Subversion and Reinforcement: Gendered Tropes in Video Games

Abstract

Media corporations hold significant influence over societal representation through their control of media content. This essay analyses three different pieces of media: *Tomb Raider (Pre-2013 Reboot), Dead or Alive (DOA),* and *Bayonetta*. Drawing from Gender Trouble (Butler, 1990), Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (Mulvey, 1975), Bell Hooks, and theories of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), I would argue that despite their attempts at progressive representations of female protagonists, these games are nonetheless framed and aestheticised within the male gaze. Such an interaction between subversion and reinforcement shows the complexity of gender representation in modern games.

Introduction

In their work, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinem*a, feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey introduced the concept of the "male gaze," which criticises the way women are portrayed in traditional Hollywood films as passive objects of male heterosexual desire: "The pleasure of looking has been divided between active/male and passive/female in a world ordered by sexual imbalance" (Mulvey, 1975). The interactive medium of video games, therefore, heightens this dynamic even more by actively involving players in the objectification and framing processes.

In her work on the "male gaze," feminist thinker Laura Mulvey examined how patriarchal institutions are represented in and reiterated by visual media, above all with respect to the objectification of women. Mulvey contends in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" that women are often presented in popular media as passive objects of male desire, created for the enjoyment of the heterosexual male viewer. She discusses how this dynamic reduces women to the role of spectacle, denying them agency and objectifying them as a source of aesthetic pleasure. Mulvey's theory provides a prism through which one can analyse how women are portrayed in many media, and as such, her work has been central to feminist film criticism and beyond.

The feminist theorist Bell Hooks has criticised the theory of Mulvey for its many flaws. Among these drawbacks, the basic flaw is that it does not entertain intersectional views such as those of race and class; instead, her approach was much related to gender, primarily ignoring how those other identities influence and interface with the objectification experience. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), "Any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot adequately address how Black women are subordinated, because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism." This shows that it is important to look at identity intersections through which oppressive

experiences are interconnected. These illustrate how vital considering intersectional identities are in analysing patriarchal media systems, such as the games in question within this essay.

In comparing and critically analysing the male gaze with female representation, both the basic ideas of Mulvey and those limits emphasised by later theorists such as Hooks and Crenshaw need to be recognised. We can further understand the complex ways in which gender, race, and class intersect to shape representations of women in the media by extending Mulvey's paradigm to include intersectional perspectives. This perspective also emphasises the challenge of disrupting the male gaze without engaging the broader institutional structures of patriarchy that sustain it.

Judith Butler's gender performance theory offers an alternative viewpoint for comprehending how gender is constructed and performed in cultural situations. Butler's argument that "Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body... of a natural sort of being" subsumes any type of essentialist discourse on masculinity and femininity. This framing of gender as performance offers a sophisticated view as to how media upholds and subverts the masculine gaze with Butler's paradigm. In respect to the research question of why attempts at subverting the male gaze fail, often in practice, "the feminist appropriation of the phenomenological theory... cultural, or linguistic" (Butler 1990).

The following case studies illustrate how video games represent gender: *Tomb Raider* balances agency and objectification in adventure narratives; *DOA* expounds upon the visual framing of the male gaze within fighting games, while *Bayonetta* explores the sexual freedom versus voyeurism dichotomy. These cases reveal complex ways in which subversion and reinforcement are intertwined in video games.

