



The evolution of female iconography in gaming

OR: HOW THE VIDEO GAMING INDUSTRY DIVIDED

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Group { 'female protagonists' :  
ensure => absent,  
notify => Group['feminists'],  
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Objective

In 2012 MoMA announced that it had acquired a selection of 14 video games for its permanent design collection. It is proposed that this will be the seedbed for a total of 40 initial acquisitions followed by a future program of collecting. This bold move by MoMA has opened the doors for other institutions to legitimately treat video games as art for the first time and allows new discourse on the medium. Jonathan Jones, when writing for the Guardian, suggested that video games could never be art due their interactivity meaning that the creator is unable to claim authorial vision¹ which suggests an interesting springboard to explore if digital and interactive formats can be considered and displayed as authentic works of art in a gallery setting.

At the same time there is a developing group of media critics who use a feminist approach, have grown up immersed in video games culture and are turning their analysis to these new medias. Summer 2014 has seen these critics at loggerheads with those who self-identify with the gamer sub-culture in a similar way to how the New Art Histories came up against the traditional canonists in the 1970s. In today's hashtag-culture this debate has become known both online and in the media as #GamerGate.

Discourse has taken place across the digital world and has also spilled into traditional media. It's important to understand that statements and theories published on the Internet effectively undergo a process of peer review – like traditional journals – in that they are exposed to the world, commented on, torn apart and arguments built back up. This peer review is available for anyone to read, if one braves the comments of YouTube or Twitter where much of the discussion has taken place.

In addition to the critics themselves and their audience who are at the heart of #GamerGate, critique of the debate has happened in traditional media. All the major gaming magazines have published articles as well as major news outlets in the US and the UK. Many outlets picked up on the rape and death threats made towards leading female protagonists in the debate but soon found themselves investigating the underlying issues of sexism within the video games industry and the role of female iconography in video games.

¹ “Sorry MoMA, video games are not art”
<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2012/nov/30/moma-video-games-art> accessed on 22 October 2014.

I propose a review of the female iconography that is found within video games and an attempt to answer the following questions:

- Is iconography in games becoming more sympathetic to women, especially considering that 48% of gamers are now female?²
- Does video game iconography normalise the sexual objectification of women by the target markets of the games?
- Why did an indie development culture split itself from the self-identified group of 'gamers'?
- Does the sub-culture surrounding video gaming encourage culturally progressive thought?

² "Game Player Data - The Entertainment Software Association", <http://www.theesa.com/facts/gameplayer.asp> accessed on 21 October 2014.

Methodology

I will aim to present my research in the format of an exhibition. I recently saw the *Turner Prize 2014* at the Tate Modern and enjoyed the way that it was laid out and presented. It showed video art alongside artefacts and large-scale installations in a series of four rooms – each devoted to a single artist. I believe that this approach could be used to look at various different aspects of female iconography in video gaming. Another recent exhibition to note would be the V&A's *Disobedient Objects* that is currently running until February 2015. This exhibition eloquently tackles the problem of displaying new media and attempts to change attitudes to works that many may not consider art. It does this through both display and critical discourse and essentially asks and answers the question 'are these objects art?'

I'd like to produce for marking a final project composed of four different parts:

Floor Plans & Gallery Paraphernalia

A demonstration of how the gallery will be laid out with works in-situ as well as considerations such as design layouts and labels for works on display. There is also software available to produce graphical representations of rooms with works on the walls – although this might be to challenging to learn in the limited time available.

Exhibition Catalogue

A small format pamphlet in the style of those given out when visiting Tate exhibitions. It would explain the significance of each room and the major works within it as well as listing each individual work with brief details.

Digital Resources

More galleries are now utilising technology in order to interact with displays. I propose creating a database on either a Wordpress or Mediawiki website installation for visitors to be able to access during the exhibition. Games often hide 'easter eggs'³ in their content and this idea could be expanded to the digital resources available using 'breadcrumbs'⁴ in order to lead the viewer to relevant pieces of information. This could be

³ An unexpected or undocumented feature in a piece of computer software or on a DVD, included as a joke or a bonus.

⁴ A series or connected pieces of information or evidence.

achieved with QR codes⁵ on the display plaques or by inputting codes to the provided website. The digital resources could then link out to bonus content (such as more video footage from the game in question) or provide links to other critical thinkers on the subject.

Research & Annotated Bibliography

Since so much discourse on video art and its female iconography is to be found online, I'd like to present an annotated bibliography as part of the marked presentation. I'm aware of the difficulties when analysing and using sources from the Internet and think that rationalising and considering my sources is an important part of formulating a critical response.

