

New Lara: A Postfeminist Analysis of Rise of the Tomb Raider

by

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ABSTRACT

Lara Croft, the heroine of the hugely popular *Tomb Raider* videogame series, is a representative of femininity in contemporary popular culture. The newest Lara Croft game, *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (released in 2015/2016) presents a new version of Lara Croft (new Lara), who is a departure from the postfeminist action hero archetype that Lara Croft exemplified before the character's reboot in 2013 (old Lara). Lara Croft has undergone a significant transformation since her first incarnation in *Tomb Raider I* in 1996. Some aspects of Lara Croft's characterisation that have changed are her wardrobe, her body shape, and the character's emotional complexity. Narratological aspects of Lara Croft that have changed are her relationships with other female characters, as well as her relationship with her deceased parents. And finally, some of the ludological elements of the game that have changed are Lara Croft's weapons, and the way in which she navigates her environment.

The study relates Lara Croft's transformation to the changing structures in the videogame industry, such as the number of women currently playing videogames and the number of women currently involved in creating videogames. It is found that the number of female gamers has increased significantly from 1996 to 2017 and that where women are more involved in the creation of videogames, the female heroines' representation tends to be more in line with that of new Lara. The study identifies a new female heroine archetype, which I term 'the new Lara phenomenon', that is increasingly displayed in female videogame heroines after the 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot.

Keywords: Postfeminism, cyberfeminism, videogames, ludology, narratology, Lara Croft, Tomb Raider, action heroine.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and research questions

The representation of women in the mass media is under more scrutiny than ever before. The industry itself is starting to acknowledge that, fueled by patriarchal and misogynistic ideals, the portrayal of women in films, television series and in videogames, among others, has been problematic for decades. Although sexist representations of women in the media remain ever-present, some efforts are being made to challenge these problematic portrayals and they are yielding positive (although still limited) results (Curtis 2017). Even the age-old Disney princess narratives, that have deeply embedded patriarchal undertones, have recently been rewritten. For example, a kiss from the female villain replaces the princesses' kiss from a male 'knight in shining armour' in *Maleficent* (Stromberg 2014), and *Beauty and the Beast* (Condon 2017) features a rebooted Belle, played by self-proclaimed feminist activist, Emma Watson.

Furthermore, women's presence (and absence) in powerful positions in the entertainment industry has also come to the fore. The #MeToo movement has recently put a spotlight on women's rights as well as their abuse in the entertainment industry. At the same time, more films with female directors, such as the hugely popular *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins 2017) movie directed by Patty Jenkins, are being released on the big screen. In the videogame industry, the pay gap between male and female developers, and the lack of female developers in senior positions, for example, have also become controversial issues (Makuch 2018). Many of these debates are manifested in discussions surrounding videogame heroines, and in particular for this study, Lara Croft, who is the heroine of the *Tomb Raider* videogame series.

Since the game's creation in 1996, *Tomb Raider*, including its sequels and various spin-offs, has sold approximately fifty-eight million copies worldwide (Table 1) (Video Game Sales Wiki, [Sa]). Its main protagonist, Lara Croft, has become a significant popular culture icon who has had a powerful influence

on gaming and popular culture since her creation. In addition to videogames, Lara Croft has starred in three feature films, the most recent film released in 2018 with Oscar-winning actress, Alicia Vikander as young Lara. Lara is now also more popular than any super model in the world, having appeared on the covers of over 1200 magazines by 2016 (Arrojas 2016). Lara Croft has been in twenty *Tomb Raider* games to date, including the game's spin-offs. Table 1 shows a summary of the twelve official *Tomb Raider* games released from 1996 to 2018.

	Developer	Game	Date	Sales (million)	Console	Acronym
Old Lara	Core Design	<i>Tomb Raider</i>	1996	7	Sega Saturn	<i>TRI</i>
		<i>Tomb Raider II</i>	1997	6.5	PlayStation 1	<i>TRII</i>
		<i>Tomb Raider III</i>	1998	6		<i>TRIII</i>
		<i>Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation</i>	1999	5		<i>Last Revelation</i>
		<i>Tomb Raider Chronicles</i>	2000	1.5		<i>Chronicles</i>
		<i>Tomb Raider and The Angel of Darkness</i>	2003	2.5		<i>Angel of Darkness</i>
	Crystal Dynamics	<i>Tomb Raider Legend</i>	2006	2	Xbox PlayStation 2 PC	<i>Legend</i>
		<i>Tomb Raider Anniversary</i>	2007	1.3		<i>Anniversary</i>
		<i>Tomb Raider Underworld</i>	2008	2.6	Xbox 360 PlayStation 3 PC	<i>Underworld</i>
New Lara	Square Enix	<i>Tomb Raider</i> (reboot)	2013	11	Xbox One PlayStation 4 PC	<i>TR</i> reboot
		<i>Rise of the Tomb Raider</i> and DLC (Endurance Mode, Cold Darkness Awakened, Baba Yaga: Temple of the Witch and Croft Manor)	2015- 2016	7		<i>ROTTR</i>
		<i>Shadow of the Tomb Raider</i>	2018	None yet		<i>SOTTR</i>

Table 1: Summary of official *Tomb Raider* games.¹

¹ The information in Table 1 is compiled from the Square Enix Corporate Strategy Meeting Report (2009), the Tomb Raider Games Wiki (2018) and Makedonski

In the three most recent games starring Lara Croft, namely *Tomb Raider* reboot (*TR* reboot) (2013), *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (*ROTTR*) (2015) and *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (*SOTTR*) (2018), Lara Croft's signification has changed significantly from her former incarnations, to which I refer as 'old Lara' (see Table 1). Many academic articles have been written on these former versions of Lara Croft, as her exaggerated features and violent demeanour have elicited much debate and criticism. There is, however, not much written about who Lara Croft became after the character's reboot in 2013, to which I refer as 'new Lara'. Although providing important groundwork for the critique of a female character in a video game, many of these previous studies are losing their relevance, as Lara Croft has become much more complex than being either a feminist icon or an object of the male gaze, or both, as previous studies by Maja Mikula (2003; 2004), Anne-Marie Schleiner (2001), Helen Kennedy (2002) and Bob Rehak (2003) have variously positioned her. Although the recent study by Hye-Won Han & Se-Jin Song (2014) has addressed the 2013 reboot of *Tomb Raider* and the 2014 trailer of *ROTTR* (2015), it does not address the full *ROTTR* game released in 2015. To my mind, this new version of Lara, who also appears in the 2018 *Tomb Raider* movie, needs closer scrutiny.

Claudia Hart and Claudia Herbst (2005) identify Lara Croft (from *Tomb Raider I* in 1996 to *Tomb Raider and the Angel of Darkness* in 2003) as the epitome of the "new woman type", or alternatively, the postfeminist 'supergirl' as outlined by Stephanie Genz (2009), who is simultaneously self-empowered and super sexy. Hart and Herbst (2005) have also explored other game heroines such as BloodRayne (2002), Ashlin (from *Jak and Daxter*, 2001) and Alma (from *Ninja Gaiden*, 2004) who are characters that similarly emerged from a masculinised culture where virtual females are generated by men and not by women. Furthermore, all these female characters are overtly

(2017). In Table 1, a distinction is made between 'old Lara' and 'new Lara'. From 1996 to 2008, Lara Croft's representation did not change significantly and is therefore categorised as 'old Lara'. All articles written on Lara Croft before 2013 (when 'new Lara' emerged in the 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot) refer to the 'old' version of Lara Croft (Figure 1).

sexualised and perpetuate militarist values that appeal to male gamers while masquerading under the guise of self-empowerment (Hart & Herbst 2005), a characteristic trope of femininity in postfeminist popular culture. Old Lara, who is considered as both a feminist icon and an object of the male gaze, is therefore no exception to the postfeminist 'supergirl' (Genz 2009).



Figure 1: Evolution of Lara Croft, 2013. (TV Tropes: Franchise/Tomb Raider).

As seen in Figure 1, many aspects of Lara's signification have changed since 1996, the most obvious being her body shape and her wardrobe. Lara's 2013 appearance is maintained and elaborated upon in the subsequent games, *ROTR* (2015) (Figure 2) and *SOTTR* (2018). Lara Croft's relationships with other characters in the game world (living and deceased) have also changed since 1996, as well as the relationship between Lara and her enemies and Lara's relationship with her environment and surroundings, especially during the transition from *Tomb Raider Underworld* (2008) to *TR* reboot (2013). These ludological and narratological changes point to the fact that Lara Croft

is gradually moving away from the two-dimensional, overtly sexualised and untouchable action heroine that she used to be, to a more relatable model of femininity to which twenty-first century women and girls may want to aspire.

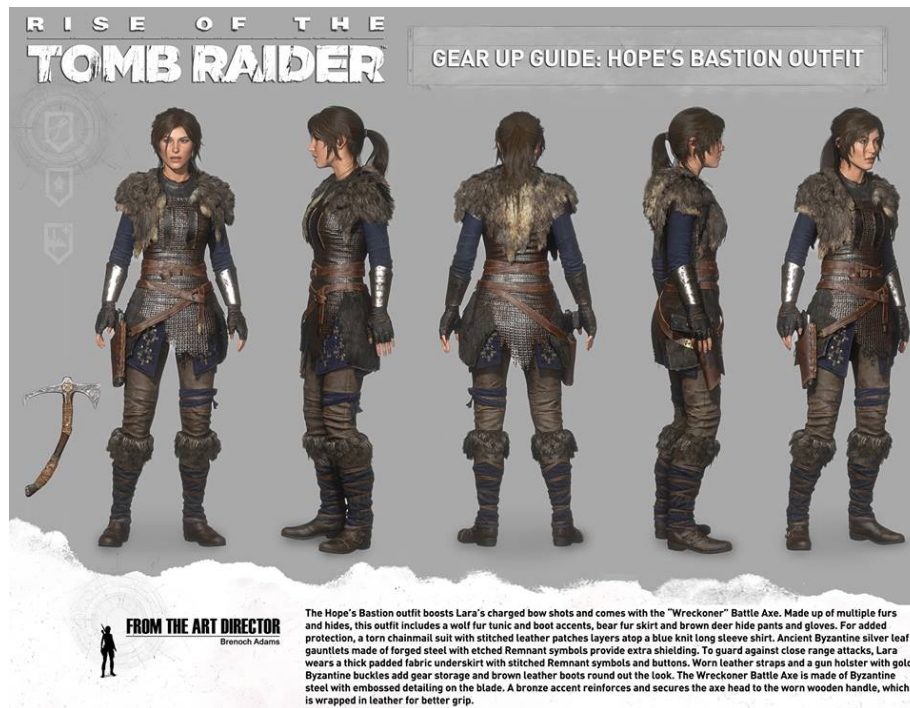


Figure 2: Hope's Bastion Outfit, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, 2015. (Tomb Raider Forums).

This study is based on the assumption that Lara Croft's evolution owes much to changing structures in the videogame industry and changing perceptions of gender and of women in broader society, as videogames are always experienced in relation to the hegemonic ideologies operating in particular contexts (Du Preez 2000). For example, it is no secret that women have been subject to harassment on the Internet due to their increasing involvement in gaming. Mia Consalvo (2012: [Sp]) attributes the recently high number of cyber-attacks on women to the "growing presence of women and girls in gaming not as a novelty but as a regular and increasingly important demographic".²

² For example, the incident where Anita Sarkeesian received death threats on the Internet because of her YouTube series, *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*.

The question I am interested in investigating in this study is therefore not only *how* Lara Croft has changed from 1996 to 2018, but also *why* Lara Croft has changed so significantly over twenty-two years. I attempt to address these questions by trying to understand what type of new heroine Lara Croft has become and whether this new heroine archetype is manifested in other video game heroines released after *TR* reboot in 2013. Although new Lara pretends to be the epitome of the new feminist ideal, her latest manifestation cannot be unproblematically embraced either. I will therefore consider the implications of this new heroine for the gaming industry and on perceptions of women in society more broadly.

1.2 Aims and objectives

The main aim of the study is to conduct a critical analysis of Lara Croft in *ROTTR* (2015) through the lens of postfeminism. The second aim is to be able to explain how and why Lara Croft and other female protagonists in recent popular videogames are portrayed as they are from around 2013 onwards. Firstly, in order to do an analysis of a videogame, such as *ROTTR* (2015), videogame theory needs to be explored in detail. An exploration of videogame theory should include discussions of both ludology and narratology, which entails looking at the rules and gameplay elements that make up the videogame, as well as looking at the story or narrative that is present in the game. The technical elements of the *Tomb Raider* games released from 1996 to 2008 need to be identified in order to be able to understand how the gameplay and narrative of *ROTTR* (2015) contribute to the representation of new Lara.

The second objective is to investigate how female characters have been represented in videogames up to the time of study, as well as what roles women have played as creators and consumers of videogames in the past. The study relies on a cyberfeminist critique of women's relationship with technology, how cyberfeminism has lead women to become more involved in

the videogame industry, and what effects women's involvement has had on the industry.

The third objective is to articulate what postfeminism is in a broad sense and then to explore the various characteristics of the postfeminist action heroine specifically. In order to understand new Lara's signification, it is important to examine the relationship between old Lara and the postfeminist action heroine. This discussion then lays the foundation for the discussion of the relationship between new Lara and the postfeminist action heroine.

The next objective is to analyse how the various aspects of Lara Croft, such as her appearance and wardrobe, her relationship with her deceased parents, her relationship with her surroundings, and her narrative have changed compared to her previous incarnations. The objective is furthermore to investigate the ludological and narratological transformations that take place from *Tomb Raider* games released in 1996 to 2008 to *ROTTR* (2015), and to identify how they construct a new identity for Lara Croft. Finally, in order to reach the second aim towards the end of the study, the objective is to draw back on cyberfeminism and investigate women's positions as consumers and producers of videogames after the advent of new Lara.

1.3 Theoretical framework and literature review

The study is grounded in critical feminist theory in that it seeks to expose the gender stereotypes that circulate in the representation of Lara Croft, and specifically new Lara in *ROTTR* (2015). It is also informed by videogame theory, as Lara Croft is a *female videogame* character whose representation has undergone significant transformations. The following section briefly contextualises videogames and positions their analysis within cyberfeminist discourse and postfeminism. Furthermore, the seminal literature written on Lara Croft from a feminist perspective, as well as two studies that looked at the portrayal of women in games are reviewed. Chapter Two engages in a more thorough literature review of each topic discussed briefly here, but it is important to point out that all literature found on Lara Croft was written before

2012, with only two articles to date that allude to the 2013 *TR* reboot and the 2014 trailer for *ROTTR* (2015). In other words, this study breaks new ground by analysing a topic on which no material has so far been published.

1.3.1 Existing studies on female representation in videogames

Mark Wolf and Bernard Perron provide a comprehensive history of the trajectory of videogame theory from the 1970s to early in the twenty-first century in their introduction to *The Videogame Theory Reader* (2003). Wolf & Perron (2003) identify *PONG* (1972) as the first hit videogame, and two decades later, by 1993, videogames were being adapted to the big-screen (Wolf & Perron 2003). Likewise, *Tomb Raider* was adapted into two feature films that starred Angelina Jolie as Lara Croft: *Lara Croft, Tomb Raider* (West 2001) and *Lara Croft, Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life* (De Bont 2003). More recently, Alicia Vikander starred as young Lara in *Tomb Raider* (Uthaug 2018).³ In 1998 (significantly after the release of *Tomb Raider I* in 1996), studies devoted to women in gaming started becoming more prevalent (Wolf & Perron 2003).

According to Jeroen Jansz & Raynel Martis (2007: 143), research conducted by Tracy Dietz (1988) almost three decades ago revealed that only 15% of female characters had hero status in games and that female characters were predominantly cast as princesses or wise old women that typically had to be rescued by the male hero. Jansz & Martis (2007: 143) also refer to research conducted by Christine Gailey (1993) regarding gender representation in videogames that similarly revealed that “a few women [in videogames] appeared as dangerous gang members that must be dealt with violently” and other “good” women were represented as “cute and unthreatening”.

More than a decade after the study by Gailey in 1993 however, the research by Jansz & Martis (2007: 148) suggests that female characters increasingly hold more powerful positions in games. Although gender stereotypes with

³ *Tomb Raider* (Uthaug 2018) is Lara Croft’s origin story. This film is based on the narratives of *TR* (reboot) (2013) and *ROTTR* (2015).

regard to the physical features of men and women were still present at the time of their study, as is seen in Figure 3, which shows the box art for *Tomb Raider: Underworld* (2008), there was nevertheless a conscious shift in the representation of power relations between the sexes in videogames (Jansz & Martis 2007: 148).

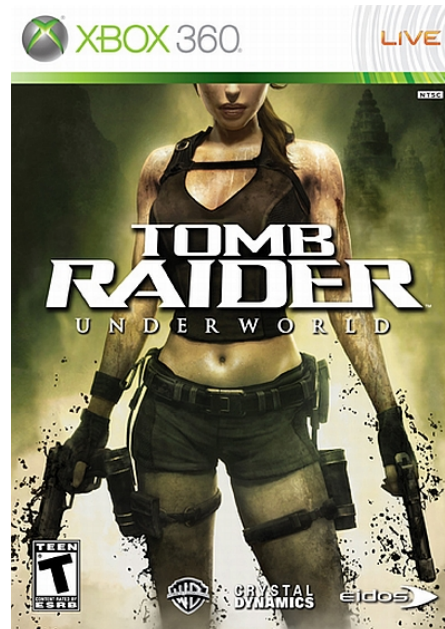


Figure 3: *Tomb Raider Underworld* Xbox 360 cover, 2008. (IGN).

1.3.2 Cyberfeminism

Cyberfeminism is a branch of third wave feminism that is concerned with women's relationship with technology. Stacy Gillis (2007: 168) usefully summarises cyberfeminism's main stances. According to Gillis (2007), cyberfeminism is a perspective that advocates women's use of new technologies for empowerment, it acknowledges that there is inequality between women and men in digital discourse and it aims to change this situation. Cyberfeminism has been criticised, however, for idealising cyberspace's disembodied nature.⁴

⁴ See Wyatt (2008), Paasonen (2011) and Munster (1999).

Judy Wajcman (2009: 6) elaborates that for cyberfeminists, cyberspace is gendered and can provide the technological basis for a new form of society that could potentially be liberating for women. For the first time, through the advent of cyberspace and the 'cyborg', which promised women a disembodied experience, women were provided with the means to move beyond "the biological family unit" that oppressed them for so long (Wyatt 2008: 114). But, as gender relations influence the "process of technological change, which in turn configures gender relations", women's exclusion from technology has inevitably placed them in a subjugated position despite the utopian promises of cyberspace (Wajcman 2009: 7). This is certainly evident in the early versions of Lara Croft (1996-2008) (Figures 1 and 3), who was created mainly by male programmers and for a male audience.

Cyberfeminism highlights the potential for women in new media, but surely if men continue to create versions of digital women, such as Lara Croft, for male consumption, this potential seems doomed. While cyberfeminism provides a background for the study of *ROTTR* (2015) and of women in the gaming industry, postfeminism provides the tools to reach a more detailed account of a character such as Lara Croft.

1.3.3 Postfeminism

Although postfeminism occupies a tricky position in relation to third wave feminism, it may account for the emergence of a character such as Lara Croft. Stephanie Genz (2006: 339) contends that postfeminism can be located within a specific time and place in history: the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century in Europe and America in which consumer, middle-class aspirations play a key role. (Significantly, Lara Croft was first created towards the end of the twentieth century). Postfeminism is simultaneously a "descriptive category in popular culture" and "an academic stance associated with post-modern/poststructuralist theorizing" (Genz 2006: 336), and at the turn of the century, notions of femininity became constructed around "young women's 'right' to individualism, liberty and sexual self-expression" (Genz

2009: 8). Genz identifies different postfeminist femininities, which include the 'housewife heroine', the 'superwoman', the 'singleton', and 'the supergirl'.

Christina Stasia conducts a postfeminist analysis of the *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (West 2001) film that could also be applied to the *Tomb Raider* games released before 2013, in other words, old Lara. In her study Stasia (2007: 238) lists the core characteristics of the postfeminist action hero, or for Genz (2009), the 'supergirl', that apply to this earlier version of Lara: she is strong, yet unthreatening; she is feminine and heterosexually attractive; she is almost always white and middle-class; and she is violent, but always within the parameters of patriarchy. Laura Mulvey (1975: 10) famously argued that women in cinema "connote to-be-look-at-ness" by which she meant that "the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film". Stasia (2007: 243) identifies film Lara as spectacle, to be "looked at" – Lara has agency and drives the plot, but focus is placed not on her muscles, but on her hyperfeminised features, such as her large breasts and the weapons straddling her thighs.

Evidently, postfeminism allows women to be feminine and feminist simultaneously (Genz 2006: 344). Postfeminism justifies Lara Croft's representation as an object by "[making] room for 'femmenists' who stage a sexualisation of the feminist body in order to construct a new femininity around the notions of autonomy and agency" (Genz 2006: 345; emphasis in original). From this position, Lara Croft's sexualised representation (Figure 1) portrays her not as a victimised object, but as an active and sexualised subject (Genz 2006: 245). This seems contradictory, however, and I argue that although new Lara may have emerged during the historical moment of postfeminism, she is not the same type of postfeminist action heroine as her predecessors. In fact, I hope to demonstrate that new Lara may be an entirely new type of action heroine who displays a departure from the outdated postfeminist action heroine and that this trend is mimicked in other female videogame heroines too.

1.3.4 Lara Croft

In many ways, old Lara is a contradiction. Mikula (2003: 79-80) argues that old Lara is “everything that is bad about representations of women in culture, and everything good” as she does not rely on a male character to help her. Ironically, however, Lara appeals to male gamers because of her blatantly violent behaviour, as well as her eye-candy appeal. Mikula (2003: 81) explains that for the player, Lara can be the “self” and the “other” simultaneously as the male player is invited to identify with her *and* to objectify her (due to the third person camera view where the player views Lara’s entire body from the back). According to Mikula (2003: 81), male players enjoy controlling Lara, while female gamers enjoy being Lara or going on the adventure alongside her.

Another key aspect of Lara Croft, according to Rehak (2003: 481), is her ability to migrate from one media environment to another. Besides blurring the lines between masculinity and femininity, Lara also blurs the lines between producers, texts, audiences and technologies due to the fact that “[she] manifests in as many forms as there are people to view her” (Rehak 2003: 478; 482). Rehak (2003: 478; 482) identifies that Lara’s simultaneous existence in various forms of media is not only a coping mechanism for postmodern society, but also “*adaptive responses to postmodernity*” where a “mediation of media” occurs in the age of simulacra (emphasis in original). As a way of dealing with excess, postmodern society ironically creates and infinitely recreates a character such as Lara Croft until the sign’s meaning is dissolved completely and personal meanings can be superimposed onto her.

A recent article by Han and Song (2014) briefly discusses the 2013 *TR* reboot. Han and Song (2014: 34) acknowledge that efforts are being made by programmers to make Lara Croft more realistic, both in terms of the game’s aesthetic and in terms of new Lara’s narrative. Han and Song (2014: 38), however, contend that even though Lara’s appearance in the 2013 reboot is more realistic, emphasis is not placed on her unique features as a female hero, but rather, her heroism is modeled on her male contemporaries such as

Nathan Drake from *Uncharted* (2016) and Booker Dewit from *Bioshock Infinite* (2013), for example. Han and Song (2014) never mention what these sought after 'unique features of a female hero' might be though.

With regard to *ROTTR* (2015), Han and Song (2014: 40) identify Lara Croft (and her deceased mother) as a damsel-in-distress. They substantiate their claim by referring to the 2014 *ROTTR* trailer that features Lara at a male psychologist because she struggles with post-traumatic stress after her ordeal on Yamatai in the 2013 *TR* reboot. Han and Song (2014) do not, however, analyse the entire *ROTTR* (2015) game and therefore assumptions about Lara's position as a damsel-in-distress cannot be substantiated with sufficient evidence from the game itself. In this dissertation, I seek to further interrogate the validity of the claims made by Han and Song (2014) by fleshing out new Lara's characteristics and narrative in greater detail.

