

Interdisciplinary Perspectives *on the* Legacy *of* Lara Croft

Studies of Culture, Fandom and Gender

Edited by

Natalie Le Clue

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EDITED BY

NATALIE LE CLUE

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And of course, a special nod to Lara Croft herself, probably the first digital heroine I ever cheered for, jumped with, and occasionally cursed at. Here's to many more adventures ahead.

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Introduction

Natalie Le Clue

Like many who first encountered *Tomb Raider* in the late 90s, my relationship with it began with a sense of awe, a lot of frustration and intense immersion. I remember being captivated, not just by the intricate puzzles or the thrill of navigating tombs, but by Lara herself. Lara felt different. She was bold, unbothered, brilliant, and a kind of character I had never seen before. And in many ways, Lara Croft was not just a character – she was the beginning of my gaming life, a touchstone for everything that would follow. I did not yet have the language of fan studies, but I knew that this game meant something.

Over the years, I have played every iteration of the series, and the joy, nostalgia, and attachment have never left me. It is this long-standing personal connection that made me particularly attuned to the ways fans reflect on *Tomb Raider* across various platforms. By having previously explored nostalgia and memory in fandom through research on *The X-Files* (Le Clue and Vermaak-Griessel, 2024), I was struck by the affective richness and narrative complexity that emerge when fans reflect on *Tomb Raider*. However, memory is merely one strand of what Lara Croft means to players, viewers, and fans across the decades. Over 30 years she has been reimagined, rebooted, debated, adored, critiqued, commodified, and reclaimed.

As this collection shows, *Tomb Raider* is a site of constant negotiation over identity, representation, genre, power and place. Lara Croft occupies a unique position at the intersection of genre innovation, technological evolution, feminist iconography, colonial fantasy, and global fan labour. Because of this, fans and scholars have wrestled with what Lara's evolving form, voice, and adventures signify. Whether it is viewed through the lens of embodiment, gender politics, colonial discourse, or media legacy, *Tomb Raider* provides rich terrain for interdisciplinary inquiry. The contributions for this collection reflect this diversity. They draw from fan studies, game studies, gender studies, cultural history, postcolonial critique, and legal analysis to unpack the many meanings and contradictions that the franchise embodies.

This collection is formed around four thematic sections each one addressing a key set of questions that arise when engaging with *Tomb Raider* critically. The first section, *Body and Identity,* focuses on the construction and reception of Lara Croft's digital body. Here, Zegura, Simard, and Carazo explore how

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the character's visual design has shaped gendered expectations in gaming, how fans negotiate representation through critical perspectives, and how memes both reproduce and subvert long held tropes of power, sexualisation, and nostalgia.

In *Memory and Narrative,* the second section, the focus shifts to how *Tomb Raider* is remembered (Le Clue), rewritten (Berns and Camillieri), and narrativised (Engelbrecht). These chapters examine the franchise as a source of emotional continuity and demonstrate how fans and creators embed the franchise into personal and collective storytelling practices. The third section, *Genre and Gaming Influence,* explores *Tomb Raider's* role in shaping the action-adventure genre (Romero) and extends to investigate the legal and cultural discourses present (Stec, Perez, and Parawicz). These contributions show the franchise as not only a product of innovation but as a case study in how games mediate questions of heritage and cultural imagination.

In the final section, *Colonial Narratives and Cultural Impact,* contributors challenge the franchise's entanglement with colonial logics (Srinivas and Diwakar) and its global afterlives. These chapters interrogate the ideological complications of Lara's adventures (van der Walt) and highlight the complicity and resistance thereof (Farooqui).

In combination, these chapters showcase the critical and interdisciplinary potential of considering *Tomb Raider* as a cultural text which is situated at the intersection of media history, identity politics and fan engagement. By interrogating Lara Croft through lenses such as body politics, affective memory, postcolonial critique, and genre formation, the contributors demonstrate the extent to which the franchise functions as both a product and a producer of expanded cultural discourses. It proffers that Lara is not only a fictional figure but is instead a contested site of meaning that continues to absorb and reflect the shifting modalities, anxieties and desires of the world around her. By mapping Lara's digital and symbolic presence, the contributors trace the evolving terrain of gender, power, media, and memory in the contemporary moment.

