

LARA CROFT AND 'TOMB RAIDER':
MESSAGES ABOUT SEX, VIOLENCE AND OBJECTIFICATION

by
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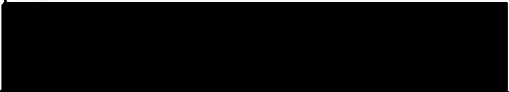
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The video game "Tomb Raider" features a highly sexualized female main character, Lara Croft, who has become both a cultural icon and popular selling point for the video game. Because the magazines in which this game is covered and advertised are part of the mass media, a powerful agent of socialization, concern arises over what messages these magazines are sending to boys about the objectification of women. Fourteen issues of one video game magazine, PSM, were examined for all content related to "Tomb Raider," with particular attention to the portrayal of women. The results showed that the magazine's sexualization of Lara Croft objectifies women and links sex with violence, encouraging boys to view women as objects of fantasy and of sometimes violent sexual pleasure.

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INTRODUCTION

The various media that pervade American society today send numerous, and sometimes conflicting, messages about female sexuality to both male and female young consumers. While some of these messages can be construed as positive, others stand out as grossly negative and potentially harmful. One example of such a message resides in magazine content pertaining to the popular video game "Tomb Raider" and its sexualized main character, Lara Croft. Although it is difficult to determine just how these messages affect the children who receive them, as a society we must continually review the ideas that the media are passing on to our young people in order to raise awareness about them and, ideally, reduce their potential effects. That is why I have decided to critically analyze one magazine's coverage of "Tomb Raider," looking for the messages about female sexuality that it sends to its readers.

I first learned about the video game "Tomb Raider" while visiting friends with my fiancé. They had recently purchased a Sony Playstation — at that time the newest and hottest video game system on the market — and had rented the newly released "Tomb Raider" in order to try it out. As both my fiancé and his friend were both video game buffs, they decided to turn on the Playstation for a while and try out the new game.

The first observation my fiancé and his friend made was about the ludicrous body proportions of the main character, Lara. Her breasts, whether viewed from the front or the

side, were enormous. Laughing, the two of them backed Lara into a corner, forcing the video game's "camera," or point of view, to swing around and show Lara from the front. (Throughout most of the game, the player views Lara from behind and watches the action over her shoulder.) I sat on the couch with the friend's wife, and we exclaimed in disgust over the worse-than-Barbie portrayal of women in this game.

When the men became bored with Lara's anatomy, they began experimenting with the action in the game, which was strikingly detailed and realistic. They learned that they could make Lara swan dive from a high outcrop and plunge into the river below. One of them, while trying to repeat this maneuver, misjudged the jump and sent Lara gracefully diving from a cliff to the waiting rocks below. Halfway down, she emitted an ear-piercing scream, and then her body thudded and flopped bonelessly when it hit the ground. Suddenly, the new game became finding different ways to make Lara "commit suicide."

Although the game struck me at the time as merely graphically disgusting and violent, I later began to muse on the implications of an interactive video game that so blatantly mixes sex with violence. Two factors contributed to my fascination with the game: not long after our first encounter with Lara, my fiancé purchased the game and began playing it at home; and "Tomb Raider" exploded in popularity, becoming one of the hottest Playstation and CD-Rom games on the market. At that point, articles and advertisements featuring a scantily clad Lara and suggestive text began popping up in video game magazines and national media such as *Newsweek* and *The New York Times*.

Using sex to sell products is not a new phenomenon. Advertisers have learned that sex appeal does the trick, especially when the target market is composed of adolescents. But until "Tomb Raider," I had not yet seen a sexualized character used to sell a video game. Violence, yes; social aggression, yes; but sex, no. What also struck me about this media attention was that it was not targeted at young girls, as my perception had been that much advertising that featured beautiful, sexualized women targeted young girls rather than

boys, telling them that if they want to be sexy, they need to buy such-and-such product. With "Tomb Raider," however, the target market is young boys, and the message is different, but no less destructive: If you want to own and control this beautiful sex object, buy our game.

Parents who want to instill in their children respect for members of the opposite sex need to be aware of the messages video game magazines are sending to the boys who read them. Parents are ultimately in charge of their children's educations, and it is up to them to monitor the reading and game-playing habits of their children and to prevent, or at least counteract, whatever negative effects these magazines may have. Teachers should also be aware of the content of these magazines so they may prevent messages they consider to be negative from seeping into their classrooms. And finally, boys themselves should be taught that the messages displayed on the pages of magazines are intended to sell a product, not to teach a lesson about the way the world works. If the magazines' readers can be taught to look at them critically, perhaps the messages will have less of a chance of getting through.

When I talk about my interest in "Tomb Raider" to adult, non-playing males, few of them know the game by name or by the name of its main character, Lara Croft. Sometimes mentioning "the game with the well-endowed character" sparks their memory; other times bringing up Lara's string bikini does the trick. In either case, most of the people I talk to who do not keep abreast of the video game industry recognize the popular game based on the clothing or body proportions of its main character, not because of any particular virtue of the game itself. I believe this is at least partially due to the sexualization and objectification of the fictional Lara Croft in video game magazines, and that is why I am interested in the messages that these magazines are sending to the young boys who constitute the company's target market.

BACKGROUND

Lara Croft has entered the world at a time when the world needs her the least. As American society falls ever deeper into a pit of teenage crime, suicide, and date rape, people are looking for the causes of these social ills and finding them — whether correctly or not — in the messages about violence, gender, and sexuality that the media are sending to adolescents. At the same time, the media are becoming an increasingly powerful and pervasive force — as I will show later, children spend hours in front of the television and home video game systems, both boys and girls look to advertisers to help them define themselves and develop into the people they want to be, and more and more fictional and unrealistic characters are being raised to the level of cultural icons to which adolescents turn to define their physical ideals of beauty and strength.

This is the backdrop against which I intend to analyze the messages conveyed through the highly sexualized, and at the same time violent, coverage of "Tomb Raider." As video games become increasingly graphic and their characters increasingly realistic, Lara Croft stands to become the computer-generated embodiment of ideal feminine beauty and sex appeal. And because the video game market caters primarily to boys, she has the potential to become not the ideal against which girls compare themselves, but the fantasy ideal against which boys may compare the real girls they will someday date and possibly marry. In addition, these boys' interactions with Lara have the potential to teach them how

to interact with their future girlfriends and wives.

In large part, the coverage of this game in video game magazines has the potential to shape the way boys approach Lara Croft. The violently sexual nature of this coverage plays a large role in the objectification and sexualization of Lara; perhaps it plays an even larger role than the game itself. Removed from the distractions and puzzles that game play presents, the coverage sometimes focuses entirely on Lara's body. It also incorporates much more graphic and realistic pictures of the character than the game can to emphasize Lara's sexuality. As I will show later, magazine coverage of "Tomb Raider" instructs young game players to view this cyber-woman as a sexual being, an object for their possession, and a person whom they can control and subject to violent acts. In essence, it teaches players how to realize the possibilities the game itself presents.

However, these magazines are not created in a vacuum, and it is important to note the circumstances in which they deliver their messages. In analyzing their coverage, one must also look at how they relate to the game itself and to the other aspects of the "Tomb Raider" phenomenon. And in order to better understand how the relationship between boys and video games (and what magazines have to say about them) has developed to this point, one must look to the history and demographics of the video game market and how it relates to advertising and socialization.

Video Games

Video games entered the American arena in the 1970s with systems such as Atari and Coleco Vision. Although at the time these early games were exciting and compelling, by today's standards, their graphics were primitive and one-dimensional, and despite a

surge in game popularity in the mid-'80s, game variety stagnated and sales began to lag.¹ Later that decade, the introduction of the Nintendo Entertainment System, with its more realistic graphics and violent games, rejuvenated the industry by successfully targeting children.² Other systems soon followed Nintendo's lead. With the subsequent development of CD technology, which has a higher memory capacity than cartridge game systems, video games have become increasingly more graphically detailed and realistic. Whereas early video game characters were depicted by the rough outline of a human form shown in one color (Atari's "Haunted House"), today's characters are rendered in three dimensions, with considerable attention given to details such as the motion of hair and clothing. Games for the Sony Playstation, the Nintendo 64, and the PC — the game formats most recently released on the market — have become especially realistic, in both the features and the movements of their characters.

With the creation and popularity of realistic, violent games targeted toward boys, concern has begun to arise over the social ramifications of video game violence. Thus, social research on video games is still a fairly new and sparsely populated field. Studies on the popularity of video games within different age groups and genders as well as on the content of video games are both relatively recent phenomena. However, as these games become increasingly violent and realistic, the subject captures an ever-greater amount of attention.

¹ Buchman, Debra D. and Funk, Jeanne B., "Video and computer games in the '90s: children's time commitment and game preference," Children Today 24 (1996): 12-15.

² Buchman

Age and Playing Habits

A 1996 study of children's video game preferences concluded that younger children spend more time playing video games in the home than older children.³ The study is based on a survey of 900 children in the fourth through eighth grades that asked them both how much time they spent playing video games as well as what types of games they preferred. The survey was administered to these children in groups over a period of four years (1992-1995), during which it tracked changes in game-playing habits.

