

The Male Gamer and the Transness of Lara Croft

ABSTRACT This article takes seriously two things: that Lara Croft is trans, and that I, a trans masculine games scholar and game maker, was a male gamer. Many scholars have rightly challenged the assumption that gamers must be male, but what about the assumption that male gamers are cis, or that gamers and game characters, whether assumed to be male or female, have obvious, binary, genders? As a male gamer, albeit assumed to be female in the 1990s, I take this opportunity to “play along” with masc and femme early games criticism, debating the subject/object relationships of players and characters. Finding that early readers of *Tomb Raider* perceived Lara Croft as trans, a nexus of a “male gamer” and a “female game character,” I also ask, why was Lara trans in the 1990s, and, supposedly, not the male gamer? What did her transness mean to 1990s writers, and what can it teach us today? Finally, assuming the male gamer may also be trans, what is his true relationship with the transness of Lara Croft? The default assumed-male gamer may not be male, the “girl gamer” may not be female, and gender play in the highly gendered and sexualized games of the 1990s may not be as simple as it seems. A special guest appearance by Super Mario, Lakitu, and the *koopas* gaze continues a comparison between Lara Croft and Nintendo characters as game objects. From queerness and games and the transness of early media theory, this analysis builds toward more precise, playful, and personal forms of trans video game studies. **KEYWORDS** gaze theory, Lara Croft, LGBTQ, masculinity, Nintendo, objectification, queer, queerness and games, representation, Super Mario, Tomb Raider, trans, transgender, video games, video game studies

This article takes seriously two things: that Lara Croft is trans, and that I was a male gamer. Around thirty years ago, in 1996, Lara Croft made her debut as the much-debated female must-play character of the *Tomb Raider* series. Foundational video game studies texts from the 1990s debated Lara Croft’s gender, sometimes with little discussion or awareness of trans people’s existence outside the realm of theory or play. After thirty years, I think it is finally time to revisit Lara Croft using these premises. Many scholars have rightly challenged the assumption that gamers must be male, but what about the assumption that those male gamers are cis, or that gamers, whether assumed to be



FIGURE 1. “Lara’s Home” in *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996). Screenshot by the author c. 2024 from *Tomb Raider I-III Remastered* (Aspyr, 2024), on PlayStation 5.

male or female, actually have obvious binary genders? The default assumed-male gamer may not be male, and the “girl gamer” may not be female. We also assume that Lara Croft, who, as Amanda Phillips argues, blended masculinity and femininity from the very beginning, is a cisgender woman, or do we? I found when rereading 1990s texts that many of us have never perceived her as cis but have discussed Lara Croft’s gender using queer theory and have used terms like transgender to describe her.¹ This went against my memory of Lara as a paradigmatic cis female game character onto whom many heteronormative and binary anxieties over the voyeuristic male gaze and the victimized (white) female body had circulated. Why was Lara trans in the 1990s, and not the male gamer? What did her transness mean to 1990s writers, and what can it teach us today? Finally, assuming the male gamer may also be trans, what is his true relationship with the transness of Lara Croft?

I keep in mind and am inspired by the most recent scholarship on Lara Croft that does the important work of studying LGBTQ+ gamers and game makers, building theories of gaming representation,² queerness and games,³ expanding beyond the perception of the male gamer and the male gamic gaze,⁴ and reading Lara Croft’s gender in its intersection with her whiteness (or potential to have been a woman of color).⁵ These conversations will not be the central focus of

this article. Instead, I revisit some key texts on Lara Croft from the 1990s, and the conversations they responded to, through these two lenses, performances, mirrors: *Lara Croft is trans*; *I was a male gamer*.

LARA CROFT IS TRANS

Lara Croft's transness differs from other trans game characters of her generation. Unlike Samus Aran of *Metroid*, she was not the subject of a theatrical gender reveal; Lara's buxom body was never covered by mechanized armor.⁶ Unlike Christine (a.k.a. Birdo or Birdetta), she was not mocked for being feminine, or misgendered, in her game manual; Lara's femaleness was hardly treated as a joke.⁷ Unlike Vivian, of *Paper Mario*, who authors intended to be trans, but was localized and translated out of existence, turned into a cis character, Lara's transness was not encoded then lost, but ambient, inescapable, regardless of authorial intent.⁸ Frequently discussed trans femme characters of the 1990s and early aughts, all from Nintendo, built from a Japanese popular culture that sold multiple gendered and sexual representations in mainstream media, some of which survived localization for Western audiences. In the British *Tomb Raider* series, there is no indication of Lara Croft's cisness or transness within the game's story or language. Without these indicators, she might as well be cis. Except that Lara Croft was singled out and considered a problem within gaming—helping to found the entire field of video game studies—partially because of the perception that she was trans, discussed as part of Lara Croft's vast presence outside the game text.

