Fighting/Fat: Fighting Game Characters and the Emptiness of Video Game Fatness

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The fatness of fat characters in screen media, video games included, is well understood on an aesthetic level. However, this research asks: Is there a mechanical dimension to the fatness of these characters? Fighting games, with their need for common toolsets among playable characters, offer a useful ground to explore that question. While the characters in this study did not exhibit a “mechanical fatness,” they do reveal that certain combinations of aesthetic fatness with gameplay mechanics may offer a potential site of resistance to the pervasive fatphobic tropes present in video games.

Keywords: fat studies, diversity, body types, character design

Meet Rufus

Rufus is a character in Capcom’s 2009 fighting game Street Fighter 4, the first new release in that series in almost a decade, and one that contributed greatly to a rejuvenation of the competitive fighting game community worldwide.

It would not be unfair to characterize him as “a large yellow karate orb.” Rufus is a massive white man from the United States. He’s mostly bald, except for an extremely long braided ponytail, and wears a yellow and black motorcycle suit meant to evoke Bruce Lee’s famous outfit in the 1978 film Game of Death, but with the jacket unzipped almost all the way down to his navel. His face is defined by huge, round eyes and a bushy blond mustache trailing down both sides of his pear-shaped head.

The most noticeable bit of Rufus, however, is his physique: when I referred to him as an orb, it was because of the almost perfectly spherical shape of his torso. His arms and legs are somewhat thickset, but the man’s actual body is unrelievably round; not rotund, as in “having a vaguely rounded shape,” but round, as in almost a perfect circle. The game’s official website, captured by the Wayback Machine in November of 2009, gives his “three sizes” as B180/W250/H215 and his height and weight as 195 cm/185 kg,1 making him approximately 6’4” tall, 400 pounds, and—measuring around the waist—8 feet in circumference.

As a video game character, there are multiple angles at which Rufus can be interpreted or read from. On a purely narrative and aesthetic angle, his design feels distinctly parodic: “what if Bruce Lee were a clueless fat guy from the American southwest?” Mechanically speaking, on the other hand, he rather reads against type. One might expect a very fat character to move slowly and clumsily, but Rufus is quite agile, attacking quickly and moving at a decent pace around the screen. “Tier listings”2 in fighting games are subjective and dynamic, based as they are on emergent player strategies and tournament results, but in the early days of SF4, Rufus was a fairly high tier character who found use by big name competitive players.3

While some work exists, there is not much extant scholarship on the representation and use of fatness, and tropes related to fatness that is specific to video games. Yet because of their nature, video games—and particularly playable video game characters—offer us an advantageous position from which to ask: what does fatness, or being fat, mean? By looking at characters like Rufus, we can consider not just how the character looks and acts, and what they are capable of, but also what they were constructed to be capable of. Rufus’s spherical, high-kicking martial arts body and fatness were built from the ground up, whole cloth4—what does the result tell us about our cultural concepts of fatness?

This research asks how video game fatness conveys and constructs itself. I examined playable fat video game avatars specifically in terms of their mechanical limitations and affordances: what they were capable of doing, or more accurately, what the designers felt was appropriate to allow them to do, particularly compared to the more body-normative characters in the same roster. In this way, I could identify if fatness had—in addition to the existing aesthetic and narrative dimensions—a mechanical meaning; was there some gameplay mechanic or capability that relied on that fatness to logically function?

The answer, ultimately, was no. Rather than a fatness that was “built into” the bodies in question, what I found was a fatness that was effectively draped like a costume over an otherwise featureless set of interlocking game mechanics. Drawing on the work of Kathleen LeBesco and Sabrina Strings, I discuss the fatness of video game characters—as exemplified by fat fighting game characters in particular, where fat characters are more commonly represented, versus being more rare in other genres—as the digital equivalent of a “fat suit,” an aesthetic and conceptual outer layer that cues us to understand and read the underlying 3D skeleton in particular ways.

Fatness in Video Games

While writing, criticism, and scholarship looking at the connection between fatness and video games exists, it isn’t an extensive body of work. Some relatively early work in game studies does address it, however; one of Ian Bogost’s earliest (2006) pieces, “Video-games and ideological frames,” discusses the connection between food, fatness, and game mechanics in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. He discusses the game’s requirement that main character CJ eat to keep his stamina up, a scenario that can lead to CJ
becoming visibly fat, which then impacts a number of his physical abilities (e.g., sprinting and climbing). Bogost’s analysis centers on the cost of available food in the game; “healthier” food is more expensive, and he argues this reflects real-world conditions regarding access to nutritious food. This analysis touches on fatness, but fatness itself—and the intensely basic, facile way that the game approaches it—is tangential to Bogost’s core point about class and food access.

Later work, both academic and critical in nature, addresses these issues more directly. Game designer and critic Anshuman Iddamsetty’s (2018) piece “How video games demonize fat people” for The Outline discusses how (mis)representation of fat bodies in games has its roots not just in cultural images of fatness, but in industry practices as well. She discusses statements from developers and creative leadership at studios such as Insomniac Games about how the creation of fat body options for playable characters was deliberately pushed off the table in favor of other choices (like more varied clothing, etc.). This is in addition to numerous examples she discusses of fat characters portrayed as villainous, gluttonous, greedy, disgusting, and in many other ways intensely negative.

