

HE IS NOT YOUR HERO: GENDERED EXPERIENCE UNVEILED THROUGH GAMEPLAY VIDEOS (A CASE STUDY OF GENJI FROM OVERWATCH)

Chuxuan Zhang

University of Edinburgh

Holland Annexe, 18 Holyrood Park Road, Edinburgh, Scotland, UK

ABSTRACT

The gaming industry has predominately exhibited a significant gender disparity, resulting in the portrayal of game characters, including avatars, in a manner that reinforces gender stereotypes. This study aims to investigate the impact of avatar portrayal on the overall gaming encounter among individuals with diverse gender identities. To achieve this objective, gameplay videos are analysed as valuable sources of players' experiences. The case study focuses on Genji, an avatar from the video game *Overwatch* (2016) and its subsequent sequel and replacement. By employing multimodal discourse analysis, the study examines the impact of avatar characteristics on player engagement in the context of *Overwatch* (2016) and *Overwatch 2* (2022). The findings reveal that avatar characteristics significantly influence player engagement, particularly in terms of gameplay mechanics, surpassing that of the narrative. The endorsement of heteronormative representations, as the character Genji exemplifies, could conspire with the toxic environment. The research advocates that promoting gender inclusivity in the gaming industry requires the integration of a wide range of avatars that not only reflect queerness in the narrative but also in the game mechanics, thereby fostering a more inclusive gaming atmosphere.

KEYWORDS

Avatar, Gameplay Video, Gendered Experience, Overwatch

1. INTRODUCTION

Video gaming has long been recognised as a masculine space. The phenomenon is evident in various forms, including problematic depictions found in gaming artefacts, gender disparities in the gaming industry labour force, and associated social media buzz (Bailey et al., 2021; Cote, 2020; Maloney et al., 2019; Tompkins and Martins, 2022). The origins of the game are often ascribed to these phenomena. Throughout history, a predominant focus has been on marketing games towards a male demographic (Friedberg, 2015). This may limit the variety of content types that dominate consumer landscapes and gaming offerings. Men are the main contributors to the discourse shaping of the gaming domain. Numerous scholars assert the enduring validity of this statement within the present context (Bailey et al., 2021; Maloney et al., 2019; Tompkins, 2021).

The subsequent discussion will shed light on the gendered representations in games, in alignment with the research concerns delineated in the text. In her scholarly work, Shaw (2014, p.6) criticises the gender representation of characters in game artefacts as non-progressive. This may manifest as character portrayals that follow gender stereotypes or uneven representation of diverse gender identities (Malkowski, 2017). However, it has been observed by scholars like Süngü (2020) that efforts have been made to enhance the representation of diverse characters within the game.

Avatars are distinct representative characters facilitating player interaction with the game environment and other characters via the screen. Schröter and Thon (2014) propose a comprehensive framework for analysing the portrayal of video game characters, encompassing three essential perspectives: their role within the narrative structure, their contribution to gameplay mechanics, and their involvement in social dynamics. In addition to the functions above, playable avatars allow players to assume various identities within the virtual environment. This enables interactions in the game world to exceed those encountered in real life. (Bowman & Banks, 2021). Avatars possess the capacity to assume diverse attributes, encompassing gender, race, and

species, empowering players to detach themselves from their identity temporarily. Hence, it is imperative to thoroughly investigate the potential impact of the avatar on the player, thereby establishing its significance.

Several scholarly investigations have explored the potential correlation between the selection of gendered avatars and the gender identity of players (Ratan et al., 2019; Tompkins, 2021). This study aims to investigate the correlation between different factors in the context of the play experience, with a focus on maintaining objectivity rather than being influenced by personal biases. This study examines the impact of narrative and gameplay characteristics of avatars on the gaming experience of players with different gender identities. Specifically, it explores the relationship between avatar attributes and gaming experience. The issues will be investigated by utilising gameplay video as a research tool. The character Genji, who appears in both the games *Overwatch* (2016) and *Overwatch 2* (2022), has been chosen as a subject of analysis to explore the aforementioned inquiries. The subsequent section will elaborate on the gameplay video and the various cases involved.

2. RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS

Overwatch (2016) and its sequel and replacement production, *Overwatch 2* (2022), are first-person shooters published by Blizzard Entertainment. Given the substantial similarities in narrative context and gameplay mechanics between *Overwatch 2* (2022) and its predecessor, the subsequent discussion will utilise the designations *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022) when explaining both iterations. *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022) showcases a wide array of heroes representing various backgrounds and characteristics. The game emphasises teamwork and offers a selection of 32 playable hero avatars, which can be divided functionally into three categories, attack, support, and tank. While portraying these avatars, the games manage to grant a vibrant setting in the avatar narrative. Meanwhile, it has a higher proportion of female players than its counterpart (Choi et al., 2020). Taken together, *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022) is a suitable playground for addressing research inquiries.

This research examines the utilisation of gameplay and narrative aspects concerning avatars. The gameplay dimension investigates the avatar's mechanics, dynamics, and associated emotional experiences, drawing inspiration from the work of Hunicke et al. (2004). On the other hand, the narrative dimension places greater emphasis on the backstory of the avatar. This distinction arises from the separation of focus between the avatar's gameplay attributes governed by game mechanics and its narrative depiction portrayed through peripheral productions within the context of *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022).

