I WASN´T LOOKING AT HIS NICE ASS: HOW TO PLAY THE "FEMALE WAY"

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Abstract: This article explores the strategies used by female video game players within the masculine and heteronormative culture of video games and asks whether there is a "female way of playing". With knowledge of the fact that most avatars are still male, I revisit the concept of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1989) and argue that female players objectify male characters and yet try to identify with them. I will support my claims with empirical evidence from interviews and participant observations of the fourth instalment of the *Uncharted* adventure game series, *Uncharted: A Thief´s End* (2016).
I have identified multiple levels of objectification, including comments about the look of the male avatar, explicitly sexist remarks, emphasis on romantic narratives and the "maternal" frame. In the context of identification, it has shown how female players can choose heterogeneous approaches; some interviewees have problems with the male figure to identify with, some have opted for a non-gendered approach and the rest performed stereotypically male characteristics. These findings prove not only the complexity of the relationship between the player and avatar but also the various (potentially queer) strategies that all players (not just women) can choose to achieve the same level of gameplay experience.

Keywords: Male gaze, female gaze, female player, objectification, identification, avatar, gender, doing gender

Introduction

Nowadays, it is becoming more and more difficult to claim that video games are still a world made by men, for men and about men (Cassel and Jenkins, 2000). Video games are increasingly offering the chance

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to play as strong female characters or male characters who represent different kinds of masculinity and provide narratives that are not necessarily heteronormative. Therefore, for many scholars (Gee, 2003), gender is not such an important variable in the production of the audience for video games.

Unfortunately, at the discursive level, we must still discuss the masculine orientation of video game culture. Most mainstream video games invite the hegemonic way of playing and 'reading' the game (Hall, 1980). It is obvious that the ideal player understood as an inscribed reader (Sparks and Campbell, 1987) of those texts, is still a white heterosexual man. Therefore, many female and non-heterosexual players are constantly reminded of the intended male subject upon whom they are encroaching (Shaw, 2015), and they are forced to play in a subversive way to achieve the same experience as the intended subject (Krobová, Švelch, Moravec, 2015).

This article identifies the specifics of female video gameplay. Moreover, it goes beyond the standard essentializing dichotomy of masculinity and femininity and related claims that women are "naturally different", by questioning these stereotypes and showing the complexity of (gender) identities.

Specifically, this article aims to describe how female gamers play male characters. I examine whether gender is a significant variable and whether it makes the process of identification more complicated or impossible. In addition, I show how female players look at male characters, and, from this, determine whether they objectify those characters. I also ask how players deal with the obstacles of objectification and identification, as they are, primarily in third-person shooter games, contradictory phenomena. I use player interviews and ethnography to answer the research questions. Specifically, I narrow my focus to the players of *Uncharted: A Thief´s End* (2016).

What makes a female player?

Quantitative data (e.g. Esa, 2017) reveals that almost half of video game players (41 per cent) are female and that adult women represent a greater portion of the video game-playing population (31%) than boys aged 18 or younger (18%). Moreover, research has shown that women and men spend the same amount of time playing video games (Bryce and Rutter, 2005). This data tells us about the numbers of players, but it does not reveal which games, why or how women play: the questions of women›s favourite genres[1] and strategies remain unanswered.

1 The notion that women enjoy different genres and choose different, feminine-coded themes can lead to essentialist conclusions. Although the genre of "games for girls" can be understood by developers (and some scholars) as the genre attractive for female players, the reality may be different. Games for girls

The same can be said about the localization of female positions within the video game (sub)culture.

Recent research has attempted to prove that women play video games differently than men. For example, Yee (2017) claims that women tend to play mobile games and non-competitive games based on relationships and strong storylines. When women play action games, they choose different strategies to win (Kafai, 2008). Ratan (2015) found that women less often define themselves as hardcore players and show significantly less self-confidence when playing online games. Their position in the video game subculture is also rather specific: many female players are introduced to video games by a male family member, friend, or romantic partner (Taylor, 2011; Ratan, 2015).

