

Subversion and Reinforcement: Sexualised Representations of Female Protagonists in *Tomb Raider*, *Dead or Alive*, and *Bayonetta*

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EN Abstract: This article examines hypersexualised female protagonists in *Tomb Raider* (pre-2013), *Dead or Alive*, and *Bayonetta*, games spanning action-adventure, fighting, and hack-and-slash genres across 1996–2009. Often considered progressive for their agency, these character designs simultaneously reinforce gendered stereotypes through the masculine gaze. The study investigates how seemingly empowering representations operate within an aestheticised pleasure framework, revealing tensions between reinforcement, subversion, and nonheteronormative readings. Using a medium-specific close-reading methodology, informed by an adaptation of Mulvey's (1975) concept of the three looks —camera, character, spectator— to interactive video game contexts, the analysis examines in-game graphics, combat animations, mechanics, camera framing, and promotional materials. Theoretical insights draw from Mulvey's feminist cinema theory, extended via Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality and hooks' (1992) racial critiques; Butler's (1990) gender performativity; and Ruberg and Shaw's (2017) queer gaze. These games were selected for their fighter-like protagonists, enabling comparison of recurring sexualisation themes across genres, eras, and audiences, highlighting continuity —persistent objectification— and variation —evolving interactivity—. The findings demonstrate how participatory gameplay, camera agency, and aesthetic choices shape gendered spectatorship in ways prior cinema-focused scholarship misses, contributing an intersectional analysis of “aestheticised progressivism” in video games. Video games thus mediate empowerment and objectification simultaneously, both reinforcing and challenging patriarchal norms while enabling queer-informed engagements.

Keywords: video games; female protagonists; male gaze; hypersexualisation; queer gaze.

ES Subversión y refuerzo: representaciones sexualizadas de protagonistas femeninas en *Tomb Raider*, *Dead or Alive* y *Bayonetta*

ES Resumen: Este artículo examina las protagonistas femeninas hipersexualizadas en *Tomb Raider* (pre-2013), *Dead or Alive* y *Bayonetta*, videojuegos pertenecientes a los géneros de acción-aventura, lucha y hack-and-slash entre 1996 y 2009. Aunque estas figuras suelen considerarse progresistas por su agencia, sus diseños refuerzan simultáneamente estereotipos de género a través de la mirada masculina. El estudio analiza cómo unas representaciones aparentemente empoderadoras operan dentro de un marco de placer estetizado, revelando tensiones entre refuerzo, subversión y lecturas no heteronormativas. A partir de una metodología de lectura cercana específica del medio, informada por una adaptación del concepto de las tres miradas de Mulvey (1975) —cámara, personaje y espectador— al contexto interactivo del videojuego, el análisis examina gráficos del juego, animaciones de combate, mecánicas, encuadres de cámara y materiales promocionales. El marco teórico articula la teoría feminista del cine de Mulvey, ampliada mediante la interseccionalidad de Crenshaw (1989) y las críticas raciales de hooks (1992), la performatividad de género de Butler (1990) y la mirada queer propuesta por Ruberg y Shaw (2017). Estos videojuegos se seleccionan por sus protagonistas de perfil combativo, lo que permite comparar temas recurrentes de sexualización a través de géneros, periodos y públicos diversos, atendiendo tanto a la continuidad —la persistencia de la objetificación— como a la variación —la evolución de la interactividad—. Los resultados muestran cómo la jugabilidad participativa, la agencia de la cámara y las decisiones estéticas configuran formas de espectacularidad generizada que los estudios centrados en el cine no alcanzan a registrar plenamente. El artículo contribuye así a un análisis interseccional del “progresismo estetizado” en los videojuegos. En este sentido, los videojuegos median simultáneamente empoderamiento y objetificación, reforzando y desafiando normas patriarcales mientras habilitan formas de recepción informadas por perspectivas queer.

Palabras clave: videojuegos; protagonistas femeninas; mirada masculina; hipersexualización; mirada queer.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Methodology. 2.1. Research Question and Aim. 2.2. Corpus Selection. 2.3. Theoretical Framework. 2.4. Analytical Approach. 2.5. Medium-Specific Considerations. 2.6. Methodological Rigor and Limitations. 3. Case Studies. 3.1. Tomb Raider (Pre-2013 Reboot). 3.2. Dead or Alive. 3.3. Bayonetta. 4. Analysis and Discussion. 5. Conclusion. 6. References.

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1. Introduction

The way that bodies are perceived, wanted, and valued has long been influenced by visual media, which reinforces profoundly ingrained power structures related to gender and sexuality. Practices of looking are never neutral; they are structured by systems of power and visual pleasure that determine who is granted agency and who is rendered an object. These dynamics of spectatorship, control, and representation demand renewed critical attention as video games establish themselves as a prominent storytelling medium that rivals and frequently surpasses cinema in terms of cultural influence. The article argues that contemporary video games often practise “aestheticised progressivism”, a representational practice in which female characters are empowered through gameplay mechanics and narrative framing yet are simultaneously mediated by patriarchal pleasure-driven visual economies. Through a comparison of *Bayonetta*, *Dead or Alive* (DOA), and *Tomb Raider* across different historical and cultural settings, this research demonstrates that interaction complicates the masculine gaze in complex ways, such as through queer subversions, rather than simply displacing it.

Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze remains central for analysing how women are constructed as objects of heterosexual visual pleasure, since “the pleasure of looking has been divided between active/male and passive/female in a world ordered by sexual imbalance” (Mulvey, 1975). In video games, however, this model requires adaptation, because spectatorship is shaped not only by framing but also by camera control, avatar embodiment, mechanics, and player interpretation. Intersectional and queer approaches further complicate this framework. Hooks (1992) and Crenshaw (1989) expose the limits of a universalised account of gendered spectatorship by foregrounding race, class, and overlapping systems of oppression, while Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity allows femininity to be read as a repeated and regulated cultural performance rather than a stable essence. More recent feminist and queer game studies have shown that players may negotiate, appropriate, or resist sexualised imagery through embodied and oppositional modes of engagement (Shaw, 2014; Gray, 2014; Ruberg, 2019). The article therefore approaches the gaze as a participatory process shaped by visual design, mechanics, and situated spectatorship. By providing a medium-specific, close-reading analysis of three classic games across genres, eras, and audiences, this study contributes to the body of knowledge on how interactive and visual design mediate objectification and empowerment. The selection of *Tomb Raider*, *Dead or Alive* (DOA), and *Bayonetta* allows for analysis of how interactivity, camera control, and gameplay mechanics intersect with sexualisation and empowerment, with each game exemplifying distinct ways female protagonists are framed for visual pleasure.

The Queer Gaze studies non-heteronormative engagement with visual media by using concepts from film theory, queer media and spectatorship theory (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017). It studies how representations that are hyperbolic, theatrical, or campy can be read against more traditional heterosexual or masculine readings. Players can decode sexualised female characters in video games in ways that exceed objectification frameworks because of interactive elements such as camera control, combat mechanics, and avatar embodiment. The Queer Gaze, alongside Mulvey’s masculine gaze and Butler’s gender performativity, highlights subversive and empowering possibilities, focusing here on landmark game instalments to examine historical moments in female representation.

The following case studies illustrate nuanced and often conflicting ways in which gender is portrayed in video games. For instance, academics have described Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* as a “cyberbimbo” because she demonstrates the coexistence of objectification and agency by being simultaneously sexualised and agentic (Kennedy, 2002). The rebooted *Tomb Raider* series reframes Lara Croft as more complex and vulnerable, challenging traditional gender expectations while still relying on traces of her sexualised image (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014).

Similarly, the sexualisation of female fighters in *DOA* extends beyond simple fan service. Semiotic analysis of *DOA 6* shows that characters such as Tina are sexualised through fashion, their “innocence” or taboo appeal, and the monetisation of revealing costumes within the game (Luo, 2023). The producer’s defence of this design as “dynamic, strong, sexy and confident” illustrates how culturally specific notions of beauty are encoded differently across Japanese and Western audiences (Jansz & Martis, 2007). Conversely, *Bayonetta* encapsulates the tension between voyeurism and sexual freedom: as feminist critics note, the game integrates her nudity and “undressing” into her power, yet this power remains closely entangled with objectification (Pan, 2023). Existing studies indicate that some female players perceive *Bayonetta* as empowering rather than merely titillating, suggesting that its design allows for interpretations beyond a purely male-gaze-orientated perspective. Taken together, these case studies show how interactive design mediates objectification and empowerment, leading into a comparative discussion of intersectionality, the male

gaze, and the Queer Gaze. The sections that follow are organised so that *Tomb Raider*, *DOA*, and *Bayonetta* are examined first, followed by a comparative discussion showing similarities and differences in negotiating intersectionality, the male gaze, and the queer gaze.

2. Methodology

This section outlines the research strategy and describes the analytical techniques used to examine portrayals of female protagonists in video games. It discusses the research question, the game corpus selection criteria, the applied theoretical frameworks, and the qualitative techniques that were carried out to systematically investigate the visual, interactive, and narrative elements. Medium-specific factors and methodological constraints are included to clarify the scope and rigour of this study.

2.1. Research Question and Aim

This study investigates the ways in which female heroines in seemingly empowering video games function within frameworks of sexualisation and aestheticised visual pleasure. It examines how interactive portrayals of female characters negotiate tensions between empowerment, objectification, and subversion, with particular emphasis on *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996), *Dead or Alive 6* (Team Ninja, 2019), and *Bayonetta* (PlatinumGames, 2009). These titles were selected as historically situated examples that mark distinct moments in the evolution of female character design across genres and industrial contexts. These dynamics are analysed in relation to visual design, gameplay mechanics, performative gestures, and camera systems that structure how bodies are displayed and consumed.

Importantly, this study approaches empowerment as a conditional and mediated construct. It questions which forms of femininity and which bodies are permitted to signify strength, agency, and heroism within mainstream game design. By attending to the aesthetic norms that underpin these representations, such as thinness, hyper-sexualisation, and stylised bodily performance, the analysis also considers how empowerment may remain tethered to desirability within a heteronormative visual economy. Where appropriate and considering intersectional and queer-coded readings, this study identifies recurring patterns across medium-specific elements, including character animation, design, narrative framing, and player-controlled camera perspectives. By tracing similarities and differences across genres, eras, and audiences, it aims to contribute to broader debates surrounding female representation, agency, and visibility in video games.