I myself discussed many of the same tropes and stereotypes that Iddamsetty discusses in her piece in a Game Developers Conference talk (Harper, 2015) called “Portrayals and pitfalls of fatness in games.” In the talk, I mention a number of persistent tropes about fat characters that see common use in video games, almost all of which portray fat bodies in a decidedly negative light: a constant association with food (and by extension gluttony), ill-fitting clothes that visually center a cartoonishly large stomach, the use of farts or vomit as “special attacks,” being portrayed as delusional or unintelligent, and more. Both Iddamsetty and I came to similar conclusions despite using different core examples in doing so: in a majority of cases, fatness in video games is a way to vilify characters, to make them disgusting or off-putting. While we both cite cases of characters that escape this—for example, we both mention Ellie from the Borderlands series of games as a more nuanced or complicated example, as also noted by Agata Waszkiewicz (see below)—they are by far the exception.

Monsters, Villains, and Nonconformance: Fat Characters in the Margins

This construction of the fat body as disgusting or pitiable has resonance with work on fatness in other screen media. Amy Gullage (2014) discusses episodes of the sitcom Friends where the character Monica is presented in a fat suit as “Fat Monica,” reifying cultural notions that fat bodies are sexually undesirable, particularly for women. Katherine Sender and Margaret Sullivan’s look at The Biggest Loser (Sender & Sullivan, 2008) emphasizes how that show constructs fatness as emblematic of laziness or a lack of drive and willpower. While Johnanna Ganz (2012) found the show Weeds to have “subtle” pushback, that analysis also emphasized the show’s portrayal of fat characters (particularly young fat women) as pitiable gluttons. Clearly, the aforementioned negative tropes of fat portrayal in video games are part of a symbolic cultural construction of fatness with some durability and history to it.

Mackenzie Edwards (2018) discusses the TV fat character trope of the “slob”—focusing on the emblematic example of Homer Simpson—and notes in particular that a key quality of the slob, in addition to fatness, is their perceived or demonstrated lack of intelligence.

Homer Simpson has never been portrayed as an intelligent character (which is typical in portrayal of a slob), but in becoming fatter he becomes even less intelligent. It is his excessive weight that leads to a lack of brain power. When he becomes an emblem of excess and indulgence, his intelligence is curtailed. (p. 11)

She goes on to connect this troubling depiction with deeply ableist views on disability as well, emphasizing that perceived intelligence, an ability to be productive in capitalist society, and fatness are all deeply intertwined in the representation of characters fitting the “slob” archetype.

Sarah Stang (2018) takes analysis of these tropes in the games space a step further, connecting how fatness is used in video game character design with monstrousness. She argues that for many villainous video game characters—be they disposable routine enemies or big, plot-centric bosses—their evil or vile nature is visually emphasized by their fatness, which is “associated with evilness, compulsion, madness, disability, disease/infection, and body horror. As such, these games all reveal and propagate the fear of non-normative bodies by presenting fat characters as horrific, repulsive, and grotesque” (p. 2). She also notes the gendered dimensions of this: fat evil women are often fat in a way that emphasizes fertility or fecundity (i.e., the Broodmothers of Dragon Age), whereas evil men are fat in a way that emphasizes gluttony, lust, or a lack of moral fiber.

Waszkiewicz (2021) similarly makes connections between fatness, gender, and villainousness, a concept orthogonal to the monstrousness that Stang discusses. Waszkiewicz argues that thanks to numerous cultural standards about fatness, “fat becomes a threat to be avoided, while the ideal thin state is defined by negation” (p. 167), which in turn contributes to the portrayal of fat characters as villains and monsters.

In arguing for more resistant examples/readings, they point in particular to Ellie, a nonplayer character in the Borderlands series of games. For Waszkiewicz, Ellie—an extremely large woman who, in her dialogue across the games in the series, is confident in her sexuality and attractiveness (see also Harper, 2014)—“represents a strong, independent, and both body- and sex-positive woman, but her femininity is once again coded as non-normative” (p. 171).

However, the concept of the fat monster or villain is an area with a degree of reader resistance as well. I have previously discussed (Harper, 2017) how some online communities of larger queer men have attempted to reclaim the monstrous body as a symbol of power and esteem rather than a gross villain. This is not necessarily perfect, however; I note that part of this reclamation effort is the construction of monsters such as the orc into bodies consistent with hegemonic masculinity, that is, “big” but heavily muscled, etc. However, the talk also discusses games such as Mitch Alexander’s Tusks; in which the orc is built not as a monster, but as an alternative, where many body types and gender expressions push back on the sort of constructions observed by Stang and Waszkiewicz.

