Of Castration Anxiety and Hypersexualized Female Bodies: A Critical Assessment of the Objectifying Gaze in *Batman: Arkham* Video Game Series

Anupama K.
School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai, India

G. K. Chithra
School of Social Sciences and Languages, Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai, India

Abstract—This article builds upon Laura Mulvey's idea of the Male Gaze to conduct a feminist reading of the video game series *Batman: Arkham* (2009-2015). It does so by using Bechdel Test to analyze the depiction of the major female characters appearing in the series. The article investigates why portrayal of the women characters in video games is always problematic and how *Batman: Arkham* franchise becomes yet another transmedia text that fails in showing its female characters accurately. The textual analysis of the games confirms that the video game industry protects and perpetuates male privilege through the hypersexualization and objectification of female characters. As a result, the study further identifies a noticeable lack of compelling female characters in the video game series. Thus, the investigation calls for the necessity of a neutral and unbiased counter gaze for the legitimate portrayal of the women characters in the video game narratives as well as proper gender representation in the fast-growing game industry.

Index Terms—transmedia storytelling, gender inequality, critical game studies, Batman franchise, castration anxiety, Gaze Theory

I. SEXISM IN THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY: AN INTRODUCTION

The video game is a fascinating, powerful, and widely popular medium. They are arguably the best technology-based teaching tool in terms of how a gamer must stick to the proposed 'behavioral script' of the game to make decisions instantaneously. The video game industry is more profitable than both the global box office and the music business combined. However, video games are still a man's game when it comes to the number of women who play them. According to a recent survey performed by the C. S. Mott Children's Hospital among parents of 13-18 years old children, 41% of boys play video games every day compared to 20% of girls (Clark et al., 2020). Another survey conducted by ESA finds that among a hundred and fifty million people who play video games only 41% are female gamers (Yanev, 2022). Moreover, while male gamers overpoweringly gravitate towards multiplayer action-based games, female players are much more likely to be interested in puzzles and party games (2020). Very often, just a sound of a female voice or a hint that a girl might be on the team ignites the primal sense of excitement and oddness in a large section of the male players (McLean & Griffiths, 2019). This gives an outcast identity to female gamers around the world.

Similarly, there are only 19% of female workers in the gaming industry. Unfortunately, they are prone to face the repercussions of the video game industry's notorious crunch culture (Snider, 2019). The workers behind the screen including the game developers, artists, coders, animators, and engineers are put for inhumane working hours to finish their assignments. They are put under enormous pressure to work overtime to meet the game launch deadlines. Once the game is ready for release many workers must face layoffs and mainly women workers face the consequences here. Female workers face huge mental health issues such as "emotional exhaustion, reduced persona accomplishment, and feelings of hopelessness" (Snider, 2019, p. 1). World Health Organization marked its concern over the mental health of those who work in the gaming industry by recently adding gaming disorder to its ICD-11. However, the abuse of power and coercion mainly affects the marginalized including women. From a broader perspective, this may lead to the over-sexualization and production of misogynistic attitudes in the gaming culture. This lack of opportunity and representation reflects in the content of the games as well. Women avatars and their stories are almost invisible in the game narratives.

Though gaming was first derived by targeting adult players, the goal was not to draw any specific gender. Early video games such as Tic-Tac-Toe, Checkers, and Centipede targeted adult players irrespective of their gender or age. But, during the 1980s video games switched from electronic aisle to marketing as a toy because of the great video game

recession that happened during the same time. Due to the availability of the excess number of video games, marketers tried to revamp the video game industry. Thus, they targeted boys who fall between the ages of 10-15. Subsequently, game trailers and advertisements started to aim at young boys for whom game stations and gaming tools were easily accessible.

During the Golden Age of arcade games in the 1970s and 80s video games have long been considered part of the masculine culture. Most of the video games produced by the industry are narratives that center on the exploits of brave masculine avatars. Whether it is as the damsel in distress cliché or as sex objects that feed masculine power fantasies, women play minor roles in the narrative (King & Douai, 2014). Eventually, however, video games introduced female protagonists and they began to make their debuts through the portrayal of brave female combat though their roles remained sexualized to appeal largely to the male spectators. The most iconic of these early videogame heroines is the Tomb Raider herself Lara Craft. Not only was Lara's busty character model supposed to attract male gamers, but the advertising campaign set forward by her developers worked hard to highlight her feminine features earning Lara the reputation of being one of the most prominent sex symbols in the popular culture. Though Lara Croft no longer wears a crop top and shorts in her most recent iteration, which takes place more than twenty years after her debut. She now has less exaggerated and more natural body proportions. This de-hyper sexualization of Lara Croft can be seen as an example of a larger growing trend to humanize female characters in video games. In a study that analyzed the appearances of the female characters in videogames across the last 31 years, researchers found that the portrayal of female videogame characters like Lara Croft getting less sexualized. There is a noticeable decline in the sexualized portrayal of women characters in video games after 2006. The study asserts that the rise of female gamers and the growing criticism of the industry's ostensibly male hegemony are to blame for the fall (Lynch et al., 2016, p. 566).