In 1997, for example, *New York Times* game critic J. C. Herz wrote of *Tomb Raider*: "When a boy plays the game, Lara is not the object, as she would have been in older games: she is the game."⁹ The boy who plays the game plays it as a woman."¹⁰ In this reading, Lara is a symbiosis of a *male gamer* and a *female game character*, a bit of a genderfluid cyborg, like Major Motoko Kusanagi in the *Ghost in the Shell* series (Masamune Shirow, 1989–), who helped inspire the trans blockbuster *The Matrix* (dir. Lana and Lilly Wachowski, 1999) by trans women Hollywood directors.¹¹ Drawing from Herz's comments, Mary Flanagan used queer theory to expand and question the gamer's relationship to Lara Croft. "Never before has there been a figure in any media that has become such a unique axis of complex identification with the audience," Flanagan wrote for the film journal *Wide Angle* in 1999. "The boundaries between subject and object, the delineation between various points of view, and the notion of self and other are inextricably intertwined."¹² Croft's identity as a code object, a

“pure data loop,” was in conversation with what Judith Butler had discussed, the fundamental instability of woman as a category.¹³ Helen W. Kennedy, writing for *Game Studies* in 2002, also inspired by Butler, went on to identify Lara Croft as transgender, albeit in very 1990s-sounding language. “In this complex relationship between object and subject,” she wrote, “through having to play *Tomb Raider* as Lara, a male player is *transgendered*.”¹⁴

Kennedy approached the question of Lara’s transness through her lens of assessing the feminist potential of Lara Croft: “Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?” as the title of the article promises. The “transgendering function” assesses whether Lara Croft’s transness has value, only inasmuch as it destabilizes gender norms, but Lara’s femininity relies on “exaggerated signifiers,” and it is “immediately and irrefutably countered by other phallic signifiers.”¹⁵ Male gamers are insufficiently queered outside the game: male players claim not to identify with Lara and create “stories and art that tends to want to securely fix Lara as an object of sexual desire and fantasy.” Ultimately, her objectification, and her “exaggerated” and “phallic” femininity, make Lara Croft’s transness problematic and incomplete.¹⁶

Academic trans studies was available for discussion by this time, but many authors in video game studies ignored trans scholars’ perspectives when discussing Lara Croft’s gender—even when using queer theory—part of an academically institutionalized pattern of trans scholars’ perspectives being pitted “against queer theory” in the 1990s.¹⁷ Foundational media studies and trans theory scholar Sandy Stone used both queer and post-transsexual theory to analyze the relationship between the gamer and the game character, observing that online multiuser spaces contained a disproportionate number of female characters, compared to the typical gender division of internet users. Likely, many off-line men enjoyed being a woman in virtual worlds, just one of multiple “boundary stories” she told of changing technology, gender, and identity in the 1980s and 1990s.¹⁸ In a related but different point to Kennedy’s argument, Stone told *Mondo 2000* that such “gender switch . . . on the Net” was insufficient to help men understand being a woman. “They get a lot of attention. But that doesn’t tell them anything about the other side of getting that attention, about being an object of desire, about being a person to whom, to a certain extent, one’s real self is opaque, invisible.”¹⁹ Queer theory and post-transsexual theory²⁰ are about performance, she continues, but “the theatre for that performance is the body, the conscious THE body or SOME body, but it’s THIS body, it’s always grounded in THIS body, the place where whatever pain the political apparatus can exert upon you comes down to ground. And

multiplicity is one of the strategies for getting around this.”²¹ Multiplicity and embodiment exist together and in tension for Stone’s concept of post-transsexual, with embodiment a stage and a site of potential vulnerability, and multiplicity as a potential source of play within or around that structure.

