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HIGH-TECH, LOW REPRESENTATION
Women Gamers on Cyberpunk 2077's Sexualized
Representation

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis studies the ways female gaming communities criticize the female representation in Cyberpunk 2077. Although studies about gaming communities and their interaction have been conducted, female-led communities specifically are still a newer topic of focus. There are several online platforms where communities for gaming can be found, but many women still feel excluded from these conversations due to sexism. As a result of this, female-led communities have been created as safe spaces, where women can freely discuss their hobbies, even in male-dominant topics.

The subreddit r/GirlGamers is an example of a female-led community, and the conversation surrounding Cyberpunk 2077 in this community is the subject of this thesis. Two posts and their comments from the subreddit were picked to be analyzed through the method of qualitative content analysis. The final number of comments that were analyzed was 76, as well as the two main posts. The results of this thesis showed that many women felt that female representation in the game was still shallow and sexualized, although the game genre provided some explanations for why this was the case. On the contrary, some women felt like the sexualization and representation of men and women was equal throughout and had no criticism in relation to these topics.

Keywords: gaming communities, video games, female representation, content analysis, cyberpunk

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TIIVISTELMÄ

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Tämä kandidaatintutkielma tutkii naispeliyhteisöjen tapoja kritisoida naisrepresentaatiosta pelissä Cyberpunk 2077. Vaikka tutkimusta peliyhteisöistä ja niissä tapahtuvasta interaktiosta on tehty, naispainotteiset yhteisöt ovat vielä uudempi tutkimuksen aihe. Peliyhteisöjä on monilla eri alustoilla, mutta naiset kokevat olonsa ulkopuolisiksi keskusteluista seksismin myötä. Tämän tuloksena alustoille on luotu naispainotteisia yhteisöjä, missä naiset voivat vapaammin keskustella harrastuksistaan, jotka voidaan nähdä miesvaltaisina.

Subreddit r/GirlGamers on esimerkki naispainotteisesta yhteisöstä, ja tällä yhteisöllä tapahtuva keskustelu peliin Cyberpunk 2077 ja sen naisrepresentaatioihin liittyen on tämän tutkielman kohteena. Tutkimusaineistoksi valikoitui kaksi julkaisua ja niihin lähetetyt kommentit, ja aineistoa tutkittiin laadullisen sisällönanalyysin kautta. Lopullinen analysoitavien kommenttien määrä oli 76, lisäksi myös alkuperäiset julkaisut. Analyysin tuloksista keskeisimpinä teemoina nousivat naisten yliseksualisointi, sekä nais- ja mieshahmojen representaatioiden eroavaisuudet ja samankaltaisuudet. Osa kommentoijista kokivat seksualisoinnin cyberpunk -genrelle ominaisena, kun taas osan mielestä naisia seksualisoiitiin miehiin verrattuna kohtuuttoman paljon.

Avainsanat: peliyhteisöt, videopelit, naisrepresentaatio, sisällönanalyysi, cyberpunk

Tämän julkaisun alkuperäisyys on tarkastettu Turnitin OriginalityCheck -ohjelmalla.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Video games and gaming in general has been a polarizing subject. As the subject has grown in popularity in recent years, games reach a wider audience including different groups of people (Engelstätter & Ward, 2022). As a result, the definition of a stereotypical gamer as an antisocial male (Paaßen et al., 2016) doesn't apply to most, and the opinions within gaming communities reflect on this change. Gaming communities grow in size and reach, and research about how these communities interact is necessary to understand the ever-evolving demographic of gamers.

Women often don't feel safe to express themselves freely due to cybersexism, which still runs rampant in online gaming communities (Vergel, La Parra-Casado, Vives-Cases, 2023). Cybersexism can be defined as sexism that happens in digital spaces (Vergel et al., 2023). As an effect of cybersexism, women have created safe spaces specifically for women, where they can discuss freely without the fear of sexism or misogyny altering their experiences, thus leading to an interesting sub-category of gamers that present an intriguing subject for further research.

This thesis aims to delve deeper into the world of female-led gaming communities and their criticisms about the representations of female characters in the game *Cyberpunk 2077*. *Cyberpunk 2077* is a digital role-playing game released in 2020 by a Polish game developer, CD Projekt RED. The main character is a mercenary in a fictional city called Night City, where cybernetic body modifications to modify one's looks and abilities have become reality for most. The game involves explicit topics such as corruption, sex work and death; due to the nature of the game, there is constant discussion about the game's story and real-life implications in online forums. This thesis will include the analysis of discussions surrounding the female main character and non-playable characters, NPCs.

