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Contemporary Video Games: A Bad Precedent for Female Beauty?

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Abstract:

If you have played a video game in the last couple of years, what have you observed when it comes to presenting genders? Does it seem like female characters are designed to be relatable representations of their gender; or do they seem like the creations of the perverse, male gaze that influences most of the industry? Beyond a few exceptions, female representation in video games is over sexualized in ways that affect the perspective of the female body. Over time the female figure regarding nudity and what is deemed appropriate within the media has shifted and become desensitized.

3D character modeling is a form of art; and like others that had preceded it, it was often a lens through which to see the male gaze. Many famous artworks have been created by males. Through their views, they shape ideologies and the communal subconscious of the world. The female body is no exception to this, from Masaccio's *Adam and Eve* to Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, or Manet's *Olympia*, the nude female body went from an absolute sin to a model of intimidating power.

Now, within the past few centuries, Lara Croft's 3D body (which has been created by males) sheds a lustful light on the female body. Instead of a relatable feminine character, she was created to be an infallible object of male fantasy. In this paper, I plan to explore how the creation and transformation of Lara Croft's body has had a major impact on how the world views the female body in a negative light, and how this differs little to how men's influence in art has portrayed this in the past. It is crucial that the efforts to bring attention to this matter continue as we start to see changes in video games to bring forth better choices regarding female characters and sexualization.

Contemporary Video Games: Sets a Bad Precedent for Female Beauty?

In October 1996, the action game, *Tomb Raider*, came out on most video game platforms throughout the world. It was a video game with a quaint similarity to the popular film franchise, *Indiana Jones*; though, instead of playing as a snarky, irritable man falling into one trap after another, you played as the beautiful female protagonist, Lara Croft, adorned in tight clothing that revealed presumably way too much skin for the bug-ridden environment of a jungle. 3D graphics were still relatively new at the time, so everything still had that jagged charm of polyhedrons that stuck out in immersion breaking ways; but it's hard to imagine a time where her oversized, triangular breasts were not seen as comical. Players were not put off by this, though, as the sexualized character model had stirred infatuation in the hearts of many who played it. Rumors turned to legends as many seemed obsessed over getting "secret codes" that would allow them to play the game with her in the nude. The gaming industry continues to rise with success but lacks respect for women. This is an obvious fact since many video games lack female protagonists who are not sexualized. This is not to say that they do not exist, but it is a rare occasion. These examples help to demonstrate the continued demand and focus on de-sexualization in the gaming industry in order to create a safer gaming environment for women. The absence of female protagonists in the industry begs the question that, when they are the protagonist, is it just to be an object of sexualization?

"In case if a female character introduced into the game, the high chance that she is going to be highly sexualized. Despite this fact, the target audience is getting

more diverse, it does not change the perception of female gender by video game companies and society.”¹

Core Design developers Paul Douglas and Gavin Rummery were aware of the rumors surrounding their character Lara Croft from Tomb Raider having the ability to be manipulated through codes into playing as a naked character. Their response to the situation was to say, “It annoyed us because a) it didn’t exist and b) it meant we’d meet people at parties who thought we were perverts making pornographic video games for children,” said Rummery. (TheGamer) This seemed to bother him and other developers so much that they even went as far as putting in this “secret cheat” into the game that, once entered, would instead cause Laura Croft to spontaneously explode.

When it came time for the second installment of the franchise, the rumors were clearly still irritating the two. At the conclusion of the game, there was a cutscene that showed Lara in a robe about to step into the shower. She’s about to take the robe off when she notices the player watching. She promptly shakes her head, picks up her conveniently placed shower shotgun, and shoots the player with it. The developers were clearly keen on chastising the players for these rumors, but the marketing department was not on the same page. According to Douglas, they supposedly wanted to capitalize on them, suggesting that they should show her nude in the game. “Even during development someone in management, perhaps half-jokingly, asked us for something similar and we told them to bog off”. While their contempt for these ideas may at first seem admirable, it is perhaps misleading to see them as still holding the ethical high ground in

¹ Kondrat, Xeniya. “Gender and Video Games: How Is Female Gender Generally Represented in Various Genres of Video Games?” *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology* 6, no. 1 (2015): 178.

this situation. They wagged their fingers at players and their team for these lustful feelings towards Lara, but the fact is that they had a part in over sexualizing her in the first place.

