Online Communication in the Digital Age
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Lecture – 55
Transforming Stereotypes: Evolving Portrayals of Gender in Video Games

   Good morning, dear friends and welcome to this module. In the previous modules, we have talked about the genealogy of cyber feminism, cyborg and its metaphors, commodification of the female body and the pleasures of interface and the gendered body. We have discussed them in a virtual context across the contested spaces of the cyber digital communication. Today we shall be looking at the evolution of the representation of gender in video games. Gaming and the video games are historically dominated by a fellow centric narrative. The portrayal of men versus women and sexism in the video games has always been a point of contention for the gender and sexuality studies.

Video Games and Gender

- The portrayal of women in games often reflects traditional gender roles, sexual objectification, or stereotypes such as the "damsel in distress", the "sexy sidekicks", the "rewards".
- For example: Princess Zelda from The Legend of Zelda series or Princess Peach from the Mario series.
- Male characters are often stereotypically depicted as big and muscular, and LGBTQIA+ characters are marginalized or non-existent in most cases.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org

   The portrayal of women characters in games often reflects traditional and conventional gender roles, sexual objectification or stereotypes such as the damsel in distress, the sexy side kicks, the rewards etc. For example, Princess Zelda from the Legend of Zelda series or Princess Peach from the Mario series. Male characters are often stereotypically depicted as big and muscular and LGBTQIA plus characters are marginalized or non-existent in most of the cases.

We will look at the Tomb Raider franchisee as our case study for this module. Early video game franchisee like Tom Rida often presented ambiguous and complex representations of females. Lara Croft, the iconic protagonist embodied both empowering and problematic qualities reflecting shifting cultural attitudes.

Tomb Raider Franchise

- Since its inception in 1996, the Tomb Raider franchise, including its sequels and spin-offs, has sold millions of copies worldwide, solidifying Lara Croft as a prominent figure in popular culture.
- She has appeared in numerous video games, three feature films, and over numerous magazine covers by 2016.
- The Tomb Raider games have sold over 95 million copies globally as of 2022 and generated nearly $1.2 billion in revenue by 2002.
- * https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-los-angeles-times/88925532/

Source: https://en.as.com

Since its inception in 1996, the Tom Rida franchise including its sequels and spin-offs has sold millions of copies worldwide solidifying Lara Croft as a prominent figure in popular culture. She has appeared in numerous video games, three feature films and numerous magazine covers since then. The Tomb Raider games have sold over 95 million copies globally as of 2022 and generated nearly 1.2 billion dollars in revenue by 2002.

The early Tomb Raider games challenge the traditional representations of women by featuring Lara Croft is a strong and independent as well as a capable protagonist. She took on daring adventures, defying the conventional role of women in video games.

Gaming in a Man's World*

- Lara Croft's emergence as a strong, independent protagonist marked a departure from the traditional "damsel in distress" archetype in video games, setting the stage for increased female representation in action games.
- The gaming industry has historically skewed toward male interests, *offering stereotypical products* that discouraged women gamers.
- The American Association of University Women Educational Foundation (AAUW) conducted a study in 2000, revealing that girls favor interactive role-playing games over violent ones. (Mayfield, 2000)**

Source: https://www.in.ign.com

* Mikula, M. (2003). Gender and Videogames: the political valency of Lara Croft. Continuum, 17(1), 79-87.

** Mayfield, K. (2000). A pretty face is not enough. Wired News, December 18, 2000. Retrieved October 6, 2023, from https://www.wired.com/2000/12/a-pretty-face-is-not-enough/

Her emergence as a strong and independent protagonist marked a departure from the traditional damsel in distress archetype in video games, setting the stage for increased female representation in action games. The gaming industry has historically been skewed towards male interests offering stereotypical products that discouraged women gamers. The American Association of University Women Educational Foundation or AAUW conducted a study in 2000 revealing that girls favour interactive role playing games over violent ones.

Similar other studies confirmed such contemporary findings. Tom Rida provided a perfect balance between identification and action. However, this was not so with the repercussions.

- Female gamers prioritize character identification, with the study emphasizing their frustration when they can't connect.
- Tomb Raider's format disrupts smooth identification between players and Lara Croft.
- It combines first-person immersion and third-person control, empowering players to embody and guide Lara.
- Ironically, male players often assert control over Lara and her sexuality, maintaining a subject-object dynamic, even when the game offers a more blurred distinction.