Tomb Raider (Pre-2013 Reboot)

Tomb Raider is an action-adventure video game made by Core Design. Early versions of *Tomb Raider* provide a complicated interplay between objectification and empowerment, illuminating how the male gaze functions in digital media. The protagonist, Lara Croft, is one of the most recognisable female video game characters created, praised for her physical prowess, independence, and intelligence (Wrightson, 2023). Her portrayal, nevertheless, also highlights how patriarchal ideals are ingrained in game culture. Croft represents a spectacle created for male visual enjoyment, with an exaggerated hourglass form and a focus on her body in promotional materials. Mulvey's framework offers another way to see this dichotomy: although Croft is shown as a formidable explorer, the focus on her looks frequently turns her into a desirable object.
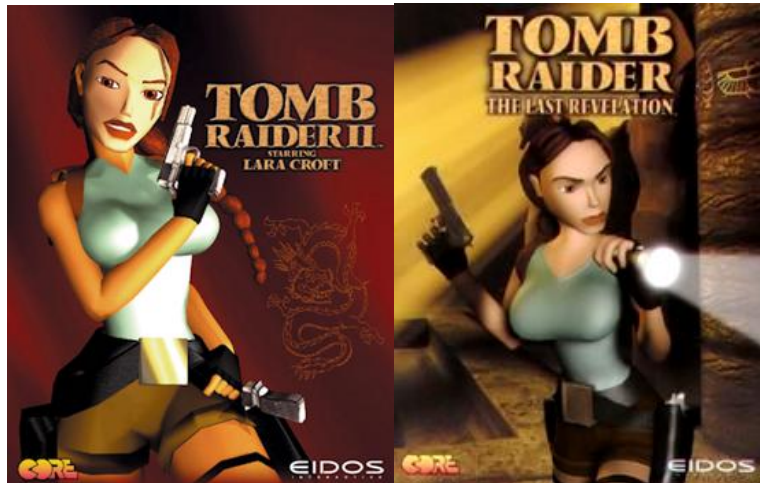
Figure 1 – Promotional art for Tomb Raider 2 (Tomb Raider II, 2024), and Tomb Raider, The Last Revelation (Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation, 2024).

The concept of scopophilia, or the pleasure of looking, is often congruent with the visual representation of Lara Croft. The in-game camera angles often dwell on her body; the framing of the scene is done in such a way that the male gaze is reiterated. For instance, voyeuristic interaction is facilitated by camera arrangements focusing on hip or chest views while Croft is climbing, swimming, or squatting, as seen in **Figure 2** below.

Figure 2– Camera angle whilst Croft swims (Fandom, 2024)

Because of this dynamic, the male gaze is no longer a passive cinematic process but an active and participatory one. "Lara Croft has been both a figure of female empowerment and an objectified sex symbol meant entirely for the male gaze." (McInnes, 2016). This reflects Glick and Fiske's theory of ambivalent sexism, where women are both objectified and admired at the same time. Croft's knowledge and athletic skills certainly challenge accepted gender roles, though any empowerment derived from this is consistently undercut by camera positions hypersexualizing her appearance.

However, the interactive nature of video games complicates this static foundation of Mulvey's. The male gaze is an interactive mechanism: players themselves operate the camera

and the interactions within the game. This opens a new angle on the conversation in which agency for the player and character is divided.

Crofts' objectification was reinforced by early Tomb Raider game promotional campaigns (**Figure 1**). In most cases, posters and merchandise focused on Croft's body rather than her storyline, turning her into a sex symbol rather than a multidimensional character. This corroborates Judith Butler's performativity theory, which would consider Lara's over-the-top femininity an iterative performance based on gender expectations. Her marketing and design reinforce traditional gender stereotypes by showcasing manufactured femininity intended to appeal to male consumers.

Despite framing herself as an object, Lara Croft complicates a strictly objectifying reading of herself by subverting at least some traditional gender positions. In the process, she acts out as an avatar for being an adventurer and a puzzle solver, a position traditionally undertaken by men. Her fighting skills, resourcefulness, and intelligence turn around the passive nature of the female protagonist in media (Park, 2012).

