

I Wasn't Looking at His Nice Ass: Female Gaze and Video Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Female video game characters are traditionally understood as objects of heterosexual men's desire. Due to their unrealistic (and enhanced) proportions they become virtual sex objects. Is it possible for a male video game character to also become a target of such objectification? In this paper, I revisit the concept of male gaze (Mulvey 1989) and argue that objectification and sexualization is not limited only to female characters but can apply also to male characters. I will support my claims by empirical evidence from participant observation of the upcoming fourth installment of the Uncharted adventure game series (2007).

Video game culture is still considered a male's world. Cassel and Jenkins (2000) stress that it is world made by men, for men and about men. Both male and female characters are predominantly designed by men, and moreover by heterosexuals (IGDA 2014). Therefore, women are designed to be attractive to watch, while male characters are attractive to play.

The actual representation of masculinity in video games is often influenced by the notion of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005) which is a normative pattern of practice which embodies the most honored way of being a man. It has been reported that male video game characters have unrealistic proportions (Martins et al. 2011) and often fit within a certain archetype of "the primeval hunter/gatherer type [with] arm-cripplingly ripped biceps, necks too muscley to turn, emotion dials stuck on 'aggressive grimace' and a 50% lack of chest coverings" (Houghton 2012). On the other hand, female characters are hypersexualized and ready for the male gaze (Mulvey 1989). This concept assumes that a (biological) male is a voyeur, while a female is just an object with a property of "to-be-look-at-ness". Video game narratives also presume heterosexual consumer, so most video games are, implicitly or explicitly, heteronormative (Shaw 2009). In such state of things, minorities (both females and LGBT community members) choose alternative strategies to enhance their player experience (Authors removed).

The concept of male gaze has been already revisited and revised by queer studies and men's studies as essentially connected to biological malehood. Even woman can gaze as a male regardless of her sexual identity. In this sense, we can talk about female gaze (Ellis 2015), queer gaze (Sullivan 2003) or we can understand male gaze as just "a kind of

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gaze” without any biological implications. Film studios have already begun producing movies, for example *Magic Mike*, which cater to these alternative “gazes” (Ellis 2015).

The paper explores whether such affordances are offered also by predominantly male-centered video games. The character of Nathan Drake from the *Uncharted* series suggests that also male video game characters can serve as objects of (sexual) desire. From a perspective of game mechanics, narrative and especially the visual representation, Drake can be easily interpreted as a male variation of Lara Croft, on one of the most influential characters from a gender perspective (Kennedy 2002; MacCallum-Stewart 2014; Schleiner 2001).

Using qualitative interviews and participant observation of female players of *Uncharted 4: A Thief’s End* (2016), I want to explore how female players objectify male characters. I argue that not only men, but also women can in some cases choose “hegemonic” strategies while playing. Despite aforementioned criticisms of the concept of male gaze, I consider it a valuable analytical tool which is, however, not tied to a particular gender of the beholder and the object of desire.

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