

Not That Kind of Croft: A Feminist Textual Analysis of the 2013 *Tomb Raider* Video Game

By

Lydia McInnes

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Women's and Gender Studies Department

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Approved:

Barbara Friedman, Ph.D., Advisor

Alice Marwick, Ph.D., Reader

Lilly Nguyen, Ph.D., Reader

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Chapter One

“Adventure Found Me”: An Introduction

Gaming’s bravest (and bustiest) archaeologist crashed back onto the scene in 2013 after nearly five years since her last [main] video game appearance. Ever since the beginning of her crypt-hunting career, tomb raider Lara Croft has been both a figure of female empowerment and an objectified sex symbol meant entirely for the male gaze. However problematic she may be, Lara is also an example of ideal female representation and how future gamers, designers, and programmers can start to change the traditionally male-dominated industry.

Lydia McInnes, “Lara Croft in Gaming: Feminism in a
Hypermasculine Industry,” 2016

Or so I thought in 2016, when I wrote the above UNC PIT Journal essay. Upon reflection, however, I have felt alternately heartened and discouraged by the tone of my article: heartened by the enthusiasm and passion with which I examined and defended the Lara Croft I met and fell in love with in late 2013, and discouraged by the way I defended her without an appreciation of her long-running status as a geek-male fembot fantasy and the 2013 game’s problematic characterization of her as a vulnerable and victimized female protagonist.

When I wrote that paper, I was a first-year still finding my way at college. I had a passion for writing, and a fledgling feminism that had yet to be tested. After its publication, I took my first Women’s and Gender Studies class, and, in 2017, as a rising junior, I declared the major and took my first class on feminist theory.

Thus, I find myself in the unusual position of a feminist scholar at the beginning of her scholarly career reflecting on and writing in response to her own work. Although other feminists

have surely revisited their work, my first “true” scholarly work is, essentially, a response to my own optimistic, but untested earlier work.

I mention this in observation of feminist research traditions of reflexivity and to provide some context for this analysis, which is itself the result of a long fascination with Lara and her history as a pioneer of female representation in the male-dominated video game industry (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Even as I wrote the PIT essay, I knew there was more to read from Lara’s character and the 2013 game named for her. In this way, my thesis has been a long time coming – almost my entire collegiate career, in fact.

So much of the work I have done (and will continue to do) is in response to my personal experience playing and analyzing video games. For several years now, I have (sporadically) written articles about feminism in gaming and popular culture on my blog, *Cosmetics and Consoles*, and I have talked at length to everyone and anyone who will listen about the need for critical study and reform in the gaming industry.

Thus, this project represents a synthesis of the academic and personal realms of my life, my passion for writing and feminism, and my interest in video games and cultural studies. It combines cultural and content analysis with feminist understandings of gender and power toward the goal of building a database of narrative and character representation recommendations for future games. Further, it is a step toward my ultimate goal of writing and designing Triple-A video games with unabashedly feminist protagonists. This critical feminist analysis of Lara will illuminate encoded meanings in *Tomb Raider*, that will, in turn, help me to be a more conscientious feminist game producer.

Although the game was and remains problematic for several reasons, I argue that reading the game as a feminist text will encourage further critical analysis of this game and others.

Critical discourse about video game representation and portrayal will benefit the gaming industry and its current and future players: It will encourage more diverse female and minority representations in games, and increase the potential for less harmful, more engaging story lines and game elements to become the industry *norm* rather than the *exception*.

This project and the intensive feminist research accompanying it were almost certainly not what 15-year-old me had in mind when I first installed *Tomb Raider* in 2013. But this adventure -- like the one Lara Croft encounters in the game -- found me.

“You’re a Croft, Lara”: #Gamergate and The Necessity of Feminist Game Studies

In August 2014, after the Steam¹ release of independent game designer Zoë Quinn’s *Depression Quest*,² Quinn’s ex-boyfriend Eron Gjoni wrote a series of blog posts about her that, among other things, accused her of engaging in a relationship with a journalist in exchange for a positive review of her game. This moment is cited by many as triggering the vicious “Gamergate” controversy, a loosely defined “movement” among traditional geek masculine gamers that was characterized by a backlash toward feminism and progressivism in video games.

#Gamergate, as it came to be known, was a savage online movement disparaging women and minority representation in video games under the guise of protesting unethical practices in game reporting. It was a violent, misogynistic, right-wing response to a perceived threat to geek masculine dominance in the video game industry, an attempt to bar women and other minority groups from entering traditionally masculine game spaces (Shaw, 2014).

Although it raged primarily from late 2014 to 2016, such behavior continues in many forms to this day, from a backlash against “historically inaccurate”³ WWII female soldiers in *Battlefield V*, to a boob-heavy representation of women in *SoulCalibur VI*, a game featuring female

character models that have changed little, if at all, from the original release 23 years ago (Farokhmanesh, 2018; Regan, 2018). Quinn and others, including game developer Brianna Wu and feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian, were among the individuals targeted by trolls and hackers in the months following the release of *Depression Quest*. They faced sustained online attacks that included doxing,⁴ hacking of their social media accounts, and rape and death threats. The response to Sarkeesian was particularly vicious after the start of her 2013 video series, *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, which aired on her website, *Feminist Frequency*. Her likeness was even made the subject of a Canadian internet game in which players could punch her in the face, transforming it into a bruised and bloodied image (Consalvo, 2012).

#Gamergate is important to mention within the context of my thesis, as it was a response to increasing female and minority representation in video games and can even be interpreted as a direct response to the 2013 *Tomb Raider* video game, the subject of this project, which featured a female protagonist relentlessly mowing down an entire island of male cult survivors in order to save her (female) friend's life and rescue her shipwrecked crew. Despite the care⁵ taken by its predominantly male developers to assuage male fears of a strong, powerful, *indomitable* female protagonist, far-right⁶ male audiences of the 2013 *Tomb Raider* witnessed Lara's character evolve: She learned how to strap a grenade launcher onto a rifle and fire it at her would-be murderers. She used the tip of her climbing axe to bash a man's head, screaming: "Run you bastards! I'm coming for you all!" And they were afraid.

While it is true that in the years since #Gamergate, mainstream gamer culture has charted a path away from misogynistic extremism toward greater representation with positive female portrayals in both non-player/non-playable characters (NPCs) and playable protagonists, much work remains to be done (Humphreys, 2017). Since *Tomb Raider*'s release in early 2013, there

has been a steady increase in the number of female playable protagonists featured in Triple-A console titles. Yet despite this and, despite the fact that the percentage of female players has hovered around the 50% mark for the past several years, the number of games with female protagonists pales in comparison to the number of games with all-male or predominantly-male playable protagonists (ESA, 2018).

ESA numbers and the lack of gender parity. Evidence of the gender discrepancy in video games comes primarily from the annual report of the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), the major trade association for the video game industry and the central regulating body for most intellectual property protection policies, government outreach and lobbying, and business and consumer outreach and research. In the 2018 edition of the organization's annual report *Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry*, the average age of the US gamer was found to be about 34 years old (32 average for men, 36 average for women), with gamers ages 18 and older representing more than 70% of the total game-playing population (ESA, 2018, n.p.). Interestingly, adult women (ages 18 and older) represent a larger portion of players than boys 18 and under, an estimated 33% women compared to 17% men (ESA, 2018, n.p.). This is contrary to many cultural assumptions about gamers, which tend to depict them as overwhelmingly young, cis-gendered, white heterosexual men (Consalvo, 2012; Shaw, 2014; Humphreys, 2017).

That percentage, women over 18 as 33% of the total gaming demographic, is up from 31% in 2016, while the share of boys under 18, around 17%, is down 1% from 2016 (ESA 2018). And yet, of those that qualify as “frequent purchasers,” 61% are men whereas only 39% are female (ESA, 2018, n.p.). While the report does not detail what makes a player a “frequent purchaser,” it is worth noting that of the top 20 games of 2017, just six of them allow gamers *the*

option to play as a female character (*Destiny 2*, *Mario Kart 8*, *For Honor*, *Injustice 2* and *Overwatch*), and just two games feature a *female-only* protagonist (*Horizon Zero Dawn* and the single-player campaign of *Star Wars: Battlefront II*) (ESA, 2018). Perhaps then, there is a relationship between “frequent purchasers” and player gender that influences the types of games produced (and the representations therein).

The report goes on to parse the ages of male and female players before declaring in semi-bold type near the end of the page that “45% of US gamers are women” (ESA, 2018, n.p.). The question then becomes, if nearly half of all gamers are women, why did over half of the most popular games of 2017 feature male-only playable characters? Why wasn’t that number closer to 10, closer to parity, and why are female-led games like *Horizon Zero Dawn* and the single-player campaign of *Star Wars: Battlefront II* still the exception and not the rule of the gaming industry? The history of the video game industry offers some clues.

Video game history and the lionization of geek masculinity. From its beginnings in the late 1970s, to its post-1980s boom, video games have lionized a type of “hard-core” geek masculinity, one that exists in two places at once: outside the traditional boundaries of hegemonic masculinity, but within the circles of identity, power, and capital that make up the video game industry (Consalvo, 2012). While such an in-depth discussion of how this came to be and how exactly it is maintained is beyond the scope of this study, it is important to recognize that this central-marginal position of white male players – when combined with all the power and influence that comes with such positions – allowed them to erase other gamer identities, both in terms of audience consideration and character representation. Women and other minority groups have, in essence, been *symbolically annihilated* (Tuchman, 1979) by geek masculine gamers: harassed and silenced as an audience demographic, overwhelmingly erased from narrative

considerations, and continually depicted as stereotypical victims and damsels-in-distress. This has happened while geek male gamers and producers have canonized themselves and their identity – straight, white, male – as the ideal video game character, the ideal video game consumer, and the ideal video game producer (for elaboration, e.g., Consalvo, 2012; Shaw, 2014; and Lien, 2013).

In order to determine the degree to which female identities have been erased, or annihilated, from the video game canon, I used the media review aggregator site Metacritic to isolate the top 100 games from 2010 to 2017 and found that, of the 431 games cited on Metacritic, only 7% of games featured female-only protagonists. This means that a pitiful 30 games of 431 games counted for that period had a female protagonist as the *main and only* playable character. Compare that to 46% of games featuring male-only playable characters (199 games), 29% of games that give players a choice between a male or female playable character (126 games), 12% of games with indeterminately gendered playable characters (50 games), and 6% of games with a playable character whose gender was left unstated but presumed to be male (26 games). Thus, despite the fact that women represent almost half of all gamers in the United States, only 7% of all games released in last seven years had female characters as the sole playable character in the main game campaign (see Figure 1).⁷

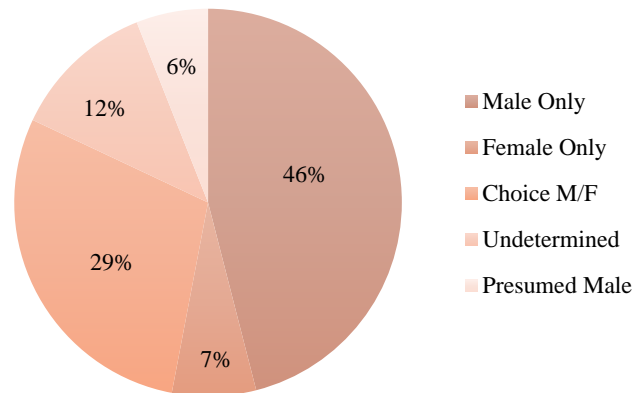


Figure 1: Gender breakdown of main playable protagonist in Metacritic top 100 games (2010-2017)

It is important to note that 29% of total games (mostly fighting, action-adventure, and role-playing, or RPG, games) gave players a choice between male and female players. While allowing players to choose between a male or female protagonist might sound like progress, “it takes another level of commitment to have your game be led [by] a preordained female character” (Tassi, 2014, n.p.). On the speculation that *Halo 5* could have had a lead female protagonist, Paul Tassi, a Forbes reporter notes that “only a few established legends get [the] honor” of being a lead female protagonist. Lara Croft and Samus Aran (protagonist of Nintendo’s *Metroid* series) are perhaps the two most (in)famous, and new female leads are “few and far between” (Tassi, 2014, n.p.).

The importance of Lara Croft. It is because these female characters are “few and far between” that it is important to consider the ones we have, as they often serve dual roles as cultural icons of female representation in a male-dominated industry, and as lighting rods of feminist praise and criticism (Tassi, 2014, n.p.). This study examines the character of Lara Croft

through a feminist critical lens, looking specifically at her character and how it is depicted throughout the 2013 game.

In this thesis, I examine Lara as she is presented in the 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot, a Triple-A,⁸ action-adventure video game developed by Crystal Dynamics and published by Square Enix as the tenth installment in the wildly successful *Tomb Raider* franchise. Following Lara's journey from castaway to cult-island survivor, *Tomb Raider* constructs a new and updated origin story for the famed archaeologist, one of the only playable female video game characters to withstand the test of time and remain culturally relevant.

I am looking specifically at Lara because, as previously mentioned, she was one of the first examples of female representation in video games and is, arguably, the most enduringly popular female video game character of all time. Critically analyzing the discourse surrounding Lara in all her video game iterations and, more importantly, her character and depiction in the 2013 game, will, I hope, encourage broader deconstruction of traditional gamer norms and expectations that will stop geek masculine gamers from symbolically annihilating women and other minority identities from video game discourse (Tuchman, 1979). Additionally, I will argue that celebrating the parts of Lara that make her different from her male video game protagonist counterparts – i.e., her female presentation and her feminist characteristics – will establish a precedence for future video games in which the harmful, negative views of women and minority populations, so often perpetuated through stereotypical character depictions and tired narrative tropes, are challenged and counteracted with more positive character representations.

Thus, this study asks, in what ways the 2013 *Tomb Raider* be read as a feminist text and in what ways can Lara be read as a feminist character? I say “can be” because I am not trying to ascertain whether or not it definitively is a feminist text and Lara a feminist character -- such a

fixed, objective truth is antithetical to the feminist mode of research. Further, the idea of whether or not it *is* feminist depends on the person reading the text and their ability to understand and decode the cultural messages contained within (Hall, 1999). Finally, asking the question of whether or not Lara is a feminist does her a disservice, reducing her to a good/bad binary that cannot account for the multiplicity of potential interpretations players can read from her character (Kennedy, 2002).

Thus, while I am asking if her character and the 2013 game in which she is depicted “can be” read as feminist, my study will focus on *how* she and the 2013 game can be read as such, looking specifically at Lara’s power and agency as the protagonist and main playable character of the game, how she progresses through the game space using her wit and ingenuity to conquer a male-dominated island of cult survivors (and how her character growth and progression through the island and the game’s levels can be interpreted as a metaphor for female movement through a male-dominated world), and how her friendship and ultimate rescue of the “damsel in distress” character Sam Nishimura functions as a lesbian “queering” of the traditional video game rescue narrative. It is my goal to encourage further critical analysis of this game and others, something that will, I hope, encourage more diverse representation among video game protagonists and a more welcoming video game culture as a whole.

Following a review of relevant literature, my analysis begins by looking at and addressing how the attempted sexual assault of Lara at the beginning of the game is both deeply problematic and highly Othering for female players and sexual assault survivors (Beauvoir, 1949). This scene and its treatment by male game leads, including executive producer Ron Rosenberg and brand director Karl Stewart, functions as an attempt to alleviate male fears of a powerful female protagonist, and while this may not “fit” with my feminist reading of the game

– as it may be hard to judge as strongly feminist a work that includes such a blatant disregard for female players and sexual assault survivors – it is important to acknowledge the scene as a cautionary tale for game developers and games to come.

After the analysis of the attempted sexual assault scene – the literal and figurative “Crossroads” of the 2013 game and this study – the thesis moves to a feminist textual analysis of the game, focusing particularly on the depiction of gender and power relations between Lara and other NPCs in the game *and* between Lara and the player.

This project is heavily influenced by feminist, media, and cultural studies traditions. Its approach is feminist, as it pays attention to “assessing the relations and expression of power within texts” with the ultimate goal of placing “central focus on the lives of women and members of other groups who have not traditionally held cultural and political power” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 267). It acknowledges the centrality of media in representing issues of power and focuses on the discourse surrounding and meanings embedded in the video game – a nontraditional textual body, perhaps, but undeniably, an “object that generates the meanings you want to know more about” (Brummett, 2010, p. 25). This study emphasizes culture in that it is dedicated to understanding the meanings and implications constructed and disseminated by cultural artifacts, including video games (Hesse-Biber, 2014).

This project is multilayered and multidisciplinary,⁹ just as the character of Lara Croft is multidimensional and multifaceted. I am, in effect, adding my feminist interpretation of the 2013 Lara and the game she appears in to the “ever-increasing variety of Laras, whose character natures . . . are in a constant state of flux” (Mikula, 2003, p. 84). While my reading of her – as a queer, oppositional, feminist female figure – may be different from others’ interpretations, I hope to do her justice by defining and elaborating on the feminist qualities and characteristics of her

and her game in a way that gives future game developers and designers (including myself), a reference on what to do and what *not* to do in designing a future feminist video game protagonist.

Chapter Two

“Remember What I Taught You”: Scholarly Readings of Lara Croft

Before my analysis of Lara Croft and the 2013 game can continue, it is important to review what other scholars have said about the development of her character since her video game debut. Throughout the years, she has been hailed as both a geek male fembot fantasy and a female pop culture icon, but scholarly feminist opinions of her have shifted of late, moving away from her blatant demonization in such works as *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (1998). In particular, contemporary scholars recognize her potential as an “empty sign” by which various gender-subversive interpretations can be realized (Mikula, 2003, p. 83).

Three of the four articles I have chosen to highlight in this study were published before the release of the 2013 *Tomb Raider* game and thus focus on previous iterations of the game franchise. The fourth article, published in late 2014, almost a full year after the game’s 2013 release, makes explicit references to the game I will be discussing, but the scope of the article also includes the history of Lara’s character and her “to-be-looked-at” body (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014, n.p.). I mention this to lend further justification to my study. While scholars have had plenty to say about the character of Lara Croft, there has not been an in-depth critical analysis of the 2013 game and its multiple cultural messages. I have chosen to focus on these four recent articles for their contributions to the study of Lara and *Tomb Raider* and because they share a common theme: the recognition and promotion of Lara’s potential for resignification through audience interpretations, something I am actively doing in this textual analysis and something I believe is important to most, if not all, cultural and media studies projects.