The chosen online forum is Reddit. The platform allows registered users, also called *redditors*, to post content, such as text, images and videos, on topic-specific communities, also called as *subreddits*. Reddit has a built-in voting system which is used by users to agree, or alternatively disagree with a post. Upvoting can be done on posts themselves, as well as the comments on a post. The more upvotes content gets, the higher it will appear on the page (Reddit Brand System, 2024). If a comment gets downvoted enough it gets collapsed and is pushed further down by the platform, thus negatively impacting its visibility to other users.

The focus will be on how the users of the subreddit r/GirlGamers discuss and criticize the representation of female characters of Cyberpunk 2077. Previous research shows that video games tend to over-represent gender stereotypes, and many gamers find that women are still oversexualized in video games (Kondrat, 2015). The first part of this thesis explores the theories related to representation in video games, cyberpunk as a genre, and terminology necessary for the analysis, while the second part analyzes which aspects of female representation are criticized or on the contrary, applauded, by the subreddit. This is done by coding the comments from two posts in this subreddit, and by finding common themes within the comments.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this chapter I will introduce some earlier research and literature of the main themes of this thesis, such as female representation in video games and cyberpunk as a genre. Additionally, some game-related terms such as *role-playing games* as well as *non-playable characters* are explained, as they provide critical context for the analysis phase of this thesis.

2.1 Female representation in video games

Female representation in video games has become an increasingly important topic of research throughout the years as video games as a hobby has grown in popularity among women. Before diving into video games specifically, it is important to identify what representation really is. One of the seminal works of representation in media and cultural studies is the book edited by Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997). Here, Hall defines representation as “using language to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully.” The study of representation is not new to media studies, but the interactivity of video games poses a new challenge for this research; without interaction, a game “falls dead” (Grodal, 2003; Kioussis, 2002; Vorderer, 2000, as cited in Jansz & Martis, 2007). If a player is not drawn to the represented world of a video game, the enjoyment will not be as great; the representations matter even more than they do in non-interactive media

If the assumption in the game industry is that gamers are white, heterosexual men, it will lead to games catering to these audiences. Media industries produce movies, games or other media for an imagined audience, and they insist on only creating things that will generate profits (Shaw, 2015). Although statistics prove that men are not the majority by a lot, the stereotype is still there; while gamers, regardless of their gender, keep buying games that have been produced to cater to male audiences, the representation of women or other marginalized communities will remain shallow. Additionally, the discourse about female representation is often discussed from the viewpoint of white women (Shaw, 2015). This leads to the representation of women in marginalized communities being subject to research in a separate matter.

The concept of male gaze can be a diminishing factor of good female representation in video games. It can be defined as “male gaze projecting its fantasy onto the female

figure”, where the woman is simply a passive object of looking (Mulvey, 1975). Mulvey further claims that women’s appearance in cinema is created to have maximum erotic impact in order to appeal to the male audiences, who are the people “doing the looking”. This concept of male gaze can be seen in video games where female characters follow the conventional beauty standards and wear minimal clothing. Shaw (2015) also sees this concept of male gaze as prevalent in the gaming industry, as she argues that it has been a tradition to commercialize women’s bodies.

The male gaze can be seen as one of the reasons why the female representations in video games are still shallow and problematic (Malkowski & Russworm, 2017). On the contrary, Kondrat’s study (2015) revealed that while many find the representations in video games shallow, most didn’t feel like the representations had any influence on their thought processes in real life. However, as Hall defines representation, they are attempts to represent the world meaningfully (1997). Perhaps the meaning of representations isn’t always clear to those who play video games, as Kondrat’s findings contradict the very definition by Hall.

Representations can still matter, even when audiences do not recognize them as such. Shaw (2015) highlights in her book an example from literature, from the immensely popular *The Hunger Games* written by Suzanne Collins. Collins clearly describes the appearance of a character as having “dark brown skin and eyes”, but some fans imagined her as a “innocent blonde girl,” which resulted in racist outbursts when the movie had an African American woman act in the role of Rue. In Shaw’s words: “These outbursts do indicate, however, that there are specific moments in which representation *can* matter to audiences.” While someone might not be consciously thinking about how women are represented, they’ll still be able to recognize patterns when enough media is consumed. For this reason, shallow and sexualized representation shouldn’t be the only women we see in media.

2.2 Cyberpunk as a genre

Cyberpunk as a genre is a sub-category that was developed from science fiction in the 1980s. It was deeply influenced by the rise of hacker culture, fear of corporate overreach and late-stage capitalism. Bruce Sterling (1986) describes cyberpunk as depictions of dystopian futures in a “high tech, low-life” environment. The genre explores themes of posthumanism, corporate control and high-tech environments, where everything is a

commodity due to late-form capitalism. Cyberpunk is considered a visual genre as well as a literary one; the visuals often include neon cityscapes, crowded urban environments and the blend of organic and synthetic forms.

