

review

Dead or Alive: Extreme Beach Volleyball

by Patrick Lichty

videogame

To put it bluntly, sometimes there are cultural event-sites where the participant is simultaneously appalled, yet so fascinated by the concept or addicted to the play that it's hard to disengage. This is probably the best way to describe Team Ninja's *Dead or Alive Extreme Beach Volleyball*. This insidious little piece of Xbox thumb candy came to my attention as a result of my ongoing research into the construction and representation of artificial bodies, virtual and otherwise. Furthermore, my critical stance regarding the violence of game culture piqued my curiosity in this title, in that *DoAXBV* incorporates gameplay with amazingly amiable competition. I knew that I would have a great deal of ambivalence towards this title, and it didn't disappoint.

The basic plot of the game takes on the popular *Dead or Alive* fighter games, except that in a bombastic plot twist, the fight promoter Mr. Zack (voice by Dennis Rodman) has invited his female fighters to his tropical island for a special tournament. However, the joke is on the ladies, as Zack has provided them with a two-week, all-expense-paid South Seas vacation, filled with poolside activities, numerous landscapes to wander through, potentially profitable volleyball matches, and a full casino to party the night away.

The player can choose one of the numerous female characters from the *Dead or Alive* game series (the one most famous in the electronic art world would be Hitomi, who appeared on the cover of the last issue of Artbyte magazine). Upon doing so, they are brought to the poolside where Lisa (a tanned American fighter from the series) gives you a quick overview of things to do on the island. During the day, these activities may range from walking on the beach, shopping for gifts for fellow players (to create alliances), looking for swimsuits for your collection, frolicking by the poolside, or finding a volleyball match. The fourth and final segment of the day is spent at night in the hotel, where Zack usually sends you a gift, and you can either review your winnings or go to the casino, where you find a full range of games of chance.

One of the game's deeper moments relates to the social dynamics of gaining and keeping volleyball partners. Apparently, rivalries from the *Dead or Alive* games have been transposed onto *DoAXBV*, so not only do you have to develop a winning strategy to keep a good partner, but in order to gain others, you have to remember favorite colors, foods, hobbies, etc. in order to win them over through gifts and the like. This is one of the more engaging aspects of the game in that it emphasizes the social dynamics of your vacation, but conversely it also reinforces stereotypes through the assumption that your deadly ninja rival might be mollified somewhat by a gift of red nail polish. Such plot devices require a great deal of suspension of disbelief on the part of the player, let alone the idea that top Japanese and Chinese fighters might actually have D-cup bust sizes. But I digress.

It's the model of gifting and friendly competition that continually breaks the traditional formula of gore and violence, but renders itself problematic through the stereotyping and objectification of



even the fiercest of female warriors. I even remember some press around the time of *DoAXBV*'s release jokingly mentioning advances in Team Ninja's "mammary physics engine." Furthermore, one can't misinterpret the voyeuristic use of the camera zoom trigger while exercising by the pool. I realize that there is a minority of games that offer alternatives to the usual violent fare, but is the best option to the abattoir striving to win volleyball matches so Lei Feng can have the coveted 'bracers and briefs' outfit? Serious cause for reflection.

The main problem with this title is that it is so undeniably well done. The modeling, character design, cut scenes, and intro animations are nothing short of breathtaking. In this respect, Team Ninja has come close to Square Enix's *Final Fantasy* franchise in terms of aesthetic points. However, I detect a need of Western mass media culture to conflate Sarah Connor (the woman warrior for the future from *The Terminator*) with Dita von Teese (buxom heiress to the Bettie Page fetish genre) in continually using the same Pamela Anderson centerfold tropes. The issue of body image in gaming is a critical point that has been dealt with quite well by theorists in the New Media genre, and I feel that I cannot add anything to the conversation that has not already been critically analyzed.

Another annoying aspect of *DoAXBV* is that the game play is easy to pick up but hard to master. There are

roughly only two actions, lob and spike, but position and timing also determine the effectiveness of your players in the court. However, the range of game play, including the casino, the poolside hopping game (which is useful to win a few thousand yen if nobody will play with you that day), as well as the volleyball matches make for game play that I haven't gotten bored with after a handful of plays, which has been longer than many titles have held my attention.

I realize that this possibly isn't the safest title to review -- for many of the reasons I have already mentioned. It is a cultural minefield (and thus of particular interest). I remain deeply ambivalent in my feelings toward *DoAXBV* in that it violates many of my principles of mature or complex representations of women. I would definitely not recommend this game for young women in their formative years. Nevertheless, I find that it represents a refreshing diversion from the usual machismo-fueled grind that powers a lot of other titles. Unfortunately, it does this in ways that I find nearly as objectionable -- but sadly, for now I have been seduced into wanting to worry whether Lisa is going to like the hibiscus flower I bought for her hair. *DoAXBV* doesn't leave much middle ground for political correctness, and judging from its title, it doesn't make any pretenses about offering any. For a person like me who gets a bit of battle fatigue, *DoAXBV*'s tropical vacation has insinuated itself as a guilty pleasure in my gaming activities. It's a game I hate to love.



A still from the intro animation to *Dead or Alive: Extreme Beach Volleyball*