

Subtle Kombat: Kung Jin's Complicated Koming Out

By Todd Harper | April 24, 2015



Last week, WB Games and NetherRealm Studios brought out the latest game in the long-running [*Mortal Kombat*](#) franchise. Clever fans noticed a scene in its story mode that heavily implies series newcomer Kung Jin, the cousin of razor hat-tossing series regular Kung Lao, is gay... an implication that the game's cinematics director then [more or less confirmed on Twitter](#).

The thorny issue of queer representation is rarely uncomplicated; even the best, most pleasing versions often have some sort of dissonant note that gives people pause. This is fine; nothing is ever perfect, and frankly, I think I'd be happy to reach a point where queer representation is common enough that we can openly critique it rather than have to be wildly jubilant that it exists at all.

In terms of Kung Jin, there's a lot about the situation that I think is positive. Jin's sexuality comes up during a flashback to his early life, well before the present of [*Mortal Kombat X*](#)'s plot. The scene finds Jin sneaking into the temple of thunder god Raiden to steal a trinket: a statue the Kung family left to the temple in honor of Kung Lao. Disaffected with his life, angry at Raiden for his part in Kung Lao's death, Jin intends to steal and then sell the statue.

Raiden interrupts this scene, provoking Jin into a fight on purpose so that afterwards he'll listen to reason, because Raiden has a suggestion: he wants Jin to join the Shaolin monks, as Kung Lao had. Flustered, Jin argues: "I... I can't. They won't accept-"

Raiden cuts him off, saying decisively: “They care only about what is in your heart. Not who your heart desires.”

This is hardly a trumpet-blaring, streamer-throwing, glitter-tossing pride parade of a coming out scene, and to that I can only say: thank god. It’s understated, but in the process it doesn’t fall into the traps that this sort of scene often does. It doesn’t suddenly make Jin’s sexuality the cornerstone of his character arc; instead it’s just one influence on the decisions of his life. I could see tiny aspects of my own history, and of common queer experiences, in this flashback. Even before Raiden decides to smack the sass out of Jin so he’ll see reason, he makes offhand mention to the undirected rage and frustration Jin feels. Jin himself discusses the rift that’s formed between himself and the Kung family over their treatment of Raiden and Kung Lao’s death.

It’s easy to look at Jin and see a young man who has turned to a dark road because he feels like he has no place where he belongs and who has had a serious ideological rift with his family. The reasons may have more direct story implications — drawing a connection from Lao to Jin, as the crop of new characters in *MKX* are intended to be a “second generation” of fighters — but regardless, they’ve got queer resonance, to me. It’s believable without being aggressive.

As the story progresses it’s clear that Jin is a bit of a jokester and, a bit of a show-off, but that he has what it takes in the clutch. I’ve compared the new generation of *MKX* Kombat Kids to the Planeteers, and in that analogy Jin is clearly the Wheeler. If you think about it, though, that archetype is almost universally applied to aggressive skirt-chasing cishet guy characters; the link between bluster/bravado and heteromasculine sexuality is well-established in the language of pop culture. To have that archetype instead be inhabited by a queer character is an interesting, subtle twist.

There’s also the fact that queer fighting game characters are rare; they’re either so obscure or heavily understated that nobody knows about them (*Street Fighter* and [Capcom](#) vs. SNK’s Eagle), based on weird stereotypes (*Street Fighter*’s Zangief), or are just... a mess, when it comes to the actual presentation and handling of their queer identity (the [conversation-dominating Poison](#)). There are a handful of others, such as *Guilty Gear*’s dapper user of weaponized billiards, Venom, but even he is relatively understated.

Part of the reason for this is that fighting games, even those with complicated narrative backdrops and plotlines, are not by and large story-driven. Moreover, a fighting game needs to make its point about a character swiftly and at-a-glance, which is part of what makes them so vulnerable to [reproducing exploitative or problematic stereotypes](#). There's very little space in most fighting games to thoroughly discuss a character's sexuality, really; even the 10 seconds' worth of it we get for Kung Jin is surprising along those lines.

Plus, let's face it: the schlocky, over the top violence/gore of [Mortal Kombat](#) has always positioned it as a somewhat bro-y type of game, so seeing the series unapologetically add a queer character is great. There's also the fact that Jin is of Chinese descent; queer Asian men are an unfortunate rarity in the media full stop, games or otherwise, so that's nice to see too.

Yet despite all this, I find it difficult to really celebrate what NetherRealm has done with Jin in a "bust out the cake and noisemakers" sort of way. To continue a running theme in this story of my linking blog posts I've done on these topics, I've written before about the [inherent problems of "background queerness"](#) in games. One of the issues with the "subtle" approach is giving the character's queerness weight and importance. In the content of *MKX* I've played so far, the topic never comes up again. Ever. It's not touched on, discussed, not even briefly mentioned in a pre-fight intro or unique interaction with another character. In the story scene where it does happen, it's sub rosa enough to be easily missed.