Genji is an attack hero. In contrast to specific characters whose creators openly express their emphasis on either gameplay (e.g., Brigitte) or narrative (e.g., Ana) during the design phase, the origin of Genji is not explicitly mentioned. Nonetheless, his mechanics and appearance were likely intertwined by the developers. The design and concept of Genji are characterised by his distinct portrayal as a cyber ninja, wielding a great sword and exhibiting agile movements. This depiction is widely acknowledged and easily identifiable, as are the thematic colours associated with him.

This concept fundamentally delineates his performance concerning the mechanics of the game. The integration of Genji's offensive mechanics presented considerable difficulty due to the inherent complexity of incorporating melee weapons into a first-person shooter video game (Technica, 2017). However, per his conceptual framework, the ultimate design choice was to outfit Genji with shurikens to engage in long-range combat while still retaining his proficiency in close-quarters combat for his ultimate ability. The individual's mechanical abilities grant him vital offensive capability and improved mobility in diverse environments. Consequently, he significantly demonstrates the ability to disrupt the adversary's forces during combat encounters.

Meanwhile, the in-game voice packages, the game archives, and its franchises effectively portray the narrative surrounding Genji and his relationship with certain avatars. He is portrayed with a relatively comprehensive narrative: As the younger son of the Shimada Clan, he faced a perilous threat to his life due to intrafamilial disputes instigated by his sibling. Eventually saved by the Overwatch organisation (mainly Mercy, who plays a prominent role in his modification and healing), Genji undergoes significant mechanical enhancements, ultimately serving as a Cyborg Ninja for Blackwatch (carrying out black ops missions of Overwatch). Genji grapples with existential confusion as a cyborg and eventually departs from the organisation in search of the meaning of life.

According to Jenkins (2013), fandom offers an avenue for fans to express their perspectives on matters related to sexuality and gender. Gameplay videos have emerged as prevalent manifestations of fan engagement within the video game sector. Critics argue that gameplay videos hinder the essence of games, which is the dynamic and interactive relationship between mechanics and user input (Ober, 2021, as cited in McKittrick et al., 2023). In addition, from the perspective of the game industry, the videos may also threaten the interests of gaming companies (Carey, 2019) and prevent the gaming experience from being fully appreciated (Tekinbaş, 2004). Regarding video content, gameplay videos have been questioned for fraudulent content due to their desire for popularity and reach (Ober, 2021).

In contrast, scholars who hold favourable views towards gameplay videos perceive the performative aspect as the primary focus rather than interpreting them as deliberate misrepresentations. They argue that creators boost the entertainment value of these videos by assuming multiple roles simultaneously, acting as operators, performers, and spectators (Nguyen, 2016). Similarly, Fernández-Vara (2019, p.123) argues that these videos have the potential to serve as a reliable source of data for assessing game experience. This research endeavour will employ gameplay videos as a primary data source to examine the gendered experiences within the realm of gaming.

In order to examine the relationship between gendered avatars and players, the study made an effort to prioritise Genji gameplay videos that were relevant to gender-related analysis. Four videos were carefully chosen, each containing specific information as presented in Table 1. The aforementioned data constitutes the primary dataset examined within the scope of this scholarly research article. A critical analysis was conducted on the game contribution and player interaction for the four samples.

This study aims to evaluate the gendered aspects of gaming in the context of *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022), utilising a comprehensive analysis of a collection of gameplay videos. In order to accomplish this objective, the researchers tried to employ the term ‘Genji’ as a primary keyword in conjunction with other keywords related to gender, including ‘female’, ‘male’, ‘gender’, ‘transgender’, and ‘girl’. A total of eighteen videos were identified and documented. Subsequent filtration was conducted to acquire additional interpretive data regarding the interaction among the players. As a result, four videos were chosen for the conclusive examination. These videos were specifically chosen due to their inclusion of pivotal gameplay moments and their substantial representation of interactions between the player and other participants.

Table 1. The selected Genji gameplay videos

Video No	Uploader Username	Video Title
V1	ChristalRaine	Mercy? Nah, I'll lock Genji instead ;)
V2	Cannaestia	When A Girl Plays Genji –Overwatch
V3	Necros	Impressing an EGIRL in Overwatch NECRIZZ
V4	Diggums	GENJI PLAYS WITH HIS GIRL? Overwatch

These gameplay videos serve as performance texts that aim to construct, maintain, or problematise gender norms around Genji. They are sites of gendered experience, exposing us to the construction of gendered discourses in gaming and the power structures embedded in the conventions of these discourses.

Based on the manner of presentation of the gameplay video, multimodal critical discourse analysis is employed here to analyse the data. As noted by Kress (2012), this method involves examining and interpreting any text as a comprehensive and meaningful semiotic entity. Its purpose is to describe and analyse the elements and dynamics present within the text, including the manifestation of power in social interactions. It is characterised by the ability to consider multiple modes as a relevant cultural resource for producing meaning (representation) by individuals belonging to a specific social group within a specific temporal context.

