A Case in Study: *Tomb Raider*

Lara Croft, the gorgeous heroine of the *Tomb Raider* franchise, is one of the most well-known video game characters in the history of computer and video games. After nine games (a tenth is due for release in the summer of 2003), hundreds of magazine covers, and a full-length, action movie, Lara Croft has certainly become an icon. The *Tomb Raider* series and Lara Croft are models for designers around the world. The *Tomb Raider* games have sold millions of copies, and Lara Croft is an international star. Although, companies and designers emulate the formula used to develop this megahit, *Tomb Raider* is a phenomenon that is not likely to be repeated, mainly because the game and the heroine were the first of their kind. The third-person shooter, action adventure genre has blown up since the 1996 release of *Tomb Raider*. Lara Croft was conceived and designed by Toby Gard who worked for Core Design of Europe. The game was published by Eidos Interactive and was released to the Sony Playstation X, Sega Saturn, and PC. Since then, the *Tomb Raider* franchise and Lara Croft have become one of the biggest successes of the video game industry. *Tomb Raider* is embraced across genders, nations, and ages. Its success and longevity raise many questions for its creators and fans. This case study will attempt to answer several questions. What is the history of the game and what did the game accomplish? Many games have been and are being released with looks and gameplay that resemble those of *Tomb Raider*. How has *Tomb Raider* influenced the game industry? Lara Croft is a smart, tough woman who serves as a role model for females, but she does not repel males in doing so. How have this game and its heroine affected gender roles in video game culture? Many other questions can and have

arisen about the franchise, but these are pertinent to the culture, design, and business of the game.

Work on the original *Tomb Raider* started in 1993, three years before its release in November of 1996. Toby Gard can be credited with the creation of Lara Croft and *Tomb Raider* (Blache). He conceived and designed the original Lara Croft that has gone on through several without many modifications. Adrian Smith, producer of most of the sequels, says, "She was drawn by Toby Gard, and I have to say the original drawing he did is still Lara today. It was one of those instances where everything done in the early stages was right" (Smith). The game was developed at Core Design and published by Eidos, and was released to the Sega Saturn and the PC, but it is most famous on the Playstation X platform. Before the release of the original *Tomb Raider*, an incredible amount of time and effort went into making the game and main character work. Adrian Smith said, "We always knew the type of game we wanted. Go back seven years; it was all about first person shooters. We wanted a title where you had more of a connection with the main character. So we went to third person, and gave the character more emphasis." Core did give a huge emphasis on the character and were extremely successful; Lara Croft has become more famous than the actual game. Gard designed and redesigned Lara many times until he had created a character that he was happy with. Originally, Lara was named Lara Cruz, and one of the first concepts of her personality was a psychotic military type (Blache). Core wanted someone more sophisticated; they wanted a main character who is witty, athletic, possesses dexterity, and still has a certain coyness. The obvious decision was that the character would be a woman. Since Core was British (and because they knew Americans have an infatuation with the British), they

also made Lara English and gave her the name Croft (Smith).  Gard put a lot of time and

used his own ideas of a character that would interest him when perfecting Croft.  He says

that if you are sure that you really like what you have designed, then other people have a

good chance of liking it, too (Saltzman).  The gameplay and appearance of the *Tomb*

*Raider* game struck and enticed gamers around the world.  It offered something the PC

gaming community had not seen before—a 3D, third-person shooter with gameplay

elements drawn from 2D platform games like *Prince of Persia* (Poole).  Console gamers

had seen a phenomenon like this a few months earlier with the release of Mario 64, but

for PC gamers, *Tomb Raider* was the first entry of the now well-established third-person

action, adventure game.  Lara runs, flips, scales mountains, dives, swims, drives a

motorcycle, shoots with handguns in each hand, and has a plethora of other exciting

moves.  *Tomb Raider* borrows gameplay elements from first-person shooters, role-

playing games, and puzzles like those in *Prince of Persia*, but it manages to offer a new

and different, exciting experience (Influential).  Core Design's brainchild exploded onto

shelves in 1996 and has since become a cultural and marketing phenomenon.  One or

more *Tomb Raider* games has come out for several gaming platforms—Playstation X,

Sega Saturn, Sega Dreamcast, Gameboy Color, PC, and Macintosh.  Lara has been

named to *Entertainment Weekly's* "It" list featuring the 100 most creative people in

entertainment, to *Details* magazine's "Sexiest Women of the Year" list, and to *Time*

*Digital's* "50 Cyber-Elite" list.  Paramount Picture's $80 million feature film version of

*Tomb Raider* debuted at number one at the Box Office and overall has grossed $275

million worldwide.  The *Tomb Raider* franchise has already generated close to 1 billion

dollars in sales, and has another movie and Playstation 2 game both due for release in the summer of 2003.