2.2. Corpus Selection

The corpus was selected to capture variation across genre, period, and audience address. *Tomb Raider* represents early 3D action-adventure design and the emergence of Lara Croft as an iconic but sexualised female protagonist. *DOA 6* foregrounds competitive fighting mechanics, hypersexualised character models, costume systems, and camera placement within a contemporary graphical context. *Bayonetta* offers a hack-and-slash framework in which theatrical femininity, queer-coded performance, and combat mastery become inseparable. Together, the three games allow comparison between recurrent patterns of objectification and genre-specific forms of agency, while the focus on pre-2013 *Tomb Raider* situates Lara Croft within the technological and cultural constraints of late 1990s and early 2000s game design.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

The article combines feminist film theory, gender performativity, intersectionality, and queer game studies. Mulvey's male gaze provides the primary framework for analysing visual pleasure, objectification, and spectatorship, but it is adapted to account for player movement, camera control, combat animations, and interactive framing. Butler's theory of gender performativity enables the analysis of femininity as a repeated and stylised performance enacted through costume, gesture, movement, and combat. Crenshaw's intersectionality and hooks's critique of racialised spectatorship contextualise the limited representation of race, body type, and class across the corpus, particularly where empowerment remains attached to slender, idealised, and culturally privileged bodies and the limited representation of race, body shape, and class within the selected games. Finally, the Queer Gaze is used to examine how hyperbolic femininity, excess, camp, and theatrical sexuality may be read as oppositional or non-heteronormative forms of engagement rather than as straightforward objects of heterosexual desire (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017; Ruberg, 2019).

2.4. Analytical Approach

A systematic qualitative close-reading approach was applied throughout the corpus: first, patterns of visual objectification and aestheticised pleasure were identified through camera angles, cutscenes, and framing techniques; second, animations and movement were examined to determine how combat, traversal, and idle behaviour emphasise or subvert sexualised representation; third, character design, including proportions, costumes, and visual motifs, was evaluated in relation to empowerment and objectification; and lastly, narrative and agency were considered through their contribution to these dynamics. To ensure the research is able to capture how design choices mediate empowerment and objectification, this qualitative close-reading approach is preferable over quantitative measures, as it allows nuanced examination of various visual, interactive, and performative elements that may get lost in broad metrics. This is in line with established qualitative studies, focusing on play and game mechanics analysis instead of abstract numerical representation (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006).

Although primary audience research was not conducted, promotional and marketing materials are analysed to account for intended player engagement and potential audience interpretations. Cross-case comparisons are used throughout to identify recurrent patterns, divergences, and medium-specific dynamics. This study does not provide any primary empirical research, but it acknowledges that audience response and designer goals might offer further insight into how empowerment and objectification are understood and remain a viable avenue for future investigation.

2.5. Medium-Specific Considerations

Video games present distinct methodological challenges compared to other visual media. Interaction distributes agency among the player, the designer, and the character because it allows players to control aspects such as camera angles, character movement, or gameplay choices. Game designs have the opportunity to give players full agency, partial agency or close to no agency depending on the narrative format of the game. These were considerations taken in the selection of the aforementioned examples. This necessitates a medium-specific approach that accounts for the performative quality of motion, the active role of interaction, and the evolution of character design within franchise series and across genres. By applying Mulvey's paradigm to the interactive medium, this research illuminates how gameplay shapes the co-constitution of empowerment and objectification by considering the interaction between player agency and designer-imposed visual structures.

The aim of this cross-temporal analysis is not to measure progress but to examine how different eras of industrialisation cope with similar conflicts between agency and visual pleasure in the face of technological, economic, and cultural shifts. Since all three games are action games, the heroes need to look physically strong, agile, and athletic to live up to the narrative and gameplay demands. This impacts character design, as genre-specific constraints mean that athletic bodies are preferred, and certain forms of representation, such as non-athletic or differently shaped characters, might be excluded or limited. To avoid direct equivalency, the analysis situates each game in its specific historical and genre-specific context, demonstrating how social norms, gameplay requirements, and medium-specific affordances all interact to shape the visual representation of female protagonists.

2.6. Methodological Rigor and Limitations

Methodological rigour was ensured by employing precisely specified analytical categories and systematically recording observations with screenshots, cutscene captures, and detailed annotations. While the specific expressions of visual and interactive design differ across titles due to genre and technological context, the same analytical categories were systematically applied to each case study to ensure consistency of interpretation. Limitations include the absence of primary empirical audience research and the corpus-specific nature of the findings, which may not generalise to all video games. Although effort was made to maintain a consistent approach to applying the analytical categories, some degree of interpretive judgement is unavoidable in qualitative coding.

3. Case Studies

The three games were selected to represent diversity across genre, temporal context, and audience engagement. Together, *Tomb Raider* (pre-2013), *Dead or Alive*, and *Bayonetta* offer a comparative lens through which to examine how gendered representation, visual design, and interactivity function across distinct industrial and aesthetic contexts. Using the medium-specific close-reading approach outlined in Section 2.4, while *Tomb Raider* enables a longitudinal analysis of protagonist portrayal, *DOA* foregrounds hypersexualised character design within competitive mechanics, and *Bayonetta* presents stylised, theatrical femininity that invites readings of both empowerment and subversion.

3.1. *Tomb Raider* (Pre-2013 Reboot)

Tomb Raider is an action-adventure video game released in 1996 by game developers Core Design (Core Design, 1996). Lara Croft became one of the most recognisable female video game characters, celebrated for her intelligence, independence, and physical competence, while simultaneously criticised for her exaggerated hourglass figure, a dual positioning of empowerment and sexualised spectacle (Wrightson, 2023; Dovey & Kennedy, 2006).

As a third-person action-adventure game, player movement and Lara's body positioning cannot be disengaged the avatar functions as what Klevjer (2012) describes as an embodied extension of player agency rather than a neutral visual shell. Lara's legs and breasts are often shown by the camera, and owing to the interactive nature of the game, these sexualised images become part of the interaction of the player (Shaw, 2014).

