

Gender Transgressions in Console<sup>1</sup> and Computer<sup>2</sup> Game play



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<sup>1</sup> Consoles are independent systems which plug into a television screen, such as XBOX, PlayStation and Nintendo GameCube

<sup>2</sup> Computer games are PC or Mac-based software, [as well as] Internet-based games

“...the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.” Donna Haraway

The Culture of video game playing is not new to feminist studies. It has long been observed and theorized as another male-dominated cultural domain, where aggression, objectification and subjugation of women are problematic. Most feminist research in this area has been focused on the effects of representations of gender and violence on young children. Little has been written about the identity-gender relationships between game players and game characters. In addition, the fact that research has been focused on young children overlooks the substantial adult and adolescent demographic, where gender transgressions hold not only personal but political meanings.

As virtual reality communities challenge ideas of identity and gender, and as the video game genre diversifies and progresses, gender representations are becoming much more fluid and ambiguous. The possibilities of taking on different subject positions with regard to gender are broadening. I will argue that the console and computer-based game genres hold significant possibilities for subversive readings and gazes of game characters, as well as gender experimentation. In this regard, feminist-based game art as gender transgression is yet another growing politically subversive phenomenon, which offers alternative readings to prescribed game representations.

[Contents]

1. Exploration of the video game genre history
2. Computer Gameplay<sup>3</sup> – a gendered experience
3. Female Video Game Protagonists – subversion of gender in Tomb Raider
4. Game Patches and game art – taking measures in their own hands

[1]

At the beginning of 1990s there was a shift from arcade games to console games.<sup>4</sup> Along with the convenience of playing in one's own home, console and computer games revolutionized graphics and audio, sublimating in a sleek 3-D virtual game experience. This sprung the production of an array of gameplay body extensions – joysticks, wheels, control pads, turning the typical game player into a classic Haraway cyborg - “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.”<sup>5</sup>

Cyborg identities in the video game space are quite analogous of Internet-based communities where identity is actively challenged in the form of “imaginary gender tourism”<sup>6</sup> – a freedom of being whoever one desires, experimenting with gender meanings and actively constructing new ones. Multiple User Domains (MUD) such as LambdaMOO (Object-Oriented MUDs), are pioneers in allowing an ultimately free gender-identity play in a text-based virtual environment.<sup>7</sup> In a console/computer game environment then, *game* becomes the socially acceptable arena where one has the freedom to juggle imaginary identities [in search of a ‘real’ one], and *play* out alternative genders [sometimes in search of a ‘real’ one].

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<sup>3</sup> Gameplay: a technical interaction between control keys and game movements, sometimes used to describe the general experience of playing the game.

<sup>4</sup> Cunningham, Helen, p213

<sup>5</sup> Haraway, Donna, p150

<sup>6</sup> Schleiner, Anne-Marrie, p225

<sup>7</sup> [Telnet://Lambda.moo.mud.org:8888](http://Telnet://Lambda.moo.mud.org:8888)

Yet, because all of us are socially gendered, ultimate gender/identity play, even in a science fiction world, is not so realistic. Precisely because video games are science fiction and a reflection of societal relations<sup>8</sup>, game production and playing has always been a gendered experience. While arcade spaces were male-dominated, console/computer games entered the home and were played by an increasingly diverse audience. This called upon more industry attention to the demographic needs of game players, specifically the needs of female audiences. In 1994 industry efforts to cater to its female customers gave birth to Sega's own Girl Game Task Force.<sup>9</sup> It was formed to research and recommend ways to engage girls and young women in video game play. Although important, the efforts of this group only reinstated various stereotypes about gender-related preferences instead of challenging the gender status quo.