What has made *Tomb Raider* such a hit?  Is it the heroine or the game itself?  The longevity of *Tomb Raider*'s popularity stems from both.  Most of the initial purchasers of *Tomb Raider* bought the game because they wanted a break from playing the tough guy, so they opted for this attractive female character.  Lara Croft is the perfect break from this for gamers of any age and gender.  Her voluptuousness is very compelling to the male buyers, but her strength and sassiness is appealing to males and females alike.  It is true she is a digital sex symbol, but she has also become a role model on the small and big screens.  Croft is physically appealing, but she is also clever, agile, and courageous.  To many gamers, the superficial aspects of her appearance become secondary to her know-how and ability, and this is what brings purchasers back game after game (Blache).  When asked about how to make a successful character and game, here is what Toby Gard had to say:

> For creating a successful game character...there are many things that contribute.  Good design, which means making sure that the right people are involved... Good integration, which involves making sure that the character fits the game, and the game is worth playing.  Good marketing, to make sure the public wants to know more about the character.  And good follow-through, like toys and shirts as well as properly timed sequels, and continued placement of the character in the public eye

> On game design, your objectives should be contingent upon your resources.  If you're forced into using a type of technology, such as a certain engine, or are

limited in any other way by your platform or programming, then you have to come at your design from that direction first... Assuming that you'll be making a game for the PC or one of the newer 3D consoles, however, your restrictions are pretty loose. You can take a pure idea and you know that in some form you'll be able to make it happen—however hard that route is (Saltzman).

*Tomb Raider* excelled in all of these areas. Its marketing achievements in particular are sensational. In the early stages of marketing the title, Core underwent turns of events that boosted Lara to stardom. Core was extremely lucky with the way the media embraced Lara. Core Design would never have been able to afford the kind of publicity that the press gave *Tomb Raider*. Britain's top financial newspaper, *The Financial Times*, featured an article about Eidos with Croft artwork on the front page of the story, and the icon was born. Soon after that, *The Sunday Telegraph* and *FACE Magazine* featured pictures of Lara on related articles. In just a short period of time after the game's release, the press was demanding material concerning *Tomb Raider*. Several retailers gave endorsement offers to Core Design, but Core was and still is very strict about how Croft and *Tomb Raider* are portrayed. Core holds the reigns firmly on Lara's human incarnations as well as her onscreen characters. Several models have the taken on the role of the *Tomb Raider*, but Core does not even like the models to speak at trade shows without its approval. Rhona Mitra and Nell McAndrew are two of the models most embraced by *Tomb Raider*'s fans. Many models have tried to fill her shoes, but the model search ended with Academy Award winning actress Angelina Jolie. Jolie not only looks the part, she gives Lara a spine and personality unlike the model-minded imitations of the video game star. Jolie even performs most of her own stunts in the movie (Blache).

Moving to the other aspects that Gard mentioned, obviously *Tomb Raider*'s follow-through is outstanding, with merchandise, a movie, and sequels released right before Christmas each year after the original's debut. The game design was innovative and new, paving the way for hits like *Metal Gear Solid* and *Syphon Filter*.

With the background out of the way, let us move on to how *Tomb Raider* has affected game design and influenced the console and PC game industries. *Tomb Raider* started the trend for quality animations and strong characters in the third person perspective (Chan). The game has helped fuel the fire of this rapidly expanding third-person game industry. Toby Gard and Core Design have shown how emphasis on a character and design can create an icon. More often gamers are seeing more developed characters with in depth backgrounds in action adventure games. Solid Snake and Max Payne are great examples of this. Further evidence of the attention put into characters nowadays is in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*'s main character—Ray Liotta was hired to do the voice of the main character. Games need to start utilizing the benefits of voice performances by talented actors or actresses. *Tomb Raider* did this to some extent with the movie starring an Academy Award winner. Although Angelina Jolie does not do the game voice, she still added life to the character. On top of influencing character development, *Tomb Raider* can also be credited with taking the Sony Playstation X to the top of the console industry. Today's game consoles have the capacity for incredible feats, but the systems are really only as good as their best games. The systems will not sell without games, but a game can change a system's presence in or domination of the console industry (the video game industry saw this with the record-breaking sales of *Grand Theft Auto 3*). With the success of the *Tomb Raider* came a surge in the

Playstation's success (Poole), and the *Tomb Raider* sequels have been contributing to the longevity of the Playstation (Blache). The *Tomb Raider* franchise has basically set up a model that designers can strive to achieve. It has brought to light the fact that gamers often want to play titles that have a recognizable character, or someone they can readily identify with. It has reinforced the trend to make game characters seem more like real people, and it has shown the possibility of a character that strongly attracts both males and females.