The first among these four articles is Anne-Marie Schleiner’s “Does Lara Croft Wear Fake Polygyons? Gender and Gender-Role Subversion in Computer Adventure Games” (2001).

This article examines the various “gender-subject configurations” that Lara’s character offers to players, allowing a “multiplicity of sometimes quite contrary positions and subjectivities,” to be read from her, including Female Frankenstein Monster, Dominatrix, Femme Fatale, Drag Queen, Positive Role Model, and Vehicle for the Queer Female Gaze (Schleiner, 2001, p. 222-224). By using a “cyborgian, piece-meal and polymorphous” analytic approach to studying Lara, Schleiner is examining her character from multiple theoretical angles in order to emphasize the queered potentials Lara’s character offers nontraditional players, or any who do not identify with the geek masculine player stereotype (Schleiner, 2001, p. 222).

Each of the positions takes a different approach to the character of Lara and how the player understands their relationship and gender configuration in comparison to her. For example, the “Frankenstein Monster” position posits Lara as a “fetish object of the male gaze” while the “Drag Queen” position emphasizes the potential for male players to be “transgendered”¹⁰ by playing her, thus rejecting rigid gender roles and encouraging them to “experiment with ‘wearing’ a feminine identity” (Schleiner, 2001, p. 222-223).

I want to highlight one of Schleiner’s potential gender-subject configurations, “Lara as Positive Role Model,” as this was the configuration that aligned with my initial reading of Lara in my first playthrough of the 2013 game. In this configuration, Lara is constructed as a “possible entry point into the male discursive domain of computer games” (Schleiner, 2001, p. 224). Essentially, Schleiner is arguing that, although Lara in the *Tomb Raider* games exists as a male construction of (exaggerated) femininity with her large breasts, small waist, and breathy voice, she can still function as a point of identification for female players. Once women and girls engage with the character, the “next step,” according to Schleiner, is for them to take an interest in the male-dominated field and begin to influence future female characters and creations

through their active participation (Schleiner, 2001, p. 224). Ultimately, the involvement of women and girls will reshape the gaming industry, and perhaps more enduringly, gamer culture.¹¹

Using the multiple gender-subject configurations presented by Schleiner, Helen Kennedy's article, "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis" (2002), functions as an attempt to reframe the feminist debates about Lara with an emphasis on moving beyond the binary "either/or answer" to whether or not she is a positive female character. Kennedy's article highlights the ways in which feminist debates about Lara tend to focus on her body and the dominant masculine, heterosexual reading of her character. The article begins by critiquing the question posed in its title – "Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?" – for its limitations. According to Kennedy, this question "presupposes an either/or answer, thereby neatly expressing the polarities around which most popular media and academic discussions of Lara Croft tend to revolve" (Kennedy, 2002, n.p.).

Lara is a "visual spectacle" for players, a "fantasy female figure" to be sure, but one that has a unique "bimodal" appeal for both women and men (Kennedy, 2002, n.p.). Lara-as-spectacle permits multiple feminist interpretations, one of which, in the vein of Schleiner's work, features a positive reading of Lara that focuses on the ways the original *Tomb Raider* game "rework[ed] a male-dominated genre and feature[d] a female central character" (Kennedy, 2002, n.p.). To many female players and feminist scholars, Lara's occupation of the traditionally masculine game space was a "rejection of particular patriarchal values and the norms of femininity" that allowed for a "direct contradiction of the typical location of femininity within the private or domestic space" (Kennedy, 2002, n.p.).

Other feminist scholars, however, have focused on Lara's role as an "eroticized object of the male gaze" in which she provides "fetishistic and scopophilic pleasures" for the male viewer (Kennedy, 2002, n.p.). In particular, Kennedy highlighted the way Lara's body is layered with "fetishistic signifiers" – the round glasses, the holster/garter belts, the long braid of her hair – and how they turned her female body into an object of sexual desire when it had previously been viewed as a threat to the male order (Kennedy, 2002, n.p.).

Kennedy argues that these frameworks, while helpful to understanding the character of Lara as she has been perceived by feminists in the years since her first game, are not able to account for the full meaning of her character. It is "impossible to securely locate Lara within existing feminist frameworks, nor is it entirely possible to just dismiss her significance entirely" (Kennedy, 2002, n.p.). Kennedy does not have an answer as to how Lara's character should be interpreted or how further meaning can be uncovered, but she argues current textual analysis methods are "inadequate to explore the range of pleasures available from playing as Lara" (Kennedy, 2002, n.p.). Any feminist critique of Lara must also involve a critique of the masculine games discourse of which her game is a part, she writes (Kennedy, 2002, n.p.). She stresses the importance of moving beyond debates over Lara's sexual appeal and instead taking seriously girl gamers' complaints about contemporary portrayals of women in video games.

In an expansion of Kennedy's critique of the polarized debate on Lara, and of Schleiner's gender-subversive readings of her character, Maja Mikula's "Gender and Videogames: The Political Valency of Lara Croft" (2003), highlights the ways in which Lara has been conceived as an "empty sign" in the years since her original appearance, to allow for "diverse, often contradictory inscriptions and interpretations of her character" (Mikula, 2003, p. 83). The notion of a sign as a meaningful unit comes from semiotics, or the study of signs and symbols and their

use or interpretation. It refers to an object that combines both a signifier – the tangible presence of something – and a signified – the abstract idea or concept of something – to create meaning (de Saussure, 1966).¹² In Lara’s case, her signifier is her digital body or her presence in the virtual space of the masculinized game world, and her signified is the various ideas and interpretations that have been read onto her through the years (e.g., a highly sexualized and stereotyped representation of the female body, a badass action heroine acting as a positive role model for female players, etc.).

Mikula argues that the appeal of Lara comes from her being “everything that is bad about representations of women in culture, and everything good” (Mikula, 2003, p. 79-80). Her “‘femaleness’ is clearly shaped by a desire to embody male sexual fantasies,” she wrote, but her character, her intelligence and independence, her adventurous and resourceful spirit is a representation – a complete sign, made up of both its signifier and signified parts – of women and femininity that is undoubtedly positive (Mikula, 2003, p. 79-80). In Mikula’s estimation, the most interesting aspect of Lara’s character is the way it is adaptable, “easily taken up by fan-producers” in a way that can be so “readily detached from the circumstances of her initial production” and that renders suspect any claims about what her character *really* means or is supposed to represent (Mikula, 2003, p. 80).

Referencing the ways in which our global market is unpredictable and highly erratic in terms of its likes, dislikes, and audience reactions, Mikula argues that in the years since her original appearance, Lara has transitioned from a two-dimensional sex symbol to an “empty sign,” or a signifying digital body onto which no single signified meaning can be located (Mikula, 2003, p. 83). Essentially, Mikula is arguing Lara is a signifying blank slate, upon which fans and consumers’ multiple, varied character interpretations are accepted as potential signified

meanings. The most interesting part of this argument is the gendered ways in which audiences produce potential meanings, or the ways in which players are encouraged to identify with or to objectify Lara's character.

As Mikula notes, previous research suggests "identifying" with a character is a gendered act, in that female gamers are more likely to identify with the character they are playing than men, and are more likely to become "irritated" when they can't identify with a female character (Mikula, 2003, p. 80-81). However, the idea of having a subject/object binary with female *identifying* gamers on one side and male *objectifying* gamers on the other is, in reality, much more complicated. Returning briefly to Schleiner, there is a gender-subject configuration in which lesbian or bisexual female players are invited to objectify Lara just as much as a heterosexual male player. In this position – "Lara as Vehicle for the Queer Female Gaze" – female players are invited to objectify and enjoy the pleasures of playing and controlling Lara as much as they are invited to enjoy the pleasure of playing by identifying with Lara or playing as though they were "being" her.

The last article I will discuss in this literature review is the most recent, titled "'Take That, Bitches!' Refiguring Lara Croft in Feminist Game Narratives," by Esther MacCallum-Stewart (2014). This article, published in *Games Studies*, uses a YouTube player walkthrough/gameplay of the 2013 game to emphasize the need to move beyond good and bad constructions of Lara's sexuality. Using fan-produced content, MacCallum-Stewart is attempting to separate Lara's body from her gender in a way that allows for the multiple interpretations Mikula, Schleiner, and Kennedy call for in their work. Refusing to act as an "apologist" for Lara's body, while addressing her past as a sex symbol and a "to-be-looked-at body," MacCallum-Stewart makes an argument for reading Lara that echoes the other scholars in this

literature review (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014, n.p.). She uses one female fan's game playthrough as an example of how players can look beyond Lara's hyperfeminized body and beyond her past to read their own meanings onto the character.

These articles represent only some of the scholarly material about Lara and her *Tomb Raider* video game series. Additional articles reference Lara Croft but do not study her at length; Layne and Blackmon's "Self-Saving Princess: Feminism and Post-Play Narrative Modding" (2013) is a prime example. The article itself is centered around their definition of "post-play narrative modding" as "any significant change to the narrative or to a gamer's perception of the narrative" after the game's release and how it can be used to enact creative feminist resistance to otherwise ambivalent or misogynist game narratives (Layne and Blackmon, 2013, n.p.). While this idea is compelling and worthy of further exploration, Layne and Blackmon mention Lara only in passing, describing the ways in which her character has been changed by fan participation since her 1996 release (Layne and Blackmon, 2013, n.p.). Although I find Layne and Blackmon's work intriguing, I have limited this synthesis to literature with the most in-depth character analysis of Lara, as Layne and Blackmon's article, among others, only briefly mentions Lara Croft without going into detail or making her the focus of the study.

The articles described above are useful for my study as they provide both a theoretical background and a proof-of-concept for my feminist textual analysis of the 2013 *Tomb Raider* game. All the articles reference the "potential" of Lara and of *Tomb Raider* for producing multiple meanings depending on the person playing the game and their beliefs, ideas, or influences. It is this "potential" that directly ties into the methodological articles of my literature review, in which what it means to do a "queer, oppositional reading" is described.

“She’s Just One Girl!”: A Queer, Oppositional Reading

To do a queer, oppositional reading of Lara Croft and *Tomb Raider* is to read and think through many layers of communications, feminist, and cultural studies theories as they apply to a video game, a nontraditional textual medium, but one rich with analytical potential (Brummet, 2010). This work is feminist because it is paying attention to the ebb and flow of Lara’s power and agency as she moves through the game world and as she navigates the traditionally geek masculine video game space. This work is part of the larger genre of cultural studies because it is focusing on this game as a cultural artifact shaped and influenced by larger ideological structures of power and patriarchy. This work is also heavily influenced by fan studies and the work that fans and media consumers do in resignifying their favorite media texts in ways that resonate with their personal circumstances or identities. Finally, this work is deeply personal, for me and many other female and nontraditional gamers, as we try and find our place in a male-dominated video game culture.

I mention this to stress the fact that there are multiple influences for this work, and many ways to approach the study of this and other video games. In this project specifically, I am performing a feminist critical analysis in a way that allows me to develop a queer, oppositional position to the main encoded messages that, in turn, allows me to read queerness and feminism into the video game and Lara’s character. This is not the only way to read this text, nor is it the only way to read and connect with the character, but it is one that resonates for me.

Before I elaborate on the methodologically *queer* part of my queer, oppositional *Tomb Raider* reading, it will be helpful to address Stuart Hall’s encoding-decoding model of communication, and how that process results in different reading positions, including the oppositional position that informs my approach of this project. Hall, known for his work in the

realm of media, fan, and cultural studies, posited a four-stage model of communication that follows the life cycle of a message's meaning from production to circulation to use (also known as distribution or consumption) and reproduction (Hall, 1999). The model emphasizes the asymmetrical positions of message producers and receivers (see Figure 2).

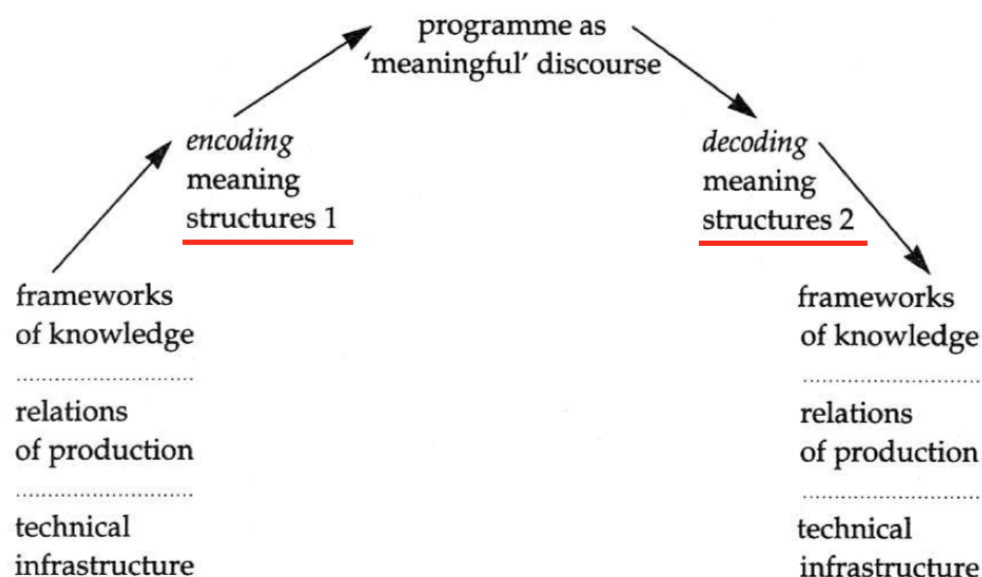


Figure 2: Stuart Hall's Encoding-Decoding Communications Model¹³

Referring to those messages that have been intentionally programmed into media content by their producers as *encoded messages*, and those that are inferred or read by the audience or consumers after the fact as *decoded messages*, Hall stresses the ways in which the “codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical” depending on the positions of the “encoder-producer” and “decoder-receiver” (Hall, 1999, p. 95). Essentially, “every visual sign [or piece of media] connotes a quality, situation, value or inference, which is present as an implication or implied meaning” intended by the content producer (Hall, 1999, p. 97). How that

connotation or implied meaning is received and understood depends on the content receiver and their pre-existing ideas and social biases.

As a result, audiences can decode media messages from a range of positions, including “dominant-hegemonic,” “negotiated,” and “oppositional” (Hall, 1999, p. 101). A dominant-hegemonic reading position is one in which the audience or receiver decodes meaning from the media text in a way that is consistent with the producer’s intended meaning. A negotiated, or “corporate,” reading position is one in which the audience understands the dominant definitions and signifiers through “particular or situated logics” (Hall, 1999, p. 102). In this case, the original message is accepted and rejected at different points in the text. Essentially, negotiated-corporate positions “acknowledge the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions” that are readily accepted in dominant-hegemonic readings, while “reserving the right to make a more negotiated application” of certain details according to the particular circumstance or understanding of the receiver (Hall, 1999, p. 102). Lastly, an oppositional reading position is one in which the receiver understands the originally encoded message but decodes it in a “globally contrary way” using an “alternative framework of reference” to reject the original message and read new meanings in the text (Hall, 1999, p. 103). There are multiple examples of this from erotic “slash” fanfiction on popular sites like Archive of Our Own (AO3) to Eve Sedgwick’s work on analyzing homoerotic subplots in the work of authors like Charles Dickens and Henry James. More recent examples include “Of Bread and Blood,” a book of critical essays about Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* series (Clark & Pharr, 2012); and “Harry Potter and Convergence Culture,” a collection of essays about the *Harry Potter* fandom (Clark & Firestone, 2018).

As previously stated, I will be using the oppositional position as outlined by Hall to develop an alternative or oppositional reading to the main encoded message of the *Tomb Raider*

text. I say oppositional rather than negotiated or corporate, since I believe the main feminist message – i.e., Lara’s ultimate success in navigating the hostile, male-populated game world as a parallel for women navigating a male-dominated world and eventually achieving parity – was not originally encoded in the game, and thus requires an oppositional reader position in order to decipher it. Despite having two female writers (Rhianna Pratchett and Susan O’Connor) credited with most of the game’s writing and story, and despite marketing dependence on the “girl power” potential of Lara and her story as an against-all-odds survivor, this was a game designed by men for men, as the executive producer’s comments and the “Crossroads” trailer clearly show.¹⁴

Despite using the term “code” to describe the process of reading text in an oppositional way, there is no strict key on how to do so. For now, it is enough to understand Hall’s encoding-decoding theory and the various reading positions one can adopt in relation to a text. I will explain my oppositional reading of the main encoded message of the *Tomb Raider* text in the following chapters.

To unpack the “queer” part of my queer, oppositional *Tomb Raider* reading, I draw on the work of two foundational feminist and queer studies scholars, Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler; specifically, their definitions of what the “queer” in queer studies means and what it can be.

In a 2013 essay adapted from her pioneering 1993 book *Tendencies*, Sedgwick offers several possible definitions of “queer.” Its first and perhaps most theoretically important meaning was that of gender-dissonance, a classification of difference compared to socially prescribed norms regulating a person’s sex, gender, and sexual orientation.¹⁵

While this first definition is important to remember as part of the violent legacy of the term “queer,” it is not the term’s only meaning. In fact, Sedgwick argues for an understanding of

the term queer that defies a singular definition: one that draws on the social and personal history of the word and allows for theoretical “loose ends” in which not all meanings directly equate to each other; one in which “common sense” normative views of sex and sexuality are interrogated and critically questioned; one in which a person’s individual use of the term “queer” can function differently from its use as a descriptor for someone else.

Sedgwick argues that the popularity of “queerness” and queer studies comes from its multiple uses, from its conceptual fluidity, and from its promise of possibility:

That’s one of the things that “queer” can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, the gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meanings when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, or anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically. The experimental linguistic, epistemological, representational political adventures. (Sedgwick, 2013, p. 8)

Judith Butler, in “Critically Queer,” likewise emphasizes the multiple potentials of the term queer, specifically as a “site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings” (Butler, 2013, p. 21). Using concepts of gender and queer performativity and identity categories and formation, Butler highlights several possible definitions and meanings of the term “queer” and how it functions in queer studies – most notably, as a performative political act of self-identification and reclamation – before stressing the ways in which it should remain a “discursive rallying point” with meanings that change and adapt to future generations in a way that cannot be fully anticipated (Butler, 2013, p. 22).