The utilisation of multimodal critical discourse analysis confirms to be highly valuable in examining gameplay. As per Kress’s (2010, p.5) definition, the term ‘mode’ encompasses the various means of generating meaning and experience, including spoken and written language, gesture, gaze, layout, and image. The video medium is a typical example of a multimodal text, encompassing various semiotic elements such as written text, static and moving visual images, sound, and other forms of communication. The study utilised multimodal critical discourse analysis to investigate the gameplay experience offered by the character Genji and the role of gender representation in the avatars used in the game. This analysis integrated both the material capabilities and the social influence of various semiotic elements.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Titles and Thumbnails

The initial procedure involved thoroughly analysing the thumbnails and titles of the chosen gameplay videos. Prior studies, including Christel (2006) and Yoon and Kim (2019), have demonstrated the significance of video thumbnails and titles as crucial elements in conveying discourse. These visual and textual components convey information about the video's content and entice prospective viewers. One could argue that these findings also shed light on the specific style of Genji gameplay that garners greater viewer attention within the gaming context of *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022). Based on the title, it seems that the different uploaders adhere to an antagonistic dynamic, wherein they position Genji within a binary framework alongside either Mercy or the female persona of the player. This dynamic could potentially be interpreted as a subordinate association, wherein Mercy is relegated to the role of "his girl." These relationships are also perpetuated in thumbnail images.

Regarding thumbnails, an examination of the analytical framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) reveals a notable visual metaphor wherein the portrayal of gender identity aligns prominently with the heteronormative norm, thereby openly endorsing heterosexuality. The heteronormative intimacy between Genji and Mercy is particularly evident in their portrayal, characterised by non-verbal cues like gazing. The emergence of the two avatars within the frame initiates a dynamic interaction characterised by reactivity. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020, p.67), a vector can be defined as the directional line of sight from Mercy to the relevant content of Genji, conceptualised as a 'phenomenon'. The male individual assumes the actor's role, while the female individual fulfils the role of a devoted admirer of his performance, reinforcing Genji's central position. Depending on the nature of the video, the individual's focus is either the performance metrics of Genji's players, such as their kill statistics, or the physical attributes of Genji, specifically his buttocks.

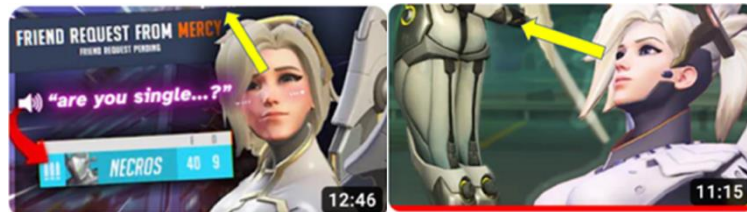


Figure 1. Interaction between Genji and Mercy (left to right: cover of V3 and V4)

Meanwhile, the visual depiction in the cover image sustains an explicitly binary structure through the composition. Mercy adopts an upward gaze towards Genji, implying an unequal power relationship and a sense of admiration for him. At the same time, concerning the left-right structure, according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2020, pp. 196-198), the left stands for 'the given, the taken for granted' and the right for 'the now/present'. Caution must be taken that this symbolic construction is rooted in a Western reading tradition, or at least a left-to-right reading tradition. While establishing character dynamics, Genji is presented as being submitted to, while the adoring Mercy shows affection towards him. Similarly, when female players are introduced, whether competitively or entertainingly, feminine semiotic entities oppose Genji.

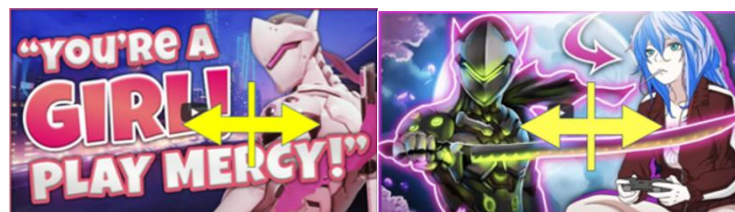


Figure 2. Binary structure of the composition (left to right: cover of V1 and V2.)

The incorporation of colour is intricately intertwined with the underlying structure of dyadic gender paradigms. The utilisation of the colour pink by creators, irrespective of gender, serves as a symbolic

representation of femininity, aligning with prevailing societal categorisations of colour (Cunningham & Macrae, 2011). The selection of colour holds significance when the creator is free to engage in design decisions. Unlike the green and pale-yellow colours that frequently appear on covers and subtitles, perpetuating the official visual design of the characters, the image identified as female is often deliberately highlighted in pink. The colour pink appears in the modification of the theme colours of Genji, the movements of the figures, and the textual representation of female player spoken content. In brief, the titles and thumbnails designed by either male or female players are littered with evidence of the logic of dichotomous gender constructions centred on Genji.

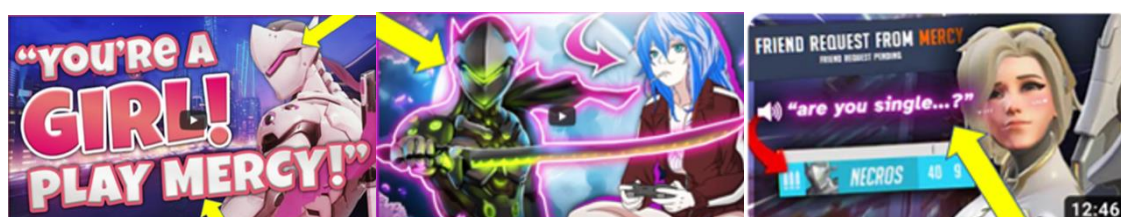


Figure 3. The usage of colour pink (left to right: cover of V1, V2, and V3)

3.2 Play of the Game: The Cult of Gameplay Capabilities

The video exposes the diverse collection of game contributions that *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022) provide to players. These include but are not limited to digital text presentation of kills, assisted kills, deaths, and voice incentive of multiple kills. The ‘Play of the Game’ feature, determined by an algorithm, highlights an impactful action performed by a player during a match. Displayed at the end of each match, it showcases the player’s significant contribution from their perspective.

