

Bayonetta (2009) - Objectification or Empowering

Bayonetta is the titular character of the Bayonetta franchise. This essay will be exploring to what extent she is objectified through her design and portrayal, both from and within the game world as well as in relation to the other characters, and how she could be seen as an empowering character. In regard to objectification – the definition of being sexually objectified by MacKinnon-Haslanger is used: “having a social meaning imposed on your being that defines you as to be sexually used, according to your desired uses, and then using you that way.” (MacKinnon,1989). In regard to empowerment, it is defined in this essay by the Collins definition of “Something that is empowering makes people feel stronger and more successful than they did before” (www.collinsdictionary.com, n.d.), as well as keeping in mind that “empowerment should result in an understanding that both men and women are equal beings” (Mehta and Sharma, 2014). This essay will focus on analysing the content and creation of Bayonetta (2009). Bayonetta can be seen as a result of ‘The Lara Phenomenon’ which led to a rise in powerful female characters within video games. The study which coined the term states how this portrayal of women could be perpetuating harmful stereotypes but could also be seen as empowering (Jansz and Marti, 2007) – Bayonetta fits into both sides of the argument in the sense that she occupies a powerful position within the game, yet it is hard to ignore her overtly sexual nature. Female characters in video games are “proportionally more likely than males to be portrayed in a sexualised fashion”, it is important to note that Bayonetta further feeds into these double standards and regardless of whether it is objectification or empowerment – it still has harmful real-world consequences on how men view women, and how women view themselves (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro, 2009).

Bayonetta is deemed the “ideal candidate for thinking about the objectification of women in video games” (Ruberg and Shaw, 2017, p.110). She wears a tightfitting, black catsuit with a cutout showing off her breasts and a large expanse of her back. Her proportions are unrealistic – long legs and a long torso to further accentuate her sexual allure. This depiction is conventional of women within the action genre (Burgess, Stermer and Burgess, 2007); where their male counterparts are allowed to have bulky muscles that justify their power, women are subjected to designs that show off their assets in a way that is oftentimes – anatomically impossible. This is done in a way to emphasise their sexuality which can be

interpreted as inherently objectifying due to it having no other purpose other than to make them more appealing to the spectator (Beasley and Standley, 2002). Her design alone can be viewed as objectifying, it has been compared to the likes of drag – an artform based around exaggerating overtly feminine stereotypes. This has been seen as “reasserting notions of sexualized and gendered bodies” (Harper, 2015, p5), further perpetuating already harmful attitudes towards women from men and women alike (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro, 2009). Heavy gender stereotyping is not something women like in the presentation of characters (Hartmann and Klimmt, 2006), so it is easy to assume that Bayonetta was not designed for women – but for men. To take this further, Bayonetta is designed perfectly for the male gaze, fitting the definition in the ways that Bayonetta has her “appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (Hein, 2006, p.809). Therefore, it can be said that her design is inherently objectifying.

It is important to note that Bayonetta’s character design was done by Mari Shimazaki – notably a woman. This isn’t to say that women are absolved from feeding into objectifying tropes when creating characters, but it is important to understand the intention behind the design. Shimazaki states in a blog post commenting on the process of creating Bayonetta’s design: “When a female character appears in an action game, her limbs often seem thin and short. That is why I tried to make her more appealing as an action game character by adjusting her proportions and extending her limbs.” (Shimazaki, 2009). This can be interpreted as her feeding into the objectification by trying to make her specifically more ‘appealing’, but even taking this view can be seen as empowering due to how it is a woman’s view on what appealing is. As well as this, the intention behind Bayonetta’s design can be seen as subversive to the typical tropes due to Shimazaki wanting to stray away from the typical portrayal of women in the action genre as being being ‘thin and short’, this is consolidated by research that has shown women in video games are often portrayed with ‘thin bodies’ (Mou and Peng, 2008, p924) . Therefore, her take on the opposite, elongating Bayonetta’s limbs, can be seen as an artistic choice to show her power through shape language (Mehtälä, 2020) – her being taller, giving her a more dominant presence compared to the meek passivity associated with being small. To further this, Bayonetta doesn’t fit the standards that would deem her most attractive in terms of body type (Lassek and Gaulin, 2016) – whilst she does have a conventional figure, her curves aren’t accentuated to the impossible proportions that would deem it inherently objectifying. Ultimately it would be a disservice to conclude that Bayonetta’s design is born completely out of the male

gaze – therefore it isn't subjectively objectified and would be fair to say it is empowering due to the woman's vision behind it.