Where the character's hourglass form accentuates sexual features, her chest and legs are frequently the primary focus of framing in graphics used for marketing and advertising. In addition, this emphasis prioritises the female form over agency, rendering the female body a spectacle of male visual pleasure and an unattainable standard for female players. This objectification underscores how the masculine gaze is maintained, with sexualisation embedded into the earliest character designs. An alternative reading of this paradox draws on Mulvey, who suggests that despite the character being depicted as a powerful explorer, the focus on her attractiveness often results in her being represented as an object of desire, highlighting the tension between objectification and empowerment in early digital media (Figure 1; Cobbett, 2018).

Scopophilia, or the pleasure in looking, is manifested in various camera techniques within *Tomb Raider*, as identified using the camera-framing category in the medium-specific close-reading framework. Analyses of older *Tomb Raider* games note that the thirdperson camera and fullbody framing position Lara's body, often from behind, in a way that invites objectifying, scopophilic looking (Mikula, 2003). Similarly, in *Tomb Raider: Underworld* (2008), camera angles and cutscenes often emphasise Lara Croft's body, drawing attention to her sexuality rather than her in-game actions (Flitcroft, 2020). These framing choices reflect patterns of scopophilic pleasure described by Mulvey's (1975) male gaze, in which the visual emphasis shifts from narrative or functional purpose to sexualised observation.

The male gaze in video games can be both potentially participatory and integrated into game design. However, even when players can control camera angles, as in the early *Tomb Raider* games, the camera is predominantly controlled by the game itself, frequently positioning Croft's body to highlight sexualised aspects. According to McInnes (2016), "Lara Croft has been both a figure of female empowerment and an objectified sex symbol meant entirely for the male gaze," underscoring the contrast between her intellect and athleticism and her hypersexualised appearance. This tension is exemplified by Glick and Fiske's (1996) notion of ambivalent sexism. While she is objectified for her appearance, Croft is respected for her abilities, underscoring how empowerment is conditionally granted only to bodies that conform to dominant aesthetic and gender norms. Camera positions that emphasise her body rather than her actions consistently undermine the empowerment derived from her capabilities, even when challenging traditional gender roles (Figure 2; Core Design, 1996).

Mulvey's initial, static concept of the male gaze is problematic in the context of participatory video games (Juul, 2005). The gaze becomes an interactive mechanism wherein the camera is partially controlled by the player, while character movement is predetermined by the game. The masculine gaze is thus a participatory and performative process unique to video games, as gender-based objectification occurs not only through character design and camera work but also through player engagement.

Although her body was the focus of early marketing campaigns rather than her plot, these hypertexts do not provide new forms of objectification (Mikula, 2003); rather, they simply emphasise patterns already evident in the game. Butler's gender performativity theory illuminates this tension: whereas Croft contests traditional femininity through her knowledge, physical abilities, and independence, she also recapitulates cultural gender norms in her appearance and movements. The end result is a polysemic character whose empowering and visual objectification exist in a state of tension with one another, showing how video game design serves as a site for mediating gendered expectations for players.

Lara Croft went against conventional gender norms in video games, yet her persona was often sexualised and presented as an object of the masculine gaze. It is therefore important to note that Croft has agency, is intelligent and resourceful, and, as a problem solver or adventurer, occupies roles often tailored for masculine heroes (Park, 2012). Her fighting skills and problem-solving abilities also subverted the stereotype of passive female protagonists throughout media.

There is also Lara Croft's traditional, tall, thin, and white physical aesthetic, which has tended to be aligned with Western ideals of beauty. She marginalises other ethnic, bodily, and class identities. Such a dynamic exposes the boundaries of empowerment when larger identity intersections are ignored; even an agentic protagonist functions within limitations shaped by societal hierarchies (Crenshaw, 1989). According to Nakamura (2008) and Gray (2014), online games convey racialised and bodily identities, suggesting that Lara Croft's tall, skinny, and white body is more than a simple matter of visual preference because it is a tool used to convey dominant ideas of identity online. Lara Croft's tall, thin, and white physical aesthetic reflects Western beauty ideals and marginalises other racial, bodily, and class identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Nakamura, 2008; Gray, 2014).

Her traditional, tall, thin, and white physical aesthetic reinforces Western beauty ideals, highlighting intersectional limitations (Crenshaw, 1989) even as her intelligence and agency challenge gender norms. Through costume design, animation, and marketing, these concepts are often further underscored, excluding individuals who do not fit this template and implicitly equating physical attractiveness with ability and agency. This intersection of race, body, and implied class serves to illustrate how culturally specific norms shape empowerment: Lara's image is still framed by dominant aesthetic and cultural expectations, even as she demonstrates competency, intelligence, and narrational agency.

A shift in the industry's perspective on gender representation is captured by the evolution of Croft's character design in reboots such as the 2013 release *Tomb Raider* (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). Despite sexualisation, the older Croft's inflated proportions were more clearly identifiable as "fake" due to the confines of basic 3D graphics; Liu (2018) explored this evolution in her analysis of figure changes across the *Tomb Raider* series (Figure 3; Westecott, 2018). Conversely, Croft's 2013 redesign features hyper-realistic 3D graphics, more realistic dimensions, functional clothing, and a more detailed emotional backstory. This change reflects how improved graphical quality recontextualises past exaggerations into designs that would appear decidedly less realistic were they to be presented today, demonstrating how developments in technology and aesthetics impact the framing of female figures (Westecott, 2018). While there is still significant visual focus on Croft's body in the reboot, this tends to be used to illustrate her relationship with her environment and equipment rather than functioning primarily as overt sexualisation, which supports broader trends showing reduced character sexualisation over time (Liu, 2018). Without entirely renouncing camera-framing and character-design conventions, these developments reveal a maturation in the *Tomb Raider* franchise's depictions of agency, embodiment, and sex/gender.