⁵ A matrix barcode that can automatically lead a smartphone to a URL on the Internet or a local network.

Resources

The global phenomenon of #GamerGate has meant that the Internet has exploded with critical theories and opinions on both the portrayal and evolution of women in video games and the sub-cultres that surround this industry. There is no shortage of availability of material to examine from both academic scholars in the field right through to the message boards where groups organise their arguments and mobilise. I plan to initially examine the following sources:

Literature from MoMa

The first major art museum to bring video games into their collection.

Anita Sarskian

A notable new media critic who has produced a series of reviews called 'tropes vs. women'. She uses both blogging and YouTube videos to disseminate her arguments as well as writing in traditional media.

YouTube

Many new media critics (both with academic and non-academic backgrounds) use YouTube as a platform for debate. Both the videos themselves and the comments that others leave on them (as a crude form of peer review) can provide much information about video gaming sub-cultres.

Twitter

Arguably much of the #GamerGate discussion was carried out on Twitter between various groups and sub-cultres. Everything is searchable and conversation threads are able to be followed due to the structure of the site.

Major news outlets

For both response to video game art in general and specifically #GamerGate. Many news outlets have also produced spin-off opinion pieces discussing the iconography of female characters in games, largely reflecting their wider political leanings.

Previous Research

For Museums and Societies I produced an essay on *What Art Museums are for Today* in which I touched on video games and their place within art museums and began to research this subject. I have attached this essay in Appendix A.

Installation photographs

Many galleries have recently faced the problem of how to display digital art and MoMA currently has an installation of its video game art in New York. Photographs of these installations will allow me to critically question how such art can be displayed effectively.

Charlotte Moss

U68068 Independent Study in History of Art – Proposal

Appendix A

What are art museums for today?

In many ways the New Art Histories changed the game for art museums. The ability to define feminism, Marxism and post-colonialism amongst others, as individual approaches is a reminder of the flexibility of art history as a subject.¹ The New Art Histories gave museums and galleries the ability to take a fresh approach to their collecting habits and educational programs by viewing collections in new ways and creating displays other than a traditional progress based hang. However what started as a countercultural revolution has found itself part of the dispositive of the art institution as it expands into ever more political and commercial avenues. The added factor of mechanical reproduction in colour meaning that we no longer have to visit art museums just to see works means that art museums have had to explore other reasons for their continued existence.

When looking at the program of education for any art museum today it is impossible to miss that it is largely aimed at children and those new to studying art. There are occasional curators talks for art lovers and symposium for art historians, but like Gombrich's *Story of Art* most of the educational outreach is aimed at the young beginner. However the remit of education within art museums does extend beyond the obvious and the art museum can be seen to be a contributor to international politics. After the 2001 terrorist attack on New York many galleries in the USA made attempts to break down the negative stereotype of 'civilised us and barbaric them' with regards to the Middle East.² However many galleries ended up showing work that was produced by artists who lived, at least part of the time, within the U.S.,³ thus supporting a Westernisation of the Middle East. This could be interpreted as supporting political movements happening at the time, which culminated in the War on Terror. Education does not stop at classes, lectures and outreach programs; political agendas and education about the current political landscape are at the heart of many art museums today.

¹ Lynda Nead, "Feminism, Art History and Cultural Products" in *The New Art History*, eds. A. L. Rees, Frances Borzello (London: Camden Press, 1886), 120.

² Jessica Winegar, "The Humanity Game: Art Islam, and the War on Terror", *Anthropological Quarterly* 81:3 (2008): 652.

³ Winegar, "The Humanity Game", 654

In the post-2001 era the politics of religion comes up time and time again, but this is nothing new where art museums are concerned. Since their inception they have always showed works of religious art and applied their own political bias, but modern art museums themselves have been accused of becoming cathedral like structures where you can worship at the altar of art.⁴ In the case of the Tate Modern, the cavernous space of the turbine hall has been compared to the nave of a massive cathedral. That comparison is hardly surprising since the original architect of Bankside Power Station, Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, also designed Liverpool Cathedral. But the comparison to religion is about more than just the building itself. Art museums act as a space where we can take part in the veneration of artists, they tell us who we should be admiring by placing their work on display within their hallowed walls.

However this raises the question that if art is like religion and 'Religion is [. . .] the opium of the people'⁵, is art replacing religion as a way to pacify the proletariat? Certainly Andrew Marr makes a strong case for art museums being a refuge for those seeking to escape the pressure of the urban world.⁶ It seems many people do see the art museum as a place to relax and recuperate and this is backed up by the amount of late night socialising events that the major art museums now host.