A study documenting the effect of sexist media has on the viewpoint of developing teenagers states that, the stereotypical depiction of masculinity and femininity also encourages a sexist social structure. Given that video game portrayals are aimed at a young audience who are actively building social schemas, particularly concerning gender, this is extremely disturbing (Dill & Thill, 2007, p. 853). Videogames have been recently trying to evolve in their representation of gender stereotypes surrounding them. Therefore, remakes of games that had problematic representation in the past can show whether or not the game industry has evolved at all from its more toxic past. A study that discusses how video games have stuck to an extremely rigid portrayal of women in video games concludes that, the building of character representations that are formed in these games needs to be addressed as well, as video games continue to become a part of everyday life. More than ever, studies on how gender is entwined with all aspects of videogames, especially their interactivity, are required as new technology and the new medium of interactivity emerge daily" (Snider, 2019, p. 2).

Though there is a slight increase in the number of female gamers, the sexual objectification of the female characters in the game is still prevalent. Even amidst the trend of showing the female characters sensibly, a few female avatars still appear without any strong back story and fulfill the function of satisfying the male gamers and empowering the male characters. This makes the whole video game industry a sexist platform that spreads toxicity and fallacy regarding gender among the players. However, some people still argue that it is traditional for female characters in video games to look sexy and appealing, for it makes them more interesting to male gamers. Games that feature highly sexualized characters or ones with over-the-top physical proportions are seldom addressed for their appearance, especially the legacy characters with said traits. One such depiction can be seen in Rocksteady Studios' most popular and successful transmedia versions of Batman Universe, *Batman: Arkham* (2009-2015) video game series. Being one of the most popular and influential transmedia story worlds, adapting the Batman Universe to a new medium is always problematic. Though, *Batman: Arkham* series borrows from and contributes to a broad and varied Batman mythos, the series offers excellent quality on a large narrative scale (Arnott, 2016, p. 4). With gender representation and portrayal still being hot issues for games worth discussing, the study proposes Bechdel Test to analyze the series and reinforces the objectifying gazes present in the games. In 1987, the American cartoonist Alison Bechdel proposed the Bechdel Test, which examines the representation and depiction of women in fiction. It inquires as to whether a video/film has two ladies conversing about topics aside from topic concerning men ("Bechdel Test"). It fails if it revolves around a man or if a man participates in it. Further, the test result complements the concept of the male gaze proposed by Laura Mulvey.

II. MALE GAZE, GAZE THEORY, AND BECHDEL TEST: THEORIZING THE GAZE

The Male Gaze is a concept put forth by the British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her breakthrough work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* in 1975. It is the practice of sexualizing female characters in various artistic and media representations. Women are consequently solely depicted in the media as objects for male lust. These images of objectified women are shown in various movie advertisements and comic books of popular culture. Hence, the notion of the male gaze, emphasizes the idea of patriarchy, while also continuing to reinforce the ways that men have power and control over women in films and other media (Mulvey, 1975). While using the concept of the male gaze to analyze any visual text, one must view it from three viewpoints that the man who works behind the camera, the male characters who are already there within the text, and the male spectators looking at the image of the female characters. The male gaze essentially says that when a heterosexual male tries to film a woman and represent her on screen, the result will be an exaggerated sexually pleasing image of the woman. One of the typical features of the male gaze in visual media is with

the camera ankle focuses on women from the bottom to top while slowing down and focusing on the more erotic areas of the female body. This both objectifies the woman, while also highlighting the areas of her body that are sexually desirable. Showing women as such, makes them seem more submissive and powerless to men. Due to this objectification and misrepresentation, a piece of common knowledge is established that the body is the main feature of interest in a woman (Mulvey, 1975). Other than the gazes, dialogues, and storyline that demean the existence of female characters also impact the spectators' awareness.

The male gaze theory has also made its way into other disciplines and schools of thought such as queer studies, literary and cultural studies, transmedia storytelling, critical race studies, postcolonial studies, holocaust studies, and black/whiteness studies.   In general, the concept of gaze is used to help describe the hierarchical power dynamism and the classified relations between two or more groups or, alternatively, between a class and an object. Researchers from various domains recently developed a bunch of phrases associated with gaze such as the heterosexual and homosexual gaze, the transatlantic gaze, tourist gaze, color gaze, and the meta-fictional gaze, to name but a few (Manlove, 2007, p. 92). Michael Foucault in his works on power uses the concept of the gaze to describe different types of power and coercion that discipline and control society (Foucault, 1995). According to Slavoj Zizek, the difference between what an eye of a character sees versus what a gaze of a character sees is that "the eye viewing the object is on the side of the subject, while the gaze is on the object. When I look at an object, the object is already gazing at me, and at a point from which I cannot see it" (Zizek, 2009, p. 35).