“At the centre of *Tomb Raider* was a fantasy female figure. Each of her provocative curves was as much part of the game as the tombs she raided” (Kennedy 2002). This is especially evident in game mechanics that underscore her vulnerability within a paradox where empowerment is rendered within a patriarchal framework. Certain animations and sound effects, for example, may sexualise her fragility by making her reactions to injuries or dangerous situations deliberately exaggerated (Mikula, 2003). Such audiovisual cues indicate how Lara’s empowerment can be coupled with visual and auditory languages that appeal to masculine desire. This dynamic reflects a conflict between objectification and competence (Flitcroft, 2020).

A queer perspective provides further insight into the ways in which Croft’s hypersexualised appearance both conforms to and subverts traditional gendered expectations. Though the figure was clearly designed primarily for the heteronormative male gaze, alternative readings counter to a traditional male-centric spectatorship are enabled through her athleticism, assertiveness, and performative body gestures. This analysis considers how camera angles, animations, and interactive mechanics can be interpreted beyond heteronormative considerations by using the Queer Gaze, as described in the methodology. This allows players to experience Croft’s empowerment in ways that are not restricted to masculine visual pleasure.

3.2. Dead or Alive

This analysis examines *DOA 6* (2019) as a representative entry for its contemporary use of sexualised character design, costume mechanics, and interactive physics. Earlier *DOA* titles share similar patterns, but this instalment reflects current graphical fidelity, animation realism, and industry trends in hypersexualisation.

As a fast-paced competitive fighting game, *DOA* emphasises movement, performance, and spectacle, which shapes how empowerment and objectification are experienced (Klevjer, 2012). Set in the world of martial arts competitions, the game combines action with a strong emphasis on visuals. The game’s character design and gameplay mechanics are deeply informed by the male gaze. In addition to reinforcing gender stereotypes, the excessive use of highly impractical clothes presents female characters as sexualised objects rather than fully fleshed-out people. Besides being dramatically eye-catching, such attire consciously detracts from the fighting skills of these characters, which limits the perception of empowerment.

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. As stated by Bogost (2007), game mechanics are rhetoric through creating meanings via procedural systems, and thus, it can be presumed that the sexualisation within animation physics is a form of ideology. The most well-known example is the use of “bounce physics” (GameFAQs, 2019). 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 dumb down female characters’ personalities or fighting prowess. Additionally, these exaggerations create opportunities for alternative, playful interpretations when viewed through a queer gaze framework, allowing non-heteronormative readings of femininity and power. Exaggerations of pose and the physics of bouncing clearly have scopophilic pleasure elements, but a more detailed look using the framework of Queer Gaze indicates that the same poses and animations could be interpreted alternatively as elements of camp, subverting conventional expectations of heteronormativity to enable alternative approaches to femininity.

Camera framing in *DOA* enhances the objectification of the characters by emphasising legs, hips, and breasts (Figure 4; KasumiLover, 2019). These are sexualised areas that, as culturally coded symbols of femininity and erotic appeal, fall under the male gaze, focusing the viewer’s attention on the character’s desirability rather than their skill or agency (Mulvey, 1975). The camera often centres on these features even during dramatic moments to accentuate their visual consumption (Ibrahim et al., 2024). While fighting games are visual spectacles by nature, *DOA* framing places more emphasis on sexualised presentation over combat skill or strategic involvement. It results in a voyeuristic experience adhering to Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze (Lynch et al. 2016; Gaming Horizons Report 2017).

The *DOA* fighting game series’ representation of female characters illustrates how sexualisation and character autonomy intersect. By explicitly applying the methodology’s camera and animation categories, systematic observations of idle poses and combat sequences reveal that the visual objectification of characters is persistent and deliberate. Camera framing and animation decisions in the series bring attention to traditionally sexualised body parts such as breasts, hips, and legs (Lynch et al., 2016; Ibrahim et al., 2024; see Figure 5; Guys, 2019). The visual objectification produced by these motions, positions, and camera angles, which emphasise the character’s body rather than her fighting skills, again resonates with Mulvey’s idea of the masculine gaze. Most of *DOA*’s female fighters have slender bodies with either Eurocentric or East Asian racial coding, and their costumes and animations enforce assumptions about gender and class. These intersections stress how institutional biases perpetuate specific aesthetic norms impinge upon empowerment and agency in a manner that marginalises those who fall outside such dominant contexts (Crenshaw, 1989). As Nakamura (2008) and Gray (2014) highlight, digital media and video games reproduce racialised and corporealised identities with the implication that graphical and mechanical decisions encode cultural notions regarding what constitutes a normative digital body. It is evident that the character design involves body-type standardisation and racial categorisation through Eurocentric versus East Asian physical characteristics, which clearly reveals that aesthetic hegemonies are condensed to circumscribe empowerment by making agency dependent on normalised identity constructs (Crenshaw, 1989).

Later instalments added “costume destruction” mechanics that allowed clothing to rip during battle and expose more sexualised body parts (DeviantZiu, 2023). As Sicart (2011) suggests, game mechanics are value

systems that are communicated to players through their active participation, which means that the mechanic of costume destruction embodies assumptions about gender, visibility, and reward. Despite their framing as realistic elements, these features are primarily utilised to draw additional attention to the character's body shape and are superfluous in terms of gameplay. This constrains the liberatory possibilities of female combat capabilities by reinforcing the tendency within fighting games for women's strength to be coupled with sexual exposure (Lynch et al., 2016). Even when female characters are using competent combat, their postures and movements are designed to highlight sexualised parts and body curves, rather than merely supporting practical fighting strategies.