Any theory of Lara Croft being trans through cyborg fluidity, if lacking trans people, is unfortunately detached from trans embodiment and experience, and, like self-identified cis men’s gender-swapping experiences, may center cis-coded experiences as its working definition of transgender. I don’t think, for example, that 1990s writers were thinking about me as the “male gamer,” then a femme as stacked as Lara, “transgendering” myself into existing as the girl I was assigned to be. Following Stone’s recommendation to consider embodied experience, then, as well as the tradition in trans theory of personal narratology, let’s talk about how I was a male gamer, before moving on to what this all means in retrospect about how to read Lara Croft.²²

I WAS A MALE GAMER

When I first played *Tomb Raider*, I shared Lara Croft’s supposedly feminine and unrealistic physical proportions. I wrangled my chest, that had ballooned past the bra sizes available in regular stores at a ridiculously young age, into a variety of garments that displayed or concealed, but never fully controlled it. A key issue in the 1990s discussion of Lara Croft was whether male gamers perceived her body as an object, or whether they merged in some sense with her subjectivity. I faced this question in my daily life regarding the apparently female body I used to travel and interact, even with the field of video game studies when I first began studying it. My inappropriate and spectacular femininity, gender bending, caused a scene everywhere I went, from the mall or flea market used games stands, to the street, where people yelled out of trucks, honked horns, or followed me, feeling as spectacular as a street sequence featuring Divine in a John Waters movie.²³ Unlike in trans games portraying women’s street harassment such as *mainichi* (Mattie Brice, 2012) and *Dys4ia* (Anna Anthropy, 2012), I, like Divine, was not really a woman.

My body seemed a provocative and sometimes valuable object to navigate the world, as opposed to a person. Should I protect it (her?) or must I destroy or modify this body somehow? Was there, as some ostensibly feminist forms of theory might suggest, a disturbing masculine threat of violence within me, in the desire to irreversibly transform the feminized aspects of myself through hormones or surgery? Would transitioning be masculine violence (mine)

against a female form (also mine)? These questions reflect a trans male gamer; do they have relevance to the possibly dysphoric connection between any male gamer and Lara Croft? Needing to navigate the world as her with imperfect and difficult controls, the male gamer is not fully in control of Lara, but is in part controlled by her, a frustrating situation for any stereotypical male gamer.

HOW LARA CROFT OBJECTIFIES THE MALE GAMER

Though we may question what kind of representation Lara Croft is of womanhood, Lara Croft cannot really be objectified as a way of removing her power, for she is an object already. Everything on the screen in a computer game could be defined as a game object, including the player character, particularly if a developer used object-oriented programming to organize attributes and methods.²⁴ Martha Nussbaum defines objectification as “treating *as an object* what is really not an object, what is, in fact, a human being,” an act that can be good or bad, consensual and pleasurable, or violent and disempowering, depending on context.²⁵ In these terms, Lara Croft is not an objectified subject, but an object we misidentify as a person, imbuing it (her) with a sense of personhood.²⁶ As a *personified object*, Lara Croft has power, including power over the player. Although many authors in the 1990s debated whether the male gamer had the power to objectify or violate Lara Croft, and there were certainly plenty of misogynistic fantasies about her, *Tomb Raider* actually presents the opportunity to submit to Lara Croft, to enjoy a power fantasy of femininity that gamers may find appealing or threatening for multiple reasons. To play *Tomb Raider*,



FIGURE 2. *Lara Croft Was My Family* (Carta Monir, *ZEAL*, 2017). Carta Monir, “Lara Croft Was My Family,” *ZEAL* August 15 2017, <https://medium.com/mammon-machine-zeal/lara-croft-was-my-family-ca4e2b8daf12>.

the male gamer need not become a trans woman, but he must respect Lara, follow her leadership, and learn her rules. Could male gamers, feeling entitled to control games, have been threatened by this experience of Lara objectifying and instrumentalizing them?