The evolution of Croft's character design in subsequent reboots, such as the 2013 release, "Tomb Raider (2013)," reflects a change in the industry's views on gender representation (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). A more realistically proportioned Croft, useful apparel and an increased emphasis on her emotional complexity and past are a few changes of the revamp. This reboot also develops the theme of the long-lasting influence of the male gaze despite addressing a lot of issues of earlier versions: for example, in marketing materials and gameplay, Croft's physicality is emphasised over her agency despite a less sexualised character design as shown in **Figure 3**. While progress indeed has been made, the Tomb Raider series relies rather heavily upon visual and narrative language as created through the male gaze.
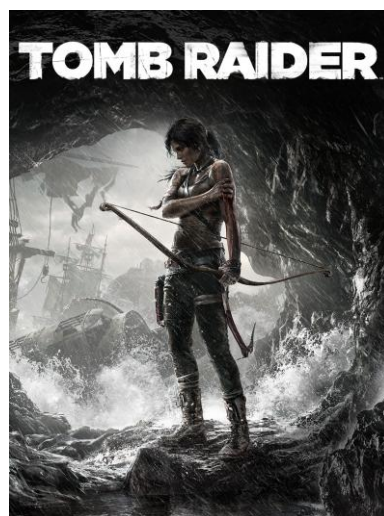

Figure 3 – Rework of Lara Crofts character design (Howlongtobeat, 2015)

Croft's hypersexualization depletes her agency, "since an iconic, powerful female character within what are understood as spaces for the performance of hypermasculinity can result in ambivalent reactions on the part of male gamers" (Kennedy 2002). In a paradox where empowerment is graphically coded inside a patriarchal framework, this is especially evident from the gaming mechanics that emphasise her fragility. Exaggerated sounds and animations that eroticise her anguish are often used to accompany injuries or dangerous times, further solidifying the masculine gaze. These aspects all provide good examples of how a visual language that appeals to masculine desire is intertwined with Lara's empowerment.

Dead or Alive

Dead or Alive (DOA) is a Japanese fighting game developed by Team Ninja. Set in the world of martial arts competitions, the game has combined the gravity of serious action with plenty of emphasis on visuals. The game's character design and gameplay mechanics are deeply informed by the male gaze; how female characters are experienced as objects of sexual and visual desire, aside from being combatants, is dictated by this. In addition to reinforcing gender stereotypes, the excessive use of highly impractical clothes presents female characters as sexualised objects rather than as fully fleshed-out people. Besides being dramatically eye-catching, such attire consciously detracts from the fighting skills of these characters, which goes completely against the notion of portrayal that is only empowering.

Beyond visual depiction, sexualisation is also apparent within the gameplay, as interactions and animations tout the female characters' bodies as objects of desire to the player. The most well-known example is the use of "bounce physics" (GameFAQs, 2019) which exaggerates the animations of characters' breasts. This aspect amplifies objectification while removing the competitive aspect of fighting in the game universe as the focus is no longer on the fighting style. The design decisions of exaggerating female anatomy and showing revealing clothing often dumbs down female characters' personalities or fighting prowess for the sake of their physicality.

This objectification is enhanced by framing the camera, which speaks volumes about how physically powerful women characters are in combat. *DOA* makes a point to emphasise body parts such as breasts, hips, and legs; often, the camera is zoomed onto these parts when a dramatic moment is reached. In comparison to other fighting games such as *Mortal Kombat 11*, where the focus shifts away from overtly sexualised parts of the body into facial expressions or the energetic brutality of the battle scenes themselves (Nadro et al., 2019). This emphasis makes the character's spectacles meant for visual consumption, limiting the player's emotional attachment to them as fighters. Rather than using strategy to maintain a player's engagement, this framing is a form of voyeuristic pleasure, consistent with Laura Mulvey's idea of the male gaze.

Another layer of sexualisation, added in later versions, is the "costume destruction" (DeviantZiu, 2023) mechanic. As characters fight, their clothing can break, revealing large

parts of their bodies. This feature, while presented to enhance realism, is very commonly criticised as exploitative. Given that women's strength equals physical exposure in most fighting games (Lynch et al., 2016), this only reinforces patriarchal views and shrinks the empowering potential within the combat skills of females.