Source: https://i-d.vice.com

Female gamers prioritize character identification with the study emphasizing their frustration when they cannot connect.Tomb Raider's format disrupts smooth identification between players and Lara Croft. It combines first person immersion and third person control empowering players to embody and also to guide Lara. Ironically, it was found that male players often asserted control over Lara as well as her sexuality, maintaining a subject-object dynamic even when the game offered a rather blurred distinction.

Regardless, many female players identified with Lara Croft as an empowering figure in the context of video games.

- Female contributors on a Tomb Raider forum highlighted distinct gender-based experiences in the game.
- The empowerment derived from gameplay varies according to how gamers engage with gender norms.
- Many women enjoy embodying Lara rather than controlling her.
- Lara represents a compelling figure for some, embodying qualities desired by both men and women, such as adventure, independence, possibility, and strength.

Source: https://www.starburstmagazine.com

Female contributors on a Tom Rida forum highlighted distinct gender-based experiences in the game. The empowerment derived from game play varies according to how gamers engage with gender norms. Many women enjoy embodying Lara rather than controlling her. Lara represents a compelling figure for some, embodying qualities desired by both men as well as women such as adventure, independence, possibilities and reflecting strengths.

Lara Croft emerged as a sex symbol in the gaming world known for her revealing outfits, exaggerated physique and objectified representation which also in fact contributed to her iconic status to begin with.

Lara as a Sex Symbol

- In the sequels to the original game, Lara Croft's character evolved with escalating aggression and sexualization, delving into the Freudian Id's core, merging a death wish with the pleasure principle.
- Her attire and attitude grew deliberately more sexual as the series advanced.
- Unlike high culture, popular culture works adapt to changing audience expectations (Lord, 1960), and in the age of computer-mediated communication, audience preferences and knowledge in popular culture are no longer shaped by artists, leading to reconceptualizations of characters like Lara that cannot be fully controlled by their creators or owners.

* Lord, A.B. (1960). The singer of tales. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Source: https://www.tombraiderforums.com

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Lara Croft's early portrayal in the Tom Rader series often subjected her to the male gaze. She was designed with exaggerated features and attire that cater to objectification.

Body Image*

- Multivocality is evident in Lara Croft's visual representation, where her features and skin color allow for diverse interpretations.
- Her exaggerated body compensates for her non-corporeal nature, offering players the opportunity for sexual fantasies by manipulating camera angles.
- Lara's physique is criticized by feminists for promoting unrealistic body standards and objectifying women, potentially affecting self-esteem, causing issues like depression and eating disorders.
- Other feminists view Lara as a model of power and self-control, contrasting her with Barbie's traditional feminine image.

Source: https://www.today.com

* Kennedy, H. W. (2002). Lara Croft: Feminist icon or cyberbimbo?. Game studies, 2(2), 1-12.

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Lara's body represents a rebellious display of willpower and defiance against material ideals emphasizing exploration and combat. A psychoanalytical approach influenced by Lara Mulvey's work in 1975 delves into the male gaze and fetishistic pleasures associated with Lara's character. Her sexualization may be heteronormative and rooted in the victim rhetoric. However, her embodiment of both butch and femme qualities opens her to diverse identifications and desires.

Emulating Lara's body with its exaggerated features is not expected just as people do not expect people to possess superhuman abilities like superheroes. This perspective challenges unrealistic beauty standards suggesting a preference for genuine health and DNA over photoshop manipulated perfection.

Post-feminism, although not very formally defined, provides a framework for analyzing Lara Croft's earlier version and her embodiment of post-feminist complexities.

While intersecting with third wave feminism, post-feminism also critiques the second wave feminism. Angela McRobbie highlights the second wave's potential to undermine feminism. Notably, by reinforcing sexualized media images in the name of female empowerment. Post-feminism's alignment with consumer culture in the late 1990s complicates it as choice and self-rule are promoted as entitled femininity which paradoxically includes embracing consumerism and capitalism perpetuating patriarchal ideologies.

This framework maintained the focus on women's physical appearance and materialism tying their self-worth to external attributes and positions.

- Genz (2009)* identifies various postfeminist representations of women in the twenty-first century, including the "supergirl," a modern action heroine who challenges traditional gender roles.
- Lara Croft, in her original incarnation, embodies the "supergirl" concept.
- Old Lara embodies characteristics of the archetypal femme fatale, who subverted gender norms in the 1940s, such as being beautiful but untouchable and indifferent to the male gaze. (Du Preez, 2000)**
- Lara's translatability across various media environments, her celebrity status, and her role as the first digital star blur the lines between producers, texts, audiences, and technologies.