1.4 Research methodology

This study engages in an analysis of the visual signs, the narrative, and the ludological elements in *ROTTR* (2015) through the lens of postfeminism. The study is primarily speculative and exploratory and applies the literature reviewed in Chapter Two to the two versions of Lara as I have identified her above. Even though there is still an ongoing debate between ludologists and narratologists regarding the best approach to studying videogames, for the study of *ROTTR* (2015), both the ludological and narrative elements of the game need to be taken into consideration, as both the narrative and the gameplay reveal something about Lara Croft's transformation.

To briefly summarise, ludology focuses on the aspects of videogames such as play and game activities, and claims that pleasure in playing games lies primarily in the gameplay (Ang 2006: 306). Narratology, on the other hand, focuses on the study of videogames as narratives and claims that pleasure in a game is derived from its storyline (Ang 2006: 306). Han and Song (2014: 28) further elaborate on the relevance of narratology as a methodology with which to study videogames by substantiating that "video games are [without

doubt] a representative narrative format that reflects contemporary video paradigms". The narrative of most action-adventure games follows that of a hero's journey (whether male or female) and the characterisation of the hero reflects the hegemonic ideology of the time.⁵ This is also true for female protagonists such as Lara Croft (Han & Song 2014: 28-29).

Ang (2006) outlines factors that are taken into account when conducting a ludological analysis of a game. Essentially, playing a videogame is defined as "an activity based on formally defined rules" (Juul 2001 in Ang 2006: 307). Ang (2006) gives a detailed list of these rules: *paideia* rules and ludus rules, hard rules and soft rules, world rules, game rules and narrative rules, and abstract rules. Ang (2006) applies this framework in a reading of *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002) and undeniably proves this framework to be useful in videogame analysis. These rules are discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

1.5 Significance of the study

There are several reasons why studying videogames, and female characters in videogames, are important. Firstly, as videogames are a popular narrative medium, the female heroes that they portray reflect the gender values of the time and they reflect contemporary video paradigms (Han & Song 2014: 28-29). Secondly, these images and games are consumed and played by male and female gamers who experience these gendered bodies in particular ways (Han & Song 2014: 29). And thirdly, as videogames recently feature more female protagonists, a substantial and ongoing analysis of the characterisation of these characters is necessary (Han & Song 2014: 29).

As Han and Song (2014: 27) rightly state, "Lara Croft serves as both a leading model and mythical signifier for female protagonists". Extensive research by theorists such as Mikula (2003; 2004), Rehak (2003), Kennedy (2002) and Schleiner (2001) has only been done up to *Tomb Raider Underworld* (2008) though. These theorists seem to have said everything that there is to be said

⁵ The hero's journey refers to Joseph Campbell's (2004 [1949]) monomyth that describes the stages through which the archetypal (male) hero goes.

about old Lara. The reason for this is that Lara's representation did not change significantly from 1996 to 2008. The most recent *Tomb Raider* games, however, have not yet been adequately addressed in academic circles even though Lara Croft has undergone a notable change from *Underworld* (2008) to *ROTTR* (2015). For this reason, this study can provide much insight into how perceptions of femininity are changing specifically in video games and in visual culture on the whole.

1.6 Chapter outline

This chapter has provided a short introduction to the main issues and debates surrounding the videogame character, Lara Croft. In Chapter Two, I explore the myriad of literature on old Lara, as well as establish a theoretical framework through which to undertake a close analysis of *ROTTR* (2015). Chapter Two further elaborates on the mechanics of ludological rules and narrative in videogames by presenting literature on videogame theory. Thereafter, in Chapter Three, this framework is applied in the analysis of *ROTTR* (2015). The characterisation of Lara Croft and the ludological and narratological transformations in *ROTTR* (2015) are interrogated in detail in Chapter Three.

Finally, Chapter Four contextualises the study more broadly within contemporary popular culture by examining the role that the position of women in the videogame industry play in the transformation of Lara Croft, as well as by identifying other recent videogames in which the trend of the transformation of female characters is evident. Chapter Five concludes the study by summarising the main findings of this dissertation and identifying gaps in the research on female videogame heroines which provide potential areas of interest for further research.

CHAPTER TWO: DANGEROUS TERRITORY – EXPLORING THE LITERATURE ON OLD LARA

2.1 Introduction

In 1946, the American military invented a complex computer, programmed to calculate the data required to deploy a hydrogen bomb during World War II. This technology eventually became the predecessor of the first hit videogame, *PONG* (1972), which was a rudimentary missile shooting game (Kuo, Hiler & Lutz 2017). Still defined largely by the masculine dominated contexts of science, technology and militarism from which they developed, since the release of *PONG* in 1972, videogames have changed significantly and evolved into the complex systems that we play and enjoy today. In 1982 the first book theorising videogames, *The Art of Computer Game Design* by Chris Crawford, was published. Almost two decades later, the first publication on gender in videogames, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (1998), outlines the main concerns for feminists in the videogame industry. At the same time cyberfeminists started to question women's relationship with technology (Munster 1999), and for postfeminists, questions regarding how individual players perform gender within a game context, amongst others, arose (Heeter in Wolf & Perron 2009).

Due to these types of complex questions and issues that videogames incite, for many theorists, videogames are considered as cultural texts that produce many different meanings thereby influencing social life (Lauteren 2002). For example, videogames are mediated sign systems that both produce meanings and are given meanings by audiences who play them, and there is an extensive intertextual culture associated with videogames in the forms of gaming magazines, fan sites and blogs, to name a few (Lauteren 2002: 218).

Most importantly, videogames are playable, so they adhere to the conventions of play, namely ludology, and gaming as a social activity (Lauteren 2002: 219). Celia Pearce (2005: 2) argues that both narratology and ludology should

be considered when discussing videogames as “most games lie in a fuzzy realm between [ludology and narratology]”. While board games rely predominantly on ludological rules, the incorporation of the computer (or video) in games adds a number of characteristics that expand the role and importance of narrative (Pearce 2005).

Jesper Juul (2002) proposes a useful conceptual framework for examining computer game structure. According to Juul (2002: 324), games can be divided into games of emergence and games of progression. Emergence games, such as *The Sims Online* (2002), are games that combine a small number of game rules to create a large number of game variations. In contrast, progression games rely heavily on narrative as they consist of a predefined series of events that need to unfold in order to complete the game (Juul 2002: 324). Games of progression were introduced with the advent of the adventure game, such as *Tomb Raider* (Juul 2002: 324).

This chapter firstly reviews the seminal texts on videogame theory and then discusses ludology and narratology as theoretical frameworks through which to analyse videogames. Studies regarding the portrayal of women in videogames are also reviewed, with emphasis on the roles that women play in the videogame industry. Finally, I review the literature on cyberfeminism and postfeminism, as *ROTTR* (2015) is a videogame with a female heroine and therefore both branches of feminism are useful in the analysis of the game. The focus of the discussion is on ‘old Lara Croft’ and Tomb Raider games released before 2013, and the literature that has grappled with this multi-faceted videogame character. Although this ‘territory’ is well-known, it is vital to explore this literature again in my attempt to position new Lara in relation to her previous incarnations.

2.2 Videogame Theory

Thirty years after the advent of the first academic text (Crawford 1982) that theorises videogames, Wolf and Perron’s (2003) *Videogame Theory Reader* (*VGTR1*) presented a successful compilation of essays that dealt with

videogame theory at the turn of the century. Since the publication of *VGTR1*, two handheld consoles (Nintendo DS and Sony PlayStation Portable) and the next generation consoles (Xbox 360 and Sony PlayStation 3) were released (Wolf & Perron 2009), and the online gaming community bloomed with the release of *World of Warcraft* (2004) and online gaming networks such as Xbox Live and PlayStation Network (Wolf & Perron 2009). As a result, in 2009 Wolf and Perron published the *Videogame Theory Reader 2 (VGTR2)*. In *VGTR2*, Wolf and Perron (2009) argue that the transformations that have occurred in gaming systems influence the way in which videogames should be theorised. Where *VGTR1* (2003) aimed to justify the existence of videogame theory, *VGTR2* (2009) attempts to articulate the nature and scope of videogame theory and tries to organise the terminology and findings of the discipline (Wolf & Perron 2009).

Almost ten years after *VGTR2*, it was announced at Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) 2017 that both Microsoft and Sony are releasing consoles capable of 4k gaming at 60fps,⁶ Sony is releasing an even wider range of Virtual Reality games, as well as a new collection of smartphone-controlled games, and Nintendo is releasing more titles for its newest handheld console released in 2017, the Nintendo Switch (Porter, Boyle & Fitzsimmons 2017). Meanwhile, 67% of US households currently own a gaming device and the consumer spend on the videogame industry in 2016 was \$30.4 billion (ESA 2017). In light of the increasing pervasiveness of videogames, not only in households, but also in commerce, theorists are now exploring the possibilities of gaming as an educational tool - referred to as gamification⁷ - the economic impact of the gaming industry,⁸ and the psychological effects of videogames,⁹ to name

⁶ 4k means that a game functions at a display resolution of 4000 pixels, which is also referred to as ultra HD. 60fps means that a game functions at 60 frame rates per second, which is significantly faster than the 30 frame rates per second that older consoles are capable of. This shows the great leaps that gaming technology has made in recent years.

⁷ See Kapp (2012), Kingsley & Grabner-Hagen (2015), Paine (2014) and Kim (2015).

⁸ See Molesworth & Watkins (2016), Chantepie, Michaud, Simon & Zackariasson (2014) and Brock (2016).

⁹ See Devilly, Callahan & Armitage (2012), Chen, Chen & Li (2015) and Kristjánsson (2013) for example. In 2018, videogame addiction was even added to the

a few. The study of videogames today is broadly built on two theoretical frameworks, namely ludology and narratology. The discussion below explains how both ludology and narratology are necessary in order to analyse *ROTTR* (2015) later on in Chapter Three.

2.2.1 Ludology and narratology

Gonzalo Frasca coined the term ludology in 1999. Ludology is broadly defined as the study of games in general, and videogames specifically (Frasca 2003: 222). Ludology is a formalist discipline that focuses on the structure and rules of a game (Frasca 2003: 222). Frasca (2003: 221-222) argues that videogames, unlike traditional media, are not only based on representation (which he aligns with narratology and film), but also on simulation (which is aligned with ludology and videogames). For Frasca (2003: 223), to simulate is “to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviours of the original system”.¹⁰ For Frasca, what distinguishes simulation from representation is that simulation reacts to external input (such as the player manipulating the actions of game avatars) where representation (the narrative) does not (Frasca 2003: 223). Furthermore, two genres of simulation have been identified, namely *paidia* and *ludus*.

The terms *paidia* and *ludus* were used as early as 1961 by French sociologist Roger Caillois in his seminal text *Man, Play and Games* in which he began to theorise play. A *paidia* game has very few rules, whereas a *ludus* game is restricted by rules and involves more “skill, patience and ingenuity” to play (Caillois 1961: 13 in Lauwaert, Wachelder, & Van de Walle 2007). Frasca

International Classification of Diseases as a serious mental disorder by the World Health Organisation (Barr 2017).

¹⁰ Baudrillard (1994 [1981]: 2) famously argued that in an age of simulation, all referentials are dissolved and that *signs* of the real are being substituted for the real. Frasca’s (2003) definition of simulation in terms of videogames supposedly maintains the original referent, but in reality, a simulated game world is in fact also a representation of the real that is being substituted for the real (Baudrillard 1994 [1981]). In other words, Frasca’s conception of ‘simulation’ is in fact very similar to Baudrillard’s decades-old definition of simulation.

(2003: 229-230) elaborates: *paidia* refers to “play”, especially applicable to the games children play, where *ludus* refers to “games” with social rules.

Paidia and *ludus* both form the foundation of the study of videogames. *Ludus*, however, is applied specifically in videogame studies (hence the term ‘ludology’) due to the following characteristics of *ludus* games: *ludus* is structurally the same as the three-act Aristotelian story which has a winner or a loser at the end of the game, a *ludus* game presents “an organic whole”, an isolated product that is defined by a secluded set of rules, and *ludus* games operate in terms of binary logic (Frasca 2003: 230). *Tomb Raider* is an example of a predominantly *ludus* game, (although it also utilises some *paidia* rules, like all games do) as one ultimately ‘wins’ the game by completing it, where *The Sims Online* (2002) is an example of a predominantly *paidia* game (that nevertheless also has *ludus* rules), as it is open-ended with no clear winner or loser and no clear end either (Juul 2001 in Ang 2006: 308; Frasca 2003: 231).

Chee Siang Ang (2006) identifies subsets of *ludus* and *paidia* rules. *Ludus* rules are divided into intrinsic and extrinsic rules; intrinsic rules contribute indirectly to winning the game and extrinsic rules contribute directly to winning the game (Ang 2006: 311). For example, in *Tomb Raider*, Lara always has to complete a certain set of smaller quests (intrinsic *ludus* rules) in order to complete the main quest and win the game (extrinsic *ludus* rules). *Paidia* rules are divided into symbolic *paidia* rules and semantic *paidia* rules (Ang 2006: 310). According to Ang (2006: 310), symbolic *paidia* rules “define what players can and cannot do in the virtual space”, where semantic *paidia* rules “define the causality of [these] actions”. Again, in *Tomb Raider*, Lara can shoot enemies, but she cannot, for example, tackle them or talk to them (symbolic *paidia* rules). The consequence of Lara shooting and killing an enemy is then that she can proceed to the next level or next location in the game (semantic *paidia* rules).

Wolf and Perron (2003) also identify other formalistic elements of videogames as another way of understanding their ludological structure. They identify four

fundamental elements of videogames that have appeared persistently in research on games. These elements are graphics, interface, player activity and algorithm (Wolf & Perron 2003: 14). Algorithm is further divided into representation, rules, responses and randomness (Wolf & Perron 2003: 15).¹¹ Graphics is the visual display on the screen and is essential to any videogame, where interface refers to the buttons on the screen that allows player activity to occur (Wolf & Perron 2003: 14-15). Player activity is divided into diegetic activity (what the player's avatar does) and extradiegetic activity (what the player physically does) and is informed by the reactions that the algorithm makes in response to the changing data in the game (Wolf & Perron 2003: 15). Finally, algorithm is the program controlling the game's procedures and consists of rules that are limits imposed on the game and randomness that ensures that the game is not the same every time it is played (Wolf & Perron 2003: 15). Representation, as one of the subsets of algorithm, refers to the game's graphics, sounds and interface, and how these elements are combined to create a coherent game (Wolf & Perron 2003: 15). From these descriptions it is clear that although distinguishing between each of these categories is useful, they inevitably overlap and cannot be studied separately. In order to streamline the analysis of *ROTTR* (2015), Ang's (2006) description of *ludus* rules and Wolf and Perron's (2003) elements of videogames will be utilised.

In all the *Tomb Raider* games released before 2013, the interface is relatively simple. Lara only has access to her twin pistols, her binoculars, her grapple-hook and her health pack; her infinite ammo is displayed on the top left hand corner of the screen (Figure 4). The diegetic activity in early *Tomb Raider* games is quite unrealistic, with Lara doing handstands on cliffs, jumping impossible distances without mountain climbing gear, doing backflips while running, and diving into shallow pools. Finally, the game rules specify that Lara cannot progress beyond the landscape that is created for her. In other words, the landscape is designed for Lara and she is in total control; there will never be a distance in the game that old Lara cannot jump.

¹¹ Espen Aarseth (2004: 47-48) similarly identifies three aspects of videogames: rules, material/semiotic system (a gameworld) and gameplay.



Figure 4: Interface of *Tomb Raider Legend*, 2006.
(Screen shot by the author).

Game time is another critical aspect of videogames. According to Juul (2004), one is both yourself and the game character when one plays a game.¹² Juul (2004) therefore distinguishes between play time (the time the player takes to play the game) and event time (the time in the game world). Action games (such as *Tomb Raider*) often proceed in real-time where the play time and event time are closely linked (for example, one hour in the *Tomb Raider* game world may be twenty minutes in play time) (Juul 2004). Save games are manipulations of game time (especially in action games) that allows the player to replay a certain section of the game should the character die (Juul 2004). *Tomb Raider* has the save function, and Kennedy (2002: [Sp]) notes that this function of *Tomb Raider* makes Lara “resolutely immortal”, because she is reincarnated indefinitely until the player completes the game.

¹² Markku Eskelinen (2004) also mentions temporal relations in videogames. Eskelinen (2004) identifies order, frequency, speed, duration and simultaneity of events, as well as the time of action as elements of time in videogames.

While ludology provides useful insights into the way in which a game such as *Tomb Raider* is structured, narratology offers another theoretical lens through which to study videogames that illuminates insights not uncovered by ludology. To demonstrate this point, Barry Atkins's (2003) emphasis is on videogames as a form of fiction.¹³ He broadly defines narratology as the study of how stories are told (Atkins 2003: 9). According to (Atkins 2003: 7), videogames use "a form of narrative storytelling where the production of story is the end result of play". This means that videogame narrative cannot be approached in quite the same way that film narrative, for example, is approached. As narratology was already an established field before videogames became popular, narratology in videogame studies has often been criticised for imposing archaic narratological conventions on the analysis of videogames and not focusing on the unique modes in which narratives emerge in videogames (Atkins 2003). This criticism notwithstanding, in an analysis of *Tomb Raider*, narratology is useful as *Tomb Raider* is a game/fiction hybrid that borrows heavily from cinematic conventions, whilst not being reducible to film (Atkins 2003: 22-23).

Ang (2006: 317) distinguishes between two narrative modes in videogames: spatiality (the space in which the narrative takes place, or the game world) and fibula (the actions and events in the videogame). *Ludus* rules and narrative events are closely related, as the fibula influences the *ludus* rules and *vice versa* (Ang 2006: 318). Consequently, if the narrative of a game changes, so do the rules and therefore the gameplay; if the player's actions (and more often in very recent games, the player's choices) change, so does the narrative (Ang 2006: 318).¹⁴ Some narrative events, however, are predetermined, and are presented in cut-scenes, whereas ludic events are

¹³ In a similar vein, Nick Montfort (2004) uses the term 'interactive fiction' to refer to videogames. He describes a work of interactive fiction as "a program that simulates a world, understands natural-language text input from an interactor and provides a textual replay based on events in the world" (Montfort 2004: 316).

¹⁴ For example, in games such as *The Witcher 3 Wild Hunt* (2015) and *Dragon Age Inquisition* (2014), the player makes choices that directly influence the outcome of the game. *The Witcher 3 Wild Hunt*, for example, has up to seven different possible endings, so the gameplay changes almost every time it is played from beginning to end.

determined “at the moment of playing” (Thon 2006: [Sp]). Narratives do not only contribute to the construction of a fictional world, but they also convey information about the fibula and ludic structure of a game (Thon 2006: [Sp]). *Tomb Raider* uses cut-scenes, and in early *Tomb Raider* games, the player’s actions do not have a significant impact on the narrative of the game.¹⁵

Henry Jenkins (2004: 121) argues that the discussion of narrative in videogames thus far is too narrow and should be broadened to “the process of narrative comprehension”. Jenkins (2004: 121) suggests that investigations of narrative should look beyond linear storytelling to “spatial exploration”, as videogame narratives serve a different purpose than traditional self-contained narratives. Therefore, Jenkins (2004: 121) uses the term “spatiality” to argue that game designers are not only storytellers, but “narrative architects”. Spatiality, according to Jenkins (2004), is key to constructing narrative in videogames, as videogames do not simply tell stories; they are carefully sculpted worlds. However, in focusing on game designers as storytellers, videogame studies has generally focused more on level design, for example, than plotting or character motivation (Jenkins 2004), a perspective I find to be very important in understanding the ideological operation of videogames.

Equally dissatisfied with the limited conception of narrative in videogames, Michael Nitché (2008: 3) elaborates on spatiality. According to Nitché (2008: 3; 7), “game spaces evoke narratives” and it is evident that narrative in videogames is not limited to the way in which stories are told, but expands to being “a form of understanding of the events a player causes, triggers, and encounters inside a video game space”. Nitché (2008: 3) refers to “evocative narrative elements” in videogames to describe the ludic elements of the game as they do not contain a story in themselves, but they trigger important parts of the narrative for the player. Nitché’s (2008: 3) “evocative narrative elements” are similar to the fibula - the actions and events in the videogame - described by Ang (2006).

¹⁵ Old Lara’s narrative remains somewhat ambiguous as it changes throughout the earlier *Tomb Raider* games. The only consistencies are that Lara is orphaned and that she has inherited the Croft Manor from her deceased parents.

Jenkins (2004) furthermore distinguishes between embedded narratives and emergent narratives. Within an open-ended narratological structure such as a videogame, embedded narratives are presented by providing cues and prompts to the player in order to drive the plot forward (Jenkins 2004: 126). Emergent narratives are not predetermined and are shaped by the gameplay (Jenkins 2004: 128). *Tomb Raider* is an example of a game with an embedded narrative,¹⁶ however, through the introduction of side quests and weapon modifications, as well as additional game modes in later *Tomb Raider* games, one can argue that *Tomb Raider* relies increasingly on emergent narratives as well.

In this discussion, it is apparent that both ludology and narratology should be used as theoretical frameworks in the study of videogames and should not be treated as mutually exclusive as some theorists have done in the past (for example Bolter and Grusin (1999) who emphasise representation and Aarseth (2004) who emphasises interactivity).¹⁷ In a study of *Tomb Raider*, the combination of ludology and narratology could therefore also provide a more substantial analysis of both the game and the character, Lara Croft. Moreover, as Lara Croft is a female videogame character that has sparked much debate both in academic circles and the popular media, it is not only the ludological and narratological elements of *Tomb Raider* that should be addressed, but also her portrayal in the games as a woman.

¹⁶ Aarseth (2004) links the adventure game genre (of which *Tomb Raider* as an action-adventure game is an example) explicitly with narrative due to its episodic structure. According to Aarseth (2004), adventure games successfully combine gameplay and narrative.

¹⁷ In the *Elder Scrolls* series (1994-2017), for example, there is extensive game lore that consists of all the locations, creatures, myths, crafting techniques, plants, and spells, to name only a few, that came into existence over the thirteen years of the game's existence. The existence of such lore, often found in series such as Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (Jackson 2001-2003), is also evidence that videogames are notable story-telling mediums.

2.2.2 Women in games

After 1998 when Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins published *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, theorists increasingly paid attention to studying the portrayal of women in videogames. Before 1998, few content analysis studies existed, but the scenario has since changed.¹⁸ Since the turn of the century, many studies devoted to the analysis of the portrayal of women in videogames have started emerging. These studies have found that when female characters are present in videogames they are usually submissive to male characters (Jansz & Martis 2007).

In 2001, Berrin Beasley and Tracey Standley studied gender stereotyping in forty-seven videogames by analysing 597 characters. They found that women are not only underrepresented in videogames,¹⁹ but also that 41% of female characters are big-busted and that they are wearing less clothing than male characters. Furthermore, their limited clothing emphasises their bodies (Beasley & Standley 2001). Another study of sixty videogames and 489 characters by Edward Downs and Stacy Smith (2010) similarly found that female characters were underrepresented in videogames and were often portrayed with revealing clothing and unrealistic bodily proportions.²⁰

Similarly, Christopher Near (2013) conducted a study on the portrayal of women on videogame box art. The quantitative study focused specifically on how the portrayal of women on 399 videogame boxes influences the sales of games. The study revealed that only 7% of game boxes featured female characters exclusively (Near 2013: 11). Females were central in only 19% of game boxes, and they were sexualised in 21% of all the game boxes under

¹⁸ See Dietz (1988), Provenzo (1991) and Gailey (1993) in Jansz and Martis (2007).

¹⁹ A more recent study by Williams, Martins, Consalvo & Ivory (2009) found that women are still underrepresented in videogames, as well as Hispanics, Native Americans, African Americans, children and the elderly.

²⁰ A study by Martins, Williams, Harrison & Ratan (2009) also found that videogame characters portrayed realistically were significantly thinner than the average American woman.

investigation (Near 2013: 11).²¹ Women are not only underrepresented on game boxes, but higher sexualisation of female characters is also associated with higher game sales (Near 2013).²² Near (2013: 2) uses the box art of *Tomb Raider I* (1996) as an example of where the sexualisation of Lara Croft on the box art directly contributed to the high sales of the game (Figure 5).