Other studies demonstrate that there is no difference between female and male ways of playing. Yee, for example, also states that we cannot say that "women play only for socializing and men play only to kill monsters", in another study (Yee, 2011, p. 89). There are differences, but they vary in percentage, so it would be unwise to give them a lot of weight or generalize based on them (Yee, 2011). The specifics of the "female way" of playing must be identified in the construction of femininity itself and the deep structures of gender construction, which still generate assumptions about "what women like and what they should like" (Yee, 2011, p. 84).

Moreover, female ways of playing may take a variety of forms. The simple and broad concept of a "female player" also differs from the more particular notion of "gamer grrrlz" proposed by Cassel and Jenkins (2000), who claim that a significant number of female gamers have similar game preferences, interests, and attitudes as male players. In any case, especially on a theoretical level, it is important to note that female gaming is different, as it happens under different conditions. Female players must overcome more obstacles, such as the absence of the female avatars to identify with, sexist representation of those female characters present within a game or a hostile and toxic game culture environment (Shaw, 2009).

Female player vs. male avatar

The player experiences the game environment and the plot of the game directly — he/she uses the body of the avatar to "live" within the game. Therefore, it is necessary to establish a relationship with him or her. The relationship may differ in intensity but can be described as emotional engagement with a character (Perron, 2012).

promote gender stereotypes, propose limited choices for identification and create separate, girl-only spaces that lead to the ghettoization of female players (Seiter, 2003).

This relationship can take the form of objectification: playing as a character of the opposite gender invites objectification by (heterosexual) players in line with the hegemonic reading of such character. In the same way, playing the character of the same gender may invite queer readings (such strategies are mostly subversive, because video game narratives rarely include non-heterosexual characters, and they usually presume a straight male consumer). However, the player also has to identify with the playable character[2]. Both objectification and identification can occur concurrently (Consalvo, 2004) and, although they are theoretically contradictory, often remain in balance in practice. Such a situation occurs primarily in third-person role-playing games, the control scheme of which makes identification much more complicated, but objectification easier because the avatar´s body is visible to the player.

To analyse the aforementioned different processes, Schröter (2016) proposes three different modes of experiencing game characters. These modes can be defined as three situations or moments during play that alternate and intersect in different ways. "[W]hen playing games, attention may shift between those aspects and become focused on one or more of them" (Schröter, 2016, p.38). In the *narrative* mode, the player is not fully identified with the avatar and perceives him or her as an "identifiable fictional being with an inner life" (Schröter 2016, 38). Therefore, they can comment on the avatar´s appearance. In the *ludic* mode of experience, the player considers the avatar to be an element of the game mechanics that extends his or her agency into the game world (Schröter, 2016). The *social* model of experience occurs in online multiplayer games while communicating with others.

Theoretically, identification with the avatar is reinforced when the player and the avatar share as many characteristics as possible (Cassell and Jenkins, 2000, p. 2). This contributes to the popularity of games with the option to choose the avatar›s gender or the ones that offer a variety of visual and physical features such as *The Sims* (2000), or online multiplayer games in general. Most games, however, do not allow the player to choose their gender, and avatars in video games are typically male (Clark-Fory, 2015; Sarkeesian, 2015; Williams, 2009).

The process of cross-gender identification is commonly explained by analyzing it in a quantitatively marginal situation: when men identify with female characters. Other authors draw upon such concepts as, for example, 'the adolescent final girl' (Clover 1993), or 'the Erotic Triangle' (Consalvo, 2004), which deals with queer identification. Others claim that it is not possible at all for both objectification and identification to take place at the same time. For example, Lahti (2003) shows that, when

2 Of course, we also need to ask whether the identification is really necessary: "We get pleasure from text that represents us, certainly, but we also enjoy those that do not" (Shaw, 2011, p. 3).

a male player cannot identify with a female character, he objectifies her, which suggests the reason why female heroines are often sexualized.