Sterling argues in his preface to *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* (1989) that the appeal of cyberpunk lies in how it reflects larger social themes of corporate control in a high-tech setting. Many researchers argue that William Gibson's novel *Necromancer* is one of the "quintessential" works in cyberpunk, as it was one of the first novels to incorporate themes from punk and hacker cultures into one (Sterling, 1986). It established some of the genre's core themes like blending of human and machine, which is apparent in *Cyberpunk 2077* as well. Citizens of Night City can modify their bodies to the extremes with cyberware; one can change their looks as much as their human heart desires. This offers the illusion of self-expression and, but ultimately reinforces systemic control, which illustrates the double-edged nature of technological 'progress'.

Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) discusses this idea of cyborgs – the mixing of humans and machines – offering criticism of concepts in Western thinking, like binary gender expression, capitalism and militarism. Haraway argues that technology offers new ways to imagine gender and identity beyond these Western ideals, since cyborgs can essentially look like anything. While Haraway's cyborg is a symbol of resistance against capitalism, the cyborgs in *Cyberpunk 2077* essentially work for the benefit of capitalism, since the cyborg bodies are the greatest commodity of Night City. This exaggeration serves as a reminder throughout the game that the world of *Cyberpunk 2077* isn't supposed to be seen as an ideal world, but rather as a dystopia we want to avoid.

Additionally, Carlen Lavigne's work *Cyberpunk Women, Feminism and Science Fiction: A Critical Study* (2013) combines topics of the cyberpunk genre and feminist concepts such as the ones introduced by Haraway. Lavigne refers to the authors in Sterling's *Mirrorshades* as "first-wave" authors, and highlights that these authors are predominantly male; Lavigne introduces the idea that cyberpunk stories written by women are influenced by feminist politics while ones written by men are not, thus being less popular amongst the audience and not included by early authors in these popular anthologies. On the contrary, Lavigne also explains how cyberpunk as a genre has been declared dead many times after its initial beginning in 1986 but extends on this idea by elaborating that "masculine" cyberpunk's death allowed for a new, feminist strain. She highlights how a big rise in female authors happened in the 1990s, when cyberpunk was deemed dead. This

highlights the inequalities that are still apparent, although it can be argued that women are represented more equally these days. The “death” of masculine cyberpunk was seen as the death of the whole genre, while before this death female authors weren’t even given a chance to be visible authors of the genre.

In conclusion, the genre of cyberpunk has a diverse history that has received its fair share of criticism. While it is inherently critical of Western ideals like capitalism, it doesn’t always extend well enough on the criticism and its interpretations can be seen as shallow. Some scholars like Lavigne argue that if more female writers had been highlighted, cyberpunk might have offered a deeper, more intersectional critique of the systems it portrays. In the context of *Cyberpunk 2077*, this raises the question whether the game’s narrative inherits these shallow characteristics, or if it strives for a more nuanced depiction of identity, power, and resistance.

2.3 Role-playing games

Role-playing games, later referred to as *RPGs*, can be defined as semi-structured narrative processes, where the participant plays a main character in a fictional world (Arjoranta, 2011). RPGs are fairly new to popular culture, as game researchers mark the release date of *Dungeons & Dragons*, one of the most popular RPGs in the world, as a pivotal year for the beginning of this subculture (Bowman, 2010). Common denominators for most tabletop RPGs include having a set of rules, a game master who oversees the narrative, and supportive “props” enhancing the experience like dice, décor and a table where the game is held. Usually, players roll a set of dice when faced with a task or an enemy; if the value they roll is higher than the value set by a game master, they succeed at the task. There are variations of this so-called game system, however most systems build on this idea.

RPGs can be divided into further subcategories, but for the sake of relevancy the focus of this chapter is on *virtual RPGs*, or *VRPGs*. This subcategory ditches the common denominators listed in the previous paragraph, and everything happens in a virtual medium; the experience is narrated by voice actors through pre-recordings, and the game mechanics serve as the props. The players themselves oversee all character customization that the game allows. Keunyeong et al (2015) elaborated through a study that individuals found games more enjoyable when they could customize their characters, thus allowing them to relate to their characters more. This way VRPGs with character customization

can allow players to have more in-depth experiences, and the storytelling doesn't rely on just one person, the game master, and their performance.

VRPGs often have a set number of endings that can be reached through different dialogue and interaction options. NPCs are, as the name suggests, characters in the game, that the player does not play as. According to Kramarzewski and De Nucci (2023), NPCs are “controlled by predetermined behaviors designed by the game designer”. These characters can be interacted with during quests to proceed, or outside of quests to simply get immersed in the game's world. Many VRPG games are also in the *open-world* category. Open-world games can be defined as video games that “organise their game-spaces as single, entirely traversable contiguous spaces, often vast in their dimensions, which frequently comes with a high degree of freedom for player action” (Schoppmeier, 2023, p. 30). The open-world category is not a genre, but more so a technical aspect of a game. The player can decide where to go and when, and their position in the game's world is not tied to a specific questline.