Carta Monir's Ignatz Award-winning memoir comic *Lara Croft Was My Family* (2017, fig. 2) portrays a female gaze on the male gamer that shows the male gamer's disempowerment.²⁷ From reading 1990s discussions of children ostensibly becoming trans through Lara Croft, one might assume that Carta—expected to be a boy by her family during some of the time portrayed in the comic—would try to play as Lara Croft as an exploration of femininity. Instead, Monir remembers how her father, a male gamer, obsessively played the *Tomb Raider* series, while Carta and her mother looked on and made suggestions. In *Lara Croft Was My Family*, the father serves as a male gamer intermediary, a prosthesis for the entire family's engagement with Croft, and, by extension, with *Tomb Raider*.²⁸ In this way, *Lara Croft Was My Family* is about Lara Croft's relationship with the female gamer(s) (Lara/Carta, Lara/Carta's mother), set against this backdrop of the more often discussed relationship of Lara Croft and the male gamer.

The male gamer has commonly been imagined in an empowered and controlling "Player 1" role, as opposed to what Shira Chess calls the "Player 2" of female or feminine gamers as constructed by the video game industry.²⁹ In a 2002 discussion of Lara Croft, James Newman described the particular kind of Player 2 role played by Carta and her mother as both the "secondary player" and "non-controlling navigator," an active term that describes the intellectual authority observers have at times over the player holding the controls.³⁰ Lara's strength in Monir's story is her inability to be controlled by the patriarch that surveils Carta for signs of femininity in the late 1990s. The family of non-controlling navigators constantly imitate Croft's vocal mannerisms outside the gaming sessions, Croft's way of saying "n-no" when coming upon a locked door without a key, for example. In game, Carta's father may want Lara to open the door, but she still says no, and, due to the computer's immutable rules (to the average player, anyway), that no is final. "Honestly . . . I think it was cathartic to watch Dad control a woman who wasn't any of us," Monir tells her sibling in the comic's conclusion.

Through observed play, the male gamer opens himself to serve Lara's demands and be a container for the wishes of the family. He must be the one to execute the button presses Lara demands of him, while also fielding the suggestions of the family, who, as non-controlling navigators, may engage freely

with the story and puzzles, asking the male gamer to input the correct combinations as he struggles to comply. This version of being a male gamer is subtly disempowering. It may offer the illusion of mastery, being the operator of technology, but it is deeply gratifying for members of the patriarchal family who see their father's vulnerability displayed (to failure in the game), escape his control (commenting to the sidelines, no longer the targets), and view, while remaining distanced from, his frustration and failure.

The submissive role of the male gamer is no design accident. *Tomb Raider* explicitly teaches a submissive (though possibly bratty) play style in a tutorial sequence inviting players to visit Croft Manor outside the game narrative (see fig. 1). *Tomb Raider*, *Tomb Raider II* (1997), and *Tomb Raider III* (1998), each offer a tutorial in relating to Lara, framed as a visit, though she maintains the third-person viewpoint on the game world, keeping her back turned to the player. As a teacher of the *Tomb Raider* game mechanics, Lara is strict, sometimes mocking, and a bit withholding. When giving instructions, Lara teases the player. Teaching walking, a valuable skill for early game navigation, Lara challenges you to knock her off a ledge. "With your finger on the walk button, I won't fall off, even if you try to make me. Go ahead, try." After a few difficult early jumps, a player may finally earn Lara's surprised, "Nice," when they land their first running jump to grab a ledge in midair.

This is as encouraging as Lara will be. Outside her home, in the tomb, Lara remains silent through many confusing puzzles, as the player figures out the many mechanics the tutorial does not teach, an early example being Lara's ability to move giant stone blocks.³¹ Different areas of the tomb present new opportunities to learn and fail, and players are rewarded for thinking of Lara as more powerful than they have yet seen. When moving, Lara's subjective perspective dominates. There is a look button, to rotate Lara's view and look around while her body remains stationary, but it's often more effective to rotate Lara's body when trying to understand the space, to keep an awareness of where she is when deciding how to move next. The "up" command will then move her in the direction she is facing, and all directions are relative to this point. In battle, the player controls when Croft draws her trademark dual pistols, and when she pulls the trigger. We even dodge for her, navigating her body out of the way of enemy attacks, but we must also submit to Lara's preferences; by default, she will choose which enemy to shoot.³²

The difficulty of *Tomb Raider*, which is metatextually empowering in terms of building skill and confidence and impressing other fans, reinforces the disempowerment of the player while playing, coaxing them to rebel against the

game's domination.³³ The frustrating friction between the player struggling to please, support, and occasionally embody Lara, and the game, offering an exploratory challenge even to this most athletic of game characters, is part of the game, and part of her character. A different character would navigate the space differently because the relationship between a difficult-to-control character and a player would not feel so intimate if it wasn't so intimately framed and negotiated.

