

THE MYSTERIOUS LARA CROFT: Digibimbo vs. Digiheroine



Every once in a while, a game comes along whose influence extends beyond the gaming world and into contemporary society. One interesting and hotly debated aspect of this is the role certain video games play in gender politics. Consider the following.

Scene One. A helicopter, its propellers whipping the air, zooms into the scene and drops down an agile figure onto the ground. It's a woman, dressed in hiking shorts with pistols holstered to both thighs. The woman has landed in a dark cave and, after a cautious look around, begins to explore it, sometimes walking cautiously, other times running ahead, leaping boulders. She comes across a flare lying mysteriously on the wet cavern floor. With a happy sigh, she picks the item up. Suddenly the woman hears low grumble behind her and somersaults backwards to face an angry tiger. She whips out two automatic pistols and blasts the tiger to its death, her face contorted in a snarl.

Scene Two. An exotic dancer is performing in a strip club. The camera zooms away from her to reveal an empty audience. The slogan "Where The Boys Are" is flashed across the screen while a crowd of lusty men rapidly exit the strip club in pursuit of the same woman we just saw exploring eerie caverns.

This “woman” isn’t even really a woman at all. She’s Lara Croft, the star in the hit video game series Tomb Raider. Lara Croft is something of a cultural icon. While her *raison d’être* is to provide a medium for gamers to explore caverns and kill tigers, her celebrity comes from sexually-oriented marketing schemes like “Where The Boys Are.” Thus her character (and in particular her physique) has stirred up controversy over on a number of topics: is Tomb Raider an alarming indication of the increasing sexuality and violence of video games or simply an amusing adventure game with a long-overdue heroine? The complicated dual role Lara Croft plays as both a sex symbol and a champion of feminism has played a significant role in the development of Tomb Raider as both a video game and a cultural icon.

BIRTH OF A LEGEND

Such phenomenal success was hardly predicted by the game’s creator. Toby Gard was in his early twenties when he “fathered” Lara Croft in a small design studio in Derby. The studio was situated in a large townhouse owned and operated by Core Design. Core, a small software company recently acquired by Eidos Interactive (the company which would therefore produce all the Tomb Raider games), had a staff of a few dozen graphic designers and programmers. It was the sort of atmosphere in which anyone could come up with a good game idea and run with it, from layout artists to programmers. That is exactly what Toby Gard did.

Gard never fathomed the controversy that would arise over his carefully crafted digiheroine. In an interview with the BBC news, Toby insists that Lara Croft was never meant to be overtly sexual. In fact, Lara wasn't even necessarily going to be a woman. Toby Gard simply wanted to create an



Tank Girl, the comic heroine that was one of Toby Gard's inspirations for Lara Croft

innovative three-dimensional game starring a tomb-raiding adventurer.

Jeremy Smith, Core president, feared George Lucas would be angered over the hero's similarity to Indiana Jones and Toby re-invented a new star accordingly. Taking inspiration from the comic heroine Tank Girl and the pop star Neneh Cherry, Toby decided to

go in a radically different direction with his leading character.

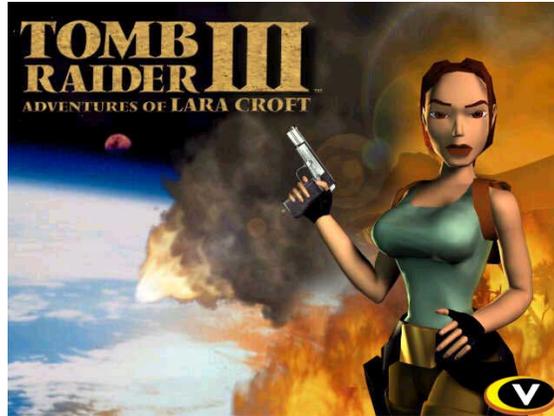
Even in the beginning, Lara's creators were soundly aware of the potential controversy a female lead in a video game could stir up. Jeremy Smith's first reaction upon seeing Lara Croft? "I looked at the monitor in disbelief and said something like 'My God, that's a woman. You can't be f**ing serious!'" (22 Art) In the end, he allowed Toby Gard to continue on with the development of Lara, saying in retrospect ". . . you have to give the creatives their freedom." Interestingly enough, after the completion of the original Tomb Raider game, there was such disagreement over the direction Tomb Raider was headed that Toby Gard left Core Design in order to start his own company, abandoning Lara to her illustrious fate. (Q&A)



