adopted father. In *Mortal Kombat II*, Jade eventually combats her revenant self. Revenant Jade blames Kitana for her death and threatens Jade that Kitana will get her killed. Jade vows that she will never abandon Kitana, and that their sisterly friendship will never be broken. During this encounter, Jade is quoted to say, "Then so be it. I would not trade Kitana's friendship for anything" and "She and I fight side-by side against Shao Kahn. His oppression cannot stand!" (Mortal Kombat Fandom, 2020). Jade eventually has Kotal Kahn (the ruler that took Shao Kahn's place- also her lover) spare the Tarkatan¹⁵ army. During this interaction, the player sees a female Tarkatan warrior for the first time in the series. Jade, a woman in hierarchy world of Outworld, is able to rise against the male power and spare an entire species. Later in the game, Kitana promises the Tarkatans and the Shokan¹⁶ army that they will find equality and peace in Outworld once Kronika is defeated. Sheeva, the female Shokan who leads the Shokan army, and Baraka, the Tarkatan leader take Kitana on her word. Eventually, Kotal and Shao face one another, and Kotal becomes paralyzed from the waist down. Kitana fights and kills Shao, ending his attempt at a new reign. Kitana becomes the new Kahn (now the term can also mean empress), becoming the first female ruler in Outworld. All armies within Outworld rally to her side, united, and eventually fight alongside her in the last stand against Kronika. This one woman managed to do something that no Kahn was ever able to do--unite all peoples in Outworld without having to fight rebellions or conquer new lands. Furthermore, Kitana does not use her sexuality to gain power. She not only participates in fighting which can be viewed as a male-dominated practice, but she also excels in it and defeats one of the most powerful male characters in the entire *Mortal*

¹⁵ Humanoids that are demon or orc-like in appearance.

¹⁶ Four-armed humanoid species.

Kombat universe on her own. This is a major change in the series as normally Liu Kang or Raiden are the only ones who can really face off and win against Shao Kahn.

As for the plot and lore of the *Mortal Kombat* series, there should be no denying that the introduction of Kronika has shaken the series down to its core. All events that occur in *Mortal Kombat 11*, all character interactions and lore revisions are set into motion by Kronika's design. Instead of the traditional Father Time, we now have a Mother Time. All of the character arches previously discussed in this paper would not happen if Kronika did not blend the past with the present. Kronika is the first character to be seen in the series who is of the Titan race. Since she has the power of time, the entire reality bends to her will. Time is something that all characters have to submit to, and NetherRealm chose to give this power to a female character. Players discover that Kronika has actually been the hidden antagonist, the one watching from the shadows, all the way back to the original *Mortal Kombat*. It is revealed that Kronika has two children- Shinnok, the fallen Elder God, and Cetrion, a literal "Mother Nature" character. The two siblings represent darkness and light in Kronika's grand design for reality. By killing Shinnok, Raiden has disrupted and upset the delicate balance that Kronika has diligently worked to maintain. Kronika is considered to be *Mortal Kombat 11's* main antagonist, meaning she is a wolf in sheep's clothing; she has all of the power that is typically associated with masculine characteristics, yet she is a woman. Kronika promises all of the minor or side antagonists that she will put them into power in her new era, which she can in fact do as she does win the struggle. Kronika's emergence is very interesting for the series as she is the most powerful character to receive a defined sex. Even the One Being was not given a sex or a gender. Kronika's presence and power in the series can be viewed as a response to the way women were typically portrayed

in nineteenth-century literature. This way of writing is summarized by Peter Barry, in his book “Beginning Theory”:

The representation of women in literature, then, was felt to be one of the most important forms of “socialization”, since it provided the role models which indicated to women, and men, what constituted acceptable versions of the “feminine” and legitimate feminine goals and aspirations. Feminists pointed out, for example, that in nineteenth-century fiction very few women work for a living, unless they are driven to it by dire necessity. Instead, the focus of interest is on the heroine’s choice of marriage partner, which will decide her ultimate social position and exclusively determine her happiness and fulfilment in life, or her lack of these. (Barry, 124)

Kronika turns this way of woman portrayal of female characters on its head. It is not stated how Kronika had her children, and there is not mention of a father. Kronika sets the events into motion all by herself (she still enlists mortals to do her bidding) and literally tries to rewrite history. She even has the power to view alternate timelines, and the ability to foresee events before they happen. Ultimately, she is defeated, but it takes the combination of Raiden’s and Liu Kang’s powers (literally, they become one person) to stop her. Raiden becomes mortal, and Kitana becomes a goddess. Kronika’s power is encased and amplified within her hourglass, which controls time itself. Even though she is killed, she does in fact accomplish her goal and resets time just before her defeat. The only beings left unaffected by the change are Raiden, Liu Kang, and Kitana. Kitana becomes a goddess, and together as equals, the two begin to reshape reality into one that is peaceful for all. For the first time in the series, man and woman have equal power and equal claim in the universe.

The *Mortal Kombat* series is in new territory that it has not previously visited. With Kronika’s revision of the lore, the series now has the freedom to explore female characters more than it has ever done before. In a way, Kronika has given the series a clean slate. Due to the complaints of the physical character designs, the series’ shift into female focus has been a rocky one. The series has taken big steps into this direction, but it has not whole-heartedly given the

spotlight to female characters. Male character influence has dominated this series, and even in its shift to female focus, *Mortal Kombat* still has assigned male characters as the ultimate protagonists. Moving forward, the series definitely has the potential to fully commit to the idea of female character focus, but whether or not the series will make this commitment remains to be seen. In the end, *Mortal Kombat* is moving into a new direction, even if for every step it takes forward, it takes half a step backwards.

Works Cited:

Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory - an Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*: Fourth Edition, Manchester University Press, 2017.

“List of Mortal Kombat Characters.” Mortal Kombat Wiki, mortalkombat.fandom.com/wiki/List_of_Mortal_Kombat_Characters

“Male Gaze.” Dictionary.com, www.dictionary.com/browse/male-gaze

“Male Gaze.” TV Tropes, tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MaleGaze

Mortal Kombat 11. Xbox One, 2019. Chicago, IL: NetherRealm Studios.