3 CYBERPUNK 2077

The video game Cyberpunk 2077 is based on a tabletop RPG called Cyberpunk, which was published in 1988. This original game was iterated three times by the creator Mike Pondsmith, with the last iteration being released in 2020. Cyberpunk 2077 was released in 2020 as well, and it is currently playable on PC, PlayStation 4 and 5, and Xbox One and the Series X/S. This chapter will provide insights into the game, as I will explain the setting and gameplay.

3.1 Setting

The story revolves around a mercenary V, and their struggles with a microchip that gets implanted in their head in the aftermath of a gig-gone-wrong in the year of 2077. The microchip, which is slowly killing V by eating away their brain, contains the soul of a deceased rockstar-turned-terrorist, Johnny Silverhand. V and Johnny work together to remove the microchip from V's head, while trying to make it in the dystopian Night City, where crime and corruption is present at every corner. Night City is located on the west coast of the United States, and it's defined by its towering skyscrapers colored with neon lights, the stark juxtaposition of extreme wealth and poverty, and it's an embodiment of the "high tech, low-life" ethos described by Sterling (1986).

Different parts of the city are controlled by gangs or alternatively megacorporations, which highlights the inequalities driven by capitalism. From the neglected area of Pacifica to the City Center representing corporate dominance and wealth, Night City is not being portrayed as an ideal place to live. The megacorporations that produce cybernetic body modifications benefit from the commodification of bodies, which is seen on the streets as the player walks through Night City; there are adverts for strip clubs, sex hotels and pornographic content wherever the eye meets. It's a city of contradictions; limitless possibilities coexist with systemic oppression.

3.2 Gameplay

In ordinary VRPG fashion, the player can decide what their version of V looks like and sounds like. Throughout the game the player can modify their V's looks by paying "ripperdocs", the game's version of plastic surgeons. The player can modify things ranging from the characters genitalia to simply V's hair color; the voice option that is

chosen affects whether the NPCs of the game refer to V as a woman or a man, thus making this the most critical choice the player makes regarding V's identity. In addition to changing the main character's looks, the player makes all the choices for them, altering the way the game plays out.

Cyberpunk 2077 leans on the traditional difficulty check system that is implemented in many tabletop RPGs, as the player levels up their skills with perk points they garner through completing quests. Doors can be opened with force or technological skills; if the skill for a door is too low for example, that area remains inaccessible until the player either levels up that skill or finds another way to reach the area. This skill system can be seen as another form of character customization, as one can make their character physically strong, tech-savvy or agile, to name a few possibilities.

Due to the game's form of being open-world, this allows the players to explore the map without being tied to specific levels or quests, thus enhancing immersion and the role-playing aspect of the game. The player can hire prostitutes for no other reason than role-playing, or they can sit down and drink at bars. While the player completes the main quests of the game, they get introduced to NPCs they can romance. These four romanceable NPCs are divided into two categories; ones female V, and alternatively male V, can romance. Both versions of V have one male and female option they can date. The romance options add another level of depth that increases the role-playing aspect of the game, as it's completely optional to romance these NPCs. The romance options serve as important parts of the storyline even when they aren't being romanced. The romance options are River Ward and Kerry Eurodyne, as well as Judy Alvarez and Panam Palmer.

4 RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

This thesis aims to explore the following question:

How do female-led gaming communities criticize the representation of female characters in *Cyberpunk 2077*?

Although studies about gaming communities have been made previously, there is still a lack of research that focuses on female-led communities specifically. Due to the game's dystopian world and polarizing topics, it creates a setting where discussion is bound to happen.

4.1 Research method

The selected method for this thesis follows the framework of qualitative content analysis. Content analysis is quite a loose framework where the analyzed content can be various things included but not limited to articles, discussions, and letters (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018), thus providing a flexible framework to follow with my analysis of Reddit posts and comments. First, all the content being analyzed is added to a spreadsheet where their contents are coded. Coding is defined as the method of dissecting longer media texts into shorter parts and then categorizing these shorter parts (Juhila, 2021). There are two ways to approach coding; one being theory-based the other content-based. In theory-based coding a pre-existing framework or theory is used to sort comments into groups, whereas the content-basis allows the researcher to pick the codes themselves (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2018).

Once the contents of all posts and comments have been coded accordingly, I will group the comments into themes that emerge from the codes. The themes will be named with the help of the most used words and phrases found in the research data, and the names will be the subheadings for the next chapter. The headings will aim to present the most prominent criticisms and comments from the Reddit posts and comments. These themes are the core of this thesis, as the aim is to figure out what is being criticized and discussed.

