

ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN HYPERSEXUALIZED PIXELS: A PARTNERSHIP WITH LARA CROFT

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The infamous Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* franchise (created by Eidos Interactive, 1996), was heralded as both a strong female protagonist and a hyper-sexualized, dissocialized trophy-avatar cyber-persona. Lara has been referenced in discussions of the predominance of male producers throughout the history of game development (e.g. LeJacq, 2013) and as an example of the created object of masculine fantasy (Kennedy, 2008). The reboot *Tomb Raider* (2013), developed more than a decade after the original, offers an opportunity to explore the evolution of “the feminine” in a notorious and contentious context. By comparing the narrative archetypes and the player-character relationship of both the original *Tomb Raider* and the 2013 reboot, we examine how the game-play is an experience-driven and highly visceral narrative which opens a door to the possibilities of a greater understanding and inclusion of diverse audiences within the gaming industry.

Evolving possibilities of narrative forms

Lara's original persona and ethos was developed and preserved in three titles released in the late 90s: *Tomb Raider* (1996), *Tomb Raider II* (1997) and *Tomb Raider III* (1998), as well as multiple spin-offs. The responses to the Lara Croft character depended upon the lens through which she was perceived and understood. She was the first video game digital celebrity (Flanagan, 1999). She was a "fetish object of the male gaze" (Schleiner, 2001, p. 222). She was "a symbol of cool, appearing in lifestyle magazines and throughout the media landscape..." "a favorite icon of the era's girl power movements" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca, 2013, p. 89-90) and a "cyber heroine" (Deuber-Mankowsky, 2005). The complexity of the Lara Croft ethos came, in part, from her capability as the franchise's protagonist combined with her exaggerated femininity; "Lara exudes feminine masculinity, and her role, rather than challenging masculine dominance, feeds it and makes this dominance acceptable through feminine curves, seductive lips, and over-sized eyes," (Lancaster, 2004, p. 88). Deuber-Mankowski (2005) also saw a decisive split between the character's behavior and appearance: "Lara Croft's femininity is reduced, in a very traditional manner, to her oversize female attributes. One sees her femininity by looking at her, even when her behavior is masculine through and through" (p. 47). If the past Lara Croft exemplified extremes of both femininity (appearance) and masculinity (behaviors), what are the gendered possibilities for a Lara Croft re-imagined with a more complex narrative, deeper levels of interactivity, and a more diverse player audience? *Tomb Raider* (2013) contains a robust collection of narrative devices as well as a more cohesive narrative arc than that of Lara's past adventures. By using the classical narrative archetypes defined by both Jung (1947/1981) and Wolff (1956), we can examine gender in relation to Lara's behaviors rather than just her appearance.

As Wolff (1956) observed in fairytales, mythology, literature, and film studies, feminine characters within fictional (and virtual) spaces divide into four feminine archetypes: Queen,

Amazon, Hetaera, and Medial (see Figure 1). The feminine archetypes act as the equal and opposite balance to Jung’s masculine archetypes: King, Warrior, Lover, and Magician. These archetypes do not represent or dictate the performance of identity within real spaces but instead represent storytelling mechanics that are recognized and repeated within fictional space as modalities undertaken in the performance of character to push the narrative arc forward (Campbell, 2008).

