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Masculinity on your Screens: Constructs of Men and their Sexualities in Role-Playing Video Games, Films, and Adverts

Today most of the cultural texts built of images, narrations, and sounds refer to the new media. People come across this type of message on a daily basis, since our daily life has been strongly filled with new technologies, and what some time ago was just science fiction, now reflects the order of the everyday life of the 21st century society. Reality has been extended to include new meanings, and technological progress has made contemporary people want to catch up with novelties. Today, our daily lives incorporate social media, and an extensive range of the online *multi-player and single-player games with their virtual individuals*. The world of fiction increasingly permeates our reality – a fact promoted by our computers and smartphones ceaselessly working in an online status. Michał Klichowski and Mariusz Przybyła pointed out (2013, pp. 147–148) that people discover a reality that is augmented owing to applications in their tablets and smartphones, but also owing to such inventions as Google Glass, while practically speaking they also start to exist virtually through such products as SmartBand:

[...] Even if you are not within your smartphone's range, this intelligent gadget will record information on your activity and will automatically send it once your connection is restored. Record your lifestyle and daily activity using the Lifelog app (<http://www.sonymobile.com/pl/products/smartwear/smartband-swr10/> [accessed on 17.12.2014])

Modern technology, without any doubt, contributes to the digitation of daily life. People experience themselves not only as “real people”, but also, in a certain way, as digital beings. It is also in games – both single- and multi-player ones – that we find both representations of real players and virtual beings, bots with their artificial intelligence that are programmed to perform concrete actions.

Virtual worlds intermingle with real worlds, and, just like people learn owing to technologies and media, the technology “learns” about people: programs sug-

gest amenities tracing and analysing users' manner of work, while virtual opponents in games try to anticipate each other's steps.

Since the technology, media and technical progress as such have a great impact on shaping humans, we need to have a closer look at the educational side of the media, images, virtual gameplays and other modern cultural texts such as video games, apps, and digital adaptations of what used to have paper form, i.e. books, including comics. What is educational in the contemporary adverts? What, one may ask, can we see on the silver screen and what in the black mirror of the computer?

New cultural texts contain images of women and men, thus becoming an influential platform of gender-related socialisation and shaping of knowledge on what men and women should be like. These messages also offer homunculuses – artificial people created for the purposes of advertising campaigns, the development of the epic quality of films, or creating an original virtual gameplay. The homunculuses are both artists' depiction of the viewers, and a peculiar design of what the viewers should be like. They are a type of a merger of the expectations and suggestions that may result from one's belief on what is feminine and also what is masculine.

Our paper aims at an indication of several significant aspects of modern virtual-multimedia cultural texts – texts that demand more in-depth sociological, psychological and pedagogical analyses.

Stereotypization of gender – personality traits and physical appearance

Stereotypes are ubiquitous, and there are as many types of them as there are easily noticeable traits allowing for the identification and naming of concrete social groups. In other words, we may differentiate stereotypes which are related to one's ethnicity, gender, age, religion, social origin, and even one's job. This is not all, since along with the development of technology, there emerged stereotypical references related to people's digital activity – e.g. people living in villages are often associated with an absence of access to a computer or an inability to catch up with technological novelties. Similarly, one may frequently come across the image of "serious people keeping both feet on the ground", who are associated with *not* playing video games.

In order to be able to refer to stereotypes in advertising, films and games, we need to grasp what is, currently, described as masculine and what feminine; therefore, we shall focus on gender stereotypes and on what they really are. According to Deaux and Lewis, gender stereotyping includes the following four components: specific personality traits, specific roles (behaviours), physical appearance, and professional references (Wasilewska 1997).

When analysing the above fragment, we may notice that stereotypes are based on cultural beliefs highlighting concrete physical and mental traits, but also

a specific position in the society, which is determined by the sketching of the individual's typical appearance and profession. In this way a safe framework is created – it is safe because it guarantees order, with categorization facilitating the understanding and reception of the reality. However, questions arise here – what about individuals who do not fit the image? What if the framework is too narrow or too broad?