In this field, Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, which is rooted in the discipline of Psychoanalysis has been widely adopted as theory and criticism across a variety of cultural and humanist fields. The conclusion of her thesis is that the pleasure found in one person gazing at another can be employed to study the gender power dynamics of the visual media. Gender power irregularity is an inevitable trait of visual media, and it primarily is constructed for the satisfaction of heterosexual white male viewers. The whole idea is deeply rooted in white patriarchal ideologies (Mulvey, 1975). The concept has the potential for broader applications despite the steady criticism and revision by many of her colleagues in feminist and film studies. The ideology of the male gaze is still being used today to analyze the films, video games, advertisements, and other visual media representations of women. While, since the mid-1990s, pragmatic and psychoanalytical approaches to culture and visual media may claim to be on the ascendancy, Mulvey's concept of the gaze has retained its significance precisely because it examines the notion of vision that cannot certainly "be measured, counted, or even seen" (Manlove, 2007, p. 95). Lecturer of Screen and Cultural studies Janice Loreck explains, "classical Hollywood film is constructed in a way that supports or serves the repressed psychic needs of a presumed male spectator; particularly his repressed fear of women and the need to feel empowered over women" (Loreck, 2016, p. 1). Mulvey, on the other hand, believes that white heterosexual white male particularly is the main targeted audience and because of this, their needs are met first. Because the heterosexual white men have the universalist image of the ideal Vitruvian and the ultimate power center (Braidotti, 2018).

Mulvey considers cinema as the reflection of everyday life. She uses psychoanalysis to study cinema to reflect on life through it. This goes beyond what is seen on the screen that is the content but also the form of the cinema itself. So, what happens on the screen can be easily understood as a reflection of certain societal norms. One of the points she makes is how the act of viewing the cinema on the screen that is sitting almost isolated in a huge dark room and peeping into the lives of the people on the screen produces a certain type of ecstasy and satisfaction. She draws this idea called scopophilia from Freudian psychoanalysis which is a desire to look. This desire is augmented when it is the act of looking into somebody's private life. Because the viewer is being streamlined into something that s/he is supposed to be and that elicits excitement. And this leads to a desire to understand and control. Because when someone puts something under their gaze, they make it intelligible to others. The viewer holds the total command over it. So, the cinema satisfies the viewers' desire for scopophilia (Praitis, 2017). Mulvey further borrows the concept of castration anxiety from psychoanalysis to explain the reason behind men's treatment of the female identity in visual culture. According to Freud, castration anxiety is the result of childhood experience. It intensifies during the socialization phase of a child from factors such as the child's relationship with the parents (Taylor, 2016).

The content of the cinema satisfies another desire, and this desire reflects the interest of men. So, what is seen on screen is going to appeal primarily to men within a socio-economic setting in which men hold dominance. On the screen, this can be reduced to two distinct kinds of personalities. There are either women presented on the screen as objects to be looked at by male viewers or there are strong male characters that the men can see and try to become. In psychoanalytic terms, these men on the screen occupy the role of the ego ideal. So, men watch an image of what they want themselves to be like, and then the image is going to be fostered by certain strong characters being presented on the screen that serve as their own ideal who they can try to emulate and become. On the screen, men would often be the ones occupying very active roles. On the other hand, women would often be occupying passive roles as just objects for men on the screen. This can be accessed using Bechdel Test. The Bechdel Test is a test applied to films to see if two women within the film sustain a conversation together for more than a minute, where the conversation does not talk about a man and see how well a visual text follows it.

Although ample studies have been conducted on the representation of female bodies in visual media including films and animations, only a little attention has been given to such portrayals in video games. The article examines the

depiction of female characters in the *Batman: Arkham* videogames series in the light of Mulvey's concept of the male gaze and further reinforces the inference with the result of the Bechdel Test.

III. OF STRONG MEN AND EYE CANDY GIRLS: MISOGYNY IN BATMAN: ARKHAM

A franchise can be considered transmedia if it has more than one visionary involved in it. Bill Finger and Bob Kane were the first two visionaries of the *Batman franchise*. However, since then there have been many visionaries who collaborated with the Batman franchise to turn it into the transmedia universe that it is now. The latest addition to this transmedia narrative world is the *Batman: Arkham* video game series. The most popular are the games *Arkham Asylum* and its sequel *Arkham City* which are launched in 2009 and 2011, respectively. Later, Arkham Origin (2013) was released as an experimental multi-player game, and followed it in 2015 *Arkham Knight* got released from the same production house. The whole series takes place mainly in and around *Arkham Asylum* and *Gotham City* where the billionaire turned vigilante chases his enemies including Joker, Scarecrow, Killer Croc, Red Hood, etc. to safeguard the state. According to a study, the series is a totalizing Batman text and is a modern epic for its plot intricacies and characterization (Arnott, 2016). Thus, *Batman: Arkham* strengthens the literariness of video games.

It is often said that a video game is made three times that is when it is written, produced, and edited. What we see as a video game is the result of all these steps. In other words, all these steps end up characterizing women as feasible for the male gaze. The gaming landscape, while still, a male-dominated locker room utopia is one of the symptoms of a larger social issue outside the gaming. Nick Yee writes, "our offline politics do not change when we enter the virtual worlds. It is also about how things beyond our control end up altering how we think and behave" (2014, p. 45). The proposed theoretical framework contributes to an understanding of the intricate and complex ways in which media shapes and reinforces current gender dynamics in our culture. *Arkham* series in this way deals with a lot of serious topics such as capitalism and its repercussions, the inevitable social hierarchy, the treatment of asylum seekers and criminals, etc. However, its treatment of the female characters as merely imperceptible figures is a less explored area.