In parallel, the determination of a player’s position can be achieved through a rigorous analysis based on data, wherein the magnitude of their contribution is assessed and taken into account. The discourse among players illustrates that the act of eliminating an adversary who has already engaged in combat with a fellow teammate is commonly referred to as ‘stealing’. The fundamental performance metrics within the game are consolidated in the combat panel and career profile of the player. These statistics serve as a reference point for players to assess their performance. The pursuit of victory and the feedback system in *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022) result in an evolving power dynamic between players, using their relative skills as a reference point.

[Scene: Genji (Cannaestia, female Genji player) eliminates an enemy that is attacked by Reaper (Male Player O)]

Male Player F: Rob (Male Player O), Jen(Cannaestia, , female Genji player) is trying to steal your goal. (Content of V2)

These gameplay videos reveal the positive (killing for recognition) and negative (being killed as a joke) aspects of gaming skills as their primary content. The videos have been meticulously edited to emphasise instances where players demonstrate superior performance in the aforementioned aspect. This editing process involves the removal of less captivating sections and deliberate highlighting of moments wherein players successfully eliminate multiple adversaries. Comedic elements manifest in situations where players emphasise their mistakes or subpar performance, such as their inability to deal damage or encountering unexpected eliminations.

[Screen: Play of the Game: RAINE (female Genji player) as Genji]

Raine: [looks at the camera] Easy (Content of V1)

[Scene: Genji (Cannaestia, female Genji player)) being trapped and eliminated, with hit sound effects, all players laughs together]

Male Player F: Yeah. Way to go. You just distracted them with your stupidity...Fucking good play. You’re a good distraction. They feel like... What the fuck is she doing? (Content of V2)

Simultaneously, the team’s interests are crucial in the avatar selection process. The gameplay footage showcases players actively participating in dialogues pertaining to their avatar selection. Effective communication and coordination among team members can optimise overall productivity. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that team members may also face evaluation or mistreatment from their peers, contingent upon their competencies. Sarcasm, humour, and teasing are commonly observed in such contexts.

In certain instances, players may dispute acquiring and utilising a specific avatar, particularly when it is not readily accessible.

Cannaestia(female Genji player): Rob (Male Player O), grab heal.

Male Player F: Healer, Rob (Male Player O).

Male Player O: Don't tell me. I don't wanna heal. (Content of V2)

3.3 A Critical Reading of Genji's Player Experience with Mercy as Comparison

Avatars in the game create their demands on the players. Genji, one of the attack heroes, requires a subtle mastery of gameplay abilities. The player must possess accurate aim, sound command of the map, and dynamic abilities to go along with Genji's agility and mobility. Proper use of Genji's abilities can result in consistent damage to the enemy, especially with his ultimate skill. Some players clip footage of themselves multi-killing with Genji to prove their proficiency as Genji players. This echoes the context mentioned in the previous section, where a player's ability to damage enemies as Genji can be seen as proof of their worthiness to be called a 'Genji Main/Player'.

The analysis of video content, particularly V1, demonstrates the pervasive existence of gender identity-based discrimination and inequitable treatment. Female players frequently encounter instances of harassment, which can create perceived barriers that hinder their ability to participate in playing the character Genji. The disclosure of gender identity frequently becomes inevitable due to the necessity of verbal communication for effective team coordination in gaming contexts such as *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022). In certain instances, the interactions involve harassment targeting the players' sex and gender identity, exemplified by derogatory remarks such as 'rub one out' or 'make sandwiches'.

Furthermore, female Genji players in video content also encounter unpleasant interactions influenced by Genji's role as a referee. They often face unwarranted harassment, irrespective of their skill level or ability to effectively play the Genji role. In other terms, a female participant can face disqualification as a Genji player due to her gender. This incident occurs when she selects Genji as her chosen avatar. Instances of harassment persist even in cases where her demonstrated proficiency in playing the character Genji and her valuable contributions to the team have been established.

Male Player 1: Why aren't you playing Mercy? Why are you not playing Mercy?

Male Player 2: [laughter]

[Raine ((female Genji player)) looks into the camera several times, purses her lips with a speechless expression] (Content of V1)

[Scene: Raine(female Genji player) activates the Genji Ultimate Ability and eliminates five enemies]

Raine (female Genji player): Anymore? [raises eyebrows] I should play Mercy, by the way, I wish I knew how to play Genji [looks into the camera].

Male Player 1: That's right, that's exactly right. Oh my gosh. She just noticed it. The hysteria has worn off (inaudible – 01:56). (Content of V1)

The employment of Genji as an avatar by male players in the game can be seen as a manifestation of a parallel logic that aligns with the construction of heteronormative gender roles. In V3 and V4, individuals are exempt from scrutiny or evaluation of their gaming proficiency. Male players who demonstrate exceptional proficiency in playing the character Genji are often portrayed as highly skilled and assertive individuals, showcasing their dominance over other players, particularly those who play as Mercy. The Genji player receives a trophy in the form of a friend request from the Mercy player in V3, which is prominently featured in the title, thumbnail, and video content. In instances where gender is not a prominent theme (V3 and V4), gender conflicts remain concealed as the Genji performance aligns with societal expectations associated with this avatar.