Reference

Le Clue, N. & Vermaak-Griessel, J. (2023) "X Files till I DIE": Fan memory from the X-Philes. In J. Fenwick & D. A. Rodgers (Eds.), *The legacy of the X-files* (pp. 207–218). Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

Section 1

Body and Identity

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Chapter 1

Polygonal Pleasures: Lara Croft's Body and 3D Computer Graphics

Cass Zegura

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Abstract

'Lara looks better Flat' (ATI Technologies Inc, 1998b, p. 201). So proclaimed an advertisement for the ATI XPERT@Play 98 computer graphics card, which juxtaposed the flat-panel display that the card was designed for with the roundness of Lara Croft's body. The author situates this body within the technological developments that produced this card and the rhetoric of its advertisement: the so-called '3D Graphics Revolution'. Lara Croft's attractiveness was discursively linked to these developments in the mid-to-late 1990s, as they produced the visual pleasures of her novel, digital three-dimensional body. This chapter uses consumer-oriented computer gaming magazines from the 90s to explore how 3D graphics and its promises were staked to Lara Croft's body, from editorial commentary on her 'considerable' polygons to advertisements for hardware graphics accelerators. Within Lara Croft, the logics of gender and polygons became intimately intertwined. Immersion was – and remains – a gendered fantasy.

Keywords: Computer games history; 3D graphics; immersion; sexism; embodiment; visual pleasure

Introduction

At first glance, one would be hard-pressed to identify the actual product of the opening advertisement in the first issue of *PC Accelerator* (Imagine Media, 1998-2000). Past its cover warning that the hobbyist gaming magazine was

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'NOT SUITABLE FOR SMALL CHILDREN OR OLD WOMEN' lay a two-page spread contrasting the original black-and-white sketch of the iconographic Lara Croft with her 3D model from the latest instalment of the *Tomb Raider* franchise. Compared to the sketch's wide, open stance, 3D Lara is rendered coquettishly, glancing over the shoulder at the reader with one arm folded across her stomach and the other held close to her chest, her gun resting just above the curve of her prominent cleavage. This would seem to be an advertisement for the upcoming *Tomb Raider III* (1998), but the ad's sparse text suggests something else: 'With the power of 3Dfx EIDOS brought Lara Croft from object… to obsession' (3Dfx Interactive Inc., 1998b, pp. 2–3). From just the ad, it is not evident what 3Dfx is or what power it lent the *Tomb Raider* developers. What is on clear display is Lara Croft herself and the promised, tantalising transformation from a digital object to something more. Something desirable.

It is expensive for computers to produce images, from the graphical user interfaces that we interact with daily to the *video* of video games. This is all the more true for 3D games, of which the original *Tomb Raider* (1996) was among the very first. In the 1990s, advances in processing power allowed computers to handle more than the pixels and two-dimensional sprites that had previously defined the medium's visual aesthetics. 3D graphics afforded a more immersive and realistic depiction of spaces – the real world is three-dimensional, after all – at the cost of being more computationally complex, a distinction akin to high school geometry versus linear algebra. Generating these objects and manipulating them – even in simple ways like giving them colour or moving them through the game world – necessitated dedicated hardware. 3Dfx and companies like it came in to do just that: selling specialised circuit boards known as graphics cards that removed processing strain from the rest of the system and improved graphics quality and speed. Such specialised chips had existed for years in arcade machines, console systems, and personal computers, but the technical demands of 3D graphics intensified their marketing as consumer products for gamers. At the helm of the so-called '3D Graphics Revolution', advertisements exploded across gaming magazines like *PC Accelerator* as companies like NVIDIA, Diamond Multimedia, PowerVR, and ATI Technologies sought to convince gamers that *their* chip would offer an unprecedented level of realism and immersion.

Yet there was no chip in 3Dfx's 1998 ad. No circuits, no semiconductors, no wires, nothing explicitly referencing its Voodoo2 3D chip at all.[1] Just Lara Croft's body.

The use of women's bodies in advertising is nothing novel. Numerous scholars have drawn out the gendered dimensions of gamer magazines and their presumed male audience (Apperley, 2023; Consalvo, 2007; Cote, 2018; Fisher, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Kocurek, 2015). Acknowledging this work, this essay takes

[1]The racist appropriation within this product line should not go unstated. A heavily stigmatised Black cultural and spiritual practice, Voodoo was likely chosen as a name for its mystical, exotic, and othering associations to promise a power in graphics processing akin to witchcraft.

an interest less in gamers themselves and more in how Lara Croft was presented in these magazines as a uniquely three-dimensional object. Evident in advertisements like 3Dfx's, as well as references from fans and critics alike to her *polygons* as a discursive substitute for her more sexualised physical characteristics, Lara Croft's body was enmeshed not merely with the *Tomb Raider* franchise but with a whole new paradigm of computer graphics. This has implications for understanding the medium of video games itself. The promises associated with these technical developments – more realism, more pleasure, more immersion – became associated with Croft by extension. And, by extension, these promises and the technologies used to approximate them were, and continue to be, gendered, from the first angular meshes of the 90s to contemporary ultra-high-resolution virtualised micropolygon geometry (*Unreal Engine 5 is now available!*, 2022).