Neneh Cherry, another of Toby's inspirations

THE HISTORY OF TOMB RAIDER

That fate already includes five successful games. The first Tomb Raider was played on both consoles (the PlayStation and the Sega Saturn) and the PC. It was a groundbreaking



TRIII, the third of five successful games in the series

accomplishment in the world of video games, the first title to allow fast, unrestricted movement in a three-dimensional environment. At that time, Lara was made up of a wire frame consisting of 230 polygons. Its graphics may seem crude in comparison to games like Final Fantasy today, but they were praised at the time for being state-of-the-art. Even in this crude form, Lara's figure was beginning to spark hot debate.

After the first Tomb Raider's enormous success, a multitude of other Tomb Raider games quickly followed, each one more popular than the last. Tomb Raider II had Lara blasting through windows in Venice and swimming with sharks. Gold Editions of the games were released for the PC, while Tomb Raider III was adapted to the Sega Dreamcast. A version of Tomb Raider can even be found on the Game Boy Color system. ("History of Tomb Raider") Each game showed graphics

exponentially better than the last game, superior artificial intelligence in its adversaries, and – as several histories are quick to point out - a far more well-developed Lara. With this newly remodeled Lady Croft came a string of advertisements that emphasized her body more than game play. Women gamers who were initially proponents for the game became adamantly opposed to it. It seemed that the more recognizable Lara’s 3D breasts became, the more weary women became of them.

Yet after over half a decade and countless arguments against Lara, Tomb Raider games are still going strong. Although Lara supposedly “died” in Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation, a new Tomb Raider game is slated to hit shelves later this year, complete with a brand-new engine and a myriad of other improvements.

In the new Lara Croft game, Lara is made up of 5000 polygons. Designers



emphasized their desire to keep the original Lara’s “virtual appeal” intact. “We could easily make her out of 10,000 [polygons] if we wanted to, but we don’t. We actually want a silly pointed nose – want that feel.” (98 Ponting)

Thus, Lara Croft, and the entire Tomb Raider franchise, lives on. The plots to an additional four games after this next generation Tomb Raider have already been written. It will be interesting to see future

consoles fight it out for the rights to Tomb Raider. With so many suitors vying for the attention of Lara, her popularity is undisputed.

LARA'S PROFILE

So who is Lara? According to the game's intricate back-story, Lara Croft was born into a prominent British family on February 14th, Valentine's Day 1968. She used the riches at her disposal to develop both intellectual and athletic prowess, yet remained confined to the rules and regulations of a proper British lady. Wishing to quench the fire in their wild child, the Crofts sent Lara off to a series of boarding schools. Their attempts proved futile when, after being the only survivor of a near-fatal plane crash, Lara decides that traveling the world solo is her destiny. This is where the adventure begins. Oh, what an adventure it is.

PLAYING THE GAME

Because she is an arrangement of polygons rather than flesh and blood, Lara is often talked about as the alluring but unattainable. Playing Tomb Raider has the same sort of frustrating appeal: just when you think you've finally managed to survive those awful spiked walls colliding towards you, another damn wall comes crashing down onto your head.

As the name suggests, Tomb Raider is a game in which the player (through Lara Croft) must uncover some valuable archaeological find in obscure locations. The

path to each treasure is barred by danger. Lara's super-human acrobatic skills are blatantly obvious as she jumps enormous distances and dodges peril with a series of perfect rolling back flips, skills she must use to fend off adversaries and manage to survive a variety of complex booby traps.

The three-dimensional caves and ruins Lara inhabits are so interesting that just walking around becomes as entertaining as solving the puzzles. The game is intelligent, engaging, and graphically interesting. Gamers and game reviewers alike have praised it. Yet it seems the popularity of Lara Croft has more and more begun to shadow Tomb Raider as a game.

LARA'S CELEBRITY

Just how popular is Tomb Raider? While the video game has harvested profits of one billion dollars and counting, the multimillion-dollar feature film and scores of merchandise have made countless more. (Poole) I would argue that Lara Croft has become as iconic in the adult world as Mario was to children. After the initial success of the first Tomb Raider, Lara Croft became a darling of British advertisements, selling everything from the British energy drink Lucozade to Bimbo (yes, Bimbo), a Spanish snack cake similar to Twinkies. In addition, she has appeared on several magazine covers and television ads.

