

The Functioning of Gender as an Interpellated Factor of Difference in *Until Dawn*

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Abstract

The divided feminine is a tool of patriarchal society weaponized both in daily lived experiences and in the narratives individuals consume. Popular media in particular is saturated with manifestations of the divided feminine, which isolates women into identities authored by the patriarchy and not by the women themselves. This paper explores how the divided feminine exists within and has impact on the narrative of the survival horror video game *Until Dawn*. Through personal game play and examination of other gamers' play, the author observed and critically analyzed the intersection of gender and sexuality in player-characters and their in-game interactions. Using this analysis, the author unpacks the connection between the universal (male) gaze, how it manifests itself in the game, and how this manifestation transfers to the player of the game. The gaze works to divide the feminine presence within the game, in a process Jill Soloway refers to as "bifurcation." This creates a cost for the presence of agency in the female characters who are divided by the gaze, resulting in a hegemonically informed presentation of women as a fractured entity, to be acted upon by the possessor of the gaze. Because realities can be shaped by popular narratives, and those narratives are saturated with ideas like the divided feminine, women's identities lack the agency to resist the ideas perpetrated by stories such as *Until Dawn*. Society will only be able to make significant headway toward resisting the bifurcation of women when stories feature women capable of working as allies, rather than as rivals who demean and undermine other women's efforts.

Keywords: Gender, Agency, Video Game

1. Introduction

Until Dawn is a survival horror game created for the Playstation 4, which released in 2015 to a very positive rating from critics. It follows the stereotypical plot of a slasher movie from the eighties: eight teenagers end up stranded and alone at a ski lodge in the Canadian Rockies in the middle of winter. They must struggle to survive the night and make it out safely, which won't be easy with the multiple threats roaming the mountain. What makes the game unique is that players get to make the choices for how they survive this gritty setting of a horror movie. *Until Dawn* uses a ripple effect game mechanic in regard to choice, which it names the "Butterfly Effect." It works through compounding consequences of choice: one decision a player makes can have results that ripple through the entire game, drastically changing the way the events turn out.¹ It was rumored that there are hundreds of endings to the game, and while this

has proved an exaggeration, it illustrates how central this choice-based narrative is to the functioning of the game and how it tells its story.

Yet, not all of the eight characters on the mountain have equal agency in these choices. In order to explore why this is, it is necessary to examine the theories of cultural hegemony and interpellation that emerge from Marxist philosophy. In *The Theory Toolbox*, Jeffery Nealon and Susan Giroux explain that cultural hegemony allows “certain cultural forms [to] predominate over others; [so] certain ideas have more influence than others.”² The basic idea is that there is a status quo determining what is accepted as normal and there are pressures exerted by society to fit into this constructed normality. Overall, these normalities reinforce the power structures of the society they are located in. How the normality is defined varies from society to society, but hegemony exercises incredible influence over the perceptions of the members of various societies through the normalizing of certain specific characteristics and beliefs. Interpellation, on the other hand, forms individuals into subjects. Nealon and Giroux explain that “the individual is ... interpellated as a subject by the institutions of modern life. ... In other words, [the individual] is always ... being defined by the generalized social categories of the modern state.”² Individual subjectivity filters through controlled and generalized social categories—thus what makes a person unique functions to place them in a specific societal position that forms their identity.

There has not been much critical work done on *Until Dawn* in particular. While a few articles discuss the game, most aren't scholarly, nor do they use literary theory. Of this non-academic work, only a handful focus on gender in the game. One article, by Teagan Jones, argues that the female characters are merely tired horror movie tropes and that this is problematic in our current day and age.³ Another, by Zach Budgor and Jess Joho, focuses specifically on the final girl trope, referring heavily to Carol Clover's framework on gender and horror.⁴ Finally, Bianca Batti argues something similar to this paper: the game presents the illusion of choice, in that it fails to allow women to choose to do specific things at certain points in the narrative, such as not have a cat fight.⁵ Bringing together some of this work, this paper draws from film theory, including Carol Clover's work on the final girl, the feminine monstrosity, revenge narratives, and the importance of eyes in the horror genre.⁶ However, there has not been any work focusing on how the male gaze bifurcates, divides, and controls women in *Until Dawn*, and this paper seeks to fill this gap.