Results showed that game-playing declined steadily as the subjects progressed from fourth to eighth grade. About 90 percent of fourth graders reported playing at least one hour per week, while only 75 percent of seventh and eighth graders reported doing so. Similarly, 22 percent of fourth graders admitted playing more than 10 hours a week, compared to less than five percent of eighth graders. A tabular breakdown of the average hours of game play among each age group showed that among girls, fourth graders spent 4.5 hours playing video games, fifth graders spent 3.14 hours, sixth graders clocked in at 1.6, and seventh and eighth graders averaged about 2. Boys spent about 7.14 hours playing video games in the fourth grade, 6.12 in the fifth grade, 5.4 in the sixth, 4.87 in the seventh and 3.89 in the eighth.

The survey also recognized the difference between arcade play and home play, which is a significant factor. Arcade play, which was more popular in earlier days when home video game systems were not as widely available as they are now, has a more social aspect to it than home play. At arcades, children converge at a particular location and take turns playing the different games available. While playing video games is generally the primary activity at these places, children also socialize, watch each other play, and

³ Buchman

sometimes play together. Many children also play home video game systems with their friends, as well, but these systems by their nature offer more of an opportunity for solitary play; rather than playing them socially, children can use them as substitutes for socializing. Because home systems are so convenient and widely available, they received much more play than arcade games, according to the survey. However, the age trend holds for arcade play, as well. The hours spent playing at arcades steadily declined as the ages of the subjects rose.

This survey supports the conclusion that video games now appeal to younger age groups. Although older children and even some adults still play video games, sometimes in significant amounts, younger children remain the primary market for video games.

Gender Differences

Similarly, studies show that not only are the primary video game consumers young, but they are also boys.⁴ A mere glance at the video game shelves of any store reveals that the majority of games on the market target boys. The abundance of sports, racing, and blow-'em-up games shows exactly what audience game manufacturers are going for. Some game companies, noticing that the industry does have a small but persistent female market, have released games that attempt to appeal to feminine players. The Playstation game "Spice," a create-your-own-music-video game based on the teenybopper smash music group the Spice Girls, is one example of this. However, these games are a minority and usually generate fewer sales than male-oriented games. Thus, the current game market seems to be based on the principle that most video game players

⁴ Buchman; Funk, Jeanne B. and Buchman, Debra D., "Children's perceptions of gender differences in social approval for playing electronic games," Sex Roles: A Journal of Research Aug. 1996: 219-231.

are boys, and the girls who play do so because they enjoy the same kinds of games that appeal to the male gender.

The reasons why boys dominate the video game market is a matter of considerable speculation. One possible reason is that because video game manufacturers produce games designed to appeal primarily to boys, girls see the industry as one in which they are not wanted or sought after; because the games do not appeal to them, they do not play them. One theory links the lack of female interest in video games with the stereotypical presentations of men and women often found in these games. Many of the most popular games portray men as ruthless aggressors, while women, when present in these games at all, are usually the helpless victims of violence.⁵ Interviews with child game players revealed that children often view female roles in video games as subordinate and boring, which may be one reason why girls are less attracted to them than boys.⁶

One study hypothesized that gender differences in video game play relate to the perceived social acceptability of the activity for each gender. Analysis of a survey administered to 364 fourth- and fifth-grade students, 203 of whom were girls, determined that "both boys and girls endorsed an inverse relationship between popularity and time commitment [to video games] for girls, suggesting that, like many other traditionally 'male' activities, the acceptable parameters of electronic game playing are more restricted for girls."⁷ Although both the boys and girls surveyed perceived moderate video game playing as socially acceptable for girls, they believed it was more acceptable for boys to

⁵ Buchman

⁶ Buchman

⁷ Funk

devote large amounts of time to the activity than for girls to do so.⁸

In addition to the differences in their time commitments to playing video games, boys and girls also differ in the types of games they prefer to play. The Buchman study cited in the "Age and Playing Habits" section asked its 900 subjects to list their favorite games, and then it fit these games into a set of categories. The categories were divided into general entertainment, in which the main action includes no fighting or destruction; educational, in which the action involves learning new information or inventing new ways to use information; fantasy violence, in which a cartoon character must fight or destroy things in order to accomplish a goal; human violence, in which a human character must do so; nonviolent sports, in which the action is a sport without fighting or destruction; and sports violence, in which the action is a sport with fighting or destruction.⁹

The study found that, across grades, the category with the lowest percentage of interest was educational, and interest in this category declined as the subjects grew older. Girls proved more interested in educational games than boys, with fourth-grade girls listing them as 18 percent of their favorites and eighth-grade girls as six percent. Educational games made up only three percent of fourth-grade boys' favorites and .5 percent of eighth-grade boys'. General entertainment games were 16 percent more popular among eighth-grade girls than boys, while sports games were 26 percent more popular among eighth-grade boys than girls. Violent games were equally popular among boys and girls, accounting for about 50 percent of all favorites across the board, but while girls expressed more interest in fantasy violence, boys were most likely to choose as their favorites games classified as human violence.

These results suggest that girls tend to prefer games that are more whimsical in

⁸ Funk

⁹ Buchman

nature, while boys devour games that feature more realistic violence. Part of this difference can be explained by examining the inherent social differences between boys and girls:

Even when females choose to take the role of a male character, previous socialization experiences may limit their success at playing violent games, reducing time commitment. In violent games, a commitment to ruthless competition is typically a winning strategy. Females are more likely to be socialized toward cooperation, which may decrease success with violent games.¹⁰

Because boys are acknowledged as the most ardent consumers of realistically violent video games, as well as being the primary consumers of video games in general, it is fair to assume that most magazine content featuring violent video games is directed toward them.

Video Game Content

Just as important as looking at who plays them, analyzing the content of video games can be revealing as to not only who they are intended for, but why children of different ages and genders are attracted to different types of games. One 1995 study took a sample of 33 of the most popular Nintendo and Sega Genesis video games and analyzed them in terms of the two areas for which the media receive the most criticism: their portrayal of women and the use of violence.¹¹ Not surprisingly, the study found that the most common portrayals of women were either negative or nonexistent, while violence was a major component of most of the games.¹²

¹⁰ Funk

¹¹ Dietz, Tracy L., "An examination of violence and gender role portrayals in video games: implications for gender socialization and aggressive behavior," Sex Roles: A Journal of Research March 1998:425-442.

¹² Dietz

The study found that only 15 percent (five) of the video games portrayed women as heroes or main action characters, and in each of these games, male heroes still outnumbered females. In addition, these "positive" female characters were dressed in stereotypical clothing, either wearing pink or clad in skimpy, revealing "harem"-like outfits. On the other hand, many of the games failed to represent the female population at all. While some of these games included no human characters at all, of those that did, 30 percent had no women in them. Many of these were sports games.

Aside from lack of inclusion, the most common portrayal of women in these games was as the victim or the "damsel in distress," which occurred in 21 percent of the games. Some of these women had been captured by the "bad guy," and it was up to the main hero to rescue them; others merely stood around screaming while the men took action. Another portrayal of women was as visions of beauty or sex objects; in these games, women — usually peripheral characters — had large breasts and thin hips and wore skimpy, suggestive clothing. Unexpectedly, the study also found that in a few games, women were actually portrayed as villains who got in the way of the male hero and tried to seduce him into casting off his responsibilities. The only way to win at these games was to resist or defeat these feminine villains.

Overall, in the majority of the games in which females were depicted, they occupied peripheral roles that either thwarted or supported the roles of the male heroes.¹³ "(W)hen female characters were depicted they were most often presented as dependent upon the men (such as victims) or in supporting roles to men. Women were also frequently presented as sex objects or were depicted as contributing less than men."¹⁴

Similarly, violence constituted a major part of most of the video games studied.

¹³ Dietz

¹⁴ Dietz

Seven of the games were rated non-violent, but the remaining 79 percent (26) included some type of aggression or violence. In nine of these, the violence was described as a socially acceptable form found in sports games. In seven of them, however, some form of violence or aggression was directed at women, whether that violence was a major part of the game or a small, peripheral portion. And finally, nearly half of all the games contained violence directed specifically at other characters, typically involving fighting.¹⁵

Socialization

What these studies are aimed at is deciphering the different messages that video games send to the children who play them. Like most other media, video games, probably due to their pervasiveness and the amount of time young children spend playing them, are now looked at as one of the many factors that contribute to the socialization of these children.¹⁶ Socialization — the learning of what constitutes normal social behavior, the molding of cultural norms and the perception of the moral and societal consequences of certain behaviors — occurs through a number of means, including parents, teachers and peers, of which the media are only a few.¹⁷ However, because the media — television and video games in particular — are so pervasive and so much a part of young people's lives, their potential for contributing to socialization and the messages they impart call for scrutiny of their role as a conveyor of societal norms. "(A) wide variety of media messages can act as teachers of values, ideologies, and beliefs, and ... can provide images

¹⁵ Dietz

¹⁶ Strasburger, Victor C., Adolescents and the Media: Medical and Psychological Impact, (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1995) 37.