One of the more interesting industries Lara Croft has graced with her presence is the music industry. She went on tour with the band U2, appearing on a giant screen television in concert. An entire C.D. entitled "A Tribute to Lara Croft"

was created in her honor. She also starred in a video for the German song “Manner sind schweine.” Translation: Men are Pigs.



In addition to advertising consumer products for various different companies, Lara has a jumble of her own merchandise from figurines to a limited edition Land Rover. The back cover of the Tomb Raider II instruction

booklet advertises everything from the traditional posters and sweatshirts to a \$475.00 bomber jacket. Her popularity is so great that a series of human models have been hired to make appearances as Lara Croft.

Nearly all of the advertisements and marketing techniques featuring Lara emphasize her physical appearance. It is almost always these advertisements that come up when opponents of Lara make their arguments against her. One could conclude that it is the marketing of Lara Croft (rather than the game itself, interestingly enough) that lies at the heart of the Tomb Raider controversy.

The perception of Lara Croft to the outside world is an overtly sexual being. With such a reputation, it is no one wonder that gamers and non-gamers alike have formed opinions on Tomb Raider based solely on its heroine’s physique. Is it really her physicality? Is the game just that entertaining – or is something deeper?

BEING LARA CROFT

Steven Poole has a theory. “It seems probable that men who like Lara don't want to have her; they want to be her. That's why they play the game.” (Poole) Under this theory, would Tomb Raider been as popular if Lara Croft had been Lawrence Croft, the epitome of male virility?

A recent study by psychologist Kathryn Wright explores the how and why of male gamers who play female characters in game. Although she only gathered data from a small section of male gamers, the results are worth noting. According to her survey, a whopping 60% of male gamers used female characters for a “game play advantage,” citing such boosts as faster, more agile characters (19%), and a psychological edge over male gamers (11%).

Some male gamers even admit to being curious about the social and psychological impacts of playing a female character. A quarter of those surveyed claimed that “playing females adds to the role-playing experience.” Another 19% were interested in gender exploration, seeing the world from a female perspective.

Only 23% of those surveyed said they used female characters due to the visual stimulation. Additional reasons included better variety of female characters (13%), the amusement of it (6%) and sheer habit (6%).

What then can be concluded from this survey? While Lara’s visual appearance may play a part in her popularity to a male audience, perhaps it does not play as big a

part as women think. Another theory put forth Nell McAndrew, former Tomb Raider model, is that men are interested in playing Tomb Raider because of a desire to control Lara. Says Nell McAndrew, “ She is indeed a powerful woman but is also dependent on the player’s hands.” (53 Art) *The Art of Seduction* goes on to suggest that men have an almost fatherly, protective sense about Lara. What is interesting is that female gamers who enjoy Tomb Raider have an entirely opposite stance on Lara. Perhaps Steven Poole’s theory is better applied to us, because for many women, Lara is the ultimate symbol of the strong independent woman. She has even won the hearts of the ultra-feminist magazine *Emma*. Lara hasn’t won the hearts of *all* women, however . . .

WOMEN WHO HATE LARA

One of the largest complaints about Tomb Raider is that Lara Croft was created “by men, for men.” With measurements of 34D-24-36, it’s difficult to deny that Lara was made to be sexually attractive. Yet who says women have done any better in creating female role models? Barbie, the most iconic figure in girl’s play (and the star of one of but a few series of games geared towards a female audience) has even less anatomically correct measurements of 36-18-38.



Is Lara Croft the perfect woman from a male perspective or an overall societal one? One could argue that Lara is simply the western ideal of the perfect woman: tall, strong, independent, and, of course, shapely. It is interesting to note that female leads in Japanese games are young, girlish . . . and small-breasted. Take, for example, Ulala in Space Channel 5. Her girlish voice, swaying walk, and revealing outfit were obviously made by men, for men. Yet Ulala is more often praised than criticized. One article went so far as to pit the two against each other: Lara as a teenage boy toy and Ulala as the strong female role model. I find the comparison laughable. Lara is a well-read, published explorer who is world-renowned for her archaeological endeavors. Ulala is a fluffy news reporter out in space who defeats her enemies by dancing them to death. Why then is Ulala kept out of the way of controversy? It seems her cup-size has kept her from being abreast of reproach. Pun intended.