4.2 Research data

The research data for this thesis has been collected from Reddit, more specifically from the *GirlGamers*-subreddit. Reddit has a built-in function for searching for content within

communities, which was used in the data collection phase. Since the community is for people identifying as women, no additional search terms were needed to filter through posts made by irrelevant groups of people. The queries “Cyberpunk 2077” and “Cyberpunk 2077 women” were used to collect data within the subreddit. Both queries provided similar results, and sometimes these results overlapped with one another.

After these searches were conducted, I filtered through the potential posts and comments based on the following criteria: the posts had to be relatively popular, and they had to include relevant phrases in the titles, such as “sexualization” and “women”, as well as “Cyberpunk 2077”. In this case, relative popularity meant posts with at least 30 comments. I also noted how many upvotes each post had. This way it was clear that the posts were thought-provoking to other members of the subreddit, generating discussion between members.

Unsurprisingly, several posts met these criteria, and not all of them were included in the research data. Ultimately, two posts were picked as they were both somewhat recent; both were posted at most 12 months ago from the date of the search, which happened in November of 2024. Although the criteria were initially that posts with more than 30 comments would be picked, both posts exceeded those criteria and had more than 85 comments and over 100 upvotes at the time of filtering.

After the two posts were picked, I read through all the comments in the posts and coded them in an Excel spreadsheet. Since there are 245 comments in these two posts, not all of them were included in the coding phase to keep the amount of data controlled. On Reddit it is possible to comment on other comments, as well as on the posts themselves. For the sake of staying on the topic of the posts, only comments that were made to the original post have been included in the coding phase. This limited the number of comments being analyzed to 84 comments. One of the two posts discusses CD Projekt Red’s other popular game, *Witcher 3*. If comments to this post didn’t mention *Cyberpunk 2077*, they were not included in the coding phase. The number of these comments was 8, thus finalizing the number of text entries at 76.

Due to Reddit’s upvoting functionality, some posts were automatically collapsed by the platform. Since it is relevant for this thesis to only look at the most popular themes that emerge from the community, the comments that were automatically collapsed have not been included in chapters five and six. Although redditors conversed about misogyny and

sexualization in general in the comments of these two threads, the comments that did not mention *Cyberpunk 2077* in any way are also not included in the analysis as they don't answer the research question.

Once the coding was completed, the final spreadsheet included the two main posts as well as 76 comments. Additionally, while most of the comments that were counted by the platform were not included in the analysis, it's worth noting that those that were included often received positive responses with others agreeing with the points being made. The number of upvotes and replies on specific comments suggests how popular and widely accepted those points were. Although the final number of comments analyzed is small compared to the total of 245 from both posts, it still highlights recurring topics.

To note the technical limitations of using Excel, the final spreadsheet contains more entries than there are comments being analyzed due to some comments being too long to be included in one cell. However, since the focus is on what is said instead of who is saying it, it seems acceptable to analyze the comments separately without noting that they are from the same person. For this reason, the amount of text entries on the spreadsheet is 94, of which six were not related to the analysis and thus excluded. 88 is the final number of text cells in the spreadsheet, and this number is later referred to in the analysis section of this thesis.

4.3 Research ethics

To ensure that the data remains unchanged throughout the process of writing this thesis and analyzing the data, the Reddit posts have been saved as PDF documents locally on my personal desktop computer's hard drive. Once the thesis is complete, these documents are destroyed, and no longer accessible by anyone.

The Reddit comments and posts used for this thesis are freely available online for anyone to find, and the usernames of redditors are not included in the analysis. Their previous posts, comments and/or upvotes are not relevant for this thesis and therefore not included; since their history isn't included, they aren't identifiable through the comments that are used in this analysis. A previous study stresses the importance of considering the risk level and contents of a study (Moreno, Goniou, Moreno & Diekema, 2013). If the contents being analyzed contain information that can make the person identifiable or if the information is deeply personal, the study can be defined as high risk. Since the subject of

analysis is discussions revolving representation and not personal matters, this thesis can be classified as a relatively low risk study. Additionally, the participants' personal information is not presented, since the focus is not on who is speaking, but on what is said and how it is said. Comments that could contain personal information are not used in this thesis, even though they have been posted on a public platform. Due to the public nature of Reddit and the subreddit I don't find it ethically necessary to inform the redditors whose comments are used.

5 RESULTS

This chapter will provide insights into what the women of the GirlGamers subreddit are saying about *Cyberpunk 2077*, and the game's representation of its female characters. After coding each text entry in the spreadsheet, the main themes that emerged from the posts were overall sexualization as well as the differences in representations between male and female characters. Many redditors also reflected on society's role in why the game has characters like it does, and emphasized how change needs to happen on a larger scale in order to change how women are represented in the video game industry.

5.1 Sexualization of female characters

A general consensus among the redditors was that the game does largely sexualize its characters. However, the users' thoughts can be further divided into two categories; others felt as though the sexualization was done in a way to appease to heteronormative male ideals, whereas the other half expressed that the sexualization was fitting of the cyberpunk genre's critical view of capitalism.