¹⁷ Strasburger 7

for interpreting the world whether or not the designers are conscious of this intent."¹⁸

The idea of socialization developed in 1963, when Stanford University psychologist Albert Bandura branched out from the popular Freudian notion that the development of the self arose from sexual conflict to propose the social learning theory.¹⁹ He hypothesized that children learn behavior by observing the people around them in real life — and the people portrayed in the media — and modeling their behavior after what they see.²⁰ Because television provides glamorous, attractive role models, it stands to reason that children would want to try and be like the people they see on the screen. As a result, television may affect many behavioral decisions of adolescents, such as the decision to consume alcohol.²¹

Other theorists have also hypothesized about the ways in which children learn from the media. According to the theory of cognitive scripting, movies and television programs provide children with "behavioral scripts that can be retrieved at any time."²² Others to consider are the excitation or arousal theory, which holds that excitement induced by exposure to the media is transferred to other ongoing activities, and cognitive neoassociation theory, which holds that emotional associations caused by media exposure may either encourage or inhibit certain behaviors.²³ All of these theories lead back to the

¹⁸ Gamson, W.A., Croteau, D., Hoynes, W. and Sasson, T., "Media images and the social construction of reality," Annual Sociological Review 18 1992: 373-393.

¹⁹ Strasburger 8

²⁰ Strasburger 8

²¹ Strasburger 8

²² Strasburger 8

²³ Strasburger 8

idea that children sometimes imitate the behavior they see reflected in the media.

Some cases in which such imitative behavior was direct, clear and had a powerful impact have generated considerable publicity. For example, several teenagers have been killed after imitating a scene from the movie *Stand By Me*, in which characters dodge an oncoming train by jumping off a bridge, and more teenagers were injured and killed while imitating a scene from the movie *The Program*, in which a drunken character lies down in the middle of a highway.²⁴ Clearly, some teenagers allow what they see in the media to directly influence their behavior.

Other effects of the media may be less obvious, but they are no less significant. Children can not only directly learn from and copy the behaviors they see on television, but they can soak in these behaviors through a process called generalization.²⁵ According to this theory, children may not directly imitate the behaviors they see in the media, but they might soak them in and respond to certain situations in a way similar to what they have learned through movies and television. Thus, if a child watches violent programs, he or she may not directly imitate that violence but might respond violently to certain situations.

Proving a direct correlation between media violence and violent behavior is difficult, if not impossible, but a large body of research suggests that some relationship does exist. Laboratory experiments date back to 1963, when one researcher showed a violent film to one group of college males and a nonviolent film to another and then had an experimental assistant with a name relating to the appropriate film anger some of the students.²⁶ He concluded that the subjects exhibited more aggressive behavior toward the assistant when they were angered, when they felt that the violence within the film was

²⁴ Strasburger 9

²⁵ Strasburger 9

²⁶ Strasburger 26

justified and when the target for the aggression was related in some way to the film.

Several correlational studies have further suggested a link between media violence and behavior. One 1972 survey of 2,300 students showed that the greater the aggressiveness or delinquent behavior exhibited by the subject, the higher the violent content of their favorite shows.²⁷ Another survey indicated that television violence may reinforce or facilitate aggression in those already predisposed toward it.²⁸ And finally, a London survey of more than 1,500 males ages 12-17 found that those who watched a lot of violent television committed more serious harmful antisocial and criminal acts than lighter viewers and that both aggressiveness in sports and foul language were associated with more exposure to violent television.²⁹

Although this paper is not a psychological study and does not attempt to prove any connection between video games and children's behavior or psychological states, the theory of socialization has become a large part of how Americans think of the media, and the idea that the media teach children gender roles, social norms and socially acceptable behavior has become widely acknowledged.

The literature on media violence is compelling and clear: Aggression is a learned behavior and young children are particularly vulnerable — although they may not display evidence of being affected until they reach adolescence or young adulthood... Although the data do not point to media violence as the major cause of violence in our society, it is certainly a socially significant one.³⁰

²⁷ Strasburger 27

²⁸ Strasburger 27

²⁹ Strasburger 28

³⁰ Strasburger 37

Video Games vs. Television

Although most adults understand and acknowledge that television programs diverge from reality in sometimes drastic ways, for young people, these shows actually resemble real life. They place flesh-and-blood people in situations that, although sometimes physically impossible or unrealistic, can be manipulated on videotape to appear as though they are really happening. Children who do not yet understand the capabilities of studio camera work and editing might watch these programs and believe they must have really happened; otherwise, how could they be shown on TV?³¹ And on sitcoms and "realistic" television dramas, while the dialogue and situations may seem ludicrous or manufactured to adults, children might see them as showcasing real people carrying out their lives in normal, familiar settings such as home, school and work. Thus, although television portrays unrealistic actions and situations, at the same time it mimics reality by making these situations appear as though they really happened.

Video games, on the other hand, are more flagrant in their defiance of reality. Rather than featuring scenes acted out by real people in settings resembling real places, video games are much more like cartoons. They are created on computers using pixels and polygons, and in many cases the characters have little resemblance to humans. Especially in earlier video games, many characters are animals, such as Donkey Kong, a primate, Sonic the Hedgehog and Spyro the Dragon. Even humanoid characters are generally not rendered realistically; they are often short, squat, elfin or cartoonish. The Super Mario Brothers are a prime example of this — twin plumbers with exaggerated features, brightly colored clothing and simply drawn figures.

³¹ Grossman, David and Cagney, Mary, "Trained to kill," Christianity Today Aug. 10, 1998: 31-40.

The action in most video games up until the past few years has also been fairly simple and unrealistic. This simplicity is particularly marked by the manner in which "enemies" in the game are killed or destroyed. In "Super Mario Bros." (Nintendo, 1987), for example, when enemies are hit they merely fall off the playing screen. In "Castlevania" (Nintendo, 1988), they dissolve into thin air. In other games they fall to the ground and disappear, or they disappear after a crude explosion effect. Most of the time, these "deaths" contain little or no gore or realistic detail.

With more recent games, however, technological advancements have allowed greater detail and realism in character rendering and motion. Not only have the human characters begun to look more like real humans, but the violence in these games simulates real life much more closely. Blood spurts, dismemberment and carnage are much more likely to appear in video games now, especially those such as the CD-Rom "Diablo" and "Doom" series, "007" for the Nintendo 64 and "Silent Hill," for the Sony Playstation — and, of course, the "Tomb Raider" series. As computer rendering becomes more graphic, the gap between television and video game realism is closing.

At the same time that video games gain on television in terms of realism, they involve a deeper level of interaction that the tube does not offer. While watching television, one is merely a passive observer, watching as the action takes place. With video games, however, the player is actively involved in the action by controlling the movements of one or more characters. Thus, the player is thrust into the action and required to assess the simulated situation, respond to on-screen stimuli and make decisions about how to act within that situation. In many cases, the player is often either the instigator or the victim of violence, or both.

Violence and Desensitization

Just as it is difficult to show a cause-and-effect relationship between television and youth violence, it is also tough to do the same with video games and violence — especially as television has been around much longer than video games and has generated much more study and debate. However, theories and studies abound pointing out that some sort of relationship, whatever its nature, does exist.

One of the most disturbing aspects of video games is their interactivity and the involvement of the player in the violence that takes place on the screen, however virtual it may be. First, on an instinctual level, video game violence is sending a powerful and frightening message to the young people who play them. It is telling them that violence is okay, that in some cases it is good because it will help them accomplish their goals and that the use of violence — even excessive violence — can be indulged in with little or no consequence to their "real" lives, other than perhaps getting in the way of chores or homework. Regardless of how children ultimately react to this message, its mere presence and potential ramifications can be dangerous.

Although playing electronic games occupies less time than television for most children, the interactive nature of game playing may intensify potential influence. If, as many believe, violence is primarily a learned behavior, then the powerful combination of demonstration, reward and practice inherent in electronic game playing creates an ideal instructional environment. Unfortunately, the lessons being taught are that violence is fun, obligatory, easily justified, and essentially without negative consequences.³²

Second, some researchers and psychologists believe that because of their interactivity, video games condition children to respond violently to certain stimuli. In an article in *Christianity Today*, military psychologist David Grossman, who has testified as

³² Buchman

an expert witness in a trial in which a young boy shot and killed a convenience store clerk, draws parallels between video games and the conditioning the U.S. military uses to train its soldiers to kill.³³ In order to force soldiers to overcome their natural aversion to killing, the military uses operant conditioning, a tactic that teaches the soldiers to respond to a certain stimulus in a specific way. It repeatedly bombards them with that stimulus in a high-pressure or (simulated) life-threatening situation, so that the soldiers' mental capacities are frozen with fear and they learn to respond instinctively, without thinking, to that stimulus.³⁴ Grossman likens this training to the video games that were played by the young man involved with the convenience store shooting:

He had spent hundreds of dollars on video games learning to point and shoot, point and shoot. One day he and his buddy decided it would be fun to rob the local convenience store. They walked in, and he pointed a snub-nosed .38 pistol at the clerk's head. The clerk turned to look at him, and the defendant shot reflexively... Afterward, we asked the boy what happened and why he did it. ... He said, "I don't know. It was a mistake. It wasn't supposed to happen."