The camera is essential to the debate due to how it acts as the audience stand in, "the male look is the gaze on women in a position from the camera, the spectator comes to identify with this male gaze and objectifies the women on the screen." (Jacobsson, 1999). In Bayonetta, the camera often leers at Bayonetta's features – it trails up her body, showing off her curves in suggestive ways. The audience is forced to view her through this lens of the male gaze, the camera is objectifying her and by admission the audience is as well. But despite this, Bayonetta gazes right back – it can be argued that she is aware of the audience, she is aware that her body is on show, by looking into the camera it as if she is saying she knows you are looking. This introduces agency into the argument. It can be argued that she instead subverts the objectification into empowerment. Bayonetta wields her sexuality as a weapon; it is integral to her character in the ways she weaponises it. From her exaggerated swaggering strut to how she speaks – taunting the enemies (Mark, 2011). Some however would argue that "the performance of confident sexual agency...is central to this new disciplinary technology of sexiness" (Gill, 2008, p32). She may show agency, but this does not mean she is absolved from being objectified – this may just be feeding into a new form of objectification. A counter point could be in regard to Bayonetta's position: Bayonetta within the story is the main character. She spends the most time in front of the camera due to her position. This gives her "more significance beyond her physical attributes" (Lynch et al., 2016, p14) as she has a story arc and development that go beyond her just being a sexualised woman fighting monsters. Bayonetta is very similar to Lara Croft in this regard: "while Lara does exist to be looked at because of her conventional attractiveness, the plot of the game depends on her decisions and development as a character...this makes Tomb Raider subversive of the male gaze by depicting female agency independent of male influence." (Mwedzi, 2021, p7). The same point can be argued for Bayonetta. It can also be said that "although game structures and rules shape and influence players' gaze, they also cannot fully determine the gazing practices that players may adopt." (Jennings, 2018, p240) the camera may leer but that does not mean the audience will automatically leer alongside it.

It could be argued that Bayonetta is objectified by being seen as a prize to be sought from one particular character within the game: a male called Luka. He constantly objectifies Bayonetta by oggling her body

(WEB083, 2023), however he is not rewarded for this behaviour – unlike other common media depictions where the women are often won over by the male at the end (Holt and Thompson, 2004). Instead, he is treated like that of the comic relief archetype (Platt, 2019), Bayonetta toys with him – putting any males in the audience who have been displaying similar behaviours of the character Luka, in their place. It calls them out on their objectifying behaviour which in turn can be seen as empowering. Bayonetta is not at all depicted as a subordinate to any of the males within the game, this is already a step ahead of most other video games where the same cannot be said (Dietz, 1998). During the end of the game, she is bested by the male antagonist and briefly experiences feeding into the damsel in distress trop (source), however this is immediately flipped onto its head as another prominent female character within the game, Jeanne, comes to rescue her. This can be seen as empowering due to its subversion with the strong female friendship saving the day rather than a male who seeks to control them.

To conclude, there are arguments to be made for either side; Bayonetta can be seen as incredibly objectified due to her look and how she is portrayed within the game – these are active decisions made by developers through a predominantly male gaze to satisfy a male audience. However, the developers can only go so far in her creation – once the audience plays the game it is up to them to interpret the character of Bayonetta. “Analyzing texts tells us how the audience was constructed and about the inner workings of industry logics, but an audience study helps us make sense of where these meanings go after they are constructed” (Shaw, 2015, p63) A Some may find her empowering, but others may not. Ultimately it is entirely subjective, people's feeling and emotions towards the character cannot be discredited if they feel like the character is overly sexualised and are offended by such. This does not negate the current state of the industry where many female characters play into such harmful stereotypes regardless of whether their overt sexualisation is meant to be subversive or not - “if female characters require sexualization to bolster their merit, that objectification and its deleterious outcomes (e.g., discomfort among women who do not play video games) become difficult to avoid” (Lynch, 2016, p16). Comparing finally to Lara Croft, “continually regarding Lara's sexualisation as a negative quality will forever keep her apart, and will by default, other players who never even considered her a problem” (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014). This goes the same for Bayonetta – if she is viewed as a sex object by those who simply look at her design and nature without critically analysing the space in which she inhabits, it will continue to perpetuate the notion that ‘sexy equals objectifying’ which is a harmful notion by itself.

Women should be allowed to show their sexual nature without being demonised for it. Bayonetta defies the narrow boundaries of traditional objectification, she challenges the notion that a woman's expression of her sexual nature is inherently degrading: therefore, she serves as an empowering example of how a character can be sexually confident within her own right, opening up the possibilities for more nuanced representations of women in media.

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