Going further, Butler asks how “‘queering’ persists as a defining moment of performativity” before going on to detail its position as an “interpellation that raises the question of the status of force and opposite, of stability and variability” (Butler, 2013, p. 18-19). Drawing

on concepts of gender performativity from her seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and Sedgwick's work on queer performativity, Butler reflects on the nature of performativity and how it is not an act of self-expression or self-presentation, but an "unanticipated resignifiability of highly invested terms" in which the

signifiability cannot be controlled by the one who utters or writes, since such productions are not owned by the one who utters them. They continue to signify in spite of their authors, and sometimes against their authors' most precious intentions. (Butler, 2013, p. 28-29)

Thus, queer performativity, for Butler, is the resignification of the term "queer" in a way that changes from generation to generation, and that which, "in the present, is never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted and queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes" (Butler, 2013, p. 21). This notion of queerness and queer performativity as a site of potential resignification of meaning is particularly important to my work with *Tomb Raider*, as it echoes Mikula's concept of Lara's character as an "empty sign" to be resignified in new and multiple ways, including those Lara's original creators – her encoder-producers – might never have imagined. My own reading of Lara is a resignification of her character with feminist meaning in a way that echoes other resignifications that come about as more people come to know her character through the *Tomb Raider* games. Understanding Lara, then, is less about discerning her one, true, fixed meaning and instead, recognizing her potential as a powerful signifying character with multifaceted meanings.

Returning briefly to Sedgwick, I want to highlight the most important part of Sedgwick's conception of queer and queer studies and the one that I believe is most relevant to my project. Referring to the ability of herself and others in the field to invest much-loved cultural objects –

movies, TV shows, books, and even video games – with queerness, she describes the responsibility of queer studies as one that comes from a promise to

make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and, with the relative freedom of adulthood, to challenge queer-eradicating impulses . . . where they are to be so challenged. (Sedgwick, 2013, p. 5)

To Sedgwick, to study “queer” is to invite the possibility of alternate meanings, to read queerness and gay or lesbian emotions and representation in places it may not have been originally invested. To study queer is to embrace sexual differences and radical self-determination, to interrogate heterosexual normality and the lack of queer representation in popular culture. And that is exactly what I intend to do with *Tomb Raider* and Lara. In particular, I will identify later in this thesis and elaborate on the homoerotic subtext in the game and the ultimately victorious rescue of Sam Nishimura by Lara in a way that will queer the game’s story and the “damsel-in-distress” trope that functions as much of its narrative foundation.

Queer studies and communications/media studies are dynamics fields, and this literature review has focused on the work of but a few scholars. However, this brief look at some conceptualizations of “queer” and how I will be using the term, along with a basic description of Hall’s encoding-decoding model of communication and the oppositional reading position I will be adopting provide a strong foundation for this queer, oppositional reading of *Tomb Raider* and the character of Lara Croft.

“You’ve Got Good Instincts, Girl”: Strategies of Reading and Game Basics

In any textual or critical analysis, there will be some degree of subjectivity based on the existing knowledge and preconceived biases of the reader. My analysis of this game in particular is (perhaps obviously, given the title of this work) influenced by my feminist positioning. It is also influenced by my prior history (or should I say, lack of) with Lara Croft. Immediately after finishing the game and in preparing for this thesis, I read many reviews of the game that compared this iteration of the (in)famous tomb raider to her predecessors. However, I had no such experience with the pixelated, triangle-chested avatar of the 1990s and the slick, sexier versions in the early 2000s. Perhaps that gives me a degree of clarity some of the reviewers and players who remembered her early run do not have. Conversely, perhaps I lack some critical insight into how her character was originally represented and how it has evolved.

I have tried to do my best by Lara and this version of *Tomb Raider*, using multiple coding methods and lens of analysis to critically assess her character and her role in the narrative of the game as a whole. I do want to recognize that this process was perhaps made easier by the fact that I had played the game a total of eight times before playing it once more for this analysis. I have played the game in its entirety almost 10 times since it came out, and, thus, even before I began this thesis, I had some idea of what issues I wanted to explore. Still, with each new playing, I catch things that previously escaped my notice. Further, in the process of writing I have come to more fully realized conclusions about that which I had already noted in the game.

All this to say that in the process of playing the game for this most recent time, I was looking for a variety of specific variables, while others came as a surprise to me during the playing and analysis process. A simple system of coding¹⁶ was used to look for patterns and themes. In particular, I kept track of a few factors: moments in which the specter of Lara’s

sexuality was raised (i.e., moments when the camera focused on Lara's slight, tank-top-clad form, or pretty much every moment of the scene of attempted sexual assault), specific mentions of violence against women or Lara, instances in which Lara cried out for help or for her friends, times in which Lara engages in affirming thoughts or speech (i.e., saying "I can do this" before climbing a particularly steep cliff), and moments in which Lara expresses her emotions (i.e., crying, hugging her friend Sam, getting angry at Mathias and yelling at him, etc.).

I also kept track of three key events in the game, what I have categorized as Moments of Ingenuity (Ingenuity), Violent Death Events (VDEs), and Cataclysm Events (CEs). Ingenuity was used to measure and keep track of times in which Lara uses some aspect of her environment to progress in a way that is independent of the player and, through the narrative of the game, seems to come from Lara's own intelligence and survivor skills. One example of this is when Lara frees herself from a snare by shooting the winch, then thinks to grab the bundle of rope and tie it to her arrows, thus crafting the rope arrows that become an important mechanic throughout the rest of the game. These moments are important as they emphasize Lara's resourcefulness and agency and stress her independence from the player otherwise controlling her.

The VDEs are mini-cutsscenes that focus on Lara's death as a result of player failure, usually during a Quick Time Event (QTE) that requires players to press certain buttons in certain sequences to perform actions. These deaths are distinguished from death in combat or by falling in that they feature special animations and an intense camera zoom on Lara as she struggles from the moment of the failure until she succumbs to her wounds. These are – in my opinion – the worst part of playing *Tomb Raider*, and there is no option to skip or forego seeing these sequences. I often have to engage the "mute" function as I play through sections where there are multiple potential VDEs, so that I can easily look away if I make a mistake in timing and Lara

dies. I will discuss these scenes and their effect on players in detail in later chapters, but for now, I will highlight one example of what I looked for while playing. After unlocking the Shipwreck Beach map in the later part of the game and proceeding to an area that involves climbing on broken ship pieces and cliff edges to reach the wreck of the *Endurance*, if the players fails to time Lara's jump right she will fall into the water, at which point a VDE cutscene will start. In this particular scene, Lara, after falling into the water, is forced back into a rocky outcropping by the power of the waves and she breaks her neck. Blood trickles from her mouth as she floats limply in the water before the screen fades to black.

The CEs, and the last major game event I coded for, are sequences common to most action-adventure video games, from *Tomb Raider* to *Dead Space 2* to *Uncharted: A Thief's End*. I have dubbed them "Cataclysm Events" because they are characterized by a period of intense chaos and action in which the player controls the protagonist through a veritable landmine of destruction, involving everything from collapsing cave floors to earthquake-induced fissures. There are about ten CEs in the entirety of the game, and they often require a QTE in which the player must press a certain button at the right time to make a long-range jump or to escape out of the path of a falling boulder. What is notable about the CEs in *Tomb Raider* is that it is Lara's female body that is performing the actions necessary to survive a CE, feats that take significant athletic skill and endurance.

Watching Lara jump across collapsing floors or swing from fraying ropes to land on unsteady platforms during the CEs is rewarding for two reasons: she is performing the kind of actions that were previously restricted to the male protagonists of the action-adventure games that included such Cataclysm Events, and, in successfully completing and surviving the CEs, she is mirroring the actions of male protagonists in a way that discredits the claims of male gamers

that no woman could do what male characters in video games do. The reality of the CEs is that they feature the kind of earth-shaking destruction that no one in the real world would survive, regardless of gender. Thus, while there are some who would discredit Lara and other female video game protagonists by arguing that a “real” woman would be incapable of the athletic stunts performed by video game women, that same argument -- especially in the context of *Tomb Raider*’s CEs -- can be turned on the male characters, since in her CEs, Lara is performing the same actions a male character would. Thus, if anything is “unrealistic” about her performance, it is that she emerges from these CEs with her ponytail intact.

While those are the main things I coded for in playing the game, I also made sure to note any actions, scenes, or pieces of dialogue that seemed to align with my pre-established themes: the threat of sexual assault in the “Crossroads” scene early in the game, representation of female power and sexuality, metaphors for patriarchy in the game world and Lara’s progress in spite of it, and queerness and queered power in the “damsel-in-distress” narratives. As I have previously mentioned, a lot of my knowledge of this game, its symbols, meanings, characters, narratives, and other ludological features came from my previous experience playing the game and reading the cultural conversation about the game and about Lara Croft.

Before I proceed further with my analysis, I think it will be beneficial to briefly explain a few particulars about the game’s plot, mechanics, and characters. The game’s main characters and the ones I will be referring to most often are:

- **Lara Croft**, the protagonist and player-controlled character, a young archaeologist from England, following in the footsteps of her father.
- **Conrad Roth**, or Roth, Lara’s father figure, legal guardian, and captain of the ship the *S.S. Endurance*.

- **Sam Nishimura**, Lara's best friend, filmmaker and videographer, and descendant of the Sun Queen Himiko, the Priestess-Queen of the Ancient Japanese kingdom of Yamatai.
- **Father Mathias** (or Mathias), the leader of the Solarii, a cult of former shipwreck survivors who washed up on the island and decided that worshipping Himiko was the key to leaving.
- **Alex**, a geeky tech-guy working on the *Endurance* who has a crush on Lara and wants to impress her.

Additional, minor characters (Jonah, Reyes, Grim) and a few named cult members (Dmitri, Nikolai), will be mentioned, but the five characters listed above are the most important for this analysis and the ones I will be discussing the most.

The plot of the game is fairly simple. Determined to find the lost island of Yamatai, Lara Croft and the crew of the *Endurance* sail into a stormy patch of sea known as the Dragon's Triangle off the coast of Japan only to wind up shipwrecked on Yamatai. They must fight for their lives against a group of cultists that believe Sam, descendant of the Sun Queen, is the key to getting off the island. The cultists, led by Father Mathias, believe that sacrificing Sam to the Sun Queen is the key to stopping the storms that surround the island and prevent everyone from leaving. It is later revealed that the storms are actually controlled by a supernatural being, the undead Himiko, who is going to use Sam's body as a vessel for her soul so she can regain her full power and re-establish her empire.

There are a variety of game mechanics and features, none of which I will emphasize much as they are fairly standard across most action-adventure genre titles and across video games in general. There are collectible items such as documents and relics that flesh out the world of the game, various maps like Geothermal Caverns or Coastal Forest that demarcate the

boundaries of the game space the player can physically move about in and explore, and challenge tombs for Lara to raid for rewards and experience points (XP), which can be used by the player to buy skills that enhance Lara's performance in some way. There are also upgrades to be crafted onto Lara's existing weapons – the bow is her primary weapon, but upgrades include a machine gun, a shotgun, and a pistol – and new weapons to be found. There is also a fast travel and base camp mechanic in which players, upon discovering a base camp, can have Lara sit down by a fire to access a special menu that allows them to purchase skills with their accumulated XP, or to fast travel, or jump, between base camp locations.

At various points throughout the game, usually through a cutscene or specific sequence, Lara acquires a specific set of Gear – capitalized to highlight the fact that this Gear cannot be obtained anywhere else – that is then featured throughout the rest of the game. For example, at the beginning of the game, Lara stumbles across some empty lifeboats and supply crates and finds a two-way radio that becomes an important piece of Gear, as it allows her to communicate with the other members of the *Endurance* crew.

I mention the Gear and the XP and skills set of game mechanics to emphasize a point which I will return to in later chapters. There are several skills Lara acquires that are directly purchased by the player, using accumulated XP, which go on to become important to Lara's performance in the game. There are three categories of skills – Survivor, Hunter, and Brawler (the last of which is only unlocked after Lara's first human kill) – and three tiers of each of those categories – Rookie, Hardened, and Specialist. Purchasing and unlocking the various skills in each of the three tiers and categories follows the natural progression of the game and of Lara's character as she goes from a scared, shipwrecked archaeologist to a determined and fierce expert survivor.

However, there are also moments, usually accompanied by cutscenes and triumphant music, in which Lara uses her Ingenuity, as described above, to gain a skill or obtain a piece of Gear independent of the player. It is through these moments that the flow of power and agency is shifted from the person on the other side of the screen controlling her character to the figure of Lara Croft herself. These are important moments in the playthrough and read as proud moments for Lara as she uses her wit and intelligence to perform a task or create something the player never would have thought to do. I will return to this point later, especially in the chapter “If I Don’t Survive, None of Us Will,” but I felt it was important to mention here in the context of describing the game’s mechanics.

That is a very basic description of the game mechanics and plot. What follows is the more in-depth analysis of specific moments and narratives in the game and how they construct what I am reading as the feminist character of Lara Croft.

Chapter Three

“You Can’t Stop Me!”: Lara at the ‘Crossroads’ and the Misogyny that Threatens to Define Her

In order to proceed with the bulk of my analysis, it is important to discuss the proverbial elephant in the room in terms of feminist study: Relatively early in the game (roughly 40-45 minutes in), there is a depiction of attempted sexual assault against Lara by a male non-player character (NPC). This scene, according to the predominantly male production team that worked to design and package the game, is supposed to establish a “turning point” for Lara and is a “defining moment” of the reboot series (Schreier, 2012b, n.p.). In order to continue with a feminist analysis of the game, I think it is important to take a moment to talk about this scene in detail, break down its encoded, or imbedded, cultural messages, and begin to discuss how we can move forward from this scene to decode a larger feminist narrative in a queer, oppositional reading of the game as a whole.

The scene begins slowly, opening with a shot of Lara’s determined face as she leaves the game’s first map, weapon in hand and makeshift axe hanging from her side. Lara and her colleague-superior Dr. James Whitman, after working together to open a large gate painted with cult symbols, realize that they are, in fact, on an island that may have once been part of Yamato. This discovery comes as they walk an overgrown path lined with shrines and altars to a female queen-figure. Dr. Whitman notes that many of the legends of Queen Himiko describe her as wielding god-like, shamanistic elemental powers, to which Lara responds dryly, “A woman wields that much power, and sooner or later it gets called witchcraft” (Tomb Raider, 2013).

They reach the top of the darkened path and encounter a shrine with fresh offerings, suggesting Himiko is still being worshipped. Just as Lara reaches that conclusion, a man walks

out of the nearby undergrowth with his hands raised in supplication. In accented English, he entreats Lara and Whitman to follow him to where he has found their injured friends.

The scene quickly devolves, as more men appear out of the brush holding makeshift bows similar to Lara's, and Whitman, despite being the only one wielding a firearm, puts down his gun and surrenders. Lara backs away from the men and hastily nocks an arrow just as a dark-clothed man jumps out of the trees behind her, knocking her to the ground.

The man – whose name is later revealed to be Vladimir, captain of the Mountain Village group of the Solarii Brotherhood – exchanges a few words in Russian with another scavenger before dragging Lara away and pinning her against a nearby tree. Brandishing his gun, he threatens her – “Don’t you fucking move” – before instructing the other scavengers to round up the last of the *Endurance* survivors (Tomb Raider, 2013). After this cutscene, Lara engages in a quick stealth sequence, slipping undetected past patrols of scavenger mercenaries by ducking behind walls and bushes, all while her hands remain bound behind her back.

Everything about this scene is meant to invoke anxiety and to heighten the tension of this dramatic moment. It takes place at night in a Kamakura-period mountain village. A fire, probably started by one of the scavengers in an attempt to flush out any escaped *Endurance* crew members hiding in the ruined village huts, rages through the nearby buildings and brush, painting the sky in brilliant oranges and reds. Sparks and embers dance on the wind past Lara's crouched form, and she flinches when the player accidentally moves her too close to the fire, the corner of the screen flaring red with her pain. Gunshots echo periodically in the mountain village and the music swoops low, dramatic, as the scavengers discover Lara is missing and curse each other, wondering how “the girl,” “the outsider,” managed to escape them.

Ducking into a nearby ruined house ends this sequence and another cutscene starts as Lara attempts to hide from the scavengers. The camera zooms in on her terrified face as Vladimir paces in the background, moving once past her hiding place before circling back with his gun drawn. Lara pants and closes her eyes as Vladimir sticks his gun in between the slats of the ruined house and orders her out.

Speaking in Russian and broken English, Vladimir's full dialogue during this and the previous sequence is chilling, something that previously escaped my notice since the subtitles when he speaks Russian do not provide a translation of what he says. "You're quite a pretty girl, huh? You remind me of my sister," he says when he first captures her. Then, "Thought to escape, baby? Do you think you can escape?" and "[My sister] was a bitch, too!" as Lara struggles to break free from his grip (Tomb Raider, 2013).

The cutscene ends with Lara being dragged out of the hut by Vladimir, who pins her against the wall, sticks his face in the crook of her neck, and slides a hand down her thigh. The Quick Time Event (QTE) that follows involves the player pressing a series of buttons in quick succession in order to fight back. If followed correctly, Lara knees Vladimir in the groin before she is dragged back and he again pushes his face into her neck and *smells her* – the sniffing noise is an uncomfortably audible sound effect. Another QTE prompt follows, and Lara bites Vladimir's ear before they fall to the ground and he drops the gun.

They wrestle for a moment before the crude binding around Lara's wrists breaks and she lunges for the gun. Yet another QTE takes place in which the player needs to quickly aim and fire the gun, but, regardless of the aim, Vladimir falls on top of Lara and they struggle for the gun. If the player fails the QTE, Lara is shot in the head and dies. If the player succeeds, Vladimir is shot in the head. A graphic cutscene follows, in which Vladimir, having been shot at

point-blank range, falls sideways off Lara, struggling for breath as the camera lingers on his bloodied and broken face.

The scene ends with a close-up on a bloody Lara as she drops the gun. She falls to her knees and bends forward, dry-heaving into the dirt as she comes to terms with what she has done. The entire sequence focuses on Lara's first human kill and sets the tone for the rest of the game, marking a significant transition from young, fragile shipwrecked archaeologist to an armed survivor, wary and afraid, but ultimately willing to do whatever it takes to survive.