This essay begins by overviewing existing scholarship on gaming magazines and gender, framing the essay's historiographical work, and providing a brief technical introduction to the real-time 3D graphics of the mid-1990s. It then parses two distinct but related discourses within computer gaming magazines on Lara Croft as a 3D object. I term this three-dimensional objecthood '3Dness' as a shorthand for the technical – and, I argue, gendered – qualities of being 3D in a digital space. For example, in the first of these two analyses, I consider how Lara Croft being a 3D object, as a technologically produced material status, was used to talk about her body and its desirability, such that the technical and the sexual were inextricable from one another. In the second analysis, I focus on the discourses of 3Dfx and other graphics chip manufacturers that used this sexualised 3Dness to sell the technologies that enabled it. In these advertisements, the hardware of real-time 3D graphics became – and, indeed, always was – also a technology for producing gendered differences. The final part of this essay repositions Lara Croft within a different game genealogy, predicated not on the action-adventure genre but on the longstanding suturing of immersion to (cisgender and white) women's bodies. Drawing on wide-ranging examples from the destructibility of sex workers in *Duke Nukem 3D* (1996) to early erotic computer games, the visual pleasures and possibilities of video games have long been staked to their female characters. Lara Croft offered another instance of this promise, reiterated for a new technology and a new visual paradigm.

Gender and Gaming Magazines

Coverage of gaming in magazines and other forms of paratext is foundational to shaping gamer cultures and gaming itself as an activity (Consalvo, 2007). Numerous scholars have taken this premise to zero in on how these magazines represent gender as part of constituting the male gamer identity. Early instances of this work considered topics like the associations between the arcade and boyhood as constructed in the popular press (Kocurek, 2015), the proliferation of hypersexualised, objectified female characters (and the related absence or ridicule of female gamers) (Fisher, 2015), and the role of these magazines in solidifying the popular and masculinised perception of who a gamer was, particularly in the 1980s (Kirkpatrick, 2012; Apperley, 2023). This perception – and with it implications

for whom it would be most profitable to orient towards – was so ossified that even as women and girls were always playing games and organising their own gamer movements, media about games remained conservatively oriented towards men and boys (Cote, 2018). Throughout this literature is an understanding that gender in games, both representationally and in broader cultural meaning-making, is not static, innate, or historically transcendent. Rather, through advertisements, reviews, editorial commentary, and interstitial content, these magazines, particularly from the 1980s to the turn of the century, contributed to the enactment of video games as a boys-only club, a medium for men and their desires.

This chapter takes this basic conceit and applies it instead to the technological periphery of the medium – the technical processes of visualisation, also known as rendering, that might seem so abstracted from representation that they pass as neutral or apolitical (Freedman, 2020, p. 165). I am interested less in counting and describing depictions of women and more in the language already used to describe them, as this discourse joined Lara Croft specifically to the technical developments of real-time 3D graphics, and the longstanding aspirations for media(tion) therein (Bazin, 1946). Despite my narrower scope, I borrow methodologically from this earlier scholarship to analyse the texts and visuals in my corpus. My reading of these artifacts is a close one, focusing on a handful of advertisements and individual phrases. In weaving them together across magazines and years, these objects form a pattern that implicates gaming technologies in gaming representation – despite their historical separation within game studies (Malkowski and Russworm, 2017).

In constituting the archival materials for this essay and its textual analysis, I have chosen to focus primarily on computer gaming consumer magazines. *Tomb Raider* was initially published on three platforms: MS-DOS (Microsoft Disk Operating System), the PlayStation, and the Sega Saturn. The franchise and its protagonist made appearances across both general gaming magazines and console-specific ones, gracing, for example, the cover of the November 1998 issue of the *Official U.S. Playstation Magazine* (Ziff Davis Media, 1997–2007). However, the contours of the computer gaming consumer market are distinct from those for consoles. This produced unique discussions of and advertising for 3Dness that would have otherwise been folded into the console itself. The PlayStation had its own proprietary graphics chip built into the hardware. A company like 3Dfx had less reason to advertise to these players. For a PC gamer, however, better graphics – and thus greater immersion – could be purchased, creating a competitive market for selling realism.

For this reason, my analysis primarily considers two American computer gaming magazines: *Computer Gaming World* (Ziff Davis, 1981-2006), hereafter *CGW,* and *PC Accelerator*. *CGW* was a popular monthly publication, second only to its (regrettably less archived) rival *PC Gamer* (Future US, 1994-present) (MDS Connect, 2003). It favoured an objective, journalistic, and critical, if informal, style aimed at appealing to computer gamers across age and genre preference, even offering (and defending) some early critiques of sexism (Computer Gaming World, 1995, pp. 22–24; Dembo, 1995, p. 62) and racism (Chin, 1997, pp. 221–222; Wilson, 1997, p. 25) in gaming. By contrast, *PC Accelerator* was more niche in