



## Featured Articles

## A different kind of Sophisticated Gent: a look at Dorian Pavus

December 19, 2014

Note: This is the second in a series of articles exploring the diverse cast of BioWare's Dragon Age: Inquisition. The following contains details from all points of Dorian's sub-<'>' Dragon Age: Inquisition, including his ultimate romance sub-quest...

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## Queer Mechanic #5: Queering the Male Gaze

by [Mitch Alexander](#)



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**Queer Mechanic** is a regular feature here on GayGamer – each month, we'll be presenting a new game mechanic that could be used in games that include or focus on queer identity or culture. *Queer Mechanic* is a thought experiment, to see both what we could add to games, and to recognise what's been missing from them; it's a challenge, both to readers, to come up with novel, interesting and effective ways to use them, and to developers, to include them in games; and it's a discussion for a more inclusive, more varied, and more innovative future for the games industry.

The concept of **male gaze** as we know it now was formulated by Laura Mulver in her 1975 essay, "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*", and has since been diffused throughout the fields of media critique and analysis, in particular that of film.

[Finally Feminism 101 has an excellent FAQ on the male gaze over here](#), which is well-worth reading so that most of what follows makes sense, but, in



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summary: the male gaze is the name given to the idea that scenes in media are often constructed from the perspective of an assumed straight-male viewer and his (often, but not always, sexual) interests.

We've probably all seen movies where a female character takes a shower, and the camera takes its time to hover over her body, lingering at her hips, her ass, her breasts, perhaps a close-up of her lips, half-opened, or her eyes, closed as though in pleasure.



**Boom.** That's male gaze. The camera "stands in" for the straight male audience, watching the woman in a way that would probably seem jarring and unusual were it to be done to a male character. Not because male characters aren't nice to look at – but because we're so used to seeing only women framed as sexual characters (or objects).


Male gaze is an interesting topic to discuss in the medium of games, because video games in particular have borrowed a number of techniques, concepts and vocabulary from film that make it ripe for exploration – the most obvious of these are Quantic Dream's games *Fahrenheit/Indigo Prophecy*, *Heavy Rain* and *Beyond: Two Souls*, but really, any game with characters moving around a scene and followed by a camera will inevitably borrow filmic techniques. And, as the concept of "male gaze" has similarly been applied to other non-film media, so to can we discuss the theory with regards to concepts unique to (or most prevalent in) games.

For this month's Queer Mechanic, we're going to take a look at ways of toying with, subverting, destabilising and queering the concept of the straight male gaze. So let's jump right in!

What kinds of factors do we have to consider before we discuss mechanics or systems that help us destabilise the normative male gaze?

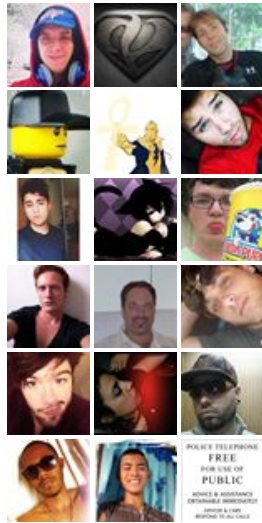


One massive problem is that [queer \(lesbian, bisexual, women-loving, etc\) women are frequently seen through the lens of a straight male viewer throughout media](#), which diminishes the opportunity for those interested in women (who aren't themselves straight men) to represent, explore or communicate about queer female sexuality without it being co-opted for



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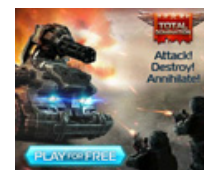
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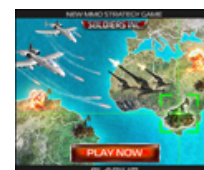
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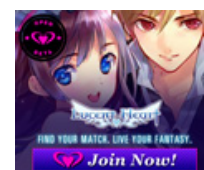
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straight male use. One example of this in games is the Mass Effect series, which, [having included woman-on-woman sex before man-on-man sex](#), and its [monogendered space aliens which happened to look pretty much like human women with tentacle-hair](#), could easily be said to prioritise its straight-male audience.

