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## Strangers In the "Myst" of Video Gaming: Ethics and Representation

This paper is revised and extracted from **The "Girl Next Door" in Virtual Play Space: Victim, Vixen, or Invisible**, by Elizabeth A. Buchanan and Tomas A. Lipinski; IEEE Proceedings, August 1999.

### Introduction: Identity, Gender, and Video Gaming

In August 1999, Lara Croft donned the cover of *Playboy*. One month later, she held the cover page of *PSM* (Play Station Magazine, the most frequent figure appearing on the cover in *PSM's* history--four times in two years). The two images were strikingly different, as one can imagine. But, the implications of the two representations are indeed significant and call into question the ideas of reality, identity, gender, and representation. Which Lara Croft is "real?" Which one, if either, is a figure with whom girls and women in the world of games and beyond can identify in any meaningful way? Or, is she despite her assertive, powerful character, another unattainable image of sexuality to which girls and women are unable to relate? The character of Lara Croft has grown beyond the fantasy stage to a sense of reality. Girls want to be Lara Croft, and who wouldn't? The boys and men playing *Tomb Raider* may play it for a multitude of reasons, but be sure: Eidos, the producer of the game, knows what it is doing...

### Ethics of Virtual Representation: Boys will be Boys?

For decades, indeed centuries, we've been socially and culturally taught the clear distinctions between boys and girls--their behavior, manners, school yard antics, appearances, areas of "appropriate" studies and "expertise," toys, and much more. We've seen differences in the ways in which women are positioned in film, TV, and theatre as characters and as viewers. We've been told of "essential" differences between the sexes, and such differences are accepted as legitimate rationale for inequity and bias. We've seen dolls and "action figures" "represent" boys and girls, and now, we are seeing similarly prescribed technological distinctions in the form of computer games, video games, and software. We've come to expect and, as some assert, desire, such differences--this is what society deems "right." Girls wear pink and boys wear blue--this is the way it is. And of course, now girls get pink computers and printers and boys get camouflage. Associations between the masculine and the feminine are defined for us and are continually reinforced through various cultural mechanisms: The high-tech information age in which we are currently living offers a plethora of avenues through which such reinforcement takes place. The politics in and of

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representation, whether virtual or real, are extremely gendered.

Researchers have recognized the inherent masculinity contained within and around computer/video gaming (Braun and Giroux, 1989), while others, such as Durkin (1995) and Provenzo (1991), acknowledge great aggression as the defining trait of video games, and the existence of more violent male figures and characters in video games than are seen on television. The now-defunct Purple Moon's Brenda Laurel flat out acknowledges that girls' interests are simply, fundamentally different from those of boys; girls seek relationships and exploration as opposed to the repetitive, so-called skill-building tasks found in games for boys. And, within these differences lies a deep cultural significance: Alloway and Gilbert assert "[J]ust as the Barbie doll culture constructs a highly gendered representational field targeted at girls, which includes multimedia cultural texts, images and objects, the world of video games offers much the same to boys and young men" (95). Further, this world " is semiotically marked out in terms of difference and opposition: an understanding, for example, of what it means to be a male or female subject; to have dominant ethnic or racial status; to be privileged or silenced. Young people take up positions within their social worlds according to how they are situated and constructed as gendered, classed and ethnic identities, although the interplay between these positionings is always complex" (97).

To begin to understand these issues in video gaming, one must look at the virtual characters as well as the ways in which girls and women are addressed in and through the games. We need to adopt a critical perspective and understand both levels of gaming--the world of the game as well as the "real" world. How do we assess the ethics of both, without making the invalid leap found in many correlational studies? Can we look at the issues raised by gender representation in computer and video games from a philosophical perspective, specifically, through various ethical theories with much confidence? Brey asserts no, and his argument is worth a brief presentation. Two major positions can be identified; first, the "standard pro-censorship," in which

it is claimed that such games are immoral, that they hinder moral development, that they cause immoral or anti-social behavior in the real world, and that under these circumstances, the state has the right to impose censorship. In the "standard anti-censorship position," the libertarian viewpoint is defended that since immoral acts in a virtual environment do not cause harm to others, the decision to engage in such behavior is private, and morality of these games or the right of individuals to use them should be decided by private citizens individually and not by the state or other acting body. (Brey, 12)

Should we censor *Resident Evil* because of its "animated blood and gore," or, is the "Mature, 17+ rating" sufficient to ensure that libertarian ideal? *Tomb Raider*'s Lara Croft (with 36-24-36 measurements) promotes an image of femininity nearly unattainable by most girls. But, "when Lara's got a problem, she doesn't talk it through, she blasts it to smithereens" (Kafka and Levine, 1998, 39). Thus, the female

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character possesses agency, something not too common among popular games: Of the top 5 best selling games, none has a female protagonist at the helm (NYT, The Year's Top Media Buys, 1/4/99, C21). As Brey noted, misrepresentation and biased representation raise significant ethical issues, and our focus on gender reveals further ethical dilemmas within such games. Must girls and young women be indoctrinated into a world of such few choices--can virtual females be protagonists if they don't look a certain way? Do "real" girls and women have virtual characters with whom to identify? They don't identify with Lara Croft, and the producers of *Tomb Raider* really do not care: "Eidos has sold 3 million copies to retailers, aiming at America's hormonal midsection: men 18 to 35 years old" (Kafka and Levine, 1998, 39). Does *Tomb Raider* succeed in the boys' world of games and of fantasies because she has agency or because she wears a tight t-shirt?