The Method

The original study from which this analysis is drawn had one central goal: to analyze fat playable characters in terms of their mechanical and systemic affordances, not separate from, but in the context of their aesthetic presentation as fat. The initial design used Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton’s (2006) “Game analysis: developing a methodological toolkit for the qualitative study of games”
as a starting point, particularly their concepts of an “object inventory” and an “interaction map.” The result was a textual analysis of fat video game characters who could be controlled and thus considered in terms of what they could do. What actions were the characters allowed to take inside the game’s playable systems? Did those actions feel impacted by the character’s fatness, particularly in comparison to the body normative members of the game’s playable cast?

The core question guiding this inquiry is this: What meaning does fatness have at the system or mechanical level, for video game characters? Put a different way: what is “fat” about the gameplay of these characters, if anything? Their visual design and narrative framing show a clearly defined fatness, but does this translate into gameplay and mechanics?

In the same way that Consalvo and Dutton’s entire proposed toolkit focuses the analysis on (for lack of better phrasing) the “game-y” parts of the text, the approach of this study was to center the role of game mechanics and gameplay on the meaning-making and interpretive process that textual analysis seeks to explore (McKee, 2003). As Fernández-Vara notes in Introduction to Game Analysis (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 132), “[t]he goal is not only to admire how the game is done, but how the formal elements relate to player experience.”

Let us consider the aforementioned yellow karate orb, Rufus, in terms of analysis for purposes of this study. There are multiple layers to Rufus as a playable character that could be considered in terms of, for example, the formal elements mentioned in Fernández-Vara’s analysis guide:

- Aesthetics: What are his visuals (both core design and animations)? What does it look like when he moves, acts, stands still, etc.? Similarly, what are his sounds? Does he have voice acting, and if so, what is it like?
- Narrative: Where does Rufus fit into the story of his game (in this case, Street Fighter 4)? What sort of lines of dialogue is he given? What are his relationships to other characters?
- Mechanics/affordances: What can Rufus do in the context of his game’s possibility space (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003)? What verbs can the player use to take action, while using/inhabiting6 Rufus’s fat video game body?
- System relationships: How do Rufus’s various in-game abilities relate to other playable characters in the same title? Are there actions he can take that others cannot, and vice versa? Do some actions that are shared between Rufus and other playable characters “feel” or act differently when used by him, versus being used by others?

This is by no means an exhaustive list of the possibilities, but these were the guiding principles that went into the data collected on the characters being analyzed in this study.

For each character analyzed, time was spent engaging in actual gameplay with the character. This was an opportunity not just to see their mechanics firsthand, but also to get a sense of the character’s “feel,” for lack of better phrasing: when a player has their hands on the controller/keyboard and is actively using the character being analyzed, what is the subjective experience of that, and how does that subjective experience intersect with the character’s fatness?

Why Fighting Games?

While the very initial broad sample included characters from various genres, those considered in this more focused study were drawn from fighting games specifically. The findings discussed here were based on, and are applicable to, fat characters in effectively any genre. However, in the initial sample (which was then expanded for this work to include newer or otherwise overlooked fighting game fat character options), there was a quality fighting games possess at the design level that makes them distinctively useful for illustrating these findings.

One of the key thematic principles of fighting games is the notion of balance (see Paul [2012] and Harper [2013]): a level playing field for the competitors. A part of what creates that balance in fighting games is the notion of shared tools or move sets: there need to be actions which are common to most (typically all) of the playable roster, to build a common set of tools for players to rely on.

In a game like Street Fighter, for example, both Ryu and Zangief—two playable characters with sharply contrasting design philosophies, both in terms of their system mechanics and presentation elements—have access to three types of punch, three types of kick, a close-range grapple/throw, the ability to jump and crouch, and so forth. While those tools may execute with different properties, their generalized use cases are the same: whether it be a little faster or a little slower, a punch is still a punch. Even if some characters visually differ on this axis—such as M. Bison, whose six “normal” attacks are aesthetically all punches, as befits his “boxer” design—the mechanical side is effectively the same considered in terms of frame data, hit/hurtboxes, and the like.

This expectation that every character in the roster will have more or less the same list of mechanical tools with the same core functions is not necessarily absent in other genres, but it’s a core expectation in fighting games, which makes them well suited for a study where fat characters are then weighed against their body normative counterparts in terms of the use and effectiveness of their shared verbs/actions.

The design elements and tropes I’ll be discussing here are by no means limited to fighting games. Fat characters with the same issues (for good or for ill) are not numerous, but they do appear across nearly every genre in the medium. As I discuss below, however, fat fighting game characters often provide options that are more conducive or supportive of reparative or complicated readings.

The (Aesthetic) Fatness of Fighters

In total, 13 playable characters were directly analyzed for this study:

Rufus (SF4), E. Honda (various Street Fighter incarnations), Chang Koehan (King of Fighters), Earthquake (Samurai Shodown), Fat Princess (PlayStation All Stars), Goldlewis Dickinson (Guilty Gear Strive), Cheng Sinzan (Fatal Fury), Raiden (Fatal Fury and KoF), Wario (Smash Bros.), King K. Rool (Smash Bros.), Bob (Tekken), Ganryu (Tekken), and with great effort, Helga (from the original SNES Clayfighter).