“The problem with Cyberpunk 2077 is that although the game has a “sex sells” mentality it is very obvious that to CDPR what sells is just naked oversexualized women.” (P1)

The first Reddit-post serves as a statement itself; the user expresses their frustration with the game developer company, since their criticisms are not limited to *Cyberpunk 2077* but CD Projekt RED as a whole. Many redditors across the two posts agreed with this sentiment, and they felt that the game was built in a way that simply catered to an idea of a male gaze. The redditors brought up different examples from the game that they found too sexualized, such as the way clothing is almost always tight-fitting and revealing, and how there is more than just one mission where you have to carry a naked woman to safety.

The aspect of late-stage capitalism is discussed throughout both posts. As explained in chapter 2.2, cyberpunk is a visual genre with lots of neon lights. The game incorporates neon lights and capitalism in the form of advertising, where most ads revolve around sex, porn or prostitution. Many redditors found this grim and explained how the ads are impossible to avoid, which in turn affected their gameplay experience. Most of the game

is spent on the streets of Night City, so in order to finish the game, you will face your share of ads that portray naked and sexualized women.

“It’s extremely sexualized, but I feel like that’s kinda the point? There are some things that feel gross and sexist, but I feel like the point is that it’s kinda gross and sexist. It’s like the idea that sex sells taken to the absolute max to the point where it feels kinda ridiculous.” (P2)

As explained in chapter two, cyberpunk as a genre is inherently a criticism of a late-stage capitalistic dystopia. Technology’s development has been put ahead of the wellbeing of humans, and it presents itself as a major difference between the classes. Cyberpunk 2077 works as a prime example of this genre, as the game presents humans as commodity throughout the game; sex workers are a common sight on the streets of Night City, and ads promoting prostitution are everywhere. Women and men are sexualized throughout the game, and it aligns with the genre’s criticism. Although the sexualization is indeed present, some of the redditors find it as a portrayal of a dystopia, rather than as an attempt to idealize this world.

“It’s [the sexualization] done in a way that fits perfectly with the hyper-commercialization and ad-infested cyberpunk theme where whatever you can do to sell a product is allowed.” (P2)

Most comments relate this sexualization to the commodification of bodies and a “sex sells” atmosphere. The fact that these ads for prostitution and appearance-related body modifications are everywhere is seen as a way to desensitize the population of Night City to the commodification. Many felt that this highlighted the corruption and differences between classes: the ads were nowhere to be found in the high-class, corporate ruled sections of the city, whereas the gang-controlled areas were completely bombarded with ads. One commenter even mentioned the “high tech, low-life” ethos that Sterling (1986) described as a reason for why women and men are portrayed the way they are, which showcases the community’s understanding of the genre.

5.2 The (un)equal representation of characters

Another main theme that emerged from the data was the general discussion about the representation of characters of all genders. Since both Reddit posts revolved around the topic of sexualization, the representations were discussed from the viewpoint of external factors, such as the looks of characters as well as the clothes they wear. Similarly to the sexualization aspect, this theme was also divisive among the redditors. For some users the sexualization was focused on female presenting characters, but on the contrary, some saw the representations of all characters to be equally sexualized.

“I'm fully aware that the game has ads of sexualized men, I mean one ad literally promotes a show about a male prostitute called Wattson Whore, yet the problem lies in how the game portrays its female characters and NPCs compared to its male ones.” (P1)

As the previous chapter elaborates, female characters were indeed viewed as being oversexualized. Whether the redditors felt that it was justified due to Cyberpunk 2077's genre or if they saw it as excessive, it was apparent in the opinions voiced by the users. Another aspect that rose from the posts was the unequal representation of male and female characters. Nine comments about the representation being uneven were found in the data, and in addition three comments discussed beauty ideals that are projected on to women in the game. Although the number of comments isn't great in relation to all comments, these opinions seemed extremely popular; the top comment of the first thread had gained 380 upvotes at the time of data collection, which is only 82 upvotes less than the upvotes on the original post.

Different examples of the representation between genders differing were brought up, and these comments also garnered a generally supportive response from other users. While many agreed with the fact that men were sexualized too, the underlying problem with the game's representation was indeed the unequal amount of sexualization. Examples from the game's missions were brought up several times, as well as the possible ways different genders can dress.

“Guys get to be old, cool, ugly, bad ass, cyborg, mutilated, machines, bestial, handsome, weird, dorky, etc.”

And ladies have the same variety like sexy, cute, pretty, attractive, beautiful, alluring, hot, etc.

Yep, no problems here... ” (P1)

Many agreed that as a female V you had less options to fully cover yourself, while the male V could wear more loose-fitting clothing. It is important to note that both male and female presenting V's can wear the same clothing, but the way the clothing fits depends on the outer appearance of the main character. For example, some tank tops are cropped and tight fitting on a female V, whereas the fit is more loose and covering for the male V.