To me, that feels inescapably weird; I'm not sure how much praise I can offer for meeting what seems like the most basic, the most entry-level queer inclusion. It says something that our confirmation on whether or not Jin is gay (as opposed to bi or pan, or some more fluid sexuality, which are all options given his scene with Raiden) comes from cinematic director Cianciolo

himself, in a tweet where [someone finally just asked him point-blank about it](#). I'm legitimately happy that they made Jin gay, and I'm even happier that it didn't go *massively wrong* in the thousand and one ways it *could* have. That's big. But when I see Jin's inclusion being hailed as Great! Inclusion! I get uncomfortable.

The complexity continues, however. In discussing the situation with friends, one asked: "Well, how could the game include it more? Would that help?" To be honest, I think the answer is: I don't know, and I doubt it. Shoehorning more "gay time" for Jin into the script seems silly, especially given that [Mortal Kombat](#)'s myth-arc is about elder gods and interdimensional fighting tournaments and spec ops soldiers with cyborg shotgun arms, and that its visual style is all about wild kung fu movie aesthetics and a guy who can literally bear hug people to death. Where does nuanced discussion of Jin's sexuality and its place in his life fit into that cosmos? It probably doesn't, and even if it did, what would the shape of that look like?

Should Jin hit on guys he finds cute? Maybe, but I already find that behavior obnoxious in heterosexual characters like Johnny Cage, so why would I put up with it from Jin just because he's gay? Never mind that the rest of the cast appears to be straight men, and I find the practice of gay men hitting on straight men in the media often goes to a bad place. Should Jin have some sort of Tragic Story Event™ stemming from his sexuality? Probably not, since his big story moment is beating the snot out of people with his weapon that is a literal pun (it's a bow-staff... "bo staff," *get it*).

The only ways I can think of to tastefully and interestingly make Jin's sexuality matter more is in his incidental dialogue/barks: win quotes, special intros... but even that is a complicated problem. If Jin said "HAY GURL" every time he matched up with, say, Cassie or Jacqui, his two women teammates, that would not just be weird, it'd be really off-putting. That's the bind fighting game characterization often finds itself in: when you need visual/audio shorthand, stereotypes loom large behind you as an easy go-to that will inevitably land you in a place you don't want to go.

One person that responded to Cianciolo's tweets on the subject asked if this aspect of Jin's character would be explored in the tie-in comic, and I thought that was a great question. Tie-in content is certainly one way you can add to the canon universe's exploration of the topic without having to shoehorn it into a game framework that isn't suited to that sort of subtle narrative content.

I think it's natural, when I express my reservations about the situation, for people to ask me "Well, what should they have done differently?!" Frankly: nothing. I think everything NetherRealm did was fine, both in and outside of the game (kudos to Dominic Cianciolo for engaging the dialogue on Twitter respectfully and without reservation). I honestly don't have any quarrel with them. But I also want it recognized that what they did is like, just a start. It's the bare minimum of inclusion for queer folks, the least we could possibly ask for.

As long as the issue continues to be complicated, though, I'm going to keep having complicated feelings about it. When I hear myself say "Let's give NetherRealm credit for doing a cool thing with Jin but not go overboard" I flip right back to 2014 and the impending release of what was then called *Ultimate Gay Fighter*. The situation with that game is more or less the inverse of Jin's; *Ultimate Gay Fighter* as presented in 2014 was full of damaging and reductive stereotypes, but came from a queer creator. As you might expect, a few of us that work with queer issues in gaming had [some reservations about that game](#). Those issues weren't unfounded, but they put us in a somewhat awkward place. Shouldn't we be happy for a queer game dev making a queer game with queer characters? Isn't speaking out against it going to dissuade other devs — queer or otherwise — from trying to do the same? Well... yeah. That gnawed at me then, too.

The point, though, is to keep trying. To acknowledge forward steps and course correct after backwards ones. To keep forward momentum going and

not be satisfied. In the spirit of that, I think NetherRealm deserves credit for not just including a gay character in a long-running franchise, but also doing it in a genre where that's rarely seen, *and* doing it in a respectful way. About Jin himself and his inclusion, I have little (if any) complaint.

But we can't treat his inclusion as a satisfying end point. It's good, but it's a small thing, and only a start; it needs to grow bigger than some heavy implication in a cutscene and a few tweets from a sympathetic dev. How do we add a queer character to a fighting game and make it both consistently meaningful but not overpowering, for example? Considering the troubled history of characters like Poison, we've been searching for an answer to that for some time now without a satisfying answer.

So let's celebrate a company getting it right, but let's hold the industry accountable for continuing to get it right in bigger, bolder, more satisfying ways, too.