Necros (male Genji player): Rizz her up? Shut the fuck up, chat. She wants you. Bro, yeah. She interacted with me, that's true, a massive time. (Content of V3)

This can be further supported by empirical evidence of acts of Mercy. The videos (V2, V3, and V4) highlight the reliance on the character Mercy within the game. Mercy is widely recognised as a hero who demands less proficiency to play due to her role as a support hero, primarily providing offensive or healing support to allies through an auto-targeted beam. Although she possesses a secondary weapon in the form of a pistol, its significance is secondary to her primary role as a support hero. Mercy's unique abilities include reviving deceased teammates and flying to the aid of her teammates in need. While Mercy players effectively

communicate crucial information on the battlefield, the mechanics of her character inherently create a sense of dependence on other heroes, irrespective of their gender. Moreover, prioritising support (commonly known as "pocketing") towards a specific ally can sometimes be perceived as favouritism.

Cannaestia(female Genji player): [screams] I need healing!

Male Player F: (plays as Mercy) OH, FUCK YEAH!!! [these words are also presented on screen in text format serving as an emphasis] That's what I needed. that's what I needed. OH. I need someone to be stupid. OH, keeping stupid anything. (Content of V2)

3.4 You Jump, I Jump: The Impact of Narrative Interpretation on Game Involvement

[Scene: Genji falls out the map and dies, Mercy also jumps off the map and eliminates herself]

Genji Player: [sings] Near, far, wherever you are-

[Screen: text at the bottom in green: [Titanic song commences.]]

Male Mercy Player: [laughter] (Content of V4)

The emphasis on narrative (V4) allows the win-lose dichotomy to be diluted transiently. Nourishing an interesting role-playing interaction with happenings encountered in the game as raw ingredients is the aim of the players in V4 or the outcome the footage pursues. The actions above are counterproductive to the game's victory and the other teammates' efforts. The actions exhibited by the individuals in question reflect their deliberate assessment of the plausibility of the narrative connection, which is contingent upon the roles they portray and the comedic impact they generate. The romantic affiliation between the two individuals contributes to a compelling progression in Mercy's martyrdom. Similarly, the video segments are collectively evaluated based on their comedic impact on the overall presentation.

Furthermore, when players interact with the character of Genji through his narration and even in a voiceover format, they tend to prioritise behaviours that align with the Genji syllogism rather than behaviours that directly contribute to achieving victory in the game. The narrative and emotional elements embedded within his backstory possess the potential to exert an influence on the player's behavioural patterns. Conforming to the narrative, offering assistance to non-Genji avatars is teased as 'cheating'. Meanwhile, Genji expresses his disapproval out of envy when other players seek Mercy's healing services. This practice contradicts the principles of rational resource allocation in pursuit of achieving victory.

Genji Player: Why are you healing other people?

Male Mercy Player: I'm sorry. Don't cheat on me... (Content of V4)

The video narrative alludes to the relationship between Genji and Mercy, which mirrors the allusion to the romantic relationship between the two avatars within the broader context of the game franchise. Furthermore, the conversation resonates with the official narrative of Mercy's role as the individual responsible for Genji's cyborg enhancements. Nevertheless, it is frequently overlooked in discourse throughout the game, with only sporadic references made in V4.

Genji Player: [singing]: You whore.....

Male Mercy Player: Oh, Shi- That better not be for me! For all the shit I've done for you! Bitch, I'll rebuild you into a fucking meatloaf sandwich!

4. DISCUSSION

In the context of *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022), the level of player involvement is predominantly influenced by the gameplay attributes of the avatar, owing to the game's strong emphasis on skill-based mechanics. *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022), a team-based combat game, requires players to pursue success by employing accurate aiming, strategic deliberation, efficient communication, and comprehensive map awareness. The game promotes constructive involvement by implementing a comprehensive feedback mechanism that enhances the game's visual appeal and offers great positive reinforcement, commonly referred to as 'juiciness' (Juul, 2010). This complex feedback method further enhances players' admiration of their gaming abilities.

The overarching game environment in *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022) establishes a hierarchical structure among avatars, which is determined by the skill requirements imposed on players by each diverse avatar. The

character of Genji embodies remarkable gaming abilities, presenting a formidable challenge to players while providing opportunities for substantial advancement within the game. The distinct narrative and gameplay mechanics inherent in each *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022) avatar contribute to a hierarchical structure among avatars, as the admiration of gaming skills becomes a prominent factor. The portrayal of Genji in media has the potential to acquiesce the perpetuation of stigmatisation towards other avatars, thereby creating an environment conducive to discrimination. To put it precisely, individuals compete to showcase their superior skills by favouring the character 'Genji', and they may experience a sense of dissatisfaction if they are labelled as a 'support main'.

It is crucial not to disregard the significance of narrative, as there is a substantial and inherent connection between narrative and the game's mechanics. A cohesive connection between the two dimensions is established by contextualising Genji's in-game identity as a skilled combatant and agile mover within his narrative framework. Although the precedence between Genji's narrative and gameplay traits remains agnostic, they exhibit high consistency.