In the series, Batman's enemy turned ally Catwoman aka Selina Kyle is one of the major female characters. More than her involvement and contribution to the progression of the game, the Catwoman is remembered for her luscious body and seductive movements. A character's animated physique and exaggerated movements contribute to who they are. And as any other characteristic of a character, the game designers make use of body movements to express certain specifications about them in the game narrative. Movements are a powerful element of video games. In fact, movements are the main feature that takes a game forward. People who play video games often can appreciate the significance of a timely run or dodge in a platformer or a well-executed jump in an action-adventure game. However, these relatively unremarkable gestures can occasionally reveal the most about a character. This includes how they perform everyday activities like sitting down, running, and walking. Movement can be used in ways that defy or reinforce gender preconceptions, just like any other aspect of a character. In Bungie's wildly popular online shooter *Destiny*, players start by creating their own avatars—guardians who fight to preserve the final vestiges of mankind. Players can select from many genders in this character customization tool, just like in other games. *Destiny* treats its female characters in most respects the same as it does its male counterparts. For instance, when you play as a female character, your equipment is not sexualized, yet it nevertheless appears to be just as functional and fashionable as the gear worn by male characters. The only way the male and female characters can be distinguished by gender, though, is through their gestures that include all the body movements (Sarkeesian, 2016).

Though there have been many versions of Catwoman in multiple media, the character still represents the epitome of the perfect female physique. She wears a skintight catsuit with a zipper top that highlights her cleavage and hourglass body shape. Apart from the physique, Catwoman's character is not as complex as Batman's or any of the major male protagonists in the games. The character can be read along with Mulvey's observation that when women are watched from the perspective of the male gaze they are dehumanized and viewed as only objects of desire, beauty, and sex appeal, losing all their agency in humanity. It does not present women as real but as the idealized sexualized version of a woman that is in a typical heterosexual male's head (Mulvey, 1975). Though Catwoman is a skilled martial art fighter, she always ends up using her sex appeal to confront her enemies. While Batman and other male characters use different gadgets to combat the enemies Catwoman is left with no other options but to use her body to seduce and deceive the opponents. In *Batman: Arkham Knight*, the character is further shown as someone with no opinion or decision-making skill. Here, Catwoman ends up joining Scarecrow's criminal group to destroy Batman and ultimately Gotham. The game portrays the character as a puppet while extensively adding frames that focus on her body. Even though Catwoman and Batman work together to rescue the people, the glorification goes to the bravery of the Caped Crusader. Catwoman hardly receives any recognition for her heroic deeds. Moreover, in a scene, Selina is tied to a chair waiting for Batman to rescue her. This scene barely contributes to the whole narration but adds a few more shots where the character's physique is again highlighted.

Joker's sidekick Harley Quinn aka Dr. Harleen Frances Quinzel is another major female character appearing in the video games. Later the character performed in the 2016 spin-off *Suicide Squad* in which she got major screen time along with other leading characters. In both the film and video games she is portrayed to be sexy to the male gaze. From the outset, Quinzel was assigned to treat Joker. However, during the treatment, she becomes obsessively fixated on Joker and soon starts to identify herself as his love interest. She then helps Joker to escape the prison and plots against

Batman. Here, Quinzel suffers a personal identity crisis and sticks with Joker's decisions, and obeys his commands. However, this reinforces Joker's character as destructive and powerful. In the video game industry where patriarchal culture is prevalent, its products tend to be signifiers of male fantasies and obsessions. And this is mostly expressed through the linguistic commands the male characters impose over the silent female images (Mulvey, 1975). In the *Arkham* game, when they first show her, the camera stays at the ground level and shows her legs and high heels before they even show her face. Here, Quinn is the object of collective gazes from both the spectators and also the male characters who are part of the game. She is sexualized, alienated, glitzy, and on display (Mulvey, 1975, p. 12). Most of the shots focus to highlight her physical attributes, and her dialogues are centered around other male characters. In the video games, Quinn is merely seen as an object to appeal to both the male characters as well as the male gamers. Quinn, most of the time empowers Joker and gives the gamers a feeling that Joker is immensely powerful and that she is just a puppet in his hands. Her character makes sure that Joker's masculinity shines through. This gives Joker the needed potential to be an equal rival to Batman. In all four series, Quinn appears as a plaything of Joker. She is addressed with many nicknames such as "sweety" and "honey" by the male characters. Harley Quinn's relation to the Joker is obvious, but most of the time she acts as Joker's property and slave. She is never in a scene by herself, and this brings the idea of the female character's only purpose is to empower the men. In many instances in the game, she serves no purpose other than to be observed. This supports Mulvey's view that women's bodies are all too frequently shown as things created to appeal to men and fulfil conventional notions of femininity (Mulvey, 1975, p. 5). Thus, Harley Quinn and Catwoman's characters are prime examples of what Mulvey explains. In these visual texts, men are depicted to be powerful and dominant, whereas women are shown as vulnerable love interests. Mulvey writes,

> As the narrative progresses, she loses her outer glamorous traits, generalized sexuality, and showgirl overtones as the story unfolds and becomes the primary male protagonist's property. Her sexiness is then restricted to the male star alone. The audience can indirectly possess her by identifying with him and engaging in his power. (1975, p. 12).