“Just look at the CP2077 romances: Panam and Judy are amazing, whilst River is comparatively undercooked and Kerry frankly feels like an afterthought. (I know, Judy is lesbian, but let's face it, men have little issue with watching two women together onscreen).” (P1)

Many redditors argued that the reason why women and men in the game are unequally represented is the concept of male gaze. It was argued, that CDPR is a game developer company which's target demographic is hetero males, and this was elaborated through examples of the romance options. It is possible for players to get a romantic partner in the game as explained in chapter 3.2, but it isn't necessary to make progress in the game. Even though it is a minor part of the progress, the concerns of romance options catering to straight men were brought up several times by redditors.

“I felt the game was just sexual all around. I felt like the women weren't really singled out.” (P1)

On the contrary, some redditors saw Cyberpunk 2077 as a game that represented both male and female characters in a similar fashion. Most of the conversation revolved around sexualization, and many argued that the game tried to make it seem equal through ads and the game's sex workers, “joytoys”. I previously discussed the dressing options for both male and female V, but one popular comment mentioned seeing both sexes walking around “dressed pretty slutty”. They did however mention women being dressed “sluttier” and more prevalent, which somewhat contradicts this claim of equal representation. This, once again, highlights the community's ability to critically discuss the game.

5.3 Ideological contextualization of representations

“You're correct about all of this, but misogyny is so normalized in our society that a lot of women aren't ready to hear it.” (P1)

Although the previously mentioned themes were the most common ones that emerged from the posts, other ideas were also presented. Several redditors brought up the point that *Cyberpunk 2077* is not the only perpetrator of misogynistic or shallow representations, and thus it is difficult to criticize these representations. Since misogyny is an issue on a much larger scale than just in the video game industry, it seems as though the redditors feel the need for progress to happen on a societal level first in order for it to also happen in this industry. On the contrary, a few redditors felt that the criticism of sexualization was ridiculous. Some stated that they have seen women dressed much more sexualized at a younger age in real life, and therefore found the game too ‘puritanical’ to be judged so harshly.

“It's a world where enshittification has basically run its full course, to the point that apartments don't have kitchens, but do have built-in vending machines. All shareholder value has been extracted and what remains are the dregs.” (P2)

Some redditors made additional comments about how Night City’s hypercapitalistic atmosphere is present through ways other than just the commodification of bodies. Apartments in lower income areas don’t have kitchens and they’re replaced with vending machines, news about gun-related deaths are simultaneously gun ads. Due to the sexualization not being the only way the world is portrayed as grim, many felt that the sometimes-egregious sexualization could not only be justified, but also necessary to make the world even less appealing.

Several commenters also simply expressed their agreement with the original posters, rather than having any additional input for what was said in the posts. This agreement could also be seen in the upvotes to the posts and comments. It is also worth noting that although this topic was divisive among the redditors, no personal attacks were made in relation to the original posters’ thoughts. The discussion remained civil even when the redditors didn’t fully agree with other comments. Whether this was due to the conversation happening on a female-only community remains unclear; however it is clear,

that the redditors felt comfortable enough about sharing their personal, strong opinions in the comment threads.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As seen in the results, the way female gamers criticized *Cyberpunk 2077*'s female representations were mostly in relation to the sexualization of the characters. Although many saw the sexualization fitting of the genre, several redditors questioned whether it was overdone to appeal to male audiences and the assumed male gaze. Since only comments that were made directly on the post and not in response to other comments were included in this thesis, a significant number of comments were left out of the analysis. A lot of these excluded comments provided more context to what the redditors meant with their original comments, and including these could have provided a more in-depth analysis of the *GirlGamers* subreddit's thoughts about the subject.

The choice of analyzing a female community serves as both an advantage and a disadvantage for this thesis. Since the community is specifically for female gamers, it allows women to speak more freely of their thoughts. As brought up in the introduction, cybersexism can be seen as one of the reasons why gender-specific communities are created; although this sexism is of course a negative part of the internet, it has also provided women and marginalized communities with safer communities to talk in. Now women can discuss more critically of games, which are still mainly seen as a male hobby. There is a smaller threat of men altering the conversation negatively, since the space is specifically for women.

I find it important to note that while the subreddit is titled *GirlGamers* and its description calls it "a place for gamers who also happen to be women, probably", anyone can join the subreddit regardless of gender. Reddit doesn't ask for one's gender, and it also doesn't limit the communities a redditor can see based on a presumed gender. In the thesis I have assumed that all the comments have been made by those who identify as women, but it is possible that others have commented too. This doesn't necessarily make the analysis any less credible, since there is a reason why the commenters have joined the subreddit. Additionally, the way the commenters identify isn't important for this thesis, since the research question relates to how female-led communities criticize *Cyberpunk 2077*.