Those persons who do not fit the definition of an image are often marginalised, since people do not know which category they should be ascribed to, and their very presence makes one question what so far was a foundation; it suggests the incompleteness or incorrectness of a stereotype, while stereotypes are to provide a specific safety in the area of the reception of the reality (by ordering it).

When it comes to the ordering of reality, it is worth having a closer look at what traits, behaviours, and professions are associated with the individual sexes, which is closely related to the conception itself of gender and the social requirements posed to men and women.

Table 1. Traits, behaviours, and professions associated with the individual sexes

Criterion of division	Women	Men
Personality traits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – emotional – dependent – self-sacrificing – delicate – tender – gentle – sensitive – caring – submissive – coquettish – talkative – spendthrift – indecisive – infantile 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – rational – independent – active – competent – intelligent – able to cope in difficult situations – decisive – confident – willing to be a leader – aggressive – physically strong – courageous – resourceful
Roles (behaviours)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – fulfil themselves as mothers – run the house and perform the related actions – serve men – professionally active 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – the head of the house – breadwinner – professionally active – displaying initiative

Criterion of division	Women	Men
Physical appearance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – delicate – move gracefully – have a pleasant voice – smiling – care about their appearance – physically attractive – objects of desire 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – tall – strong – wide chest
Jobs (professions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – teacher – hair stylist – waitress – beautician – secretary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – car mechanic – constructor – director – office worker – driver

Source: author's own compilation on the basis of: (Wasilewska 1997, pp. 83–85; Bajkowski 2010, pp. 211–215).

When searching for similarities and differences in the area of stereotypes, we may notice that men are usually identified as persons who are serious (although not excessively) and above all keep both feet on the ground and deal with matters of higher importance. Men are shown as acting subjects, active nonconformists, with a competitive drive that is highly valued in the contemporary employment market – much more so than the qualities of understanding, empathy, and emotionality, which are associated with women. Interestingly, this rather strongly coincides with what is usually expected of women, i.e. looking after the home, family, children, and the elderly. If a woman decides to work, then her professional activity oscillates around the caring and teaching professions. Let us have a look at Table 1. A desirable role of a woman at home is looking after children, and also among the suitable professions we can find that of a teacher – most often of the younger, kindergarten and early school children – which results from the belief that childrearing and looking after children are women's tasks. Another type of profession emerging from the table is the caring professions: a hair stylist, or a beautician, who look after our appearance. Similar expectations are formulated in relation to the private sphere, where it is also the woman who is expected to care for the aesthetics, order, decorations and interior design, at the same being herself pretty and beauty-oriented. The third category that can be noticed in the table is the role of a supporter, someone facilitating and helping to perform serious positions and tasks (assistant, secretary). Women's tasks include assisting those who are better or have a better position, knowledge, and experience: chefs, managers, directors. Female activities are related to a whole range of down-to-earth

and trivial tasks “unworthy of higher positions” such as bringing coffee, preparing the table, etc.. Through this division, some actions are veiled in seriousness and secrecy, while others become insignificant tasks, thus making the persons performing them automatically “less significant”. Such a division in the scope of the image of persons and actions reflects the division into the sacred and the profane, where the sacred refers to the creation and handling of issues of great importance behind the closed doors of the office or kitchen, while the profane refers to the presence of the uninitiated, the ones without a voice, who perform simple tasks on the other side, behind the closed office doors.

What are, generally speaking, the consequences of the functioning of such images? The consequences of gender stereotypes include both men’s and women’s thinking differently about themselves and their presentation of themselves to others, but also different treatment of both sexes by their environments (for instance by other people or social institutions), which results in their different behaviours and life histories. Ultimately, this very often leads to the phenomenon of the self-fulfilling prophecy, i.e. a confirmation of the stereotypes (Wojcieszke 2006).