However, it is not possible to reject cross-gender identification simply because the avatar is of a different gender than the player, neither it is to assume that the player always identifies with the character that he or she resembles most. Players can “move beyond the information provided by the text” (Schröter, 2016, p. 35) and supplement it with their knowledge and characteristics (such as age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, opinions or hobbies) to build relationships with their avatars. Therefore, cross-gender identification is possible, although it is uncertain whether this is because players do not care about the gender of the avatar or because they want to play queerly (Krobová, Švelch, Moravec, 2015). Vorderer and Bryant (2012) argue that “to break loose from gender (if ever possible) in an online environment would be to become emancipated from the norms controlling the real-life gender and to enjoy, for a moment, the freedom of the opposite sex” (301). As their research highlights, this option is attractive not only to LGBTQ+ players who deal with gender issues more explicitly daily. In role-playing video games, 48 per cent of players play avatars of the opposite gender not for pragmatic reasons, but to experiment with gender identities (Vorderer and Bryant, 2012). As Shaw (2015) points out, the connection between identity, identification and thoughts of representation is not necessarily linear or static.

Objectification can also take place at different levels. It does not necessarily have to become sexist or sexual; it can happen in the form of a performance of power over the avatar, or awareness of separation of the player´s identity from the avatar. The best way to conceptualize the process of objectification is the theory of the ‘male gaze’[3] (Mulvey, 1989). This theory originated in film studies, but it has already been revisited by scholars from other fields, and it can be very productive in the context of video games. In a certain sense, the player is the director of his or her experience: he or she decides which direction the character will go and whether the character will die or succeed.

On the other hand, the concept of the male gaze removes the possibility that non-masculine, non-heterosexual and non-white players can feel the pleasure of voyeurism. Moreover, a woman can gaze at a man, regardless of her sexual identity. In such cases, we describe this phenomenon as the female gaze (Ellis, 2015) or queer gaze (Sullivan, 2003, Krobová, Švelch, Moravec, 2015), or we can understand the male gaze as just a gaze without any biological implications (Cogburn, 2009).

To describe the female gaze, different understandings of the concept arise. Firstly, a female gaze can be defined by the gender of the

3 This theory describes the relationship between a male spectator/player and a female character. It assumes that the (self-identified) male is the voyeur, while the female character is just an object and is characterized by her “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey, 1989).

„gazer“. Therefore, it is an activity done by those who identify themselves as women. Secondly, the female gaze is understood as a subversive activity that is conscious and active and/or connected to media that are considered feminist (Gamman, 1988). Thirdly, a female gaze has defined a practice that can be done mainly in movies coded as „for women“. Fourthly, a female gaze can be described as an activity with different qualities. In this sense (and also in connection to the previous understanding of the concept), Zoonen (1994) argues that female practice does not lie just in the switching of genders, but is more complex and multi-layered. Therefore, in current media produced for female audiences, men are depicted more as objects of romantic desire than sexual desire. Moreover, romantic narratives are always present, whether in the content or in the reflection of the female audience which tends to look for it (Zoonen, 1994). Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the male gaze is a hegemonic way of looking as well as a practice of power.

According to Douglas (2016), video game characters are more open to the female gaze when they have a strong personality, express their emotions in relationships with other characters, and the goals of their actions in the game can go beyond proving their power and strength. However, the female gaze in the context of mainstream video games needs to be always understood as a subversive strategy. To study the connection between the female gaze and “female-friendly” content, one can analyze a game that is more open to different readings (it should be noted, however, that more stereotypical content does not disallow the female gaze).

Methodology

According to Douglas (2016), we can assume that the *Uncharted* series, a third-person shooter and an Indiana Jones-style action-adventure game (Schreier, 2017), is open to different readings. The series follows protagonist Nathan Drake who represents a different conception of masculinity. Physically, he corresponds to the “best way of being a man” (he is white, heterosexual, young and handsome), but he deconstructs the stereotypical inner characteristics; he shows emotions such as fear or sadness and needs help from his friends and wife, Elena, a non-playable character.

Based on the player´s experience with this game, I asked the following questions:

- Is there a “female” way of playing?
- Can we speak about the female gaze and what it does or could mean?
- What is the relationship between objectification and identification?

To answer these questions, I chose a qualitative approach and gathered data at two levels: firstly, by conducting interviews with female players, and secondly, by ethnographic observation during joint group playing.

