David Todd

Professor Gene Gort

Visual Culture

5/4/2020

Masculinity in the World of Video Games

The process of developing an identity throughout the course of life is incredibly multi-faceted. Each day we are exposed to hundreds, if not thousands, of images and media that have a profound effect on this development. These influences can come from anywhere, even seemingly innocuous leisure time activities. No activity is perhaps more culpable in this manipulation than video games. Within these virtual worlds of infinite possibilities exists a preferential perspective imposed upon the player. Years of predominantly male representation in the broader culture of video games, presents itself in certain ideological positions found within. By hijacking the gaze of the player and exposing them to excessive use of hyper masculine imagery and heightened gender stereotypes, video games have created an environment that is problematic for society.

Video games have many tools with which to weave this influence into the gameplay. The in game camera provides a vehicle with which to exploit the gaze of the player, filtering the images that are seen. Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright describe this feature in detail. “Many video games are designed to give the player the sense of a single point of view with which one may identify...Sometimes this convention has been used to show a character’s subjective perspective...First person shooter games typically position the viewer behind a weapon with the screen displaying prospective targets, for example” (Sturken and Cartwright 169). The positioning of the aforementioned camera

can drastically change the effect. Take, for example, a simulation game like The Sims that uses a “birds eye” camera view; elevating the players viewpoint so that they are overlooking the subjects below. There is an inherent power behind a point of view such as that. The player gains a sense of omnipotence and superiority as they organize and control the units beneath them. If it is instead a first person shooter, such as a title from the Call of Duty series, the camera is placed so that you are to look through the eyes of the character. With this orientation, the player will take on the role of the soldier behind the weapon, assuming all of the qualities of combat that come with it.

As stated previously, the activity of playing video games has a tangible impact on identity development. For someone of a formative adolescent age, the effect may be rooted deeper into their real world identity. However, it is possible that a person of any age can adopt an entirely different identity that they play out within the game, known as a “virtual identity”. Communications professor Charlie Ecenbarger examines how this process unfolds. He tells us that “virtual environments allow individuals to explore identities that they may not have had the opportunity to otherwise. A virtual environment also provides a space to interact with people from around the world. Players have the opportunity to explore and “try on” identities of the other, which then can be incorporated into the self and employed at the appropriate moments” (Ecenbarger 35). In a world unencumbered by the limits of reality, the lines that define who we are blur completely. Women may assume the identity of a man, and vice versa. Children can become elite warriors, professional athletes, or perhaps an anthropomorphic animal.

With time, these new virtual identities can bridge the gap with our real life identities. Author Sherry Turkle tells us that “players can develop a way of thinking in

which life is made up of many windows and [real life] is only one of them" (Turkle 192). In her book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, she closely scrutinizes the lives of those who engross themselves in these identity defining games. From her observation, she surmises that by participating in a multitude of different role-playing games, one can possess many versions of themself, with no one being any less legitimate than what is considered their "true self". This notion can be troublesome when taken to extremes. The idea of male "power fantasies" that have been present in cinema for generations is certainly not lost on the culture of video games. Few men are given the opportunity to enact the more primal pleasures of their imagination. Through gaming, they are able to enthusiastically engage in acts of violence and misogyny with no consequence. The male lead character is often displayed as the pinnacle of manliness; women love him and men want to be him. Actions performed range from wholesale slaughter of enemy soldiers with high powered firearms, to indiscriminately committing heinous crimes in the middle of the street. Who wouldn't want to take a break from the dullness of an ordinary life to live such a life of uninhibited domination, if even for a little while. If there is such a correlation between real and virtual identities, this leads to a rather concerning conclusion. "In sum, [video games] blur the boundaries between self and game, self and role, self and simulation...You are what you pretend to be, you are what you play" (Turkle 193).

Much of the issue of disparity between males and females in the larger community of gaming can be traced to the ways in which each gender is presented. Inequitable gender representation is a tale as old as time. Over the years, movies and television have solidified a particular archetypal standard for each. This encompasses

everything from how to act, all the way to the styling of the hair. The expectation for women has been traditionally problematic. Portrayals of female characters are rooted less in the interests of female players, and more in the desires to satisfy the “male gaze”. This idea of the male gaze and the objectification of the female figure in media is explored extensively in the work of Laura Mulvey. “The determining male gaze projects it’s fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded from strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey 62). She speaks on the nature of these issues in the world of cinema. In the context of video games, this visual preference is dialed up to eleven. In a fictional world of three dimensional graphics, what incentive is there to adhere to realistic human proportions? The physical traits of the female form which determine the characters “to-be-looked-at-ness” can now be exaggerated to the point of impossibility. Looking at head to head fighting games like Street Fighter, where the graphic stylization allows for nearly every character to sport a body trained to unreachable points of fitness. Female characters are over sexualized, with erotic features such as grossly large breasts. The objectification is topped off by the choice of clothing, which usually reveals more than it covers. Presenting these bodies as standard modes of appearance that are detrimental to the self image. It is the stunning lack of practicality in the presentation of female characters that exposes the male dominant slant. It points to the notion that there are “few female characters that are not designed to serve as objects of a male-identified gaze” (Sturken and Cartwright 132). This brings the idea of “agency” into the conversation. To put forth one idealized type of

female casts a shadow on the wide variety of people that may not see themselves in that character. The more extreme the idealization is, the smaller that population that identifies with them becomes. Players deserve the ability to choose an experience that is not tied up in some else's perspective. It should be said that male characters are often depicted in similar fashion. The intention feels distinctly less predatory, but is concerning all the same.

Video games are an activity that can have a far more profound effect on our perception than we know. The amount of hours we spend playing them in leisure have a direct impact on the development of our identity, both in and out of the virtual world. For this reason, the glaringly obvious male bias and egregious treatment of female characters is particularly concerning. Forcing the player to ingest highly objectifying visuals of women and traditionally masculine men, aided by purposeful manipulation of the in game camera, has created a dangerous standard for the culture as a whole. As the years go on, the paradigm appears to be changing. These new changes must be accepted if the current norm is to be traded for one that provides agency for all.

Works Cited

Ecenbarger, Charlie. *The Impact of Video Games on Identity Construction*. Ball State University.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Palgrave, 1989, pp. 14–25.

Sturken, Marita, and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: an Introduction to Visual Culture*. 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2018.

Turkle, Sherry. *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2014.