Nonetheless, remnants of the narrative persist beyond the aspects closely aligned with gameplay mechanics. Occasionally, when players adhere strictly to the logic of the narrative, it may lead to queer gameplay experiences that contradict the player dynamics invited by the game mechanics. These instances can be regarded as narrative performances that expand the canonical territory within the game. However, the gameplay footage shows that Genji's complex persona is rarely invoked when the narrative does not explicitly drive player engagement. In cases where game mechanics clash with narrative properties, the narrative usually yields to the dominance of game mechanics (V1, V2, and V3).

The validity of the game mechanism over narration is outstanding in the relationship between Genji and Mercy. Narratively, Mercy is portrayed as the technical owner of Genji, but the game mechanics force her to be frail, incapable, and dependent. This institutionalised symbolic violence is encoded within the avatars and inevitably impacts players. When Genji interacts with Mercy, heteronormative norms come to the forefront. The avatar actively narrates and idealises masculine performance, shaping players' perceptions of what it means to embody Genji or Mercy. Genji is constructed as a hero, while Mercy assumes the role of a mother, providing care and compassion (Jung, 2014). This dynamic is reflected in the concept of 'pocketing', a metaphor for the womb where a supporting hero provides additional support and attention to a teammate.

The video evidence presented provides insight into the presence of a toxic atmosphere within the *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022) context, consistent with the assertions made by Blamey (2022). The toxicity here is marked by a hostile and harmful environment, which promotes and sustains patriarchal privilege to uphold its dominant position (Consalvo, 2012). The presence of a toxic environment can pose difficulties for female players in developing a positive rapport with Genji, often limiting their interactions to utilising him solely as a tool to demonstrate their proficiency. Female players may experience pressure to select heroes with lower skill requirements, such as Mercy. Alternatively, they encounter challenges in being recognised as credible competitors, despite possessing equivalent skill levels compared to their male counterparts.

Certain individuals who engage in toxic behaviours may attribute lower gaming proficiency to biological determinism, leading to mistreating female players through derogatory actions. This mistreatment is based on the belief that female players inherently lack competence in gaming. However, empirical evidence from Terlecki et al. (2011) indicates that sexual differences have minimal influence on gaming proficiency. Despite their high skill level, proficient female professional gamers continue to face prejudice and intimidation, highlighting the significant role of gender identity in inciting harassment. This finding is consistent with the studies conducted by Taylor et al. (2009) and Ericsson and Bergström (2020), which demonstrate that gender rather than actual skill levels primarily provoke mistreatment.

However, *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022) deserves recognition for its commendable efforts in promoting narrative diversity. Upon contemplation of the gameplay encounter in V4, it becomes evident that there exists a notable defiance against a toxic cultural environment within the storyline presented by *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022), thereby corroborating prior scholarly investigations. The diverse selection of playable characters and their intricate narrative backgrounds possess the capacity to confront the negative aspects of a competitive system based on merit and encourage the representation of various gender identities through virtual personas. The game's inclusion of a diverse range of characters, encompassing various genders, ethnicities, and occupational backgrounds, has been lauded by scholars as a commendable development (Choi et al., 2020).

In addition, the game endeavours to disrupt the traditionally male-dominated realm of shooter games to cultivate a more inclusive virtual environment that appeals to individuals who typically have limited involvement with first-person shooter games (Lin, 2019). According to Hayday and Collison (2020), the

positive outcome observed in *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022) can be attributed to the inclusive practices implemented by game developers. This serves as an illustration of how game developers can effectively promote social justice within the domains of gaming and esports. However, the results of this study demonstrate that unintentional reinforcement of discriminatory practices can occur even when well-intentioned actions are taken to encourage and celebrate the achievements of female players.

While acknowledging the positive aspects of *Overwatch 1&2*'s (2016, 2022) diverse range of contextual avatars, it is essential to exercise caution when discussing the representation of queerness, particularly concerning the portrayal of Genji's character. Whether it pertains to the cover or the title, the narrative framework employed in the characters of Genji and Mercy appears to reflect a deep-seated misogyny that is ingrained within the gaming culture (Bègue et al., 2017; McCullough et al., 2020). The perception exists that Mercy and female players, by default, are considered less capable compared to Genji and male players. Their stance on their own positions on the spectrum of gameplay competence, aligned with what they critique, is predicated on surrendering to the universality of 'girl'.

The issue of toxicity within the game is undeniably problematic. In instances where female players exhibit exceptional competence or choose not to engage in interactions, they continue to be labelled as 'game girlfriends' or 'mothers' pocketing others. However, the narrative of the avatar potentially enables Mercy players to justify and modify their identity, influencing their actions accordingly. In a similar context, the interplay between Genji, masculinity, and toxic male players gives rise to a complex amalgamation that manifests as an aggressive hybrid, which in turn serves as a destructive force that undermines the game's attempts at diversity.

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of avatar representation on the overall gaming experience among a diverse population of individuals with different gender identities. The attributes of avatars have a substantial impact on player engagement, specifically regarding gameplay mechanics. *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022) employs a hierarchical framework to organise and present avatars. This system positions Genji as a prominent game avatar, specifically as an attack hero characterised by a significant level of operational complexity and his contribution to game progression. When structured hierarchically, the alignment of game mechanics with gendered avatars can mirror the toxic environments prevalent in certain games and reinforce the narrative frameworks that prioritise heterosexual experiences. This alignment can inadvertently contribute to perpetuating toxic gaming culture and reinforce heteronormative ideologies.