In instances when characters were available in multiple series games (such as Bob or Earthquake), efforts were made to play them in as many different titles as were available; for example, the analysis of Earthquake includes both his appearances in sprite-based 2D versions of Samurai Shodown on the NeoGeo, as well as his more recent 3D version in the series remake.

While I am aware of other characters that exist who could fit the study, I was unable to get direct access to play many of them, such as Art of Fighting’s Wang Koh San or Mortal Kombat’s Bo Rai Cho. In those cases, or in more edge case situations such as
Distinctly were not wildly, almost hyperexaggeratedly. Moving, attacking, and even in for characters with bodies that were muscle-big,12 and who were in some way constructed by the text as, if not fat, then at least some degree of visible muscle with obvious paunch—unsurprising, given that they are all characters from SNK franchises such as *King of Fighters* and *Fatal Fury*, as is Cheng Sinzan. Bob from *Tekken* has a slightly more realistically proportioned version of the top-heavy, spherical torso that Rufus and Cheng Sinzan show, with the emphasis on “slightly”; *Guilty Gear*’s Goldlewis Dickinson also has this body shape, but with thicker limbs that give him less of the “orb with hands and feet” feel that Rufus and to a lesser extent Bob show.

Of course, there is also the issue of “bellied jiggle”; while in the older, 2D sprite-based games this is less of an issue, in more modern 3D titles, this is highly frequent. *Tekken*’s Bob features a small degree of “jiggle physics” in this regard, as does the 3D version of Earthquake in the recent *Samurai Shodown* remake, but it is more or less restrained. *SF4*’s Rufus, on the other hand, jiggles wildly, almost hyperexaggeratedly. Moving, attacking, and even in some cases merely standing there not doing anything causes Rufus’s massive belly to sway to and fro.

Both E. Honda and Ganryu have the pop culture standard of a sumo’s form: thickset but with as much muscle as fat, with a knees bent low stance that makes them appear shorter than they are. One of the outliers, King K. Rool, gets a partial pass—an anthropomorphic crocodile is likely a little less subject to the body norms applied to fully human-appearing ones—but he still shares a similar body shape to other fat characters, including fellow *Smash* playable Wario: a wide, somewhat squat body. Notable in particular in K. Rool’s case is his golden breastplate, which specifically is molded to the shape of a pair of vaguely flabby pecs and a large, round belly with an outie belly button.

The only two playable women in this sample, Fat Princess and Helga, are only slightly similar, but are nonetheless consistent with broader cultural imaginaries of fat women’s bodies. Helga’s is perhaps the most recognizable. Her clay model form is a helmeted, braided head with horned helmet atop a hyperexaggerated opera-valkyrie body; her upper torso is made of two gigantic shapes for her breastplate, while her lower body is a very rotund, vaguely blob-like shape followed by two incongruously thinner legs. She deliberately invokes the kind of cartoonish parody opera diva that Bugs Bunny riffs on in *What’s Opera, Doc*. Fat Princess has a somewhat similar body shape: a wide, chubby cheeked face over a body in a pink dress that is primarily two massive breasts and a vague, wide cone underneath as her skirt, with two dainty feet (and barely any visible leg).

The cultural signifiers of fatness that were discussed above—particularly the design tropes common to fat characters—are also here in abundance. At least a third of these characters have some core design connection to food or eating. Fat Princess and Earthquake in particular either eat during some of their moves, or in postmatch “win poses,” and Wario has at least one special technique that involves chomping down on effectively anything he can sink his teeth into, up to and including other fighters, explosives, or his own motorcycle. Bob’s entire set of special moves, as named via the in-game command list, are all references to food and cooking. Attacks that involve belching or farting also make multiple appearances, particularly in *Earthquake* and Wario’s cases; while I was not able to play him directly, *Mortal Kombat*’s Bo Rai Cho also has these sorts of attacks, which are clearly visible in an official downloadable content trailer featuring him for *Mortal Kombat X*.

A nontrivial number of characters in the sample also fall into the “slob” archetype discussed by Edwards, above. In particular, characters like Wario, Earthquake, and Chang Koehan are standouts, here, specifically in terms of perceptions of their reduced intelligence. Chang even has an “alternate version” in one *King of Fighters* game—Chang as a young, thin muscle dad—described as “Smart Chang,” an official name that draws a sharp and purposeful contrast to his “normal” version.

