

## ***Bayonetta's* missteps in representing female and LGBTQ identities**

*Bayonetta* is an action-adventure, hack-and-slash video game series created by PlatinumGames, spanning three games over 12 years that have been released on PS3, Xbox 360, PC, Wii U, and Nintendo Switch. The series revolves around the titular character Bayonetta herself, one of the last remaining of an ancient clan of dark arts practitioners known as the Umbra Witches. As explained in the first game, they are counterparts of the holy Lumen Sages, both of which were known as overseers of the world. As a forbidden child between an Umbra Witch and a Lumen Sage, her birth marked the start of a war that nearly wiped out both factions, although she survived in a comatose state. Sealed away in a coffin for more than 500 years, she eventually wakes up in the present day with amnesia and little knowledge of who she is, dedicated to finding out her past and killing angels from heaven who are trying to kill her along the way. The series has garnered a cult following for its empowering portrayal of women in its own unique, fashionable way, as well as being heralded sort of an icon among LGBTQ gamers for similar reasons. However, numerous missteps in the most recent game of the series, *Bayonetta 3*, have seriously undermined these ideas and seemingly erased much of what people loved about Bayonetta's character and what she represents.

*Bayonetta's* portrayal of women is unique in an industry that is just starting to get a hold of female representation, which has always had problems with objectification and being sentenced to smaller roles. Of course, *Bayonetta* predominantly features a female protagonist, but the way she is seen as empowering is not just by being strong and well-written beyond their looks. Instead, Bayonetta's looks *are* a source of empowerment. As a character, Bayonetta is incredibly sexualized. Her model was rigorously designed to be sexually appealing, with incredibly large legs and a slim, appealing model, and a skin-tight outfit to match. Her demeanor doesn't shy away from this, either. Most notably, her hair is used for her clothing and to fight, which often leaves her with very little clothing or as straight-up naked. However, there's a

difference between Bayonetta and other examples of video game sexualization, which is that Bayonetta, completely controls this aspect of her and uses it in this incredibly over-the-top, dominating way. The way she is sexualized is ridiculous and too flashy to be seen as realistic (look at how disproportionately long her legs are!), and it's tied in with her fighting style itself. In this way, she comes off more as a dominatrix: someone who has complete agency over her sexuality and is not afraid to make people suffer with it, and it's done with so much theatricality and hyperfeminine flair that it becomes difficult to take it completely seriously.

The way the games present Bayonetta and her power also influences her empowering nature. The best single word to describe Bayonetta would be "overpowered." She is portrayed as literally unkillable and destroys everything in her path with complete control over her situation. She never gets knocked down a peg or power crept, which is when new characters are introduced that get more and more powerful, to the point where the protagonist faces a foe that seems unbeatable. Instead, she *is* the ultimate power, and she'll make sure they know about it. In this sense, Bayonetta is the one who runs the show. Her feats are incredible, too. She's killed countless angels and demons, including the creator of the world and the Overseer of the human realm, while barely breaking a sweat. It's such an empowering portrayal because it shows a female character who is not only strong but who controls their narrative with an iron grip and can do anything and everything. She refuses to be controlled by anyone else and can do whatever she wants, free from any man, woman, or thing trying to stop her.

In addition, *Bayonetta* as a series has resonated with many LGBTQ fans for related reasons. A Polygon article titled "How Bayonetta the witch cast a spell on LGBTQ+ fans" gives an overview of the main reasons why this series has been so big for the community. The hyperfeminine flair Bayonetta always employs has been likened to other real-life LGBTQ performers, most notably to drag queens from her over-the-top sense of fashion and dance moves that seem inspired by it (Trama). Additionally, she has been heavily suggested to have a lesbian relationship with another character, Jeanne—another Umbran witch who starts as a rival

but eventually becomes a companion of Bayonetta's. Developers of the game have made statements and even official artwork suggesting that they're a real couple, and it's not out of reach in the narrative itself (Trama). In *Bayonetta 2*, for instance, the main plotline is that Bayonetta goes to the Gates of Hell to save Jeanne's soul from being devoured, something that she wouldn't do for anyone else (Trama). Even though the games never made her sexuality clear, it's been heavily implied that, at the very least, she's interested in the same sex.

So where does this all get thrown out the window? To put it simply, blame the third and most recent game of the series, *Bayonetta 3*. This game was released very recently, on October 28, 2022, and like the rest of the series, it's an absolute joy to play through. But it's still a game that's deeply, deeply flawed in its storytelling and butchers what many of the biggest fans of the series love Bayonetta for.

The most notable thing this game does is that it power creeps Bayonetta. The main villain of this game, an all-powerful, multiverse-traveling being known as Singularity, is planning to destroy the entire multiverse and rule over it according to its ideals. Throughout the game, we see Bayonetta struggle to defeat this all-powerful being and is completely pushed to her limits. It wasn't made clear at any point this woman had any limits, so it's hard to swallow that she's at a disadvantage here. Yes, this enemy is incredibly, ridiculously strong, but we've seen Bayonetta completely dispatch enemies someone could argue are just as strong, if not stronger than Singularity is. Even outside of the fact that it doesn't make sense, the idea that Bayonetta is at a disadvantage ever seriously downplays the empowering aspect of her overpoweredness, that she's a woman with the complete agency over what she can do. Now, *Bayonetta 3* is breaking that illusion by showing that this woman is beatable and requires some interventions to win.

Speaking of interventions, there is one character intervention that throws a lot more out the window than what already was. That character is Luka. To put it simply, Luka is an investigative journalist who tags along with Bayonetta and seems to have the hots for her, although he's always been purposefully ignored. In the words of Maddy Myers of Polygon,

“mere mortals like Luka should’ve counted themselves lucky to breathe the same air.” (Myers)

This time, however, he’s powerful, genuinely helpful, and moves the story significantly, along with the addition of a romance subplot between him and Bayonetta. All of these details together highlight a major problem with *Bayonetta 3*: its heteronormativity. It’s not that Bayonetta gets helped by any man—that’s happened before—it’s the fact that it’s Luka. A character treated as a joke by everyone suddenly implied to be Bayonetta’s destined lover when past statements don’t reflect that her character would be romantically interested in him in any way. It also ignores the implied relationship with Jeanne that seemed to be brewing, but now it’s all but de-confirmed. Those details kill two birds with one stone. Affirmed by Game Rant writer Andrea Trama, it’s not even close to nearly as empowering because Bayonetta fails and settles with a man who also saves her life, both things that were inconceivable until this game. Additionally, the perceived queer representation is almost entirely gone because the implied subplot of romance with Jeanne seems to just be queerbaiting, which means to imply but not outright state that there’s a queer relationship despite that not being the case.

At the end of the day, most critics have looked past this and have given *Bayonetta 3* incredible review scores. It’s also most likely going to be the best-selling game in the series, as it’s topped weekly sales charts in Japan and the US. When most people review the *Bayonetta* games, however, they always shy away from discussing the story. Many call it confusing and unimportant to the experience since the gameplay is just too fun to try and follow the convoluted storytelling. But not everyone wants to completely dismiss the story and characters for what they are, and people have made their voices known that this ending is a disservice to what made the series so beloved to many of its hardcore fans. As someone who considers themselves a hardcore fan of the series, it’s disappointing that they took the story in this direction, as it becomes difficult to look at *Bayonetta 3* positively despite its objectively good qualities. It’s an opinion shared by many other hardcore fans that have played the game up until the end, as it’s

saddening that a character who was taken by many to be an empowering, progressive figure is essentially stripped of those qualities.

### Works Cited

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