Until Dawn demonstrates how characters that do not fit within the Western hegemonic norm of a neurotypical white male character are defined by their otherness; in other words, their subjectivity is defined by their difference through interpellation. While those differences manifest through race and mental health, among others, this paper focuses on the function of gender in regard to this dynamic. Specifically, this dynamic is explored using the characters of Mike Munroe, Jessica Riley, and Emily Davis as case studies to demonstrate how they are constructed by their gender, how gender informs the role they play in the game, and how it affects the choices presented to them. Ultimately, this paper argues *Until Dawn* interpellates the three characters as hegemonical stereotypes, and this in turn serves as a reinforcement of dominant Western cultural norms.

2. Hegemonic Normality, As Represented By Michael Munroe

Mike Munroe serves as the axis of comparison to examine the other characters for difference. Mike exists as the hegemonic norm in *Until Dawn*. He fits all of the requirements: he's white, male, straight, and neurotypical. In turn, Mike as a subject is interpellated as the main character, present to be identified with and portrayed throughout the game to be liked. When players meet him, he is described on his character introduction card as intelligent, driven, and persuasive, all of which are incredibly positive traits.¹ Given other character introduction cards are not as positive about the characters, this indicates that the game clearly wants players to interpret him in a highly positive manner.

From the very beginning of the game, Mike is portrayed in a very flattering light, which fits with his functioning as the hegemonic norm. Mike is immediately shown to be the popular cool guy whom the majority of women have a crush on. Both Emily and Jessica have dated or are currently dating him—at one point fighting over him—and a non-playable character, Hannah, was hopelessly in love with him.¹ In fact, the game's backstory reveals that Mike used his sex appeal to prank Hannah, which sent her running out into the mountain at night in a blizzard and kickstarted the horrific event that brings the group back together a year later. Clearly, Mike is meant to be liked, which the women's attraction to him serves to illustrate. As *Until Dawn*'s narrative continues, Mike becomes more and more likeable to the player, as they watch him bravely charge in to save his girlfriend and explore the mountain and Sanatorium in order to uncover what is going on. Mike is given, by far, the most play time of the eight characters, and with this, is able to discover the most collectable items and make many impactful choices. He engages in extremely long action sequences, and is rarely seen without a gun, once dangerous and threatening events begin to occur.¹ These details reveal the power given to him, as the hegemonic main character. Mike has no shortage of agency, and his decisions drastically impact how the story proceeds for himself and his friends.

Mike also has the opportunity to nearly have sex with his girlfriend, as long as the player makes the correct choices. They are able to seduce Jessica, by flirting with her and making the correct gentlemanly decisions while playing as Mike.¹ If they succeed in their seduction, Jessica will remove her clothing, and walk around her in undergarments. This detail demonstrates male gaze, which is concentrated in both Mike and the assumed universal subject. Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" proposes the concept of the male gaze, which explains that women in film function through a exhibitionist "to-be-looked-at-ness," and are reduced to objects that male subjects look at to gain pleasure.⁷ Jessica's stripping down to her intimate garments clearly demonstrates the functioning of the male gaze, both in Mike as he objectifies her, and in the assumed player of the game. Mike in this way performs as the "main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify," which Mulvey labels the "ego ideal of the identification process."⁷ He is meant to serve as the point as which the assumed subject will identify, and thus becomes the medium of the gaze for the assumed players - someone whose experience they would want to imagine. This proves problematic for women, however, as they are presented a choice: they can identify with the possessor of the gaze designed to be the "ego ideal" of the universal subject who objectifies and fetishizes women, or they can identify with the fetishized woman.⁷ As Jessica's subjectivity is diminished through her fetishization, identifying with her proves unappealing. Yet the other option is equally unsavory: accepting and identifying with the male gaze through Mike.

The two manifestations of the male gaze, Mike and the assumed player, are not so different, as Mike is written with the expectation that players will actually self-insert into his role. This is due his hegemonic normality, which fits the expectation of the universal subject. The concept of the universal subject is explored by Neelson and Giroux in *The Theory Toolbox*. They summarize the idea succinctly saying, "the supposedly 'universal' subject has a very specific gender: masculine."² Neelson and Giroux push the idea further, suggesting that the idea formed when others, such as women and non-white individuals were not granted subjectivity by the government as a whole in the past, and thus the white male was the universal subject, as only he was allowed to make decisions or have a voice.² Universal subjectivity informs how content is created. Entertainment and media are written with the goal of appealing to the universal subject and creating something that will bring the subject enjoyment. Since Mike fits the norms of the universal subject, being white and male, he is thus designed to be inserted into. It is anticipated that the universal subject will be the player of the game, and due to this, Mike is interpellated as the protagonist. Mike's role can thus be explained by this phenomenon. Since he is meant to be inserted into, his large amount of playtime, decisive decisions, and role as a clear possessor of the gaze makes sense, as he functions as a stand in for the player. His moments of save-the-girl heroism thus can be considered through this context, suggesting that Mike functions as a form of wish fulfilment for the hegemonic universal subject.