The underlying assumption for the Task Force was that girls preferred non-violent, community-building activities.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, many researchers have pointed out that the Girl Games movement, as it is also known, had many positive contributions, with games such as "Hawaii High: The Mystery of Tiki" – a female-geared interactive maze game with female protagonists, or "Rocko's Modern Life: Spunky's Dangerous Day" – a gender neutral Nintendo-based game with "creature"-like protagonists.<sup>11</sup> For the game industry, gender neutral games were just plain good business, because they did not alienate male customers by creating a female-centered game, i.e. the rationale is that girls will play boy's games but boys won't play girls' games.<sup>12</sup>

Since most games have traditionally been geared toward male customers, it is female gamers who have had to adapt to its constructs, characters and imagery. Thus, when it comes to gender transgressions, girls and women are already skilled in a kind of "transgender identification"<sup>13</sup> through playing out male characters in action games. The challenge to societal gender relations then, has become a challenge to science fiction reality – how to create multiple gender positions, thus allowing more fluid cyborg identities and in turn – improve 'real' societal gender politics. For the industry, the question is how to incorporate more active female representations without losing the male market share.

[2]

The gender interplay of a typical video game has traditionally been one where female characters are passive supporting figures, prizes to be won or princesses to be saved, while male characters are the active protagonists who experience and create adventures.<sup>14</sup> Everything controlled by the gaming industry, from graphics to plotline, logic and strategy, gameplay and controls, has clearly been geared toward adolescent men. Yet, girls and young women now hold an increasing share of the game playing market, and actively contemplate and challenge stereotypical constructs and representations in mainstream video games. As one female gamer shares: "I couldn't play [games] anymore without being constantly reminded that they were not designed for me."<sup>15</sup> Yet, the Girl Games movement proved not to be the answer to this building frustration. On the contrary – it was founded on predicated and essentialist assumptions

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<sup>8</sup> Haraway, Donna

<sup>9</sup> Gillen, Marilyn, p88

<sup>10</sup> Yates, Simeon, K. Littleton, p106

<sup>11</sup> Gillen, Marilyn, p89

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Cunningham, Helen, p223

<sup>14</sup> Edmonds, Lisa, p20

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

about femaleness. Many young women, alienated by girls' games such as Barbie World, lashed back at the Girl Task force:

Yawwwnnn. Community and collaboration are what women bring to the table? Maybe it's a problem that girls don't like to play games that slaughter entire planets! Maybe that is why we are still underpaid, still struggling, still fighting for our rights. Women are not Men and Men are not Women, but all Women are not members of the doily of the month club either.<sup>16</sup>



Then, in the late 1990s, the video game industry finally gave audiences what they wanted - an action third-person shooter game with a female protagonist. The Eidos-made "Lara Croft: Tomb Raider" seemed both empowering to women, and appealing to boys and men.<sup>17</sup> Its release was a blockbuster on the game market and was closely followed by Capcom's "Resident Evil 2" which did just as well. Other major titles with single or sets of female protagonists, that have come on the market since, are the Final Fantasy

series, Pokohontas, King's Quest: The Princeless Bride, Phoenix Quest and others<sup>18</sup>. It is interesting to note that "Final Fantasy X-2", the latest edition in the series, features all Asian female characters, and one male character. This is entirely the opposite of realities before, where there would be a token female character amidst a selection of male identities.

*"The Dress-sphere system is awesome! It works like a job system, you find dress-spheres, and you are able to change classes any time you want, even in the midst of a battle! Some classes include, gunner, thief, strongress, White mage, black mage ETC. A definite must have for all hardcore rpg player."*

*"The Series have developed characters that one can relate to..."*

*"This FinalFantasy game has newer graphics, first ever to have a female (Yuna) as the main character... And best of all you will be searching for Yuna's lost love one, Tidus."<sup>19</sup>*



Fig.1. Final Fantasy X-2, Square Enix

As evident from these brief comments, all made by male gamers, video game players tend to concentrate a lot more on the technical qualities of a game, so the gender of the gaming avatar<sup>20</sup> loses its predicated meaning. The roles are not only reversed (The female protagonist, Yuna, is searching for her lover, Tidus) but these male gamers see it as a delightful improvement and as something to relate to. This kind

<sup>16</sup> Yates, Simeon, K. Littleton, p106

<sup>17</sup> Kafka, Peter, p39

<sup>18</sup> Edmonds, Lisa, p21

<sup>19</sup> Comments from male gamers on the Future Shop site [www.futureshop.ca](http://www.futureshop.ca) accessed Nov 29, 03

<sup>20</sup> Avatar in games is the chosen character, skin or morph

of gender transgression and identification is especially significant with male gamers, since female gamers, as mentioned earlier, are already conditioned to inhibiting 'neutral' [male] identities and subverting gender.