Alicia Summers and Monica Miller (2014) conducted a study on the portrayal of women in gaming magazines from 1988-2007. Summers and Miller (2014) coded 223 female characters from 175 game magazines. In their study, Summers and Miller (2014) distinguish between benevolent sexism and hostile sexism. For them, benevolent sexism favours a more traditional view of women, emphasising paternalistic and protective attitudes towards women, typically viewing women as 'damsels-in-distress' (Summers & Miller 2014: 4-5). Hostile sexism objectifies women and/or views women as power seeking, specifically using their sexuality to their advantage (Summers & Miller 2014: 5). The study found that the portrayal of women in game magazines up until 2007 had changed from benevolent sexism to hostile sexism, as women are increasingly being portrayed as heroes and not as damsels-in-distress (Summers & Miller 2014: 10). Based on their study, to my mind the earlier versions (1996-2008) of Lara Croft (Figure 5) serve as an example of hostile sexism.²³

²¹ Near (2013) coded females as sexualized when they had disproportionately large breasts, clothes showing the cleavage or stomach, any revealing clothing or a suggestive pose.

²² An earlier study by Burgess, Stermer & Burgess (2007) revealed similar results in the study of 225 videogame covers.

²³ Summers and Miller (2014) evidently have a very negative outlook on the possibilities of female empowerment in videogames, as their study suggests that *any* portrayal of women in media is fundamentally sexist. However, perhaps Summers and Miller (2014) use this terminology as their study is focused specifically on sexism.

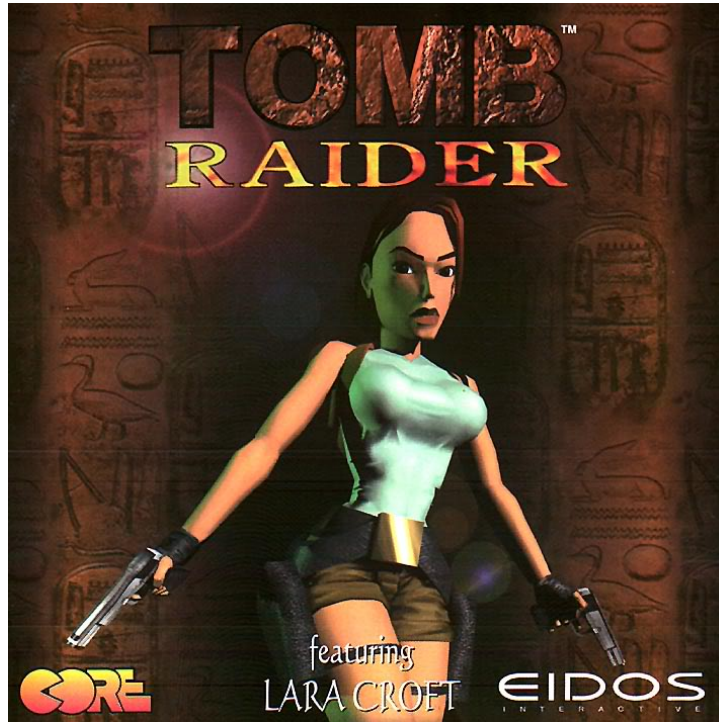


Figure 5: *Tomb Raider I* box art, 1996. (Stella's Tomb Raider Site).

Although a great deal of research clearly indicates that the portrayal of women in videogames is highly problematic, some research also shows that it is improving. Jansz and Martis (2007) found that female characters increasingly hold more powerful positions in games. They termed this trend “the Lara phenomenon” as Lara Croft has “paved the way for a woman who contrasts the dominant stereotype” (Jansz & Martis 2007: 141). Jansz and Martis (2007) describe a similar trend that Summers and Miller (2014) identified as “hostile sexism”, as “the Lara phenomenon”, which is a more positive view of the increasingly powerful positions that women hold in videogames.²⁴

²⁴ “The Lara phenomenon” does not, however, refer to the sexualisation of female characters as much as it refers to the *positions* they hold in videogames. For Summers and Miller (2014), the combination of sexualisation and power equates to hostile sexism, where for Jansz and Martis (2007), even though they address sexualisation, it is not the main factor in determining the positive or negative portrayal of a female character. For Summers and Miller (2014), old Lara would be an example of hostile sexism as she is strong *and* sexualised, but for Jansz and Martis, she is a powerful character because she is the main protagonist, amongst other things.

Jansz and Martis (2007) conducted a content analysis of the introductory films of twelve videogames and twenty-two characters. Although 60% of the characters were male, the number of lead male and female characters were equally distributed (Jansz & Martis 2007). Furthermore, Jansz and Martis (2007) did not observe a lead or supporting female character in a submissive position. Jansz and Martis (2007) also observed that although sexy attire was mainly worn by female characters, it was not exclusively so. 60% of the male characters they identified had emphasised muscles and 25% of the male characters had “eye catching behinds” (Jansz & Martis 2007: 146). Both Jansz and Martis (2007) and Summers and Miller (2014) only studied gaming magazines and videogame characters up to 2007 though.

A broader, more recent study by Teresa Lynch et al. (2016) also reveals that the sexualisation of female characters is on the decline. Lynch et al. (2016) examined 571 videogames released between 1983 and 2014. In their study, the sexualisation of female characters was measured by the proportions and amount of skin revealed in four areas of the character’s body (waist, buttocks, chest and leg regions) and sexualised movements, for example unnecessary undulation or jigging.²⁵ Characters were also considered as sexualised if their breasts were disproportionate to their body size. The study revealed a pattern of higher sexualisation of female characters in 1992 to 2006, and a decline in sexualisation of female characters between 2007 and 2014 (Lynch, Tompkins, van Driel, & Fritz 2016: 580).

Based on these findings, although some gender stereotypes surrounding the physical features of men and women are still prevalent, there appears to be a conscious shift in the representation of power relations between the sexes in some recent videogames, and in the overt sexualisation of female characters (Lynch et al. 2016). This decline in the sexualisation of, and sexism towards, female characters is partly attributed to an increased interest in gaming by

²⁵ The variables that Lynch et al. (2016) used were similar to those of Jansz and Martis (2007). Jansz and Martis (2007: sp) categorised sexualisation in terms of attire (sexy/ordinary), body (heavy/normal/thin), build (muscular/normal), breasts (large/normal) and buttocks (large/normal).

women and to the heightened criticism of the videogame industry's male hegemony (Williams 2006 in Lynch et al. 2016: 576). A closer look at cyberfeminism reveals that this branch of feminism led the challenge to the videogame industry's male hegemony and ultimately to the decreasing sexualisation of Lara Croft from 1996-2013 (Figure 6).



Figure 6: Evolution of Lara Croft (detail), 2015. (Cram Gaming).

2.3 Cyberfeminism

Cyberfeminism is a branch of third wave feminism that is concerned with women's relationships with technology. According to Amanda Du Preez (2009: 35), the relationship between women and technology has been mostly ambiguous; women are believed to belong to the "embodied feminine sphere" and technology to the "disembodied masculine world". In gaming, where most games remain male-orientated and the industry male-dominated, feminism specifically looks at games created by women and women's preferences in games, as well as the representation of women in videogames (Heeter in Wolf & Perron 2009). Most cyberfeminist texts are predominantly concerned with women's roles in the online sphere,²⁶ but for the purpose of this study, cyberfeminism provides a useful background to understand women as creators and consumers of videogames. For the purpose of economy, my

²⁶ See Brophy (2010), Worthington (2005), Gajjala & Mamidipudi (1999) and Daniels (2009), for example.

discussion of cyberfeminism is limited, but I am aware that cyberfeminism is much more complex and multi-faceted than it comes across in this discussion.

The emergence of cyberfeminism as an intellectual and political movement can be traced back to Donna Haraway's (1984) "A Cyborg Manifesto" and Sadie Plant's (1997) *Zeroes and Ones*. Stacy Gillis (2007) attempts to resituate cyberfeminism within twenty-first century feminist discourse ten years after Plant's seminal text on cyberfeminism. Gillis (2007: 168) summarises cyberfeminism's main stances as follows: cyberfeminism is a perspective that advocates women's use of new technologies for empowerment, it acknowledges that there is inequality between women and men in digital discourse and it aims to change this situation. Gillis (2007) explicitly argues, however, that instead of subverting power relations between men and women, technology (and especially the Internet) has simply reinforced them.

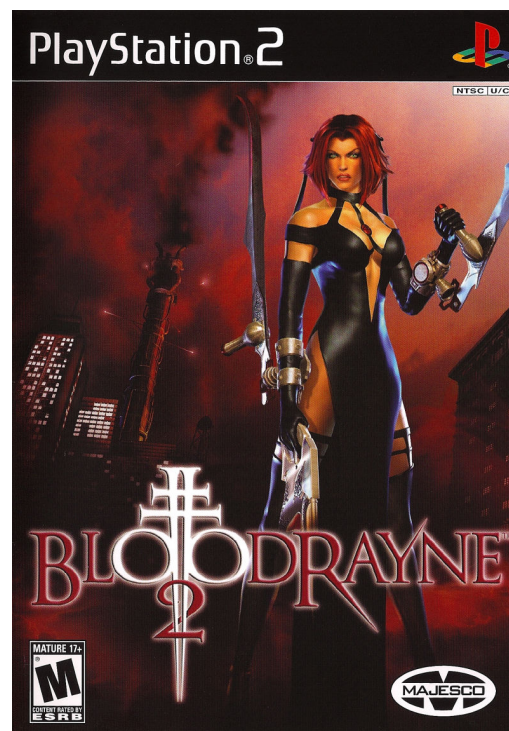


Figure 7: *BloodRayne 2* box art, 2004. (Moby Games).

Women's exclusion from technology to a great extent is manifested in the creation of the early *Tomb Raider* games, for example, where there were only two women in the lead design team of *Tomb Raider I* in 1996. Even though Toby Gard wanted to create, and has succeeded in creating, a female character who is self-empowered and strong, one could still attribute old Lara's idealised and scantily clothed body partly to the fact that a man created her and that women were mostly excluded from her creation. Other examples of this are *Bayonetta* (2009), who was created by Hideki Kamiya and *BloodRayne* (2002) (Figure 7), who was designed by Joe Wampole. Several texts that further explore women's roles and challenges in the gaming industry as producers of videogames are explored in the next section.

2.3.1 Women as producers of games

In the first significant text on women's roles in gaming, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (1998), theorists started questioning the notion that only men play and produce videogames. The text explores the 'girls' games' movement, which saw feminist activists and leaders in the gaming industry come together to create games for girls; *Barbie Fashion Designer* (1996), created by Mattel Interactive, being one of the most popular so-called girls' games (Cassell & Jenkins 1998). The gameplay of girls' games, also called "casual games", which were designed by women, is also much simpler than the gameplay of other "hardcore play" games, such as action and adventure games (Vermeulen & Van Looy 2016: 290). According to Hartmann and Klimmt (2006 in Vermeulen & Van Looy 2016: 290), games that are "attractive" to women, such as *The Sims Online* (2002), "seem to be focused on social interaction, non-purposeful exploration and collaborative instead of competitive gaming elements".

Indeed, these girls' games are markedly more inclusive of women both as producers and consumers of videogames; however, they inadvertently (and unfortunately) reinforce negative stereotypes of women, suggesting that women are incapable of navigating the complex game worlds of 'hardcore games' created for male gamers. These games, such as, *Barbie Fashion*

Designer (1996), also stereotypes women as only being interested in fashion, shopping, dating and appearance (Mikula 2004; Kafai et al. 2008).

Ten years after *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (1998), Yasmin Kafai, Carrie Heeter, Jill Denner and Jennifer Sun (2008) published *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*. According to Kafai et al. (2008: xvi), by 2007, gender studies in videogames had moved beyond the 'girls' games' movement to a more complex approach to gender as "situated, constructed and flexible". In 2008 in the US, 40% of gamers were female (ESA 2008), which is a significant increase from 1998, when only 25% of gamers were female (Cassell & Jenkins 1998: [Sp]). Kafai et al. (2008) attribute this growth in female gamers partially to the player's ability to customise avatars and online multiplayer games such as *The Sims Online* (2002) and *World of Warcraft* (2004),²⁷ which allow women to practice more flexible gender identities in cyberspace. This is perhaps one instance where cyberfeminism has succeeded in improving women's position within the male-dominated videogame arena.

Mia Consalvo (2008) addresses the challenges faced by female game developers. Consalvo (2008: 177) mentions that while 40% of the game developers for *The Sims Online* (2002) were female 60% of its players were girls and women. Consalvo (2008: 177) proposes that more women played *The Sims Online* (2002) because more women were involved in its creation: "Creating and maintaining a more diverse workforce ... could result in games that are more gender inclusive". *The Sims Online* (2002) was not initially created as a 'girls' game', but unfortunately, due to the game's undemanding gameplay and emphasis on the customisation of avatars and on consumerism, it has become stigmatised not only as a 'girls' game', but as a feeble game that is not taken seriously in the (male dominated) gaming community. Ironically, by attempting to create a more gender-inclusive game that subverts negative stereotypes of the types of games that women play,

²⁷ In 2007, only 16% of *World of Warcraft* (2004) subscribers were female (Yee 2007 in Kafai et al. 2008), in 2015, 35% of *World of Warcraft* (2004) subscribers were female (Mueller 2015).

developers have (to some extent) reinforced them.²⁸ Although the percentage of female programmers has decreased from comprising 51% of programmers in the industry in the US in 2012 to only 22% in 2015 (IGDA, 2015: 11),²⁹ female developers involved in the *Tomb Raider* games have increased between 1996 and 2015.

Lara Croft was originally created by Toby Gard and in the first *Tomb Raider* game (1996), only two women were part of the design team. Ten years later, in *Tomb Raider Legend* (2006), seven women were part of the design team. In both the *Tomb Raider* reboot (2013) and *ROTTR* (2015), more than seventeen women were part of the lead design team.³⁰ Most significantly, the stories for both of the new games were written by female scriptwriter, Rihanna Pratchett. Furthermore, in *ROTTR* (2015) other women such as Rose Hunt (lead producer), Tracy Jaspersen (senior animator) and Nicole Tan (environment artist) played pivotal roles in the game's creation.

Unlike *The Sims Online* (2002), *ROTTR* (2015) is not labeled as a 'girls' game' or 'casual game', even though women were heavily involved in the game's creation. Instead, *ROTTR* (2015) is praised for the complexity of its gameplay and its emphasis on strategy, and it is considered a 'hardcore game' because of the action-adventure genre.³¹ If one looks at Lara Croft through the lens of cyberfeminism, it is clear that Lara Croft's transformation could partly be attributed to the fact that more women play videogames

²⁸ Of course, not *all* players of *The Sims Online* (2002) were female, and *The Sims* has been extensively discussed in academia for its subversive potential. See Sihvonen (2009), Martey & Stromer-Galley (2007) and Jansz, Avis, & Vosmeer (2010), for example.

²⁹ The IGDA (2015) report does not give reasons as to why the percentage of female developers has decreased specifically between 2012 and 2015. Mia Consalvo (2008: 177), however, shows how "structural sexism", resistance to change, and difficult and long work hours, amongst other things, leaves some women in the gaming industry feeling burned out and they consequently leave the industry.

³⁰ Promotional material for *SOTTR* (2018) features Lead Writer, Jill Murray, Performance Lead, Emilie Guilloux, Senior Lighting, Artist Audrey Flammand Lapointe, and Dev Tester, Bianca Lavric talking about how they worked on the game. Evidently women continue to be in high positions in the creation of new *Tomb Raider* games.

³¹ See *ROTTR* (2015) reviews by O'Brien (2015) from IGN, Mahardy (2016) from GameSpot and Loveridge (2016) from Trusted Reviews.

(according to the ESA, in 2017, 42% of gamers are female) and because more women were involved in higher positions in the games' creation.

2.4 Postfeminism

A branch of feminism that may account for the emergence of a character such as Lara Croft is postfeminism. Although "postfeminism has [not] been [formally] defined", a characteristic it shares with postmodernism (Coppock, Haydon & Richter 1995 in Gamble 2001: 43), it provides a useful theoretical background for the study of Lara Croft, who, herself, embodies the ambiguities of postfeminism and postmodernism. In this section I explore the various (and, at times, conflicting) positions on what postfeminism means.

For Gamble (2001) and Faludi (1991), with its emphasis on individualism and choice, postfeminism is a backlash against the ground gained by second wave feminism which focused, among others, on the collective feminist struggle for equality. Bailey (1997: 18) attempts to articulate the differences between the 'waves' of feminism: the first wave of feminism is considered to have begun with the Seneca Falls Conference in 1848, and ended in the 1920s with "the passage of women's suffrage"; that is to say, when women were afforded the right to vote in America. According to Bailey (1997: 20), after 1920, feminism was dormant for a long time as not much in terms of women's rights were accomplished after that.

In retrospect, the 'second wave' feminist consciousness can be considered to have begun in the late 1960s and early 1970s, thus, approximately fifty years after the women's suffrage (Bailey 1997: 19). As a continuation of first wave sentiments, second wave feminism became concerned with issues such as rape, and sexuality, as well as issues of race and class (Bailey 1997: 20). Second wave feminism therefore built and expanded upon first wave feminism, and saw early first wave feminists as "grandmothers or great-grandmothers" (Bailey 1997: 20). Evidently, first and second wave feminism share a maternal relationship, with the second wave closely aligning itself with the first wave.

Third wave feminism, however, distances itself from second wave sentiments, and considers them as slightly old-fashioned. Young feminists (or third wavers) feel that second wave feminism's emphasis on collective histories and political correctness is not relevant to the late-capitalist context of the late twentieth century (Bailey 1997), in which there is an increasing emphasis on individualism and consumerism (Stasia 2007). Third wave feminism therefore dismisses second wave feminism as "victim feminism" and asserts that instead of trying to change power structures, "equality is achieved by seizing power" (Stasia 2007: 240). Third wave feminists ironically "seize power" through conventional femininity, and, in some ways, postfeminism is simply another manifestation of the third wave's faith in 'girl power'.

Postfeminism, which is considered by some to be a branch of third wave feminism, is also, according to Stephanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon (2009), in direct *antithesis* to the third wave, as it aims to criticise and undermine second wave feminism, which is understood to nevertheless have strong affiliations with third wave theory and activism, even though it claims not to. According to Christina Stasia (2007), on the other hand, to the extent that both are concerned with popular culture and the contradictions that women face in late capitalism, postfeminism can be viewed as a branch of third wave feminism. In the same vein, Stasia (2007: 239) also acknowledges that "unlike third wave feminism...postfeminism rejects the institutional critique made by second wave feminism". It is evident from these discussions surrounding postfeminism that there is in fact no singular definition of postfeminism and that it has a very complicated relationship with its feminist ancestors.

For Angela McRobbie (2004: 255), postfeminism is an attempt to undo feminism, while simultaneously "engaging in a well-informed and well-intended response to feminism". The fact that postfeminism rejects institutionalised critique, however, causes some to question the validity of postfeminism, labeling it as "a con trick engineered by the media" (Gamble 2001: 43). Postfeminism is therefore simultaneously a critical stance and the

manifestation in popular culture of a particular view of what it means to be a woman in twenty-first century, post-industrial society.

Postfeminism is located within a specific time and place in history: the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century in Europe and America in which consumer, middle-class aspirations play a key role (Genz 2006; McRobbie 2004). Postfeminism is also directly linked to the increasing importance of the media and consumer culture, with feminism's second wave collective activist struggle for choice and empowerment being replaced with "individualistic assertions of (consumer) choice and self-rule" (Genz 2009: 85).

According to Genz (2006: 339), the postfeminist woman uses her sexuality and femininity as active forms of recognition, motivation and agency, using her consumer capacity as a form of self-expression.³² Stasia (2007: 238) importantly observes that postfeminist women are convinced that "they live in a post-patriarchy" society. Posing nude as symbolic of her control over her own sexuality, popular culture icon, Kim Kardashian, is a postfeminist symbol, and a prime example of the postfeminist woman. Kardashian's antics in the media perfectly exemplify Angela McRobbie's (2004: 258-259) assessment of the postfeminist woman: women are now active subjects and their provocative display should apparently not be interpreted as "[enacted] sexism" according to which they are the object of the gaze; instead, the postfeminist woman is a subject because she is doing it "out of choice". This is perhaps one of postfeminism's greatest discrepancies, as it appears to justify almost anything that the postfeminist woman does, as long as she chooses what she does.

Genz (2009) further identifies different types of twenty-first century postfeminist women in popular culture. Through a discussion of these femininities, the inherent contradictions of postfeminism become even more apparent. The first postfeminist identity that Genz (2009) describes is 'the (un)happy housewife heroine'. According to Genz (2009: 99), at the turn of the century, women "were eager to re-embrace the title of 'housewife' and

³² For example, Genz and Brabon (2009) argue that women use plastic surgery as a means of gaining control of their bodies and as a form of self-expression.

rediscover the joys and crafts of a 'new femininity'". This type of postfemininity is exemplified by personalities such as Nigella Lawson, who cooks on television while "simultaneously managing to look infinitely glamorous" (Genz 2009: 99). In this way, female domestication, which has been regarded as a symbol of female oppression for the past century, is re-negotiated as being empowering to women because this time, she chooses to "go home" (Genz 2009: 100).

The second postfeminist identity that Genz (2009) interrogates is 'the superwoman'. After the triumphs of the second wave, women were now afforded the liberty to enter the workforce, where "market employment" was seen as superior to the housewife's "work within the home" (Genz 2009: 119). The effects of women being afforded a career in addition to being a "mother", "wife" and "housemaker", inevitably left them "doubly burdened" (Genz 2009: 120). The construction of the postfeminist 'superwoman' therefore tries to live up to the "unattainable ideal" of being both a wife and mother, as well as having a "male" career (Genz 2009: 122). In popular culture, the 'superwoman' is embodied by characters such as Tess McGill from *Working Girl* (Nichols 1988), who tries to become a successful business woman while attempting to maintain her femininity (Genz 2009).

Third, Genz (2009) distinguishes 'the singleton'. The 'singleton' is the "young, unattached and mostly city-dwelling woman" who faces the predicament of enjoying her "independent urban life" while also trying to find a husband and settle down (Genz 2009: 135). *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Maguire 2001) articulates this predicament that early twenty-first century women faced as Bridget tries to negotiate her place between "feminist notions of empowerment" and "patriarchal ideas of feminine beauty" (Genz 2009: 136). For the 'singleton', these uncertainties cause emotional turmoil, as is constantly displayed in the figure of Bridget Jones. Evidently, the uncertainties of a postmodern society are manifested in the various postfeminist identities found in popular culture.

2.4.1 The postfeminist action heroine

The final postfeminist femininity that Genz (2009) describes is ‘the supergirl’, who is the modern-day action heroine that problematises “passive femininity and active masculinity in terms of diametrical opposition and mutual exclusivity” (Genz 2009: 152). Stasia (2007: 237) lists a number of action heroines in film that are considered as ‘supergirls’, namely *Charlie’s Angels* (McG 2000), *Miss Congeniality* (Petrie 2000), *Elektra* (Bowman 2005), and *Aeon Flux* (Kusama 2006), to name only a few. In videogames, *Bayonetta* (2009) and *BloodRayne* (2002) (Figure 7) are notable ‘supergirls’.



Figure 8: Screenshot from *Tomb Raider: Legend* (old Lara), 2006. (Steam).

Lara Croft – in her old manifestation – is also just such a ‘supergirl’. In an interview with *Face* magazine in 1997, Toby Gard, Lara Croft’s creator, said that Lara is neither merely a feminist icon nor a sexist fantasy, she is, more accurately, a bit of both: “strong independent women are always the perfect fantasy girls – the untouchable is always the most desirable” (Mikula 2003: 79). Ironically, characters are labeled as postfeminist ‘supergirls’ even though they were created by men. The flaws of the postfeminist identity become

apparent, as women consume images of themselves created by men for men, and re-inscribe these images with concepts of female empowerment. Figure 8 shows old Lara, who perfectly embodies the postfeminist 'supergirl' in *Tomb Raider Legend* (2006).

Old Lara can most certainly be described as a postfeminist action hero. The postfeminist action heroine adopts certain (traditional) male characteristics as a means of empowerment, such as strength and action, yet she maintains her physical feminine attributes, like the postfeminist action heroines mentioned by Stasia (2007: 237) (Genz 2009). She therefore "performs a paradoxical cultural function as she both contests and reaffirms normative absolutes and stereotypes", being both a feminist icon and a patriarchal token (Genz 2009: 154). For some feminists, on the one hand, Lara Croft is nothing more than a male fantasy: Lara Croft was created by a man, her body is idealised and sexualised and the third person camera angle allows the player to constantly see Lara's body in full view (Mikula 2004). Lara's violence also appeals mainly to male gamers and male gamers are invited to simultaneously identify with her and objectify her (Mikula 2003).