Mike serves as a representation of masculinity, which his bravery throughout the game clearly demonstrates. However, Mike's masculinity is slightly deconstructed in the beginning of the game, where he begins to feel unnerved as a result of the strange occurrences he's experiencing on the mountain. He starts to behave in a more jumpy and paranoid manner, becoming startled by deer and feeling uncomfortable when he and Jessica find a indigenous shrine. Jessica herself comments on this, saying that she "thought [Mike] was one way, but [he's] kinda another way," demonstrating that he has not been the masculine norm she expected and that she's not so sure she's into him.¹ Jessica shames Mike for his cowardice, acting to reinforce the norms of maleness by punishing him for failing to display them. Mike's slight failing to perform masculine behaviors is intriguing, considering his very hegemonic character. It seems to deconstruct his masculinity, displaying that underneath the charismatic facade, there is cowardice and fear. Yet, Mike's fear is all contained in the early parts of the game. Once Jessica is snatched through a window by an unknown figure, Mike transforms into the hegemonic male hero who knows no fear. This is a result of interpellation - Mike as the protagonist, source of the gaze, and ego ideal must perform as the fearless hero. He is forced back into this role, instead of receiving further development in regard to potential complexity. The impact of the way Mike was written extends even further.

Affective Disposition Theory states that individuals as consumers want good things for characters they like.⁸ In "Judgment and Choice: Moral Judgment, Enjoyment and Meaningfulness in Interactive and Non-Interactive Narratives," Shafer states, "as long as we like and approve of a character's behavior, we hope for a good outcome and fear the negative," which effectively explains how Affective Disposition Theory functions.⁸ In regard to Mike, this concept is utilized in that Mike is written as an extremely likeable character, and is thus provided with plot armor throughout the game. *Until Dawn* is all about the various ways in which characters can die, yet Mike, despite constantly being in exceedingly dangerous situations, can not be killed until the very end of the game. Whereas other characters can die with the slightest mistake, Mike can miss every gunshot, make every bad decision available to him, and still cannot be killed until the end of the game.¹ This is due to Affective Disposition Theory. Mike can not die because he is written to be liked by players, and thus it is expected that the players want him to survive. Furthermore, as the ego ideal created to serve as an identification point for the universal subject, Mike must be present through the entire narrative.

3. Constructions of Femininity As Difference - Through Jessica Riley And Emily Davis

While Mike functions as the masculine hegemonic subject of *Until Dawn*, Jessica and Emily serve as representations of two sorts of females, both of which are regulated by cultural hegemony and interpellation. They are defined by these roles, and subsequently confined to the parts these roles would play in a hegemonic narrative, operating as the “divided feminine,” as a result of the male gaze.⁹ Jill Soloway explores this dynamic in her speech about the female gaze saying, “men divide [women] for their storylines,” by presenting them in a binary fashion. This only allows them to function in one of two roles: the good girl “Madonna” or the bad girl “whore.”⁹ Jessica and Emily function as representations of this bifurcation in *Until Dawn*, which occurs as a result of the male gaze, centered in Mike. Jessica is written as a woman to be viewed and seen as a prize, and exists to play the role of damsel in distress at a key point, which forces Mike into the role of savior. As she is positioned as a prize to be won, she eventually transforms into a good girl who must be protected and saved by the male, but she starts out as a bad girl who deserves punishment. Emily, meanwhile, is written as a bitchy woman, meant for the universal subject player to hate. She behaves in ways that make it easy for players to dislike her, and the game seems to assume that she will be disliked. However, Emily is also given agency through choice and action at one of the tensest moments in the game, and with that, the opportunity to really find out what’s happening on the mountain. Since Emily has been constructed as a stubborn and bitchy woman, she is capable of having enough power to save herself. Emily’s available agency and choice reveal the problematic nature of interpellation surrounding women with power; they are hegemonically constructed to be bitchy. Both Jessica and Emily function in stereotypical ways, which are informed by the cultural hegemony and shaped by interpellation.