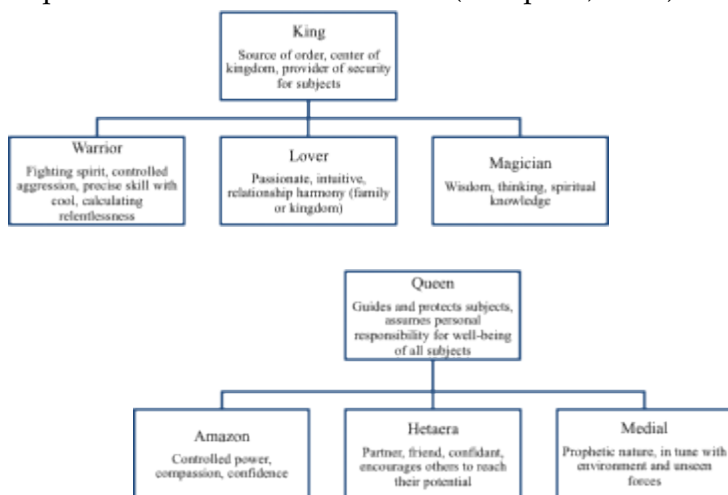


Figure 5: Masculine and Feminine Narrative Archetypes

An observable tendency for Lara’s behaviors is evident in the many different narratives of the *Tomb Raider* franchise prior to the 2013 reboot. Both Lancaster (2004) and Deuber-Mankowsky (2005) describe Lara Croft as embodying the masculine archetypes in her behaviors in contrast to her hyper-feminine outer appearance. Most predominant is Lara’s representation of the King archetype. The King archetype is the center of his own universe, bringing about a calm confidence and reassurance of his own importance while understanding and controlling the powers of the other masculine archetypes (Moore, 1991). The King acts decisively and calmly in a crisis. When Lara is faced with unbelievable mystic environments, enemies, or events in the

original games, she behaves like the King. For example, during the climax of *Tomb Raider* (1996) the antagonist, Natla, is transformed into a giant mutant abomination against which Lara must battle. Although these supernatural forces, even within fictional space, would shake most people, Lara is at home among them. She acts calmly and decisively in response to the supernatural, which suggests the unflappable mastery of the situation which defines the King archetype. Her role includes an understanding of the supernatural world inherent to the Magician archetype, and the confidence to successfully harness the aggression of the Warrior archetype. Repeatedly, Lara presents an ethos that is capable, knowledgeable, and confident. In her representation of the King archetype, Lara experiences the powerful emotions of the Lover archetype but controls them for the good of the kingdom. For example, in *Tomb Raider: Legend* (2006) Lara searches for her lost mother, Amelia Croft, who disappeared in a mystic portal early in Lara's childhood. Lara as the Lover archetype is highlighted by her fierce loyalty to her mother, and her overwhelming rage when she discovers who is responsible for her mother's disappearance, but as the King archetype Lara controls her impulse to execute the culprit. These repeated patterns of masculine-archetypes-associated behavior throughout the franchise previously make Lara's behavioral tendencies in *Tomb Raider* (2013) particularly interesting.

In the reboot *Tomb Raider* (2013) Lara's behaviors, while still archetypal, reflect a more nuanced interaction between her narrative role and her feminine appearance. The Queen archetype emphasizes more nurturing and less instrumental interactions with other characters in the game. The Queen archetype is motivated to give life, nourishment, and protection to those around her. When the plane is shot down at the beginning of the game, Lara's first initiative is to rescue the stranded pilot. When another character, Roth, tells her to save herself instead, Lara refuses and acts against his directions. While still in the role of leader, Lara's goals and interests shift to

accommodate the needs of those around her rather than continuing the immediate mission at hand. When a pack of wolves injure Roth, Lara bandages his leg and her primary objective immediately changes to become the retrieval of medicine for him rather than escaping the island.

Like the King archetype, the Queen understands and accesses a combination of the other three feminine archetypes. As the protagonist of *Tomb Raider* (2013), Lara must engage in combat with the other characters, typically a Warrior archetypal role; however, the corresponding female archetype, the Amazon, ventures into the unexplored and mysterious spaces, traditionally occupied by men. Unlike the Warrior archetype, which navigates the control of one's aggression, the Amazon represents controlled power and the confidence to be compassionate. Although Lara has always resided comfortably within typically male realms, the difference in *Tomb Raider* (2013) is Lara's retention of her emotional self. While the Warrior archetype stresses the disconnection of emotion to one's work, which we see in Lara's ruthlessness in earlier titles, the Amazon remains connected emotionally, but rejects the need for dependency. The Amazon, through Lara, is expressed throughout the *Tomb Raider* reboot through her remorse toward killing her captors.

In addition to the Amazon's deeper connection between aggression and compassion, the Hetaera archetype comes to light in Lara's interactions with the other survivors on the island. The purpose of the Hetaera is to relate to the psyches of those around her and elevate them to their balanced mature archetypal states. The relationships that Lara maintains with the male survivors underscore this elevation of those around her. Both Roth and Alex sacrifice themselves to save Lara, acting as servants in service to a King/Queen archetype. She does not play the damsel-in-distress, nor does she coldly sacrifice the other characters for the greater good of the game goal. Instead, Lara

insists on protecting them to the best of her ability, inspiring their sacrificial acts.