According to a 1997 issue of the UK magazine, *Computer and Video Games*, the marketing team for Core Design finally got their wish when a cheat “Disco Mode” was discovered in one of the games. It was created by one of the developers to, “amuse them during those lonely nights of playtesting levels.” In order to access it, a player had to rhythmically press a certain button to the beat of a song (the magazine suggested “Wannabe” by the Spice Girls) and this would eventually cause Lara to start dancing under disco lights. The screen would then suddenly go black, and then Lara would reappear suddenly in the nude. This was clearly done for playtesting as the enemies don’t attack you in this mode, with many of them actually feeling quite excited about her new lack of clothing. A T-rex apparently even claps for her. The magazine goes on to recommend the player to, “do a lot of swimming and climbing over ledges in this mode. It’s a real treat!”

Clearly, this shows a great deal of hypocrisy on the developer’s part. On one hand, they chastise players for the lustful actions described in the previous quote; but on the other, they had taken time away from developing the game to render a fully naked model of her, just to watch move through the game as they were playtesting it. It makes it seem as though Lara’s shower shotgun was less for the players and more likely an extension of guilt that should have been pointed back at the developers who created her.

Regardless, this is an issue that is strongly prevalent in the video game industry, as bored, predominantly male video game developers find ways to “amuse themselves” in inherently lustful ways as the games are created and tested. These actions bleed through the cracks of the

games and into the minds of the players, subliminally laying the foundation that females are objects of desire and lust over being in depth characters themselves. This isn't the case for all video games, but it is a situation that shows up time and time again, as in recent games such as World of Warcraft or Overwatch, with women scantily clad in "legendary armor" with cartoonishly absurd breasts and buttocks. As video games become more widely accepted as a form of art, it begs the question, how has the female image been displayed before?

Well to begin, the subject of nudity is not at all a new thing. The difference is in the past, nudity was used as a form of statement rather than a piece to look at with mouth agape. In the pre-renaissance era, art was more for religious statements than not, with nudity being a receptacle for the profane. In 1425, the painter Masaccio created a representation of Adam and Eve being banished from paradise. In it, an angel scorned escorts the two naked figures out, as both appear to be crying out in shame. While Adam hides his face, Eve hides her body, showing that the shame of her deeds is an extension of the shamefulness of her naked self.

Nudity was considered sinful and never represented in art unless necessary to portray those for whom have sinned. It was not for the enjoyment or pleasure of the viewer; in fact it was quite the opposite. Where some in modern day culture looked for any way of revealing what was underneath Lara's clothes, the religious culture of this time couldn't help but gasp and groan of the lack thereof in Adam and Eve. This shame of the nude is almost as toxic as the former, which is the reason artists of the renaissance believed they needed to challenge it.

In the famous painting, *The Birth of Venus*, Botticelli challenged the idea that there had to be a religious, shameful context to paint a woman nude. Within it, Venus is partially hiding her feminine curves, pondering something as she emerges from the sea. As if to "hang a lantern" on

the fact that Botticelli knew this would be controversial, he also shows a woman to Venus' right trying to quickly cover her body up from the eyes of the angels above. The angels in which, ironically, are also partially nude. The nudity in this painting serves as an act of defiance to the conservative religious paintings of the past, showing that the graceful Venus has no need to be ashamed of her body.

This trend seems to continue from that moment forward as many artists begin to challenge the same concept. From Agnolo Bronzino's *Allegory of the triumph of Venus* in 1550, to Edouard Manet's *Olympia* in 1863, there was a plethora of paintings that gave the proverbial middle finger to the idea that a woman's body was shameful outside the context of religious mythology. Bronzino's was a pointedly provocative piece that most even now would find a bit disturbing, with an incredibly immodest Venus kissing her son Cupid. The incestuous act could not be any more sinful, but Venus shows no signs of shame, despite some particularly shocked gods and onlookers right behind them.