This marked ease of gender/skin/dress-swapping in video game cultures today could be traced back not only to virtual MUDs, but also to the astounding popularity of console/computer RPGs (Role Playing Games). RPGs could be read as an indication of the gamers' ability and desire to engage in increasingly fluid identity/gender subject positions. In this regard, we can talk about gender transgressions even in games with seemingly stereotypical nature, such as "Tomb Raider," without being caught in the representational quality of an image.

[3]

Fig.2. Tomb Raider: Anger of Darkness, Eidos



As with "Final Fantasy X-2" on Fig.1, looking at the above screenshots of "Tomb Raider", it is hard to miss the Barbie-like proportions and scant clothing of female game characters, and their unrealistic over-feminization, clearly intended for a male gaze. Yet, under the stereotypical female 'skin,' Lara Croft is a tough and merciless action figure that we know will just "kick Ken's butt."<sup>21</sup> So just what made "Tomb Raider" so successful? Certainly, the positive female role-model image sold some

copies to the young women demographic. As well, Lara's sexualized femme appeal sold some copies to the adolescent men audience. Yet, it is important to note that much of the success of "Tomb Raider" is due to its astonishing 3-D graphics, audio, challenging strategy and innovative gameplay. Yet, there is more to this.

Fig.3. The Nude Raider patch



In her article *Does Lara Croft Wear Fake Polygons? Gender and Gender-subversions in computer Adventure Games*, Anne-Marie Schleiner examines the gender/identity makeup of Lara Croft as it could relate to the subjective positions of different users. She sees the Lara Croft avatar as a "cybogan, piecemeal and polymorphous" figure, which could be engaged in several "gender-subject configurations" and a single subject (gamer) can morph freely in and out of different positions.<sup>22</sup>

The positions she discusses are Lara Croft as the female Frankenstein monster, a drag queen, a dominatrix, a female role model, a vehicle for female queer gaze, and an archetype for subversive game hacker art.

Lara's "fusion of femininity, death and technology...can be traced back through 19<sup>th</sup> century science fiction robots, Gothic literature, blow-up dolls and comic book heroines."<sup>23</sup> As a

Frankenstein monster subject (a Haraway cyborg), she is a male fantasy stereotype of fetishized techno-sexuality. The popularity of this gender/subject position is exemplified

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<sup>21</sup> Kafka, Peter, p39

<sup>22</sup> Schleiner, Anne-Marie, p223

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p224

in the creation and distribution of the Nude Raider patch – a game patch where Lara Croft ‘kicks butt’ in the nude.

Lara’s “drag queen” subject position, conversely, is one of subversive or subconscious identification, not objectification, with Lara’s female body, as experienced by male gamers. Whether drag is something that a gender-questioning young male gamer wants to or is willing to admit to trying, the femaleness of Lara Croft as a game avatar is undeniable – she is rounded, not muscular, a token of mainstream female beauty, and every time she discovers a ‘secret’ she makes ‘feminine’ exclamations.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, “rigid gender roles are broken down, allowing boys and men to experiment with ‘wearing’ a female identity, echoing the phenomenon of gender crossing in chat rooms and MUDs,”<sup>25</sup> without the social stigma of doing it in real life.

Lara as a dominatrix is yet another subject position, which is open to users of various gender/identity backgrounds. Her leather-strapped attire is a tantalizing fantasy for sado-masochistic experimentation, in which the gamer (male or female) identifies with the victims of the blood-thirsty Tomb Raider. This gender subject position is a safe exploration of a marginalized sexuality and “may be as close to a session with a live dominatrix as some masochistically inclined users will ever come.”<sup>26</sup>

Lara as a positive female role model is a position I have discussed earlier in this paper. Her importance as a female heroine, albeit her polygon breasts and tiny waist, lies in the inclusion of female subjectivity in a cyborgian position. As Donna Haraway would see it, Lara Croft is the denial of an essentialist model of female *nature*, and an embracing of techno-feminism, a new *nurture* for contemporary women. “The cyborg skips the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense.”<sup>27</sup>