Similarly to the wise Magician masculine archetype, the Medial archetype represents the 'oracle' or the avenue by which an individual is connected to the spiritual realm. While the old Lara understood the supernatural and manipulated it for her needs, Lara's behaviors in *Tomb Raider* (2013) more closely align to the Medial archetypal role of a seer. She illuminates the unseen or unknown. This can be most clearly defined at the beginning of the game when Lara hears a voice during the storm that causes the plane to crash. She then reveals this knowledge and understanding about the island to her companions later in the story. In addition, Lara's ability to believe in the mystic forces at play on the island and her ability to act on that belief underscores her connection to and understanding of the spiritual realms.

Lara, like the mythological Greek goddess Artemis (Bolen, 1984, Leadbetter, 2005), encompasses the totality of the archetypal feminine as self-actualization: Queen, Amazon, Hetaera, and Medial. Using the lens of narrative archetypes outlines Lara's transformation from a masculine role performed by a feminine avatar, to a more balanced persona. The transformation is not an outer change that can be observed by her physical avatar (aside from her scarring), but instead it unbinds representation of her femininity from her body and connects her self-actualized femininity with her behaviors. Put simply, in *Tomb Raider* (2013) Lara is a woman because she behaves like a woman and not only because she looks like a woman. This narrative contrast opens the door to redefining the relationship between the player and Lara by reimagining the central ethos that lies within Lara as an independent agent with whom the player collaborates.

Collaborating with Lara Croft

Throughout the game-play of *Tomb Raider* (2013) the player experiences the hero's journey (Campbell, 2008) through these feminine narrative archetypes and Lara's consequent growth

through her trials. This makes Lara a powerful and independent hero in her own right. However, when introduced to the system of play the player is immediately immersed in the spectacle of game-play through the cinematic dynamism of the storytelling. The player's first interaction with Lara within the game is to swing Lara back and forth in order to escape her bonds. In doing so, however, the avatar falls and an exposed spike punctures her side. The player must participate by pressing the corresponding button in order for Lara to find the strength to pull the spike from her side. Thus, from this very beginning of game-play Lara is wounded and vulnerable, and she was designed that way. Ron Rosenberg, Executive Producer for *Tomb Raider* (2013) said, "When people play Lara, they don't really project themselves into the character.... They're more like 'I want to protect her.' There's this sort of dynamic of 'I'm going to this adventure with her and trying to protect her'" (in Schreier, 2012, ¶3-4). The producers of *Tomb Raider* (2013) wrote the narrative arc as the origin story of Lara Croft; "...She is literally turned into a cornered animal. It's a huge step in her evolution: she's forced to either fight back or die." (Rosenberg in Schreier, 2012, ¶10). The *Tomb Raider* (2013) Lara Croft has a very real sense of humanity and mortality and her fight with survival is a driving force for the narrative. While her struggle is certainly a mechanic of the narrative, it also complicates the connection between Lara and the player.

Lara Croft has held a starring role in the debates about how interactive video games incorporate the audience into storytelling, and how players negotiate their experience of narrative through games. Feminist theorists (e.g. Burrill, 2008; Kennedy, 2002) have described Lara Croft as a materialized prosthetic of the self, as an object of masculine gaze, or as merely a pretty instrument with which to effect change within the game. In contrast to cinematic events with passive viewers, games invite active agency in the progress of the narrative arc. Burrill (2008) suggests that the player experiences a simulacrum of the self as an active viewer of his or her own participation and

performance in *Tomb Raider* (1996). The audience jumps into the role of the protagonist and Lara's avatar becomes an extension of the player, a materialized prosthetic (of self), which the player wears in order to participate in the narrative of the game. At the same time, Lara exists as an object of voyeuristic appeal to the gaming audience. She represents the quintessential object of masculine fantasy, fully embodying the masculine gaze and the visual spectacle (Kennedy, 2002). This is evidenced by the plethora of explicit fan art, fan fiction, pornography, and game modifications created to enhance her sexual appearance (c.f. Kennedy, 2002; Schleiner, 2001). The visual spectacle of Lara potentially overpowers the (masculine) protagonist behaviors with which the player can connect, but Lara is also a vehicle by which the player navigates the virtual realm, being both an object outside of the player and an extension of the player's self. Burrill (2008) suggests that the simultaneous possession of Lara's female body and the recognition of Lara as the object of the masculine gaze allow the imagined male audience to perform normative masculine behaviors safely while extending into Lara, who functions as the outer-bodied self.