*Street Fighter*’s Rufus, however, takes the prize on the insidious “fat = unintelligent” front by a long mile—one of his defining character traits in the game’s fiction is his inability to tell wildly different people apart based on physical appearance. This leads to numerous cases of mistaken identity where he is convinced by blond he meets is his “rival,” Ken Masters (who conversely has never even met Rufus), a story beat that was exploited by Capcom themselves in a trailer for crossover game *Street Fighter x Tekken* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=64DNpYiqlEc). In the trailer, Rufus, passing *Tekken*’s Bob in a restaurant bathroom, immediately attacks him, confusing Bob for Ken and claiming that “[Bob]
character tropes, to be applied to fat characters. Raiden, Goldlewis, Earthquake, and Chang Koehan in particular can be described thoroughly as “lumbering behemoths” (Goldlewis even makes the earth shake as he walks, in the game’s anime-like story mode). However, even massive Earthquake is a ninja (the incongruity of a gigantic Texan ninja being, one imagines, part of the joke) and his special moves reflect it: he can swiftly teleport out of danger, then appear midair and body slam his opponents, or roll deftly across the arena at high speed.

As a converse example, consider the fighting game Arcana Heart, where the game’s powerful, extremely slow grappler character (a genre staple) is a megalomaniacal 11-year-old Japanese schoolgirl prodigy named Kira Daidouji, who sits in a swimsuit in the middle of a titanic, blob-like golem she magically controls. Clearly, if the developers wish to have a character’s attacks take on a specific gameplay quality, the range of potential aesthetic and narrative “explanations” is vast indeed.

In regard to this within the sample, Rufus again is a standout character, as is Tekken’s Bob. As stated before, Rufus’s numerous special moves—elegantly based on dynamic, kung fu cinematic-style actions—are often swift and acrobatic, with everything from diving kicks to rolling spins part of his repertoire. Although Tekken’s very slightly more realistic tone means Bob’s displays of acrobatic might are more infrequent, he too moves with a speed and grace that martial arts media (video game or not) rarely affords to his body type. Bob’s in-game motto, “Speed and weight,” is reflected in his special moves.

There are other, non-attack-based verbs available to characters in these games as well—guarding, jumping, moving, and evasion being central ones—but when it came to those actions, there was typically no observable common thread or difference in the characters of the sample versus their peers, with very infrequent exceptions (such as the noted lack of a double jump in the case of Goldlewis). While some characters moved or jumped slower/faster/higher/shorter than others, this was an observable difference within the body normative playable characters as well. Thus, it’s difficult to conclude there is anything specific about fatness that demands a certain common approach or quality to the gameplay mechanics of a fighting game character viewed separately from the aesthetic. In fact, compared with fat characters in games of other genres, characters like Rufus, Bob, and even Earthquake make it apparent that the exact opposite is the case through their swift and acrobatic, rather than slow and powerful, special attacks.

**Wearing Fatness Like a Suit**

Looking back on our core research question—what does fatness have at the system or mechanical level, for video game characters?—the observable answer based on the characters in this study is: there isn’t one. More accurately said, there is no “mechanical fatness” for these characters; rather, the “fatness” of their gameplay mechanics is understood through the lens of their aesthetics. When Kira Daidouji chokeslams someone into the sidewalk, it’s because she’s a small child riding a super-strong magical water golem; when Goldlewis Dickinson does it, it’s because he’s a *gachimuchi*25 badass. The end result (a high-powered chokeslam) is the same; the only thing that’s truly different is the wrapper.

It is in making sense of this apparent lack of definition that the work of both Kathleen LeBesco and Sabrina Strings is useful. Both scholars have written at length about the cultural construct that is fatness, and two arguments from their work in particular—LeBesco
connecting fat suits to blackface, and Strings connecting fatness itself to Stuart Hall’s concept of the “floating signifier”—are useful lenses for looking at the holistic fatness of the characters in this sample and, indeed, in games in general.

LeBesco (2005) makes an explicit connection between fat suits (see also the abovementioned Gullage, 2014) and minstrel shows, citing the writing of Paul Campos (2004), who in his book *The Obesity Myth* puts fat suits with other fat performances in the label of “fat drag,” claiming that fat drag effectively occupies a similar rhetorical and cultural space:

In fact, fat drag does fill the precise cultural space once occupied by blackface. When Gwyneth Paltrow dons a fat suit, she is doing something, within the context of the culture in which she is a movie star, is essentially identical to what movie star Al Jolson did when he blackened his skin. In each case, a celebrity engages in a carnivalesque transgression of perhaps the most crucial social boundary within the celebrity’s culture, in order to exploit both the shock value and the comic potential inherent in this sort of boundary breaking. (2004, p. 86)

LeBesco herself is more cagey about this connection—“despite some commonalities, it would be foolish to overestimate the similarities” (p. 236)—but nevertheless similarly describes a context where the performance of a marginalized identity (either Blackness or fatness) is performed for the presumed entertainment benefit of the hegemonic classes, but also as a way to manage their anxiety about the perceived “threat” of their targets. In speaking of Gwyneth Paltrow in a fat suit in the film *Shallow Hal* (referring to Campos [2004] speaking on the same), she mentions that the fat suit is “a reassurance that she needs the suit to become Rosemary—that she’s in no danger of a slide into obesity” (2005, p. 238). Effectively, the artifice of the performance both reinforces social stigma of fatness, while reassuring the audience that they are safe from becoming that very thing.