In the series, like the character of Catwoman, Harley Quinn is presented with highly exaggerated hip sway while she walks. All of this is designed to draw the player's attention to her extremely sexualized butt through the use of her outfit, the game's visual angles, and other elements. Male heroes on the other hand are allowed to simply walk like normal human beings. The visual angle shifts from medium-long to long shots while showing the Batman character's actions. Even when the players are engaged in combat, motion-captured animations of female characters frequently make them appear as though they are walking down a runway at a fashion show on heels. Most of the cutscenes focus on Quinn's sexualized body parts and mannerisms. In *Arkham Asylum*, she appears wearing a short skirt that highlights her sexualized legs and a tight corset that shows her cleavage. She has heavy make-up on her face that gives a rather funny look. Quinn looks much rougher in Arkham city. However, her clothing remains almost the same. Quinn appears slightly different in *Arkham Knight*. Though she wears the same mini skirt and corset, there are leather straps with metal studs around her body that give a much more sexualized image to the character. This contrasts with Batman and other male characters who appear perfectly dressed and well presented.

Poison Ivy aka Dr. Pamela Isley is another antagonist in the series who turns into a plant-human hybrid after a failed science experiment. Though the character has a strong backstory, Ivy is objectified in the game series with her skill in seducing her enemies. Ivy's introduction scene in the *Arkham Asylum* where she pleads for Batman's help establishes her character as a feeble-minded miserable being. Ivy pleads, "Stop! Stop! Batman Please! You have got to help my babies" (Arkham Asylum, 2009). Ivy in her minimal dressing appears almost naked showing her forest green skin. Her red lipstick, luxuriantly grown curly hair, small waist, and wide hips make her a perfect object of seduction. However, Ivy's power to control others' minds and her seduction power fail in front of Batman. This complements Batman's machismo personality. In *Arkham Knight*, Ivy gets some longer screen time compared to other female characters. However, this is ruined as the character is introduced as a victim. She waits for Batman to come and rescue her while hardly using her power to confront the enemies. Batman takes her from cell to cell until he uses her ability to destroy the poison cloud. All this time she appears almost naked and weak. The character ends up powering up the Caped Crusader.

Oracle aka Barbara Gordon is an outside informer to Batman. She constantly updates Batman with all the necessary information he needs. Oracle physically appears in *Arkham Knight* although she speaks to Batman in all the other games. Being inspired by *The Killing Joke* comic book, *Arkham Knight* adds scenes with the extreme graphic depiction of abuse and sexual assault that Oracle faces. In the gameplay, this scene exists only to trigger the anger and vengeance of the male characters including Batman, Gordon, and Robin. Oracle appears as a weak person who hardly can physically confront the villains.

Tracey Buxton and Candy are the other two female characters who appear in *Arkham Origin*. They both have criminal backgrounds and later allied with criminal leader Penguin. Both the characters are presented as very attractive with their curvaceous bodies. Most of the time, the camera gives low and high-angle shots focusing on the almost naked legs and busts of the characters. Tracy and Candy obey Penguin and take all his orders. This strengthens his image of a powerful thug leader and cultivates a sense of authority over the other criminals. The vagueness in revealing the ultimate fate of the characters also points to the careless portrayal of the characters. Because "women are the bearer of meaning, not the maker of meaning" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 12). In other words, women have no relevance to the scene

other than to be observed. However, the game gives ample screen time and space to highlight the physique of the characters. Loreck states,

> The Male Gaze indicates a sexualized mode of gazing that empowers men and objectifies women by invoking the sexual politics of the gaze. The woman is sexually positioned as the "object" of heterosexual male desire in the Male Gaze. Her own sexual desires, feelings, and thoughts don't matter as much as how she is "framed" by male desire. (2016, p. 2).

These two female characters who are intellectually less demanding serve as eye candy images that attract male gazes. The dialogues between Tracey and Candy are mostly about Penguin and Batman. Tracy's words serve as a general introduction to the Batman character in the game, "I'm tellin' you-he's not some ponce in a fancy suit. He's naughty. An 'es moppin' the floor with our best 'n brightest. Not that that's sayin' too much" (Arkham City, 2011).