* Genz, S. (2009). Postfemininities in Popular Culture. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

** Du Preez, A. (2000). Virtual Babes: gender, archetypes and computer games. Communicatio, 26(2), 18-27.

Angelina Jolie as Lara Croft
Source:
https://www.guardian.com

Genz identifies various post-feminist representations of women in the 21st century including the Supergirl, a modern action heroine who challenges traditional gender roles. Lara Croft in her original incarnation embodies the Supergirl concept. Old Lara embodies characteristics of the archetypal femi-fetal who subverted gender norms in the 1940s such as being beautiful but untouchable and indifferent to the male gaze. Lara's translatability across various media environments, her celebrity status and her role as the first digital star blur the lines between producers, text, audiences and technologies.

The reboot of the Tomb Raider game series in 2013 marked a significant transformation in the franchise. Developed by Crystal Dynamics and published by Square Enix, this new instalment portrayed Lara Croft as a young and vulnerable archeologist who has been stranded on a dangerous island. The game emphasized character development, survival skills and a gritty and realistic narrative. This reimagining breathed a fresh life into the

series aligning it with modern gaming trends and redefining the very character of Lara Croft.

Tomb Raider Reboot (2013-2018)

- Lara Croft underwent a significant transformation in the *Tomb Raider* 2013 reboot. (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014)*
- Rhianna Pratchett's pivotal role as the head scriptwriter in this transformation marked a shift in the ideological and ludic aspects of Tomb Raider.
- Pratchett's involvement signifies a recognition that female players are a crucial audience, aligning with the industry's need to create games for all genders.
- Consequently, MacCallum-Stewart views Pratchett's influence as rebranding Lara Croft as a feminist icon.

Sourcehttps://wccftech.com

* MacCallum-Stewart, E. (2014). "Take That, Bitches!" Refiguring Lara Croft in Feminist Game Narratives. Game Studies, 14(2).

Croft underwent a significant transformation in the 2013 reboot. Rhianna Pratchett's pivotal role as the head script writer in this transformation marked a shift in the ideological and ludic aspects of Tomb Raider. Pratchett's involvement signifies a recognition that female players are now a crucial audience aligning with the industry's need to create games for all genders. Consequently, MacCallum Stewart views Pratchett's influence as rebranding Lara Croft as a feminist icon.

Consequently, Lara evolved from a hypersexualized adventurer to a more relatable and complex character. Her appearance became less overtly sexual, and the game focused on her survival and growth highlighting her vulnerabilities.

Representation in the Rebooted Series*

- In *Rise of The Tomb Raider* (Square Enix, 2015), Lara's physique is lean and athletic, avoiding the hyperfeminization seen in the old Lara.
- In old Lara Croft's earlier games, her wardrobe allowed players to choose various outfits, many of which were skintight and revealing, emphasizing her hyperfeminine figure, often for cosmetic purposes.
- In contrast, in *Rise of The Tomb Raider*, new Lara has a range of practical outfits, with 18 providing tactical advantages.
- The option of revealing clothes does not exist for new Lara, highlighting her move away from the postfeminist ideal of a hyperfeminized, sexualized body.

Engelbrecht, J. (2020). The New Lara Phenomenon: A Postfeminist Analysis of *Rise of the Tomb Raider*. Game Studies, 20(3).

Source: https://www.flickr.com

Lara's physique is lean and athletic in Rise of the Tomb Raider avoiding the hyper-feminization seen in the old personality of Lara. In old Lara Crofts that is in her earlier games, her wardrobe allowed players to choose various outfits many of which were skintight and revealing emphasizing the hyper-feminine figure often for cosmetic purposes. In contrast, in Rise of Tomb Raider, new Lara has a range of practical outfits with 18 providing tactical advantages. The option of revealing clothes does not exist for new Lara highlighting her move away from the post-feminist ideal of a hyper-feminized sexualized body.

This marked a departure from earlier iterations encouraging a more inclusive and realistic representation that resonated with a broader range of players.

- Lara Croft's character transformation is marked by her shift from a two-dimensional, blank signifier in her earlier versions, which invited objectification or projection by players.
- The use of Morphology facial technology for the new Lara, with emotions performed by an actress, adds depth and complexity to her character.
- Old Lara's lack of individuating detail allowed her to be continually reinvented across media platforms, often in sexualized roles, whereas new Lara primarily appears as an action heroine, less likely to be objectified.