Interviewees were selected based on my relationships with these players, personal recommendations and snowball sampling. I did not distinguish between different levels of player involvement (e.g. involvement determined by the amount of time spent playing or the identity of occasional player or hardcore gamer). The sample included nine heterosexual female players between 22 and 32 years old, all of whom are university students or graduates. Their names were replaced with pseudonymes (Petra, Bára, Katka, Adéla, Jana, Markéta, Irena, Lenka and Elza).

I conducted all the interviews face to face in 2016. Before the interviews, I gave participants the game and asked them to play it for at least five hours (ideally, until the end). Each semi-structured interview consisted of about 10 basic questions and took 30–45 minutes. I asked them about the *Uncharted* series[4] as well as their broader experience with playing male characters. Joint group playing took place after all the interviews were completed. It took five hours and was organized at my house to support the informality of the session. During play, I watched the participants, occasionally asking a question to clarify a statement[5].

In the next stage, I performed qualitative content analysis of the transcripts. My analysis combined theory-driven and inductive approaches (Preissle, 2008). Using open coding (Benaquisto, 2008), I established three major categories of identification strategies and three different attitudes to objectification. Every category is usually illustrated by one or two quotes that best represent the coded category.

Results

As stated previously, the processes of objectification and identification are not separated and can take place at the same time. This research confirmed the theoretical allegations regarding the interconnection of

4 I did not insist that participants have previous knowledge of the *Uncharted* franchise or experience with *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* (2016), but all interviewees confirmed afterwards, that they had played these games or at least knew them.

5 It is important to note that the dynamics of playing video games in a group vary and that such an event tends to satisfy different needs (Vorderer and Bryant, 2012). Moreover, certain attitudes or expressions by an individual may be declaratively exaggerated or, conversely, affirmed by the group (Guerin, 1993). Still, I believe that a combination of views and emotional expressions is ideal for mapping different player strategies.

objectification and identification (Consalvo, 2003; Schröter, 2016) and showed that they do not necessarily have to be in opposition. However, each process predominates in different situations, as observed during the group play; each process responds to the theoretical distinction between narrative mode and the ludic mode of experience (Schröter, 2016).

Objectification mainly occurred in calmer parts of the game, when the interviewees had time to contemplate, define and describe their relationship with Nathan Drake. In other words, comments on his appearance as well as identification issues mainly occurred during cutscenes (in situations that are "passive" in the context of the video game experience) or situations in which interviewees did not have to jump or fight and they just "wandered". Interviewees identified with Drake more often in stressful action-packed situations, when "there was no time to think". This embodiment was reflected in classical expressions of identification, primarily using the first person — "I have to jump here" (Lenka) and "I am dead now" (Petra).

While some interviewees identified with Drake, they also retained their agency, producing a kind of contradictory disconnection, often occurring in single sentences: "The soldier is shooting at me, Nathan´s body is bleeding, what should I do?" (Irena). It is unclear whether this inconsistency is caused by the difference in gender between Nathan Drake and the players or whether it is a "standard" player strategy. In any case, this tiny element of depersonalisation can be understood as an objectification-related practice, although it is non-sexualized.

Objectification: sex and romance

Three different types and intensities of objectification were identified. First and foremost, all interviewees commented on the appearance of Nathan Drake. This commentary is similar to stereotypical ideas about what women do during "chick flick" sessions: "He is so cute! Look at him!" (Katka). Interviewees also often described and treated this virtual male as the real one: "He is not my type, I prefer blondes, but he is quite a handsome guy" (Adéla). They also often referred to other forms of media: "I am still thinking about his film version. Who would play him? He must be hot!" (Markéta).

Second, most respondents sexualized Drake: "Oh God! Look at his ass in this neoprene! He is so wet! Come on sweetheart, take off your clothes!" (Bára) and "Look at his ass! His ass is curling!" (Elza). This sexual framework was connected not only to sexism but also to sex: "Oh, it´s a pretty good job ... You know what I mean" (Markéta) and "Look! He´s going to masturbate! Come on, boy! Show us how to do that!" (Irena).