Since only one community from one platform was the subject of analysis, the depth of this analysis can be questionable. Although Reddit is a large platform and the subreddit is in the top 1% ranked by size, these two posts don't give a perfect view of what female gamers think of *Cyberpunk 2077*. To keep the content being analyzed in the size of a

bachelor's thesis, not all 245 comments were included in the analysis. The two posts went through a lot of filtering, and even the final 94 text entries on the spreadsheet provided some struggle with figuring out what was truly in response to the research question. Even in this small-scale study it became apparent that women don't want to see female characters in games represented as commodities, even when the game's setting somewhat justifies it. This raises an interesting question: how can genres like cyberpunk be portrayed in media, if these sexualized or otherwise morally wrong representations can't be presented?

Kondrat's (2015) study showed that many women and men find the representation of women shallow and sexualized in games. Since the study didn't highlight any specific games, it can be assumed that the responders of Kondrat's questionnaire were discussing games in general. With the case of *Cyberpunk 2077*, the women of the GirlGamers subreddit found the game inherently oversexualizing. However, this representation was seen as fitting of the genre, which highlights a case example of where sexualization can be justified. Some did argue that while the game criticizes this oversexualization, it inevitably fails, since the story partakes in the same behavior.

Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* provides a background for the feminist theories surrounding cyborgs. Since many women in the subreddit found the game sexualizing of women, their interpretations can be viewed as *Cyberpunk 2077* missing the possibility of portraying women as "true cyborgs"; cyborgs can be free, autonomic organisms free from the traditional depictions and representations of women, as Haraway so explains in her essay. However, it is worth noting that cyberpunk as a genre serves as a sort of a caricature of the dystopian future capitalism can drive us towards. If the commodification of bodies wasn't apparent in the game, would it even represent the genre that is mentioned in the title? It wouldn't be fitting for the characters to be "true cyborgs", since that is one of the main criticisms of Night City; no one is really free, and there are no happy endings for anyone.

Lavigne (2013) criticized how female authors' works in the cyberpunk genre weren't highlighted enough when the genre originally grew in popularity. She claimed that this resulted in feminist politics not being incorporated in the genre, as she found it unlikely for men to incorporate these sorts of views in their works. In relation to *Cyberpunk 2077*, many of the commenters on the two posts seemed to align with Lavigne's views and felt that there should've been more female writers in the making of the game.

It is important to note that since I'm not a native English speaker, it is plausible, that I have misinterpreted some details within the comments and posts. This could have led to comments being misplaced on the spreadsheet, thus skewing the number of entries for different themes. Since qualitative content analysis heavily relies on the researcher's own interpretations of the data, it's necessary to factor in my possible biases due to Cyberpunk 2077 being one of my favorite games. Although I tried to remain as neutral as possible, I could have possibly emphasized the meanings of some comments in different ways than how the commenters meant for them to be interpreted. Since the additional comments made in response to these comments were not included in the thesis, it is highly likely, that I missed out on receiving additional context that was provided in these comment chains. This could have added an additional layer of misinterpretation or skewed interpretation on my part. On the contrary, I do believe that my position as a female gamer adds a layer of depth to this analysis. Since it is one of my favorites and I'm well aware of how the story and gameplay mechanics work; during the analysis I knew all of the context provided by players in their criticisms and comments, and no outsider playthroughs impacted my analysis.

I have noticed the tendencies of game companies to sexualize women in my own playthroughs of games. While sometimes sexualization felt justified, like in Cyberpunk 2077, most of the time it felt as though women's bodies were simply being sold to get sales. These mental notes I took during my experiences as a gamer shaped the initial idea for this thesis several years ago, since I knew I wanted to incorporate game culture into my studies with media somehow.

Video games are in the end created to bring enjoyment to the players. If a game is deemed good by the masses, it will sell more copies, thus leading to more profits for the game company. It is in everyone's interests for game developers to provide enjoyable experiences, and many things affect whether a game is enjoyable or not. Shaw (2015) brought up an example from the dystopian universe of *The Hunger Games*, where Rue's representation differing from the readers' imagination caused an outrage within the community. While the outraged readers might not have used the word representation directly, it becomes clear from Shaw's text that it was what they were upset about. This dissonance between their imagined portrayal of Rue and what was seen in the movie adaptation impacted their viewing experience negatively, even though they were the ones who misread Collins's description of Rue.

If portrayals of women in video games follow the shallow and oversexualized representation that is currently apparent, the future of female gaming communities' responses to these games can be unclear. Although representations and experiences are personal, the consensus of games having shallow representations seems to still be relevant. Although this thesis has been a small insight into how women feel about the current games and their representations of women, it shows how necessary future research of the topic is.

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