Why are these women doing combat roles dressed in high heels? Considering the amount of fighting, racing, and jumping these women must accomplish, choosing to dress them in stiletto and tight pants rather of anything more realistic seems highly sexualized. In fact, one way the male gaze manifests in gameplay is by animating so many female characters to adopt this extremely sexist and fetishizing walk pattern. The male gaze, as proposed by Mulvey claims that women in visual media are too often shown as the passive objects of a male heterosexual gaze (Mulvey, 2009). In all these instances the gamers get pleasure and satisfaction from the exaggerated images of the female characters they see on the screen. This erotic desire or pleasure one gets while viewing *sexual objects* such as an objectified woman on media is excessively used in the game (Popa & Cristian, 2019). According to Mulvey, "a woman signifies castration, inducing voyeuristic or fetishistic mechanisms to circumvent her threat" (1975, p. 15). Freud's concept of *castration anxiety* is the fear of emasculation (Clarke, 2022). This causes men to objectify women and place them secondary in visual media.   The theory suggests that the male characters and the audience will take pleasure in the act of looking at women on screen. Because the men feel powerful and dominant while seeing the women on screen as mere objects of desire. As a result, the female characters are the object of all three gazes: the gaze of the camera, the gaze of the male gamers, and the gaze of the male characters. For this reason, it is possible to argue that the game series obviously sexualizes its female characters. When considering the promotional posters of the games, only Harley Quinn and the Catwoman appear on the covers along with Batman and Joker. All the promos focus on highlighting the female bodies and the characters seem to throw sensual looks at the camera. The images on the game posters either focus on the naked legs of Quinn or the cleavage of the Catwoman.

More men than women produce, code, animate, and develop video games, which often leads to a male-driven point of view. According to a recent study conducted by the International Game Developers Association (IGDA), there are only 30% of women game developers whereas the number of male game developers is 61% (Conocchiari, 2022). Although lately many women are trying their luck in the video game industry, the imbalance in gender diversity still remains. Mulvey writes, "in a world ordered by imbalance, pleasure in looking has been divided between active/male and passive/female. The female figure is designed in accordance with the fantasy that the deciding masculine gaze casts upon it" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 9). The appearance of women in conventional exhibitionist roles is polished for great visual erotic impact so that they can be considered to connote being looked at while they are also being looked at. Sometimes the camera *gazes* as a stand-in for the audience. The gaze is not always overtly sexual, but the woman is still treated as an object to be looked at. Sometimes the gaze focuses on fragmented body parts, which leads to the dehumanization of the person being looked at. The players are presumably assumed to be heterosexual males, placing an inevitable masculine filter to show sexualized body parts through dismembering shots. Besides, the submissive tone and camera angle encourage the players to maneuver the camera to peek up the female characters' skirts and blouses despite their in-game demands not to. However, when male characters are shown to be shirtless or with minimal clothing on, this emphasizes their strength and power rather than branding them as sensual playthings. There is a ton of untapped potential for female characters that are not animated in ways that define them as sex objects but who instead get to just be stealthy or strong, fast or imposing, clumsy or graceful. Male characters can move in ways that accentuate all kinds of attributes and personality traits (Sarkeesian, 2016).

Further, the relationship between the female characters of the games can be analyzed through the Bechdel Test. The Test analyses films and other visual media based on the conversations between two female characters. To pass the test, a film needs to evaluate in three aspects; the film should have more than one named female character, these two characters should talk to each other, and that conversation should be about something other than men. The test is widely used to find out if one visual text is misogynistic or sexist. It received wide acceptance among media people when *Sweden* introduced a Bechdel film rating system in 2013. This test gives an idea of how complex the female friendships and relationships are within a visual text. Thus, it is useful in bringing attention to the inequalities in gender representations in visual media.

Some games pass the traditional Bechdel Test, but many do not, partially because many games are overwhelmingly male-centric, but also because games are fundamentally different than films. However, it is useful in addressing the lack of meaningful women's stories in games thus encouraging the game developers more responsible. *Table 1* shows the results of the Bechdel Test conducted on the four main games of the *Batman: Arkham series*. The test analyzes the female characters and their conversations to validate if they talked about anything other than the male characters in the games.

TABLE I
BECHDEL TEST RESULTS

Video Games	Two Female Characters	Female Conversations	About Men
Batman: Arkham Asylum (2009)	✓	✓	×
Batman: Arkham City (2011)	✓	✓	×
Batman: Arkham Origin (2013)	✓	×	×
Batman: Arkham Knight (2015)	✓	✓	×

Most of the female characters in the series are antagonists except Batman's allies like Catwoman and Oracle. Thus, there are enough female characters to conduct the Bechdel Test. However, the test result shows that they exchange minimal dialogues, and all these dialogues are about the major male characters, specifically Batman and Joker. They converse in a way that empowers their male counterparts. Therefore, the women characters are constantly reminded in dialogues that their characters are objects to be desired before one becomes an agent of action.

Works like this called to consider the various cases of the representation of women in our socio-cultural discourse, continually depicting them through a restrictive, limiting, and eventually repressive repertory of depictions. For instance, it was found that in cinemas, the contradiction between the mother and the whore frequently shaped the alternatives for depicting (Manlove, 2007, p. 95). In video games, it can be as easy as having the camera focus on a female character's bottoms, breasts, or both. It can be as simple as how a female character moves around the game environment, the cut scenes that focus on a woman's bottom, the small skirt that she is wearing, or the way she walks. Thus, the idea that men are watching, and the women are being watched is emphasized by the male gaze theory. Or as the art critic Jon Berger expounds in his 1972 book *Ways of Seeing*, "men perform, and women show-up. Men scrutinize the women. And women observe their own images being looked at. This affects not only the majority of relationships between men and women but also how women define themselves" (1972, p. 32).