The Tate Modern's current expansion project brings a fresh look at what an art museum might be going into the future. It has been noted that 'museums are selling their artistic souls' by looking to cut deals with sponsors as well as by dedicating so much of their floor space to commerce.⁷ In the original Tate Modern (disregarding the turbine hall which displays a single work) only three out of seven floors are dedicated to the display of artworks. The remaining four floors primarily house spaces for eating and shopping. In addition there is a café and shop taking up a considerable amount of space on one of the exhibition floors.⁸ But in just thirteen years it seems the demand for viewing artworks has become greater than was anticipated when the Tate Modern opened. A new

⁴ J. Pedro Lorente, *Cathedrals of Urban Modernity* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1998).

⁵ Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 131.

⁶ Andrew Marr, "The Magic Box" in *Tate Modern: The Handbook*, ed. Frances Morris (London: Tate Publishing, 2010), 19.

⁷ Javier Pes, "Art Museums in the Age of Expansion", *World Literature Today*, 81:1 (2007): 41.

⁸ "Facilities at Tate Modern", <http://www.tate.org.uk/visit/tate-modern/access-and-facilities/facilities> accessed on 23 April 2014.

eleven-storey tower is currently being constructed which will hopefully place emphasis back on showing artworks rather than being a centre for retail.⁹

But how do art museums choose what should fill their space? The acquisition of video games into MoMA's collection¹⁰ could be seen as giving the power of deciding what becomes art to the collective mind of the proletariat. Admittedly the acquisition is part of the design collections rather than the higher status art collection, but it does work to verify the taste of those that video games are aimed at. However Raph Koster asserts that popular entertainment, such as games, are accessible whereas art requires literacy.¹¹ This presents a problem within an institution where the framework is apparently built around education – how do you educate in a subject that is already theoretically accessible to all? It does also start to question why art should require literacy and education to understand, if video games are now classified as art and require no such consideration.

MoMA's video game acquisition also highlights another role of some art museums today. Since its inception MoMA has always placed itself as an arbiter of taste, setting out with an aim to introduce the American public to the new European modern art.¹² It is unsurprising then due to its bold collecting strategy and its remit being all aspects of modern culture that it would decide to break the mould and define video games as art. Compare that to the Tate collection and the picture is very different. The Tate acquisition policy states that 'Tate will only acquire works by artists who have demonstrated their ability over a reasonable period of time' which presumably precludes non-established new media. However the Tate also work in conjunction with the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum so it could be unfair to consider just one of those institutions alone when new media may be more suited to the Victoria and Albert museum, for example.¹³ This does highlight the different approaches

⁹ "The Tate Modern Project", <http://www.tate.org.uk/about/projects/tate-modern-project> accessed on 23 April 2014.

¹⁰ "Video Games: 14 in the Collection, for Starters", http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/11/29/video-games-14-in-the-collection-for-starters accessed on 23 April 2014.

¹¹ Raph Koster, "A Theory of Fun: 10 Years Later" (Slide 87), http://www.raphkoster.com/gaming/gdco12/Koster_Raph_Theory_Fun_10.pdf accessed on 23 April 2014.

¹² "The Museum in the Twentieth Century", Lecture notes, *Museums and Society*, Dr. Elizabeth Darling, 20 March 2014.

¹³ "Tate Acquisition and Disposal Policy, November 2011", <http://www.tate.org.uk/download/file/fid/11111> accessed on 23 April 2014.

afforded to art museums today, choosing to proactively define taste to their audience, or reacting to the tastes of society.

Within the press release for the video games acquisition MoMA also states that as a museum its goal is to study and preserve items, not just to merely display them.¹⁴ This gives us the idea of an art museum as a repository of objects of worth to somebody, but the question is who. In the case of a private art museum it may be items considered to be of worth to the owner or individual curators, however a national art museum has a much broader challenge; it must in some way seek to collect and preserve items that are relevant to the taste of those who fund it. While on one hand that means the large corporate organisations that donate, on the other hand it will often mean the tax paying public. So perhaps we will see more video games entering the collections of major art museums in the future.

Art museums today have to navigate a myriad of different functions, with everyone from the CEO and curators to the general public believing that they are entitled to have a say in how the institution is run and how objects are displayed. It is no wonder that at times an art museum might feel fragmented in its purpose or message, when so many different forces are pulling it in different directions.

(Words: 1498)

¹⁴ "MoMA Acquires 14 Video Games for Architecture and Design Collection", <http://press.moma.org/2012/12/moma-acquires-14-video-games-for-architecture-and-design-collection/> accessed on 23 April 2014.

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