This need for the player to submit to the will of the game, and ultimately the computer, shows how male gamers were dominated, and, in the sense of becoming computer-like through providing desired inputs to a system, objectified—as any game player is by the computer system of a game—by an entity resembling Lara Croft.³⁴ As controlling players possibly acting in concert with non-controlling navigators, male gamers may have also become the vessels for commands by their family members through *Tomb Raider*, reversing patriarchal dynamics as Monir shows in *Lara Croft Was My Family*. When looking back at Lara Croft, it is important to remember that though her appearance was sexualized, and her gender both debated and at times disrespected, even as early as 1996, Lara Croft objectified the male gamer through *Tomb Raider*'s game mechanics. At the same time, conversations around her saw Lara objectified by the male gamer instead, either as a sex object, or simply as a game object. How can a trans frame help clarify these different objectifications in retrospect?

DID THE MALE GAMER OBJECTIFY LARA CROFT?

While Lara Croft was not a human to be treated as an object, discussions about how she was represented in games traced debates over objectification and representation in film studies and video game studies. In media studies and video art, creators explored the idea of Lara Croft as a *sex object*, in conversation with the feminist film theory of the male gaze. In early video game studies debates, scholars explored Lara Croft's status as a *game object* and what that would mean about her gender and sexuality.

If Lara was an erotically charged *sex object*, the gamer could potentially remain fully male, and fully straight, even patriarchal, but through interaction with an older technology of cinema—the sadistic/voyeuristic operation of the *male gaze*—that cast them as equally disempowered, murderous, and misogynist.³⁵ In discussing the male gaze, Laura Mulvey, a filmmaker herself, had challenged filmmakers to exceed the demand to provide visual pleasure or narrative in filmmaking, arguing that feminists must destroy visual pleasure in narrative



FIGURE 3. Lara Croft returns the machinima's gaze in *She Puppet* (Peggy Ahwesh, 2001). Peggy Ahwesh, "She Puppet" [2001], *Vimeo* February 3, 2010, <https://vimeo.com/9197535>.

cinema as a political act.³⁶ In popular culture, however, critiques and fears of the male gaze contributed to the popularity of depictions of sadistic voyeurism and the use of these fears in queerphobic and transphobic imaginaries. The idea of a person sneaking into a women's bathroom to spy on and violate women, for example, follows along the lines of the slasher horror genre, like the homophobic and transphobic thriller *Psycho* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) and its descendants in the "erotic thriller" genre popular in the 1980s and 1990s. Looking back at this trend of the 1990s erotic thriller, an interpretation of the powerful Lara Croft stalked and sadistically viewed by a "transgendered" male gamer's voyeurism seems influenced by mid-twentieth-century filmmaking.

The virtual camera, a viewpoint on the 3D-rendered environment of *Tomb Raider*, did appear to stalk Lara Croft, in that it took what is now called a third-person perspective on the game, then a relatively new trope of gaming representation.³⁷ This viewpoint, as if from a camera following Lara through her adventure, presented her entire body to the player from behind, meaning the player would be looking at Lara's backside as a central game mechanic, while Lara was not looking at the player. If the player retained a separate subjectivity

from Lara Croft—particularly, as a 1990s commentator might assume, a male one—they could voyeuristically gaze at Croft as a sexual object and watch her die over and over again, potentially finding some sadistic enjoyment in her death, cries of pain, and prone form lying on the ground. Was the male gamer actually playing as the off-screen person holding this trailing camera, a seeming friend actually interested in taking dirty pictures of Lara, or eventually skewering her?³⁸ Unlike the male characters of Hollywood cinema, who killed the objects of their desire to maintain power and distance, these male gamers would never obtain relief from the erotic power Croft has over them, for she is immortal and her death is impermanent.