This brings us to the theme that is most called upon in analyses of the *Tomb Raider* series and Lara Croft—gender issues. Croft as a character has received strong opposition from feminist groups since her creation. Some see her exaggerated figure as sexist, and that she cannot and should not be a role model for females. Janelle Brown of *Game Girl* speaks on this,

> I'm weary of Lara Croft... She represents everything rotten about girls in games—the Barbie-doll body, the one-dimensional character ("Must... Shoot... Enemy"), and her abject silence. She can't even scream when she is maimed... Female characters in games are usually little more than 36- triple- D fantasies, designed more to stimulate pimple-faced teenage boys than to stimulate an actual woman...[Croft's] biggest audience is the men who write Eidos begging for naked pictures of her.

It was not the intention of Core Design to create a digibimbo that would draw only prepubescent males to its market. They wanted to create a cool, in-control female character that would attract all types of gamers (D. Jenkins). As the *Tomb Raider* franchise is progressing, the arguments of the opposition are becoming obsolete. It is

hard to imagine using Angelina Jolie to portray the heroine is creating a sexist image. Clearly, males are attracted to Lara's great looks, and they may approach her as an object to begin with. But as they get into the games, they begin to relate to Croft (Jones). *Tomb Raider* is crossing the gender divide in video game culture, but with this crossing, *Tomb Raider* and other games face many barriers. We live in a gender-segregated world and social reinforcement is ubiquitous. Boys and girls are taught from an early age what they should and should not like, and how they should and should not play. In many play spaces, especially in videogames, there is a segregation between males and females. For example, Jenkins admits, "Play spaces for girls adopt a slower pace, are less filled with dangers, invite gradual investigation and discovery, foster an awareness of social relations and a search for secrets, [and] center around emotional relations between characters." This kind of classification leads to the misconception that girls cannot tolerate dangers and will dislike an action heroine like Lara Croft. Females are not by any means afraid of the violence in videogames, and they are willing to participate in the fighting in games that boys participate in, as long as they can relate to the story and character. If games do not veer away from distinguishing differences in males and females, they can reinforce similar segregation in other aspects of life such as work and school. *Tomb Raider* does an exceptional job of bridging the divide. Lara Croft is a classy, courageous heroine who females can look up to and identify with. And unlike gendered games geared toward females, the fast-paced action draws in males. The reason why feminist concern rises is that males make up the majority of the *Tomb Raider* market. The concern is that Lara Croft's image sends the wrong message about women to males. Gerard Jones speaks on this matter:

The current generation of adolescent boys loves active, powerful, threatening female figures...The male player "becomes" *Tomb Raider*'s Lara Croft as a heroic surrogate for himself... [Males] may approach their bad girls as objects first, and they may tell themselves and each other that's why they like them, but as the game begins to unfold, they are clearly identifying with them... They're both excited and scared by girls' increasing desire to hold and express power, sexual and otherwise.  They envy girl power, may resent it sometimes, but also want to partake in it and match it with their own... Becoming mega-babes helps them contain some of their anxiety about girl power.

Males, even if they say it is Croft's looks that make them play the game again and again, play because they enjoy the gameplay and because they can identify with Croft.  There is not yet a large selection of games that can satisfy both sexes, but videogame culture has witnessed a great gender crossover with *Tomb Raider*.

After tracing and analyzing the progression of the *Tomb Raider* franchise, it is clear that the *Tomb* Raider game is, and deservingly so, one of the most influential games of its generation.  The innovative, third-person action adventure hybrid changed the way games would look for the last couple years.  Toby Gard and Core Design set up an incredible model for the way game and character design can be approached, putting a huge emphasis on character development.  But surprisingly after its success and influence, the game comes second in fame to its heroine, Lara Croft.  She is one of the most prolific videogame characters ever created and she has become an icon in her own right.  She is easily recognizable just by the ponytail and 9mm handguns (not to mention her formidable bust).  Her fan base ranges across different ages and both genders, and she is

the reason that *Tomb Raider* is such a successful gender crossover.  Lara Croft and the

*Tomb Raider* series have yet to put a cap on their influence or their marketing, though.

*Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness* will release to the Playstation 2 this summer, around the

same time that the movie sequel *Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life* starring Angelina Jolie

hits theaters.  *Tomb Raider* has already had a sensational impact on videogame culture,

but its complete achievements are yet to be seen.

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