Images of men in advertising

What comes to our minds when starting to reflect on advertising is a travesty of the beginning of the aforementioned fragment on stereotypes: advertisements are ubiquitous. People encounter a plethora of advertising messages every day: on TV, on billboards, while browsing through YouTube videos, in the spam in their emails, on the radio, in leaflets, in free smartphone and tablet apps – we might go on endlessly. People are surrounded by advertisements all the time and must be to some extent shaped by the narrations and images contained in these advertising messages since they become a natural part of their social environment.

Since advertising time is very limited, advertisers need to use simplifications for their message (content) to be fully understood by the entire audience. What follows, advertisements have to be based on a limited palette of norms, values, and models of behaviour of a given culture – which does not reflect the complexity of the entire real world (Kozłowska 2011, p. 392). Dariusz Doliński points out, however, that we cannot compare the negative psychosocial consequences of advertising messages to their effectiveness in the area of their impact on consumers’ attitudes and behaviours (Doliński 1994, p. 12). This is because the use of stereotypes – created by culture and people themselves – in advertising is aimed not only at a simplification of the process of communication with the recipient during the short (lasting up to a couple of minutes) contact with the message, but also, to a certain extent, answers the expectations (Kozłowska 2011, p. 394).

As usual, a question appears as to whose expectations here are taken into account. Do not men’s expectations of women (and the other way round: women’s expectations of men) become, in advertising, living phantasms, non-real phanta-

sies preying on the needs of physical contact, safety, satisfaction, consumption, contact with the superficially ideal, pleasant, exciting or pleasingly irritating?

However, we should also remember about another advertising strategy: the creation of needs, not just responding to expectations. The “must have” effect has become as equally important as the “must be such” one – the models presented in ads become a standard clothed in popular brands. By raising cultural pressure in the audience, a wish to be the same construct is built. Therefore, a man should have beautiful hair, roam the city in a sprightly gait, and be a swashbuckling male: both a gentleman and a conqueror, and a protector. At the same time, women should – in line with the advertising message – take care of themselves, be beautiful, slim, tempting, and paradoxically both independent and submissive, since men should also like them when they are in their arms, and so they should be guided by men’s dreams and expectations. It is worth adding that such an image is shown both by the companies manufacturing clothes, and those offering food, services, holidays, literature (depending on the imagined recipient), medications, games, household goods, and in particular technological gadgets.

The topic of attractiveness and sexual performance is very often undertaken in advertising. It is enough to just look at the number of ads of medications improving sexual performance. Very popular are also email messages (spam) discussing the issue. Below are just a few examples of spam messages concerning sexuality and physical appearance.

EXAMPLE ONE:

Topic: Size of penis is important!

Content: [Name of medication] is a 100% safe food supplement recommended by doctors, which enlarges and thickens the male member by as much as 40% of the original size. It also increases libido and helps blood flow into the member; as a result blood fills and permanently extends blood vessels referred to as cavernous bodies [the correct name is: cavernous bodies – authors’ note] of the penis. In a longer perspective, the above results in the thickening and enlargement of the penis, and allows a stronger erection.

[Name of medication] is a 2–3 cm larger penis after just three weeks of application! Full, long, and strong erection after just a couple of days!

EXAMPLE TWO:

Topic: Do you desire to impress your woman tonight?

Content: She will be impressed by your potency [link]

EXAMPLE THREE:

Topic: Do you want to have the skin of a 20-year-old?

Content: As we age, we start having problems with the complexion. Skin is no longer as flexible as it used to be and wrinkles finally appear.

Thousands of women all over the world used this method [link], managing to get rid of wrinkles in just three weeks! [link]

As we can see, the desires to satisfy sexual needs and the requirements of one's appearance are here both created and strengthened. The focus is on pleasure, on how others see us (with an intention to surprise them) and on an improvement of very broadly understood biological defects. The advertisements in question of the medications improving potency very often accentuate the fact that they contain natural ingredients and improve health.

What prevails in the advertisements is the vision of a man as an alpha male, a model every man should strive to be – someone who is a swashbuckling muscled fighter, sportsman, a handsome carer, a heteronormative lover. In the majority of the advertising micro-universes, we meet independent men. Of course, there are also many advertisements presenting "helpless" men, but this is mainly the case in advertisements of detergents, i.e. ones in which women are typically cast as the main heroines, specialists on washing, doing shopping, and having good looks.