Peggy Ahwesh's machinima *She Puppet* (2001, fig. 3) shows how Lara Croft endures, despite being seemingly trapped as a character in a slasher film. Wedged in the corner of an icy passage to allow Ahwesh to rotate the virtual camera, Lara Croft is finally framed in a cinematic subject position, meeting the virtual camera's gaze in medium close-up, breathing foggy digital breaths toward the viewer. The soundtrack to Dario Argento's *Suspiria* (1977) plays: is this a musical reference to how frequently Lara Croft's body might be impaled by spikes in a pit, if the player is not careful? A full minute of Croft's deaths follow: she is on fire, shot, electrocuted, bitten, impaled, devoured. "I was just free and innocent, and I have to learn," speaks Croft's inner monologue, as tigers pace around her dissolving body, disappearing into the forest floor. "Well, actually, when I think about the potential of humanity, then I'm happy. Otherwise, I'm most miserable when I see how it really is." This depiction, though it dwells on the image of Lara's death, ultimately portrays how she is unable to be truly harmed by the male gamer's possible sadistic voyeurism. She offered the player the opportunity for genuine connection and relationship, but, through joy in watching her die, or by human error, she is fated to die violently, over and over again. She invests hope in the player but is often disappointed. In works like this we see how the *sex object* frame, of Lara as a victim and male gamer as villain in a sadistic/voyeuristic mode, fails to control Lara.

Drawing from Lara's lack of humanity, male gamers in video game studies attempted to get Lara Croft under control through another form of objectification, a strict interpretation of the game object that lacked representational, narrative, or personal value for gameplay. What if the male gamer, not "transgendered," and not sadistically or erotically motivated, were merely a dispassionate calculator of game moves, and what if Lara, an entity causing so much passion in popular culture, were nothing more than an invisible token of code

to such a gamer, no more feminine or alluring than the Queen on a chess board? That would be convenient!

Saying Croft has no erotic pull may deny the sadistic/voyeuristic gaze framework, but it further objectifies Croft in another way, attempting to make her *fungible*, interchangeable with other objects of her type, submissive to the idea of gameplay as a technological force harnessed by the dispassionate male gamer.³⁹ This argument, reflective of the formalization of academic game studies in the aughts through ludology/narratology debates, affirmed the traditionally masculine subjectivity of the gamer and games scholar by removing Croft's gender entirely. "The dimensions of Lara Croft's body, already analyzed to death by film theorists, are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently," Espen Aarseth, who had theorized game narrative against cinema as fundamentally ergodic, reflected in 2004 of the then nine-game *Tomb Raider* series.⁴⁰ "When I play, I don't even see her body, but see through it and past it." This flamboyant claim for pure ludology, analyzing gameplay mechanics without a focus on narrative, is certainly bold and memorable, even twenty years later. But Aarseth's claimed lack of identification with or desire for Croft is so cold as to be hard to believe, as computer scientist turned games theorist, and champion of narratively motivated game design Janet Murray pointed out soon after.⁴¹ The claim that Croft's body meant nothing was challenged even in the article where it appeared: in the original *Electronic Book Review* article, editor Stuart Moulthrop responded quizzically, granting *Tomb Raider* might not exactly be "a misogynist-masochist fantasy" but doubting that replacing "the pneumatic Lara Croft" with "a less salacious anatomy" would leave the game "intact."⁴² Aarseth shot back: "the polygonal significance of Lara Croft's physique goes beyond the gameplay. But that doesn't mean it tells us much, if anything, about the gameplay, does it?"⁴³ Though this entire discussion's playfulness, competitiveness, and back and forth seemed a distant performance of male gamer subjectivity to me earlier in my life, I feel tempted to play now, as part of my exploration of the male gamer position.

So I'm game. What if Lara Croft's "salacious anatomy" *were* replaced by one supposedly less provocative, such as that of Super Mario in his own 3D debut of 1996, *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo EAD)? I certainly was frustrated as a male gamer by my initial lack of control over Mario in his 2D 1980s and 1990s exploits, when a childhood friend gave me the SNES controller only to watch me get hit by the first koopa and keel over! How was I supposed to know Mario was so wimpy and defenseless? The same year that *Tomb Raider*



FIGURE 4. The *koopas* gaze in *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo EAD, 1996). Screenshot by the author c. 2024 from Nintendo Switch Online.

offered a 3D platforming action game with exploration elements, hidden areas, and treasure hunting, Mario made his own entrée to the 3D platforming genre in *Super Mario 64*. Replaying *Mario 64* shows how the choice to frame Lara Croft from behind with a virtual camera in a 3D environment that displayed her entire body was not unique. Mario is shown in exactly the same way, meaning he could also be interpreted as the object of a stalking camera's gaze: the *koopas* gaze (fig. 4).