Surprisingly, several interviewees felt uncertain about their comments and tended to apologize or show remorse. The same interviewee who longed to undress Drake from the neoprene (Bára) rejected the idea that she objectified him: “I was not looking at his nice ass. Really. He is very cute, but ... you know”. Some interviewees also felt sorry for Drake: “It´s so dishonouring to treat him like this” (Markéta), “I want him to take a nap, he must be exhausted” (Jana) and “Hey, boy, are you ok? Poor little guy!” (Adéla). This distinct level of objectification can be described as a maternal frame. It is paradoxical; although the players did not have any problems with eliminating enemies, it was crucial to keep Drake safe and not let him suffer.

The maternal frame is strongly related to romanticising tendencies of interviewees. Six of them emphasized the romantic storyline of the game, not only through cutscenes, which told the story of Drake´s and Elena´s marriage but also while playing. Moreover, they asked other interviewees whether Drake and Elena resolved their disputes and remarked that they believe they will: “Why do they argue all the time? Drake, honey, kiss her and tell her what you feel” (Katka). They also commented on his decisions and connected them to their own experiences in relationships: “He is lying to her! That is classic!” (Irena).

Interviewees also repeatedly expressed the desire to go to Elena´s place and explain everything to her, instead of solving the game puzzles. Several interviewees asked whether they would be able to play Elena to resolve the love affair: “Oh, my God, I love their relationship! It would be perfect to play both and try to keep their love alive!” (Katka). This attitude brings the processes of identification and objectification closer together and shows that some interviewees wanted to identify with a female character.

To conclude, female objectification strategies corresponded to the essentialist understanding of the female gaze as a more complicated “way of looking” connected with romantic narratives and supported by texts that are more open to interpretation. It might seem obvious that the narratives representing non-standard notions of masculinity could help to strengthen the objectification process. On the contrary, we must bear in mind that the same interviewees performed strategies that are stereotypically connected to a “masculine” way of playing and objectification, so the process of female playing is blurred and impossible to describe linearly or simply.

Identification: How to become a “feminine macho”

As stated previously, explicit identification occurred during high-action scenes, because there was no time to think or comment on Nathan Drake›s appearance. This process is unconscious, so I had to

describe identification also based on the interviewee´s comments regarding identification with male avatars in general. In this sense, the interviewees were divided into three categories.

The first group considered identification with a male character to be problematic. They argued that these problems do not significantly affect their gaming experience, but they are aware of the dissonance: "I am not able to enjoy the game playing a male. I want to have a choice, I want to create a female character, my personality" (Elza). This statement supports previous research (Cassel and Jenkins, 2000; Shaw, 2015) that shows that harmony between the gender of the player and the gender of the avatar is important for some players. Here these views are reinforced by an emotional link to the story: "He looks sexy, but I do not want to play him. I want to play Elena and meet Drake, look at him and kiss him. It would be cool" (Jana). Moreover, this claim can be considered evidence of the interconnection between identification and objectification.

The second strategy is a "non-gendered" identification. In this case, the interviewees questioned the fact that the gender of the avatar played was important for identification. This approach may look like a complete fusion with the character: "Oh, I am dead" and "He is shooting at me! How you dare! Shooting at me!" (Elza). It was also mentioned in general comments about the identification process: "I never think about the gender of my avatar. All of them are non-gendered for me. It is a very androgynous puppet" (Irena).

The most interesting and surprising attitude is the third one: fusion with the male avatar. This identification strategy emphasizes that playing video games is discursively still a masculine activity. One interviewee (Markéta) performed the role of a man during play, but she also reflected on this strategy in the interview: "When I play, I felt like a man and my female part is invisible". Another interviewee (Katka) connected her body and Drake´s body: "I almost feel my testicles!"