While Bronzino's was still technically rooted within a religious context, Manet's could not be any further away from it. It shows a nude prostitute, who is aptly named *Olympia*, laying in a bed before the viewer. Her face is stoic as she looks directly at the viewer, completely indifferent to the fact that she is nude before us. In many paintings that have come before, the naked female would appear shocked or surprised to have been caught in such an indecent state, but not Olympia. In her indifference there is strength. Her body is her own, and there is no shame to be found in it.

In these examples of nudity there is a purpose far beyond the intent of evoking lust; but that is not to say similar paintings of the time were simply out to be *just* acts of defiance or

strength. Some seemed to go in another direction, still showing women in the nude, but instead of shaming them for simply being nude, they would instead intentionally (or unintentionally) shame the make-up of their bodies. Take for example Tiziano Vecellio's 1538 painting, *Venus of Urbino*, the painting that inspired *Olympia*. At this point there have been many renditions of the goddess' form, but none have gone to the extent that Vecellio must change it in the name of sensuality. Venus exudes confidence as she looks to the viewer an almost indifferent look; but at a closer inspection, one would notice that her legs don't seem to be quite right. According to Google Arts & Culture, "In favor of making the painting sensual, she is not anatomically correct; if she were to stand, her legs would be too short, and her feet would not properly support her." It's a fact that most first time viewers would miss when looking at the painting, but it is true. Vecellio had changed the proportions of her legs to make her appear more sensual and appealing to the viewer.

Whether it be appealing or not, this depiction of women is distorted, creating an image in the viewer that may subconsciously change the way they see women. It shows that for centuries, from once we became comfortable with the female form, we have decided to distort it into images that we prefer. This has followed us into the modern age, and just as Greek and Roman artists preferred to model the most ideal or "perfect" statues of women, some video game designers choose to model their perfectly unrealistic images as well.

Lara Croft is just another example of this, and it only shows the damage that this can cause when male gamers are exposed to these types of depictions. "Many women who do play video games choose to hide their offline sex and gender, allowing teammates to believe the assumption that other players are men in part by avoiding voice chat systems and other

technology that would ‘out’ them.”² Women are routinely treated as objects without emotion when interacting with their gamer counterparts. It’s the reason many female gamers decide not to play online games at all, because the severe sexual language used to objectify them can lead to a truly traumatizing experience. There are video games that females naturally gravitate to such as farming/ sims where the lack of male players minimize violence; therefore, keeps them in a safe bubble.

Thankfully, there have been steps in the right direction. Lara Croft has been freed from her low poly self in 2013, and with that, she has lost some objectifying features. Though still very pretty, her features have been toned down in a way that gives her a realistic, natural look that gives female players a more relatable avatar to experience the game through. With these subtle changes, and nuance for character creation, she has become less of an object and more of a person; and with this, the subconscious image of Lara changes within the male gamers that play these games as well. This not only changes the subjective experience they bring into future *Tomb Raider* games, but into all other game titles as well.

“By taking a more nuanced approach to the politics of video games and aligning this medium with prevalent cultural ideologies created in part by the expansion of Its, we can come to a new characterization that understands video games as something more than just a collection of rule- based systems which grew out of Western military/commercial domination; they are

² Robinson, Jessica A. “‘I Ain’t No Girl’: Exploring Gender Stereotypes in the Video Game Community.” *Western Journal of Communication* ahead-of-print, no. ahead-of-print (2022): 4.

machines that presuppose and incorporate a player's subjective experience into their very form and structure.”³

This is the kind of change that needs to be seen within the industry so that male gaze within games (as well as within art) can set aside the lustful, perfectionistic images of women from the past. Female players will be more encouraged to play a wider variety of video games without the discrimination and violating language that is currently present in the gaming community. As we have changed our views on the sinful depictions of Adam and Eve, to the intimidatingly shameless depiction *Olympia*, to finally our outright lustfulness for Lara Croft's body, it is important that we do not continue down this line of further prioritizing the sensual nature of the female body. Art itself needs to be produced in ways where nudity, if anything, has meaning, not for just the sake of the objectification of women. Otherwise, the subjective views and experience of this male gaze will bleed into aspects of art and life, thereby poisoning the communal subconscious of all those who view it.

³ Kelly, Matthew. "The Game of Politics: Examining the Role of Work, Play, and Subjectivity Formation in Papers, Please." *Games and Culture* 13, no. 5 (2018): 469.

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