Sabrina Strings (2019a, 2019b) also connects race and fatness, though in a different way. She connects the origins of fatphobia (particularly in the United States and Europe) directly to race and racism: in the colonial-era project of race creation by white culture, fatness became a tool for the power structures of the time. Her work shows, citing the writing of Paul Campos (2004), who in his book *The Obesity Myth* puts fat suits with other fat performances in the label of “fat drag,” claiming that fat drag effectively occupies a similar rhetorical and cultural space:

LeBesco and Strings come to their arguments on fatness through the lens of looking at race. Like fatness, race is an experience that is both embodied and conceptual; race and fatness are intersectional and thus not cleanly separable. However, my purpose in discussing this work here is that LeBesco and Strings both use fatness’s connection to race to describe scenarios which emphasize how empty fatness can be on a conceptual level. For LeBesco, the fatness of the fat suit is a mirage: a performance of some imaginary construct of what fatness is envisioned to be, rather than an embodied performance of its “realities.” Strings argues that the imaginary construct of fatness has little to do with specific materiality; instead, what counts as “fat” is whatever the cultural machinery of (in the case of her work) race needs it to be.

Looking at the relationship between the aesthetic fatness of the characters in this study—not just their visual elements, but also their overall narrative framing and presentation—alongside the lack of a definitively observable mechanical fatness, I believe that this scholarship provides a way to understand the nature of that relationship. Taking into account that playable game characters are a mixture of mechanical affordances and presentational qualities, if this analysis determined little to nothing in the mechanical layer that was discernibly and ineluctably “fat,” we are left with the presentational layer: the audio-visual design, the aesthetic and narrative framing. Our question then becomes, why these specific presentational choices?

If we use LeBesco and Strings as a lens, then one answer becomes clear: these characters are performing fatness. If we consider the mechanical affordances of a character like Bob or Rufus as their “physical self,” or as close to one as a virtual space can provide, then choosing to make them look, sound, and act the way they do is effectively equivalent to putting that “physical self” in a fat suit. Cultural ideas about fatness in the form of tropes and design elements are effectively hung off the mechanical skeleton, making that skeleton recognizable and legible to us in specific ways.

Thus we see the discursive creation of the meaning of their actions through the lens of our existing cultural understandings of fatness. Hall refers to the knowledge gained from the act of classification (i.e., assigning the floating signifier of race to a particular group) as a “soother”:

“[h]ere, each of these knowledges is functioning not as the provision of the truth, but as what makes men and women sleep well in their beds at night” (p. 365).
Knowing that things are in their proper designated category makes us feel secure that the world is working the way it’s supposed to; seeing fat characters that act in ways consistent with our understanding—drawn from a fatphobic cultural lexicon—“soothes” us in the same way.

Of course Chang Koehan is slow and powerful: he’s fat, and these are traits we culturally associate with bulk and heft. Conversely, the incongruity of Rufus and Bob is that their trope-laden fat bodies don’t move, inside the system, in ways that we would expect. Rather than being slow or plodding, they’re acrobatic and light on their feet, but that lightness is understood in opposition to our cultural expectations and tropes of fatness. Paradoxically, it means that in having qualities that read against type for what fatness is “supposed” to be, characters like Rufus reify it instead. One could even argue that the adherence to fat character design tropes other than the agility/acrobatic-ness are there to make the nonconforming elements feel less threatening.

Are You a Good (Fat) Witch, or a Bad (Fat) Witch?

In thinking about what the implications of this work are, I found myself looking at the entire sample, ranging from the totally expected and trope-y to the more complicated characters living on the edge of tropes with the potential for resistant readings. Now I was Glinda from The Wizard of Oz, inquiring: “are you a good representation, or a bad representation?” Are you characters that present a positive or affirming range of readings for a fat player, or are you there solely to use tropes about fatness for the sake of doing a bit?

There were a few unqualified instant answers—I am unlikely to accept, even under torture, that SamSho’s Earthquake is anything other than an unmitigated fatphobic disaster, despite his handful of trope-breaking special moves—but in truth, my conclusion was that for most of these characters, it’s not that cut and dry. After all, my experience critiquing Overwatch’s Roadhog is that while I found him a vile morass of tropes, other fat players found him empowering and enjoyable, and the reasons why that they articulated were perfectly valid, if sometimes specific to the person making the argument.

Rufus is really an excellent example. As noted previously, the SF universe truly paints him as a delusional fool, someone so box-of-rocks clueless that he’d confuse two vastly different silhouettes just because the person he’s looking at has blond hair and knows a martial art. Both in the games and the extended canon content of the series, nobody takes Rufus seriously. The visual design of his model is bizarre and hyperexaggerated, particularly the way his belly moves. To me, all of these are qualities that say: “Rufus is a joke, and more critically, Rufus is a joke at fat people’s expense.” Going back to LeBesco, he is doing “fatface” or Campos’s (2004) “fat drg”: they dressed a character up in the visual and cultural language of fatness for the amusement benefit of nonfat people.