This scene, which debuted at the 2012 E3 conference in a trailer titled "Crossroads," was heralded as a "defining moment" for the character of Lara Croft, a moment in which she is "turned into a cornered animal," according to executive producer Ron Rosenberg (Schreier, 2012b, n.p.). In an interview with *Kotaku* writer Jason Schreier, Rosenberg said the scene was "a huge step in [Lara's] evolution. She's forced to either fight back or die" (Schreier, 2012b, n.p.). While the scene with Vladimir was a "defining moment" for Lara, it wasn't necessarily for the reason Rosenberg or Crystal Dynamics intended.

The "Crossroads" trailer and the attempted sexual assault of Lara depicted in the game ignited a firestorm of controversy surrounding the game and its producers. Feminist and nonfeminist players alike reacted to the trailer by calling out the company and the game for its depiction of sexual assault. Although Rosenberg used the phrase "attempted rape" in his interview with Schreier, in the weeks that followed, *Tomb Raider* brand director Karl Stewart and Crystal Dynamics tried frantically to distance themselves from any connotation with sexual violence. Stewart, in a follow-up interview with Schreier, denied Rosenberg's interpretation of events and said the scene was characterized not by sexual violence, but by "close physical intimidation" intended to "make [Lara] stronger. To make her feel empowered and to take her

beyond that breaking point where she realizes the severity of the situation and she's willing to fight to stay alive" (Schreier, 2012a, n.p.).¹⁷

While Stewart was right in that the "Crossroads" scene does involve "close physical intimidation," it does so by *depicting sexual assault* and implying a completed rape of Lara will occur if the player does not respond to the QTE prompts in time. While Rosenberg, Stewart, and other Crystal Dynamics executives were quick to point out that the scene ends with Lara's death by strangulation at the hands of Vladimir if the player does not respond to the prompts correctly, this "violent death event" (VDE) plays out differently from the ones encountered before and after this point.

Normally, the VDEs involve a graphic depiction of Lara's death while the screen dims to grey with red accents – presumably Lara's blood – appearing at the corners. Up to this point there have been three other VDEs, distinguished from "regular" deaths from falling or gunshot wounds by their intense camera zoom and a mini-cutscene. The deaths, to this point, have involved being: stabbed in the chest by a crazed male scavenger, crushed by falling rocks, and killed by a wolf. More importantly, all of these VDEs end with a definitive death in which Lara stops moving/struggling and dies.

What's different about the strangulation VDE at the hands of Vladimir is that it ends with Lara still moving. The screen dims as Lara gasps for breath and Vladimir leans in menacingly, but she does not stop moving or struggling when the screen finally fades to black completely. While this difference is small enough to go unnoticed by most, it is a significant enough departure from the tradition of other VDEs in the game that those players who notice it can draw some fairly chilling implications from it. Specifically, it implies that Lara lives beyond the end of the death cutscene and is subsequently raped by Vladimir as a result of the player's actions.

Even without this subtle examination of the “Crossroads” VDE, the scene and the narrative it is involved in is disturbing enough in its reliance on the trope of sexual violence against women to create a compelling plot point. A press release issued by Darrell Gallagher, studio head of Crystal Dynamics, denied the existence of rape in this scene and in the game as a whole. According to the release, “In this particular section, while there is a threatening undertone in the sequence and surrounding drama, it never goes any further . . . Sexual assault is categorically not a theme we cover in this game” (Foxy-Gonzalez, 2012b, n.p.). However, Gallagher’s declaration “misses [the] point entirely,” wrote Kellie Foxy-Gonzalez for the feminist pop culture blog *The Mary Sue*. “Regardless of whether we are calling it an attempted rape, sexual assault, or a ‘threatening undertone’ . . . a man makes a movement toward Lara Croft’s hips in a way that simultaneously threatens her life and conveys sexual assault . . . Call it whatever you’d like, that is sexual violence” (Foxy-Gonzalez, 2012b, n.p.).

It is important to note here that Gallagher’s denial of audience interpretations – of their recognition of sexual assault as depicted in the game – reflects a breakdown of the communicative structure Stuart Hall outlined in his landmark essay, “Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse.” In detailing the three audience reading positions (dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional) that occur in the decoding process, Hall notes that

the great majority of so-called “misunderstandings [of meaning]” arise from the contradictions and disjunctures between hegemonic-dominant encoding and negotiated-corporate decodings. It is just these mismatches in the levels which most provoke defining elites and professionals to identify a “failure in communications.” (Hall, 1999, p. 103)

Referring to the way in which the structural position of media producers and audience members is often unequal, Hall is highlighting how the end result – asymmetrical encoded-decoded meanings – can lead to negotiated or oppositional readings of media texts. These readings, which stray from the original “imprinted” or encoded meaning, can then irritate or “provoke” the “defining elite” (Hall, 1999, p. 103). This leads the elite to cite a breakdown in the communicative structure as the moment of misunderstanding between audiences and producers. Thus, “sexual assault is categorically not a theme we cover in this game,” is less a statement of fact and more an attempt by Gallagher and the Crystal Dynamics executive team to reframe negative audience responses as “misunderstandings” of meaning (Foxy-Gonzalez, 2012b; Hall, 1999, p. 103).

In the case of *Tomb Raider* and the “Crossroads” scene in particular, it is clear through Schreier’s interviews with Stewart and Rosenberg and Gallagher’s press release, that the “defining elite” were the game’s producers, a mostly-male cast and crew that relied on hegemonic ideas of femininity and female sexuality to construct a narrative in which Lara’s sexuality and gender identity, the two things that set her apart from most other video game protagonists, were wielded against her, converted to tools of male dominance and aggression.

The encoded message, the dominant-hegemonic position and reading of the scene, outlines a narrative of inevitability. *Of course*, Lara would face sexual assault: She is pretty and young and she washed up on an island of male shipwreck survivors – many of whom probably haven’t seen a woman in months, if not years. *Of course*, this is her “defining moment.” She must survive; the responsibility of fighting back, of living beyond this encounter and rescuing her friends is on her and her alone. *Of course, of course, of course.*

Hall, on the inevitable or naturalized nature of certain codes or messages, writes, “Certain codes may, *of course*, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed . . . but to be ‘naturally’ given” (Hall, 1999, p. 95, emphasis added). And it seems the nature of sexual assault and of sexual violence against women is one such universally naturalized code -- it is almost expected. It is not a new plot point; popular culture is riddled with examples of this and other violent acts against women. From the *Twilight* franchise to “Blurred Lines” and everything in between, pop culture has normalized sexual violence in its myriad forms: From name-calling and degrading, to stalking and intimidation; from coercion and assault, to rape and murder; these are the subjects of our songs, our movies, our TV shows, and, now, our video games. However, just because it is common to feature sexual violence against a female protagonist does not mean it is advisable.

When asked about whether or not rape is too taboo a subject to raise in video games, Stewart responded,

That is a hard subject because I believe and the studio believes that it is a subject that we see played out in many ways through movies and TV shows . . . in all the research and all the work that we do in building the story and building this game, we take it to many different places. And this isn’t something that’s uncommon in story narrative. (Schreier, 2012a).

What remains unacknowledged by Stewart and Schreier is the fact that rape is common in story narratives because it is common in real life. According to a 2015 survey brief on intimate partner and sexual violence from the Centers for Disease Control, one in five women “have experienced or will experience completed or attempted rape during her lifetime” (Smith et al., 2015, n.p.). Additionally, over one-third of women (37.1% or approximately 44.3 million) have reported

unwanted sexual contact while an additional one in six women (16.1% or approximately 19.2 million) reported giving in to sexual coercion at some point in their lives (Smith et al., 2015, n.p.). The CDC survey defines both rape and unwanted sexual contact, the latter being, “touch but not sexual penetration, such as being kissed in a sexual way, or having sexual body parts fondled, groped, or grabbed” (Smith et al., 2015, n.p.).

While this definition is problematic in the way it limits unwanted sexual contact to specific body parts, thereby failing to factor sexual intent into touch involving nonsexual body parts like hips, legs, or shoulders, it can still apply to the touch depicted in the “Crossroads” scene as Vladimir runs his hand down Lara’s hip to her thigh and lower. Nothing is explicit, but the threat is there and plain to see, as most audiences have been primed by media narratives to equate Vladimir’s gestures with an expression of desire or sexual intent. The result is an informal cultural “script”¹⁸ with which audiences and consumers can recognize expressions of desire. In this scene in particular, threats and sexual violence are superimposed onto normative expressions of desire in a way that presents a problematic conflation of sex and violence.

By far, the worst part about the “Crossroads” scene and the player’s involvement in it, is that it penalizes players for failing the QTE prompts by punishing Lara with rape. It is even possible to read this scene as though the player *is* Lara’s rapist, as though, in failing the QTE prompts, the player has become the instrument of rape, or the means by which it is ultimately accomplished. While this scene and its subsequent implications can be disturbing for male players, even those who regard themselves as separate from Lara, it is extremely Othering for those who have experienced sexual assault, for female players, and for those who play as if they *are* Lara, a player-character configuration I am calling “play-as-one.”¹⁹

The creation of the Other, or the fundamental human expression of duality or separation from the Self, in which a group, person, or social process is regarded with hostility and treated as inferior – a concept attributed to Simone de Beauvoir and her pivotal *The Second Sex* – comes about in the way the camera focuses on Lara and her expressions as the scene unfolds. We, the players, witness her desperation and fear as she slips between the boards of a ruined hut. We see her close her eyes and gasp for breath as she hides. We see her reluctantly slide out only to be forced back against the wall and pinned by the full weight of her attacker. We see her terror, her wide-eyed expression as he leans into her, and we watch the path of her attacker's hand run down her hip and leg. The QTE prompt even appears at knee-height, separate from and yet a part of Lara, just as the player is separate and yet *is* Lara.

Those who have experienced sexual assault will recognize the fear in her eyes as she tries desperately to flee and to defend herself. They will also recognize the pattern of behavior Vladimir engages in leading up to and during the assault. They will recognize his tone even if the words are in another language, and they will recognize the position Lara has been thrust into as one they may have faced.

In this short scene, players are confronted with the specter of Lara's sexuality in a way that paints her as a desperate victim even as it tries to empower her by depicting her first kill. I have to admit that on my first playthrough, I was upset by the threatening tone and the sexual assault, but exhilarated when Lara killed Vladimir, proud of her and proud of myself for ridding the game world of him, for viciously destroying the man that dared to lay hands on Lara. It was a victory for others, too, since Lara likely wasn't his only victim – there were other shipwrecks on the island, other women that almost certainly ended up trapped on the island and brutalized by Vladimir, other women that almost certainly suffered the fate Lara thwarted by killing him.

But the more I played this game and others, including the *Uncharted* series of games, which has been heralded by many as the male-protagonist successor/equivalent of the *Tomb Raider* franchise, the more I realized just how unfair, how misogynistic the scene was by definition. The protagonist of the *Uncharted* series, a cocky, ruggedly handsome white man named Nathan Drake, has never been sexually assaulted or been threatened with sexual assault by his enemies, has never had to face the type of “close physical intimidation” Lara did in the 2013 game. Karl Stewart even admitted that he could not imagine such a thing happening in *Uncharted*. In his 2012 interview with Schreier, Stewart offered a comparison: “If a male hero like Nathan Drake had been placed in the same situation, the thigh-rubbing would not have happened” (Schreier, 2012a, n.p.).

That begs the question: Why did Lara Croft have to face sexual assault if Nathan Drake did not? Why did Lara, female protagonist of *Tomb Raider*, have to be sexually assaulted for the game’s plot, if Nathan, male protagonist of *Uncharted*, did not? While it is true that the first reboot *Tomb Raider* and the first *Uncharted* game²⁰ tell two very different stories, and that comparing Lara to Nathan (as many game players and critics have done) is unfair to both characters, the fact remains that Lara is female, and Nathan is not. Gender explains why Lara Croft was assaulted and Nathan Drake was not.

The point I am trying to make with this detailed analysis of the “Crossroads” scene, its reception, its justification by the game’s producers, its depiction of sexual assault, and its encoded and decoded meanings, is that it functions, in many ways, as an attempt to assuage male players’ fears of a powerful, empowered, ass-kicking, gun-wielding Lara Croft. As mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, that most of *Tomb Raider*’s players are male is not an unreasonable assumption to make. Although women make up nearly half of all video game

players, at the time of the game's release they were not – and arguably still aren't – the central demographic that game companies target. In many ways, game companies were and still are creating games for men, designing and writing characters they think would appeal to men, and including game mechanics and story elements they think men would like. This is in part due to the fact that men are vastly overrepresented in video game production. A 2015 International Game Developers Association (IGDA) survey found that men represent 75% of the total population of game developers, compared to 22% female, 1% male-to-female transgender, and 0.2% female-to-male transgender (IDGA, 2015). In addition, video games have historically lionized white male protagonists, a fact that has resulted in a “chicken-and-egg” representation-consumption scenario whereby more males buy video games because they see themselves represented in them, which leads game marketers and developers to create more male protagonists to cater to the high male player demographic, and so on and so forth (see Consalvo, 2012; Lien, 2013; Shaw, 2014, and others for a full discussion of this phenomenon).

Specific to *Tomb Raider*, Lara in her 1996 debut, despite being one of the first female protagonists in video games, was designed for and by men, and her appeal was mostly a physical one. Her impossible proportions, including oversized-breasts, were as big a draw for male players as her potential for gender-subversive and queer readings were for others.²¹ But the appeal of the 2013 Lara, according to Rosenberg, is the ability to see her as vulnerable and victimized, as a weak white woman that presumed male players will want to keep safe (Schreier, 2012a n.p.). He further clarified this point as coming out of discussions with all-male play testers: “When you see her have to face these challenges, you start to root for her in a way that you might not root for a male character” – presumably because you assume she cannot handle

such challenges and then are surprised and not a little bit awed when she does (Schreier, 2012a, n.p.).

Rosenberg's logic, according to Foxx-Gonzalez, relies on three assumptions about women and video games: first, that women must be protected and cannot protect themselves; second, that men cannot ever relate to women and/or female characters because of the fundamental differences between men and women; and third, that women do not play video games and thus have no need of a protagonist to relate to (Foxx-Gonzalez, 2012a, n.p.). All three points are contradicted by evidence mentioned above, in the introduction of this thesis, and by the real-life experience of female gamers across the country (including myself). These assumptions are paternalistic and misogynistic, and yet they seem to define the creative team behind the *Tomb Raider* game and the "Crossroads" scene they heralded as Lara's "defining moment."

The "Crossroads" scene, at its core, functions as a way to reduce Lara to a "vengeful victim" reacting and responding to a scenario thrust upon her by another. It does not depict her as a woman acting on her own power, thus reducing her overall agency while also showing players the potential for sexual assault that is all too prevalent in the lives of women. By hinging the outcome of the scene on the player's timely response to the various QTE prompts, the scene, in a rather roundabout way, implicitly normalizes victim-blaming and almost *justifies* punishing women with sexual violence. By imposing this scenario on Lara and the player, the game designers have unwillingly – or perhaps wittingly – reproduced victim-blaming narratives in which women are asked whether they "did enough" to *avoid* being raped or assaulted.

"What were you wearing?" "How much did you have to drink?" "Did you fight back?" – these are all questions that women are asked every day in response to sexual assault allegations

and accusations (Burt, 1980). While not all of them apply to Lara and her assault as a shipwreck survivor on a lost island populated by crazed cultists and filthy scavengers, rape myths resonate in the scene. If Lara does not fight back “hard enough” – that is, if the player fails to respond to the QTE prompts – then she and the player are punished and made responsible for what happens next. While this may not be a problem for play-separate players, for many women, for survivors of sexual assault, and for play-as-one players, it can reproduce the inequalities with which they are faced every day. As Foxx-Gonzalez (2012) observed,

Not only does this game seem hell-bent on invalidating women gamers and the idea that a female character has just as much capacity to be surprisingly competent as a male one, it also seems pretty eager to reproduce and normalize a culture in which women are blamed for being raped. (Foxx-Gonzalez, 2012a, n.p.)

And yet, despite all this, there *is* a feminist message to be read from this text. It may be one not intended or encoded by the mostly male producers and it may not be one that was read by most male players (especially those that fall into the play-separate category), but it was read by me, and I argue that it can and *should* be read by others. It can be read in the progression of Lara Croft through the male-dominated cult island, a metaphor for female progression through a similarly male-dominated, patriarchal world. It can be read in the way she uses her ingenuity to craft additional tools in order to survive, in the way her power fluctuates in such instances, moving away from the player and towards Lara’s character. It can be illuminated in a queer reading of the game and its damsel-in-distress narrative thread (a queer reading, both methodologically and literally with the undertones of lesbian romance between Lara and her friend Sam Nishimura).

The rest of this paper is dedicated to teasing out and building upon these hints of a feminist reading in a way that I believe can and should set an example for future feminist video games. Through a queer, oppositional reading; through a feminist textual analysis; through a critical look at this game and its encoded and decoded cultural meanings, it is possible to look beyond the hegemony and patriarchy encoded into the “Crossroads” scene, described in detail here in order to mark a destructive, problematic, and ultimately Othering narrative that cannot and should not become a precedent for female video game protagonists. This scene is the benchmark by which we will measure the progress of the rest of this thesis, not because it is essential to the narrative or because it is Lara’s “defining moment,” as the game’s producers would have audiences believe, but because this scene and its reception mark a significant point of “misunderstanding” between *Tomb Raider* producers and audiences. If it is such a “misunderstanding,” then I suggest we continue to *misunderstand*, both as an act of resistance and as a tool for decoding critical meaning in this game and other cultural products.

Chapter Four

“If I Don’t Survive, None of Us Will”: The Presentation of Lara’s Body in the Game World and the Real World

Understanding the game world of *Tomb Raider* is key to understanding Lara and how she can be read, or “misunderstood,” as a feminist character. More specifically, understanding how Lara’s body responds to and progresses through the game world is key to understanding her as a feminist character and how she resonates with women outside the digital game space. In this chapter, I will read the game space and Lara’s bodily progression through it as a metaphor for rebelling against the patriarchy and regaining control from the patriarchal world. The focus is on how her female body, as a site of contestation and violence within the game, parallels female bodies outside the game, and how, despite the numerous, seemingly insurmountable obstacles she is faced with over the course of the game, Lara manages to rally and defeat them, even in spaces where male bodies have failed previously.²²

Defining patriarchy. In order to fully explore the metaphor of the game world as a patriarchal one, I want to first describe the definition of “patriarchy” I am using. Although multiple definitions and uses of the term exist among scholarly work, the idea of patriarchy in feminist theory as a concept “referring to men’s family domination” was conceptualized in Marxist feminism to refer to the “hidden relationships among organizations, institutions, and daily practices that allow men to control women’s lives” (Lorber, 2010, p. 11).

