

# An Unlikely Partnership: Problem-Solving with Lara Croft

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**Abstract:** Crystal Dynamic's title reboot, *Tomb Raider* represents a shift in the traditional relational dynamics between player and avatar. The designed emotional connection to the avatar allows for education through accessing the avatar's stored knowledge, while simultaneously acting as a motivation for play. These modes of interaction immerse the player in the spectacle of play and create an opportunity for contextual learning.

The first title release of *Tomb Raider* in 1997 prompted a plethora of critical analysis and critique on the subject of femininity, gender representation, and power within the context of gaming. In this study, analysis of the *Tomb Raider* (2013) reboot suggests that Lara's vulnerability as the central hero draws the player into a more intimate connection with her and a complex partnership can develop between the player and Lara. Neither Lara nor the player acts independently as the hero; but instead they work collaboratively to overcome obstacles, solve problems, facilitate the transference of knowledge, and, ultimately, complete the story of the game.

Throughout the many games in the franchise, the character of Lara Croft has demonstrated elements of both masculine and feminine classical narrative archetypes (Jung, 1953, 1980; Wolff, 1956) through her appearance and her actions. These archetypes serve to represent storytelling devices that have been repetitive and familiar (Campbell, 2008). In Lara's previous characterizations, her role as the protagonist of the story has conformed to masculine archetypes, in contrast to her hyper-sexualized outer appearance (c.f. Flanagan, 1999; Kennedy, 2002).

## Creating a player-avatar partnership

The Lara Croft portrayed in *Tomb Raider* (2013) exemplifies a new ethos. Lara, alone, is a powerful hero, and throughout the game Lara's actions reinforce the concept of separation between player and avatar, and actively resists the projected identity of the player into Lara as a vessel (Gee, 2005). Throughout the game Lara engages with the player by speaking directly to him or her regarding the narrative development and her "thoughts" or "feelings" on their paired experience thus far within the story. In this way, not only is the player being engaged in an emotionally driven partnership, but the two are also working actively in collaboration to reach the conclusion of the over-arching narrative.

From the beginning sequence the game mechanic establishes the innate vulnerability tied to Lara's character and the need, therefore, for the player's participation. The degree by which the player participates in the narrative and in the gameplay, and the vulnerability of Lara and her inevitable deaths, both create an emotional connection between the player and Lara as partners. The player is taken into the game not as the sole protagonist but as an invisible character alongside Lara. The player is not a passive audience of the cinematic event, but as a necessary active force working in Lara's interest to defend her from death within the narrative. It is a dynamic compromising partnership in which both sides rely on the other in order for the narrative to exist and to make accessible the virtual world.

## Learner engagement through Partnership

*Tomb Raider's* (2013) co-production of the narrative illustrates some design possibility for interactive storytelling and player-avatar partnerships for educational uses. In the game the player has the responsibility of participating in interactive cut-scenes. The player helps Lara through each challenge of the cut-scene by pressing the correct button. If the player fails Lara is killed and they are both prompted to restart from the beginning of the cut-scene.

These deaths are alarmingly gruesome; in them, Lara is killed in multiple grisly and repugnant ways depending on the sequence and circumstances. The death of Lara as the result of the player's failure strengthens the emotional response to her inherent vulnerability as a mechanism of the narrative. The immediate response is not sympathy, however, but remorse. By Lara's life in the hands of the player, the narrative structure encourages the player to help her through correct participation as one half of the partnership.

Throughout the *Tomb Raider* story arcs, the player explores and finds objects of interest hidden through the island. The difference in *Tomb Raider* (2013) is that with each item found, Lara elaborates upon the narrative and the item's place within the real world history, drawing connections to real world events such as World War II, Japanese

Culture and history, and the Nazi regime. The game not only acts as a platform for learning, but also engages the player in learning through an emotional connection to the avatar and the player's intrinsic motivations to collect, explore, and achieve (Bartle, 1996).

Lara's privileged knowledge within the virtual space sets her specifically apart from the player while the narrative unfolds around them both. Learning is occurring as the player engages in routine explorative game-play and relic collection. Collecting relics through the game is a mechanic of the game itself, but does not advance the narrative. Similar to the implied learning that Gee (2003) identifies in the original *Tomb Raider* (1997) where the player is rewarded for ignoring the information presented, the learning environment created in partnership is something that runs in concealed parallel to the narrative taking place. The motivation for learning, therefore, is synonymous with the motivation which drives the player to intentionally postpone the progression of the narrative for the sake of exploration and achievement. By utilizing these intrinsic motivations for play coupled with an emotionally driven partnership to the avatar, *Tomb Raider* (2013) offers an example of active learning that can occur within a dynamic narrative.

As a teaching technique, player-avatar partnerships may arguably be more effective than traditional practices for students with non-normative learning tendencies because of its informal nature. In allowing a character like Lara to engage in partnership with the player, she has the voice and the opportunity to share her knowledge and opinions about the narrative, and it is through this exchange that learning takes place.

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