Interestingly, in the present-day ads even products have gender. The market offers such products as creams just for men, but, surprisingly, also magnesium or yoghurt for men. As much as the targeting of some products to concrete persons can be justified, in the cases in question, gender is by chance constructed in a caricatural way.

The creators of advertisements base their products on stereotypes and they use them in a variety of ways. One of them consists in a stereotypical determination of the target group – in this situation we deal with the application of widespread beliefs about "typical women" or "typical men", adjusting the content of the message to the thus-determined audience (Doliński 2003, pp. 158–159), and, what follows, to making references to fantasies, often erotic ones. The context in which the advertised product is shown is simultaneously a suggestion of socially desirable and stereotypical behaviours and beliefs. Therefore, the recipient of the advertisement learns that, for instance, women should be particularly careful about their physical appearance (Bator 1998, p. 12). Another way of using stereotypes in advertisements is showing individuals looking and behaving in a specific manner that is consistent with socially acceptable schemes, and associating such individuals with specific objects (including types of advertising products), space, and activities. It is worth adding that the clichés showed in advertisements vary; depending on the type of advertisement, different types of stereotypes concerning specific social groups are shown (Szczęsna 2007, p. 173).

There are advertisements in which the providers consciously show contradictions to the dominating stereotypes and beliefs in the real world. This measure is aimed at winning the viewers' attention and making the advertisement stand out from the others. Examples include the showing of reversed (in relation to what is deemed universal thinking of the viewers) social roles (Frątczak-Rudnicka 1997, p. 98). This measure, nevertheless, only proves how strongly rooted in the society the stereotypes are. This is because, according to Joanna Bator, such advertisements remain in the sphere of parody or pastiche, thus testifying to which attitudes or behaviours are socially acceptable (Bator 1998, p. 9).

Advertisements shape a certain model of a human being; they consolidate and cement the expected. In a way, they socialise. People watch advertisements from their childhood and exist in their virtual universe, which translates to the increasing intermingling of the worlds: the fictitious world of advertisements and what the majority would call reality. There is just one question: to what extent is the “reality” still what we would like to actually call the reality?

Heroes and “women in refrigerators”

In search of socialising models of masculinity, we should also pay attention to films. Films are another important type of texts of culture, a way of expressing ideas, beliefs, opinions, expectations, and meanings, including sexuality and masculinity.

Everybody knows productions such as *Rambo*, *Demolition Man*, *Crank* – films presenting a male destroyer, in which action consists of a series of situations requiring power and aggression. They are not the latest productions, but they still exist in culture, and are familiar to the youngest generations, which proves their social attractiveness and longevity. However, there are also films going a step further, using a motif of the so called woman in the refrigerator.

“Women in refrigerators” is a motif used in films, comic books, and games – generally speaking in cultural texts – consisting in casting the woman in the role of the so-called *plot device* – something that moves the plot forward. The “plot moving” involves the necessity to degrade women: a woman is murdered, raped, hurt or captured just to give a male hero an opportunity to avenge or save her. The woman becomes a part of the scenography; she becomes absent for the benefit of the male action. A catalogue of women treated in this way in comics (which deepen the motif) can be found in a website devoted to similar analyses (<http://lby3.com/wir/>).

Film adaptations of comics have also become popular, and – provided they immortalize an important element of the pop-culture: cult-status stories of heroes, whose significance should not be taken away – also eternalise a large part of stories based on the motif in question. The male hero becomes the predominant influence, exercising pressure on young men, creating the need to identify exactly with these and no other men, who on the one hand rescue situations, but on the other take women’s revenge and action into their own hands, making the women passive in their own story.

However, we also need to mention changes, as an increasing number of interesting productions become available and provide new meanings, trying to show women in an active, angry, but also rescuing roles. Interesting examples include the 2014 film *Maleficent*, in which a woman who is both angry and active is the main protagonist. Obviously, a man is also a part of the story, but without a narrative structure, in which making a woman a helpless delicate being is an indispensable element.