In the military and law-enforcement worlds, the right option is often not to shoot. But you never, never put your quarter in that video machine with the intention of not shooting. There is always some stimulus that sets you off. And when he was excited, ... this young man did exactly what he was conditioned to do: he reflexively pulled the trigger, shooting accurately just like all those times he played video games.³⁵

Desensitization is another way in which children may be affected by television violence, researchers theorize. The statistics are common and heard just about everywhere:

³³ Grossman

³⁴ Grossman

³⁵ Grossman

More American households contain television sets than indoor plumbing.³⁶ On average, American children watch about 23 hours of television per week,³⁷ while VCR and video game use can bring this number to between 35 and 55.³⁸ A child will view more than 200,000 acts of violence before reaching age 18.³⁹ Television networks broadcast approximately 65,000 sexual references, innuendoes and jokes per year during prime time and afternoon slots.⁴⁰

When viewing an act of violence, people have the natural tendency to respond with aversion and disgust.⁴¹ However, lab research shows that after repeated exposure to violence, people tend to become desensitized toward it, exhibiting a less severe or neutral reaction.⁴² In one study, young children exposed to a particularly violent television sequence were less likely to intervene in situations involving violence and their peers.⁴³ Similarly, after watching a series of slasher films that depicted graphic violence against women, male college students exhibited less sympathy toward an alleged rape victim and were more inclined to hold her responsible.⁴⁴

Again, although current data do not prove a direct cause-and-effect relationship

36 Strasburger 3

37 Strasburger 2

38 Strasburger 2

39 Strasburger 16

40 Strasburger 16

41 Grossman

42 Strasburger 31

43 Strasburger 31

44 Strasburger 31

between video game play and behavior, both logic and research indicate that the potential for such a relationship exists. The interactivity of video games, combined with the large amounts of time many boys spend playing them, places these games in a position where they have the potential to influence at least children's attitudes toward violence, if not their actions.

Gender Roles

Although video games send strong messages about the social and moral acceptability of violence, as well as its real-life consequences, that is not all they do. They also offer definitions of gender roles, as well as how men and women should interact.⁴⁵ Throughout their youth, children absorb cues from the people around them and interpret these cues based on the definitions of multiple roles; they then internalize these roles and use them to both define themselves and to decide how to interact with other people.⁴⁶ However, as television and, more recently, video games have shoved their way into an intimate position in many households, they, too, have begun to affect the way children perceive gender roles. Television has already been established as a means of social learning, and this includes developing a concept of what roles men and women should fulfill, both individually and in relation to each other.

While this in itself is not necessarily bad, the problem occurs when the media send stereotypical messages about the roles of men and women — especially when those messages are related to sex. The current stereotypes the media tend to reinforce portray

⁴⁵ Dietz

⁴⁶ Mead, G.H. *Mind, Self and Society*. C. Morris, ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.

men as the physically and socially dominant gender, often prized for their intelligence or professional success, while women are depicted in roles that focus on their beauty and sexuality or their place in the home.⁴⁷ In one study, a group of adolescent boys discussed with one another the media images they have been exposed to. Images of sexual aggression and violence were emphasized, revealing a "stereotyped, yet glamorized, version of masculinity."⁴⁸ These stereotypes have been associated with male callousness toward rape — the result, some argue, of the American eroticization of male dominance.⁴⁹

An examination of the content of popular video games reveals only further reinforcement of male-female stereotypes and further endorsement of male dominance. The Dietz analysis of the 33 video games discussed previously concluded that while in most cases women were not present at all, indicating that they are insignificant and do not belong in the "men's world" of electronic games, when they were present they were either the helpless victims of male violence and in need of a man's strength to rescue them, or they were sexualized, evil seductresses attempting to lure the male character from his heroic quest.⁵⁰ These are all familiar stereotypes commonly found in the media and reinforced in interactive video games.

In addition to defining the social roles of men and women, the media, particularly television, teach young people about sexual relationships. In fact, the media have become a

⁴⁷ Milkie, M.A., "Social world approach to cultural studies: Mass media and gender in the adolescent peer group," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 23: 354-380.

⁴⁸ Milkie

⁴⁹ Dietz

⁵⁰ Dietz

leading source of sex education in the United States.⁵¹ Each year, American children and teenagers view nearly 14,000 sexual references, innuendoes and behaviors on television, and few of these references involve birth control, abstinence or responsibility.⁵² On top of this, only 10 to 30 percent of schools offer comprehensive, quality sex education programs.⁵³ Surveys have shown that both adolescents and parents perceive that television is one of the most important sources of information about sex.⁵⁴

Again, while there is nothing inherently wrong with young people learning about sex from television, the problem occurs when the media portray sex in a manner inconsistent with reality. For example, "given the content of current American television, one expects that heavy viewers would believe that premarital sex, extramarital sex, rape and prostitution are all more common than they really are."⁵⁵ Such perceptions can not only cause young people to be more accepting of these behaviors, but they can also make teenagers less satisfied with their own sex lives — as well as raise their expectations of their sexual partners.⁵⁶

Summary

Although video games are not proven to have a direct effect on the behavior of

⁵¹ Strasburger 38

⁵² Strasburger 38

⁵³ Strasburger 41

⁵⁴ Strasburger 41

⁵⁵ Strasburger 43

⁵⁶ Strasburger 43

those who play them, they have the potential to affect children in even more insidious ways, by influencing their moral understanding and the terms in which they view the world. Television and other media have set up a system in which gender stereotypes are perpetuated and fed to vulnerable young minds, and advertisers pick up on these stereotypes and exploit them. Into this system enters the video game market, a market dominated by males who are young and willing to spend hours in front of the console. To maintain the interest of these boys, video game companies adopt the stereotypes already learned from television and offer them in a graphic and highly interactive format, and advertisers emphasize these stereotypes in order to sell more games.

Although I do not seek to indicate or prove any connection between video games or video game advertising and sex or violence among boys, when critically analyzing advertising and the messages it sends to young people, it is important to be aware of the background of research against which this advertising is presented. And part of this background is the way in which the media are believed to instruct children to behave in certain ways, accept certain roles and view the world in a particular manner. It is important for both consumers of the media and the media themselves to understand not merely how their actions influence children's behavior, which has not yet been reasonably proven, but what messages their actions are sending and what potential these messages have for harm. With this in mind, I turn to a critical analysis of the fictional character Lara Croft and her video game "Tomb Raider."

TOMB RAIDER

"Tomb Raider" is a three-dimensional, explorational video game created for both the Sony Playstation and the PC game formats. The single-player game revolves around the main character, Lara Croft, a British archaeologist who searches remote caves, temples, and wilderness areas for ancient artifacts. Controlling Lara, the player explores these locations, picking up items, killing enemies, and solving puzzles. The original game, "Tomb Raider," debuted in the spring of 1996 and sold about 3.5 million copies worldwide.⁵⁷ "Tomb Raider 2" followed in November 1997, and "Tomb Raider 3" was released in November 1998. The games are produced by the company Eidos Interactive.

Although the game itself is popular, "Tomb Raider's" primary attraction and main selling point remains Lara, the tall, redheaded, 29-year-old main character. Much of the game's marketing and media attention focus on her, and the explanation is simple: Lara Croft is sultry woman of Barbie-doll proportions, with long legs and enormous breasts. According to Eidos, Lara boasts measurements of 38-24-34. Her trademark outfit consists of high-cut shorts and a torso-hugging tank top, but she also appears in the games wearing a wetsuit, a form-fitting flight jacket and a negligee. "The most obvious reason Lara Croft is so popular is that 99.5 percent of the gaming population is young men," said Steve Klett,

⁵⁷ Barboza, David, "Video World is Smitten by a Gun-Toting, Tomb-Raiding Sex Symbol," The New York Times 19 Jan. 1998: C3.

the editor of *PC Games* magazine, in a *New York Times* article. "And it doesn't hurt that she's so outrageously proportioned."⁵⁸

But Lara's looks are not the only reason game players find her so attractive. Part of her allure is her female-Indiana-Jones image and her rugged, independent personality. No picture of Lara is complete without the double holsters on her hips that house her twin pistols, with which, in the video game, she blows away anything that crosses her path. In fact, at first glance Lara seems almost intended as a role model for young women, with her '90s do-it-yourself attitude and her ability to succeed in the game where men before her have failed: "When Lara caps her foes, both guns blazing like Chow-Yun Fat in a John Woo action flick, Lara takes the slogan 'Girl Power' to the next level."⁵⁹ But Lara's Barbie-like body belies her "Girl Power" potential, and rather than becoming a role model for female game players, she has become an object of fantasy for young men. "Call her Shotgun Spice; right in front of you, yet always just out of reach, she's the perfect fantasy girl for the digital generation."⁶⁰

Based on the media attention Lara has received, one might think she is a real person rather than a computer-generated image made up of hundreds of polygons. Both the *New York Times* and *Newsweek* magazine have published feature articles about her, along with photos and "biographical information." On the pages of video game magazines, Lara has become the subject of much discussion and speculation. In addition, she has modeled Gucci fashions (a string bikini), appeared in the Irish band U2's PopMart tour and recorded

⁵⁸ Barboza

⁵⁹ Croal, N'Gai and Hughes, Jane, "Lara Croft, the Bit Girl," *Newsweek* 10 Nov. 1997: 86.