The findings of this study suggest that incorporating a more comprehensive range of gender identities and representations for avatars, both in terms of narrative and game mechanics, might offer more significant opportunities to deviate from heteronormative norms and enhance the player's experience. This development has the potential to yield positive outcomes for the gaming industry by addressing the longstanding criticism surrounding its inadequate gender representation and promoting gender inclusivity.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognise the inherent limitations in extrapolating these findings. The lack of comprehensive data from players hinders the understanding of the precise actions and contextual factors of social groups. Simultaneously, the analysis is predicated upon the contextual framework of the first-person shooter *Overwatch 1&2* (2016, 2022). The significance of the avatar's gameplay mechanics and narrative characteristics in shaping players' gendered gaming experiences may vary in its explanatory capacity across different game genres. Future research endeavours could investigate a broader spectrum of avatars originating from various cultural backgrounds to examine their potential for universality. The incorporation of quantitative analyses would enhance the robustness of this interpretation by offering more substantial evidence.

REFERENCES

- Ars Technica. 2017. Blizzard answers unsolved mysteries of the Overwatch universe | ars technica. [Accessed 30 June 2023]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVxWCV-Mfqo>.
- Bailey, E. N. et al., 2021. Gender composition of teams and studios in video game development. *Games and Culture*, Vol. 16, No.1), pp. 42–64.

- Bègue, L. et al., 2017. Video Games Exposure and Sexism in a Representative Sample of Adolescents. *Frontiers in Psychology*, [Online] Vol. 8 No. 11, pp.466–466. <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.00466>
- Beres, N. A. et al., 2021. Don't you know that you're toxic: Normalization of toxicity in online gaming. *Proceedings of the 2021 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, New Orleans, LA, pp. 1–15.
- Blom, J. 2022. The Player's Interpretative Agency and the Developer's Disruptive Powers: How Blizzard Enforces Authorial Intention in Overwatch. In *Modes of Esports Engagement in Overwatch* , pp. 49–66.
- Bowman, N. D., and Banks, J. 2021. Player-avatar identification, relationships, and interaction: Entertainment through asocial, parasocial, and fully social processes. in P., Vorderer, and C., Klimmt (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Entertainment Theory (online edn, Oxford Academic)* [Accessed 30 June 2023]. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190072216.013.36>.
- Carey, J. 2019. Economic and social patterns in the adoption of new media. In Z., Vukanovic et al. (eds), *Digital Value Migration in Media, ICT and Cultural Industries* , pp. 1–11
- Choi, Y. et al., 2020. Deep strike: Playing gender in the world of Overwatch and the case of Geguri. *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 8, pp.1128–1143.
- Christel, M. G. 2006. Evaluation and user studies with respect to video summarization and browsing. *Proceedings of SPIE*. pp. 196–210. California, USA.
- Cole, K. K. 2015. "It's like she's eager to be verbally abused": Twitter, trolls, and (en) gendering disciplinary rhetoric. *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol.15, No.2), pp. 356–358.
- Consalvo, M. 2012. Confronting toxic gamer culture: A challenge for feminist game studies scholars., *A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, pp.1-7.
- Cote, A. C. 2020. *Gaming Sexism : Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games / Amanda C. Cote*. [Online]. New York University Press, New York, USA.
- Cunningham, S. J., and Macrae, C. N. 2011. The colour of gender stereotyping. *British Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 102, No.3, pp. 598–614.
- Dewinter, J., and Kocurek, C. A. 2017. "AW FUCK, I GOT A BITCH ON MY TEAM!": Women and the Exclusionary Cultures of the Computer Game Complex. In J. , Malkowski and T. M., Russworm, (Eds.), *Gaming Representation* ,pp. 57–73. Indiana University Press, Indiana, USA.
- Drakett, J. et al., 2018. Old jokes, new media—Online sexism and constructions of gender in Internet memes. *Feminism and Psychology*, Vol. 28, No.1, pp. 109–127.
- Ericsson, N., and Bergström, H. 2020. *How toxicity differ between male and female players in competitive Overwatch*. Bachelor thesis. Uppsala University
- Fernández-Vara, C. 2019. *Introduction to game analysis*. Routledge, New York, USA.
- Friedberg, J. (2015). *Gender games: A content analysis of gender portrayals in modern, narrative video games*. MA. thesis, Georgia State University.
- Genovesi, M. 2017. Choices and consequences: The role of players in the walking dead: a telltale game series. *Open Cultural Studies*, Vol 1, No. 1, pp.350–358.
- Jenkins, H. 2013. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. Routledge, New York, USA.
- Hunicke, R. et al., 2004. MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research. *Proceedings of the AAAI Workshop on Challenges in Game AI*, 4(1), Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 1722.
- Janik, J. 2018. Game/r-Play/er-Bio-Object. Exploring posthuman values in video game research. *Proceedings of The Philosophy of Computer Games Conference*, Msida, Malta, pp.1–8.
- Janik, J. 2021. Intra-acting bio-object: A posthuman approach to the player–game relation. *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds*, 13(1), Vol. 13, No.1, pp.21–39.
- Jung, C. G. 2014. *Four archetypes*. Routledge, New York, USA.
- Juul, J. 2010. *A casual revolution: Reinventing video games and their players/ Jesper Juul*. MIT press, Massachusetts, USA
- Kasumovic, M. M., and Kuznekoff, J. H. 2015. Insights into Sexism: Male Status and Performance Moderates Female-Directed Hostile and Amicable Behaviour. *PLOS ONE*, Vol. 10, No. 7, e0131613.
- Kaye, L. K. et al., 2018. Do casual gaming environments evoke stereotype threat? Examining the effects of explicit priming and avatar gender. *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 78, pp.142–150.
- Klevjer, R. 2012. Enter the avatar: The phenomenology of prosthetic telepresence in computer games. *The Philosophy of Computer Games*, 17–38.
- Kordyaka, B. et al., 2020. Towards a unified theory of toxic behavior in video games. *Internet Research*, Vol. 30, No. 4, pp.1081–1102.
- Kress, G. 2012. Multimodal discourse analysis. In J. P. Gee and M. Handford (eds.) *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, pp.35–50. Routledge, New York, USA.