The contrast between Lara's exaggerated feminine appearance and her performance as protagonist reinforces a more definitive separation between Lara and the player. The original Lara persona facilitated this relationship of separation with the player by occasionally disregarding the convention of the fourth wall that separates the player from the story. In *Tomb Raider* (1996), Lara frequently spoke to the player. Throughout the game, Lara retained her autonomy from the player by acknowledging the masculine gaze peering in from outside her defined virtual world, and having both a simulated knowledge of herself and the player (Gee, 2003). In the final cut-scene of *Tomb Raider II* (1997), the game shows the inside of Lara's mansion, floating along the floor of her bathroom, then panning upward to reveal Lara about to disrobe and enter the running shower. She immediately acknowledges the player's presence, saying "Haven't you seen

enough?” and picking up a shotgun resting beside the shower and firing at the player, ending the cut-scene. In addition to this violent act against the player, she consistently recognizes the player as an otherworldly being. She often responds to the player with a disobedient “No” when the player requests an action she is unable to perform. She reinforces the notion that she is not a prosthetic of the player’s Self, but instead an object unto herself, recognizing the masculine gaze and gazing challengingly back at the player in return. This notion reinforces the construct of Lara as a vehicle, stagnant by herself, but through whom the player may visually enjoy and manually traverse the virtual environmental puzzle.

In *Tomb Raider* (2013) the Lara Croft persona embodies a new ethos, and she behaves more like a complex cinematic character. The level by which the game-play demands player participation, the vulnerability and humanity given to Lara, and her inevitable deaths, all graft an emotional connection between the player and Lara as equal allies. Examining game-play reveals how her reflection of a more feminine ethos through behavior, and a deeper level of interactivity, contributes to this partnership.

The player does not exist physically within the virtual space of *Tomb Raider* (2013), and so an avatar like Lara is required for the existence of the narrative as well as for the exploration of the island. Alternatively, the player is required to participate within the narrative by manipulating the action of Lara to push the story forward. By caring about Lara as a person unto herself outside of the player, consisting of more than a programmed image, the player is drawn into the game as an invisible character. The player operates not as a passive audience of a cinematic event, but rather as an active force within the virtual space that defends Lara from death throughout the narrative.

Tomb Raider (2013) demands the player’s continual active participation and interaction with narrative progression. The player’s experience of co-producing the narrative while simultaneously journeying with Lara in partnership exemplifies

the design possibilities of interactive storytelling. Crystal Dynamics, the studio behind the 2013 reboot, took full advantage of modern options for telling a story through a game:

You sometimes hear discussions about whether something is a design-driven game or a story-driven game. For us this was neither, it was an experience-driven game. We wanted to bring to bear the emotional power of story and the engagement and emotional investment of game-play – we wanted you to feel like you were on this journey with Lara.

(Noah Hughes, Creative Director of Crystal Dynamics in Stuart, 2013, ¶12)

The visual cinematic nature of the game creates a more intimate relationship between the player and Lara by bringing the player into closer virtual proximity to her and giving a deeper understanding of her core ethos as it unravels throughout the narrative.

While the player controls Lara's movements and pilots her actions as in the previous titles, the player also has the responsibility to participate within interactive cut-scenes. In gaming these cut-scenes are traditionally used to progress the story arc, but now are being used to engage the player in a mechanical test. By pressing the corresponding controller button or keystroke at the correct time, the player helps Lara meet the challenge of the cut-scene and escape, or be killed if the partners fail. At this point the story continues, or they begin again from the start of the cut-scene.