In addition, if we are to discuss various subversive homoerotic positions from a male gamer perspective, perhaps there is something to be added about the female gaze as well. In the earlier generation of video games, where female characters were passive trophies, a female gamer’s gaze could be best described by Laura Mulvey’s concept of the ‘transvestite male gaze’ – in this case a temporary gender identification with the male avatar and a shared objectification of the female representation. However, in games such as “Tomb Raider,” where the female heroine is the active heroine, and especially in “Final Fantasy X-2,” where the female character is searching for the passive ‘long-lost love Tidus,’ gender/identity roles are somewhat reversed. Therefore, it could be argued, using the feminist analysis of Reina Lewis and Katrina Rolley, that there are some inherent homoerotic subject positions available to female (and male) gamers through playing. Because female users are socially conditioned to a complex relationship of identification/objectification of other female images,<sup>28</sup> it is possible to suggest that girls could relate not only to the toughness of Lara Croft, but to her sexualized beauty.

This is even more true when theorizing the queer female gaze. Just as Reina Lewis suggests that perhaps some images catch lesbian eyes more than others,<sup>29</sup> Schleiner’s own research into “the female horror-flick heroine as a vehicle for queer female gaze”<sup>30</sup> points in the same direction. Lara Croft, as an a-gendered cyborg, emerges as an avenue for female queer identity to break down binary gender

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p225

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p226

<sup>27</sup> Haraway, Donna, p151

<sup>28</sup> Rolley, K.

<sup>29</sup> Lewis, Reina

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



stereotypes. The acts of annihilation and destruction then, symbolize the releasing of queer subject positions and the pleasure of revenge of a marginalized sexuality.

[4]

As an archetypal female protagonist figure, Lara Croft has sparked a whole genre of feminist 'gender hack' art. This includes game patches with alternative endings or avatars, visual game art, and others. Among some of the gender subversive game patches that Schleiner mentions are "Tina Shapes and Tina Sounds" – a patch which morphs the male hero in "Infinity Bob" with a female<sup>31</sup>; and a Japanese "Otakun Doom" patch which replaces the protagonist in "Doom" with a female Japanese anime character called Priss.<sup>32</sup>



Another gender patch, not included in Schneider's analysis, perhaps because it didn't exist then, is a play on the already patched Nude Raider – a classic queer subversive art. It features a nude Lara Croft with a goatee, a transsexual Lara, a butch Lara, and a cross-dressing Lara.

These examples are an indication of the growing demand and preoccupation of game hackers with gender subversion and representation. As game art becomes more and more accessible to young men and women, the possibilities of subverting meanings and gender subject positions, and making a statement about societal relations increases. This sophistication inevitably leads to yet new forms of experimental game art. While game patches are

able to infiltrate gender representations on a seemingly 'skin-deep' level, "All New Gen," a feminist-produced interactive CD-Rom game, involving hybrid, mutating cyborgs that transgress gender and other subject boundaries,<sup>33</sup> is an example of a full-fledged politically subversive game.

These are just some of the numerous examples of gender transgressions happening in the console/computer game space, or originating from it. Together with the unprecedented popularity of gender/identity swapping in Internet chat rooms, MUDs and RPGs, they constitute a growing trend in science fiction realities, one that encompasses all genders, identities and subject positions. In a society marked by contested gender inequality, capitalism and individualism, a silent revolution is happening on the game front as well. The kind of gender subversions available to user subjects through the video game medium, is perhaps a safe frontier for identity formation, gender experimentation and subversion.

The degree to which such efforts produce any tangible change in 'real' societal gender relations could be debated, but at least they permit participants to conjure up new sexual and political orders and to subvert identity positions, even if only in the science-fiction realm.



<sup>31</sup> <http://switch.sjsu.edu/CrackingtheMaze/loren.html>

<sup>32</sup> <http://www.gamers.org/pub/idgames/graphics/femdoom.txt>

<sup>33</sup> Schaffer, Kay

**Note:** All of the patches described here, as well as many other Internet links, cracks and images, could be found at this database:

<http://www.birgitrichard.de/projekt/gegatab2.html>

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