This strategy also took on more expressive forms. While playing, the interviewees performed parodies of classical attributes of hegemonic or toxic masculinity, making sexist remarks and performing in a way that resembled male drag. For example, they made their voices deeper and used profanity more often: "Hey, pussy, where are you going?" (Petra) or "And now I am going to kick your fucking ass!" (Lenka). As Butler (1990) explains, these parodies do not refer to original masculinity, but the idea of the original. This parodic strategy was previously described as "stylized performance" (Krobová, Švelch, Moravec, 2015). In this case, a homosexual player follows the stereotypical ideals of the heteronormative discourse and "deliberately performs as a queer character by marking the character with stereotypical signs of his or her sexuality" (Krobová, Švelch, Moravec, 2015). In this case, the whole situation is more complicated, because this strategy is performed not by the minority affected by these representations and

performances. Moreover, this parody is heading towards a hegemonic way of performing/playing. Therefore, this might be the reason for analyzed remorses, confusion and self-consciousness about the impropriety of such behavior: “I know I should not like it, but I love these fight parts! [why?] Because I am a woman” (Jana).

All three cases could be generally understood as proof of “playing” with gender identities in a video game environment in a way similar to “doing gender” in real life. It is important to avoid mistaking “doing gender” for conforming to traditional societal expectations about gender roles. It means the opposite: “Doing gender references the methods whereby people make differentiations and these differentiations can be constructed in a variety of ways that may or may not be consistent with social expectations” (Jurik in Křížková, 2009, p. 46). Gender identity is created through a stylised repetition of acts, and it is neither fixed nor stable. Socially engineered origins of gender roles can be revealed by shifting and hyperbolising gendered practices such as drag, transvestism or “masculine performance”. As a result, it is important to ask if this drag is still just part of the “safe space” of the game world or if these performative acts somehow influence the “real” social reality.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how female players perceive and reflect upon their relationships with male avatars. The strategies of these players were identified by how they played and commented on *Uncharted: A Thief´s End* (2016). This game presents different versions of masculinity and alternative narratives, which allows it to be more open to various readings. The research data were obtained through in-depth interviews as well as direct ethnographic observations during group play.

It seems that there are specific “female” modes of play, but they do not relate to essentialist assumptions. The strategies of research participants involve attitudes that are coded as both stereotypically masculine and feminine. For example, heterosexual women objectify masculine characters in the same way as male players objectify female characters: namely, interviewees commented on Nathan Drake´s looks and potential ability to be a good lover or sexual partner. In addition, they emphasized the romantic narrative of the game, exhibited concerns for the life and health of the main hero and felt remorse for “inappropriate” comments. These attitudes can be related to female stereotypes (the need to care and protect), but they are enriched by other approaches that deconstruct such stereotypes.

The analysis of identification revealed how complicated the relationship between the player and the avatar can be. While some interviewees had a problem with Nathan Drake, some of them did not even

notice the gender of the avatar, and others began to perform the male gender as a parodic drag, an ironic expression of hegemonic masculinity.

These inconsistencies, ambivalent relationships with avatars and performances of both male and female genders demonstrate once again that gender categories are constructed in a Butlerian sense in the 'safe space' of gaming, as well as in the 'real' life. It was the same interviewees who made sexist statements, felt ashamed of them, 'grew' invisible testicles and simultaneously wish for the main hero to loosen up and talk to his wife about their marriage. Such a variety of reactions made answering the research questions even more difficult. The inconsistency of the attitudes potentially reveals the hypothetical process of deconstructing stable gender identities. While there are still more or less fixed definitions of masculinity and femininity, particular individuals demonstrate openness and fluidity and construct their subjective understanding of these categories.

The results of this study can be understood in two ways: firstly, as a simple, particular case study of female players› different strategies of play, and, secondly, as evidence that the diversity of strategies and relationships with an avatar is characteristic of all groups of players. Therefore, the potential for the deconstruction of gender roles is open to everyone. These findings can be a part of a broader theoretical statement about "doing gender". This process becomes more vivid in the hybrid environment of video games, in which players can experience the (gender) identities of different characters. Based on that, video games can provide a safe queer space for experiments with different identities. Even though our freedom is still limited by the 'game text' itself, by its particular 'frame of reference', video games can be a subversive tool which can help to deconstruct the stabilized gender system.

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