On the other hand, there really are very few fat playable characters in any genre, let alone fighting games, that move and behave like Rufus does. He is a fat character with swift, certain movements. There’s a degree of amateurish showmanship to his attack animations, but they work, and they’re not the flailing of someone who doesn’t know the fundamentals of beating people up professionally as you might see in other “joke” characters—after all, even Dan Hibiki, the most notorious joke character in the history of the genre, still knows how to throw a punch.

The result is a scenario where I keep asking myself what it would feel like to have a version of Rufus that has all of the latter and little to none of the former. Would he be an engaging character as a very serious and skilled martial artist who just happens to be very fat? Does he work? Would he be “good representation” in that case, versus “bad representation”? How inseparable are Rufus’s comically gyrating and wobbling fat body and his “clueless clown” personality? What are the implications for design of fat characters, and the portrayal of fatness, in games that this question points to?

As with the aforementioned issue of Roadhog, I don’t think there is, or even can be, a satisfying answer vis-a-vis if Rufus would be “good representation” if he got the “Smart Chang” treatment. So much of that is dependent on the reader’s subject position relative to the character being considered that “is it good or bad representation?” is effectively a pointless question from the jump.

However, if fatness really is a floating signifier, then can we float it in more prosocial directions? Many of the scholars whose work I’ve discussed in this article believe that this reparative or resistant project is possible, and I am inclined to agree. If anything, this research emphasizes that games may be even more suited to it than other screen media, because of their sheer constructedness. As I said earlier, Rufus’s fat body in SF4 was built from whole cloth, aesthetically and mechanically. We can not only give him a trope-defying fat design, we can then let the player inhabit that design, literally do things with it.

What I do know, though, is that almost nobody has tried it yet in the triple-A game dev space. Before the arrival of Goldlewis in Guilty Gear Strive, “Smart Chang” in KoF 2000 as a secret striker character—more like a piece of equipment than fully realized character, really—was about as close as we got, and as noted earlier, what they largely did in the process of making him “Smart” is remove his visual fatness. Even Goldlewis Dickinson has his issues in terms of fatphobic tropes (the ground shakes when he walks in story scenes, for example), but much like a fat created avatar in Dragon’s Dogma (see Harper, 2019), this is something that could very easily be attributed to his colossal physical might.

On the other hand, the Earthquakes, and Fat Princesses, and Cheng Sinzans of the genre very definitely don’t appear to even make the effort at all. Much as with the discussion of sexualized designs for women characters in the media, the issue is less “should they be there or not?” and instead becomes “are they the only option the reader is presented with?” What does their fatness signify? In these characters’ case, the same things it signifies in other screen media and cultural texts: otherness, glutony, lack of morals, and so forth. Are there alternatives? Largely speaking, no; the closest we come are complicated cases like Bob and Rufus, which at least provide the potential for resistant reading, but do not actively reject or attempt to foreclose the tropes involved.

One also wonders: why are fat characters represented so much more fully in fighting games, compared to other genres? Any explanation I could offer at this point would be conjecture at best, but one wonders if it is the precise thing that makes characters like Rufus work in the first place—the incongruity of mechanical capability and trope-filled representation—that is responsible.

What’s required at this point is for devs and character designers to actually want something different. Looking at Rufus, I might paraphrase comedian Hannah Gadsby (2020): “this is not a photograph, it’s a painting, which makes this”—and here I point at the harmful, trope-y bits of Rufus’s design, just as Gadsby does to a painting in her Netflix special Douglas—“a decision!” Engaging that decision, however, means engaging the broader cultural topic of fatphobia and fatphobic tropes, the cultural context in which decisions like “wouldn’t a fat Bruce Lee be funny and gross” get made.
In addition to these concerns of meaning-making and content, this work also invites some methodological questions that should be addressed, if work looking at fat characters in video games continues. In both this study and my previous work on avatar creators, what constituted “fat” or “fatness” was ultimately a judgment call informed by both my life experience as a fat person, and my expertise as a media critic/scholar. That judgment call was made necessary, however, by a lack of concrete criteria for determining if a virtual body—a 2D sprite from an aging NeoGeo title, for example, versus the increasingly photoreal 3D models of a game like Tekken—“counts” as fat.

One approach may be to develop a rubric for that process, bearing in mind the aforementioned work in fat studies that casts into question outdated and problematic markers like body mass index. However, I think it is equally possible that any such set of “standard” criterion will be inherently flawed or, indeed, even harmful to the work in question. More work should be done on identifying what the benefit of such a rubric would be, and how it might be deployed toward game bodies that have no true materiality.

I bring this work to a close by exhorting developers and character designers to have the guts to take a step away from trope-dependent design. Make a fat character who defies our expectations, because you are literally creating them from whole cloth, and you can do that—the science is behind you. There’s no law and indeed, no technical and mechanical limitation that says a fat character must also be foolish or delusional, or wear ill-fitting clothing, or be obsessed with food. More importantly, hopefully this research will encourage readers who do believe those limitations to be necessary to interrogate why they believe that to be so. Otherwise, there will be no growth. Be it “good” or “bad” representation, what we will see is the same tropes repeating, forever.