⁶⁰ Croal 86.

a single with ex-Eurythmics guitarist Dave Stewart.⁶¹ She will also be the star of an upcoming Paramount Pictures film.⁶²

As part of its marketing strategy, Eidos itself has encouraged game fans to think of Lara as a real person and has even created an entire background for her. According to her biography, Lara was born to an aristocratic family in Wimbledon, England, grew up among private tutors, and attended boarding and finishing schools. On a ski trip to the Himalayas, her plane crashed, and she became the sole survivor. This incident made her realize she could never return to her suffocating former life, so she became an adventurer.⁶³

According to representatives from Eidos, fans have responded to the company's efforts with enthusiasm. "It's really a strange phenomenon because people talk about her as if she's a real person," said Cindy Church, a spokeswoman for the company, in a *New York Times* article. "A lot of people who play video games fantasize about her."⁶⁴ Eidos' offices have even received flowers and Christmas gifts for the character. "People all over the world have sent in their pictures. She's had dozens of marriage proposals and all these cheesy letters," said Eidos employee Tricia Gray.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Croal 82.

⁶² PSM May 1998: 13.

⁶³ Barboza

⁶⁴ Barboza

⁶⁵ Barboza

Methodology

I believe this fantasy approach to Lara Croft is both encouraged and perpetuated by media coverage of the video games, most notably the coverage found in the video game magazines that boys read for information about what video games to buy. These magazines not only tell their readers which games are the most fun and have the best replay value, but they offer a way of thinking about video games that isn't necessarily found on the market shelves. They tell their readers what the most important aspect of a game is and with what frame of mind they should approach the game. And when these magazines offer coverage of a female character such as Lara Croft, according to social learning theory, they have the potential to send their readers larger messages about female sexuality and how men should think of women.

In order to study the messages Lara is sending to boys regarding female sexuality, I had originally planned to analyze the content of Eidos' advertising for "Tomb Raider" in video game magazines. However, inspection of these magazines has revealed that advertisements for the game itself are sparse and are often combined with advertising for other Eidos games. This finding contradicted my earlier expectation, that "Tomb Raider" advertising would abound and that the company would continue to exploit its star character as her popularity grew. While the few advertisements that populate these magazines are often lewd and exploitative, the ads are much more scarce than I expected.

Lara's appearance in these magazines, however, is not. Even without a notable effort from Eidos to sell the character and her game, Lara continually pops up on these glossy color pages, a testament to her popularity among both the fans who read the magazines and the editors who put them together. Thus, I have realized that the negative messages Lara sends about female sexuality are not transmitted solely — or even primarily — through advertising, but they are also being sent through the pages of video game

magazines. This discovery has prompted me to alter the focus of my research. Instead, I will analyze all content relating to Lara Croft in one video game magazine, looking at a number of issues over a period of time, to discern the messages that this magazine's coverage of the game sends to young readers.

I have analyzed the content of 14 issues of the video game magazine *PSM*, which stands for "Playstation Magazine," searching each monthly issue for references to and pictures of Lara Croft. I selected *PSM* for a number of reasons. First, unlike many magazines, which cover games released for all video game formats, *PSM* covers only games for the Sony Playstation. Thus, it not only has a smaller pool of games to cover, which enables it to devote more space to each one, but it caters only to Playstation video game players; thus, players who do not at least have access to "Tomb Raider" will most likely not read this magazine. Second, the only other magazine that covers only Playstation games is *The Official U.S. Playstation Magazine*, a publication paid for and produced by Sony. *PSM* has an advantage over this magazine because it is independent of the company and thus most likely has more freedom in its editorial content.

PSM takes a personal and interactive approach to its content. Features such as "The *PSM* Ten," "*PSM*'s Most Wanted" and video game reviews give the editors considerable space in which to air their opinions, while the editors encourage readers to send their artistic renderings of their favorite video game characters, which are published in each issue, both on the cover and inside. A hefty "Letters" section actually opens up dialogue between the readers and the editors, as well as between different readers. Overall, the magazine has the feel of a large conversation taking place between game fans. This personable style is rare among video game magazines, most of which take a more straightforward approach to video game coverage.

I have selected the time period of January 1998 to May 1999 for my research. This period covers the "Tomb Raider" phenomenon from just after the release of "Tomb Raider

II," during which the sexualization of Lara Croft became a particularly emphasized part of the game, to the present, during which Lara's popularity has remained steady although it has been six months since the release of her last game, "Tomb Raider III." I have compiled every monthly issue of the magazine within this time frame except for the February, March and April, 1998, issues, which were unavailable through back-order.

I have examined each of these issues for references to "Tomb Raider" and Lara Croft, looking for how the character is portrayed through both images and words. I have used the following questions to guide my examination of the material: How is Lara Croft depicted? (What is she wearing, what is her body position, what is her expression?) What aspect of the game is emphasized? (Does the material focus on the game itself or on Lara's sexuality?) How is Lara treated? (Is she treated as an enjoyable character or as a sex object? Is she spoken of as a video game character or as a real person?) What is the tone of the material? Specifically, I was looking for messages within the material about how women should be treated, female sexuality, the objectification of the female body and the juxtaposition of sex and violence.

Results

In 14 issues of *PSM*, Lara Croft is pictured 77 times, an average of 5.5 per issue. The most times she is pictured in one issue is 14, and the least is one. Two of these issues picture Lara on the cover. Thirteen of the pictures are drawn by fans or the magazine's editors, while the rest are either actual still shots from the game or computer renderings probably released in a press kit by Eidos or Sony. Only 16 of the pictures appear in advertisements; the rest are editorial content.

In 52, or about two thirds, of the total pictures, either Lara carries a weapon drawn, or one is visible in the picture. In 24 of them, Lara wears clothing other than her trademark

shorts and tank top; in 6 of these instances, she is clad in a bikini. Three of the pictures suggest nudity. In 2 of them, Lara wears a clearly visible bellybutton ring. Fifteen of the pictures show Lara in a suggestive pose, and 4 of them show only part of her body, not including her face.

Taken outside of the context of the magazine, these numbers suggest that Eidos has created several gratuitously sexual images of Lara Croft and that *PSM* has gratuitously littered its pages with them. After all, pictures of Lara wearing a bathing suit — which does not occur at all in any of the games — are certainly unnecessary and do not give potential players information that they need to know in order to make an informed decision about whether to buy the game. Rather, these cater to an apparent demand for information about — and images of — Lara Croft herself. And taken within the context of the magazine, it is clear that *PSM*'s coverage of "Tomb Raider" contributes to the sexualization of Lara, objectifies the female body and sends potentially harmful messages about control and the mixture of sex and violence.

Lara vs. Tomb Raider

In a question-and-answer article with the executive producer of the "Tomb Raider" series, *PSM* asks, "How many of the fans do you think play 'Tomb Raider' just because of Lara Croft?"⁶⁶ The producer replies, "I think the two go hand-in-hand. With us now, the franchise is Lara and 'Tomb Raider' — it's twofold. 'Tomb Raider' wouldn't work if we were to take Lara out. I think she is a key part to what the game is."

Although somewhat ambiguous, this answer sums up the approach to "Tomb Raider" taken in both the advertising and editorial content found in *PSM*. Whenever the

⁶⁶ *PSM* Sept. 1998: 23.

game itself is mentioned, Lara Croft can be found, smiling from the pages of the magazine. References to "Tomb Raider" without an accompanying picture of Lara, however small, are tough to find, as the character has become such an important feature in the game. At the same time, however, pictures of Lara can be found in places where the game is barely even mentioned. Articles about the Lara Croft action figures that were released in stores last summer and the upcoming Paramount Pictures film featuring Lara both display pictures of the character, yet have nothing to do with the actual game.

Lara has become a major anticipatory element and focal point for the games. Within the time frame discussed here, *PSM* ran several articles about "Tomb Raider" and its sequels. The magazine generally focuses on previewing upcoming games, reviewing the latest releases and offering tips on how to beat some of the hottest games, and the majority of "Tomb Raider" articles fall under these categories. For example, about two months after the release of "Tomb Raider II," the magazine published a step-by-step strategy guide to walk players through the game.⁶⁷ This walk-through, like the coverage of many other video games, focuses on the mechanical aspects of the game, such as how to solve puzzles and where to find hidden items. Although pictures of Lara are scattered throughout the article, the focus remains on the player, not on the character.

With "Tomb Raider III," however, *PSM* offers a much different type of coverage. Beginning in September 1998, *PSM* includes a series of preview articles on Lara's newest game, one per issue until its release in late November, for a total of three articles and six pages. After the release of the game, the magazine features both a review and a guide to the game's secrets, a total of five pages of coverage. In addition to this, issues previous to the release are peppered with minor references to the upcoming game that relate primarily to Lara herself. For example, in the monthly feature "*PSM's* Most Wanted," the magazine

⁶⁷ *PSM* Jan. 1998: 74-91.

lists "Tomb Raider III" as one of the most wanted games and qualifies the choice with the comment, "Lara, Lara, Lara — why do you haunt us? You're certainly not the 'new girl' on the block anymore, but still, we sit and wait for you to return again. What is it about you that keeps us all so enthralled?"⁶⁸ Another comment, this one tagged onto a caption for a photo of Lara, asks, "Will anybody ever get tired of this gal? As long as the gameplay continues to deliver, you can bet you'll be seeing plenty of Ms. Croft."⁶⁹ This caption clearly suggests that the game play is secondary to the character of Lara and that the game is merely a catalyst for what people really want: to see her in action.