On the other hand, some feminists celebrate Lara Croft as a feminist icon. Mikula (2004: 62) mentions that "Lara is confident, self-reliant and...she is a loner", with her loneliness indicative of female independence. With regard to Lara's body, some feminists view her idealised body as a symbol of power and self-control, and instead of using her body to get a date (as Barbie does, for example), old Lara uses it to fight (Mikula 2004). In addition, there is no indication of Lara's hetero- or homosexuality, which allows fans to reconstruct Lara's identity indefinitely on various fan forums and blogs (Mikula 2004). Old Lara's primary subversive potential therefore lies in the fact that she is an empty sign, and because she is virtual, she can be(come) anything that consumers want her to be (Mikula 2004). Unfortunately though, in contrast to cyberfeminism's utopian ideals for women in technology, the fact that old Lara is an empty sign makes her easier to objectify, instead of subverting the objectification of the digital female body.

The postfeminist action heroine has also been described as a liminal character who exists between extremes. She is simultaneously masculine and feminine, human and monster, good and evil, and feminine and feminist (Genz 2009).³³ Importantly, she is both beautiful and strong, claiming her femininity as a source of strength – a tactic that postfeminism uses to infuse “old signifiers of ... helpless femininity with new meanings of strength and agency” (Genz 2009: 157). Consequently, sexualisation and feminisation (along with empowerment and agency) are important ingredients of the potent cocktail that is the postfeminist action hero (Genz 2009). Figure 9 shows the sexualised and feminised ‘supergirl’, *Bayonetta* (2009), who is a Lumen Sage-Umbra Witch hybrid, which is translated to being both a human and a monster.



Figure 9: Bayonetta,
2009.
(Heroes Wiki).

³³ Interestingly, Genz (2009) views feminine and feminist as binary opposites. Charlotte Brunson (1991) addresses struggles faced by female media students due to this assumed binary in her earlier essay “Pedagogies of the feminine: feminist teaching and women’s genres”. Brunson (1991: 378;381) concludes that the various feminist identities should be understood within their historical contexts, for example, second wave feminism, which largely opposes traditional femininity, or postfeminism, which embraces traditional notions of femininity. Once feminist identities are viewed as *historical* identities, some of these contradictions can be overcome (Brunson 1991: 381).

Stasia (2007) specifically addresses the 2001 *Tomb Raider* film.³⁴ Stasia (2007: 244) identifies more characteristics of the postfeminist action heroine based on Lara Croft's portrayal in the *Tomb Raider* film. She is hyperfeminised (in the film, Angelina Jolie wears fake breasts and hair extensions) and shots focus on her breasts, thighs and buttocks.³⁵ She is "young and girlish", and she sells "traditional notions of women's power" because she always returns to the private sphere even though she has mobility in the public sphere (Stasia 2007: 244). Furthermore, the postfeminist action heroine is almost always white, and if she is not white, her race is ignored (Stasia 2007).³⁶ Most importantly, the postfeminist action heroine is unthreatening because she is the impossible ideal (Stasia 2007).

Lara Croft has also been discussed alongside 1990s *femme fatales* in film. The *femme fatale* archetype in popular culture dates back to 1940s film noir, returning again towards the end of the twentieth century in films with leading female protagonists (Waltonen 2004). According to Steele (2004) though, the *femme fatale* has in fact got a much earlier history than 1940s noir film; she is evident in historical figures such as Eve and Pandora. The end of the nineteenth century – the *fin-de-siecle* – saw the return of the *femme fatale* from film noir and from history, as "the position of modern women aroused particular anxiety" (Steele 2004: 316).

In summary, the *femme fatale* is sexually attractive and dangerous to the male hero (Waltonen 2004). The *femme fatale* is also unknowable, mysterious, self-centered, and like the postfeminist action heroine, almost always white (Waltonen 2004). According to Du Preez (2000: 21), Lara Croft

³⁴ Also see Smelik (2009 [2007]) for an analysis of the *Tomb Raider* films and Genz & Brabon (2009) for a case study on Lara Croft as a postfeminist videogame character.

³⁵ According to Dill and Thill (2007: 852), hyperfeminisation is the "amplification of female stereotypes", such as dependence, sexuality and submissiveness. For the purpose of this discussion though, I use hyperfeminisation as the amplification of physical feminine attributes, such as busts and buttocks.

³⁶ Black postfeminist action heroines are severely underrepresented in media. One example of a black postfeminist action heroine is Foxy Cleopatra from *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (Roach 2002) played by Beyoncé, who is also a self-proclaimed feminist.

shares characteristics of the archetypal *femme fatale*, who nevertheless subverted gender norms of her time, in the sense that “[Lara] is beautiful, but out of reach” and “she seduces without giving herself”. Old Lara’s untouchability and aloofness is also reminiscent of the *femme fatale*, as well as her indifference to the male gaze, as she is “oblivious to obnoxious perverted behaviour” by male gamers (Du Preez 2000: 23).

Helen Kennedy (2002) further elaborates on Lara Croft’s ability to subvert gender norms. Firstly, Kennedy (2002: [Sp]) affirms that the transgressive stunting body described by Mary Russo (1994), where female figures “undermine conventional understandings of the female body” by performing extraordinary deeds, is replicated in the figure of Lara. In both the *Tomb Raider* films, and the *Tomb Raider* videogames, Lara Croft inhabits a hostile, masculine environment not traditionally associated with the feminine private or domestic space and she rejects patriarchal norms (Kennedy 2002: [Sp]).

Secondly, Kennedy (2002) highlights the complex relationship between subject and object that occurs when the gamer plays as Lara Croft. When a male gamer plays as (female) Lara Croft, gender boundaries are blurred and the male player becomes transgendered (Kennedy 2002). According to Kennedy (2002: [Sp]), “This new queer identity potentially subverts stable distinctions between identification and desire and also by extension the secure and heavily defended polarities of masculine and feminine subjectivity”. Male gamers are allowed to experience wearing a female identity and consequently rigid gender roles are broken down, which is one of the biggest subversive potentials that Lara Croft presents (Schleiner 2001: 222).³⁷

Formal analyses of Lara Croft as a representative of the postfeminist action hero have mostly been done on the *Tomb Raider* movies released in 2001 and 2002, discussed above. Kim Walden (2004) further examines the videogame heroine’s influence on the film action heroine. It is important to

³⁷ Although still in the minority, it was only in 2008 that women made up 40% of gamers (ESA 2008). One can therefore assume that all the *Tomb Raider* games released before 2008 were predominantly played by men.

note that ‘film Lara’ mimics ‘videogame Lara’, so she is thoroughly “a representation of a representation” who has no immediate real-world referent (Walden 2004: 81). In other words, ‘film Lara’ is a new type of heroine who is created from a combination of contemporary media “vernaculars” (Walden 2004: 87).

Interestingly, after the release of the two *Tomb Raider* movies that starred Angelina Jolie as Lara Croft (in 2001 and 2003), Lara’s representation in the *Tomb Raider* games started mimicking Jolie’s appearance. Rehak (2003) elaborates on Lara’s complicated relationship with real-life Lara Croft models: Rhona Mitra was fired as a Lara Croft model when Mitra claimed in an interview that she *is* Lara. Thereafter, Eidos (the developer from 1996 to 2003) attempted to maintain Lara’s multiplicity – which is her simultaneous existence on various platforms – by instructing Lara Croft models after Mitra to always refer to Lara in the third person (Polsky 2001). Ironically, after the release of the *Tomb Raider* movies, this relationship became inverted as Lara’s avatar from *Tomb Raider and the Angel of Darkness* (2003) up to *Tomb Raider Underworld* (2008) adopted the appearance of Angelina Jolie (Rehak 2003). Polsky (2001) attributes Jolie’s success as Lara Croft to Jolie’s own persona of instability, and perhaps the directors chose Angelina Jolie to play Lara Croft as Jolie shares the same complicated relationship with her father (who also plays Richard Croft in the films) as Lara does.

What Walden (2004) is describing is Lara Croft’s translatability. According to Rehak (2003), Lara’s celebrity status and vast fandom blur the lines between producers, texts, audiences and technologies. First, Lara Croft is capable of migration – that is “cloning herself from one media environment to another and maintaining simultaneous existences in each” (Rehak 2003: 481). Second, as an empty sign, Lara has the ability to “endlessly resignify” and third, Lara is incarnated by her fans, since they treat her as a living being (Rehak 2003: 481). Angelina Jolie, to some extent, made Lara more ‘real’ for fans, especially since Lara Croft started to look like Angelina Jolie in subsequent *Tomb Raider* games, but this did not significantly hinder old Lara from migrating to different media environments.

For Mary Flanagan (1999), these characteristics, amongst others, contribute to Lara Croft's status as the first digital star in history. According to Flanagan (1999) the digital star system (as opposed to the cinematic star system) questions signifiers, identities and the bodies themselves, as these bodies are not only looked at, but also controlled by the player. The representation of this body addresses the cyberfeminist concern of the (dis)embodiment of virtual personalities, as well as "the particular place of gender in these embodiment relationships" (Flanagan 1999: 84).

In my estimation, most of the definitions of postfeminism that have been discussed thus far can be applied to old Lara. Although new Lara and old Lara are the same character, the ways in which they are represented differ greatly. Since new Lara is not overtly sexualised and feminised (and these attributes are indeed central to the postfeminist woman), few of the characteristics of the postfeminist heroine discussed up to this point apply to her. Chapter Three will elaborate on postfeminism in relation to new Lara and through an analysis of the ludological and narratological structure of *ROTTR* (2015), I attempt to determine where new Lara is situated on the postfeminist continuum.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the seminal texts on videogame theory, ludology and narratology, cyberfeminism, postfeminism and Lara Croft in order to establish the foundation from which the close analysis of *ROTTR* (2015) can proceed. This chapter has also provided a brief ludological analysis of the *Tomb Raider* games released between 1996 and 2008. It is evident that, firstly, even though ludologists and narratologists largely disagree on which theoretical framework is most useful when studying videogames, both offer unique and valuable methods for their analysis. Thus, in the analysis of *ROTTR* (2015) in Chapter Three, both theoretical frameworks will be used in order to conduct a close analysis on the game.

Secondly, it is apparent that postfeminism provides a useful framework through which to study Lara Croft. In this chapter, postfeminism has been applied to old Lara and I have shown how old Lara is representative of the postfeminist action heroine. In Chapter Three, postfeminism is specifically applied to new Lara. In the discussion, I interrogate the extent to which new Lara exemplifies (or moves away from) the postfeminist action heroine as she has been outlined in this chapter. Finally, I have shown that cyberfeminism provides an explanation for why a powerful (albeit sexualised) female character such as Lara Croft has emerged in the male dominated arena of videogames. Although I do not draw on cyberfeminism in a discussion of new Lara, it provides the necessary backdrop for the discussion of the emergence of other desexualised female characters in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER THREE: RISE OF THE TOMB RAIDER AND THE RISE OF A NEW FEMINIST ACTION HEROINE

3.1 Introduction

In 2013, Lara Croft underwent a major makeover in the *TR* reboot and she has maintained her new look in the subsequent 2015 game, *ROTTR*. Only two articles have been found that deal specifically with ‘new Lara’ – the term I have chosen to describe the version of Lara Croft that first appeared in 2013. I first review these articles as a necessary backdrop for the analysis of *ROTTR* (2015).



Figure 10: Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* reboot (2013), 2015. (Lincoln, R.A.).

Chapter Two reviewed literature on old Lara in terms of the ludological and narratological structure of *Tomb Raider* before 2013, as well as Lara Croft's representation and characterisation in these older *Tomb Raider* games viewed through the lens of feminism. Chapter Two has accordingly shown how old Lara is the epitome of the postfeminist action hero. Chapter Three engages in a thorough analysis of the ludological and narratological structure of *ROTTR* (2015). The chapter also discusses the characterisation of new Lara by elaborating on MacCallum-Stewart's (2014) observations of Lara Croft in *TR* reboot (2013) and, once again, by applying a feminist theoretical framework. Finally, I start to draw conclusions about what all of these changes mean for Lara Croft as a twentieth century videogame female action hero.

3.2 *Tomb Raider* reboot and new Lara

Hye-Won Han and Se-Jin Song's (2014) analysis of the 2013 *TR* reboot focuses specifically on Lara Croft's narrative as a female hero. Han and Song (2014: 34) acknowledge that Lara's superficial appearance is an improvement on earlier versions of the character (Figure 10); however, they contend that, as in the case of old Lara, emphasis is still not placed on Lara Croft's unique features as a female hero. Instead, they argue, she still models characteristics stereotypical of *all* heroes. Joseph Campbell's (2004 [1949]: 35-36) seminal text on the journey of a hero defines the hero as a character with exceptional gifts who is often honoured or rejected by society; the hero lives in an unsatisfactory world that is falling into ruin; the hero achieves victory over personal and societal oppressors and does so after going on a journey. Indeed, both old and new Lara fit Campbell's (2004 [1949]) definition of a hero.

Jeffords (1993 in Han and Song 2014) points out that in addition to fitting Campbell's (2004 [1949]: 35-36) definition of a hero, the male hero usually has a strong father-son relationship, where male dominance is reinforced by the succession of the father by his son. In a similar fashion, a pivotal figure for Lara Croft is her deceased father. Han and Song (2014) further argue that in male-hero narratives, other female characters often act as damsels-in-

distress. In the *TR* reboot (2013), Lara's mother and her friend, Sam, take on such roles, as Lara displays her heroism through searching for her missing mother and rescuing Sam from ritual sacrifice by a violent cult on the island of Yamatai (Han & Song 2014). For these reasons, Han and Song (2014) assert that Lara simply mimics the narrative of a male hero.

Because of this, Han and Song (2014) even go as far as to say that Lara has a dual identity – simultaneously acting as a female hero and a damsel-in-distress. They attribute Lara's dual identity to her relationship with her mentor, Roth, who guides her throughout the game and her relationships with her friends Alex and Angus, who sacrifice themselves in order for her to escape the island (Han & Song 2014). Han and Song (2014) briefly mention the trailer of *ROTTR* (2015), where Lara is in a male psychologist's office following her traumatic experience of Yamatai in the *TR* reboot (2013). The authors use this trailer to substantiate their claim that Lara is a damsel-in-distress, as she cannot cope psychologically after the horrors she witnessed on Yamatai (Han & Song 2014).

Quite evidently, Han and Song (2014) sketch a very negative picture of new Lara. Lara Croft no doubt fits the archetype of the (male) hero, but Han and Song (2014) never mention what the female hero archetype that new Lara *should* model looks like. On the other hand, Jo-Anne Goodwill (2009: 17) convincingly argues that the original female hero in film possesses all the characteristics of the male hero, but more: “[she also] incorporate[s] traditionally feminine behaviours and characteristics into [her] heroic activities, thus broadening the hero archetype in a way that is transformative, transgressive and liberatory”. Goodwill (2009) uses Ripley from *Alien* (Scott 1979) and Sarah Connor from *The Terminator* (Cameron 1984) as examples of the original female action hero. From the dates of these films, it is evident that these heroines actually precede the historical moment of postfeminism (that only emerged in the 1990s).

With the advent of postfeminism (and as is evident in old Lara), female heroines' behaviour (in videogames at least) is generally coded as overly

masculine while their looks are hyperfeminine in contrast to the original female action hero who behaves both in a masculine and in a feminine way.³⁸ New Lara might therefore be a return to the original female action heroine who is not hyperfeminised and who embraces feminine behaviour, such as Ripley and Sarah Connor. If one considers Goodwill's (2009) argument, it does not matter that new Lara models the stereotypical male hero, but what is important is that, if she is to be a truly transformed character, she embodies traditionally feminine behaviours too. In the analysis of *ROTTR* (2015) that follows, I show that, contrary to Han and Song's (2014) claims, new Lara does possess feminine characteristics and can thus be viewed as a different type of heroine than the postfeminist 'supergirl'.

In defense of new Lara, to my mind, Esther MacCallum-Stewart's (2014) article also provides a more thorough and convincing analysis of *TR* reboot (2013) than that presented by Han and Song (2014). First, MacCallum-Stewart (2014) gives a useful summary of the positive changes made to Lara in the 2013 *TR* reboot, summarised in Table 2.

Old Lara	New Lara
Lara's backstory has remained blank.	Lara has a detailed origin story.
Lara is presented as "a gun-toting action heroine".	Lara is presented as a complex, emotive character.
Lara's learning happens only during the tutorial in the beginning of the game.	Lara's "physical and emotional learning" happens throughout the game as the game progresses.
Lara is arrogant and self-assured.	Lara's face is "emotive and often distressed", and she frequently expresses self-doubt.
Lara's body is idealised with "biologically impossible proportions".	Lara's body is slim and athletic, "without overstepping current ideals of athletic womanhood".

³⁸ It is interesting how Ripley from *Alien* (Scott 1979) also starts to resemble the postfeminist action heroine in the fourth *Alien* film, *Alien: Resurrection*, released in 1997 (Jeunet).

Lara does impossible handstands on the edges of ledges and dives into shallow pools; there is never any dirt or blood on her body.	Lara is easily damaged by the hostile environment around her; she stumbles, she “scrambles over ridges” and she “plummets” into water before swimming.
Lara operates only within tombs and they are the focus of the game.	Tombs are treated as asides. Rather, Lara navigates the open-world of the island.
Lara only has two weapons: her twin pistols and a grapple hook.	Lara has a variety of weapons, where the player can choose in which weapon she specialises.
Lara’s deaths are comical.	Lara’s deaths are gruesome and unpleasant.

Table 2: Summary of differences between old Lara and new Lara, according to Esther MacCallum-Stewart (2014: [Sp]).³⁹

Second, MacCallum-Stewart (2014) highlights the significance of Rihanna Pratchett’s involvement in the game. *TR* reboot (2013) was released at a time when players and developers (both men and women) were becoming increasingly aware of sexism in the videogame industry, and Pratchett’s involvement in *TR* reboot (2013) became a focal point of these issues (MacCallum-Stewart 2014). For MacCallum-Stewart (2014), Pratchett’s pivotal role in the creation of the new Lara is an indication from Crystal Dynamics’ side that *Tomb Raider* has undergone an “ideological” and “ludic” transformation, where the female gamer is now also a significant target audience. As mentioned earlier, female gamers now comprise almost half of gamers in the US (ESA 2017). According to MacCallum-Stewart (2014), Pratchett’s role in the creation of *TR* reboot (2013) suggests that women should be involved in all levels of game production and that the industry should produce games for all genders. For MacCallum-Stewart (2014), Pratchett has undeniably rebranded Lara Croft as a “feminist icon”.

³⁹ MacCallum-Stewart (2014) does not distinguish between “old Lara” and “new Lara” in her paper; these terms, which describe the different versions of Lara Croft are my own. Furthermore, all quotes used in this table are from MacCallum-Stewart (2014).

Although Pratchett's role in the creation of new Lara is significant, as MacCallum-Stewart (2014) rightly argues, she cannot be credited as the sole influence on Lara Croft's radical transformation. As mentioned earlier, more than seventeen women were part of the lead design team of *TR* reboot (2013) and the number of female gamers since *Tomb Raider I* (1996) was released has significantly increased. It is therefore not because Lara Croft is transforming that more women play games, but I suggest that Lara Croft is transforming because more women play games.

Evidently, Han and Song (2014) fail to take critical aspects of the game into account in their analysis of *TR* reboot (2013). To summarise, Han and Song (2014) fail to mention that Lara's male mentor, Roth, dies halfway through the game, so she does not rely on male characters for guidance from that point on (even into *ROTTR* (2015)). Furthermore, they fail to conduct a full analysis of *ROTTR* (2015), merely substantiating their claim that Lara is a damsel-in-distress by referring to the trailer of the game that has no relation to the actual game. They also fail to recognise Rihanna Pratchett's significant involvement in the creation of the game, which undeniably had a great impact on Lara's representation and narrative. And finally, they do not recognise the possibility of a female hero archetype as put forward by Goodwill (2009). The next section explores the characterisation of new Lara in more detail.

3.3 Characterisation of new Lara

In *ROTTR* (2015), and in *TR* reboot (2013) discussed above, Lara Croft is evidently characterised differently from the *Tomb Raider* games released between 1996 and 2008. One of the most apparent transformations that Lara Croft has undergone since 1996 is her physical appearance. In *ROTTR* (2015), just as in *TR* reboot (2013) Lara's body is slim and athletic, "without overstepping current ideals of athletic womanhood", instead of being

hyperfeminised as old Lara was (MacCallum-Stewart 2014: [Sp]).⁴⁰ According to various fan forums, old Lara's vital statistics are as follows:⁴¹ her height is 180cm, her weight is 59kg and her breast-waist-hip ratio is 34D-24-35 (which are proportions similar to Barbie's body, although Barbie remains more extreme than old Lara) (Figure 11).⁴²

In contrast, new Lara's vital statistics are a height of 168cm and a weight of 56kg, which are similar to Alicia Vikander's vitals of 166 cm height and 53kg weight (Vikander is the actress that plays young Lara in the 2018 *Tomb Raider* film).⁴³ Although even Vikander's and new Lara's bodies are difficult to obtain by most women, especially if one takes not only their height and weight, but also their protruding muscles and physical strength into consideration (Vikander went through vigorous training in order to look more like virtual new Lara), it is at least not beyond the reach of a human being as old Lara's figure is (Figure 12). Even Angelina Jolie, who played old Lara in *Lara Croft, Tomb Raider* (West 2001) and *Lara Croft, Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life* (De Bont 2003), had to wear fake breasts and hair extensions in addition to doing intensive training in order to vaguely resemble old Lara (Stasia 2007).

Based on the above, it could be argued that the restructuring of Lara Croft's body eliminates the extremes that are manifested in the body of the postfeminist action hero as described by Genz (2009). To put it plainly, new Lara does not have breasts and buttocks that are disproportionate to her waist and long legs, but instead, even though her breasts are still full, especially in

⁴⁰ MacCallum-Stewart (2014) does not clarify which "ideals of athletic womanhood" she is referring to, as ideals are highly subjective. Perhaps Alicia Vikander (Figure 10), who is young Lara in the *Tomb Raider* (Uthaug 2018) film, is a useful model for MacCallum-Stewart's ideal.

⁴¹ Old Lara's vital statistics vary slightly depending on the forum. See Wikiraider (2017), Stella's Tomb Raider Site (2017) and Andrivet (2014) for Lara's vitals.

⁴² The Barbie doll is a much-debated subject for feminists, as Barbie's breast-waist-hip ratio is 34E-16-29, which is highly unrealistic and absolutely unattainable by women (Olson 2014). Theorists such as Schick, Rima, & Calabrese, (2011) and Norton, Olds, Olive & Dank, (1996), for example, have argued that Barbie imposes skewed body ideals on young girls that play with the doll, and would probably agree that old Lara does the same.

⁴³ Unfortunately, new Lara's breast-waist-hip ratio is not available on the forums.

TR reboot (2013) (Figure 11), all her body parts are in proportion to one another. As I will argue further, as seen in Figure 11, although new Lara wears body-hugging clothing, she is not hypersexualised as old Lara, and as most of the postfeminist ‘supergirls’ were.



Figure 11: Old Lara (1996) versus new Lara (2013), 2013. (De Four, D).

Lara Croft's wardrobe is one of the biggest appeals in the *Tomb Raider* games. In every *Tomb Raider* game up to 2008, Lara has the ability to choose from a variety of outfits, ranging from explorer outfits, to evening wear, to wetsuits and bikinis. As the game progresses, these outfits are unlocked and Lara can wear them as she pleases. For example, should Lara (or the player) choose to do so, old Lara can raid a tomb in her infamous sexy golden bikini. Old Lara's outfits have no impact on the gameplay and they are merely cosmetic. In addition, most of old Lara's outfits are revealing, placing emphasis on her breasts and buttocks, as is seen in her Classic Tomb Raider outfit in Figure 11. In older *Tomb Raider* games, Lara can access as many as

30 outfits depending on the game and the downloadable content (DLC) available for the game (Tomb Raider Wiki, [Sa]).



Figure 12: Comparison between Alicia Vikander as Lara (2017) and Lara Croft in *TR* reboot (2013), 2017. (Corner, M).