Analysis of combat sequences indicates spots that emphasise sexualised body parts often relate to lower levels of visibility regarding trajectory traces and fail to exert strategic agency while advancing the conflict between functional battle and visual spectacle. Character agency is further constrained as animation, costume mechanics, and camera emphasis collectively frame femininity, beauty, and power as interrelated and mediated through a male-orientated gaze.

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). This demonstrates how female fighters are designed with a narrow body ideal that prioritises sexual appeal over agency, reinforcing the visual consumption of the player. While other fighting games focus on the visual dynamics of combat, *DOA* balances objectification and empowerment using visual triggers intended to cater to the male gaze. Consequently, female character agency exists within a constrained patriarchal framework, highlighting the tension between empowerment and visual objectification.

Beyond hypersexualisation, *DOA*'s female characters also exhibit limited racial and body-type diversity, illustrating how intersecting identities shape representation. The roster allows little space for racialised or non-normative bodies; most characters are either Eurocentric or East Asian and conform to slender, idealised body standards. In many cases, animations and costume designs reinforce gendered or class-based stereotypes by presenting femininity through a narrow, socially desirable lens. These constraints on empowerment are further shaped by the intersections of race, body, and implied class. Character representation is mediated through structural biases that privilege specific aesthetic and cultural norms, marginalising those who fall outside the dominant visual framework, even when they demonstrate combat proficiency or narrative agency.

While the fighting-game setting places a different emphasis on physical movement, spectacle, and interactive involvement, *DOA*, like *Tomb Raider*, exemplifies the complex negotiation between empowerment and objectification. The focus on sexualised character design often diminishes narrative depth, even when some characters' motivations and backstories subvert gender norms. This pattern illustrates that, despite potential empowerment, interactive design and visual framing continue to reinforce the male gaze. A queer reading interprets sexualised animations and exaggerated femininity in ways that transcend heteronormative masculine expectations. Stylised exaggeration, camp aesthetics, and performative gestures facilitate alternative readings that challenge conventional standards of gender and spectatorship. These perspectives demonstrate how *DOA*'s visual spectacle, although dominated by male-gaze interpretations, enables multiple, sometimes conflicting, modes of engagement with gendered bodies. These alternative readings also reveal that some kinds of poses, animations, or interactions can be interpreted in such a way that players can reread notions of power, agency, and gender to allow for potential sites for empowerment that still remain within the male gaze-determined rules.

3.3. Bayonetta

The gameplay mechanics of *Bayonetta* are inextricably bound up with combat and her hyper-feminine presentation. The sexualised animations combine rhythm-based combat, aerial movement, and hack-and-slash gameplay to create a visual spectacle that is integral to both gameplay and narrative.

Bayonetta is an action-adventure and hack-and-slash game developed by PlatinumGames (2009), featuring a female lead with a rich backstory and distinctive abilities. She is a witch who wields magical powers, demonstrates mastery of both melee and ranged combat, and possesses a playful, confident personality that drives her interactions with allies and enemies alike (Harper, 2016). A combination of elaborate and exaggerated femininity is evident in *Bayonetta*'s design, from the intricate hair-based costumes to the high-heeled pistols, which are both visually striking and functionally impractical for actual combat. While aesthetically notable, these design features are connected to agency and control in that *Bayonetta* maintains active command over her environment through her appearance, abilities, and combat style.

Although *Bayonetta* is frequently recognised for employing overt sexuality as a form of empowerment, her character occupies a tenuous position between agency and objectification. Her stylised stances and exaggerated physicality draw attention to her body for visual consumption, yet they are also essential to her combat mechanics and narrative agency. Specific camera techniques are employed to capture *Bayonetta* in ways that accentuate sexualised elements (Figure 6; Reddit, 2023). Examples include low-angle shots emphasising her torso and legs, zooms over her hips or chest during signature attacks, and over-the-shoulder tracking angles focusing on provocative stances. These choices reinforce the male gaze while simultaneously situating her body within otherwise empowering combat actions, rather than prioritising gameplay clarity.

Bayonetta's design therefore exemplifies the complex interplay between objectification and empowerment: her combat proficiency, narrative agency, and confident self-expression coexist alongside a visual presentation foregrounding her body, positioning her between reinforcement and subversion of patriarchal norms. Her body functions both as a site of visual spectacle and a tool for combat control, with provocative fight animations often revealing additional flesh.

Due to the fact that *Bayonetta* is an action-adventure hack-and-slash game, the control element and fighting mechanics are invariably tied to the sexualised moves. In hack-and-slash games where rhythm, flow, and expressive movement are privileged, combat animations serve as indispensable locales where meaning, affect, and agency are constituted through play (Klevjer, 2012; Sicart, 2011). The genre affects the feeling that is induced by the spectacle and empowerment (Shaw, 2014). For instance, her “Wicked Weaves” attacks frequently incorporate slow-motion camera perspectives that emphasise her acrobatic poses, producing giant fists from her heels to strike enemies. In these sequences, her body occupies the central focus of the action, utilising sexualised imagery as a mechanism to defeat adversaries and participate in highly stylised combat. Systematic observation of combat sequences, including “Wicked Weaves” and aerial flips, reveals that sexualised imagery is integrated with gameplay mechanics and intersects with ethnicity, body type, and class, highlighting where empowerment is facilitated or constrained by social and aesthetic hierarchies rather than incidental eroticisation. This also illustrates how Butler’s concept of gender as performative is enacted, with femininity and strength performed within a patriarchal visual framework, while Queer Gaze readings further reveal moments where subversive, non-heteronormative interpretations of empowerment emerge.