Lara Croft is not the first video game character who has been capitalized upon to sell her game. Sonic the Hedgehog, a character created by the video game company Sega, was the star of a number of games and was the primary focus of the marketing for those games. The same is true for Nintendo's Super Mario Brothers and Donkey Kong. In each case, the game sequels existed because of the character, and the character was used to sell the games. With Lara, however, the difference is that she has become larger than her role within the games. She has been drawn outside of "Tomb Raider's" puzzles and enemies and has taken on a life of her own, as a woman with a background, a voluptuous body and millions of male fans. The difference is that Lara has become a highly sexualized character, a transformation that has taken place at least partially in the pages of *PSM*.

Sexualization

Although Lara is created and animated through computer graphics, making her more of a cartoon than a person, she is also drawn as a voluptuous woman, with

⁶⁸ *PSM* Dec. 1998: 33.

⁶⁹ *PSM* Sept. 1998: 23.

considerable attention given to details such as her hair, clothing and jewelry. As Adrian Smith, the executive producer of the "Tomb Raider" games, puts it, "She's the figment of the imagination of the guy who originally drew her. She's a Jessica Rabbit."⁷⁰ Clearly, Lara represents a male fantasy, and as such, she can also be considered an object of sexual desire. It may seem odd that a fictional character, a person who doesn't exist in the flesh and whose face is composed of pixels, can become the subject of a sexual fantasy, but in reality, this computer-animated cartoon is sexualized in a number of ways through *PSM* alone.

First, the character herself — or, more accurately, the physical appearance that was designed for her — is inherently sexual. Her enormous breasts are emphasized by a skin-hugging tank top, and her long-legged, curvy lower body is shown off with high-cut shorts. Her face is molded according to current ideals of feminine beauty, with high cheekbones, full lips and slanted, cat-like eyes. Without any help from the editors of *PSM*, a picture of Lara alone conveys an impression of female sexuality.

But these images aren't published alone on the page; rather, they are supplemented and embellished with text that carries the sexualization of Lara Croft even further by openly encouraging *PSM* readers to think of her as a sex object. For example, in a regular comic strip feature called "Smart Bomb," *PSM* places a series of pictures of Lara wearing a bikini side by side. The text says, "'The Truth About 'Tomb Raider': Super new levels! More puzzles! Mega-hot weapons! Cool vehicles! New... aw, you know *why* you want it!"⁷¹ Obviously, the message here is that players really want "Tomb Raider" so they can fantasize about Lara. Similarly, in the introduction to a "Tomb Raider III" secrets guide, the magazine states, "So, gear up and pack a lunch 'cause Lara's waiting for you to join her

⁷⁰ *PSM* Sept. 1998: 23.

⁷¹ *PSM* Sept. 1998: 125.

once again. Psst... don't forget your issue of *PSM* or you might not even make it to first base!"⁷² From the terminology used in this introduction, one could infer that playing "Tomb Raider" is like going out on a "date" with Lara Croft and that the real point is not to make it through the game but to enter into a sexual relationship with the character.

Another striking instance of the sexualization of this character appears in the magazine's "Letters" section, in which readers' questions and comments are published. One reader writes, "[I]t is extremely difficult to get around complimenting *PSM*, so here it is: Your magazine is like Lara Croft served on a silver platter."⁷³ *PSM* replies with a cartoon of Lara, with exaggerated breasts showing nipples, lying on a silver platter and eating an apple. The caption says, "You asked for it, pal, so here it is: Lara Croft on a silver platter! Just leave it to *PSM* to fulfill your dreams..."

Other cartoons also emphasize Lara's sexual aspects. On the cover of its most recent, holiday issue, *PSM* ran an artist's rendering of Lara along with a female character from another video game⁷⁴. In it, Lara stands with her legs spread apart, and she is turned to the side to show off her large breasts. Although she is clad in her standard uniform of a tank top and brown shorts, the shorts are so skimpy that they do not entirely cover her buttocks. In her hand she holds a list of names, and the headline says, "Naughty or Nice?" Inside the magazine, a small feature explains how the cover art was created. *PSM* comments, "Adam [the artist], ever inventive, also provided us with some alternate and even sexier poses of our favorite adventurer, Lara, to which we said 'Gggggrrrrllll! Yes,

⁷² *PSM* Feb. 1999: 95.

⁷³ *PSM* July 1998: 96.

⁷⁴ *PSM* Dec. 1998: 1.

please."⁷⁵ Again, the magazine is encouraging its readers to think of Lara as a sexual being, this time on its front page.

Finally, while all of the advertisements appearing in *PSM* sexualize Lara to a certain extent, one in particular urges boys to not only fantasize about her, but to turn her into an obsession. This ad pictures a room, bare except for a slew of Lara Croft posters and paraphernalia papering one wall. A table covered with lit candles sits beneath the posters as a shrine to the character. In the corner, a guy huddles on a bare mattress with his head in his hands, and most of the picture is blurry. It looks as though the guy is suffering from drug withdrawals. The text reads:

4 a.m., Tallahassee, FL — Two drunks battle it out down the hall. The 38 Express squeals to a halt every half hour on the street below. Sleep doesn't come easy in room 23. But for 19-year-old Ray Cooper, it has nothing to do with the noise. As he says, "It's because every time I close my eyes, all I see is Lara Croft."⁷⁶

According to this ad, Lara is such a powerfully sexual character that she can become an obsession for the boys who play her games. This example shows just how far Eidos and *PSM* have gone to bring out Lara's sexuality and encourage readers and players to fantasize about her.

But the sexualization of Lara Croft doesn't end there. Another way in which the editors of *PSM*, as well as the advertisers, bring out Lara's sexuality is by focusing on her wardrobe. In the first "Tomb Raider" game released, Lara, like most video game characters, wears only one outfit for the entire game. Her standard outfit consists of a pair of tight brown shorts, a skin-tight, aqua-colored tank top, hiking shoes and a pair of twin pistol holsters. The tightness and sparseness of these clothes serve to reveal all of Lara's

⁷⁵ *PSM* Dec. 1998: 6.

⁷⁶ *PSM* Jan. 1998: 61.

nooks and crannies — as well as her many curves. In a practical sense, the clothes are somewhat functional for Lara's adventures in desert areas, but when the game takes her to arctic regions, where she must tromp through snow and swim through icy water, shorts and a tank top seem pretty unrealistic.

Perhaps in response to these sentiments, Eidos created an additional feature for the sequel: It gave Lara a few new outfits to wear during different parts of the game. For example, in an extended water portion of "Tomb Raider II," Lara now wears a wetsuit, and in the colder part of the game she dons a flight jacket — still skin-tight despite its sheepskin lining — although she retains the shorts. These changes in clothing created a new selling point for the game, which is surprising considering the game is marketed to boys, and boys generally care less about clothes than girls do. Lara's clothes are mentioned in just about every *PSM* review of "Tomb Raider II": "It features more moves, a bigger arsenal, vehicles for Lara to drive, and much larger levels with a wider variety between them. All this, plus you even get four new outfits for Lara to wear! ... The developers at Core clearly knew what the fans wanted, and they gave it to 'em in spades."⁷⁷ In the final portion of the game, which takes place in Lara's home, the character fights a few final bad guys wearing only a negligee, and *PSM* features several still shots from this portion of the game — especially the final sequence, when Lara prepares to take a shower. This negligee shower scene even became the subject of a comic strip, in which a male character from a different video game hunts down a pair of electrobinoculars so he can spy on Lara while she removes her negligee for the shower.⁷⁸

After receiving such a positive reaction to Lara's costume changes, Eidos designed several more outfits for "Tomb Raider III," and again, these additions to Lara's wardrobe

⁷⁷ *PSM* Jan. 1998: 70.

⁷⁸ *PSM* Nov. 1998: 180.

became a hot topic in much of *PSM*'s anticipatory coverage of the game. Upon receiving a preliminary demo of "Tomb Raider III," the magazine ran a series of shots from the game with explanatory captions. The following are a few of the editors' comments:

"Unfortunately, the version we played didn't have all of Lara's new outfits. A full wetsuit is on the way to help Lara survive those icy rivers." and "Wait until you see her 'cat burglar' outfit!"⁷⁹ After the release of the game, the magazine ran a general review accompanied by a picture of Lara in one of her new outfits, a gray sports bra and camouflage pants. The caption reads: "Sporting a fuller (but certainly not less revealing) wardrobe, Lara dresses up and down for different levels."⁸⁰

As Lara's wardrobe within the game has changed, so has her wardrobe in the computer-rendered pictures that accompany articles about "Tomb Raider." Although the majority of Lara's pictures show her wearing her standard shorts outfit, an increasing number of them — especially after the release of the third "Tomb Raider" game — show her striking a sultry pose in her new threads. In the issues following the release of "Tomb Raider II," *PSM* takes advantage of computer renderings of Lara wearing the wetsuit she dons for the water portion of the sequel, running at least four such pictures.⁸¹ With the creation of "Tomb Raider III," the camouflage pants, worn with an especially revealing sports bra, have become Lara's most common costume in *PSM* pictures. Until that point, this outfit was the most revealing to hit the magazine's pages because although it includes pants, which cover the character's shapely legs, the sports bra reveals Lara's midriff and also exposes more cleavage than any previous shirt. In one ad, which features a large

⁷⁹ *PSM* Sept. 1998: 50-53.