The game mechanics and the way how the characters are presented weaken the character agency in *DOA*. It's hard to disentangle the strength of the women from their sexual appeal since their fighting style and movements often include acrobatic stances that put them in sexually suggestive positions (**Figure 4**). These designs give a limited perspective on gender roles that reinforces long-standing preconceptions by implying a direct relationship between femininity, beauty, and power.

Figure 4 – Tina's finisher in DOA 6 (Guys, 2019)

By maintaining the focus on visual pleasure and not the talent of the characters, the competitive mechanics of the title, where sexualised character models are used as a selling point, fall in line with Mulvey's concept of the male gaze: "Nearly all the women in the games analysed were thin, with long legs and large breasts, while the men could be any shape they want." (Clement, 2018). While other fighting games focus on the visual dynamics of combat, *DOA* balances objectification and empowerment using visual triggers intended to arouse a specific segment of male players. Consequently, any attempts to understand the agency of female characters outside the boundaries of male pleasure are complicated by the patriarchal framework in which their authority is defined.

 DOA is a case study into how views of female agency within video games can be altered through sexualised depiction. While there are indeed powerful, competent female warriors on the surface in this game, those very representations are distorted at the root by the male gaze, that is, visual consumption rather than empowerment. This parallels the dynamic of persistent conflict within media representations between feminist portrayals and the lingering presence of patriarchal structures objectifying women.

Despite these limitations, *DOA* still allows for some room for subversion. For example, some of the characters' motivations and backgrounds somewhat defy the traditional gender norms.

Often, these narrative innovations get buried under the overwhelming reliance on visual pleasure as a marketing factor in the game. Further versions could achieve a greater balance between objectification and empowerment by incorporating more realistic graphic designs and sophisticated narration.

Bayonetta

Bayonetta is an action-adventure and hack-and-slash game developed by PlatinumGames (2009) that has a female lead that represents strength, dominance, and mystery. *Bayonetta*, an iconic character of outrageous fashion and exaggerated femininity, is often celebrated as a feminist icon who leverages overt sexuality to reclaim control (Harper, 2016). This perspective seeks to form a contradictory position regarding Bayonetta's status between objectification and empowerment.

While *Bayonetta* exudes a confidence that could be seen as empowering through her self-expression, unapologetic sexuality, and playful dominance, her appeal as a positive feminist portrayal is complicated by the game's use of voyeuristic camera angles and sexualised visuals (**Figure 5**). This raises questions about how much the game truly subverts the male gaze versus simply capitalising on its economic appeal. For example, in combat scenes, the camera often focuses on her body, emphasising her provocative poses and minimal clothing. One of the key questions this framework raises is whether *Bayonetta* exploits its commercial appeal or subverts the male gaze.

Figure 5 – Bayonetta's poses (Reddit, 2023), (Reddit, 2023)

This paradox in *Bayonetta's* design problematically manifests in the fact that her hypersexualization and exaggerated femininity are both a challenge to and reinforcement of patriarchal standards. In her provocative fight animations, where clothes disappear to show more skin, her body is put forth as a site of voyeuristic pleasure and an aesthetic tool of dominance. The way *Bayonetta* uses her beauty as a weapon to subvert expectations while still being confined by the masculine gaze that frames her is fittingly in line with Butler's theory of gender as a performative construct.

Bayonetta tries to frame her sexuality as a source of agency versus passive objectification, whereas this is in no way the case with *DOA*. Following Butler's idea of gender as performance, *Bayonetta* "actively controls her sexuality for self-expression and as a weapon

against her adversaries" (Carter, 2016), using her looks and charms against the enemies using excessively dramatic or showy femininity. While reinforcing patriarchal standards and beautiful ideals, though, interactions in playing her character, such as voyeuristic camera controls, the player has over her undermine this empowerment more often.