This event of death, as a mechanic of play, is not unusual. Most game-play structures have a retry-upon-failure model, which returns the player to an earlier instance if he or she fails or the avatar is killed. However, the representation of failure in *Tomb Raider* (2013) is shockingly visceral. If the player fails to perform the mechanic properly or prudently throughout the interactive cut-scenes, then Lara is shown being gruesomely killed in a way consistent with the area and circumstances. When the player fails, the grisly death that Lara suffers reinforces her

vulnerability and is a narrative mechanism used to elicit an emotional response; however, the response is not one of sympathy but of remorse. Lara's life is put into the hands (literally) of the player to protect through proper and active participation. This method of storytelling does not simply invite interactivity and experience, but instead demands it in order for the hero, Lara, to survive. The "fight or die" mentality that Rosenberg underlined previously is not solely Lara's struggle, but a cooperative struggle for both the player and Lara. The player must actively engage in the game or Lara will graphically "die" before the eyes of the player. The negative experience of watching Lara's death due to the player's inability reinforces this emotional commitment.

In a sense, this graphical death construct has existed all along. In the original *Tomb Raider* (1996) for example, if the player fails to pilot Lara over a gap she falls into darkness, presumably to her death. The screen fades to black and the player is prompted to retry. The emotional ties between the player and Lara are separated because, while the player assumes the agency of responsibility over Lara, she is never visibly destroyed and thus exists as an inexhaustible disposable possession that continues to be usable by the player. In contrast, the *Tomb Raider* (2013) visual spectacle of the likable hero dying gruesome and horrible deaths due to the player's own mechanical mistake manifests a more emotionally driven motivation for play.

Lara's complex narrative roles and her vulnerability encourage the player to connect emotionally with the character and the game, but does not necessarily facilitate the familiar heteronormative modality of the strong male hero rescuing the weak female. Instead, the player's initiative to establish a sense of camaraderie with the avatar introduces a new mode of interaction between the player and Lara, namely through the role of partner within the virtual space, with equality given to each party. While the player compensates for Lara's vulnerability, the player is also bound to operate in accordance with the

capabilities and limitations of Lara within the story space. The player's ability to interact with the virtual world increases as Lara's ability increases. Lara's ability to progress through the narrative relies on the player's initiative to participate; likewise, if Lara did not exist within that space the player would have no avenue for interaction to move the story forward.

Without the participation of the player that the video game medium requires, Lara would arguably triumph within the narrative space as the hero. Lara's narrative could be played out as film, entirely without the player's participation. Instead, Lara's vulnerability creates the need for the player's contribution to the partnership, while also inviting the player into the experiential space of the narrative alongside Lara. The injection of mortality into Lara's story does not weaken her or make her a "cornered animal," as Rosenberg claims, but instead facilitates the need for partnership with the player, creating a more balanced relationship and a deeper interaction with the story being told.

Lara Croft as the modern hero

This analysis touches on a few key components of an invested relational partnership created by carefully designed storytelling devices, but the implications of this level of interactivity are much greater than a single game-play experience. The ability to communicate through storytelling has and will continue to change as we uncover and create new relationship structures which enhance and modify the experience of both story and play simultaneously.

In the past, Lara has represented the object of masculine fantasy, as well as being the vehicle for the performance of identity, but now she is pushing back against the predispositions of what (and who) she is supposed to be. *Tomb Raider* (2013) offers a narrative protagonist who promotes an equal partnership between the player and the character in creating the narrative of the game. Through Lara we can explore the conditions by which we experience interactivity within the narrative realm. With her mortality and dependence upon the player, she becomes one

half of an equal partnership, the whole of which comprises the entirety of the role of protagonist. This partnership is inclusive to a wider audience of players and invites an imagined audience beyond the stereotypical gamer identity (c.f. MacCallum-Stewart, 2014).

From a broader perspective, as the technology surrounding game-play improves and allows for increasingly more complex avenues for interactivity between the real and virtual subjects, what new relationships will emerge? How will we differentiate between these subjects and their respective realms when power and sovereignty is shared between artificial and real intelligences cooperatively? How do these concepts redefine the nature in which we discuss, produce, and participate in storytelling? Are contemporary producers concerned that the male audience will reject a powerful female hero unless some partnership is made with the player, or is the gaming culture ready to broaden the scope of inclusion by producing and encouraging games of participation and partnership with a larger audience? Is the partnership with Lara Croft replicable between masculine protagonists and male gamers, or will male gamers automatically slide into the role of power discussed by previous theorists? With Lara's next adventure in production at Crystal Dynamics, *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015), further analysis and different perspectives is required to more fully understand the cultural and perceptual implications of these narrative possibilities.

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