Notes

1. Via https://web.archive.org/web/20091123194129/http://www.capcom.co.jp/sf4/rufus.html. It should be noted that the breast/waist/hip ratios given in Japanese anime and games in this way for animated or otherwise non-real characters are typically more than a bit divorced from reality, as these numbers might suggest.

2. As in, a relative ranking of a character’s expected performance against other playable characters in the game—a “high tier” character is more favored to win in a broad range of matchups, compared to a “low tier” one.

3. Even 5 years into the game’s life cycle, Rufus was being used by both Justin Wong and Ricki Ortiz, both well-known and successful names in competitive fighting games: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2arOGwkOBKA is a match of both fighting each other as Rufus which highlights his in-game speed nicely.

4. Atypical to current video game design trends, there wasn’t even motion capture used for the core of his 3D rig (cf. https://playwinner.com/news/2009/12/22/new-japanese-official-super-street-fighter-4-blog-translatio.html), so his ground-up construction is effectively total.

5. Literally a salad—every fast food chain in game has a series of different fast food meals, and then a “Salad Meal” that doesn’t impact the “fat” statistic: https://www.gtasanandreas.net/eating/.

6. In regard to Klevjer’s (2007, 2012) concept of the avatar as either a prosthetic or a proxy, arguments could be made for either in the case of a fighting game character. However, in terms of relating the character’s aesthetic fatness to their mechanical abilities, rather than the player’s, the difference is largely immaterial for our purposes.

7. Consider frame data, a common metric for understanding the system dimensions of a fighting game character’s actions. Ryu’s medium punch may have more “safe” animation frames than Zangief’s, but Zangief’s may do more damage as a tradeoff. This concept of tradeoffs between the safety, speed, reach, and strength of a move are evident when these moves are compared across characters even from this primarily numeric frame data perspective.

8. I use the name for the Japanese releases of Street Fighter in this instance; in the SF community he may more commonly be called “Boxer” to address the name shuffling Capcom did when Street Fighter 2 first came to the United States.

9. Reactive areas on a playable character’s 3D model or sprite; that is, the part of the fist that “connects” with the opponent, or the part of the opponent that registers as being hit.

10. Pardon the pun.

11. While King Hippo has all the hallmarks of the characters involved, Punch Out! is not strictly a fighting game with the same genre conventions as the other titles involved here.

12. By which I mean something like a body builder, who is physically large, but that size is due to rippling muscles rather than, say, a big belly.

13. Consider Saguy and Ward (2011), who compare the queer concept of coming out to “coming out” as fat, observing that visual privacy plays a part in both identifying and being identified as fat: “while coming out usually refers to revealing something hidden, body size is hypervisible” (p. 54).


15. If a set of culturally enforced body norms exists for anthropomorphic crocodylidae outside of, for example, the extant but comparatively narrow social space of the furry community, I would be interested in hearing about it.

16. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8eltVpB77E is a video featuring this character.

17. This is in regard to his earlier, 2D sprite-based game appearances; in the more recent 3D revival of Samurai Shodown, this particular move appears to have been removed, thankfully.


19. As if simply calling him “Smart Chang” didn’t drive the ideological point home enough as it is. You can view this design on the SNK games wiki: https://snk.fandom.com/wiki/Smart_Chang.

20. Where their fat bellies take up all of the available space and rub against each other, causing them both to jiggle intensely, a scene the camera focuses on with what I would be willing to term “glee.”


22. Consider this in comparison with Potemkin, another GGS character—Potemkin is a huge muscle giant, much more “muscle guy” than fat (he has a vaguely inverted triangular shape). Potemkin can double jump, unlike Goldlewis, but he can’t forward dash. Thus, it seems unlikely that fatness alone would be the “reason” in either case.

23. No, I did not make this up: https://arcana-heart.fandom.com/wiki/Kira_Daidouji.

24. But not completely absent; at least one move of Bob’s in Tekken 7 involves leaping high into the air before pinwheeling down onto the opponent. Of course, he does so while rolled into a perfectly round ball, meaning they get you coming and going, as it were.
25. A Japanese portmanteau effectively meaning “muscle-chubby”—a man with a muscular build who is still somewhat fat or plump. The term finds common use in gay comics and manga.

26. After all, this is the foundation of Juul’s (2005) *Half-Real*, one of the earlier texts of its kind exploring the nature of games as a meaning-making process.

27. Or, for our U.S. readers, what we’d call a baby pacifier.

28. And, I would argue, the resulting humor as well, in that it’s “funny” to see fat bodies move swiftly or gracefully expressly because it’s incongruous.

29. Much like my (admittedly personal) dislike—or perhaps more accurately, outright rejection—of Earthquake.

References


Hall, S. (1997). Race, the floating signifier: What more is there to say about “race”? In P. Gilroy & R.W. Gilmore (Eds.), *Selected writings on race and difference* (pp. 359–373). Duke University Press.