Bayonetta is designed to be both a symbol of power and an object of desire, with provocatively posed battle animations and revealing attire, all of which are intended to attract the male gaze. The hypersexualization of female video game characters often aligns with conventional social expectations of femininity, linking a character's physical attractiveness to her strength (Lynch et al.). Female characters in video games are frequently portrayed with unrealistic body proportions (**Figure 6**), leading to disproportionate sexualisation (Downs et al., 2010). *Bayonetta's* slender figure and Eurocentric features represent a narrow, idealised view of femininity that appeals to a specific demographic. Additionally, as Hooks argues, representation of women in video games is often limited when issues of race and class are excluded. The opportunity to explore broader systemic injustices is undermined by the focus on an aestheticised, sexualised version of femininity in the game (Biana, 2020).

Figure 6 – Bayonetta's body proportions (Higgin, 2010)

Despite the criticism, some have seen her exaggerated femininity and confident demeanour as a means of empowerment. *Bayonetta* actively controls her sexuality for self-expression and as a weapon against her adversaries. She is positioned as a figure of agency rather than servitude by her overt confidence and dominance, which go against conventional depictions of femininity. Female characters are often designed visually to reinforce gendered stereotypes, even when they might claim agency and relevance to the story to contest such prejudices (Jansz et al., 2007). *Bayonetta's* self-awareness and playful control over her image blur the line between objectification and empowerment.

Although *Bayonetta's* exaggerated femininity and confident persona are being framed as empowering, even the most powerful female characters often perpetuate gendered stereotypes through overt sexualisation. Research by Burnay et al. (2019) shows that sexualised female characters in video games can influence player attitudes, reinforcing stereotypes and fostering

tolerance for sexual harassment. These findings reflect criticisms of *Bayonetta*, suggesting that, despite her portrayal as empowered, her design ultimately reinforces negative stereotypes of women.

The concept of ambivalent sexism, highlighted by Tompkins et al. (2020), where both objectification and empowerment are represented through characters like *Bayonetta*. Her sexualised appearance is identified with this paradox, as it is displayed more as a choice than required from outer structures. She can become a feminist icon for some because, in her case, this paradox exists. Using her sexuality as a tool of domination instead of letting it dominate her; her character deflates the male gaze. By redefining her sexuality as a source of agency rather than submission, her exaggerated femininity often ridicules conventional conventions. The game narrative itself, through its exploration of issues regarding power, authority, and autonomy, also serves as a critique against strict gender norms. Because of this paradox, being both rebellious and perpetuating stereotypes, Bayonetta is positioned as a complex feminist figure.

Conclusion

The representation of gender in video games has been a constant struggle between challenging and reinforcing the masculine gaze. The case studies show how patriarchal framing still has an impact on character design and storyline in both overt and covert ways through an examination of *Tomb Raider*, *DOA*, and *Bayonetta*. Whereas Mulvey's theory of the male gaze is still a valid basis through which these relationships could be examined, particularly about how the frame and the visual language emphasise voyeuristic pleasure, Butler's theory of performativity and Crenshaw's intersectionality shed light on multiple performances of gender and the exclusion of intersecting identities that are so crucial and usually ignored by conventional critiques.

 There are moments, even, where they challenge patriarchal norms, despite them more often failing at that challenge. *DOA* has its bright points through character arcs despite its focus on objectifying imagery, whereas *Tomb Raider* shows how revamping narratives can buck convention. *Bayonetta* further complicates the narrative, embracing gender as a weapon of strength and even a potential area of reification.

It is by reimagining visual storytelling that game creators have the potential to progress further in moving beyond patriarchal aesthetics and critically engaging with perspectives of intersectionality. It's through this that future media can create portrayals of genuine empowerment for all without reinforcing established hierarchies. This balance will be the key to overcoming such restrictions created by the male gaze and pushing more nuanced, inclusive representations of gender in games.

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