Even in *ROTTR* (2015), Lara can access a total of thirty-one outfits. The most notable change employed in Lara's *ROTTR* (2015) outfits, however, is that eighteen of these outfits provide Lara with tactical advantages. For example, the Sacra Umbra outfit (Figure 13) reduces the delay before Lara's health starts regenerating during combat, where the Siberian Ranger outfit (Figure 14) increases Lara's carrying capacity for all special ammunition. So the gamer would not choose Lara's outfits for cosmetic purposes (for example, some gamers chose to have old Lara climb cliffs in her golden bikini as a means to objectify her). Rather, they choose her outfits based on the environment that she is in as this is a determining factor for Lara's survival. Furthermore, in all instances, Lara's outfits in *ROTTR* (2015) are unrevealing and quite elaborate as seen in Figures 13 and 14. According to the criteria of

sexualisation of female characters put forward by Lynch et al. (2016),⁴⁴ old Lara would be considered as sexualised whereas new Lara's appearance puts far less emphasis on her body as a sexual object. In this way, new Lara has drifted away from the postfeminist ideal action heroine, as a critical characteristic of the postfeminist 'supergirl' is her hyperfeminised and sexualised body.

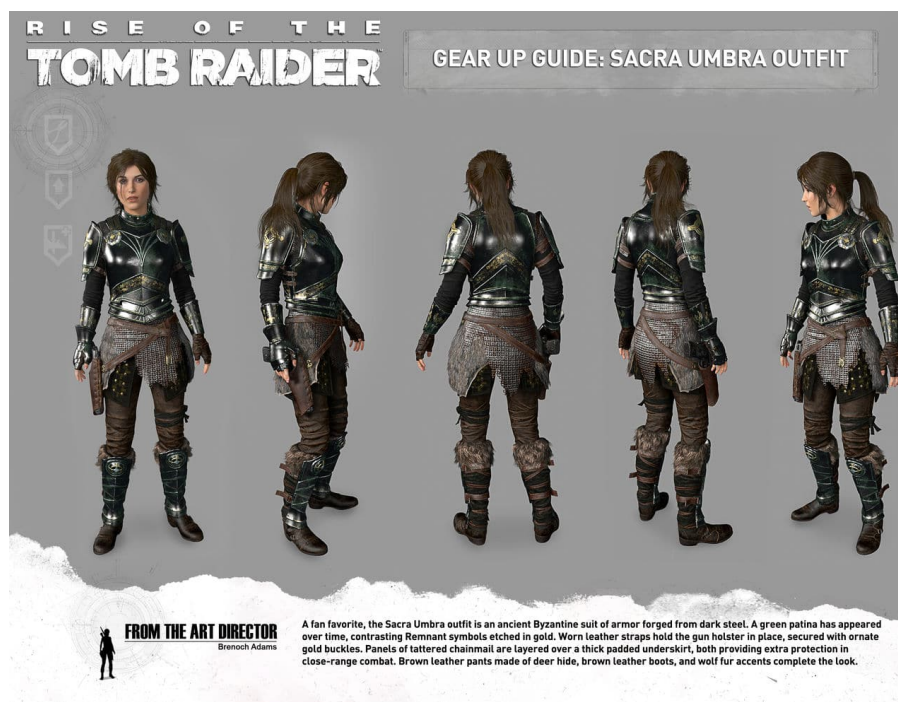


Figure 13: Sacra Umbra Outfit, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, 2015. (Tomb Raider Forums).

Lara Croft has furthermore transformed from a flat, two-dimensional character, to a complex, emotive character. New Lara is created with Morphology facial technology, which means that Lara's emotions and movements are performed by an actress and then imported into a computer system where developers build the character upon that foundation (Campbell

⁴⁴ As discussed in Chapter Two, the sexualisation of female characters was measured by the proportions and amount of skin revealed in four areas of the character's body (waist, buttocks, chest and leg regions) and sexualised movements, for example unnecessary undulation or jiggling. Characters were also considered as sexualised if their breasts were disproportionate to their body size.

2015).⁴⁵ Consequently, developers managed to create a new Lara who is both a human being and an action hero, who is both vulnerable and powerful and who is emotionally appealing to gamers (Campbell 2015).

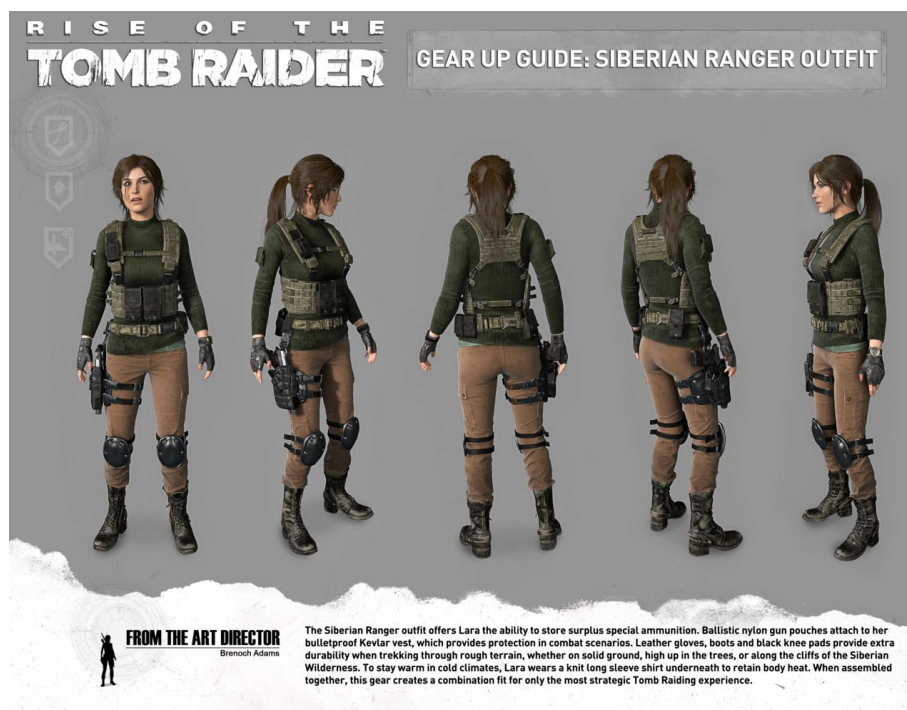


Figure 14: Siberian Ranger Outfit, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, 2015. (Tomb Raider Forums).

In Figure 15, for example, Lara's facial expression is both determined and apprehensive when she first encounters Sofia, an inhabitant of Kitezh. Old Lara lacked emotional complexity due, in part, to the fact that the previous generations of console technology did not allow it. As argued in Chapter Two, old Lara, like almost all postfeminist 'supergirls' in videogames, also does not have a real-life referent, essentially making her an empty sign and allowing her to be reinvented on various platforms. Perhaps new Lara's reinventions, which are discussed in detail later in this section, are limited to an extent since she was modeled on a real-life referent.

⁴⁵ In *ROTTR* (2015) and *SOTTR* (2018), Camilla Luddington is the voice of Lara Croft.



Figure 15: Lara Croft encounters Sofia, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, 2015. (Screen shot by the author).

In addition to Lara's detailed facial features and expressions, new Lara's movements have become increasingly lifelike. According to Campbell (2015), movement has always been a key component of Lara Croft's characterisation, but in *ROTTR* (2015), motion capture technology is used to increase fluidity of movement in the avatar. In contrast to old Lara, who was formed solely with a relatively small number of polygons⁴⁶ and not Morphology facial technology, new Lara's movements are performed by an actor and then digitally rendered to become Lara Croft's movements.

Along with the increasing detail evident in Lara Croft's physical appearance, new Lara's complex characterisation is reflected in both her speech and behaviour. In *TR* reboot (2013), which is Lara Croft's origin story, she is initially portrayed as a naïve, uncertain and scared young explorer. In this game, Lara frequently expresses self-doubt and worry, and she hesitates before killing enemies and even animals.⁴⁷ In *ROTTR* (2015), Lara willingly

⁴⁶ Polygons are used to create three-dimensional surfaces in games. The higher the number of polygons, the more detailed the surface becomes. According to Wikiraider (2013), Lara Croft consisted of a mere 400 polygons in 1996. With the release of each game, the number of polygons used to create Lara increased. In 2007, Lara consisted of 7000 polygons (Wikiraider 2013).

⁴⁷ See MacCallum-Stewart (2014) for the full analysis of *TR* reboot (2013).

goes on an expedition to find Kitezh, she is more confident and self-assured, and she is placed in the game world with better knowledge of her environment and her enemies. She still, however, expresses regret and self-doubt at times. She says in her camp journal “People are suffering [again] because of my actions”, but immediately rebukes herself saying “no, no you can’t think like this, Lara, or you really will drive yourself crazy”.

Mikula (2004) famously identified old Lara as an empty sign. It is exactly because old Lara is two-dimensional in both her characterisation and facial and bodily expressions and movements that she so easily becomes an empty sign who invites gamers to either objectify or identify with her, or do both. Poole (2000: 153) argues: “[Old Lara’s] very blankness encourages the (male or female) player’s psychological projection”. In the case of new Lara, because she has more substance as a character and as a videogame entity, she has the potential to move beyond being an empty sign, and instead become a *character* rather than acting simply as an avatar or a vehicle with which the gamer can navigate the game world. Due to new Lara’s detailed characterisation, she may also be more relatable to female gamers, in contrast to the unattainable postfeminist action heroine who is largely unrelatable to women because of her exaggerated proportions, idealised body, and one-dimensional characterisation.

Rehak (2003: 481) further argues that owing to old Lara’s “lack of individuating detail”, she is continually reinvented across media platforms. For example, old Lara would appear on billboards and magazine covers in various forms, sometimes acting as a model, sometimes as an action hero, and sometimes as a topless pin-up girl in Playboy Magazine (like BloodRayne who has also appeared topless in Playboy Magazine in August of 2004). Because new Lara is not so much an empty sign due to her complex characterisation (and as I point out later, her detailed narrative), she can only be Lara Croft, the action hero. Since her inception, new Lara has not been on a magazine cover as anything other than Lara Croft the action hero with her characterisation established in *TR* reboot (2013) and *ROTTR* (2015) intact.

3.3.1 Characterisation of Ana and Sofia

Another factor that influences the characterisation of new Lara is her relationship with other characters in the game (especially female characters), as well as their characterisation. Han and Song (2014: 39), for example, identify new Lara's friend from *TR* reboot (2013), Samantha Nishimura, as a damsel-in-distress because Lara has to rescue her from abduction by a violent cult on Yamatai as the main quest in the game. The fact that Sam's relation to Lara is that of a damsel-in-distress therefore frames new Lara simply as a male hero disguised as a female hero, as male heroes in videogames, such as Link from *The Legend of Zelda* (1986) and Mario from *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), often need to rescue the female damsel-in-distress (Han & Song 2014).

There is no doubt that Sam fits the damsel-in-distress trope, as she is constantly being kidnapped and needs rescuing by a (male) hero, like other damsels-in-distress in videogames, such as Zelda in *The Legend of Zelda* (1986) and Princess Peach in *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) (TV Tropes [Sa]). The final cinematic after Sam's rescue highlights new Lara's masculine qualities, as she carries Sam away after heroically rescuing her (Figure 16).⁴⁸ In *ROTTR* (2015) though, there is no female character that needs to be rescued by Lara, but instead, Lara repeatedly rescues her male friend, Jonah. The only two other notable female characters in *ROTTR* (2015) are Sofia, who fights alongside Lara, and Ana, the main antagonist in *ROTTR* (2015).⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Of course, the relationship between Lara and Sam had many fans speculating whether new Lara is homosexual and incited many queer readings of the character. See blogs such as Pfangirl Through the Looking Glass (2013).

⁴⁹ Although I categorise Lara Croft in *TR* reboot (2013) as 'new Lara', she has not undergone her full transformation into 'new Lara' as articulated in *ROTTR* (2015) yet. For this reason, there are still some aspects of new Lara's characterisation in *TR* reboot (2013) that are inconsistent with arguments I make about new Lara's characterisation in *ROTTR* (2015).



Figure 16: New Lara carries Sam away, 2013. (Pfangirl Through the Looking Glass Blog).

Ana is Lara Croft's stepmother who married Richard Croft after Amelia Croft's death. Ana is also the sister of Constantin, the leader of Lara's enemy in *ROTTR* (2015), The Order of Trinity. Sofia is one of Lara's allies in *ROTTR* (2015), and Sofia's father, Jacob, is The Immortal Prophet that Lara was looking for. Sofia is also the leader of the military that protects The Divine Source, and she later takes her father's place as leader of The Remnant after his death (Tomb Raider Wiki [Sa]).

Goodwill (2009: 18) points out that the original female action hero, such as Ripley from *Alien* (Scott 1979), for example, does not work in isolation, like old Lara and other postfeminist videogame characters do, but she relies on others. For new Lara in *ROTTR* (2015), Sofia plays the role of a character who fights alongside Lara. Of course, new Lara does save some of her friends, such as Sam in *TR* reboot (2013), but she is also a hero *with* them, not only a hero *for* them, especially in *ROTTR* (2015) (Goodwill 2009: 18). New Lara often needs her friends' aid, such as the time when Sofia helps Lara to destroy Trinity's choppers in *ROTTR* (2015), or even Jonah who helps her to climb the icy cliffs in Siberia. Reliance on others is seen as being

antithetical to autonomy and agency for the postfeminist 'supergirl', which is why she, unlike new Lara, works in isolation (Mikula 2004: 62). However, Anderson (2014: 137-138) convincingly argues that "autonomy skills are learned with and from others" and that autonomy is a social rather than isolated exercise. In this way, new Lara can have agency while also relying on others. This partly redeems new Lara as a uniquely female hero, an aspect that Han and Song (2014) have overlooked.

In addition to fighting alongside new Lara in *ROTTR* (2015), Sofia is also desexualised and realistic in terms of her bodily proportions, and she wears unrevealing clothing. Sam is placed in binary opposition to new Lara in *TR* reboot (2013), which nevertheless frames Lara as a male hero in drag because Sam's stereotypically 'feminine' behavior and clothing (see Sam's white dress in Figure 16) highlights Lara's masculine traits (Han and Song 2014). Sofia, in contrast to Sam, is Lara's semantic equal. Because Sofia is new Lara's equal, she is neutral in relation to Lara and does not enhance any of Lara's masculine or feminine characteristics as Sam does.

Han and Song (2014: 43) claim that Lara Croft (in her old and new manifestations) views "women who violate taboos in order to become masculine heroes as antagonists and seeks to eliminate them in the name of her father". They use Jacqueline Natla, who appears in *Tomb Raider I* (1996), *Tomb Raider Anniversary* (2007) and *Tomb Raider Underworld* (2009), and Amanda Evert, who appears in *Tomb Raider Legend* (2006) and *Tomb Raider Underworld* (2008) as examples of these women (Han & Song 2014). Just like postfeminist old Lara, Natla and Evert are feminised and sexualised, and according to Han and Song (2014: 43), these villains have the intrusion of male territory and the "subversion of the established order" in common. (Old) Lara Croft then exterminates them in an attempt to keep the "established order" set by her father (Han & Song 2014: 43).

Firstly, in contrast to Natla and Evert, Ana is not sexy and physically strong. Ana is also slightly older (her birth date is circa 1970, which makes her in her forties in *ROTTR* (2015)) and she is not imbued with supernatural powers like

Evert (Tomb Raider Wiki [Sa]). Instead, Ana is a character that the gamer (and new Lara) feels sorry for, as she is terminally ill and her motive for possessing the Divine Source is not world domination or the “subversion of the established order”, but it is simply to save herself (Han & Song 2014: 43). This provides a moral dilemma for new Lara, and in turn, new Lara’s moral complexity is explored in her ambivalent attitude towards Ana.

Secondly, Ana is not a masculine female character, as she is not overtly violent like Natla and Evert. She therefore does not justify “the violence perpetrated by Lara Croft” like Natla and Evert do (Han & Song 2014: 43). In fact, Lara does not behave violently towards Ana, which tones down (new) Lara’s excessive violence, even if it is just momentarily. Furthermore, Lara does not kill Ana in order to maintain “the established order [set] by her father” (Han & Song 2014: 43); in fact, Lara does not kill Ana at all – Trinity murders Ana. This shows that new Lara moves away from the male-hero narrative, which emphasises “the reinforcement of masculine order” by killing the female villain that threatens this order (Han & Song 2014: 42).

Although Ana is still problematic in her portrayal in many instances, she nevertheless moves away from the postfeminist representation of other female villains in the *Tomb Raider* series. Unfortunately, characters such as Ana nevertheless stereotype women as manipulative, as Ana manipulates her brother, Constantin, throughout the game for her personal gain. Ana also stereotypes women as deceptive, as she betrays Richard Croft’s love by working for Trinity, amongst other things. As mentioned earlier, Han & Song (2014) stand firm in their argument that in the case of the male hero, patriarchal dominance is reinforced by the succession of the father by the male hero. In the case of Sofia, this relationship remains present as she takes over The Remnant after her father’s death.

It is evident from the discussion of these characters that *ROTTR* (2015) presents two other versions of femininity (if not more), one perhaps more positive than the other. These characters also have a substantial impact on the characterisation of new Lara even though they are non-playable

characters (NPCs). The way that new Lara is constructed in conjunction to them inevitably reveals more about new Lara. As is reflected in the ludological changes made to *ROTTR* (2015) that also work to individuate new Lara and make her more complex as a character, she is less likely to be objectified as her postfeminist predecessor so easily was.

3.4 Ludological structure of *Rise of the Tomb Raider*

Tomb Raider is categorised as an action-adventure game. The ludological structure of adventure games demands that they are progressive, rather than emergent, and they rely heavily on narrative (Juul 2002), as I have shown in Chapter Two. In all *Tomb Raider* games, therefore, there is a predetermined story and Lara has to complete a number of smaller quests (intrinsic *ludus* rules) in order to progress to the next part of the story and ultimately complete the game (extrinsic *ludus* rules). Recently, developers have introduced new game modes into *Tomb Raider* by changing the intrinsic and extrinsic rules specific to the game.

In addition to Chapter Replay and Score Attack modes (found in most *Tomb Raider* games),⁵⁰ four other game modes have been introduced in *ROTTR* (2015), namely Remnant Resistance, Cold Darkness Awakened, Endurance Mode and Lara's Nightmare (which takes place in Croft Manor). All of these modes use Expedition Cards in order to change the intrinsic rules of the game, making the game either easier or more difficult for the player. An example of the effects that Expedition Cards may have on Lara is that when the 'Cold Arms' card is applied, new Lara will feel extra cold while her weapon is drawn, consequently making the game more difficult for the player. Other cards can also make the game easier for the player, such as the 'Endless Magazines' card that reloads Lara's weapon instantly when the magazine is empty. I will focus only on Endurance Mode and Lara's Nightmare, as these

⁵⁰ After full completion of the game, Chapter Replay allows the player to replay any chapter again. The player can now replay any chapter with any weapon or outfit that Lara has collected throughout the game. Score Attack or Time Trial allows the player to replay any chapter with specific goals or time limits in mind.

game modes have a more direct influence on the characterisation of new Lara.

The primary goal in the new Endurance Mode is to survive for as long as possible. Secondary goals include capturing enemy bases, discovering artifacts and raiding crypts. In Endurance Mode, Lara has a hunger meter and a cold meter on the top left corner of the screen, as is seen in Figure 17 that shows the Endurance Mode interface. She has to hunt animals (as well as protect herself against predators) and pick fruits in order to keep her hunger meter in the green, and she has to make campfires or stand close to fires in order to keep her warmth meter in the green.

Furthermore, at night, Lara's warmth decreases significantly faster, but when Lara enters shelters or tombs her warmth meter decreases at a slower rate. Should Lara's hunger or warmth reach zero, she dies and the expedition, along with the game, are over. Lara also has to gather resources (such as wood and feathers, for example) in order to craft and upgrade weapons, ammunition and gear, or to make campfires or extraction signals. Especially in Endurance mode, instead of dominating her landscape and being completely in control, like postfeminist old Lara (and in fact most postfeminist videogame heroines, such as BloodRayne and Bayonetta),⁵¹ new Lara is simply trying to survive. New Lara is subsequently increasingly vulnerable, both physically and mentally in *ROTTR* (2015).

⁵¹ I discuss these characters in more detail in Chapter Four.



Figure 17: Lara Croft in Siberian Wilderness, Endurance Mode, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, 2016. (Screen shot by the author).

Lara's Nightmare is an additional game mode only introduced in 2016 with the special twentieth anniversary celebration edition of *ROTTR* (2015). Lara's Nightmare is based in Croft Manor; she reads a mysterious letter that threatens her removal from her home. She then enters the horrifying and dark game world in which she repeatedly reminds herself that she is only having a nightmare and that "None of this is real". In Lara's Nightmare, the only objective is to destroy 'Skulls of Rage', which are presumably the source of her nightmare, and perhaps a metaphor for her troubled psyche. Even worse, Lara has to defend herself against zombies until she manages to destroy all the Skulls, and should Lara die, she is not reincarnated again.

The introduction of Endurance Mode and Lara's Nightmare visibly has a considerable impact on the characterisation of new Lara. Anderson (2014: 135) defines vulnerability as the degree to which a person is not able to control the forces that influence her. Vulnerability can furthermore "be increased by those forces becoming more powerful [and]...the person becoming less able to counter these forces" (Anderson 2014: 135). First, Endurance Mode emphasises new Lara's vulnerability as the forces that

threaten Lara become more pervasive and uncontrollable, and the player is forced to experience a Lara Croft who is not invincible, but who also needs to eat and stay warm while experiencing the fear of being pitted against a hostile environment. If Lara dies, the game is over and she cannot reincarnate. Second, Lara's Nightmare allows the player to enter Lara's troubled psyche filled with trauma from killing many enemies and from losing her parents at a young age. In contrast to old Lara, new Lara struggles psychologically with traumas from her youth and from her recent past, and these are manifested in Lara's Nightmare. New Lara's vulnerability is a move away from the invincible postfeminist 'supergirl', as mental and physical vulnerability is certainly not a characteristic that has been displayed in previous postfeminist heroines, such as BloodRayne and Bayonetta, and in old Lara.

Moreover, in the main story, Lara operates in an open-world map. This means that even though the game world is created for Lara, she does not have control over the forces that influence her (such as her environment) to the extent that she previously did. There are some distances that new Lara cannot jump, for example, and there are some areas of the game that she cannot access until she has acquired the appropriate gear to do so, in contrast to old Lara who always has the gear with which to do the job. If the distance for new Lara to jump is too far, she will grab on to the ledge with only one hand and the player needs to act fast, otherwise she falls to her death. This further increases new Lara's sense of vulnerability; even though Lara has many skills, the player still feels that Lara might not survive in the vast and hostile landscape (Campbell 2015). Ice shards prickle Lara's skin, for example; when Lara falls from a distance, scratch marks and blood are visible on her skin, and when she has been wounded by enemies to a certain extent, she moves slowly and her vision becomes grey and blurred. Old Lara lacked this detail; there is no indication of her wounds when she has been shot or falls from a distance, for example.

Furthermore, new Lara climbs mountains slowly with mountain climbing gear in contrast to her predecessor who would confidently shimmy along cliffs without any safety gear. Even though new Lara moves through cold regions

with appropriate clothing, she often shivers and expresses her discomfort where old Lara has never expressed discomfort from raiding a tomb in Nepal while wearing barely any clothing. In *ROTTR* (2015), heavy snow builds up in certain parts of the landscape and can be an impediment for the player as the thick snow reduces Lara's running speed (Campbell 2015). This further increases Lara's risk of being caught by predators and enemies in the unknown hostile landscape.

In *ROTTR* (2015) developers have also abandoned the tutorial system and instead allow new Lara's physical and emotional learning to take place throughout the game. Previously, the player would be prompted to learn the controls of the game (extradiegetic activity) and master all Lara's moves and weapons very early in the game, as old Lara is usually in control of her surroundings from the beginning. In *TR* reboot (2013), instead of being overly confident and having everything she needs to dominate the landscape from the start, new Lara starts off with no weapons or skills and she has to gain and craft them as the game progresses, only gaining some control over her surroundings much later in the game. The player also learns new controls with Lara, and as she becomes more confident, so does the player.