Source: https://www.reddit.com

The character transformation of Lara Croft is marked by her shift from a two-dimensional blank signifier in her earlier versions which invited objectification or projection by players. The use of morphology facial technology for the new Lara with emotions performed by an actress adds depth and complexity to her character. New Lara's lack of individuating detail allowed her to be continually reinvented across media platforms often in sexualized roles, whereas new Lara primarily appears as an action heroine less likely to be objectified.

This transformation challenged conventional gender stereotypes in gaming and broadened the appeal of female protagonists.

The Desexualized Heroine

- New Lara represents a departure from the postfeminist 'supergirl' trope that has prevailed in popular culture for two decades.
- As a pioneering female video game hero, Lara Croft has influenced the emergence of other female protagonists resembling the characteristics of new Lara, altering the landscape of female characters in AAA video games.
- This shift toward a new heroine archetype is reflected in various games released after 2013, marking a noteworthy transformation.

Source: https://g-mnews.com

* MacCallum-Stewart, E. (2014). "Take That, Bitches!" Refiguring Lara Croft in Feminist Game Narratives. Game Studies, 14(2).

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New Lara represents thus a departure from the post-feminist supergirl trope that has prevailed in popular culture for two decades. As a pioneering female video game hero, Lara Croft has influenced the emergence of other female protagonists resembling the characteristics of new Lara altering the landscape of female characters in AAA video games. This shift towards a new heroine archetype is reflected in various games released after 2013 marking a noteworthy transformation.

The 2013 video game reboot also inspired a reboot of the original movie franchise that starred Angelina Jolie as the titular character. The following video talks about the 2018 movie and how it signifies a departure from its predecessor.

Source: CityNews Video Link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LNnsZ51D1T8

A character that's long been hyper-sexualized gets a rebrand with the Tomb Raider reboot. Lara Croft is no longer a sex symbol protagonist in this rendition, so can she become a feminist icon? Star Alyssa Vikander hopes so. I'm Terri Hart and in today's entertainment city, a Tomb Raider for the times. It will be an adventure. In the world that we live in now, I love that it was integrated for young women to feel like it's a feminine young woman who also has the physical strength.

At a time of a seismic shift in Hollywood's attitude toward women, the new Tomb Raider movie moves away from Lara Croft's beginnings, which date back to 1996 and the first Tomb Raider video game when Croft became the first main female heroine in gaming. Acting as a catalyst for more female leads to follow, but she was presented in barely there clothes with a tiny waist and ginormous breasts. The result was that Croft became both a symbol of female self-empowerment and an object of sexual desire. When the first film adaptation of Tomb Raider came out in 2001, Angelina Jolie certainly kicked butt as a very strong Lara Croft.

You might try to kill me. I'm not going to kill you. I said you'd try. But it was still a film whose protagonist was hypersexualized. Fast forward to 2018 and Vikander as Lara Croft, who brings a modern fierce feel to the character, not unlike Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman. This adaptation is based on a 2013 reboot of the Tomb Raider video game, which cast Lara as more of a survivalist with deeper character development.

Of course, I grew up watching Angelina Jolie make an icon on the screen with the films back then, but we can make something that can be relatable for a 2018 audience that will

be something new, a very kind of human connection to this character. I was proud of everyone involved who decided to make sure that these films need to come up to the surface. Whilst filming this, or actually just wrapping it up, I went and saw Wonder Woman. I was just floored. I was growing up thinking that I would never see anything like it.

 People are so hungry for these stories that sadly haven't been shined light upon before.

For City News, I'm Terri Hart.

The transformation of female characters in video games, such as the shift from old Lara to the new one, can be attributed to advancements in gaming technology, enabling more detailed programming. Female characters now exhibit greater diversity in appearance, personality and roles within the narrative of the game. This evolution provides opportunities for more authentic and empowering portrayals of women, reflecting the broader shifts in society's perception of gender roles.

- Efforts by major gaming companies to diversify their development teams, highlighting various gender, racial, and cultural backgrounds, have also played a role.
- The involvement of women in key positions within the industry has led to more progressive portrayals of female characters.
- Increasing female participation in gaming and the rise of esports further contribute to changing perceptions of women in the gaming world. (Dwan, 2019)*

India's CS:GO female team in World Esports Championship (WEC 2023)
Source: https://www.in.ign.com

* Dwan, H. (2017). What are esports? A beginner's guide. Retrieved October 14, 2023, from https://www.telegraph.co.uk/gaming/guides/esports-beginners-guide/.