The importance of the analysis is in the complexity of the relationship between the objectification and the empowerment by categorising the animations in relation to the function in battle and the camera angle and sexualisation. The tension between her body and the sexualising framing of the camera demonstrates how femininity and strength are performed concurrently within a patriarchal visual structure, aligning with Butler’s concept of gender as performative.

Following Butler’s theory of gender performativity, *Bayonetta* actively controls her sexuality for self-expression and as a tool within combat (Carter, 2016). She is positioned as a figure of agency rather than servitude through her overt confidence and dominance, which challenge conventional depictions of femininity. While female characters are often visually designed to reinforce gendered stereotypes (Jansz & Martis, 2007), *Bayonetta's* self-awareness and stylised control over her appearance blur the line between objectification and empowerment. Her agency is nevertheless mediated by the male gaze through player-controlled camera angles and sexualised in-game framing, indicating that visual and interactive mechanics can constrain the self-directed performance of gender even when intended as empowering. A close analysis of this framing and pose choices reveals some moments when Queer Gaze readings allow for the subversion of normative femininity while simultaneously reinforcing conventions of visual pleasure.

Bayonetta's character design combines exaggerated femininity and combat proficiency, contrasting powerful gameplay with sexualised visual presentation. While her fighting skills and magical attacks demonstrate competence and agency, the revealing clothing and acrobatic poses she assumes direct attention to her physique (Figure 7; Higgin, 2010). As noted by Hooks regarding representation, this depiction may be interpreted as reinforcing a narrow, idealised conception of femininity, in which beauty and power are interlinked in ways that reflect patriarchal aesthetics rather than broader social realities (Biana, 2020). Her slender build and Eurocentric features further exemplify the limited diversity of female representation within video games, privileging aesthetic pleasure over considerations of intersectionality and inclusivity (Downs et al., 2010).

Bayonetta's sexualised design intersects with and reinforces representations of ethnicity, body type, and class when analysed through an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1989). Her slender physique and Eurocentric features uphold Western beauty standards at the expense of other racial and corporeal identities. This enables the analysis to distinguish where the body of *Bayonetta* is only a source for visual pleasure (Mulvey, 1975), where the body relates to the narrative, and the intersection of both. Based on the socio-cultural location of the player, the Eurocentric traits of *Bayonetta*, the character’s slender figure, as well as the character’s class-based aesthetics (the witch as the elite), mediate the potential of empowerment in specific ways (Crenshaw, 1989; Downs et al., 2010). Furthermore, she occupies a classed imaginary as an affluent, stylish, and fanciful witch, distancing her from the experiences of non-elite subjects. These characteristics indicate the presence of broader systemic influences in design choices, even in a figure positioned as empowered, highlighting how social hierarchies constrain sexualised empowerment. *Bayonetta's* poses, camera angles, and animations intersect with ethnicity, body type, and class, highlighting where empowerment is facilitated or restricted by social and aesthetic hierarchies.

The Queer Gaze substitutes a heterosexual, male-orientated perspective with one that incorporates non-heteronormative interpretations of spectatorship (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017). Her flamboyant combat manoeuvres, performative introductions, and exaggerated feminine display function as acts of agency rather than serving solely cute or male aesthetic pleasure. For instance, attacks such as her “Wicked Weaves” and dynamic aerial flips draw visual attention to her body but are integrated into gameplay to demonstrate command, skill, and timing. Similarly, while some camera angles may sexualise her, they also highlight her competence and agency within both narrative and combat systems. This queer-coded reading demonstrates how *Bayonetta* subverts the conventional passive feminine, enabling players to experience her empowerment beyond heteronormative structures. Her character exemplifies how video games can strategically challenge patriarchal norms and expand representation within queer-inclusive frameworks through the combination of theatricality, narrative agency, and sexualised performance.

4. Analysis and Discussion

This close-reading methodology has facilitated a rigorous, medium-specific analysis of female representation across the three case studies. This analysis moves beyond treating sexualisation as a purely visual phenomenon by accounting for how genre conventions and player interaction shape its operation in video games. The examination of *Tomb Raider*, *DOA*, and *Bayonetta* reveals patterns in which empowering representations are simultaneously constrained by interactive and visual design decisions. Character design, camera framing, combat choreography, and promotional materials collectively mediate players' perceptions of objectification, agency, and empowerment across the corpus. This demonstrates that empowerment in video games is not a stable attribute of characters, but a negotiated effect produced through mechanics, aesthetics, and modes of play.

Linking these elements with Butler's gender performativity and Mulvey's male gaze shows that even skilled characters are circumscribed by eroticised design choices, while interactivity transforms the gaze into a participatory process where empowerment and sexualisation intersect according to genre conventions (Juul, 2005; Klevjer, 2012; Sicart, 2011).

The tension between objectification and empowerment in early action-adventure games is exemplified by *Tomb Raider*. Exaggerated sexualisation, body-focused camera angles, and appearance-orientated marketing coexist with Lara Croft's physical prowess and narrative agency. As an early action-adventure title, the game's genre conventions and technological limitations constrain the player's ability to meaningfully disrupt sexualised framing. Although interactive mechanics afford players some control over perspective and movement, these elements illustrate how patriarchal visual standards can undermine agency. Fixed camera systems and pre-scripted visual framing frequently prioritise spectacle over functional readability (Juul, 2005; Klevjer, 2012). Patterns of racial and body-type uniformity reflect broader structural constraints in representation, despite the partial integration of intersectional considerations in this instance. Across these three titles, there are patterns of racialised and idealised bodies that are interwoven with sexualised bodies to support Gray's (2014) and Nakamura's (2008) argument that digital media is often used to reinforce a narrowing definition of identity. This is in spite of some female protagonists being bold or subversive in their characterisation.