Kirkland (2009) analyses the gendered gameplay in *Silent Hill* (1999). According to Kirkland (2009: 171-172), in a game with masculinised gameplay, such as (old) *Tomb Raider* games and various other action or adventure or shooter games with male protagonists, combat is militarised and "elegant" with the avatar usually fully capable of handling the gun and fully in control of the weapon. As in *Silent Hill* (1999), that employs "particularly unmasculine" gameplay mechanics that evokes feelings of "helplessness, entrapment and vulnerability", in *TR* reboot (2013) and *ROTTR* (2015) also, the combat is initially "clumsy and chaotic" (Kirkland 2009: 172). New Lara is therefore less masculinised and militarised, at least in the initial stages of her journey.

Similar to *TR* reboot (2013), in *ROTTR* (2015), even though Lara is less naïve and starts off with a better set of skills, Lara refines these skills as the game

progresses. New Lara's skills are divided into Brawler, Hunter and Survivor and as seen in Figure 18, she can upgrade these skills at any campfire checkpoint in the game. Depending on the player's gaming style, the player can customise Lara's skills to be either focused on melee, ranged or stealth damage.⁵² As Lara completes quests, raids tombs and kills enemies, she gains experience points (XP). Enough XP grants Lara one skill point, and the player can spend these to upgrade any of the sub-skills listed under Brawler, Hunter, or Survivor. Only towards the end of the game will the player have gained enough XP to max out all of Lara's skills.



Figure 18: Skills selection interface, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, 2016. (Screen shot by the author).

A similar tier system is used for Lara's weapons (Figure 19). In *ROTTR* (2015) Lara gains basic weapons very early in the game, but she does not start off with these weapons already equipped as in older *Tomb Raider* games. Again, Lara starts off being vulnerable, but gains more control of her surroundings

⁵² Brawler skills increase melee damage (there are 17 Brawler skills available), Hunter skills increase ranged damage and Survivor skills increase stealth (there are 21 Hunter and Survivor skills available).

only much later in the game as she gains more weapons and better gear. As the game advances, Lara can upgrade these weapons with resources that she finds throughout the different game locations. These resources may include common resources such as deer hide or wood, or rare resources such as bear or wolf hide (which are much more difficult to acquire).

Ironically, Lara might get killed in the pursuit of weapon parts that she needs in order to defend herself. In total, Lara can possess as many as nine bows, eight handguns, six rifles, and four shotguns in *ROTTR* (2015). The variety of weapons in *ROTTR* (2015) (twenty-nine weapons in total) is extensive compared to the mere ten weapons that Lara uses in *Tomb Raider II* (1998) or the eight weapons that Lara uses in *Tomb Raider Underworld* (2008). Even though Lara can possess so many weapons in *ROTTR* (2015), the player is still left feeling threatened by Lara's environment; this may be because she is characterised to be so vulnerable compared to her postfeminist predecessor who very rarely experienced vulnerability, because for the postfeminist 'supergirl', "helpless femininity" is effectively replaced with strength and agency (Genz 2009: 157).

This skill and weapon tier system was customarily associated with games that male gamers prefer to play, because this complex customisation was said to be too complicated for female gamers who were believed to enjoy simpler games (such as *Barbie Fashion Designer* (1996) or *The Sims Online* (2002) (Prescott & Boggs 2014: 88). The skill and weapon tier system is unique to genres such as action, adventure, and role-playing games (RPG), all of which fall under the category of "core' action based genres" that male gamers stereotypically enjoy (Vermeulen and Van Looy 2016: 290).

As mentioned earlier, however, female gamers are now considered a worthy target market for videogame sales. This is clearly seen in how Pratchett reimagined Lara Croft in a way that, in my opinion, and according to McCallum-Stewart (2014), brands her as a feminist icon *because* more women play videogames and more women play *Tomb Raider*. The change in Lara Croft's combat style reflects how negative stereotypes of women as

gamers are being challenged; women can in fact play more complex, 'hardcore' games and they enjoy playing them.

Despite these positive changes that have been made to the game, the body count in *ROTTR* (2015) does remain very high, and Lara kills enemies in an excessively violent way. Promotional material from *SOTTR* (2018) further indicates that new Lara may be becoming even more violent as her story progresses, as she will use a makeshift combat knife in addition to her various other weapons in this game.⁵³ The game's age rating is also R18, which means that it is sure to be excessively violent. In this sense, Lara's behaviour and the gameplay once again becomes masculinised and militarised, like that of old Lara (Kirkland 2009). New Lara's excessive violence may be a way of compensating for her lowered eye-candy appeal, as, according to Mikula (2003), Lara's violence appeals mostly to male gamers. In the case of new Lara, this certainly remains true.

I would like to point out though that while Lara is comfortable with killing enemies, killing is not always her first resort. In an early cut-scene in *ROTTR* (2015), instead of shooting her enemies, Lara hides from them instead, and when they find her, she bombs the roof of the tomb in order to escape without engaging in combat. In *TR* reboot (2013), Lara's first kill is out of self-defense and she shows shock and remorse after killing for the first time. In both games, the player is also given the option to sneak past enemies in some cases, thereby avoiding combat.

⁵³ A *SOTTR* (2018) gameplay demo showcased at Square Enix's E3 briefing in 2018 shows how new Lara kills even more efficiently in this game by using petrol bombs, a combat knife, and a range of other brutal weapons and skills (Gamespot 2018c).

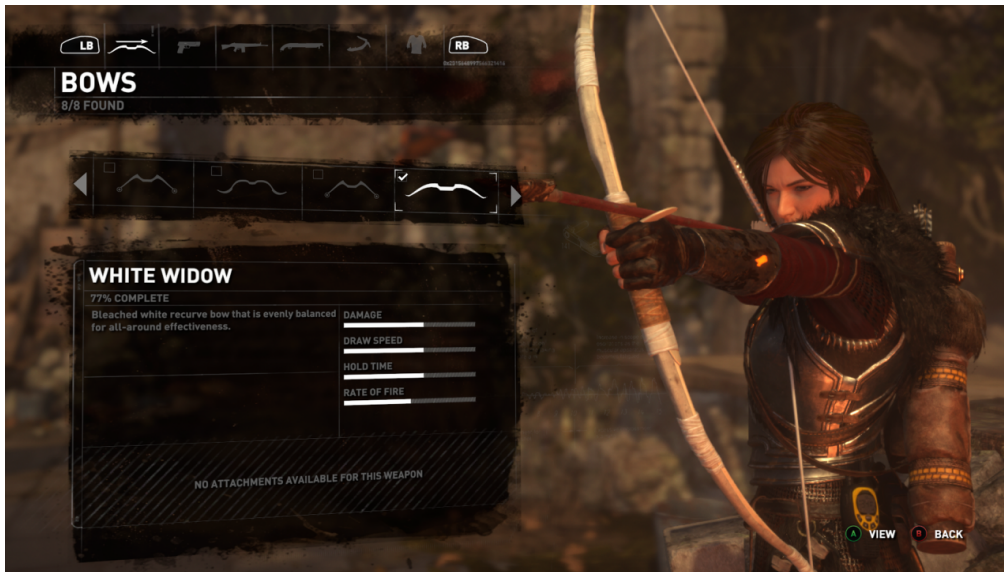


Figure 19: Weapon selection interface, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, 2016. (Screen shot by the author).

As in previous *Tomb Raider* games, Lara does not kill any female characters in *ROTTR* (2015); all of Lara's victims are male. Lara is the only woman that dies in *ROTTR* (2015) and her deaths are also unpleasant and gruesome (Figure 20). In older *Tomb Raider* games, Lara's deaths were comical and not a threat to the player (or even to Lara). Lara's ability to reincarnate infinitely eliminated the threat of death completely. In *ROTTR* (2015), however, even though Lara reincarnates after dying, her deaths are shocking to watch and the player might try to avoid getting her killed.

On the one hand, Lara's gory deaths increase her sense of vulnerability and her realism as a character, which is a transformation from the invincible postfeminist 'supergirl'. New Lara is also less likely to be objectified, as she is no longer an object of amusement either. On the other hand, however, the mutilation of the female body displayed in new Lara might encourage pervading misogynistic views towards women and should be questioned despite the positive changes made to the character. The narratological discussion of the game I embark on below will further reveal how new Lara subverts the postfeminist action hero ideal.



Figure 20: Lara dies, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, 2016. (Screen shot by the author).

3.5 Narratological structure of *Rise of the Tomb Raider*

Lara Croft's narrative has for the most part of her history remained ambiguous. Her story differs in each *Tomb Raider* game, but there are some consistencies regarding her background: Lara is an orphan,⁵⁴ she is rich from inheriting her father's wealth, and she is famous for exploring tombs (McCallum-Stewart 2014). Furthermore, Lara lives alone in Croft Manor, she is unmarried and she is in her twenties. Older *Tomb Raider* games reveal snippets of Lara's background through brief cut-scenes, but the biographical content of these snippets are inconsistent across the games. This section briefly lays out Lara Croft's new origin story, then explores the narrative of *ROTTR* (2015) in more detail and finally attempts to articulate what it means for the characterisation of new Lara.

⁵⁴ The cause of her parents' deaths varies according to each game. The *Tomb Raider Legend* (2006) timeline stipulates that Lara's mother (Amelia Croft) disappeared after a plane crash in the Himalayas (and Lara is primarily driven by the search for her mother) and her father (Richard Croft) was murdered while searching for Amelia Croft (Tomb Raider Wiki [Sa]).

In 2013, *Tomb Raider* was rebooted and for the first time Lara was given a detailed origin story. In *TR* reboot (2013), twenty-one-year-old Lara is on board The Endurance to Dragon's Triangle in Japan on her first expedition. The ship is struck by a storm and Lara and the crew are stranded on the island of Yamatai. Lara soon discovers that the island is inhabited by a violent cult and throughout the game she defends herself against cultists and predators. Lara's (female) friend, Sam, is captured by the cult to be sacrificed to the Sun Queen Himiko and in the process of rescuing this damsel-in-distress, Lara's male mentor, two of her male friends, and her male rival all die. Lara rescues Sam, kills the cult leader and eventually escapes from the island with some of the crew.⁵⁵ This rebooted origin story is chronologically followed by *ROTTR* (2015).⁵⁶

It is worth noting that in *TR* reboot (2013), there is a scene in which Lara is very nearly sexually assaulted by a male non-player character (NPC). Online, this scene has been blown up and became labeled as 'the controversial rape scene' (Murphy 2017). For many women,⁵⁷ the trend that female characters, such as Beatrix Kiddo from *Kill Bill* (Tarantino 2003) and Artemesia from *300: Rise of an Empire* (Murro 2014), for example, 'need' to be raped in order to become 'strong women', is problematic, and because of Lara Croft's rebooted origin story, she has now also earned her place among these characters. Rihanna Pratchett has defended the scene though, claiming that "critics are taking it out of context" and that considering the age rating of the game (which is 18), "you will see worse in a soap opera" (Murphy 2017). In this so-called 'rape scene', Lara does not get raped and the scene is not central to the story line or crucial to her development as a character though, and Pratchett is justified in saying that the media took it out of context.

⁵⁵ See McCallum-Stewart for a detailed account and analysis of the 2013 *TR* (reboot), which is new Lara's origin story.

⁵⁶ The 2018 *Tomb Raider* film is also Lara Croft's origin story, but it omits all of the characters that are on The Endurance in the game, and in the game Richard Croft is not alive to help Lara as he is in the movie. The *Tomb Raider* film (Uthaug 2018) also combines and offers a very condensed version of *TR* reboot (2013) and *ROTTR* (2015) in terms of narrative.

⁵⁷ See Penny (2012), Murphy (2017) and Hamilton (2012).

That being said, old Lara's origin and narrative was continually being reinvented by fans and in fact, because of this and because she is an empty sign, there exists as many versions of old Lara as the number fans she has (Rehak 2003: 482). According to Kennedy (2002: [Sp]), "providing [old] Lara with a (fairly) plausible history gives her some ontological coherence and helps to enhance the immersion of the player in the *Tomb Raider* world, and abets the identification with Lara". New Lara's detailed origin story is not only significant because it was written by a female writer (Rihanna Pratchett), but in addition to the ludological changes that give Lara substance as a character, the existence of a *completely* plausible origin story inevitably lessens the number of reinventions of Lara Croft, and allows players to identify with her more than objectifying her.

Goodwill (2009) adds that the male hero often puts the well-being of humanity above the well-being of himself or his close friends. Evidently, in the style of a true male hero, new Lara has a sense of moral responsibility and often sacrifices close friends (such as Alex and Grimm) for the greater good, but in the style of the female hero, she constantly needs to motivate herself to move forward when faced with self-doubt, and she hesitates before killing because of her stereotypically 'feminine instincts' to protect and preserve life.⁵⁸ As I stated earlier, these changes are not only a clear indication that new Lara is moving away from the postfeminist 'supergirl' ideal, but she might even be reviving in some ways the original female action heroine ideal exemplified by the women in films from the 1970s and 1980s (such as Ripley and Sarah Connor referred to earlier).

Throughout *ROTTR* (2015), and in previous *Tomb Raider* games, Richard Croft's presence is strongly felt. Lara's journey to Kitezh is a continuation of her father's quest; she very often expresses that "this was in dad's notes" or "if only dad could see this", for example. Lara is also frequently encouraged

⁵⁸ Of course, these 'feminine characteristics' of the female hero are also stereotypes and not true for all women, so they need to be questioned and interrogated, but in the case of the female hero, stereotypically feminine behaviour is seen as a positive notion.

by other characters that her father would be proud of her or that “he would have done the same”. At times, Lara experiences vivid flashbacks of her father and she repeatedly listens to his voice notes that he left behind. In *TR* reboot (2013), Lara’s other male mentors (Grimm and Roth) are killed off so in *ROTTR* (2015) only Lara’s deceased father acts as a motivating force behind her. As mentioned earlier, for this reason, Han and Song (2014) assert that new Lara simply mimics the narrative of a male hero.



Figure 21: Interior of Croft Manor – Crypt where Amelia Croft is buried, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, 2016. (Screen shot by the author).

In some ways, Han and Song (2014) are right, but although Richard Croft is a dominant figure in new Lara’s past, in the “Blood Ties” expansion for *ROTTR* (2015), Lara’s late mother is central to the story. The “Blood Ties” story starts with Lara receiving a letter threatening her removal from Croft Manor, as she has no legal claim to the estate. Lara has to find the will in order to prove that she owns the estate. Lara discovers a crypt beneath the Manor where her mother is buried (Figure 21), and this acts as proof that the Manor belongs to her. In the crypt, Lara also finds her mother’s final note to her – Amelia Croft says: “...My energy, my love [is] within you [Lara]. It will always be. Use that energy to pursue your passions in life.” It thus becomes more and more

evident that new Lara inherited many of her heroic qualities from her mother and not only from her father. It is true that Lara's will to redeem her father's name drove her to go on her main quest, as Han and Song (2014) note, but it is because of her mother that she can claim back the estate and reaffirm herself as a Croft.



Figure 22: Exterior of The Prophet's Tomb – Siberia, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, 2015. (Screen shot by the author).

In this way, different locations in the game give rise to different narratives. While Richard Croft's relationship with Lara is largely explored while Lara is in the violent wilderness (Figure 22), Amelia Croft's relationship with her daughter emerges from the private sphere of the deteriorated Croft Manor (Figure 21). In Croft Manor, Lara remains in her jeans and leather jacket and she does not have access to weapons, but rather, weapons and other artifacts are stored in Croft Manor as memorabilia. Lara does not act violently in Croft Manor (unless she is experiencing her nightmare), like a typical male hero might, but rather, her intellectual skills and intuition are utilised to locate the Crypt.

What Goodwill (2009) points out as feminine characteristics of the female hero are therefore exposed in Lara's strange journey through Croft Manor. In the case of new Lara, these are sentimentality (storing artifacts), not acting violently and using intuition. Goodwill (2009: 12) argues that the female hero uses her intuition and instinct to solve problems. While the postfeminist action hero always returns to the private sphere while having mobility in the public sphere (Stasia 2007), new Lara also does so, but instead of doing pointless activities in the private sphere (like old Lara would use Croft Manor to terrorise her butler), now her activities in the private sphere of the Manor have an important impact on her story, which is unheard of for the postfeminist 'supergirl'.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed the ludological and narratological structure of *ROTTR* (2015). It is evident that *ROTTR* (2015) and *TR* reboot (2013) are structured differently than previous *Tomb Raider* games and that Lara Croft is characterised in a more realistic way. In changing to a more 'realistic' version of a strong female hero, new Lara is being portrayed not so much as a postfeminist 'supergirl' (in other words, a female male) described by Genz (2009), but as also possessing traditionally 'female qualities' such as emotions, insecurity, family problems and empathy. Also, because new Lara is more human – and specifically female – she is now easier to identify with and therefore less likely to be objectified by (especially) male gamers (Mikula 2003). Because of this, new Lara has become the active subject, without having to use her sexuality to do so, and in turn has become less objectified while also subverting the objectifying male gaze to some extent.

To briefly summarise the differences between old Lara and new Lara, firstly, new Lara is increasingly portrayed as a human being rather than the idealised action heroine of her predecessors. Secondly, more gaming modes are introduced in *ROTTR* (2015) and these influence the characterisation of Lara Croft by exploring her physical limits and troubled psyche. Thirdly, Lara is more naïve and grows throughout the game instead of being overly confident

in everything she does from the beginning. And finally, Lara is given a detailed origin story and her mother's past is also explored in more detail.

For these reasons, new Lara does not fit the trope of the postfeminist action hero that has circulated in popular culture over the last almost two decades. Instead, she marks a transformation of the postfeminist 'supergirl' into a new type of female hero that might even be drawing on very old versions of female heroism (displayed in Ripley and Sarah Connor) as a source of empowerment. The characterisation of new Lara might even indicate a return to second wave ideals to some extent. The next chapter contextualises the preceding analysis of *ROTTR* (2015) by identifying the specific portrayal of the female hero as she is exemplified by new Lara in other recent videogames.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE NEW LARA PHENOMENON

4.1 Introduction

What I have attempted to show in the previous chapters is that Lara Croft, or what I termed, 'old Lara', emerged in line with the advent of postfeminism along with the growing popularity of videogames. Old Lara not only emerged as the "monstrous offspring of science", postfeminism and videogame culture (Kennedy 2002: [Sp]), but she became the embodiment of postfeminist ideals and the epitome of the postfeminist 'supergirl' as outlined by Genz (2009). Old Lara was also accompanied by many other postfeminist action heroines in videogames, such as *BloodRayne* (2002), *Bayonetta* (2009) and Morrigan from *Dragon Age Origins* (2009). Although these action heroines are very different from old Lara in some instances,⁵⁹ old Lara and her contemporaries have, in their individual ways, subverted *and* reinforced harmful stereotypes of women and female game characters,⁶⁰ while also paving the way for other powerful female videogame protagonists. Jansz and Martis (2007) termed this 'the Lara phenomenon'.

The Lara phenomenon was not only apparent in videogames, but also in film, television series and in comic books released in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, which depicted postfeminist 'supergirls'. Notable postfeminist 'supergirls' in film include Trinity from *The Matrix* (Wachowski & Wachowski 1999),⁶¹ Beatrix Kiddo from *Kill Bill* (Tarantino 2003)⁶² and the

⁵⁹ *BloodRayne*, for example, wears high heels, make-up and a revealing red dress that resembles dominatrix-style clothing where *Bayonetta* wears a tight body suit with glasses.

⁶⁰ As Jansz and Martis (2007) rightly point out, before the emergence of more powerful women in videogames, female videogame characters were mostly portrayed as being submissive to men, either being a princess, or a wise elderly woman, who often had to be rescued by the male protagonist.

⁶¹ Geller (2004) identifies Trinity as exemplary of the "tough chick" found in Hollywood cinema at the turn of the century, and Kennedy (2002) discusses Trinity in conjunction with old Lara as "stunting bodies" (or in other words, the postfeminist 'supergirl').

⁶² Henry (2010) compares Kiddo's redemption to that of the *femme fatale*, which is a term often used to describe postfeminist old Lara.

Angels from *Charlie's Angels* (McG 2000)⁶³ and on television, Buffy from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997)⁶⁴ and Xena from *Xena, Warrior Princess* (1995),⁶⁵ to name a few. Similar to old Lara, these women are often discussed in gender debates as they also embody both everything that is good about portrayals of women in media and everything that is bad (Mikula 2003: 79-80).

In comic books also, a number of powerful (and very often hypersexualised) female heroes and villains started appearing in the late twentieth century (Madrid 2016: 286). Many of these comic book heroines, such as Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, Catwoman, Rogue, The Bionic Woman, and She Hulk, to name only a few, even boasted their own comic book series. Characters such as Wonder Woman, who has since her creation had a complicated relationship with feminism,⁶⁶ started to display the “hypergendered backlash to the gains of the feminist movements” in the 1990s, when she was increasingly portrayed with clothing that emphasised her breasts, thighs and buttocks, and with protruding muscles accompanying her big bosoms (Cocca 2014: 99). These enhancements were considered suitable for the ‘new’ postfeminist context (Figure 23).

⁶³ Levine (2008) considers how the reinvention of *Charlie's Angels* in twenty-first century cinema reveals how postfeminism has intertwined itself into American popular culture. Geller (2004) also discusses the Angels in conjunction with Trinity as exemplary of the “tough chick” in cinema, and Stasia (2007) includes the *Charlie's Angels* in her discussion of the postfeminist action heroine.

⁶⁴ Buffy is at the forefront of postfeminist discussions and is often discussed in conjunction to Lara Croft and the other ‘supergirls’ listed above. See Rehak (2003), O'Reilly (2005), Pender (2007), Kennedy (2004) and Negra (2009), for example.

⁶⁵ Magoulick (2006) outlines the contradictions of the ‘supergirl’ inherent in Xena.

⁶⁶ Gloria Steinem labeled Wonder Woman as a feminist icon by putting her on the cover of *Ms.* magazine in 1972, but as Hanley (2014: x-xi) notes, Wonder Woman's history is filled with contradictions and at times, she even moved in the opposite direction of women's liberation efforts in the late twentieth century.



Figure 23: Cover of *Wonder Woman* #36, 2011. (Comixology).

I have shown though that since 2013, Lara Croft underwent a makeover – what I termed ‘new Lara’ – and that this new version of Lara Croft is a move away from the postfeminist action hero in videogames in terms of her characterisation, her narrative and the ludological elements present in the game. Du Preez (2000: 5) reminds us that popular culture characters, such as old and new Lara, are merely archetypes or “dream/fantasy/poetic-images” of our time, and that archetypes inevitably change according to the social context.

This chapter attempts to articulate what the characteristics of this new action heroine archetype that new Lara exemplifies are and to what extent they are reflected in new Lara’s contemporaries. The chapter then draws conclusions about whether this archetype – the *new* Lara phenomenon – is influenced by the context of changing structures in the videogame industry and what the

implications of this new videogame character type are for the industry. Finally, I begin to answer the question of what this new hero type might mean for the representation of women in the videogame industry (as characters, creators and players), and visual culture more generally.

4.2 The new female hero archetype

As has been argued throughout, Lara Croft was one of the first notable female heroes in videogames and remains “a leading model and mythical signifier for female protagonists” (Han & Song 2014: 27). After 2013, other female protagonists that closely resemble the characteristics of new Lara as laid out in Chapter Three have gradually started emerging, just as new heroines emerged twenty years ago with the birth of old Lara. This section summarises the characteristics of new Lara and shows how, in many ways, these traits are replicated in other videogame heroines that appear in videogames released after 2013. The two prime post-2013 videogame heroines that I discuss in this Chapter are Aloy from the action-adventure game, *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), and Senua from the psychological thriller, *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* (2017). The discussion surrounding Aloy and Senua is also aided by the mention of a variety of other post-2013 female videogame heroes.

4.2.1 Androgyny (non-sexualisation)

The first and most apparent change made from old Lara to new Lara and the most noticeable in recent female protagonists is the abandonment of hyperfeminisation and sexualisation in these characters’ appearances. This trend was confirmed by Lynch et al. (2016) who, after studying 571 videogames released between 1983 and 2014, noted a decline in the sexualisation of female characters between 2007 and 2014. This trend is displayed in characters such as Ellie from *The Last of Us* (2013) (Figure 24), Cassandra Pentaghast and other female characters from *Dragon Age Inquisition* (2014), Lyris from *Elder Scrolls Online* (2014), Evie Frye from *Assassins Creed Syndicate* (2015) (Figure 27), Joule from *Recore* (2016),

Zarya and Brigitte from *Overwatch* (2016) and Emily from *Dishonored* (2012) and *Dishonored 2* (2016) (Figure 25), to mention only a few.