⁸⁰ *PSM* Feb. 1999: 35.

⁸¹ *PSM* Jan. 1998: 74-91.

picture of Lara wearing this ensemble, the character is bending forward to show a large portion of her cleavage, and it is apparent that she also has her bellybutton pierced.⁸²

In these pictures, Lara wears an outfit that is actually a part of the game. However, also in conjunction with the release of "Tomb Raider III," Eidos released several renderings of Lara dressed in an ensemble that she never wears during the game: a black Gucci string bikini. One such picture shows Lara standing with her back to the "camera" and her upper torso slightly turned so she is looking at the viewer over her left shoulder.⁸³ Upraised in her left hand she holds a machine gun. The accompanying caption reads: "Now where did I put that extra clip?" The twist of Lara's torso provides just the right angle for revealing the profile of her barely covered breast, and the seat of her bikini is high-cut, showing a portion of her buttocks. Another picture shows Lara in another bikini, this one aqua-colored.⁸⁴ In it, she is lying on her side facing the camera, her head propped up with one hand and a pistol in the other. This front view shows her breasts as perfectly round and completely unaffected by gravity, and the cut of her bikini emphasizes her tiny waist and round hips. These bikini pictures differ from the others in that the outfits Lara wears in them are not present at all in the game. They are entirely gratuitous, their only purpose to sexualize Lara and to entice male readers with both what is revealed and what is not revealed. With the creation of these images, Eidos has clearly given in to the demand to see more of Lara and less of her clothing.

This interest in Lara's wardrobe has led to an inevitable conclusion. Fans, including the editors of *PSM*, have begun speculating about what Lara looks like without any clothes

⁸² *PSM* Nov. 1998: 72-73.

⁸³ *PSM* Sept. 1998: 53.

⁸⁴ *PSM* Sept. 1998: 50.

at all. In the issues published after the release of "Tomb Raider III," references to a naked or potentially naked Lara abound. In one holiday section, in which the magazine rates different games as either "naughty" or "nice," *PSM* gives Lara's game a "nice" and adds: "Will the world ever get tired of Lara? Probably not, since Eidos seems to strip more and more of her clothes away in the rendered artwork that accompanies each new game. We can't wait for 'Tomb Raider 6'!"⁸⁵ The magazine goes even farther in a later issue in a section called "PSM's Most Wanted," in which it highlights much-awaited video games or offers its own suggestions for possible games. As its number-one most wanted game, the magazine suggests that Eidos create "Tomb Raider IV: Search for Clothes": "Get ready, fans — Lara is back (again), and this time she's BUCK NAKED! No more costumes, she's in the buff for every single stage, even the ice levels! *Brrr!* This is a *PSM* sure-winner!"⁸⁶

Advertisers in *PSM*, including Eidos, have responded to this demand for a nude Lara by creating ads that hint at or refer to a Lara with no clothes. In its ad for "Tomb Raider III," Eidos runs a large picture of Lara in her camouflage outfit, showing considerable cleavage beneath her sports bra. The text includes a list of some of the action features of the game, and the headline reads: "We improved everything you asked for, but sorry, still no nude code."⁸⁷ The statement refers to a rumor about a "cheat code" — a type of code often built into video games that typically allows the player to play with infinite life or ammunition — that will allow one to play "Tomb Raider" with Lara either nude or wearing only a bathing suit. This ad is clearly playing off the desire of Lara's fans to see

⁸⁵ *PSM* Dec. 1998: 72.

⁸⁶ *PSM* April 1999: 27.

⁸⁷ *PSM* Oct. 1998: 4-5.

her naked, enticing the reader with the possibilities of the game.

A similar ad takes this suggestion of nudity even farther. In it, we see Lara's bare posterior escaping off the edge of the page, walking away from a black string bikini, which the character has worn in other pictures.⁸⁸ The bikini lies in a heap on the ground next to Lara's twin pistols. The product is a video game enhancer, which allows the player to use cheat codes for a number of video games. The text of the ad explains the benefits of the enhancer and ends with the following: "Oh, and about those bathing suit codes? We're working on them." This ad was neither produced nor endorsed by Eidos, and although Lara is not explicitly pictured, the length of her red braid at the edge of the page as well as the bikini and pistols on the ground indicate that the statement refers to her. Rather than merely hinting at the possibility of seeing Lara naked, this ad actually shows parts of the character wearing nothing but her skin. The text offers more "hope" of realizing this fantasy than the previous ad, as well. Rather than merely stating that no code exists, the ad asserts that the company is working on one, implying that it will become available.

A final ad also shows Lara in semi-nakedness. Like the previous ad, it is not produced by Eidos and does not advertise "Tomb Raider" itself. Rather, it advertises an Internet site, "Imagine Games Network."⁸⁹ The ad pictures an obviously naked Lara, sitting on a chair backwards so her legs straddle the back of the chair. We see her from just below her breasts up, with her arms conveniently arranged to hide her bosom. We also see a glimpse of each bare thigh, but the rest of her is clothed in darkness. The text reads: "Get the naked truth! Expose yourself to the most in-depth, irreverent and often wickedly funny Playstation coverage on the World Wide Web. With daily updated codes, news, reviews, previews and (of course) pictures, all in one easy-to-navigate site — IGN

⁸⁸ *PSM* Nov. 1998: 167.

⁸⁹ *PSM* Feb. 1999: 86-87.

bare it all... and then some." Although the Web site includes neither nude codes nor naked pictures of Lara, this ad implies that it does in order to entice readers to find out.

What these ads — and the demand for them expressed in the magazine's editorial content — accomplish is to continue to take the focus off the game-playing aspects of "Tomb Raider" and place it on Lara as not just a video game character but as a sexual being. Images of a nude or partially nude Lara in effect turn a video game magazine sold to young boys into the computer-rendered equivalent of a Victoria's Secret catalog or a *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition. Although neither Lara's breasts nor her genitals are ever pictured in this magazine, the suggestion of nudity present in many of these instances adds an almost pornographic flavor to a publication intended to help game players decide what video games to buy.

By suggesting that Lara's sexiness, enhanced by her various revealing costumes, constitutes one of the major reasons for buying the games, *PSM* is essentially telling its readers that what Lara wears — and, potentially, doesn't wear — is more important than what she does. Although the character is a rugged, independent woman who is intelligent and capable of accomplishing her highly ambitious goals, time and again the pages of *PSM* reduce her to a body made for wearing sexy clothes. To be fair, the game reviews do critique the functional aspects of the game, such as character movement, action, details in scenery and plot. However, these small balances are overshadowed by large, colorful pictures of Lara looking sexy in her skin-tight clothes.

Objectification

In some of these pictures, Lara is actually objectified much in the same way that real women's bodies are often objectified in fashion magazines. Not only do pictures show her skimpily clad or even naked, but in some cases, they show only part of her body,

without including her face. For example, the "Want the Code?" ad previously discussed⁹⁰ shows only Lara's braid, the sole feature in the photo by which a reader would recognize her as Lara — aside from her bikini and guns lying on the ground — her bare buttocks and her legs. This is a particularly sexual instance of objectification, considering it is Lara's nakedness that is being objectified.

In most cases, however, Lara's breasts receive the most attention out of all of her features. They figure prominently into every picture of the character that is rendered, and in some cases the artist will grossly exaggerate them, making them huge and unnaturally round and sometimes adding nipples visible through her shirt. In fact, one might argue that Lara is most known for her breasts. In one section of its magazine, *PSM* includes a video game quiz. The reader must look at the faces of different video game characters and match them with their names. Fifteen pictures of different characters are included, each one zoomed in closely on the character's face — except the picture of Lara Croft. That picture shows only her mouth and chin, focusing on her breasts rather than her face.⁹¹ In the quiz, Lara is the only character whose breasts are shown rather than her face.

The face is considered the part of the human body that most reveals an individual's personality; it contains the eyes and the mouth, two of the most common means of human expression. When these elements are left out of a picture, the parts of the body remaining become detached, not belonging to any particular individual. They become objects. By focusing in on certain parts of Lara's body without showing the individual, however virtual she is, that they belong to, *PSM* is sending a message that it is acceptable to view the female body in a piecemeal fashion and that certain body parts can be disconnected from the person they belong to.

⁹⁰ *PSM* Nov. 1998: 167.

⁹¹ *PSM* Nov. 1998: 123.

Sex and violence

One of the elements of "Tomb Raider" that makes *PSM's* coverage of Lara Croft so disturbing is the combination of sex and violence it presents. Whenever she is pictured, Lara is almost always aiming a weapon; or at the least, one is usually visible somewhere in the picture. In fact, Lara changes weapons as many time as she changes clothes, exchanging her pistols for a rifle, a machine gun, a harpoon, or a rocket launcher. I would guess that like her tough-girl attitude, Lara's flashing guns, which in the game she can fire while leaping off a ledge or executing a commando roll, constitute a large portion of her attraction.