- Kress, G., and van Leeuwen, T. 2020. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. Taylor and Francis Group, Oxfordshire, UK.
- Kress, G., 2010. *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. Routledge, London, UK.
- Lawless, T. et al., 2020. Is it really just a joke? Gender differences in perceptions of sexist humor. *Humor*, Vol. 33, No. 2, pp. 291–315.
- Malkowski, J. 2017. “I TURNED OUT TO BE SUCH A DAMSEL IN DISTRESS”: Noir Games and the Unrealized Femme Fatale. In J. Malkowski and T. M. Russworm (Eds.), *Gaming Representation*, pp. 19–37. Indiana University Press. Indiana, USA.
- Maloney, M. et al., 2019. Introduction. In M. Maloney, S. Roberts, and T. Graham (Eds.), *Gender, Masculinity and Video Gaming: Analysing Reddit’s r/gaming Community*, pp. 1–21, Springer International Publishing. New York, USA.
- Martey, R. M. et al., 2014. The strategic female: Gender-switching and player behavior in online games. *Information, Communication and Society*, Vol. 17, No. 3, pp.286–300.
- McCullough, K. M. et al., 2020. Female Video Game Players and the Protective Effect of Feminist Identity Against Internalized Misogyny. *Sex Roles*, Vol. 82, No. 5, pp. 266–276.
- McKittrick, B. et al., 2023. “What are you Bringing to the Table?”: The Something Awful Let’s Play Community as a Serious Leisure Subculture. *Games and Culture*, Vol. 18, No., 3, pp.402–421.
- Newman, H. 2019. How Baptiste, Brigitte, genji, and other overwatch heroes got made. Forbes. [Online]. [Accessed 30 June 2023]. Available from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hnewman/2019/06/30/how-baptiste-brigitte-genji-and-other-overwatch-heroes-got-made/>.
- Nguyen, J. 2016. Performing as video game players in Let’s Plays. *Transformative Works and Cultures* [Online] Vol. 22.
- Papale, L. 2014. Beyond identification: Defining the relationships between player and avatar. *Journal of Games Criticism*, Vol. 1, No.2, pp. 1–12.
- Paul, C. A. 2018. *The toxic meritocracy of video games: Why gaming culture is the worst*. University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota, USA.
- Ratan, R. A. et al., 2019. Women Keep it Real: Avatar Gender Choice in League of Legends. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, Vol. 22, No. 4, pp. 254–257.
- Ratan, R. A. et al., 2015. Stand by your man: An examination of gender disparity in League of Legends. *Games and Culture*, Vol. 10, No. 5, pp.438–462.
- Schröter, F., and Thon, J.-N. 2014. Video game characters. Theory and analysis. *Diegesis*, Vol. 3, No. 1, p.40.
- Shaw, A. 2014. *Gaming at the edge sexuality and gender at the margins of gamer culture / Adrienne Shaw*. University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota, USA.
- Shifman, L., and Lemish, D. 2010. Between feminism and fun (ny) mism: Analysing gender in popular internet humour. *Information, Communication and Society*, Vol. 13, No. 6, pp.870–891.
- Süngü, E. 2020. Gender Representation and Diversity in Contemporary Video Games. In B. Bostan (Ed.), *Game User Experience And Player-Centered Design*, pp. 379–393. Springer International Publishing, New York, USA.
- Taylor, N. et al., 2009. Cheerleaders/booth babes/Halo hoes: Pro-gaming, gender and jobs for the boys. *Digital Creativity*, Vol. 20, No. 4, pp.239–252.
- Tekinbaş, K. S. 2004. *Rules of play: Game design fundamentals / Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman*. MIT Press, Massachusetts, USA.
- Terlecki, M. et al., 2011. Sex differences and similarities in video game experience, preferences, and self-efficacy: Implications for the gaming industry. *Current Psychology*, Vol. 30, pp. 22–33.
- Tompkins, J. E. 2021. *Does the Character Matter? Avatar Gender, Identification, and Player Agency Among Women Who Play Digital Games*. Ph.D. thesis, Indiana University.
- Tompkins, J. E., and Martins, N. 2022. Masculine pleasures as normalized practices: Character design in the video game industry. *Games and Culture*, Vol. 17, No.3, pp.399–420.
- Lin, X., 2019. *Gender In Overwatch: Virtual Space And Social Realities*, Bachelor Thesis. National University of Singapore.
- Yoon, S. H., and Kim, H.W. 2019. What content and context factors lead to selection of a video clip? The heuristic route perspective. *Electronic Commerce Research*, Vol. 19, pp.603–627.