Figure 24: Ellie from *The Last of Us*, 2013. (The Last of Us Wiki).



Figure 25: Emily from *Dishonored 2*, 2016. (Gaming Illuminaughty).

As seen in Figure 25 especially, many of these characters are not only less feminised and sexualised than previous videogame heroines, but they are becoming increasingly androgynous. Zarya from *Overwatch* (2016), which has won many game-of-the-year awards and is played by over thirty-five million people worldwide in 2017 (Statista 2018),⁶⁷ is even discussed as a ‘butch’ female character on the Blizzard forums, for example. Equally, Cassandra from *Dragon Age Inquisition* (2014) boasts short hair and full armour in contrast to the notorious *World of Warcraft* (2004) heroines whose armor ironically became more revealing as the statistic that measures their armours’ defense increased. Cassandra and Zarya are also ‘tanks’, which is a class traditionally associated with male characters since they take the most damage and fight at the forefront of the battle. Instead of conforming to the hypersexualised representation of female bodies, as postfeminist heroines do (Stasia 2007), these women – including new Lara – show the introduction of a range of different versions of femininity entering videogame culture.

4.2.2 Outfits

Two recent videogames whose heroines very closely mimic new Lara are *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) and *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* (2017). Although I cannot undertake a thorough analysis of each game here, I do want to show that these post-*ROTTR* videogames resemble *ROTTR* (2015) both ludologically and narratologically, as well as in terms of the characterisation of the female protagonists. These games were not made by women (all of the lead programmers for both games are male), and there is no concrete evidence suggesting that they were made with a female target audience in mind, but on the forums both male and female gamers express their approval of many of these characters. Particularly in the case of Aloy, male and female

⁶⁷ It is interesting that in 2018, a new category named “Game Beyond Entertainment” has been introduced into the British Academy Games Awards. The category recognises games that “raise awareness through empathy and emotional impact, [engages] with real world problems, or [makes] the world a better place” (BAFTA 2018). Games such as *Overwatch* (2016) may be including more marginalised characters with these goals in mind.

gamers make comments such as “she’s pretty cool” and “more games with a female protagonist...certainly wouldn’t hurt”.⁶⁸

First, Aloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) (Figure 26) and Senua from *Hellblade* (2017) (Figure 28) are not sexualised in terms of their clothing nor are they hyperfeminised in terms of bodily proportions, just like the other heroines mentioned above. Like new Lara, Aloy’s outfits are not merely cosmetic but they have ludological consequences for the gamer. For example, the Oseram Sparkworker outfit provides Aloy with extra resistance against shock damage, where the Carja Blazon outfit provides increased resistance against fire damage (Horizon Zero Dawn Wiki [Sa]). Similarly, Evie Frye from *Assassins Creed Syndicate* (2015) (Figure 27) also gains extra carrying capacity for daggers, or extra stealth depending on which outfit and cloak she is wearing.



Figure 26: Aloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn*, 2017. (Loeffler, J).

⁶⁸ See Gamespot’s (2015) forum discussion on “What do female gamers think of Horizon Zero Dawn?”.

4.2.3 Game complexity

Vermeulen and Van Looy (2016: 290) distinguish between games associated with female gamers and games associated with male gamers. According to Vermeulen and Van Looy (2016: 290), “casual games”, that are characterised by their low complexity and short play time, are supposedly popular among female gamers, where action-adventure games, such as the ones discussed in this chapter, are considered as masculine “hardcore play” that is superior to “casual games” because of their complexity (Vermeulen and Van Looy 2016: 290). Aloy, as well as other recent heroines, such as Cassandra Pentaghast and Evie Frye, use the same complex skill and weapon tier system as new Lara. Very similar to new Lara, Aloy’s skills are divided into Prowler, Brave and Forager, which are equivalent to Hunter, Brawler and Survivor for new Lara. In addition to the tier system and the environment-sensitive outfits, *ROTTR* (2015) and *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) rely on a weapon and gear crafting system. Evidently, it seems that these new heroines have the skill and weapon tier system, as well as the crafting function, previously unassociated with videogames that feature postfeminist action heroines.⁶⁹

Moreover, the fact that almost half of the gaming population that is now female (ESA 2017) also buys these and plays these games means that the perception that women are unable to play highly involved games is steadily breaking down. In other words, although the majority of game culture is still stereotypically male, white and heterosexual and the videogame industry “continues to create content that panders towards the presumed preferences of a young, male, heterosexual audience” (Paaßen, Morgenroth & Stratemeyer 2017: 421), women are occupying a space in this community by also being able to play and enjoy “hardcore play” games.

⁶⁹ Of course old *Tomb Raider* games are also action-adventure games, so should therefore fall under the “hardcore games” category, but it is not so much the category of the game that is important, but the fact that according to statistics, women are now *actually playing* “hardcore games” where in the past they did not (ESA 2017). In 2017, the percentage of action and adventure games sold (30.3%) significantly outweighs the percentage of “casual games” sold (4.1%) (ESA 2017).

4.2.4 Characterisation

In addition to consisting of more intricate ludological mechanics, both Aloy and Senua are similar to new Lara in that they are not two-dimensional in their characterisation both physically and in terms of their personalities. Notably, both Aloy and Senua were also created with motion capture technology, with the result that they are capable of highly realistic bodily movements and facial expressions. Of course, Aloy and Senua are not icons and “empty signs” to the extent that old Lara is, because they have not existed for as long, but I argue that because these characters experience and show a wide variety of emotions, they transcend the status of simply being a vehicle or an “empty sign” that the player uses to navigate the game. In other words, they become *characters* in their own right (Rehak 2003: 482). In addition to that, because they can display such a wide variety of emotions due to motion capture technology, they effectively communicate emotions such as compassion and fear.

A more detailed account of these characters’ emotional complexity is explored in *Hellblade* (2017) since the game specifically deals with Senua’s mental state of being. In fact, the entire game is a type of nightmare that Senua experiences, and is very similar to Lara’s Nightmare in *ROTTR* (2015) in terms of gameplay and narrative. Senua has to kill metaphorical manifestations of her fears like new Lara who can escape her nightmare only when she destroys the ‘Skulls of Rage’ while fighting off reincarnations of the people she has killed in the past. These characters therefore display an increasing moral complexity that the postfeminist heroines lacked and now female action heroes have a back-story that provides a context for their strength, ambition and endurance.

Finally, in terms of combat, even though these heroines still kill many people and remain overtly violent, like their postfeminist predecessors also did, they use stealth rather than force in their combat styles. Adrian Smith, who was Core Design’s product designer, notes about Lara Croft that they “wanted the character to be coy and stealthy and agile” as it “[fits] more with a woman”

(Sawyer 1997: 62). Although Smith is talking about old Lara, old Lara is by far not as stealthy as new Lara due to their differences in ludological structure. From this statement though, it is evident that stealth is associated with female fighters. The fighting style employed by these heroines can to some extent also be considered as demasculinised and demilitarised, as Kirkland (2009) points out in an analysis of *Silent Hill* (1999). According to Kirkland (2009: 172) stealth and “running away” as a strategy provides a demasculinised gameplay experience, regardless of whether the protagonist is male or female.

In *Assassins Creed Syndicate* (2015), for example, the player can choose to play predominantly with Evie (Figure 27) or her brother, Jacob Frye, depending on the player’s preferred combat style. The player may choose Jacob as his combat style involves one-on-one combat and brawling, where Evie’s combat style relies on stealth and agility while generally avoiding one-on-one combat. For these reasons, both male and female gamers are able to identify with these female characters even better, as they are not only more convincingly human, but the overall increasing realism of these games creates greater degrees of immersion for the gamer (Kuo et al. 2017). More importantly, their detailed characterisation allows for a much more authentic construction of femininity compared to the postfeminist action heroines, who rely solely on their highly sexualised appearance to make them ‘female’.

Kennedy (2002) argues that the male gamer becomes transgendered when he plays as (old) Lara, because distinctions between the gamer and the character become blurred. This identity is subversive in that the “secure and heavily defended polarities of masculine and feminine subjectivities” are broken down (Kennedy 2002: [Sp]). However, because old Lara’s femininity is constructed with only two exaggerated signifiers (her breasts and buttocks), and not in terms of her character and fighting style, she is not a ‘feminine character’ in any real sense, and this undermines the transgendering process (Kennedy 2002). Because new Lara’s femininity, as well as Aloy’s, Senua’s, and Evie’s femininity, is constructed through their complex characterisation and gameplay, the transgendering process can happen more effectively. For

example, in a gameplay walkthrough video of the ‘rape scene’ in *TR* reboot (2013) discussed earlier, a male gamer makes comments such as “don’t touch me” when the perpetrator touches (new) Lara.⁷⁰ Furthermore, he cheers for her throughout the scene, effectively blurring the lines between masculine and feminine subjectivity and showing his emotional identification with Lara.



Figure 27: Evie Frye
from *Assassins Creed
Syndicate*, 2015.
(US Gamer).

4.2.5 Vulnerability

Another notable aspect about new Lara that is replicated in other post-2013 heroines is her vulnerability. Senua’s brutal and unpleasant deaths resemble those of new Lara in both *TR* reboot (2013) and *ROTTR* (2015). In addition to dying in increasingly violent ways, Senua cannot reincarnate infinitely so she is not “resolutely immortal” like old Lara (Kennedy 2002: [Sp]). At the beginning of *Hellblade* (2017), when Senua dies for the first time, a warning comes up that lets the player know that should Senua die a certain number of times, the entire game will be lost and the player has to start again from the beginning. In Lara’s Nightmare also, if Lara dies, the game is completely lost

⁷⁰ See Felix Hazel’s (2017) *TR* reboot (2013) walkthrough video on YouTube.

and the player has to start over. This feature makes new videogame heroines seem entirely vulnerable compared to postfeminist predecessors that reincarnate infinitely.



Figure 28: Senua from *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, 2017. (Fairme, E).

Another feature that makes the player and Senua experience vulnerability is the total lack of a tutorial system in *Hellblade* (2017). Similar to *ROTTR* (2015), and in *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) too, the tutorial system happens throughout the game rather than in the beginning; in *Hellblade* (2017), the player in fact never gets told how to play the game, even as the game progresses. The player has to figure out *Hellblade's* (2017) controls based on prior videogame playing experience. This means that just like new Lara, Aloy and Senua are initially prisoners of their landscapes, instead of the landscape being dominated by them from the beginning. Aloy only gains the expertise to kill the machines that hunt her later in the game, where Senua is left to feel lost and uncertain for the entire game. This system contrasts not only with older *Tomb Raider* games, but also with other games with notable postfeminist heroines such as *BloodRayne* (2002) and *Bayonetta* (2009) who

are in complete control of their respective game worlds from the beginning of the game to the end.

A relatively new feminist identity that has emerged in feminist debates recently is 'feral feminism'. Kelly Struthers Montfort and Chloe Taylor (2016) attempt to lay out the characteristics of the 'feral feminist' by comparing her to feral animals. Montfort and Taylor (2016) use the characteristics of the feral animal compared to the situation of twenty-first century feminists in a more metaphorical sense, but for the purpose of this study, a more direct comparison between the feral animal and female videogame and film characters proves to be quite useful.

Firstly, according to Montfort and Taylor (2016: 5), "On the one hand, we celebrate the freedom of ferals from human domination" (and in the case of feral feminists, the freedom from patriarchal oppression), but on the other hand, ferals are often also "highly vulnerable". In the case of new Lara and the post-2013 videogame heroines, as well as some recent heroines in film, such as Katniss Everdeen, the feral feminist identity could apply to them because of their increasing vulnerability. In a feral feminist analysis of *The Hunger Games* (Ross 2012), Katha Pollitt (2012: 10) points out that "Katniss is underfed" and it is evident from the "desperate" situation that Katniss is placed in against her will, that she experiences vulnerability as she, like new Lara (in the beginning), "kills only in self-defense".

Just as feral animals, the feral feminist is also left to fend for herself (Montfort & Taylor 2016). As is the case for Katniss Everdeen who needs to survive the Hunger Games in the arena by gathering resources and fighting for survival, the new videogame heroines discussed above are left in the threatening wild and uncertain videogame environment "to fend for themselves", which contributes to their vulnerability (Montfort & Taylor 2016: 5). As I mentioned in Chapter Three, new Lara starts off with no weapons and skills, and she has to gather resources in the wilderness to craft weapons and gear throughout the game. The same concept is applied in *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) where Aloy also needs to gather resources to craft with for her survival.

4.2.6 Origin story

Like old Lara, BloodRayne and Bayonetta do not have detailed origin stories. They simply exist as empty signs in any space and time within the game world. Like new Lara, however, both Senua and Aloy have origin stories and they occupy a definite time in history, Aloy perhaps even more so than Senua. *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) is set in a post-apocalyptic future and starts off with Aloy as a young child. The cut scenes in the beginning of the game further explain her origin in detail. The player even plays as ten-year-old Aloy for the first thirty minutes of the game and learns together with Aloy as she grows up. This means that these characters, like new Lara, are less likely to be reinvented in contexts where they are subjugated. For instance, BloodRayne and old Lara have often appeared in Playboy magazines, which is indicative of postfeminism's utter failure to take command of women's empowerment. These are unlikely possible transformations for Aloy, Senua, new Lara and the other new action heroines discussed here though.

It is worthy to note that many of the post-2013 videogame heroines are also depicted as young girls. Ellie, Emily Kaldwin, and ten-year-old Aloy are not only shown as their young selves in cut-scenes (like old Lara was – see the introductory scene to *Tomb Raider Underworld* (2008) for example), but they are actually *playable* as young girls. These young versions of the characters are not sexualised, and they grow up to be the non-sexualised protagonists of the games, so they are not “eternally young female automation[s]” like old Lara (Schleiner 2001: 225). I suggest that by letting the (male) player embody the infant female character at the beginning of the game (or for the entire game), she is less likely to be objectified by the gamer when she is played in her adult form.

4.2.7 Mentors

Another important feature of new heroines whose depiction are in line with new Lara is that they do not have male mentors and if they have, they are

eventually separated or the mentor dies. Sometimes the male mentor is even replaced or overshadowed by a mother figure. For Aloy, her male caretaker who guides her and teaches her everything in the beginning of the game eventually separates from her while she is on her main quest to find her mother. Senua too receives some help from a male friend early in the game, but ultimately finds that he betrayed her and then relies on the female voice that guides her throughout the game and that narrates her journey.

Similarly, even Evie Frye has no male mentor to begin with, and she often stands up against her brother's authority and even goes her own way for most of the game when she has a disagreement with him. Likewise, Cassandra Pentaghast is the esteemed Seeker who overthrows the male priest's authority and ultimately saves the main protagonist of the game who can be either male or female depending on the player's choice. This contrasts with postfeminist women who, despite being 'powerful' are always shadowed by a male mentor or father figure, such as Charlie who helps his angels in *Charlie's Angels* (McG 2000), and Giles who helps *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997), or the range of male mentors that shadowed old Lara, such as Grimm, Roth, her father, and her butler, Winston (Stasia 2007: 244). The lack of a male mentor also contributes to the notion of these new heroines having to "fend for themselves" (Montfort & Taylor 2016: 5).

4.2.8 Private sphere

Additionally, according to Stasia (2007: 244), the postfeminist action heroine sells "traditional notions of women's power" because she always returns to the private sphere even though she has mobility in the public sphere. Although the new heroine sometimes still returns to the private sphere, such as Katniss from *The Hunger Games* (Ross 2012) who marries Peta and has a baby after saving her district, this is not always the case. Aloy is left to wander the wilderness alone and Senua is eaten up by the rot that has manifested in her, not having reached her goal of finding her lover, Dillon. In these cases, the female protagonists do not return to the private sphere at all, and if they do,

like new Lara, the private sphere is not used for spending the rest of their days passively until they are called to adventure again.

Another characteristic of the feral feminist that is worth discussing here is her liminality. For Montfort and Taylor (2016: 6), feral animals are “apart from the society in which they nonetheless live” which “parallels to being feminists in a misogynist society”. Aloy, for example, is considered an outsider from the very start of the game, and she operates in the liminal outskirts for most of the game. Even after completing her quest, as mentioned above, Aloy wanders in the outside of her society and is never accepted into it. Pollitt (2012: 10) interestingly also notes that Katniss “has qualities usually given to boys”, while also being feminine at the same time, such as new Lara and the other heroines discussed in this chapter. This quality puts Katniss (and post-2013 videogame heroines) in a liminal position to the young adult heroine, such as Bella Swan from *Twilight* (Hardwicke 2008) who only has boys on her mind (Pollitt 2012).

At this point in the discussion it should also be noted that postfeminist action heroines are financially well-off most of the time, such as old Lara who has inherited great wealth from her father or the Charlie’s Angels who are always fashionably dressed. In addition, Stasia (2007: 238) describes the postfeminist body as one that is “almost exclusively white and middle-class”. The new female hero, however, is not affluent from the start, if she has any financial wealth at all. New Lara has to first fight for her inheritance (and in the 2018 *Tomb Raider* film even denies her inheritance initially), while crafting and stealing weapons in the wilderness, and Aloy and Senua never enjoy any form of financial luxury; they simply create what they need from the land.

4.2.9 Race

Stasia (2007) maintains that if the postfeminist action heroine is not white, her race is ignored. Even this demographic is starting to change as is evident in the massively popular online shooter (which can be considered a ‘hardcore game’), *Destiny 2* (2017) that includes two women of colour namely Ikora

(Figure 29), who is an African American woman and Suraya, who is a native American woman. The latest *Destiny 2* expansion titled *Warmind* (2018) even features an Asian female protagonist. The winner of 130 game-of-the-year awards, *Dragon Age Inquisition* (2015), includes Vivienne, an African mage who fights alongside the protagonist and Josephine, an Indian advisor to the Herald of Andraste. These women of colour also have the characteristics of the new female hero as outlined in this chapter, and although they are not the main protagonists in these games, it may not be long before we see more women of colour emerging as main characters in games.



Figure 29: Ikora from *Destiny 2*, 2017. (News ledge).

4.2.10 Future titles

As is evident in this discussion, recent games seem to not only feature more female protagonists, but the protagonists closely model the archetype of new Lara. Of course, not all aspects of every heroine in every game released after 2013 models new Lara, but female characters have nevertheless undergone a dramatic change compared to female protagonists before 2013. This new type of heroine and ludological structure of the games seems to be becoming a

new genre for female-fronted role-playing games. In 2018, over thirty games that feature notable female heroes will be released (Henry 2018), some of these games following the portrayal and ludological and narratological structure of ‘the new Lara phenomenon’ more closely than others.

The titles with female leads released in 2018 that closely display the new Lara phenomenon will include *Monster Hunter World* (2018), *The Inpatient* (2018), *Crackdown 3* (2018) that features another ‘butch’ female character, *Indivisible* (2018), *Detroit: Become Human* (2018), *Overkill’s The Walking Dead* (2018) and *Pathfinder: Kingmaker* (2018). A notable title is the critically acclaimed and best-selling *Far Cry 5* (2018), which allows the player to choose a female protagonist for the first time in the franchise’s fourteen-year history (Henry 2018); this protagonist adopts many of new Lara’s characteristics (Figure 30). Furthermore, at least five of the thirty titles with female characters released in 2018 will feature women of colour or will allow the player to customise the protagonist to be a woman of colour.

These positive changes have been met with resistance by the (still mainly) male-dominated videogame industry in some instances though. For example, very recently, (male) players complained about the inclusion of female fighters in the latest *Battlefield* game, titled *Battlefield V* (2018), as they felt that it is historically inaccurate, since the game claims to be based on the historical event of World War Two (Cooper 2018). It is positive to note though that despite the backlash by male gamers (the game trailer received over 300 000 dislikes on YouTube because of the inclusion of female fighters), the (male) director of the game, Oscar Gabrielson, stood firm in his decision to allow players to choose to fight with female fighters in the game, as the aim for *Battlefield V* (2018) is to “represent all those who were a part of the greatest drama in human history”, including women (Cooper 2018). The female fighters in *Battlefield V* (2018) are also not sexualised and they are in line with the representation of new Lara. Moreover, based on Gabrielson’s decision to keep female fighters in the game, it is evident that Electronic Arts considers women as a worthy target market since it is assumed that women would like to be able to play with a female avatar.



Figure 30: Grace from *Far Cry 5*, 2018. (Henry, J).

There are many reasons for the emergence of these new female heroines. One fundamental reason may be because gaming technology now allows for more detailed programming, which inevitably has an impact on the appearances and narratives of these women and the worlds that they occupy (Kuo et al. 2017: 102). This could be one reason why this type of hero is only starting to emerge now and not in 2008, where characters consisted of mere polygons. This reason does not account for the changes in the characters' narratives and the ludological structure of the games though. The next section explores additional factors that may have been influential in the radical transformation that female videogame protagonists have undergone in the last ten years.

4.3 Impact of the videogame industry

Several factors can be credited for the emergence of the new Lara phenomenon. I argue that even though women still occupy a very small

portion of the gaming programming industry (according to the IGDA (2015: 11), the percentage of female programmers has decreased from comprising 51% of programmers in the industry in 2012 to only 22% in 2015), there is growing awareness of gender and racial inequality in the videogame industry. Although cyberfeminism has not reached its goals (that I discuss in Chapter Two) in many instances, especially during its early phases, it has nevertheless provided the necessary backdrop for recent shifts in gender relations in the videogame industry.

Firstly, some big gaming companies acknowledge that white males (used to) occupy the majority of positions in the creation of videogames, and they make efforts to change that. In the beginning of *Assassins Creed Syndicate* (2015), for example, before the game starts, the player is notified that the game was created by a team of programmers that consists of people with different genders, races, religions and sexual orientations. The effects of having a wide variety of people work on a game is also reflected in the game, that has a desexualised female protagonist, provides the player with a choice between the gender of the protagonist, as discussed above, and includes other historical feminist female characters, such as Florence Nightingale, for example.

Bethesda game studios also seem to be making increasing efforts to emphasise racial and gender inclusivity within the studio.⁷¹ In the introductory videos to the 2017 and 2018 Bethesda E3 briefings, Bethesda does not start off by showing the games that they made, but the *people* who made the games (Gamespot 2017; 2018b). The 2018 Bethesda E3 introductory video shows a white mother taking her children to school, an Asian young adult in a yoga studio, a white male running, an Indian girl playing guitar, and other various types of people and identifies all of them as videogame creators (Gamespot 2018b). Bethesda states in the cinematic that “it takes every single one of [the people in the video] to make [Bethesda] games” (Gamespot

⁷¹ Bethesda is responsible for games such as *Dishonored 2* (2016), *The Elder Scrolls Online* (2014), and *Fallout 4* (2015), all of which feature female characters that fit the new Lara archetype.

2018b). Even though most of Bethesda's top positions are still occupied by white males, such as Pete Hines, who is Bethesda's Global Senior Vice President, and Todd Howard, who is Game Director at Bethesda, the introductory videos indicate an increased awareness of inclusivity not only in the consumption, but also in the creation of videogames.

Furthermore, even though these are isolated cases, some women occupy chief positions in the videogame industry.⁷² Notable women include Kiki Wolfkill, who is an executive producer at Microsoft's 343 Industries game design studio and who is responsible for development on the groundbreaking first-person shooter game franchise, *Halo* (2001-2017) that sold over sixty million copies worldwide (Gaudiosi 2014). Bonnie Ross too, who is Corporate Vice President and also founder of 343 Industries, was responsible for defining the vision of the best-selling *Halo Masterchief Collection* (2014) and *Halo 5: Guardians* (2015). Lucy Bradshaw is Senior Vice President at the big game design studio, Maxis, and she oversees *The Sims* (2000) and *SimCity* (2002) at Electronic Arts (Gaudiosi 2013).

Moreover, in 2018, at the E3 conference, female developers were also invited on stage to present detailed information on new games that they were involved in. Game director, Cornelia Geppert, for example, explained at E3 2018 how the adventure game, *Sea of Solitude* (2019), is her most artistic and ambitious project to date (Electronic Arts 2018). At E3 2018, women were also representing big gaming companies, such as Microsoft, at their briefings. Head of engineering at Xbox, Ashley Spiker, for example, explained how she and her team have come up with innovative ways to make Xbox Game Pass⁷³ services faster and more efficient for gamers (Gamespot 2018a).