One salient aspect of a woman’s life is her body and its accompanying care, treatment, and visual representations. Issues of women and women’s bodies have been central to cultural discourse, evident in the various representations and forms they take in media and advertising (Killooy et. al., 2010; Newsom, 2011; Bernard, 2016), as well as in the ways that rights and

resources for care of female bodies have been allocated and threatened (Levi, 2017). As women's bodies are such an integral part of their lives and experiences – as are men's bodies to men and gender non-binary individual's bodies to them – it is perhaps inevitable that the long arm of patriarchy would attempt to control women's bodies as another way of controlling women's lives. There are mundane examples of this – fathers dictating their teenage daughter's dating habits – and more extreme examples – white male politicians making it harder for women to access birth control as a way of policing female behavior and curtailing female sexuality – but overall patriarchal control over women's bodies often takes the form of “sexual exploitation and sexual violence [as] part of gender inequality” (Lorber, 2010, p. 5). In “Feminisms and Their Contribution to Gender Equality,” Judith Lorber describes the many ways sexual exploitation and sexual violence can function as facets of patriarchal control and gender inequality:

In wars and national uprisings, women of one racial or ethnic group are often raped by the men of the opposing racial or ethnic group as a deliberate weapon for shaming and humiliation. Domestically, women are vulnerable to beatings, rape and murder – often by their husbands or boyfriends, and especially when they try to leave an abusive relationship. The bodies of girls and women are used in sex work – pornography and prostitution. They are on display in movies, television, and advertising in Western cultures. In some African and Middle Eastern cultures their genitals are ritually cut . . . They may be forced to bear children they do not want or to have abortions or be sterilized against their will . . . In other countries, if the sex of the fetus can be determined, it is girls who are aborted. (Lorber, 2010, p. 5)

In all of the above examples, the female body and the sexual violence inflicted on it or the sexual exploitation of it is the key to male domination and control. The body becomes a vessel through which patriarchal forces can work to control the women's life and daily experience.

Although Lorber's definition of patriarchal control through the female body focuses on sexual violence and exploitation as methods of control, I will be broadening her categories and looking at violence as a whole and its effect on Lara's body. In this chapter, I will focus specifically at the ways in which patriarchal control manifests itself in the focus on and control of the female body and how Lara deals with and responds to the controlling forces attempting to gain control of her through the violence inflicted on her body. There are many aspects of patriarchy, just as there are many ways for men to control the lives of women, but in this chapter and in *Tomb Raider* specifically, I focus on patriarchal control over female bodies since it is female bodies – Lara's, in particular – that are central to the game narrative.

The game space of Yamatai. In a previous chapter, I briefly discussed some of the plot and mechanic elements of the game, but in order to continue with my analysis, it is necessary to discuss the game's setting in greater detail. As mentioned earlier, the game takes place on a fictionalized version of the Japanese island of Yamatai and, although there is much debate as to where the actual island was located (e.g., Kidder 2007), *Tomb Raider*'s Yamatai is on an island within the Dragon's Triangle, also known as the Devil's Triangle or the Pacific Bermuda Triangle. Lara and the crew of the *Endurance* – along with numerous other people from all parts of the world and all points in time – end up shipwrecked on the island because of the storms surrounding the Dragon's Triangle and the island of Yamatai. These storms are later revealed to be controlled by the half-dead Queen Himiko.

A range of boats, ships, and planes have ended up on the island over the years, and their wreckage can be seen all over the island, from several different WWII-era Japanese fighter planes in the Mountain Village map to a moldering Portuguese galleon in the shallows of Shipwreck Beach. As Lara moves around the island, she remarks on all of the wrecks, questioning how they got to the island and what that could mean for the history of the island and its current inhabitants, former shipwreck survivors who were forced into the cult of the Sun Queen, or the Solarii, by Father Mathias, Sam's captor and the main antagonist. Despite the material remains on Yamatai, the only enemies Lara finds and fights are the undead Oni – all that's left of Queen Himiko's once fearsome Stormguard army – and Mathias' male Solarii cult members.

Other than Lara, Sam, and Reyes (all part of the crew of the recently shipwrecked *Endurance*), there are no women in the game as ancillary characters or enemies, although there are occasional eerie and even disturbing references to women who may have been stranded on the island before Lara and her crew. For example, within the first few minutes of the game, Lara stumbles through a cave littered with the bones of untold others before collapsing in front of a makeshift altar and a recently-deceased female body suspended above it. Later, Lara finds a child's stuffed bunny near the Shipwreck Beach map and, after close examination, finds a name tag ("Millie") sewn into its skirt. "Singed around the edges . . . what happened to your owner?" she asks (Tomb Raider, 2013). The game leaves the question unanswered and players are left to draw their own chilling conclusions.

The worst, and perhaps most telling, example of what the game world of *Tomb Raider* does to the bodies of women comes from one of the prisoners Lara encounters in the Geothermal Caverns after her first failed attempt to rescue Sam from Mathias. These prisoners were

shipwreck survivors like Lara, captured by the Solarii and thrown into their makeshift prison in an attempt to brainwash them into their cult through torture, starvation, and extreme isolation. One prisoner, slowly losing his mind, tells a halting story about a sailing trip with his family. A freak storm knocked their boat off course and it beached on Yamatai, where the male prisoner's wife and two daughters were sacrificed to Himiko.

A sailing trip... we were going around the world . . . With my wife... and my two daughters, two daughters. They were so lovely. But it's ok. it's ok . . . It came on us suddenly. Never saw a storm like it . . . We woke to the wrecks. Shipwrecks, everywhere. Children of the Sun. Yes, they took them away, all three of them. Oh god, no! They killed them. I'll be with them soon, yes? Maybe weeks. Maybe days . . . Yes, my love. With you soon. I'll be with them soon. (Tomb Raider, 2013)

I highlight this story and the above examples to emphasize the ways in which the game world of *Tomb Raider* is built on the destruction of female bodies. The entire plot of the game focuses on the pressures exerted upon Lara's body as she moves through the game world to rescue her friend.²³ There are many bodies in this game, but Lara's is central and not just because she is the protagonist and playable character. The female body--Lara's body--is the focal point of the entire game, and although it might not be endowed with the spiky, oversized boobs and explicit sexual appeal of her predecessors, Lara's body is nonetheless at the center of the game's playing experience.

From the breathy gasps and cries of pain Lara makes when struck or running around the game world, to the intense, close-quarters camera zoom that follows her as she squeezes through rocky crevices to advance down the critical path, the player cannot experience *Tomb Raider*

without, in some way, experiencing its effect on Lara's body. The game takes care to highlight the change to her body as the game progresses: her clothes become sullied and torn; her face becomes caked with dirt, blood, and grime; and her exposed skin becomes mottled with bruises, cuts and scars. Worth noting is that Lara is the only character whose bodily appearance changes in these drastic ways during the game, and, while part of that may be explained by the limited texture and graphics capacity of the game's 2013 engine, the difference is striking, particularly when players watch Lara interact with other characters in cutscenes (Fig. 3).



Figure 3: Sam and Lara In-Game Character Models²⁴

This focus on the feminine body in *Tomb Raider* parallels our social world's preoccupation with the female body. Although there are sites where this focus intensifies and arguably has a "natural fit" – the beauty and clothing industries, for example, in which focus on the female figure has become routinized and naturalized – the female body is centered in a good

deal of contemporary discourse. Issues such as reproductive rights, gender-based violence, and exploitation in advertising and other media, remind us that the female body is often at the heart of what it means to live in the world today.²⁵

Violence and the female body. This fixation on the body can lead to its destruction or exploitation in patriarchal society: Virtually all the female bodies in *Tomb Raider* are either destroyed or exploited (the only exception, perhaps, being the side-character Reyes, who, although she is constructed as a stereotypical Angry Black Woman²⁶ in the game, is the only female character not to have her body destroyed, damaged, or exploited²⁷ over the course of the game). Lara's body in particular is dirtied, bloodied, and damaged to an extreme, so much so that it becomes almost voyeuristic at times, especially in the Violent Death Event (VDE) scenes that seem more like torture porn than death cutscenes. These VDEs have been a part of the game franchise since its first iteration in 1996, but with advances in graphics quality, they have become less of a kitschy reminder of the consequences of player failure than a gruesome punishment, or, in some cases, a twisted pleasure – there are several different YouTube compilations of Lara's deaths from the games, most with upwards of 100,000 views.

When game writer Mark Brown of *Polygon* admitted to having reservations about the gendered nature of *Tomb Raider*'s grisly death sequences, likening them to “torture porn” films, others insisted the graphic content was necessary (Brown, 2018, n.p.). The “death animations really sell your failure and tell you in no uncertain terms that you screwed up and that you need to be better,” respondents told him (Brown, 2018, n.p.). Yet, as Brown himself noted, “There are plenty of ways to achieve this without resorting to graphic violence” (Brown, 2018, n.p.).

While playing the game for this analysis, I tallied, to the best of my ability, the opportunities for a VDE as opposed to a “regular” death with no cutscene, as when Lara falls off

a cliff or is killed in combat. I counted close to a dozen distinct VDEs that can occur at various points in the game, from the ambiguous death-by-strangulation in the Crossroads scene, to a grisly death that occurs during the Waterfall Cataclysm Event (CE), in which a piece of rebar spears Lara through the throat as she descends a waterfall littered with debris. This death scene and several others that involve Lara being stabbed through the throat or strangled are important for the way they literally render Lara silent, forcing her into a submissive position as she is “degraded, dominated, and [made] weak,” subjected to the will of the game developers and the player with no way to fight back or speak out against the violent acts being committed on her body (Dill, 1997, p. 859).

For play-as-one players or those sensitive to graphic violence, these deaths can be quite disturbing and pose a significant barrier to overall enjoyment. These deaths, if encountered during the first few minutes of gameplay, might even make some players stop and turn off the game. Regardless, there are some players that consider these death scenes essential to the overall game experience and some that even receive a sadistic pleasure from watching and playing through the various VDEs. The question then becomes, to which group do game developers and designers cater? Which group do they privilege by including the VDEs in the main game experience without an option to skip or turn off the cutscenes?

I don’t yet have an answer to that question. For my part, I dislike the death scenes and often play through the sections of the game with the greatest potential for a VDE with the sound muted so that I can look away and not listen to Lara struggle in her last few in-game moments, but there are many players who enjoy the VDEs as a gruesome, visceral reminder of what happens if they fail in the game space. Regardless, it is worth noting, as Brown does in his analysis of the *Tomb Raider* death scenes, that there is something about Lara’s gruesome deaths,

about watching her undeniably *female* body get speared, stabbed, and shot repeatedly that marks a difference in tone between Lara's death cutscene and those of comparable male characters:

She's every bit as powerful, resourceful, and agile as her male counterparts, but where Nathan Drake and Master Chief and Agent 47 and Solid Snake and Kratos and Link and Gordon Freeman simply get knocked off, Lara Croft needs to be beaten up, bloodied, impaled and garroted for all to see. And when these animations are made by a majority-male development crew, for a majority-male audience, under the shadow of all sorts of nasty tropes that see women suffer on screen, it's understandable why so many people feel uneasy about these scenes.

(Brown, 2018, n.p.)

It is precisely for this reason that these scenes necessitate an oppositional reading or a "misunderstanding" of the game and of Lara's character (Hall, 1999, p. 102). As a reminder, I am using Hall's definition of an oppositional reading from his encoding and decoding model of communication, in which an oppositional reading is one where a viewer understands "both the literal and the connotative inflection" of a given message but chooses to "decode the message in a globally contrary way" (Hall, 1999, p. 103). In an oppositional reading, viewers use an "alternative framework of reference" to decode media messages, with moments of "misunderstanding" as those in which messages that are "normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading" (Hall, 1999, p. 103).

Returning to the *Tomb Raider* VDEs and their impact on audiences, if the VDEs were conceived by the majority-male crew for their sadistic pleasure potential, that suggests the developers neglected to consider players that would be repelled, not aroused, by these depictions.

If this is the case, the developers would benefit from education about the acceptability and implications of depicting female pain in popular media.

These VDE moments and others in the game are constant reminders that Lara is the *exception*. She is the exception to the island's male-only survivor population; she is the exception to their usual rules of sacrifice regarding the women that end up shipwrecked on the island; and she is the exception to the rule of violence imposed on all female bodies that wash up on Yamatai. In this way, the character of Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* game parallels her existence outside of the game space as a successful female exception to the male-protagonist rule of most popular video games.

Ingenuity, exception, and satisfaction. Yet, it is also possible to read Lara as contrary to this “exceptional” rule. True, she is the hero of the story, the protagonist, and the one that saves her friends and defeats the villain, but she is also the mechanism by which the other women on the island survive. Perhaps, by being the “exception,” she is making it easier for other women to follow in her footsteps, both in the context of the game and of the gaming world. Perhaps, by advancing through the game space amid an island of men bent on destroying her female body, Lara is deconstructing her own “exceptional” status, as it is her success that facilitates the success and survival of the other women in the game. Thus, the notion of *one exceptional woman* surviving against all odds is subverted by the fact that *more than one woman* survives the island and its many horrors, forcing players to reconsider what makes a female character “exceptional” and what being exceptional actually means, making it *that much* easier for women to penetrate²⁸ the male-dominated game space and survive.

In fact, the game offers key moments in which Lara regains autonomy over her body from the male forces trying to control it; specifically, when she rebels against the wishes of

father-figure Conrad Roth by going to rescue the pilot of a downed plane, and when she cauterizes her own wound in the back of a wrecked plane in the Shantytown region of the game. In both of these examples, there is something that the game and the male forces that dominate the game world want Lara to do, or something they want to happen to her body. By wresting control from these patriarchal forces, she is rebelling and choosing her own path in the game world in a way that can resonate with women outside the constructed game world of *Tomb Raider*.

In the first example, Roth, after witnessing the rescue plane Lara has called to the island crash in a mysterious storm, wants her to abandon her plan to rescue the pilot and return with him to the base of the mountain where the others are planning to regroup after their first rescue plan failed. “We’ve got our own people to worry about,” he says when Lara informs him of her rescue plan. He grabs her wrist to stop her from leaving. “Sometimes you’ve got to make sacrifices, Lara. You can’t save everyone . . . Sacrifice is a choice you make, loss is a choice made for you” (Tomb Raider, 2013). In this exchange, Roth is attempting to physically control Lara’s body, to “make the choice for her,” and choose loss over sacrifice. However, Lara rebels, breaking free of his hold and continuing down the path toward the pilot. “I can’t choose to let him die, Roth” (Tomb Raider, 2013).

This scene lasts only a few minutes, but it is a significant point in Lara’s growth, as it marks the first time she is exercising her own will. Until this moment, she has been following the instructions of Roth and the other *Endurance* crew members, to follow Dr. Whitman, to escape and regroup with Roth in the Mountain Village, to climb the radio tower and signal for a rescue plan, and so on. Roth attempts to control Lara – to force her to remain on his path rather than the one she has chosen for herself (toward the pilot). By challenging her father-figure’s expectations

and literally “going another way,” Lara’s act of rebellion might resonate with teenage gamers, but it also reinforces the point that Lara’s decisions are her own.

After failing to save the pilot²⁹ and confronting Himiko’s undead Stormguard army, Lara is swept down the mountain by a waterfall. This CE ends with Lara crashing into an abandoned fighter plane where she uses a parachute found on board to descend the mountain. After crash landing and exacerbating the hip wound she received earlier in the game, Lara stumbles through the Shantytown map until her injury forces her to stop. Breathing heavily, with her hand pressed to the wound on her hip, Lara desperately searches for medical supplies in the wreckage of a helicopter. Upon finding a lighter on the body of the pilot, Lara, in a moment of Ingenuity, uses the lighter and her arrows to craft ammunition and to cauterize her open wound.

This moment, while carrying with it elements of the voyeuristic, sadistic “torture porn” pleasure derived from some of the more VDEs, is nonetheless a salient moment for Lara, as it showcases her willingness to survive and her desire to regain control over the condition and conduct of her body (Brown, 2018, n.p.). The wound, suffered early in the game when she fell and her hip was impaled on a metal rod, was a source of chronic pain for Lara over the course of the game. After the Waterfall CE, the wound, newly aggravated, was impeding Lara’s progress; she could no longer jump as high or fight as efficiently. Given the choice of succumbing to the pain, likely dying of her wounds, or finding a way to survive, she chose the latter.

To regain her lost combat and traversal abilities, Lara took matters into her own hands. Using her Ingenuity, she took an extreme action that ensured her survival and, moreover, represented a reclamation of control over her body. Rather than constantly responding to the situations the island had imposed on her body (resulting in injury), Lara took a defensive first step in cauterizing her wound to prevent additional falls or other circumstances from

exacerbating the hip wound and impeding her progress. While the specific image of Lara cauterizing her own wound might not resonate with most women outside the game space, Lara's will to survive might.

Another salient moment I want to highlight as an example of Lara regaining control over her own body takes place after the fire ritual in the Geothermal Caverns and Lara is being dragged away as a captive of two Solarii cultists. Upon reaching a narrow stone bridge, Lara fights her way out of her captor's hold and jumps off the ledge into a pool of red liquid. At this point, not only is Lara potentially choosing death over capture – as she had no way of knowing how long the fall would be from the bridge or how deep the pool would be below her – she is also using a burst of strength to fight off the violent hold of two adult men, physically reclaiming her body from those that would have dragged her like a passive subject to her fate.

I also want to note that, upon first playing, I assumed, like many other players, that this liquid was the blood of all those that had been sacrificed in the fire ritual before Sam. But perhaps that red liquid Lara jumped into was something more. Maybe it was blood, but a more specific kind of blood – *menstrual* blood, perhaps? – and Lara's emerging from it was symbolic of a ritual process of rebirth. If so, she would be reclaiming her body from violent men by bathing herself in the only blood that is shed for a peaceful purpose.