“Masculine homunculuses” in role-play video games

Video games are also, as J. Z. Szeja (2004, p. 3) noticed a rather long time ago, important cultural texts. Unfortunately, Polish pedagogy continues to ignore this part of culture and omits this socialisation area in its research. Just like literature, video games tell stories and have their protagonists, which makes them very interesting and popular among both boys and girls who play together with their parents or without them (<http://www.git2013.pl/konto/materialy>). In this place we might compare games to children’s literature: games and apps become a new version of entertainment, learning, and attractive narration.

Games present – most often in a fragmentary manner – the life of both male and female heroes. We decided to perform an analysis of the construction of selected game protagonists to see what stories lie behind the concrete pixel clothes, and to show what stories win the status of permanent elements of culture.

It is worth beginning with the popular figure of Max Payne from the game under the same title. The game, just like the aforementioned films about heroes, uses a motif of a “woman in a refrigerator” – Max, a policeman, is to take revenge for his wife and daughter who were brutally murdered in their own home by criminals drugged with a substance called Valkyr. Max sets off for a lonely fight, being eyeball to eyeball – or rather gun to gun – with a crowd of criminals involved in the massacre. Just like in comic book adaptations, a woman appears for a moment at the very beginning just to become absent: she is to vanish after initiating the plot, leaving the entire game scene to the man.

The game *Alan Wake*, which just like *Max Payne* was produced by Remedy Entertainment, has a similar structure. The title protagonist, Alan, a writer authoring best-selling horrors, is to find his beloved Alice, who suddenly disappeared from their joint holidays in a small town of Bright Falls. The protagonist faces the task of roaming the murky surroundings of the town, fighting with beings of the darkness, hiding himself in the lantern light, and discovering the history of the town – all in order to find Alice, who – despite being absent – becomes an element of Alan’s story: a story full of fear and fight. Both *Max Payne* and *Alan Wake* made their mark on the history of games. A film under the same title was made on the basis of Max’s story, while for example Filip Kondrak’s text *Alan Wake, czyli podróż do źródeł twórczości [Alan Wake or a Journey to the Sources of Creativity]* (Kondrak 2012) provides evidence that the game *Alan Wake* was noticed as well. These games were noticed by both gamers and other environments. A question arises – does their unquestioned success mean that the society needs an image of a rescuing and revenging man? This is because on the one hand we have excellent sales figures and the popularity of the games under discussion, but on the other – a good, well-designed story, which nevertheless places women in the far background, doing it in a very specific way.

Some developers tried to place women in their stories, making them the main protagonists. In the well-known series *Assassin’s Creed* we become an assassin and

travel through the story performing tasks that mainly consist in murdering selected targets. Most of the protagonists are men: they are silent, resourceful, dangerous, and well-trained – but the developer also created a part of the game called *Assassin's Creed: Liberation*, in which a woman is the protagonist for the first time. The element of changing outfits and hiding was developed in a very specific way. The main available outfits are:

- the outfit of an assassin (standard combat outfit allowing access to all the available weapons);
- the outfit of a female slave (with limited access to weapons);
- the outfit of a lady (limiting movement and weaponry, but allowing to seduce men).

Available are also some special outfits – one alternative outfit for each of the above. The element of hiding and blending with the crowd was also present in the other games from this series, but it was only in this one that the authors implemented the possibility of a typically feminine seduction. Should this be considered a strongpoint or the placement of women in a stereotypical role? Fans of the game and services reviewing games often mention the implementation of outfit changing in *Assassin's Creed: Liberation*. One of the reviews put it in the following way:

Here, a beautiful outfit is used primarily to hoodwink guards and seduce our main targets. However, what we lack is the possibility to run and climb, which made me feel as if I was tied with thick rope. A beautiful maid additionally willy-nilly attracts rascals wondering about the place, and we are forced to get rid of them all by ourselves. What about the guards then? They, on the other hand, after a flirtatious smile, will let us in to the guarded area; however, leaving it will be tantamount to a crime which, here, is with no exception punished with death. Obviously the game simultaneously makes the player frequently juggle different garments (sometimes even during a single mission), from time to time providing them with as much as a feel of liberty in determining their own approach to a concrete task. However, this is the case much too rarely, and the very walks to the “changing room” artificially prolong the gameplay that lasts for about 12 hours (www.benchmark.pl/testy_i_recenzje/assassin-s-creed-liberation-hd-recenzja.html).