Jessica is designed mostly to function as an object of the gaze. Even before she has the potential to remove her clothes, her fully clothed design and way of moving indicate that she is meant to be the object of attention - to be looked at. In this same vein, she nearly has sex with Mike, provided the player seduces her properly. However, Jessica’s behavior in this way matters. Hegemonically, good females are not meant to have sex outside of marriage, they are meant to be innocent and demure. Jessica is very willing to have sex, even shouting out the door that, “Mike and [her] are gonna have sex,” and that it would be “hot.”¹ Jessica is not ashamed of her attractiveness and sexuality and uses it as she pleases. Due to this violation of the role of the demure female, Jessica is punished. In “On the Perils of Living Dangerously in the Slasher Horror Film: Gender Differences in the Association Between Sexual Activity and Survival,” Welsh studies the correlation between sexual activity and survival in the horror genre; sexually active women are likely to be violently punished for their supposedly immoral actions. He states that ““bad girls,” who do not conform to the gender appropriate schemata, are more likely to be “punished with brutally graphic death scenes.”¹⁰ This holds true with Jessica. Moments after she hollers into the freezing air that she is about to have sex and enjoy it too, she is snatched through a window, and ruthlessly dragged for miles over rocky and icy ground in subzero weather. She will be extremely injured during this sequence, though she is able to survive if the player makes the correct decisions.

The player as Mike must then pursue her and her kidnapper, as Jessica has effectively fully transformed into the damsel in distress. Her survival is now entirely dependent on decisions the player makes as Mike. If they are not able to pursue fast enough, she will be gruesomely murdered by having her jaw ripped off and being dropped down a mineshaft. This demonstrates the type of violent death that serves to punish her for her failure to conform to the expectations of the good girl. If the player does get there fast enough, she will still fall down a mineshaft, but is now bruised, bleeding, suffering from a bad concussion, and likely broken bones. If she removed her clothes earlier, she suffers through all of this in her bra and panties, and will remain alone in the depths of the mine for hours, with serious injuries.¹ Jessica’s injuries further her to-be-looked-at-ness, though instead of being a sexual object, she has transformed into a victim of torture porn. Carol Clover, in her essay “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film” comments that just as the male gaze knows what to focus on in sexual pornography, so too does it when capturing images of terrified and injured women.⁶ “Abject terror is gendered feminine,” she claims, and the results of terror lead to further injury, as audiences enjoy watching a terrified victim be killed.³ All of this aside, Jessica plays little to no role in the story outside of the damsel. She has very little play time, and doesn’t make any significant decisions at all.¹ Her agency is severely limited, and it seems as though the only reason there are segments where the player can control her is so the game can claim she’s a protagonist. In reality, she only functions as an object to be looked at, and a damsel to be saved. She is the first potential fatality in the game, with her death intending to launch the full scope of the horror within the story.

While she can survive her encounter with the killer, Jessica will disappear from the game’s subsequent narrative, only reappearing for a brief period in the final chapter. Weak, cold, and barely lucid, she is present for long enough to be killed or saved. Even if she does survive, she will only be controllable during this part if Matt, a different male

character, does not survive. Otherwise, it is up to the player as Matt to save her, again regulating her to the damsel position.¹ Jessica's control regarding the events of the night is largely non-existent. She is unable to do much of anything, and the options that are available to her do not have any significant impacts on the story. In contrast to Mike, Jessica's role in the story is laughably tiny; she is firmly regulated to be a damsel who provides motivation for others to be heroic, by needing aid. Jessica doesn't make any big discoveries or have any significant choices over the course of the game, her agency is severely limited. She only seems to be present to be looked at, acted upon, and punished.