This is not to say that women-loving-women should be excised from showing any kind of sexual interest in one another in games and media, however; it's problematic to assert that any space with sexualised women necessarily becomes "male gaze"-y or is "for men" by default, as it excludes a multitude of perspectives – however, when the space is set up with an imposed view designed to prioritise the desires of straight men (through devices such as how the woman is posed, where's she's looking, who she is or what she signifies, whether she is aware of being watched, and so on), we have to recognise that the woman is there for the viewer's pleasure rather than her own.



Another issue is men who are into submissive roleplay, or men posed as women typically are in media (e.g., underdressed and serving someone), are often used as examples that male (sexual) objectification is not only extant but prevalent; but this is not the case – at the end of the roleplay or photoshoot, men can discard the trappings of objectification. They can “take off” the markers that indicate they are there to be objectified (which, coincidentally enough, tend to be associated with women in the first place), whereas for women, when they choose to be released from a scenario of objectification, have to return to a world where they continue to be objectified without any kind of consent, by advertising, by media, even by dialogue with men.



We see also that submissive, androgynous, or “objectified” men – think of

magazines, porn, media and advertising – tend to be read as being “gay interest”, which says a lot about the assumptions about who is typically the spectator behind the camera – in no uncertain terms, it’s assumed to be a man. [One commentor](#) over on the Border House Blog article “What Do YOU Think: Objectification of Men in Games”, says

“When I can see most of a man’s package peeking around his jock-strap the way I can see most of Ivy’s breast I’ll believe men are being sexually objectified.”

To which I’d add that until images like this become a trend – when they actively inform any given man’s lived experience such as walking down the street, shopping, eating, being ill, being promoted at work, deciding what clothes to wear (and how much skin to show), taking photographs of himself, going out for dinner, walking up stairs, walking down stairs, walking alone at night, coming out as gay, or bisexual, or transgender, or anything other than heterosexual – this type of sexual objectification would be nowhere near as damaging, influential, ubiquitous or systematic as the sexual objectification of women.

So, with these issues in mind, how could we disrupt or “queer” the straight male gaze?



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March 3 2014 The simplest answer could be to analyse the games we create and excise the portions which are obviously objectifying – which, in fact, many games do, to a greater or lesser extent. You’ll be hard-pressed to find objectification in Animal Crossing, for example, much less sexual objectification for the titillation of the straight male viewer, because the game dispenses with sexuality in any form. However, that’s not to suggest that this is always the case – even in games with no overtly sexual content, we still have holdovers like the [Chainmail Bikini](#), or, more broadly, the fact that women are typically represented as under-dressed more often than the men are. The fact remains that, in contemporary society, it’s hardly likely that the mainstream would follow suit – instead, all we’d have is the male gaze, with no alternative models to speak of. Plus, if you’re a male developer yourself, it’s not always easy to recognise, understand and come to terms with the fact that something you’ve made may make use of the male gaze, and be able to correct it.





The next obvious answer may be to bend the way we portray characters to that, instead of catering to a straight male audience, we instead shift to a gay male or straight female audience (perhaps of someone like [Ulysses3302](#)'s genderbent Lara Croft "[Nathan Thomas](#)", pictured above); to provide long, lingering shots of men's bodies of body parts associated with masculinity or male-ness, all for the benefit of the viewer, while being aware that [just because something uses the same visual vocabulary of the male gaze but with a female viewer does not make it a subversion of the same.](#)

It's not perfect; the answer to resisting objectification likely should not be the wholesale "[equal-opportunities sexual objectification](#)" of other groups of people, especially if that includes or throws already-marginalised groups under the bus – but again, it's important to notice that showing a few well-defined pecs is not anywhere near the same scale of objectification that women face. That's not to say it's okay, but to recognise that male objectification is unlikely to become as ubiquitous, damaging and systematic as female objectification – it would require an entire cultural shift for men as a class, to a status below women: articles in magazines about how much skin men are allowed to show before they're considered sluts (and if that means they're "asking for it"); religious codices on men's sexual duties towards the women who own them; male prostitutes and stripclubs as the cornerstone of every "gritty" TV drama; the advertising, pornographic and fashion industry awash with images of men in bizarre, painful positions, posed to look submissive – or just dominant enough to provide a thrill when they're conquered; equal numbers of men and boys in human sex trafficking circuits run by women; centuries of being bought, sold and traded as property; the removal of men from all but a cursory 20% of positions of power due to their "emotions", their "deviousness", their "manipulative nature", their "shrewishness", their "biological weaknesses", and their "tendency towards vapidty".