These individual moments aside, other parts of the game combine to emphasize the control Lara has over her body and de-emphasize the role the player has in piloting her body. She responds deftly to her environment: gliding her hand along a rock wall as she runs alongside it; shielding her face if the player moves her too close to flames; steadying herself on a ledge if she is in danger of falling off. In these ways, she seizes opportunities to prevent her death when the player didn't notice or didn't care to. These dynamic responses remind players that even if *they*

are not paying close attention to the game's environment, *Lara* is, and she is smart enough to know what to do should the player fail to guide her.

The range of responses increases as Lara unlocks skills from the “Hardened” and “Specialist” tiers, showcasing her newfound survival and fighting abilities. Earlier in the game, for example, if Lara jumps wrong, she collapses on the ground for a moment to recover from the hard fall. As the game progresses, however, she gains the ability to roll out of a fall without input from the player, emphasizing her growth independent of the player's.

For some, these actions can be read simply as evidence of good game mechanics, but for others, Lara's dynamic environmental response is a reminder that she is highly capable and has a degree of bodily autonomy as she is responding even when the player is not. In these moments then, she is taking control over her body back from the player. These moments are powerful reminders of Lara's growth and response to an environment that was designed to control and break her body. Her continued existence in the game world may be dependent on the player piloting her character, but often her response to it, her *defiance* of it, is something that comes from *within* Lara and is highlighted in the way she discovers certain tools, like the rope arrow and the grenade launcher, and incorporates them into her arsenal with no prompting from the player.

While watching Lara gain control over herself and the game's environment is satisfying, perhaps the most satisfying environmental response and reward for game progression – at least in my experience – is listening to the shock and dismay the cultists express as Lara *refuses* to die. She exceeds their expectations repeatedly, proving herself more confident and capable than they thought she would be. “They never make it up this far,” one cultist says to another in the Mountain Village map as Lara, crouched behind a stack of scrapped wood boxes, prepares to

ambush them both (Tomb Raider, 2013). “Oh shit, she’s still alive,” one exclaims as she defeats a “brute-class” enemy, dodging his wild swing with a makeshift axe before pivoting sharply and burying an arrowhead in the back of his thigh (Tomb Raider, 2013). “Stop her, stop her, dammit! She’s tearing us apart!” yells another after Lara foils their attempted ambush using a machine gun she picked up in the previous room to mow them down (Tomb Raider, 2013). At one point, the game offers the possibility to kill a man *with his pants down* – not literally, of course, as the game does not allow for such a robust animation -- but it is implied as the man stops to relieve himself against the side of a rock wall. Upon hearing his zipper release, the player can ambush and stealth-kill him.

These moments and others in which Lara interacts with and responds to her hostile environment are part of what makes this game so enjoyable, something that is emphasized in many of the game’s critical reviews: *Kotaku* called it a “taut re-imagining” of the original game with an “increasingly empowered heroine” and one reviewer on *Forbes* said that while Lara might be “wounded and afraid” throughout the game “she’s going to press on regardless,” and that she ultimately “demands [players’] respect” (Pinchevsky, 2013; Narcisse, 2013).

Ultimately, both these reviews – and many of the others that I read before purchasing the game back in 2013 and as a review for this thesis – highlight Lara’s relentless progression through the game world as a part of the game’s overall appeal.³⁰ These are the moments where the presumed male audience – otherwise catered to with graphic violence, VDEs, and intense combat sequences – is forgotten and the game begins to cater to a wider demographic, to players, like myself, that are enjoying the game for *Lara* and the growth of her character, and not only for the graphics of her body.

Of course, it is neither realistic nor fair to suggest that all male players view Lara as a sexual object and do not also enjoy the growth of her “badass” character, just as it is neither realistic nor fair to suggest that all female players enjoy Lara solely for her character growth and not also for her digital body or for the “gendered pleasures” of watching her wield a gun (Kennedy, 2002, n.p.). But it is important to keep in mind some of the more stereotypical assumptions about what men and women enjoy in video games, as they have left influential “vestigial traces” on the “broader cultural understandings of games and gamers,” and are, more often than not, the assumptions on which the game developers, producers, and marketers operate (Humphreys, 2017, p. 9)

From the game world to the real world. How does Lara’s endurance in the hostile game world, and the ways in which she regains control from the island’s male forces and the (presumed male) player, parallel the real-life experiences of women in the contemporary patriarchal world? After all, women are not likely to find themselves in the extreme, kill-or-be-killed circumstances Lara finds herself in after crashing on Yamatai. However, Lara’s struggle for survival and relentless progression through the male-dominated island surely resonates with many women’s experiences. It certainly did with me. Lara managed to navigate a hostile game world and reclaim a certain degree of bodily autonomy and agency in the process by learning to actively respond to her environment and rebel against the male forces intent on controlling her. By advancing through the game successfully while everyone works to either control or kill her, Lara proves that survival is possible. In doing so, Lara becomes the mechanism through which the other women of the island, Reyes and Sam, can survive.

At the risk of turning a feminist game analysis into an ontological debate about the female condition, I want to point out that throughout history, women have had to fight for

something. Perhaps classifying the causes women champion as “fights” is playing into a masculinist viewpoint in which everything is framed in terms of competition or violence. Yet, just as Lara is fighting the cultists who want to destroy her, so are we in the real world fighting our own battles against male forces that wish to control or exploit our bodies. The arenas of our battles may differ -- from the legislative where feminist and feminist-ally lawmakers are working to balance privacy-based and equality-based conceptions of legalizing female access to abortions in the name of female autonomy (Levi, 2017), to the representational where feminists and feminist scholars are identifying sexist and misogynistic representations of women and women of color in our advertisements, movies, television shows – and video games – to try to combat these representations in the name of realizing more positive female representations (Killooy et al., 2010; Newsom, 2011; Bernard, 2016), and everything in between -- but the desire to fight, to live, to *survive* remains the same.

Tomb Raider and Lara’s ultimately successful struggle to survive resonates with me because I want to believe that we will all survive as Lara did, that each of us championing individual causes on behalf of women will prevail and with it, bring others with us into our success, that we will become the mechanism through which other women will realize their own survival. Playing *Tomb Raider* and watching Lara cut through wave after wave of male combatants while they insist upon the impossibility of her success calls to mind the words of Audre Lorde: “For all of us / this instant and this triumph / We were never meant to survive.”³¹

Lara was never meant to survive Yamatai. And yet, she did. Similarly, there are plenty of women in the world today who, like Lorde, were never meant to survive. And yet, they did, they do, and they will in the future. Playing and reading *Tomb Raider* and Lara’s progression through the hostile, male-dominated game space as a metaphor for female advancement in a male-

dominated world is perhaps not what the developers intended audiences to read from their game, but, nonetheless, their feminist potential and “re-signifiability” is apparent for those willing to read in opposition (Butler, 2013, p. 28).

Chapter Five

“Lara Croft, You Are My Hero!”: Queering the Damsel, Queering the Character

The last major game narrative I want to discuss involves the “damsel-in-distress” plot that is the backbone of the game’s story and appears in quite a few variations as the game progresses. More specifically, I want to look at the various ways in which the narrative is represented, countering those narratives with queered readings that emphasize the fluidity of Lara’s role in the game world.

The “damsel-in-distress” narrative is one that, traditionally, centers on a young woman in some kind of physical distress, from which she needs to be rescued by a heroic male whom she is then romantically obligated to. This characterization of women in video games and American popular culture seems timeless, with roots in Greek mythology and the rescue of Princess Andromeda by the hero Perseus (Solis, 2016, p. 37). The damsel-in-distress character and narrative has been produced and reproduced in myriad ways in American pop culture, from Ann Darrow in *King Kong* to most of the early Disney Princesses – Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella – and so on. While the most infamous video game “damsel” was and will most likely forever remain Princess Peach of *Mario* fame, there are multiple examples from video game history including Pauline – alternatively known simply as “the Lady” – from *Donkey Kong* (1981), Princess Zelda from *The Legend of Zelda* (1986), and Princess Daphne from *Dragon’s Lair* (1983) (Woe Is She, n.d.). More recently, examples have included Ashley Graham from *Resident Evil 4* (2005), Meryl Silverburgh from the *Metal Gear* series (2009), and Elizabeth from *Bioshock Infinite* (2013) (Woe Is She, n.d.).

Although Lara Croft was one of the few women to appear in the pixelated game space of early video games, she was never a damsel. From her first iteration, released in 1996, when

female characters in video games were “vulnerable victims of violence to be rescued by muscular male heroes,” Lara was different (Mikula, 2003, p. 80). She was, and remains, the protagonist of the *Tomb Raider* series and the “driving force” of the game’s plot (Mikula, 2003, p. 80). Thus, from the beginning, Lara Croft was a queer character in that, although she was popularized for her voluptuous curves and overall sex appeal, she ultimately *resisted* classification according to industry standards that would have lumped her in with the other female “damsels” that were all the representations of women in video games at the time.

In the 2013 game, specifically, although Lara is often beaten and bloodied, stabbed and shot, harmed – and assaulted – she remains a queer character (methodologically and literally, if fan theories about Lara and Sam’s relationship are to be believed) as she is not so much a “damsel-in-distress” as she is a “self-saving” damsel who refuses to be defined by gaming norms that have reduced virtually all female representation to damsels and princesses (Layne and Blackmon, 2013, n.p.). Thus, when discussing the queered narratives of *Tomb Raider* and its damsels-in-distress, it becomes useful to look at the other characters to which the damsel characterization can apply. Examining the way the game has presented their damsel narratives and, more importantly, how they can be subverted and queered through an oppositional read can help us break down the ever prolific “damsel” narrative in this game and other media, and teach us how to actively resist its construction in the future.

Although all of the game’s secondary characters and members of the *Endurance* crew can be considered damsels – as Lara rescues all of them except Whitman at some point in the game – there are three main damsel-in-distress narratives the game works to queer: the rescue of Conrad Roth (and his subsequent rescuing of Lara); the failed rescue of the geek male “tech guy” and Lara’s admirer, Alex; and the successful rescue of Sam, Lara’s best friend and the only true

damsel of the game's narrative. Thus, there are also three characters, aside from Lara, who are queered in the rescue process: Roth, Alex, and Sam.

As a reminder, I am using a definition and conceptualization of queer that works primarily to “make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tacit things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and . . . to challenge queer-eradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged” (Sedgwick, 2013, p. 5). It is also a conception of queer that investigates the “unanticipated resignifiability of highly invested terms,” symbols, characters, or narratives in a way that highlights the way they “continue to signify in spite of their authors, and sometimes against their authors’ most precious intentions” (Butler, 2013, p. 28-29).

Combining Sedgwick's queer-realizing and Butler's invested-resignifiability conceptions of queer with Stuart Hall's notion of oppositional code reading allows us to read the damsel-in-distress rescues of Roth, Alex, and Sam as significant reworkings of the traditional narrative, ones that imbue this iteration of Lara Croft with legitimacy as a Triple-A action-adventure video game hero-protagonist. These same readings also work to queer Lara's character and open her up to the potential resignifiability that Butler describes.

Roth, queered through reciprocation. As one of the key ancillary characters, Lara's father-figure and guide through the first part of the game, Conrad Roth (known simply as Roth) is central to the formation of Lara's survivor-character. In the previous chapter, I highlighted Roth, or rather, Lara's rebellion *against* Roth, as one of the key moments in Lara's progression through the game as a metaphor for her rebellion against the male forces trying to control her body. In this chapter, I want to look at another aspect of Roth's character, specifically how he

can be read as an example of how the game has queered the traditional damsel-in-distress narrative through a reciprocal process of distress and rescue.

Lara and Roth take turns saving each other throughout the course of the game. Lara first, catching Roth when he passes out after fighting off a pack of wolves, and then going after the wolves to retrieve a pack of medical supplies they stole to patch up his leg and save his life. Roth saves Lara next when she is targeted on the way up to the Solarii fortress. He provides cover for her as Lara crosses the bridge to their fortress, shooting at cultists who interfere. Not long after this, Roth saves Lara again, catching her after she jumps from a burning tower to an incoming rescue helicopter. This rescue is actually a *successful* parallel of the first scene of the game, in which Roth fails to catch Lara after she jumps between decks during the initial wreck of the *Endurance*.

The final save comes after they have boarded the helicopter and it is brought down by Himiko's storms. The crash killed the pilot *and* Lara; Roth resuscitates her using CPR. He then drags her away from the helicopter crash as a few Solarii cultists descend on the pair, Mathias at the lead. Out of ammunition, Roth tosses his gun down just as Mathias heaves an axe toward Lara's exposed back. Roth steps in front of Lara so that he is struck down by the axe that was meant for her.

This moment and the following cutscene are emotionally charged as Lara and Roth exchange a few final words. "I can't do this without you," she tells him. "I'm sorry, Lara," he replies. "You can do this. You're a Croft." Roth dies and the rest of the *Endurance* crew comes rushing into the scene (Tomb Raider, 2013). Lara collapses, sobbing as Sam goes to her and envelops her in a hug before the crew decides to hold an impromptu funeral for Roth, burning his

body on a pyre because, as Jonah says, “He died as a warrior, we’ll send him on as one” (Tomb Raider, 2013).

While Roth’s death did not take place in the context of Lara attempting to save him, it is still a moment of failure for her and the player. But what is more important about this moment is that it ends the reciprocal saving pattern between Roth and Lara. Admittedly, Roth does save Lara a few more times than she saves him, but there is still a pattern of reciprocation between them. More importantly, although there are moments when Roth is clearly depicted as the patriarchal guiding figure – the moment when he tries to stop Lara from rescuing the pilot described in the last chapter, as an example – for the most part, Roth treats Lara as an equal with Lara’s *age and inexperience* as the salient differences between them, not her *gender*.

In one of the video cutscenes viewed through Sam’s camera, it is revealed that Roth, as captain of the *Endurance*, trusts Lara over the lead male archaeologist, Dr. James Whitman, who was supposed to guide the team to the location of Yamatai. When Lara theorizes that Yamatai is concealed within the storms of the Dragon’s Triangle, Roth listens to her and charts the course of the ship into the Dragon’s Triangle.³² In another one of the cutscenes – filmed from above by Sam as she is capturing B-roll footage of the ocean – Roth and Lara share an intimate moment together. This moment, while also revealing crucial information about the nature of Roth and Lara’s relationship and setting the stakes for the emotional tension that will occur later in the game, highlights Roth’s view of Lara as an equal:

Lara: I’ve studied them so much, I can see charts on the back of my eyelids. But if I’m not right about Yamatai being in the Dragon’s Triangle . . .

Roth (referring to the necklace she has been playing with throughout the scene): I remember when you found that on one of your father's digs. You ran up and showed it to me dressed in your penguin pajamas.

Lara (laughing): I was five years old. It was my first find.

Roth: You've got great instincts, girl. You just have to trust them.

(. . .)

Lara: We're getting closer to the storm.

Roth: Well, whatever's coming, we'll get through it, eh? (Tomb Raider, 2013)

The importance of this scene hinges on Roth's praise of Lara's instincts – later used to help her survive the unforgiving environment of Yamatai – and his insistence that they will get through the storm *together*, implying they are equals that will work together to survive whatever happens.

In the traditional damsel-in-distress narrative, there is a clear power imbalance in the relationship between the “damsel” figure and the “rescuer” figure, as the damsel is usually passive and waiting to be rescued, while the rescuer is active, coordinating, leading, or participating in the rescue. Instead, in this moment and in the reciprocal process of rescue in which Lara and Roth engage throughout the game, there seems to be an emphasis on more equitable relations, with Lara and Roth traversing the “damsel” position and the “rescuer” position fluidly.

Even when Lara is being “rescued” by Roth, and thus in the traditionally passive “damsel” position, she is contributing in some way to her own rescue: When she is climbing across the bridge while Roth provides cover, for example, she is performing great athletic feats and taking care not to draw attention to herself as she climbs on the underside of the bridge away from as many cultists as possible. When she jumps from the burning tower to the rescue

helicopter, she reaches for Roth's outstretched hand and then, when she has hold of it, actively pulls herself into the helicopter using his hand and the helicopter's landing skids. And when she has been recently resuscitated by Roth after the crash of the rescue helicopter, she keeps watch for attackers as Roth drags her away from the wreckage, warning him when the cultists are approaching and prompting him to take out his gun and shoot as many of them as possible.

In this way, the traditional "damsel-in-distress" narrative has been queered by the reciprocity of Roth and Lara's rescues and the fluidity with which they move between the position of "damsel" and "rescuer." It has been further queered by Lara's active participation in her own rescue, destabilizing the notion of the passive damsel upon which entire game narratives are dependent, and thus making Lara a kind of "self-saving" damsel, even when she is in a position in which she needs Roth to rescue her (Layne and Blackmon, 2013, n.p.).

Despite this reciprocal rescuing between Roth and Lara and the interesting dynamic it creates for players, the more dramatic queering work occurs in the rescue narratives of the other two characters in this chapter: the geeky male Alex and the "gal pal" Sam Nishimura.

Alex, queered through failure and geek male representation. Alex's role on the *Endurance* is rather ambiguous, but in one of the cutscene recordings on Sam's camera, he is seen performing a repair with another crew member, Reyes, suggesting some kind of a mechanical-electrical expertise. In another cutscene, he is tracking satellite weather footage inside the Dragon's Triangle, the area into which the *Endurance* is about to sail, in another ambiguous role as some sort of tech personnel.

Other than his role on board the *Endurance*, not much is known about his character, but it becomes clear throughout the course of the game that he has some admiration for Lara. This is

revealed in the few interactions he and Lara have, and in his journal, a collectible item the player can find on her way to the shipwrecked *Endurance* in the second half of the game. It reads,

I wish I could be more like Lara . . . she just blows me away. Not only is she brilliant, she's also an amazing ass kicker. And if she didn't notice me before, she sure as hell won't now. But maybe I can still do something to get her attention.

(Tomb Raider, 2013).

This journal entry and Alex's interactions with Lara hint at an unrequited romantic relationship between them, with Alex going great lengths to impress her, even going off on his own to the wreck of the *Endurance* in search of tools the crew needs to repair a boat on Shipwreck Beach.

His physical character is tall and slim with dark hair. He wears glasses, has a tattoo of a chemical structure of caffeine on the side of his neck, and wears a graphic T-shirt with a depiction of an "escape" key from a computer keyboard. I mention his character design to highlight the markers of his "nerdy guy" persona – the chemical tattoo, the glasses, the keyboard graphic – because they play into his characterization as an idealized "geek masculine" character, a projection of the gamer – and perhaps game developer – into the game space of *Tomb Raider*.