 Efforts by major gaming companies to diversify their development teams, highlighting various gender, racial and cultural backgrounds have also played a definite role. The involvement of women in key positions within the industry has also led to more progressive portrayals of female characters. The increasing female participation in gaming and the rise of e-sports further contribute to changing perceptions of women in the gaming world.

Brenda Laurel, one of the early female game designers, recognized that girls had different gaming preferences, favoring experiences, emphasizing social interaction, verbal skills and transmedia.

Brenda Laurel is an American interaction designer, video game designer and researcher. She had founded in 1996 Purple Moon, a company creating games for girls between the age group of 8 and 14. The company focused on real life decision making over appearance and materialism. Purple Moon's games prioritized storytelling and exploring everyday scenarios as opposed to competitive score-driven games. While the company was criticized for emphasizing gender specific game design, it aimed to cater to girls' unique preferences also.

Similarly, in recognizing the need for socially and environmentally conscious video games that counter traditional gender stereotypes, Mary Flanagan has been a pivotal figure in developing games for girls.

Mary Flanagan

- Mary Flanagan, from TiltFactor Laboratory, pioneers socially and environmentally conscious video games as an alternative to mainstream male-dominated video game production.
- One of her creations, *The Adventures of Josie True* (1997), features Josie, an Asian girl, and her adventure with Ms. Trombone, an African American character, meeting historic female figures.
- These games promote diversity, empower women and young girls, and counter the sexualization commonly found in mainstream media and video games.

Mary Flanagan
Source: https://www.iadas.net

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Modern AAA video games have started to address and represent alternate sexualities more inclusively. While traditional gaming narratives predominantly centered on heterosexual romances, newer titles aim for diversity and inclusion.

Alternate Sexualties in Modern Video Games

- Renowned Role-Playing Game (RPG) creators Bioware introduced same sex relationships in *the Mass Effect* series *(2007-2017)*.
- *Life is Strange* (2015) is celebrated for its representation of alternate sexualities, with the central character, Max, having a close friendship with Chloe that can develop into a romantic relationship, exploring LGBTQ+ themes.
- *The Last of Us II* (2020) made history as the first mainstream game to feature an openly LGBTQIA+ main character.

Source: https://www.playstation.com

Renowned role-playing game creators BioWare introduced same-sex relationships in the Mass Effect series which ran between 2007 and 2017. Life is Strange in 2015 is celebrated for its representation of alternate sexualities with the central character Max having a close friendship with Chloe that can develop into a romantic relationship exploring LGBTQ plus themes. The Last of Us Part II in 2020 made history as a first mainstream game to feature an openly LGBTQIA plus main character.

This shift reflects a broader societal push for more comprehensive representation promoting empathy and understanding of alternate sexualities among players.

In conclusion, the evolving representation of gender in video games is a reflection of the shifting cultural landscape. From the early ambiguous depictions of female characters in titles like Tomb Raider to the challenges of the damsel in distress narrative, we have witnessed significant transformations.

Conclusion

- Female identification with iconic characters like Lara Croft has deepened, and we've scrutinized how some games have perpetuated the male gaze and sexualized imagery.
- The 2013 Tomb Raider reboot marked a pivotal moment, desexualizing traditional heroines and highlighting the impact of technological advancements in the industry.

  - Pioneers like Brenda Laurel and Mary Flanagan have contributed to creating games for girls, fostering inclusivity.
  - Furthermore, the representation of alternate sexualities in modern AAA games, exemplified by *Life is Strange*, illustrates a broader societal acceptance and celebration of diversity.

Female identification with iconic characters like Lara Croft has deepened and we have scrutinized how some games have perpetuated the male gaze and the sexualized imagery. The 2013 Tomb Raider reboot marked a pivotal moment, desexualizing traditional heroines and highlighting the impact of technological advancements in the industry. Pioneers like Brenda Laurel and Mary Flanagan have contributed to creating games for girls fostering inclusivity. Furthermore, the representation of alternate sexualities in modern triple A games exemplified by Life is Strange illustrates a further and broader societal acceptance and celebration of diversity.

These changes reflect a more inclusive, complex and culturally attuned video game landscapes emphasizing the medium's power to shape and be shaped by our ever-evolving perceptions of gender and identity.

Next week we will discuss the latest technological developments in modern communication, media, and their applications in our day-to-day lives.

Thank you.