Emily operates as a completely different representation of femininity: the bitchy and controlling woman. From the start, she comes off as headstrong and demanding, treating the other characters, including her boyfriend, very badly, and causing drama.¹ The fact that her voice actor performs her with a valley girl voice adds to this, causing her to sound extremely spoiled and selfish. Emily's character is interpellated; she is written to be disliked, and the writers of the game know this. At a certain point in the game, the player is asked to identify their least favorite character. The therapist asking the player to do this will respond "a bit too bitchy for your taste?" if the player chooses Emily as their least favorite character.¹ She is specifically labelled this way, none of the other characters are spoken about the same way if they are chosen as the least favorite. The game has thus been written to cause players to dislike Emily. Emily was also involved with Mike in the past, though they have broken up. It is implied that this break up was due to her difficult nature. Her past association with Mike also reveals how the male gaze divides women; this gaze creates tension between Emily and Jessica, who were formerly best friends. The male gaze split a friendship and placed the two women at odds with each other, again demonstrating the "divided feminine."⁹

According to Affective Disposition Theory, just as people want characters they like to have happy endings, they want characters they dislike to have unhappy endings.⁸ The tendency for players to make judgements about their characters and then respond to them demonstrates the intended effects of writing Emily the way she was written. Since she is written to be very unlikeable, doing things such as expressing little regret about an awful prank she pulled that ended in death, and being nasty to others, players are likely to want her dead. In turn, it is very easy to get her killed if the player wishes to. It is as though the game is presenting opportunities on a silver platter, just waiting for the player to take advantage of the offered opportunity to kill the character they are meant to hate so much. In this vein, the player is presented with an opportunity to do just that in the course of the narrative, to ensure that she will get a bad ending. As long as Emily has been bitten by the monster, Mike will be given an opportunity to shoot her.¹ The player doesn't even have a choice about whether or not to pull the gun on her. They are presented with an aiming and firing screen. All they need to do to kill her is aim the gun and click the fire button. The scene is designed to kill her, so much so, that players have felt the urge to point the gun very deliberately away from her to avoid killing her if they didn't want her dead. Her death in this way, cruelly and deliberately chosen by the player, while not in any sort of real crisis situation, is unlike any other death that can occur throughout the game. At no other point in the game's narrative is the player given a choice where they make a decision that will so clearly result in the death of a character. The game was written to cause players to dislike Emily, using interpellation to position her as an unlikeable bitch. Thus, it allows and encourages players to eliminate her by presenting them with an ambiguous and worrying situation, forcing them to make a potentially fatal decision. It is not necessary for the player to guess what decisions they need to make to have Emily killed, all they need to do is pull the trigger. This is the only point at which a scenario like this is presented in the game's narrative, clearly demonstrating that the scene was engineered to cater to those who did not like her, providing them with the gratification of her death.

Emily's positioning as a bitchy woman throughout the narrative has another effect. Emily is given agency, which Jonathan Culler defines in *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* as "how far [people] can be as subjects responsible for [their] actions and how far [their] apparent choices are constrained by forces outside of [their] control."¹¹ Emily is placed in a terrifying situation, alone in the mines, similarly to Jessica. However, Emily is able to react to her surroundings, discover information about what is occurring on the mountain, and save herself from the danger posed to her.¹ She has the opportunity to experience one of the biggest action sequences in the game, and is able to hold herself together in order to do so. In this way, she is not infantilized by the game's narrative the way Jessica is. She is allowed her own choices, which will result in either her death or her survival - and these choices come from her as a character. Emily is given strength, which runs parallel to her bitchy construction, though the negatives of her character discourage female players from identifying with her. This suggests that women can only be capable, save themselves, and make their own decisions when they are also bitchy, which demonizes women with power. While the agency given to her opens up her character as an individual that can make their own choices, the agency is removed when Mike has the opportunity to kill her. Her survival has been taken out of her hands and placed back into the hands of the hegemonically normal universal subject.

Until Dawn's marketing suggested the game is driven by choice - that it is the choices that make the game's narrative so compelling and intriguing. Yet, in a game all about choice, characters who do not fit the universal subject lack

decisions, as can be seen in Jessica, and are thus helpless to do anything to control their fate. Mike is given much choice and a large role in the action, as he fits the culturally hegemonic norm. Emily is written to be disliked due to her failure to fit into hegemony and behave in a way that is attractive to the male gaze. She is given more agency through choice, a greater role in the plot, and more power, but this comes at the cost of her being a bitchy woman, whom the game has written to be unlikeable. This game all about choice isn't really about choice at all. The choices are all mediated choices, pre chosen by the developers and divvied out to the characters based on their interpellated positions. The choices presented are still filtered through a cultural medium which furthers the hegemony, confining females to objects of the gaze who are bifurcated by it and allowing males to function as the main executors of choice. Thus, *Until Dawn's* supposedly choice based narrative still presents controlled choices that continue to represent cultural norms and confine non-males to strict and inflexible roles.

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