The "geek masculine" is an idealized construction of gamers that relies on the politics of inclusion and exclusion that come from the intentional formation of a gamer identity as a marginalized subject (Humphreys, 2017, p. 8). As a concept, the geek masculine identity has been described and debated by a variety of scholars and authors (Humphreys, 2017; Shaw, 2014; Consalvo, 2012; among others), so I will not repeat here its formation and construction, but I want to take a moment to highlight its function as a rhetorical tool before I discuss its application in Alex's character.

Humphrey outlines the “geek masculine” in relation to gamergaters³³ and the Alt-Right, highlighting the ways in which the geek masculine position is constructed as an “outsider-within” occupying a position with a unique “concatenation of identity, content, and capital” (Humphreys, 2017, p. 9). Seen as occupying a position “outside” the construction of hegemonic masculinity presented in mainstream media culture, gamers are firmly “within” the definitions of masculinity presented by gamer culture and thus have a unique position of power within that sphere as its primary demographic, or the group that most game producers and developers design for, sell to, and market to (Humphreys, 2017, p. 8).

Even the phrase “geek masculine” is intended to invoke their “inside” and “outside” positions. The word “masculine” invites comparison to the “insider” position, to hegemonic masculine standards, while the word “geek” highlights the “outsider” position of the gamer: as someone involved with science, computers, or technology, or someone who exists on the margins of the traditional structures of power and capital in mainstream media, as people who have intellectual or technical prowess, rather than physical.

The problem with the geek masculine identity and its insider-outsider identity formation is that their marginalization by the forces of hegemonic masculinity often prevents them from acknowledging their privilege within the spheres of gaming and geek cultures. Unable to see past their position as marginal within the context of dominant definitions of masculinity, geek masculine gamers often characterize themselves as “outsiders, maligned, and misread, trying to protect the safe spaces they occupy in games from the invasion of the diverse ‘others’” (Humphreys, 2017, p. 9). This was what happened in 2013 when women and minority populations began to call for recognition as a gaming demographic and geek masculine players retaliated with attacks against those populations, fearing a “zero-sum” game culture, in which the

existence of other cultures would take away resources and attention from the geek masculine cultures and the development of their “hard-core” Triple-A titles (Humphreys, 2017, p. 12).

With regard to Alex, it is possible to read his character as the ideal representation of the geek masculine gamer. As I have previously stated, he is tall and conventionally attractive, white, male-presenting, most likely heterosexual, and a character whose aesthetic is laden with signifiers of geek or nerd interests. It can be implied, then, that he is the geek male gamer given a digital form within the game space. The fact that he may or may not have an interest in Lara only furthers this point, as throughout her history as a playable character, men have expressed just as much desire to be *with* her as much as they have expressed a desire to *play* her (Mikula, 2003; Schleiner, 2001).

This reading of his character as a representation of the player in the game world is thus far unremarkable until we come to his “damsel-in-distress” moment, or the moment in which he requires rescue by Lara. About 3 hours and 45 minutes into gameplay, after Lara has rescued Sam for the first time and descended down the mountain from the Solarii fortress to the Shipwreck Beach map, it is revealed that Reyes and the other *Endurance* survivors have found an intact boat among the multiple wrecks on the beach. They intend repair it and sail away from the island. To do so, Reyes needs some of her tools from the shipwreck of the *Endurance*. Lara is not with them, having stayed behind to mourn Roth and, as a result, Alex decides to go ahead, alone, to where the Solarii are scavenging the wreck of the *Endurance*.

When Lara does join up with the others, Alex has already been gone for several hours; she decides to go after him and help him find the tools. It is at this point, on the way to the *Endurance*, that Lara can find the collectible item, Alex’s journal entry, titled “Over His Head,” which details his motivations to go to the *Endurance* alone to imitate and impress Lara (Tomb

Raider, 2013). After reaching the ship and navigating through its remains – stopping briefly in her room to collect one of Sam’s diary entries (which I will discuss later in this chapter), she finds Alex pinned beneath a pipe at the back of the ship.

After navigating a brief puzzle to reach him, Lara finds him in possession of the tools, but unable to escape because of the pipe keeping him pinned. When some cultists find them and start to fire on their location, Alex urges Lara to take the tools and go, to save herself. “I’m sorry for dragging you into this mess,” he says to her. “I thought I could be the star in my own goddamned action movie. Guess it doesn’t always work like that.” Then, when Lara praises him for finding the tools, “Finally, I impress you” (Tomb Raider, 2013).

Lara eventually gives in and takes the tools, leaving Alex to die. “How often does a guy like me get to be the hero,” he asks, and then she kisses him on the cheek and leaves the room (Tomb Raider, 2013). After she is gone, the camera zooms in on Alex’s face as the Solarii fire on him from above before he turns, closes his eyes, and shoots a nearby gas canister, igniting the room and causing the back half of the ship – separated from the front half during the initial crash – to sink into the ocean, triggering a Cataclysm Event (CE) for Lara as she races to escape the ship.

Alex’s death is both a queered “damsel-in-distress” narrative and a failed one: queered as the object in need of rescuing is both male and, as my earlier analysis proposed, a representation of the gamer in the digital space of the game; and failed, as Lara is not successful in rescuing Alex. But rather than considering that a failure on Lara’s part – although it definitely is meant to be viewed as such within the context of the game – I want to examine the implications of Alex sacrificing himself to give Lara the window necessary to escape.

On one hand, this sacrifice on Alex's part can be read as the geek masculine gamer succeeding where Lara is unable to, stepping into the game space through Alex's character – while also controlling Lara's character – and successfully rescuing Lara from herself. If she had stayed behind to try and rescue Alex, it is possible that they both would have died, and with them, any hope that the rest of the *Endurance* crew could survive. But in choosing to shoot the gas canister and sacrifice himself,³⁴ he forced Lara to save herself, to leave him behind and take the tools to Reyes, saving the rest of the *Endurance* crew. In this way, *Alex* could be viewed as the hero character instead of Lara, and through him, the geek masculine gamer he is meant to represent.

On the other hand, what if Alex's death had nothing to do with *Alex* at all? His sacrifice can be read very differently when examined through the lens of the geek masculine stereotype. Instead of looking at his character and the emotional impact his character's death had on Lara and on the tone of the game, what if we read, or “misunderstood,” his death as the death of the geek masculine identity? What if, instead of making a glorious sacrifice, killing himself to save Lara, he was instead acting as the geek masculine gamer, sacrificing himself to make room for other players and gamer cultures? What if, instead of killing himself to impress Lara, he was attempting to atone for the sins of his brothers, the white, heterosexual men occupying the “insider-outsider” masculine position and wielding all the power and privilege that entails in the gaming world?

It is unclear whether the game's developers intended Alex's death to be read as such, or whether his character was meant to be a representation of the geek male player. But reading the game through the conceptual lenses developed by Stuart Hall, Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick and others, enables new meanings and understandings to emerge from the text. Queering Alex's

damsel-in-distress narrative and reading the death of his character as the death of the geek masculine stereotype allows for a deeper look into the construction and function of the geek masculine identity. I argue that representations of the geek masculine gamer in video games is itself a subject worthy of extended study. Reading the identity into Alex hints of future possibilities.

Before I move on to an analysis of Sam and her queered damsel-in-distress narrative, I want to pose one more question: What does Alex's death, interpreted as the death of the geek masculine player, say about the state of the video game industry today, and what does it say about what white, male players (currently the primary gaming demographic) need to do to help move the industry forward? Now, that is a question worthy of future study.

Sam, queered through queerness and Lara's success. The last damsel narrative I want to examine is that of Sam Nishimura, descendant of Himiko, the first and last Sun Queen, and a documentary filmmaker brought on the trip to record the "re-discovery" of Yamatai. Sam is also Lara's best friend and is the only true "damsel" of this game: the pretty, young female whose existence as a character within the game is predicated on her rescue by Lara. She is actually rescued twice by Lara: once from the burning Solarii fortress before Roth dies, and another time from Mathias in the last map of the game, the Chasm Ziggurat, in which Lara finally confronts the undead Himiko. Both times, Lara's rescue of Sam is a heroic feat, succeeding despite all odds in a classic action-adventure rendition of the original damsel-in-distress narrative.

It is revealed through backstory cutscenes and Sam's entry in the *Tomb Raider* wiki page that Sam and Lara met at University College London where, despite being "polar opposites" in terms of personality, they became fast friends, with Sam helping Lara become less introverted by taking her out to nightclubs and "attempting to bring out Lara's Inner Party Girl" (Samantha

Nishimura, n.d.). While she is physically present in a precious few cutscenes, and her interaction with Lara is limited to a few paragraphs of dialogue and a handful of hugs, she is central to Lara's desire and motivation through the game, as it is her rescue that prompts Lara's drive to survive Yamatai. Next to Roth, Sam is the character Lara calls out for the most, talks to the most, and references the most in her internal dialogue.

The player's introduction to Sam's character comes at the beginning of the game, mere moments after Lara struggles her way onto a cliffside overlooking the sea. Seconds after the *Tomb Raider* title card flashes, Lara limps her way across the seaside cliffs to find an abandoned lifeboat and some ransacked supply crates, among which she finds Sam's pack. "Sam's pack! Sam! They must have come this way," she calls out, falling to her knees among the supplies and equipping the two-way radio and Sam's video camera Gear (Tomb Raider, 2013). "Sam?! Roth?! Can anyone hear me? I've got to find them," she says determinedly before she slips on a nearby incline and descends into the first open map of the game, the Coastal Forest (Tomb Raider, 2013).

Later, shivering under a rocky overhang in the Coastal Forest, Lara pulls out Sam's video camera to watch some of the footage – cutscenes that, as I mentioned, serve as important backstory vignettes to highlight the personalities of the various characters and emphasize their emotional connection to Lara, and through her, the player. Sam and Roth's camera cutscenes are some of the most important of the whole game as Roth's cutscenes further establish him as Lara's father figure and Sam's cutscenes underline the friendship and personal dynamic between her and Lara.

In one such scene, Sam, wielding the camera, zooms in on a studious Lara as she hunches over a pile of papers and maps:

Sam: Here's the soon-to-be world-famous archaeologist, Lara Croft, in her native habitat. She's on the hunt for the lost kingdom of Yamatai, home to the fabulous Himiko, mythical Sun Queen, and ancestor of yours truly!

Lara: Sam, this is serious.

Sam: Oh, sweetie, I know. I'm just trying to lighten the mood here. Everyone's so on edge! What are you so worried about?

Lara: I'm close to something. I'm sure of it. I just don't know if the others will listen. Or even if they should . . .

Sam: Lara, you know this stuff better than anyone! Seriously. I'm not just saying this to make you feel better. I trust you. Roth trusts you. You got this. Now let's take a break, okay?

Lara: Okay, okay! And Sam . . . thanks.

Sam – to the camera: She's not always this serious, you know? (Tomb Raider, 2013)

Later in the game, after Sam has been kidnapped and Lara is en route to rescue her, Sam manages to secure a radio and contact Lara:

Lara: Sam! Sam, it's Lara!

Lara: Oh god, Lara. It's good to hear your voice.

Sam: Yours too, Sam. Is the rest of the crew with you?

Sam: No, I just managed to steal this radio off a guard . . . They keep talking about a "fire ritual." Lara, I'm fucking terrified . . .

Lara: Listen. I'm coming to get you. I'm going to get you out of there!

Sam: Please, please, help me, Lara.

Lara: I promise. I promise, Sam.

Mercenary: Hey! She took your radio!

Sam: Oh no!

Lara: Sam!? Sam!?

Sam: Help me! Please!

Lara: Stay away from her, you bastards! Stay away! (Tomb Raider, 2013)

While these are just two brief exchanges between Sam and Lara that take place throughout the game, they highlight a unique dynamic of friendship bordering on romantic attachment – a “Friends to Lovers” dynamic, if you will³⁵ – one that is reinforced when Lara fails to rescue Sam from Mathias before the fire ritual. Before I move on with my analysis, I want to describe the fire ritual scene in detail, as I believe it highlights their unique dynamic in a way that is more reminiscent of a romantic relationship than a platonic friendship.

The fire ritual, which takes place in the Geothermal Caverns map after Lara has successfully infiltrated the old palace the Solarii are using as their base of operations, is a test of Sam’s heritage in which she is to be burned at the stake to determine if she is truly the next vessel for the undead Queen Himiko. In this ritual, Sam is bound to a stake and gagged, rendered immobile and silent, a true damsel-in-distress in every sense of the word. She is also a stand-in for all the other female bodies who have been shipwrecked on the island before her, as it is revealed through in-game dialogue and diary entries that all women who end up on the island are sacrificed in this ritual test. Mathias and the Solarii believe that finding the next vessel for Himiko is the only way to ease the storms she controls around the island that prevent everyone from leaving.

After finding Sam and the ritual location and watching as a burning torch is lowered to the pyre at Sam's feet, Lara emerges from her hiding place and fires her bow, taking down a few Solarii before she is overwhelmed and dragged to the pyre herself. She is forced to kneel – a subservient, submissive position – as Mathias accosts her before he grabs the fallen torch and tosses it onto the pyre himself. As the fire spreads and Sam begins to panic, her screams muffled by the gag, Lara gasps and seems close to tears for the first time since the game started: "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she says, struggling against her captors before slumping in defeat and looking up at Sam mournfully. "Just look at me, look at me, okay?" (Tomb Raider, 2013). Moments after this emotionally charged interaction, Sam is saved by a gust of wind controlled by Himiko that puts out the fire and reveals Sam as her next vessel. Lara is dragged away and escapes from the Solarii into the Geothermal Caverns map with nothing but her bow and her determination to rescue Sam from Mathias and the rest of the Solarii.

Imagining Lara replaced with a male figure reveals a lot about the nature of these interactions and the relationship dynamic between Sam and Lara. If Lara Croft became Luke Croft, for example, existing cultural scripts of romantic heterosexuality – specifically, protective instincts as indicative of desire³⁶ – would prompt players to interpret these scenes in a romantic light. But within the existing structure of the game, with Lara and Sam both female figures, these interactions and their friendship as a whole is meant to be read as intense and emotional, but ultimately platonic, a fact that is reinforced by one of Sam's diary entries, found much later in the game on the wreck of the *Endurance* near the Shipwreck Beach map. In this entry, the last in the collection narrated by Sam, the specter of sexuality, and specifically Sam's heterosexuality, is raised in the context of one of Sam and Lara's "adventures" together:

We had so many awesome adventures together. That insane backpacking trip through Bulgaria, I was always dragging her out to clubs. And the hiking trip on the south face of Kilimanjaro; all Lara wanted to do was explore ruins, but who knew we'd run into so many cute guys? Certainly not Lara, haha! (Tomb Raider, 2013).

This reference to “cute guys” on a trip that could be oppositionally read as a honeymoon backpacking vacation highlights the tensions between how Sam and Lara’s relationship *should* be read according to the game developers, and how it *can* be read with a queer, oppositional lens (emphasis on the *queer*).

Sam’s existence in the hegemonic reading of the game works because she is meant to be read as Lara’s best friend or “gal pal,” in which any expression of female-female desire or affection is couched in the language of platonic friendship, thereby neutralizing its homoerotic potential (McBean, 2016, p. 282). Sam McBean describes this concept best in the article “The gal pal epidemic” in which she discusses the recent trend of Hollywood gossip magazines and tabloids reporting on – and thereby policing– female celebrity romantic relationships. In these relationships, all potential lesbian or bisexual partner interactions are described in terms of platonic friendships with infantilizing, adolescent labels like “BFF” (best friends forever) and “gal pal” (McBean, 2016, p. 282). According to McBean, the BFF or gal pal designation is one often used to “describe [female same-sex] pairs who are physically affectionate in public, romantic on social media, or have confirmed their relationship status” in a way that indicates a “resistance to reading the (confirmed or likely) sexual nature of these pairings, masking the lesbian possibility with euphemisms of friendship” (McBean, 2016, p. 282).

McBean's description of a "gal pal" reading of affectionate lesbian or bisexual female relationships seems to apply to Sam and Lara's relationship, a fact many fans and players picked up on following the game's release in 2013. A quick search for "gal pals Lara Croft and Sam" on Google brings up a bevy of results, for example: a *Slate* article critiquing the 2018 movie for not including Sam's character; a *Paste* article, "Closeted Damsels and Heroic Gal Pals," that includes a line from an interview with the game's main writer, Rhianna Pratchett, in which she says, "There's a part of me that would've loved to make Lara gay" (Myers, 2015, n.p.); and a fansite advocating for Sam and Lara's LGBTQ relationship to evolve in future iterations of the *Tomb Raider* games – deactivated, since the game's 2015 sequel, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, debuted without Sam or any reference to her and Lara's evolving relationship. The "gal pal" reading of Sam and Lara has become something of an inside joke among fans, with blogs on the topic featuring in-game stills of the two embracing or sitting together with captions like, "Just gals being pals" and a sarcasm so thick, all that seems to be missing from the reading is an emoticon wink face (Bo, 2017, n.p.).

However infantilizing the label, the prolific use of the phrase "gal pal" and its subsequent read and impact on Sam and Lara's relationship dynamic has actually encouraged players to discuss their take on the game and on Sam and Lara's friendship. As much as the trend of euphemistically referring to same-sex female relationships is part of a longer history of erasing same-sex female desire, it is also notable for the ways in which it refers to a same-sex female relationship where an aspect of romance or desire is undeniable or suspected. The term is also highly visible, attempting to "cover-up" lesbian sexuality in a way that, ultimately, renders "same-sex desire legible in the very refusal to name it as such" (McBean, 2016, p. 283). The result is a specter of lesbian sexuality that, although it "does not quite come into shape [in

discourse] . . . is nevertheless there as a presence” (McBean, 2016, p. 283). As McBean argues in her article, although the phrase “gal pal” is an attempt to erase same-sex female desire, it brings the concept to the forefront of cultural discourse. Perhaps then, there is an avenue for lesbian or bisexual women to reclaim and appropriate the term “gal pal,” to destabilize its original usage as an infantilizing euphemism for female romantic or sexual same-sex relationships and queer its meanings so that it can instead be used to affirm the very relationships it once worked to negate.³⁷

Returning to the game and to Sam and Lara’s relationship as it functions within the larger damsel-in-distress narrative, it is possible to use the queered “gal pal” framing to read their relationship as less than platonic – as many fans and players have already, judging by the fanart and fanfiction available online – and thus, further queer both the damsel-in-distress narrative and the characters of Sam and Lara. Instead of a muscular strongman heroically saving the weak damsel from a terrible monster, *Tomb Raider* presents players with a different narrative, one in which a determined young woman saves her girlfriend from a crazed man, plowing through wave after wave of misogynistic cultists to do so. Reading Sam and Lara’s relationship with the queered “gal pal” frame perhaps reinforces the romantic attachment that follows many of the traditional damsel-in-distress narratives, but it does so in a way that emphasizes the differences between *Tomb Raider*’s damsel narrative and more traditional ones from games like *Super Mario Odyssey* or *The Legend of Zelda*.