If we're discussing male gaze purely in the context of how the camera is used for the benefit of straight men's viewing pleasures, one possibility would be to give the players themselves greater control over the way the camera is used, especially during cutscenes. Games like Metal Gear Solid 2, or Shadow of the Colossus, have similar features, in that they allow the player to "shift" the focus of the camera a limited amount, and [Assassin's Creed provides some alternate camera-viewpoint positions during cutscenes](#) if the player presses a button at certain points, allowing for a more structured or cinematic view of the scene. Similarly, there has been a trend towards "in-game cutscenes" in games recently, where the action takes place in real-time, while the player can still move their character and the camera.

One way to destabilise the idea of the normative male gaze may be to combine these approaches, allowing the player much more control over the camera than merely swiveling around their character; for example, providing a number of set positions for any given scene – perhaps split up into camera positions specific to that scene (if the protagonists are being watched by an antagonist, for example, the camera positions could include an option to watch them from the point-of-view of the antagonist), and camera positions not specific to any scene (such as views of character's head-and-shoulders for use during any given conversational scene, such as those used in Mass Effect and Dragon Age). The player could then shift, pan, tilt and zoom to their heart's content – and, if they end up accidentally zooming in to an incredibly dull wall texture, they could simply reset the camera back to its initial position and re-adjust it as needed.

Of course, there're still problems with just focusing on male-gaze-as-camera-behaviour; if the game includes the aforementioned Obligatory Shower Scene – such as [one of Madison's scenes in Heavy Rain, as discussed over on the Border House Blog](#) - there's only so much camera-tumbling you can really do to disrupt the idea that the scene itself is there for straight male viewers. The developer's intent and vision will still trickle through, even if we include the option to look away.



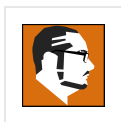
Games rely heavily upon a concept that is a vital factor in discussing objectification: agency. Agency is often talked about in two terms: player agency – the idea that players are able to enact their own wants or needs in an environment; and character agency – the idea that characters in a given medium can act upon their own wants or needs.

In video games, both of these concepts overlap and inform one another; when we play games, we are often required to take on the role of a given character with their own motivations. Depending on our level of identification with the character, we can have characters' motivations being determined by the player, player's motivations modified by what the game tells us our characters want, or even having the player and character's motivations be at odds with one another.

Agency is also a potentially good way of destabilising the straight male gaze. This is particularly interesting considering the upswell of interest in the game *Biocock: Infinite*, a (**totally NSFW!**) parodical version of *Bioshock: Infinite*; Maddy Myers suggests that (NSFW) [Biocock actually manages to imbue the character Elizabeth with more agency](#) than she was allowed in the commercial game.

However, its important to consider that agency is something that can be staged – after all, characters do not actually have agency in the same way actual people do, and this can complicate matters to the extent that characters like Bayonetta can be viewed as both [empowering by some](#), but also [hollow fodder for the male gaze](#) by others, because we must simultaneously understand Bayonetta both as an image or icon of a woman, but also the product of male creators. Suffice it to say, [it's not straightforward](#).

“It's not straightforward” is probably the most apt way to end this edition of Queer Mechanics. So, I'd like to put it to you folks – do you think there are specific ways we can help shrug off the male gaze? Are there methods you've seen used that disrupt male gaze, in film, comics, TV or games? Are there issues not covered here that must be factored in to any discussion on male gaze? Let us know in the comments below!




### About [Mitch Alexander](#)

(Writer) Mitch Alexander is a Game Design graduate, designer and critic from Glasgow, Scotland. who usually talks about things you get into deep discussions about at 3am, like *Silent Hill*, *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem*, *The Mothman Prophecies*, *The Invisibles*, or how creepy monkeys are. They're so, so creepy.



