

The Two Laras: Gender and Femininity in Tomb Raider and Tomb Raider: Legend

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INTRODUCTION

The representation of gender with games is a widely discussed and influential topic in game studies. However, for the character of Lara Croft, this seems to focus mainly on appearance and body proportions. Schleiner (2001), Berger (2002) and Dickerman et al (2008) all focus on Tomb Raider's aesthetics, along with Han and Song (2014): "Crofts outward appearance depicts a woman that does not, and cannot exist." (p. 35)

This study will instead consider how gender is embedded within mechanics and gameplay of two Tomb Raider games in reference to the construction of femininity: Tomb Raider: Legend (Crystal Dynamics 2006) and Tomb Raider (Square Enix 2013). Primary protagonist, Lara Croft has been a highly controversial topic due to the hyper-sexualisation of the character through various aesthetic elements such as clothing, body proportions and camera angles. This paper contributes to an understanding of Croft's character beyond her immediate aesthetics, focusing on gameplay as an integral method for understanding gendered representation within digital gaming. Moreover, this paper recognises the need for better understanding of female characters beyond appearance and body proportion.

Drawing from a MDA (mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics) (Hunicke, LeBlanc and Zubek 2004) approach this paper also considers the concept that the performative act of gameplay itself can be gendered (Westecott 2018). Helen W. Kennedy states that when a male player controls Lara, we might consider him as transgendered (2002). Macallan-Stewart (2014) counter-argues that Croft should be seen just as an avatar - harking back to Aarseth's comments about Croft: "When I play. I don't even see her body. but see through it and past it." (2004. p. 48).

Gendered gameplay includes the style of play: stealthy or combative, health levels, the presence of traditionally considered gendered gameplay and fetishised death mechanisms. The relationships Croft forms with both male and female NPCs are also considered as these also reflect ideas of gender and femininity. This paper suggests that gender representation differs between the two games; an effort to make a more demure and ethical Lara in Tomb Raider (2013) -widely touted in the media as a new age of less sexualised and perhaps less offensive Laras- has alienated this player in their experience of gender representation and construction. It is this dichotomy of the way Lara is constructed which highlights the necessity and contribution of this research: she is a cyber-whore to some (Mikula 2003,) and a cyber-heroine to others (Jansz and Martis, 2007; Schleiner, 2001).

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BIO

Harriet is soon to start a Masters of Research at the Institute of the Culture and Society at Western Sydney University, and has been teaching and studying at University of Sydney since 2015. She has studied across a variety of disciplines: social history, geography, media practice before realising a passion for Game Studies. Her research interests are focused on gender representation, sexuality, player experience, game play and ethics; with recent focus on Lara Croft across the ages. Harriet is a keen cinephile, writer and AFL fan.

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