IV. SUBVERTING THE MALE GAZE: AN APPEAL FOR A COUNTER GAZE

Media often mirror society and vice versa. Now that there is a sharp increase in the number of female game developers. Only a female developer can produce a game from the viewpoint of a woman. Thus, it is vital to make sure that enough women get represented in the video game industry. This not only leads to the proper depiction of female characters but also encourages more women to play video games. As a result, the problem with the male gaze can be addressed. The male gaze is about framing the women on screen as an object of desire. In other words, often the male gaze is more specifically the straight white man's gaze. The male gaze can be far more subtle than just blatantly sexual pans at the woman's body. It also intersects with how much nuance and backstory the female characters are given. The male gaze and commodification of women go beyond their bodies. It is also about dehumanization by using women to facilitate men's stories. Therefore, it is important to promote a different perspective in the gaming industry.

Furthermore, the male gaze often alienates those who belong to the intersectional category. These people face multiple forms of oppression from the dominating white male groups. This includes people of color, queer people, trans people, and the disabled who suffer from being otherization by the dominating male category (Strolovitch, 2012). So, it is important to make sure that everyone irrespective of their gender and class is getting equal representation in the gaming industry. Neither the male gaze nor the female gaze can do justice in bringing out a legitimate portrayal and representation of characters from all classes or genders. Power relationships, according to Foucault, can physically permeate the body deeply without even needing to go through the subject's own representation as a mediator (1980, p. 1973). Thus, as part of the resistance, primarily the women should know that their bodies are being objectified in video games. Secondly, women should try to reject that conditioning of female body representation. The only way one can tackle this issue is by using the difference as a tool to harness the mainstream and assuring the proper representation in the field.

V. CONCLUSION

It is not as simple as adopting a counter-female view that hypersexualizes and objectifies males to eradicate the male gaze (Sarkeesian, 2016). Not simply because it is not the solution, but also because it is not equal opportunity sexual objectification. One strengthens established repressive notion about women that are long-standing and difficult for women in their day-to-day lives while hardly reinforces anything. Nor the two are substitutable.

It is clear from the inception of the video games that the characters such as Catwoman, Harley Quinn, Poison Ivy, and others have been portrayed as objects marketing primarily towards young men. Women in video games very much up to this day are meant to occupy only passive roles. They are meant to accompany men and to be looked at and not heard. This misrepresentation of the female characters as mere eye candy figures may affect the minds and thoughts of the male gamers and leads to the production of a collective understanding that women are secondary. Therefore, proper representation is important in modern times. All video games are played by younger teens, and this makes representation even more vital as these kids are still developing their understanding of the world through these games.

And if these representations are harmful or toxic, they will grow up having toxic mindsets. Mulvey's film theory is once again clear through these works as the point of these characters is to empower the men and to objectify the women for men's pleasure. The result of the Bechdel Test indicates that the male gaze is a prominent aspect of the chosen video games. All four main series failed the test, thus proving that misogyny and sexism are dominant in the game scripts. These sexualized depictions of women are not a new thing, but in any way, they have not improved. The male gaze in video games, therefore, is highly influenced both by society's accepted gender roles as well as the lack of gender representation in the gaming industry. Thus, the only way to subvert the misogynistic culture of the video gaming industry is by confirming diversity and representation.