## 8 Responses

1.  *Azthok* says:  
[March 4, 2014 at 12:30 pm](#)

Aside the fact that I don't think that something can be more or less damaging only depending on the fact that who has to deal with it is a woman or a man, I think that male gaze is just another kind of stereotype. The problem with games is that they have many limts and restrictions when it comes to storytelling, since the very beginning stories usually were not very important and the structure itself of a game makes it less suitable and versatile in this field, other than that many of the most

famous games are big titles with a lot of money behind them (and just like with storytelling, this is something which was even truer in the past, where indies did not exist or at least where not so famous)... with that said, it is easy to understand that games are mainly commercial products and you cannot really expect to see any kind of stereotype taken out of anything commercial because you know, it would end up being not commercial at all.

Basically however I think that there is not much to do when you dislike or disapprove something except not buying it and search harder for something you like or maybe doing yourself something you could like more (talking about games, there are rather easy programs which can allow everybody to create games without knowing any language)... everytime I see something that I don't like for any reason I do exactly that. I don't expect producers to change games or movies or whatever that they like and sell extremely well worldwide just because there is something that I don't like in them. I mean, I would like that but there would be no point in trying since the world CANNOT work like that...

[Reply](#)



2. *Cyro* says:

[March 5, 2014 at 2:06 am](#)

Thanks Mitch – I really enjoyed this article. Especially the part about equal-opportunities sexual objectification. People need to be aware of the cultural complexities that invalidate the simple objectification of men as the end-all “equality” response to the objectification of women.

And Azthok, I totally agree that developers can't be expected to make changes based on one person's opinion. But not buying a game isn't enough to inform the developers what you didn't appreciate about their game. With people posting their thoughts on the internet (blogs, forums, websites, etc), I'd like to think that developers will make changes based on not one person's opinion, but on a group of people with a shared opinion.

[Reply](#)



3. *blackboy* says:

[March 5, 2014 at 2:45 am](#)

The only part that I really didn't like was the the paragraph that immediately follows the sentence, “just because something uses the same visual vocabulary of the male gaze but with a female viewer does not make it a subversion of the same.” And then proceeds to do exactly that: listing ways in which women are represented in society and media simply transplanted onto men.

[Reply](#)



◦ *Mitch Alexander* says:


[March 5, 2014 at 4:53 pm](#)

There's two different contexts for each of those paragraphs, though; the difference is that in the prior paragraph, I'm referring to staging a scene to make it appear as though the male gaze has been subverted in that one scene, whereas in the second paragraph, I'm giving examples to demonstrate the sheer scale by which societal attitudes would need to change for there to be such a thing as “egalitarian gaze,” if we could call it that. I'm not listing a series of things that a film needs to include before it can be said to be subverting the male gaze – I'm providing some scope so that it makes it obvious that men cannot be objectified by a “female-” or “egalitarian-gaze” without destroying almost every patriarchal notion we have about women.

Although I will happily make a hypocrite of myself and say that a game or film “subverts the male gaze” using only a male subject, female viewer and a camera-like object if, by virtue of the way they have established the scene, they single-handedly destroy patriarchy. I think I could give them a free pass in that scenario.

[Reply](#)



4.  [“Top 5 Transsexuals?” Not quite. | The Trans Gamer](#) says:  
[March 8, 2014 at 5:41 pm](#)


[...] for the Thumbnail will obviously attract straight men (check out this awesome article on the the “Male Gaze” by my mate Mitch on Gay Gamer.net) as they will want to see more. Zoomin.TV Games seems to use [...]

[Reply](#)

5.  [New Games Online » This Week in Video Game Criticism: A weird trick to fix games](#) says:  
[March 10, 2014 at 6:51 pm](#)


[...] On GayGamer, Mitch Alexander adeptly challenges arguments that equivocate male and female objectification under a straight male g... and explores what might developers do to “queer” the male [...]

[Reply](#)

6.  [Is Video Game Nudity Acceptable? | The Trans Gamer](#) says:  
[March 16, 2014 at 6:45 pm](#)

[...] mans? Shower scenes are also very female centric. I'll link you to Mitch's brilliant Male Gaze article again. Lets accept the male form (go that sounds weird coming from me) as we seem to accept [...]

[Reply](#)

7.  [The Narration and Abstraction of the Camera in Games | bigtallwords](#) says:  
[July 25, 2014 at 5:30 pm](#)

[...] Mitch. “Queer Mechanic #5: Queering the Male Gaze.” Gay Gamer. Mar 3 [...]

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