In contrast, *DOA* foregrounds hypersexualised character design within the context of a competitive fighting game. As a genre that prioritises visual clarity, repetition, and performative excess, fighting games intensify the role of spectacle within gameplay. Camera framing, "bounce physics", and costume mechanics prioritise conventionally sexualised body parts over combat proficiency, producing a participatory masculine gaze in which the player is complicit in objectification (Bogost, 2007; Sicart, 2011; Klevjer, 2012). Here, objectification is embedded within gameplay loops rather than operating as a purely representational layer. Limited ethnic and body-type diversity reinforce constrained conceptions of femininity and desirability, further circumscribing empowerment. Nevertheless, narrative elements and character motivations permit partial subversion of conventional gender norms, indicating that even highly sexualised designs can accommodate areas for complexity and agency.

A more pronounced negotiation between objectification and empowerment is evident in *Bayonetta*. As a hack-and-slash action game, its genre enables heightened stylisation, speed, and performative excess. Performative control over her sexuality manifests through her dynamic combat, playful self-presentation, and exaggerated femininity, which players can actively engage with through interactive mechanics. In this case, empowerment is produced through mechanical mastery instead of visual restraint. Intersectional factors such as race, body type, and class highlight that empowerment operates within socially and culturally specific aesthetic frameworks, while Queer Gaze readings reveal how the visual spectacle enables non-heteronormative engagement, challenging conventional conceptions of femininity.

Player participation, genre conventions, and camera angles conflate to temper the disagreement between sexualisation and empowerment within *Tomb Raider*, *DOA*, and *Bayonetta*, illustrating how visual display and intersecting oppressions have perpetually undermined forces for empowerment (Gray, 2014; Nakamura, 2008; Crenshaw, 1989). The male gaze differs across the three game genres: scripted for *Tomb Raider*, mechanic-driven within *DOA*, and embedded within combat skills in *Bayonetta*, supporting Juul's argument (Juul, 2005) about how player participation affects the process of spectatorship. This reveals how subversive interpretations, such as Queer Gaze, highlight other ways of interacting, especially within *DOA* and *Bayonetta*, and how extreme feminisation subverts assumptions about normative masculinity (Shaw, 2014; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017).

Collectively, the case studies illustrate how video games operate within a paradoxical framework of "aestheticised progressivism". Sexualised design does not function uniformly across video games but is mediated by genre-specific mechanics and player participation. Design decisions grounded in patriarchal aesthetics frequently emphasise sexualised spectacle, constraining empowerment even when characters display agency, intelligence, or skill. Empowerment and sexualisation are connected concepts, impacted by genre, mechanics, and the use of the camera, all being perceived from the player's social-cultural context. The findings also underscore the importance of medium-specific analysis: interactive mechanics, player choice, and engagement introduce a participatory dimension to the gaze absent in linear media, complicating the negotiation between objectification and agency. Applying intersectional and queer-informed perspectives across the three games allows for a comparative understanding of how empowerment and objectification are co-produced through play.

5. Conclusion

Video game gender representation continues to negotiate the contradictions between challenging and reinforcing the masculine gaze. The case studies of *Tomb Raider*, *DOA* and *Bayonetta* demonstrate how patriarchal framing continues to shape gameplay, narrative, and character design both overtly and subtly. Butler's theory of performativity elucidates the diverse enactments of gender within these mediated contexts, while Mulvey's concept of the male gaze remains a useful framework for understanding voyeuristic pleasure and objectification. Intersectional approaches (Crenshaw, 1989) are applied across all three games to analyse how gender, race, and class intersect in representation, complementing the medium-specific visual, performative, and interactive focus in this study. The analysis demonstrates that the aspect of empowerment in the field of interactive media is not a representational feature. It is a structurally mediated process that is conditioned by aesthetics, gameplay, or interaction.

These games occasionally subvert patriarchal norms while simultaneously reinforcing them. *Tomb Raider* demonstrates how story and designer changes lead to re-evaluations for typical portrayals, being constrained nonetheless by technical capabilities and typical visual conventions; *DOA* illustrates how slight subversion occurs based on character development, but objectification is procedure-coded into its primary mechanics; and *Bayonetta* exemplifies how gendered performance can function as a source of empowerment while remaining connected to visual spectacle. The Queer Gaze (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017) is applied across the corpus to show how non-heteronormative interpretations of spectatorship are possible, illustrating that sexualised representation may coexist with agency and empowerment. In all cases, the paradox of "aestheticised progressivism" emerges, wherein sexualised design and gameplay mechanics both constrain and enable agency.

These findings indicate that to move beyond entrenched patriarchal aesthetics, future game design and scholarship should engage critically with visual storytelling, interactivity, and the intersections of identity. The importance of a medium-specific approach to the analysis of gender representations in video games is brought to the fore in the context of this research with its focus on game mechanics/genres as well as visual aspects. This study underscores that representational change alone is insufficient without corresponding shifts in mechanics, camera systems, and player-character relations. Video games possess the potential to depict authentic empowerment without perpetuating existing inequalities by incorporating comprehensive intersectional perspectives and foregrounding player agency through both design and interaction. Achieving this balance is essential to foster more diverse, inclusive, and socially conscious representations of gender in interactive media.

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