Cal Jones, in an anti-Tomb Raider article for PC Gaming World, ends her article with a bitter “Lara, get those melons out of your vest and I’ll like you a whole lot better . . .” (338 Cassell) I find her comment more insulting than Lara’s so-called “melons”. The entire article is reminiscent of bullies on the playground taunting The Girl Who Got Her Boobs Too Early. There is something about large breasts that other women find threatening. In *Slut!*, a book that tackles negative perceptions of female sexuality, the author suggests that “slut-bashing is a sad attempt to wield power by those who feel they don’t have any.” (199 Tanenbaum) Female gamers, in light of having even their strongest female role models treated like sex objects, turn their backs on Lara Croft.

Cal Jones also complains that Lara make women feel inadequate, “capable of feats of strength that most men couldn’t muster.” She makes the ludicrous argument that Tomb Raider cons impressionable teenage boys into thinking women are not only buxom and curvaceous but “. . . they’ll also think women are super fit, agile gymnasts with enough stamina to run several marathons back to back. Cheers.” (339 Cassell). Her lack of faith in the male teenager is appalling. Yes, Lara can carry around an uzi, two shotguns, fifteen flares, three first aid kits and still manage to do a somersault. Yes, Lara can be mauled by two giant tigers and survive to tell the tale of it. What fun would it be if she couldn’t? The whole appeal of a virtual world is the ability to do things that are impossible in this world. I have not once heard a man complain about the rippling muscles of Ryu or the physical impossibility of sonic booms in Street Fighter, which brings up another interesting point . . .

MEN WHO HATE LARA

There is something just as taboo about women who express their aggression as there is about women who embrace their bodies. Toby Gard told *The Face* in 1997: “Lara . . . confounds all the sexist clichés *apart from the fact she’s got an unbelievable figure.*” (30 Cassell) A male game character who was “strong, intelligent, self-reliant” - all the things Lara is cited as being – and who also had a muscle-bound figure and a handsome face would not have his qualities demeaned by an attractive appearance. It’s as if Lara has to fight twice as hard: first to prove her strength and intelligence

and second to counteract the stereotype that comes along with a curvaceous female body. To me, that makes her all the more worthy of female appreciation.

Like the women who sneer at Lara's breasts, men think they champion feminism by calling Lara Croft a man's toy, a digibimbo. What if all male opponents of Lara do is promote shame and confusion about female sexuality? Their latest allegation is that video games promote violence towards women. A pro-Lara article

*Was is it
about a
woman with
guns?*



by Zoe Flower says it best: "Sexual innuendo and minimalist clothing styles are dished out like candy on MTV, but give a girl a gun in a game and you're suddenly contributing to the factors that lead men to abuse women . . ." (28 Flower)

LARA FANS LIVE ON

Three or four hours into my Tomb Raider initiation, I found myself stuck in a cavern with a locked door. No matter how much I went running through the room, I couldn't seem to find a switch or a key that would allow me to move on. Finally I gave in and consulted an on-line walk-through. "Climb the ladder," it said.

After several minutes of diligent searching I finally came across a wall that looked . . . *different* than the other walls. It was still flat, still grayish, but striped. Desperate, I ran up to the “wall” and pressed my ‘action’ key. Lo and behold, all of a sudden I was climbing a ladder.

That wall was just a wall until someone else opened my eyes and I saw a way out. Who Lara Croft really “is” and the effect she has on society is just as elusive. As cliché as it sounds, it all depends on how you look at things. Heather Gibson, a layout designer for Core who worked on Tomb Raider, put it well when she said, “You can look at it two ways. Call it sexist that in video games a female hero shows up as good as never, or yell SEXIST! When the first one finally does show up . . .” (14 Art)

I’d like to think that Lara Croft has done more good than harm as far as the world of video gaming goes. It’s disappointing that the bad decisions of a few marketing execs can warp the perception of so many.

I admit that Eidos hasn’t exactly done the best job in selling Tomb Raider. They ceased putting emphasis on what an entertaining game it was and more on the idea of “Lara Croft: the Woman You Can Never Have. “

The idea in itself is not insulting; it is more the fact that they make Lara out to be nothing *but* her body. In doing so, they lost a portion of their female audience, yet nearly a quarter of those who play Tomb Raider remain female and for good reason. There are those of us who are willing to overlook the emphasis put on Lara’s

front side to the fact that Tomb Raider is a smart, fun game with a smart, strong female lead.

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