With the release of "Tomb Raider III," Lara was given several new weapons to "play" with, which in turn gave *PSM* an aspect of the new game to fixate on in its preview coverage. In each of the magazine's preview articles for the game, the editors marvel at the variety of guns included in the new game with comments such as, "This latest installment has a nice mix of old and new weapons. One thing is for certain: Lara is here to cause some serious damage."⁹² In another article, the magazine states, "Lara's sporting an even more impressive stash of firearms this time around. After all, why dance when you can rock and roll?"⁹³ and "The Desert Eagle is the most impressive weapon in your arsenal. It will kill anything with just one or two rounds."⁹⁴ Comments such as these emphasize the violent element in the game as well as the "tough-girl" aspect of Lara's character that makes her so appealing to her fans.

⁹² *PSM* Sept. 1998: 53.

⁹³ *PSM* Dec. 1998: 85.

⁹⁴ *PSM* Dec. 1998: 85.

Emphasis on the violent aspects of a video game is nothing new in this magazine. Many of the games it covers contain a strong element of violence, which is often what makes them popular with and appealing to the boys who play them. With "Tomb Raider," however, the violence is only one half of a dichotomy; the other half is Lara's sexuality. These two major aspects of the game play off of and enhance each other in a number of ways. In other words, Lara's guns make her sexier, and her sex appeal makes "Tomb Raider's" violence more exciting — or at least, that is how *PSM* approaches the games.

This combination of sex and violence exists in nearly every picture of Lara Croft by the mere fact that they all depict a huge-busted woman in skimpy clothes wielding a weapon. Many of them show Lara charging the camera, her guns blazing, or standing with them drawn and ready. But in several of the pictures of Lara published in *PSM*, the character is portrayed in a particularly sexual manner; making the combination even more noticeable. This is especially true when the picture is accompanied by a caption that reinforces the dichotomy.

For example, in one picture, Lara hunches over with a gun in each hand, one aimed and the other dangling at her side. The caption reads: "Lara's armed to the... um, teeth with some fantastic new weapons. We pity the fools who try to stop her!"⁹⁵ This caption clearly suggests that the magazine is referring to a body part other than her teeth, most likely a sexual body part. Thus, the comment directly relates Lara's weapons with her sexuality. Another picture shows Lara wearing a black string bikini with her back to the camera, looking over her shoulder and holding a machine gun, accompanied by a caption saying, "'Now where did I put that extra clip?'"⁹⁶ Implied in this comment is the idea that Lara must be carrying ammunition shoved down the bottom of her bathing suit. With the

⁹⁵ *PSM* Dec. 1998: 85.

⁹⁶ *PSM* Sept. 1998: 53.

caption written in question form, as though Lara is asking it of the reader, one might infer that the reader is supposed to help her find that extra clip so she can fire her gun. A third image shows Lara lying on the ground, propped up on one elbow with her knees bent in the air. She is caressing a gun with both hands, and the caption says, "Lara checks her weapons as she waits for the start of her next adventure. She expects you to join her..."⁹⁷ This caption involves the reader even further, suggesting that he (or she) will be directly involved in whatever sexualized violence Lara is about to commit.

These examples suggest that the violence inherent in "Tomb Raider" is violence committed by Lara herself. The message here is that guys are or should be sexually aroused by a violent woman or a woman who has the potential to be violent. This message is disturbing in itself, but *PSM's* coverage of "Tomb Raider" also implies violence of a different nature: violence committed against Lara, either by the player or by the other characters in the game. Again, the magazine suggests this type of violence through both pictures of Lara and words written about her.

In the strategy guide for "Tomb Raider II," *PSM* includes several screen shots of the game being played and explains them in brief captions. In one of these shots, Lara is picking herself up off of the ground, clearly weak and injured. The explanation says, "What happened last night? You will wake up a little dazed and confused — and without your weapons!"⁹⁸ Although the caption refers to a section of the game in which Lara is captured, relieved of her weapons and then released, the first sentence adds a sexual overtone, suggesting that Lara lost control of the situation "last night" and was stripped of her power, presumably by a man. The portion of the game to which this caption refers may have nothing to do with sex, but the way the comment is worded implies that Lara has

⁹⁷ *PSM* Dec. 1998: 85.

⁹⁸ *PSM* Jan. 1998: 77.

been raped or sexually taken advantage of.

Similarly, in a *PSM*-drawn cartoon for the holiday issue, Lara is running frantically toward the "camera" with a frightened look on her face.⁹⁹ Her features are outrageously exaggerated: her breasts are huge, perfectly round and literally bursting out of her shirt, her hips and thighs are plump and round, and her fingernails, which are typically not shown in pictures of the character, are long and red. In the background, a mob of male characters from other video games is pursuing Lara. The meaning of the cartoon, which is meant to be humorous, is clear. The men are chasing after Lara because of her sex appeal, and all she can do is run to avoid being ravaged by them. Aside from stripping Lara of her characteristic aura of control and ability to stand up against male enemies, this cartoon suggests that it is acceptable for men to hunt down a woman in this fashion merely because she comes across as sexy.

Another hand-drawn image of Lara, this one drawn by a fan and submitted to *PSM* as a cover illustration, shows Lara standing with her legs apart and holding a gun with both outstretched hands, its tip smoking as though it has just been fired.¹⁰⁰ She is looking at the camera with a mixture of anger and fear, and her hair is slightly messy. Her tank top, which clings to her skin and reveals a detailed outline of her large breasts, is torn — almost shredded — and several deep scratches in her arm are dripping with blood. This portrayal of Lara is highly sexualized despite the fact that she is obviously injured. Although the picture could be read as portraying the powerful Lara emerging victorious from a battle, as opposed to Lara victimized by violence, the sexualization of a situation in which a woman has been injured and has had to defend herself is still disturbing.

The mixture sex and violence is present in advertising for "Tomb Raider," as well,

⁹⁹ *PSM* Dec. 1998: 67.

¹⁰⁰ *PSM* Jan. 1998: 70.

and although these ads lack the illuminating commentary found in the magazine's editorial content, it is still easy to see where these elements combine. In the "Want the Code?" ad previously discussed,¹⁰¹ in which we see Lara's bare posterior escaping off the edge of the page, the mixture of sex and violence is particularly noticeable. The ad pictures a nude Lara walking away from her black string bikini, which lies in a heap on the ground next to her twin pistols. The message in this ad is clear: Lara has removed her clothes and laid down her guns, and now she needs only to be caught by the fan who is willing to buy the product being advertised.

Even the game "Tomb Raider" itself contains this disturbing mix of sex and violence. Aside from the element of control, which was discussed in a previous section, the game provides another violent possibility. Throughout the game, the player can make Lara "commit suicide" in a variety of ways, thereby acting violently upon the character. In order to make the game realistic, Eidos built into it several graphic deaths that Lara can meet. For example, if Lara falls from an excessive height, she will scream until she hits the bottom with a thud. To embellish upon this death, the player can activate Lara's diving ability and make her swan dive off of a cliff and onto the rocks below. Lara also meets a graphic end if she falls into a spike pit, which the game provides a number of, gets run over by a boulder or stays under water too long. In later games, Eidos has included even more ways for her to die, including poison, immolation, quicksand and subway impact.

Taken altogether, the advertising and editorial content about the games as well as the games themselves present violent messages about female sexuality. They tell the reader that violence is sexy and that the female body can and should be subjected to violence for the enjoyment of the male who is in control. They also impart the idea that aggression against woman, either sexual or merely physical, is acceptable and even enjoyable.

¹⁰¹ PSM Nov. 1998: 167.

Summary of Findings

Based on the magazine issues that I have analyzed, I have concluded that the content of *PSM* pertaining to Lara Croft and "Tomb Raider" displays negative messages regarding female sexuality and that these messages encourage the sexualization, objectification and violent treatment of women. Through its articles and advertisements about the video game, the magazine promotes a sexually lewd and aggressive attitude toward women via its treatment of Lara Croft. By sexualizing and objectifying this character, *PSM* provides a model for demeaning, sexist and even violent treatment of women.

Although Lara is a fictional character, she is treated on the pages of *PSM* as though she is a real person. At the same time, however, no real person lies behind the character; Lara has no voice with which to protest the treatment she receives. Rather, the editors of *PSM* and designers at Eidos can make Lara indifferent to — and even happy about — the way she is treated. This sends a false message that women like being sex objects and the targets of male aggression, and it also falsely suggests that women have no voice with which to speak out against such harassment.

There is no evidence to prove that magazine readers' attitudes toward women are actually influenced by these messages; however, substantial evidence suggests that there is at least the possibility that some boys will model their behavior and attitudes after the way *PSM* treats Lara Croft within its pages. This imitation could be direct, or, more likely, the messages could have a more insidious effect, worming their way into boys' basic beliefs about the way the world works. In any case, it is certain that these sexually violent and negative messages are out there and that young readers are consuming them — whether affected by them or not — and are asking for more.

While video games are far less researched than television, many of them are either

graphically violent or powerfully sexual, as is the coverage of them in video game magazines. Much room exists for further study in this field, and as video games become an ever more pervasive medium, the need for further research grows more urgent. At the least, such research could alert parents to the potential messages video games and their accompanying magazines are sending to children.

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