The reviewer is right when stressing that *Liberation* is dominated by “changing clothes”. Is not the version with the “feminine strategy” a cheap burlesque in contrast with the male quiet killers from the other parts? The game is also criticized for being easy in comparison to the other parts from this series.

An important figure in new video games is Iron Bull from *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Iron Bull is a mercenary, a man from the Qunari race – a massively strong people with an untypical religion called Qun; he is a semi-naked muscled fighter with grey skin. Just like all other Qunaris, he has horns. He is a very confident commander who is sometimes jokey. He is designed to fight with huge types of weapons: axes, large swords, etc. He is rather dominant by nature and is shown as a great alpha male. Apart from a romance (a series of additional talks with the main character) with women, this character may also choose narration allowing

a romance with another man. This was tantamount to the breaking of a taboo and built a very strong contrast, since traits associated with a “real man” (power, sexual drive, confidence, leadership skills) are contrasted with a specific construction of sexuality – the character represents pansexuality: he is able to fall in love with someone outside the different sex category. Iron Bull thus breaks the heteronormativity, and the developers play with sexual conventions and difficult topics, sensitising players to the significance of certain social situations. Interestingly, a transgender figure is Bull’s deputy in commanding his mercenaries.

An even more interesting example of an image of men in a game is *Fragments of Him*, a game launched in 2015, in which the gamer becomes a man trying to cope with his male lover’s death. Practically speaking, the game combines two topics which are still partially tabooed and uncomfortable for many people – death and love for a person of our own sex.

In our opinion, games try to balance two clear representations of men: that of macho men and that of men who are “invisible”, absent in the consciousness of the broad audience. Does the fact that the game developers enter tabooed areas of culture herald changes?

What also seems important is the appearance of minorities – which brings games closer to reality. Obviously, some people may say that games do it in a very awkward way. It is true, not all the constructs are successful – this applies to women and men, places and events. Everything depends on the presentation of the story, artwork, and the potential of immersion in the universe (Filiciak 2006, pp. 62–63), but what is significant is the very fact that they break the invisibility of phenomena.

Conclusion

Contemporaneity offers a richness of new cultural texts – advertisements in brand new forms, video games, and film adaptations, and all this production is without any doubt strengthened by technological progress, an increased interactivity of practically every action, and an extension of reality. People begin to exist in a different way, and new cultural texts create a new socialisation platform. To what extent is the virtual only virtuality if people really digitalise their lives? Is it a one-sided action or does culture originating from the fictitious world have real impact on us – by presenting stories, tales, narrations, and offers, and creating needs and attempts at responding to them?

The provided cultural contents suggest what people should look like, and how they should behave, but there are also attempts – some more, and some less successful – at breaking this convention, that should also be analysed anew, as the conventions keep changing, evolve, and come in contact with people just like living beings. We may say that in a certain philosophical way people and technologies in the form of advertisements, games, and films/animations become symbiotic, since they create a new environment of daily life.

Our article touches several important topics only superficially, leaving many questions and points open, but this is its aim, since there is still insufficient research concerning this area of socialisation. It also presents ways of playing with the conventions that bring about an added value, break stagnant beliefs and the concepts of masculinity. Will new productions follow this direction or are we dealing with a non-committal “extravagance”?

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Summary

*Masculinity on your screens: constructs of men and their sexualities
in role-playing video games, films, and adverts*

This article explores ways in which cultural digital texts construct the norms of masculinity: how cultural consumption can act as a masculinising practice – a practice that helps shape, reinforce and validate the constructions of the dominant and the alternative versions of masculinities.

Keywords

men, video games, sexuality, popular culture, socialization

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