Furthermore, concrete ethical theories such as Kantian deontology or utilitarianism, two major ethical camps recognized universally (Kohlberg, 1976) fail to lead to coherent policy formation guiding video gaming. The invocation of the Kantian categorical imperative is problematic in a direct application to video game characters. We are to treat others with respect and treat all humans as ends, not as means. Can we apply this to the virtual characters? Do they "need" respect? Is there a societal benefit to treating virtual characters as real and with respect (and then, the argument infers, such shootings as Columbine High would cease to occur)? If we treat these virtual characters as non-real, do children and young adults understand the difference between chopping up someone in the game and chopping up her best friend? The pro-censorship position says no, children do not have the faculties to make these distinctions and we must protect them from such virtual forms of violence if we want to avoid real violence. Kant's ethics demand that we treat all peoples as ends, never to be treated simply as means. But, what is the purpose of video games and their characters? Characters comprise the vehicles through which something is attained--a high score or lots of victims. They are means and nothing else. The relationship the gamer forges with the characters in the game raises the flag for those who want to censor violent or misogynistic content. Yet, the fact that girls and young women often are denied this relationship, for reasons presented momentarily, they have little control with how they are then extending the video world into the real world. Herein lies an ethical dilemma grounded in gender representation. As an interesting aside, Brenda Laurel discovered with girls and video games is that they are not necessarily opposed to the violence, but that they are boring, with no story or elaborate plot (Belsie, 1997, 12).

A simple, straightforward utilitarian approach seems unproductive; are video games a social good? If so, do they benefit the greatest number of social members? Given that girls and women are left out of much of the gaming world on a number of levels, those games are simply unethical from the utilitarian perspective. And, the case for video games as a social good is a difficult sell: In our current cultural climate, they are seemingly little more than a social blight, and establishing any argument for their social good remains laborious.

We can however, analyze them and address a number of issues. The application of ethics in video gaming takes a

number of additional directions. In addition to misrepresentation and biased stereotypes, as Brey discusses, further areas in need of ethical examination in direct relation to gender include:

**Agency:** Do women characters have a significant role and are they able to make decisions and actions that affect the world of the game? **Passivity:** Are women characters relegated to passive positions, such as the flag-waving race starter (or "Race Chick" as I've been told) in Ridge Racer Type 4? This passive role resembles the long history of women in film and theatre. Women as objects of desire or detestation--the virgin or the whore--the victim or the vixen. Must women characters be relegated to such dichotomous existences? While Lara Croft is an active agent, she uses her sexuality in questionable ways.

**Invisibility:** Some games contain no women characters at all--many sports simulations are typical of this absence. Girls and women aren't included in such games as the NHL Hockey or NFL Football.

**Reality:** Brey notes that certain standards of accuracy must ground VR; can video games support such a standard? Can girls and women look like Lara Croft without sickness or air brushing?

**Identity:** With whom do girls and young women identify in the world of games? Again, to call on Lara Croft, an Eidos spokesperson says, Lara Croft isn't just somebody the testosterone-addled players want to bed; she's somebody they want to be. It used to be that when we played video games, it wasn't cool to be a girl" ((Kafka and Levine, 1998, 39).

**Audience/Address:** Does the video game industry "speak" to girls and women? Can they carve their own niche in arcades, pick up a gaming magazine and connect with others? Is there a textual connection between girls and video games? Why is Nathan, the young boy quoted early on saying "You can't picture a girl saying, 'Oh fuck, I've lost again?'" right in his assessment?

**Points of View/Subjectivity:** Very few video games offer the narrative perspective through female perceptions and sensations. Do games offer choices for aligning oneself with a character? Some games, such as *Resident Evil* do offer a choice between a male and female lead character and the stories are unique. Most games, however, fail to present this choice. Significance surrounds the availability of different access points, narratives, and tasks, again, noting that such qualities are appealing to girls over the repetition of "meaningless" tasks. Brunner and Bennett (1998, 59) hold that "we should make sure that the feminine perspective on technology is as much part of the conversation as the masculine one."

**Intent:** What is it we games are teaching to girls and young women? The fact that *Barbie Fashion Designer* was the top selling game for girls raises significant issues surrounding claims of progress made on a feminist front. And, just recently, Mattel and Apollo Computers announced their "mist gray" and "glitter pink accented" Barbie printer: "Every little girl that walks into the store and sees it on a shelf will fall in love with it," says Apollo's general manager. And, with such products, they are priming young girls for their role in a consumer culture where they are being transitioned from computers to the appliance market, "where color and style become major selling points" ("A Printer with Pink Accents Lends a Barbie Touch," NYT, 6/3/99, D3).

**Quantity:** In plain numbers, the availability of games

directed towards a female audience are minimal; the situation is this: "Walk the aisles of the local video game store and you'll find slim pickings beyond the shoot-em, bash-em, race-em, variety of software titles. Even well-regarded software is often male-oriented. No wonder girls fall behind boys in computer use around the sixth grade. The industry virtually ignores them" (Belsie, 1997, 12). From this, one can gather that the lack of women in the computing industry, sciences, and other technological fields makes perfect sense: "Women remain underrepresented in high-tech careers.... As a result, some women in technical careers are eager for software or any other intervention that will increase girls' interest in physics, engineering, and other non-traditional careers" (Appleton, 1999, 1C).

Thus, the ethics surrounding virtual gaming is complex. The representational politics of gender in games need greater evaluation and assessment and it is important to continue to analyze games with particular attention to the issues raised above. Organizations such as CPSR have a role in promoting the active examination of video games as cultural texts, and in encouraging girls and women to get involved in the world of gaming and computer technology.

As I've concluded before, "Know of a good game? I'd love to play." Your comments and experiences with gender and virtual gaming and video gaming are always appreciated.

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