The player is reminded, after rescuing Sam, a traditional damsel, that the traditional damsel-in-distress narrative no longer adds up. Instead of a heroic strongman, Sam’s rescuer is a young female archaeologist and that her presence in the game space and successful rescue of the damsel is, in and of itself, an impossibility according to the very narrative she just participated

in. Traditional damsel-in-distress narratives would have classified Lara as just another damsel to be rescued, but in the game world of *Tomb Raider*, Lara Croft is anything but.

Not your damsel. Thus, the damsel-in-distress narrative has been queered and deconstructed, destabilized and broken down in a way that does not allow Lara to easily fit into it. She does successfully rescue Sam – a character who, perhaps, comes the closest to fitting in the “damsel” mode, her “gal pal” sexuality notwithstanding – but she remains female at the close of the game. Lara does not transform into a male body upon her successful rescue of Sam, a feat which would make it easier to classify Sam’s rescue according to traditional damsel-in-distress narrative conventions. Lara is also rescued several times by her father figure Roth, and she, in turn, rescues him. As their rescue-distress pattern is more or less reciprocal, the boundaries between “damsel” and “rescuer” become less fixed and more fluid, thus destabilizing the traditional narrative and its rigid gender roles and distinctions. Lara also fails to rescue Alex, who, in many ways, could be read as a representation of the geek masculine gamer projected into the game space. In this narrative, the person who is usually doing the rescuing, the gamer, by way of a male “rescuer” protagonist, is actually cast in the “damsel” role, and the traditional damsel, the female Lara, is cast as the “rescuer.” Although this formula fails to produce a successful outcome, I would argue this failure is less about the organization of the damsel-in-distress narrative and its flipped roles than it is a reflection on the geek masculine gamer represented through Alex and the sacrifices these traditional gamers must make to improve the quality of games and gamer culture.

Through all these rescues, Lara is made queer by her ultimate refusal to fit in either the “damsel” or “rescuer” role. As I mentioned earlier, she was already queer in that she was one of the first-ever playable female protagonists at a time when women in video games, if they were

represented *at all*, were kidnapped princesses or other “damsels” in need of rescuing. But Lara has been queered further in this 2013 reboot of the original franchise, and not just because many fans and players suspect she and her “gal pal” Sam are more than friends. Her role in the damsel-in-distress narrative that is the central plot of this game (and many others) is fluid, and thus she resists easy classification, just as she did back in the 90s when feminists wondered aloud whether she was a booby bimbo or a positive female role model for women in video games.

Lara Croft is not a damsel. She never was and she (hopefully) never will be. But it’s important to remember that part of the importance of queering existing structures, characters, and narratives is to emphasize the ways in which they cannot be forced to “signify monolithically” and that they should, instead, be open to multiple interpretations (Sedgwick, 2013, p. 8). The “damsel-in-distress” narratives in *Tomb Raider*, as I have presented them, hold multiple possibilities for resignification, just as the character of Lara Croft is open to reinterpretation, resignification, and re-understanding. I argue that one of the many ways she can be reinterpreted as a feminist character is through a queer, oppositional reading of her performance in the game. The benefits of doing so, of “misunderstanding” the developer’s presentation of her as a “vulnerable and victimized Lara Croft” and instead reading her as a fully-formed feminist protagonist, are numerous (Hall, 1999, p. 102; Foxx-Gonzalez, 2012a, n.p.). Most importantly, it allows for a robust discussion about the 2013 game in a way that will be beneficial to future feminist gamers.

Chapter Six

“Run, You Bastards! I’m Coming For You All!”: A Conclusion (For Now)

I believe I have demonstrated at this point that there is much to be said about Lara Croft and her character in the 2013 *Tomb Raider* video game. I have covered some of the most-salient topics I noticed in my multiple times playing through the game, but, certainly, there are additional topics that could be explored in future studies.

I return to Alex Layne and Samantha Blackmon’s article “Self-Saving Princess: Feminism and Post-Play Narrative Modding,” as I think their notion of creative feminist resistance through fan and critic post-play game interaction is an avenue for future study, specifically using the notion of queer I have discussed in relation to Sam and Lara’s relationship dynamic. More specifically, it may be their relationship as depicted in fanart and fanfiction – the latter of which I have had *plenty* of experience with, as I have read many of the over 220 works under the relationship tag “Lara Croft/Sam Nishimura” on the Internet’s premiere fanfiction site, Archive of Our Own (AO3) – that is worth exploring as fanworks and fan studies in the context of games and game studies is a topic I think is worthy of future scholarly work.

When I started this project many months ago, I had only a vague outline of my purpose: produce an in-depth study of the character of Lara Croft in the 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot video game. While that remained true throughout the course of this project, it did expand somewhat as I brought in queer and communications studies disciplines, as I thought about the many narratives that make up the game and Lara’s role in it, and as I learned more about how to be a feminist scholar. More than just reading Lara Croft as a feminist character, I have, through this project, attempted to outline some of the best and worst aspects of her character as it is presented

in the *Tomb Raider* game, in the hopes of using this project as a blueprint for the design of future feminist female video game protagonists.

In this project, I have outlined my oppositional reading of the game according to Stuart Hall's encoding and decoding model of communication. I have also described the ways in which Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler's conceptions of queer and queer studies have informed my oppositional reading position, emphasizing the potential for resignification and reinterpretation in my reading of Lara and her character in the game. I have also situated my work within the context of other popular and scholarly articles on Lara Croft, and how my understanding of her character has been influenced by those readings, from Schleiner's description of Lara's many "gender-subject configurations" (Schleiner 2001, p. 222) to Mikula's "empty sign" interpretation that allows players to read diverse and often contradictory meanings from her character (Mikula, 2003, p. 83).

Moreover, I have outlined my reading of three key narratives in the game and how those narratives reflect back onto the character of Lara Croft: the attempted sexual assault in the "Crossroads" scene and how that scene and its potentially Othering effect on players marked a key "misunderstanding" between the mostly-male game developers and the game's mixed-gender audience (Hall, 1999, p. 102); Lara's "exceptional" status as a lone female figure in a male-dominated world and how her progression through the hostile, male game space can be read as a metaphor for female progression and success in a patriarchal world; and, lastly, how the "damsel-in-distress" narrative is queered and deconstructed at several points in the game and how each successive queering further emphasizes the ways in which Lara is a queer character, open to reinterpretation and resignification.

Although my honors thesis experience is concluding, this work represents only some of what I would say about Lara Croft and women in video games in general and I hope to continue this work in the future. It is only through thoughtful engagement and critique with the ideas presented in this game and others of its ilk that we can develop a blueprint for an explicitly feminist video game. While some may argue that such a game is not necessary, or profitable, or enjoyable – or *whatever* – I would disagree. Video games, as Sal Humphreys noted in her article “On Being a Feminist in Games Studies,” “inherently offer us a place to imagine different worlds” – that is part of their appeal (Humphreys, 2015, p. 15). Thus, the “different world” I am imagining is one in which the best parts of a feminist read of Lara Croft – her intelligence, her independence, her queer representation, her determination, and her all-around badassery – are presented without the negative qualifiers of a potential sexual assault against a female protagonist, voyeuristic “torture porn” violence against women, or intense victimization. I wonder what that game would look like and what it would take to get that game developed and produced, but I know I’m excited to find out.

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¹ An online game distribution platform developed by Valve in 2003 for buying, managing, and streaming video games on Mac, Windows, Linux, Android and other platforms.

² First released in early 2013, the game, designed, developed and published by Zoë Quinn with additional writing by Patrick Lindsey, *Depression Quest* is a semi-autobiographical single-player interactive fiction game that followed the protagonist as they attempt to understand and deal with their depression. The game was praised critically for its educational value and its realistic depiction of depression but was condemned by the geek masculine center of the gaming demographic who viewed it and other indie games with nontraditional gameplay and character representations as encroaching on their game territory. This game, its release, and the accompanying false allegations that Quinn had traded sexual favors for positive critical review are largely cited as what triggered the 2013 #Gamergate controversy.

³ Ignoring, of course, the multitude of roles women played in the WWII from fighter pilots and snipers to spies and codebreakers, from battlefield nurses and war secretaries to covert tacticians and Rosie the Riveters.

⁴ “Doxing” or “doxxing” refers to the act of finding and broadcasting a person’s personal information to a larger audience on the Internet without that person’s permission. Doxing usually occurs on social media platforms and tends to be motivated by malicious intent. Further discussion of doxing and internet abuse against women and minorities can be found in J.R. Vickery and T. Everbach’s 2018 book *Mediating Misogyny: Gender, Technology, and Harassment*.

⁵ Further discussion of this will follow in the “Crossroads” chapter analyzing the depiction of sexual assault against Lara within the first 45 minutes of gameplay.

⁶ Sal Humphreys in her 2017 essay “On Being a Feminist in Games Studies” gives a fascinating account of how similarities in #Gamergate rhetoric parallels alt-right hate-speech. This line in particular struck me: “Watching the ways in which the rhetoric of the alt-right movement online gathers speed and popularity and aligns with gamergate style hate speech and misogyny is very instructional for understanding the ways in which gamergaters are part of much broader cultural movements that attempt to establish new cultural norms and values that devalue women and anyone not straight, White and male.” Although this point and Humphrey’s analysis are intriguing and worthy of a research paper in their own right, they are beyond the scope of this particular project.

⁷ Although character race was not examined closely in this project, personal game-playing experience has shown me that representations of people of color are lacking. Nearly all main playable characters are white or white-passing; those that aren’t – most notably, main characters of the *Grand Theft Auto* series – are stereotyped. Although some scholars have looked at race representation in video games, additional research is needed to examine and counteract this problem.

⁸ Triple-A or AAA is an industry term that refers to those big-budget games released by major publishers with significant advertising and production budgets.

⁹ I use the term “multidisciplinary” here – meaning, of several disciplines contributing to the same study or question often in parallel – rather than interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary, as acknowledgment of the ways cultural and media studies are often related, and the way feminism is often used as a theoretical lens for both media and cultural studies research. The differences between the three disciplinary approaches, articulated in Reid, Greaves, and Kirby’s 2017 *Research, Experience and Social Change* is slight, but enough that I wanted to note it here. The difference, to me, is the way in which multidisciplinary work is stressed as different disciplines working in parallel to each other, something I understand cultural and media studies often do.

¹⁰ The term “transgendered” is actually used by Helen Kennedy in her 2002 article to describe the potential for subject-object blurring in the playing of the Tomb Raider game, but I am using it here as it is the process Schleiner was describing in her article, despite not having named it as such.

¹¹ While Schleiner is right in that the character of Lara Croft initially gave and continues to give women and girls an “entry point” for interest in video games and technology, there is something naïve in the way she outlines the “next step” for female involvement in the video game industry. Perhaps Schleiner did not feel it necessary to elaborate on the ways in which her theoretical “next step” would come to fruition, or perhaps she just simply did not have the article space in order to do so. Regardless, nothing about this next step has been or will be as straightforward as Schleiner suggests – witness that I am currently writing this in the 2019, almost two decades after this article was first written and parity has yet to be achieved.

¹² These concepts and theories emerge from the work of John Locke, Charles Morris and others, but particularly from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, who was instrumental in defining and developing the field of semiology/semiotics.

¹³ It is at the underlined points that most “misunderstandings” between producer and audience readings take place in Hall’s model, as there are often serious structural difference in relation and position between the encoder-producers and the decoder-receivers.

¹⁴ The producer’s comments, the “Crossroads” trailer and the resulting fallout will be discussed at length in the chapter “Lara at the ‘Crossroads’ and the Misogyny that Threatens to Define Her” with a further discussion on the use of Stuart Hall and his encoding-decoding theories in this essay.

¹⁵ There are, undoubtedly, people who still use the word “queer” as a negative signifier of sexual deviance, but as they have no bearing on this project, I will refer any and all use-cases of this definition in the past tense.

¹⁶ My coding methods were *very loosely* based on a few described in Johnny Saldaña’s book “Coding for the Qualitative Researcher.” In particular, my method of coding and analyzing the game was influenced by the descriptive, narrative, versus, process, and motif coding processes described in the book.

¹⁷ All sources in this section are reviews, critiques, and commentaries from game and feminist blogs and news sites. They are not part of the official, academic literature review of this project and are not peer reviewed or scholarly in nature. They are effectively “grey literature” sources – a term coined by Greaves, Kirby, Reid in their book *Experience, Research and Social Change* (North York, Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2017) – that, while still important to this project and most other cultural studies/media studies projects, are not a part of any structured literature review and will instead be referenced periodically in conjunction with other academic articles throughout this piece.

¹⁸ The idea of cultural scripts comes from the work of Erving Goffman and his book of sociological theory “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.”

¹⁹ This player-character configuration is based around on the player’s “identification playing style,” which has two possible answers: play-separate or play-as-one. While a “playing style” normally refers to a distinctive manner or way of playing, an identification playing style refers to a way of playing in which the player identifies with the protagonist, thus moving through the world of the game as if they *are* the protagonist or as if they *are controlling* the protagonist.

²⁰ Full title, *Uncharted: Drake’s Fortune*, released in 2007.

²¹ And even here, mere paragraphs after the description of Beauvoir’s Othering, we have the construction of the Other. All categories of players beside men, and specifically white men, are shoved into this category of “others” without further elaboration. Although I recognize the unfortunate reality of this, I find it necessary here as a further description of the gender subversive readings of Lara and her potential appeal to audiences other than cis-gendered white males takes place in the literature review section of this paper.

²² Lara is not always triumphant, of course. Her character can die as a result of the player’s action, but just as the game presupposes players will try until they succeed and/or the game’s events are played out in full, so will I.

²³ Who is, in turn, being used by Mathias and the cult of the Solarii for *her* body and her connection to Himiko, the Sun Queen of Yamatai, who is trapped in her *own* decaying body and needs a new one to release her power. The female body is truly central to the game’s whole plot.

²⁴ This still image was found on Pinterest and is from a cutscene in the 2013 game.

²⁵ For an excellent but also quite horrifying example of how central the female body is to advertising and media, watch “Miss Representation” (2011).

²⁶ As mentioned in the Introduction, although I did not specifically analyze race in this game, I want to recognize the fact that Lara Croft, the main playable character, is white, as most video game protagonists are. A 2009 study by Dmitri Williams and Mia Consalvo, among others, found that white people are vastly overrepresented in video games at a staggering 80 percent of the total racial makeup of video game characters (Williams et. al., 2009). Although that number has been steadily decreasing as the makeup of gamer populations changes, the visual makeup of video game protagonists still skews white in many cases. Again, this isn’t a topic I have covered or will cover in depth in this paper, but it is definitely worth additional study.

²⁷ However, it is revealed through context clues, journal entries, and the game’s flavor text that she had a daughter with Lara’s father-figure Roth, who ends up sacrificing himself for Lara during a confrontation with Mathias. So, although her body is not exploited or destroyed during the game’s events, neither she nor her body emerge from Tomb Raider’s misadventure unscathed.

²⁸ And yes, I am using the term “penetrate” very intentionally here as a way of appropriating a term with masculine connotations that is often used to describe male domination to refer instead to Lara’s success as a female video game protagonist in a largely male-dominated world. More importantly, I am also using this term to describe the process of how a successful reading of Lara Croft as a feminist character can foster more intentionally feminist video game protagonists, as their success has been proved possible through Lara.

²⁹ Potentially proving that Roth was right and that Lara should not have attempted to save him, despite the fact that this rebellion was necessary to advance the game's plot.

³⁰ Reading critical reviews of the game is perhaps the best way to judge how players enjoyed the game other than conducting a survey of players, which is an interesting prospect to be sure but something that is ultimately beyond the scope of this project.

³¹ Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival" (1978).

³² An action that did result in his death and the death of much of his crew, but *did* lead them to Yamatai, so whether or not it was a "good" or "bad" action is ultimately up for debate.

³³ Briefly mentioned in the opening chapter of this thesis, gamergaters, or #gamergaters, are those proponents of the 2013 #Gamergate controversy in which female and minority gamers, developers, and critics were attacked for their perceived "invasion" into the traditionally white, heterosexual male game space.

³⁴ This action can actually be viewed as two things: a hastening of his own death or a suicide. Those two interpretations have different implications for the reading of his character, but I do not feel qualified to discuss the philosophical implications of that. I point it out for other scholars to examine.

³⁵ "Friends to Lovers" is one tag used on the fanfiction website Archive of Our Own (AO3) to describe a relationship in which the primary characters are friends before they develop romantic feelings for each other. It is one of the most popular tags on the site and is usually accompanied by secondary tags "slowburn," "angst," "mutual pining," and "mutual misunderstanding." The tag and its accompanying relationship depiction are one of the most popular on AO3 and is a secondary tag of at least 12 of the over 220 works with the main relationship tag "Lara Croft/Samantha Nishimura." All of this I know from *plentiful* personal experience with the website and its tagging mechanic.

³⁶ A theory of interpersonal and sociocultural interaction, cultural scripts, popularized by Erving Goffman, refer to those patterns of behavior that are unique to a certain culture. In this context, you don't have to look far to view evidence that protective behavior is indicative of romantic desire or attachment, as male protection of female love interests is a common trope in romantic books, movies, and television shows and may even have roots in the damsel-in-distress narrative itself.

³⁷ And, indeed, it seems some are already reclaiming this term as a Google search of the phrase "gal pal" returned multiple results, one of which was a picture of a strapless strap-on dildo with the brand name "Gal Pal." Make of that what you will.