Where women are involved in higher positions in the creation of videogames, the games tend to be more progressive in their portrayals of women and in

⁷² See Johnson (2017) and Gaudiosi (2013; 2014) for comprehensive lists of high-ranking women in the gaming industry.

⁷³ Xbox Game Pass is a subscription service that provides gamers access to a catalogue of Xbox games and play these games for a monthly fee (Henderson 2018).

the case of *Sea of Solitude* (2019), more representative of female subjectivity.⁷⁴ For Lara Croft, Rihanna Pratchett's involvement as head writer of *TR* reboot (2013) and *ROTTR* (2015) had a substantial impact on the characterisation of new Lara. Similarly, Kiki Wolfkill's and Bonnie Ross's pivotal roles in 343 Industries impacted on the way women are portrayed in *Halo* (2001-2017). Kiki Wolfkill worked on *Halo 4* (2012) and *Halo 5: Guardians* (2015) (Gaudiosi 2014), both of which include an elderly female general who is credited with saving the world from destruction by inventing the Spartans. The main protagonist is also guided by a female Artificial Intelligence, named Cortana (in contrast to other games having a male guide most of the time). There are also female Spartans in *Halo 5* (2015) that resemble new Lara. Furthermore, half of the fan base of *The Sims* (2000), which was overseen by Lucy Bradshaw and has sold over a hundred million copies worldwide, is made up of women (Gaudiosi 2013).

As mentioned earlier, women were more actively involved in the creation of *TR* reboot (2013) and *ROTTR* (2015) too. In both games, more than seventeen women were part of the lead design team and the stories for both of the games were written by female scriptwriter, Rihanna Pratchett. Although women were not heavily involved in the creation of *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) and *Hellblade* (2017), perhaps owing to the fact that the new *Tomb Raider* games (2013; 2015) received such critical acclaim, developers may be exploring the possibilities of creating more games with female protagonists that resemble new Lara, as I have argued above.⁷⁵

That being said, more women are playing games and they are good at it too. In 2017, 67% of households in the United States own a gaming device, and 41% of them are women (ESA 2017). The emergence of esports, which is

⁷⁴ From promotional material, it is evident that Kay's journey from *Sea of Solitude* (2019) is similar in subject matter to that of *Hellblade* (2017) (Electronic Arts 2018).

⁷⁵ It has become evident throughout that film heroines are often mimicked by videogame heroines and *vice versa*. The first *Hunger Games* film was released in 2012 and due to Katniss Everdeen's unequalled popularity, the characterisation of new Lara may to some extent have been influenced by Everdeen's. As I have discussed throughout, Everdeen's characterisation is in many ways similar to that of new Lara.

competitive gaming at a professional level, and is predicted to be a \$1.5 billion enterprise by 2020, is also providing platforms for female gamers to compete and subvert negative stereotypes about women and gaming (Dwan 2017). Stephanie Harvey, for example, has won five esports world championships, and Chelsae Sandy is one of the most popular and successful *Call of Duty* (2003-2017) esports athletes in the world (Johnson 2017). But although these women subvert negative stereotypes about women not being competent gamers, there is still a 718% pay gap between male and female esports world champions (Ricchiuto 2018). Gillis (2007) expresses that instead of subverting power relations between men and women, technology has simply reinforced them, and this currently remains true for esports too, and will not change unless critical issues such as the pay gap, for example, are addressed.

Sexism and abuse online also remains a problem for many female gamers. Gillis (2007: 168) insists that “the myth of cyberfeminism”, which is that “women are using cyberspace in powerful and transgressive ways...is far removed from online experiences”. Toxic online gaming environments and inclusivity in online gaming spaces became a topic of conversation in the gaming industry as early as 2013 when Anita Sarkeesian, among other feminist activists in gaming, started questioning feminine tropes and women’s inclusivity in videogames.

More recently, Xbox CEO, Phil Spencer, has also acknowledged discrimination in the videogame industry (Lister 2018b), and the online abuse of women has started being addressed by companies such as Blizzard, Riot and Twitch, who have formed The Fair Play Alliance in 2018, headed by Kimberley Voll. This alliance/organisation aims to take concrete action against sexist (and racist) gamers in online games such as *Overwatch* (2016) and *League of Legends* (2009) (Engelbrecht 2018a). Twitch, which is an online game streaming website and now rivals Netflix and HBO,⁷⁶ has also

⁷⁶ Streaming allows one to watch prerecorded or live videos online without having to download the files beforehand. Streaming services such as Twitch provide better streaming services for viewers who pay a subscription fee, but anyone can stream from Twitch for free.

announced the BroadcastHER grant in 2018 (Lister 2018a). This grant will fund female game streamers, as they do not receive as much funding as their male counterparts (Lister 2018a).

These are only a handful of examples of initiatives employed to reduce the gender gap in gaming. It is evident from this discussion that even though there are still many problems regarding women's positions in gaming, there is also an awareness of the sexualisation and objectification of women in videogames and sexism in the videogame industry and some efforts are being made to address these matters. These statistics and examples also show that the increasing awareness surrounding women in gaming may be a contributing factor to the new Lara phenomenon. As I have shown, as women's status in gaming is improving, so is the representation of female videogame characters, and where women are more involved in the creation of games, the female protagonists tend to be more in line with new Lara. In turn, the more positive representation of popular female heroines also affects perceptions of women in general society.⁷⁷

4.4 Impacts on perceptions of women

The heroines discussed in this chapter reveal a greater range and even entirely new models of femininity for twenty-first century women to aspire to. According to Genz (2006: 339), the postfeminist woman uses her sexuality and femininity as active forms of recognition, motivation and agency. Although the new type of female heroines outlined in this chapter may still be problematic in some instances, they do not use their sexuality and femininity as a means of agency, but rather emphasise other (and for me) more positive female characteristics such as emotional complexity, vulnerability, independence, and survival instincts. This is a move in a positive direction for

⁷⁷ A study by Dill & Thill (2007) found that stereotypes perpetuated in videogames are held even by non-gamers, which means that the portrayal of videogame characters influences society's perceptions of men and women. One can therefore deduct that if the representation of characters were to become more positive, so will gamers and non-gamers' perceptions of masculinity and more specifically in the case of this study, femininity.

women as the postfeminist 'supergirl' sets unrealistic standards for women (and unrealistic expectations of women by men) that despite their utopian promises of choice and agency, ultimately puts women in an oppressed position.

Of course, just as the postfeminist 'supergirl', this new type of heroine has many positive but also, what some would consider, negative qualities. An aspect that is particularly problematic for the new heroine, especially at a time when violence in videogames is under a lot of scrutiny following the increasing number of shootings in the US,⁷⁸ is the excessively violent deaths that display the mutilation of the female body. Additionally, these characters' enduring violent behaviour still appeals predominantly to male gamers. This may discourage female gamers from playing these games and although I do not agree that violence in videogames is necessarily harmful or that it leads to violent behavior in real life, the mutilation of the female body may indeed be rooted in misogynistic ideals.

Furthermore, like the postfeminist action heroine, this new heroine still functions in the realm of middle-class consumerist and capitalist society, as she is a videogame character and therefore remains inaccessible for many women. This transformation will certainly not change the world for women, but it is an indication that the world for women *is* changing and it is even reflected in the realm of videogames. Finally, for the millions of male gamers in the world too, they can experience more equitable and representative versions of femininity that still present women as powerful, but without objectifying them.

Finally, some may view these heroines' increasing vulnerability as a regression as this supposedly diminishes their agency and autonomy. Anderson (2014) argues though that vulnerability need not necessarily extinguish autonomy. Autonomy, according to Anderson (2014: 137), "is the

⁷⁸ President Trump blamed videogame violence for the mass shootings in Parkland, Florida in the United States in 2018 as the shooter ostensibly played 15 hours of violent videogames every day. Since this incident, the ongoing videogame violence debate has been brought to light once more (Salam & Stack 2018).

ability to appreciate what activities one finds genuinely worthwhile, to figure out how to realize one's ends, to step back from one's felt convictions, and to actually carry out one's intentions in the face of temptations". Indeed, this is exactly what new Lara and her contemporaries do: they (or the player) choose what quests are worthwhile to follow, they figure out how to complete the quests, they overcome their convictions, and ultimately they fulfill the purpose and win the game. Autonomy in this way is not relinquished for the sake of vulnerability.

These heroines' vulnerability therefore does not necessarily signify a negative representation of women in media. Their vulnerability demonstrates that twenty-first century women need not be indestructible like the postfeminist 'supergirl' described by Genz (2009), but that they experience various forms of physical and metaphorical vulnerability all too often induced by patriarchy. Moreover, men playing these videogames can experience female vulnerability through the embodiment of these heroines and can attempt to empathise with threatening situations that women face as a result of patriarchal systems (such as the fear that new Lara experiences when a male NPC tries to take advantage of her – known as the 'controversial rape scene' discussed earlier – for example).

Despite the emergence of the new Lara phenomenon though, many postfeminist women are still visible in videogames. With the increasingly detailed graphics that the new generation consoles afford, these hyperfeminised and oversexualised women are now perceived as even more objectified than before, because they are no longer mere polygons, but instead, they are hyper-real and extremely detailed in their 4k display (Figure 31). Ivy, a character from *Soulcalibur* (1998-2018) has not undergone any changes since her first appearance in the game in 1998, and retains her revealing outfit and oversized breasts in the 2018 installation of the game series (Engelbrecht 2018b) (Figure 31). In fact, most of these fighting games still portray women as oversexualised and hyperfeminised, and characters such as Nina Williams from *Tekken 7* (2018), Jade and Sareena from *Mortal Kombat X* (2015) and Falke from *Street Fighter* (2018), to name only a few,

have not undergone any changes since their first appearances in these long-standing franchises.

Some female protagonists, such as Bayonetta, who will feature in a new Bayonetta game titled *Bayonetta 3* (there is no release date yet) (Sledge 2017), also have not undergone any changes since their initial incarnations. The *Bayonetta 3* trailer (Nintendo 2017) reveals that the new Bayonetta is simply the old sexualised and feminised postfeminist ‘supergirl’ Bayonetta (2009) with better graphics and smoother gameplay. The 2018 remasters of *Bayonetta* (2009) and *Bayonetta 2* (2014) for Nintendo Switch also do not feature a transformed Bayonetta.

In other recent best-selling videogames too, some female NPCs remain sexualised. Cindy Aurum, from the rebooted *Final Fantasy VX* (2016), for example, is still in line with the portrayal of old Lara, as well as Triss Merigold and Keira Metz in *The Witcher 3 Wild Hunt* (2015) and the characters from the online game, *Blade and Soul* (2014). These women are powerful, no doubt, but they nevertheless encourage the male gaze. Comments on YouTube made by male gamers describe Ivy as “thicc” and as “dominatrix” (Figure 31), and many commented that after they saw the gameplay trailer for Ivy, they preordered the game (Bandai Namco Entertainment America 2018). This is an indication that these postfeminist portrayals of women nevertheless objectify them and that some male gamers still buy these games for the sole purpose of satisfying their sexual fantasies.



Figure 31: Ivy from *Soulcalibur 6*, 2018. (Bandai Namco Entertainment America).

4.5 Conclusion

Chapter Three and Chapter Four have laid out the key characteristics of the new action heroine displayed in Lara Croft in *ROTTR* (2015). In this chapter in particular, I have shown that the portrayal of new Lara is not an isolated occurrence and does not only pertain to Lara Croft, but, importantly, that the new Lara phenomenon is also seen in other recent videogames with female heroines. The chapter has extended the discussion in some instances to heroines from film too, and I have drawn on feral feminism as a possible feminist identity to which these characters may subscribe. I have further shown that the new Lara phenomenon is the consequence of changing structures and demographics in the videogame industry where there is a spreading awareness of sexism in videogames and in the videogame industry as a whole. Finally, I have started speculating on what this new female hero might mean for twenty-first century women.

Although videogames and other popular media still have a long way to go regarding the representation of women, what I have noticed is an unquestionable improvement regarding the objectification of women in this industry. Although some games still portray women as sex objects, a niche is opening up in the gaming industry for the representation of women as skillful, intelligent and powerful and which does not demean them. The next chapter concludes the study by very briefly alluding to the emergence of the new Lara phenomenon even more broadly in popular culture – in comics and movies – as well as identifying research areas that this study has not been able to address.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This chapter concludes the study on the representation of Lara Croft in *ROTTR* (2015). I first review the findings of the study, as well as speculate what these findings might mean for twenty-first century women and for the representation of women in popular culture. I then reflect on the contribution of the study and consider gaps in the research. Finally, I briefly overview the possibility of future research, especially by considering an analysis of the *Star Wars* franchise, the *Alien* franchise, and the comic book heroine, Wonder Woman, in terms of the new Lara phenomenon.

5.1 Summary of chapters

As has been clearly shown in Chapters Three and Four of this dissertation, the representation of Lara Croft and of other women in videogames has changed significantly over the past two to three decades. From the 1990s onward the women were mostly portrayed in the mass media as what Stephanie Genz (2009) identified as the postfeminist 'supergirl', and old Lara, who was created in the 1990s, became the epitome of the postfeminist 'supergirl' in videogames. In line with the contradictions inherent in the politics of postfeminism and postmodernism, old Lara became both a positive and a negative role model for early twenty-first century women.

It is important to note that old Lara was the product of an uncertain postmodern society, where white masculine hegemony, especially in the videogame industry, was the norm. As I have shown in Chapter Two, old Lara was created by Toby Gard and by a male-dominated team of programmers. For this reason, old Lara embodied militarist and masculine values, while also being powerful and independent. For these reasons, and due to the advent of postfeminism, old Lara was therefore portrayed as both an object of the male gaze and a feminist icon. For twelve years, from 1996 to 2008, Lara Croft's representation did not undergo any major changes, and she continued to embody these contradictory values.

Old Lara's change from the embodiment of the postfeminist 'supergirl' in videogames to new Lara, who in many ways embodies the very opposite of the postfeminist action heroine, became apparent for the first time after 2013, when Lara Croft and the *Tomb Raider* series were rebooted by Crystal Dynamics and lead writer, Rihanna Pratchett. Just as postfeminism has become somewhat irrelevant for many women, especially within the last five years, old Lara has also become outdated. As I have shown in Chapter Four, due to an increasing awareness of women's subjugated position in media and in the videogame industry specifically, Lara Croft inevitably underwent a drastic transformation.

The new type of hero that Lara Croft now exemplifies clearly moves away from the postfeminist action heroine ideal, but does not necessarily present a better version of femininity *per se*. New Lara is simply a *different* version of femininity, or as Du Preez (2000: 5) terms it, another "archetype" that exists among still, at times, pervasive postfeminist portrayals of women, as well as other versions of femininity not articulated in this dissertation. In my view at least, new Lara is a more positive and representative version of femininity in the twenty-first century though, mainly due to the fact that she retains her agency and strength without being openly objectified. In my opinion, the type of female hero that new Lara exemplifies is also more representative of women's real-lived experiences in a patriarchal society, as a lot of emphasis is placed on new Lara's vulnerability, and she is by far a more attainable version of femininity compared to the unrealistic postfeminist action heroine. Although I did not have the liberty to do a thorough analysis of the 1970s and 1980s female action hero in film, I also suspect that the new Lara archetype may be a move back to the original action heroine in film.

Lara Croft, because of her popularity, her status as the first real videogame heroine, and her long history, has become one of the leading signifiers for the representation of women in videogames, and as has been shown in Chapter Four, many other videogame heroines follow the representation of Lara Croft. Most of the videogame heroines that follow the portrayal of new Lara also only started emerging after 2013, when Lara Croft changed, and, as I have shown

in Chapter Four, this happened when women were starting to play more important roles as consumers and producers of videogames. Just as old Lara emerged from her societal backdrop, new Lara is also emerging due to the current state of society and feminist debates.⁷⁹

From 2018 onward, videogamers might see even more types of games that are similar in the ludological and narratological structure of *Tomb Raider* reboot and (2013) *ROTTTR* (2015) emerging. As I argued in Chapter Four, in 2018, over thirty games with female leads will be released, and perhaps in years to come, this number will keep on increasing (Henry 2018). If one looks at the gradual move from the postfeminist action heroine to a new and different type of heroine in videogames as a trend, perhaps in another decade or two, videogamers might even see another new type of heroine emerge, depending on how the videogame industry evolves and what role women are yet to play in the industry.

5.2 Contribution of the study

This study contributes to the discourses of gender, feminism and videogames, as well as ongoing debates surrounding the representation of women in new media. As mentioned in Chapter One, there is barely any literature that discusses the representation of Lara Croft (and other videogame heroines in fact) after 2013. This study fills a gap in literature on Lara Croft after 2008, since discussions surrounding Lara Croft have become scarce after theorists have exhausted her as a subject of discussion prior to the character's reboot.

This study also opens new avenues for the theorisation of Lara Croft, as it indicates that she has undergone major changes that need to be further interrogated. Lara Croft continues to influence player's perceptions of women due to her popularity, and since the *Tomb Raider* franchise still seems to be

⁷⁹ Of course, as is the problem with postfeminism, this 'positive' version of femininity still circulates in the realm of mass consumption, as mainly white, middle class women that can afford the very expensive games and gaming consoles play them. Interestingly, the ESA does not even mention race, class and income as a demographic.

going strong with the release of *SOTTR* and the *Tomb Raider* movie in 2018, her latest representation should not be unproblematically embraced.

5.3 Limitations of the study

Unfortunately in this dissertation I was not able to analyse the evolution of the portrayal of Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* comic book series published by Top Cow between 1999 and 2005, and by Dark Horse from 2014-present. If one briefly glances over the covers of the *Tomb Raider* comic books released between 1999 and 2005 though, (old) Lara Croft is in fact portrayed in line with the postfeminist action heroine (and in line with the portrayal of other female comic book heroines of the early twenty-first century nonetheless). The *Tomb Raider* comics after 2014 portray new Lara on their covers, perhaps because Rihanna Pratchett was also involved in the writing of these comics. A thorough analysis of the narratives of the *Tomb Raider* comics could yield interesting results, especially since comic books are an exclusively narratological medium in contrast to videogames that are ludological and narratological in nature.

This dissertation also does not offer a thorough analysis of the *Tomb Raider* movie starring Alicia Vikander as Lara Croft released early in 2018. The *Tomb Raider* movie (Uthaug 2018) features new Lara, as it is based on Lara Croft's origin story, but there are some changes made to Lara Croft's story in the movie that are not reflected in the videogame that could possibly have both positive and negative implications for the representation of new Lara. As mentioned in Chapters One and Two, film Lara's relationship with videogame Lara, as well as real-life Lara Crofts, such as Angelina Jolie's and Alicia Vikander's relationship with Lara Croft, have always been uneasy, and it remains the same for the *Tomb Raider* movie released in 2018. A thorough analysis of the film could therefore provide more insight into this relationship.

Furthermore, *SOTTR* is will be released in September 2018, and due to the timing of this new *Tomb Raider* game, this dissertation has not been able to take into account how Lara Croft is portrayed in the new game. From

promotional material released of the game (Figure 32), it is evident that Lara Croft retains her superficial appearance as seen in *TR* reboot (2013) and *ROTTR* (2015), however, Rihanna Pratchett has been replaced by another female screenwriter, Jill Murray, as the author of Lara's narrative in *SOTTR* (2018). There has also been very little of the gameplay mechanics in the 2018 *Tomb Raider* game, but again, from promotional material and a brief gameplay demo, it is evident that Lara Croft has an additional weapon in *SOTTR* (2018), which is a combat knife that she has crafted from a broken airplane wing. The implications of new weapons, especially a brutal weapon such as a makeshift knife, might be that new Lara is becoming increasingly violent, but this is only speculation. A full analysis of *SOTTR* (2018) should therefore be done and the findings of that analysis could prove to be invaluable to theorisations of new Lara and of Lara Croft as a character.



Figure 32: Promotional image from *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, 2018. (Tomb Raider on Flickr).

Further, I did not have an opportunity to interrogate the representation of the male characters in *ROTTR* (2015). Not only in the *Tomb Raider* franchise, but in other videogame series with male protagonists too, the changes in the characterisation of the male heroes should also be examined. Recently,

videogames tend to strive for realism on all levels, including the representation of male and female characters. This is evident in the character of Nathan Drake, for example, who has also transformed from a flat character in the first *Uncharted* (2007) game to a more complex character in *Uncharted 4* (2016). An analysis of male characters in recent videogames will therefore provide more insight into gender relations within these games.

Finally, this dissertation is not representative of a South African context, as all the women, texts and statistics discussed here are either American or British. An analysis of female action heroines in South African film and literature needs to be conducted in order to determine whether women's representation and situations in media in South Africa are changing or remaining stagnant. An analysis of women in media in South Africa could prove to be most illuminating in a multi-cultural and multi-lingual society.

5.4 Suggestions for further research

Future research needs to be done on the new Lara phenomenon in film, in TV series (especially since Netflix and other online series platforms are becoming increasingly popular) and in comics. It might be especially interesting to apply the methodology used in this dissertation to films and comics that, like Lara Croft, have a long history, such as *Star Wars* and *Wonder Woman*. *Star Wars*, which has a history of eight movies that span over forty years, as an example of the new Lara phenomenon in film, has seen a major change in how female characters are portrayed, and what position they hold in the films. The last two *Star Wars* movies, *The Force Awakens* (Abrams 2015) and *The Last Jedi* (Johnson 2017), feature a female lead character, Rey, as the last powerful Jedi. Rey is not only the lead hero of these two star wars movies (compared to the other six *Star Wars* movies whose hero was Luke Skywalker), but her portrayal is also in line with that of new Lara. She is not sexualised or feminised like other female characters, such as Lea, have been in previous *Star Wars* movies. More elderly women are surprisingly also in powerful positions, especially in *The Last Jedi* (Johnson 2017), where older Lea is the

general of the Resistance fleet, and Vice Admiral Holdo is in charge of the fleet in Leia's absence.

The recent *Wonder Woman* film (Jenkins 2017) also portrays a Wonder Woman who is not overtly muscular and hyperfeminised, like her postfeminist portrayals in the *Wonder Woman* comic books of the Modern Age. The *Wonder Woman* film (Jenkins 2017) was also directed by a woman, Patty Jenkins, which might be indicative of changing structures regarding gender in the film industry too. As mentioned earlier, the #MeToo movement has also taken the film industry by storm and many injustices faced by women in this industry are being exposed. The various industries, such as the film and comic book industries also need to be investigated in terms of women's positions as consumers and producers of the media in order to identify reasons for change, or a lack of change, in the film and comic book industries.

Additionally, more research needs to be done on the portrayal of female characters with different ethnicities in videogames as there are still not enough women of colour who are leading heroes in videogames and in film. As I have briefly shown in Chapter Four, this demographic is starting to change very gradually (especially in film, with the release of movies such as *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) in which the black heroines' portrayals are similar to that of new Lara), but women of colour remain underrepresented in videogames, film and comics for the most part.

As I alluded to earlier, I suspect that the new type of heroine in videogames may be a return to the original female action heroine of the 1980s. A more thorough comparison between the 1980s action heroine and the new Lara phenomenon could provide greater insight into the trajectory of representations of women in media and the contexts from which they stem. An investigation of the representation of female protagonists in the *Alien* (1984-2015) videogame series,⁸⁰ which has been around for much longer

⁸⁰ The award-winning 2015 installation of the *Alien* videogame series, titled *Alien: Isolation*, features Ripley's daughter as the main protagonist and a chapter that

than *Tomb Raider*, could provide more insight into the impact of the videogame heroine on the film heroine, and *vice versa*. Likewise, a comparison between the *Alien* series and *Tomb Raider* could also provide more concrete evidence that new Lara may resemble the 1980s heroine in videogames and not only in film.

It is evident through this discussion though that society's attitudes toward women are clearly manifested in the heroines that emerge from popular culture. As women's roles in society change, so do that society's action heroines, and then they in turn have the power to change society's views of women. Women's equality and liberation from patriarchy has certainly not been completely achieved yet, but it is hopeful for women and feminists to see different versions of femininity emerge in popular culture. These versions of femininity, even though they may still be somewhat flawed and unrealistic, present women at least with the possibility of alternatives to pervasive sexist portrayals of women in media.

allows the player to play as the iconic Ripley herself. Ripley's daughter, Amanda Ripley, shares many similarities with new Lara in *Alien: Isolation* (2015).

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