REFERENCES

[1]   The Bechdel Test. (2022). *Australia Awards*. Retrieved on June 2, 2022, from https://archive.australiaawardsphilippines.org/resource-center/reading-list/the-bechdel-test
[2]   Bergers, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing* (1st ed). Penguin Books Ltd.
[3]   Clark, S. J., et. al. (2020). *Game On: Teens and Video Games*. C. S. Mott Children's Hospital. Retrieved on July 11, 2022, from https://mottpoll.org/reports/game-teens-and-video-games
[4]   Conocchiari, V. (2022). Women in the Gaming Industry: Representation is the Beginning, Opportunities are Key. *Antidote*. Retrieved on June 24, 2022, from https://antidote.gg/women-in-the-gaming-industry/
[5]   Cisneros, L. L. (2014). *Playing Nice: The Limitations and Stereotypes Placed on Female Hero Representation in Video Games*. The University of North Texas.
[6]   Clark, S. J. et. al. (2020). *Mott Poll Report: Game On: Teens and Video Games*. Retrieved on June 10, 2022, from https://mottpoll.org/reports/game-teens-and-video-games
[7]   Dill, K.E., & Thill, K.P. (2007). Video Game Characters and the Socialization of Gender Roles: Young People's Perceptions Mirror Sexist Media Depictions. *Sex Roles 57*, 851–864. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-007-9278-1
[8]   Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. In Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, & Kate Soper (Eds.) Brighton: Harvester Press.
[9]   Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press.
[10] King, A. E., & Douai, A. (2015). From the "Damsel in Distress" to Girls' Games and Beyond: Gender and Children's Gaming. *Gamification: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications*. Retrieved on June 17, 2022, from https://www.igi-global.com/chapter/from-the-damsel-in-distress-to-girls-games-and-beyond/126157
[11] Oliver, K. (2017). The Male Gaze is More Relevant and More Dangerous than Ever. *New Review of Film and Television Studies 1*(4), 451-455, DOI: 10.1080/17400309.2017.1377937.
[12] Lavigne, C. (2015). 'She's a Soldier, not a Model': Feminism, Femshep, and the Mass Effect 3 Vote. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds, 7*(3). http://doi.org/10.1386/jgvw.7.3.317_1
[13] Loreck, J. (2016). Explainer: What Does the 'Male Gaze' Mean, and What About a Female Gaze? *Women's Agenda*. Retrieved on June 10, 2022, from https://womensagenda.com.au/life/explainer-what-does-the-male-gaze-mean-and-what-about-a-female-gaze/#:~:text=The%20%E2%80%9Cmale%20gaze%E2%80%9D%20invokes%20the%20sexual%20politics%20of,important%20than%20her%20being%20%E2%80%9Cframed%E2%80%9D%20by%20male%20desire
[14] Lynch, T., et. al. (2016) Sexy, Strong, and Secondary: A Content Analysis of Female Characters in Video Games across 31 Years. *Journal of Communication, 66*(4), 564–584. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.1223.
[15] Wikipedia contributors. (2022, June 6). Male gaze. In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved 06:26, July 01, 2022, from https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Male_gaze&oldid=1096682607
[16] Manlove, C. T. (2007). Visual Drive and Cinematic Narrative: Reading Gaze Theory in Lacan, Hitchcock, and Mulvey. *Cinema Journal. 46*(3), 83-108. Retrieved on June 20, 2022, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/30130530
[17] McLean, L., & Griffiths, M. D. (2019). Female Gamers' Experience of Online Harassment and Social Support in Online Gaming: A Qualitative Study. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction (17)*, 970-994 https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-018-9962-0
[18] Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen 16* (3), 6-18.
[19] Mulvey, L. (2009). *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Palgrave Macmillan. (Language, Discourse, Society).
[20] Mwedzi, D (2021). On Subversion: A Critical Assessment of the Male Gaze in Contemporary Film and Video Games. *Liberated Arts 8*(1). Retrieved on June 12, 2022, from https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/lajur
[21] Popa, T., & Cristian, D. (2019). Voyeurism and Scopophilia. *International Journal of Advanced Studies in Sexology 1*(1), 53-55. http://dx.doi.org/10.46388/ijass.2019.12.11.121
[22] Praitis, I. (2017). The Eye of the Beholder: Voyeurism and Surveillance in Williams's Speaker/Reader Matrix. *William Carlos Williams Review, 34*(1), 49–63. https://doi.org/10.5325/willcarlwillrevi.34.1.0049
[23] Rocksteady Studio. (2009). *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (PC Version) [Video Game].
[24] Rocksteady Studio. (2011). *Batman: Arkham City* (PC Version) [Video Game].
[25] Rocksteady Studio. (2015). *Batman: Arkham Knight* (PC Version) [Video Game].
[26] Sarkeesian, A. (2016). *Body Language and the Male Gaze. Feminist Frequency*. Retrieved on May 28, 2022, from https://feministfrequency.com/video/body-language-the-male-gaze/
[27] Strolovitch, D. Z. (2012). Intersectionality in Time: Sexuality and the Shifting Boundaries of Intersectional Marginalization. *Politics and Gender 8*(3), https://doi.org/10.1017/s1743923x12000372
[28] Summers, T. (2009). Music Across the Transmedial Frontier: Star Trek Video Games. *Intermedia Games: Games Inter Media—Video Games and Intermediality*. Bloomsbury Academic, 207-230.
[29] *Teen, Video Games, and Civics. Pew Research Center*. Retrieved on June 8, 2022, from https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2008/09/16/teens-video-games-and-civics/

[30] WB Games Montreal. (2013). *Batman: Arkham Origins* (PC Version) [Video Game].
[31] Yanev, V. (2022). Video Game Demographics: Who Plays Games in 2022? *Techjury*. Retrieved on June 5, 2022, from. https://techjury.net/blog/video-game-demographics/
[32] Yee, N. (2014). *The Proteus Paradox: How Online Games and Virtual Worlds Change Us—And How They Don't*. Yale University Press. Retrieved on July 2, 2022, from https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vksvj
[33] Zizek, S. (2009). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Verso.

Anupama K. is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages at Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai, India. Her interests include Cinema Studies, Media Studies, British Literature, and Continental Philosophy.

G. K. Chithra received her Doctoral degree from the University of Madras. She is currently working as an Associate Professor in the Department of English, School of Social Sciences and Languages at Vellore Institute of Technology, Chennai, India. She has been teaching many courses related to ELT, Language, and Linguistics for over twenty-five years.