We know Mario is viewed from a *koopas* perspective because unlike *Tomb Raider*, which leaves the meaning or possible subjectivity of the virtual camera up to the player's interpretation, *Super Mario 64* provides a narrative motivation for this now-standard camera angle. Lakitu, and his own crew of "Lakitu Bros." are carrying a fleet of cameras on their floating clouds, as easily as they carry the traffic lights, wrong way signs, and errant flying go-karts of *Super Mario Kart* (Nintendo EAD, 1993), reporting to players on the action.⁴⁴ Fittingly, since Lakitu is yellow, the yellow C buttons on the Nintendo 64 controller can be used to scroll through the Lakitu Bros.' "recommended camera angles" and change the provided viewpoint, within limitations. An angry buzzing noise sounds if the player tries to select an angle the Bros. don't recommend. Stall to interact with the Lakitu Bros. and their camera angles soar around and above Mario in a dizzying arc as he stands in the grassy lawn of the castle, his small round body remaining in constant fidgety motion until he declares "I'm a-tired," and passes out on the ground.

The Lakitus strive to provide some kind of objective viewpoint on the play space, so the player can focus on controlling Mario, thrusting his body about as easily as they can stretch and deform his face in the game's opening screen, a subtle tutorial on how to use the game controller. Lara Croft may invite the player to her mansion, but Mario offers his face as a play space to be stretched by a gloved Mario hand controlled by the player. This gloved hand, which deforms Mario's face like a rubbery toy that cheerily snaps back again as Mario rolls his eyes and smiles at the player, is a remnant both of computational limitations and highly significant racialized and gendered representational tropes. Having gloves helped Mario's hands stand out in his original 8-bit character design, and this trope of the white glove, seen also in characters like Mickey Mouse, comes from American blackface minstrelsy, a racist form of performance that often mocked or demeaned Black masculinity and femininity, that also helped build the conventions of American animation.⁴⁵ Taking on Mario's gloved hand as our own to manipulate his stretchable face, we are both dressing up as Mario and using Mario as a plaything. Because video games rely on the player's submission to the computational rules, we've explored that gamers are objectified in some sense by inputting controls within the given system. Lara Croft offers a pleasurable opportunity for submission, while Mario offers a power fantasy to the player: though they may be constrained by the game rules, objectified to some extent by the computer system, they are at least in almost grotesque power over Mario himself.

Like a minstrel character, Mario has an exaggerated, parodic performance style that objectifies the character and distances the audience, rather than inviting the player into his perspective. Mario may be *friendly*, but he is definitely not your personal friend. Any identification with Mario comes from a kind of encouraged appropriation, Mario becoming *your character* from a menu of mostly fungible options, only sometimes having different stats, moves, strengths, and weaknesses. Though Mario is a straight white male—an Italian American character created by a Japanese company to be viewed in the United States as unmarked—he is intentionally presented as a violable, destructible, fungible, object. Mario's design is deliberately objectified and marked by its mutability, as shown through his many bodily power-ups and transformations, interchangeability with Luigi,⁴⁶ and with other characters generally, as in *Super Mario Wonder* (2024), in which Mario, Luigi, Peach, Princess Daisy, and Blue and Yellow versions of Toad, all have exactly the same affordances and game rules applied to them, though with different appearances that players may imbue with great personal meaning, or not.⁴⁷ *Super Mario Odyssey* (2017)—a colonial adventure of Bowser stealing important artifacts from the countries of the Mario World to prop up his nonconsensual

wedding with Peach on the moon, while Mario retrieves the relics and receives the costume of each fictional country for his wardrobe—theorizes Mario-ness as the ability to be controlled: the player can throw Mario’s red hat at enemies to occupy their consciousness and walk around with them and their powers, making them into Marios. The player even Marios Bowser.

Super Mario 64 teaches the superiority of the player’s subjectivity over Mario in a low-stakes opportunity for failure, a less-punishing version of the first death in *Super Mario Bros.*, where if the player does not press a button to jump, the first enemy will kill Mario instantly. While researching this article in 2024, I again failed the tutorial.⁴⁸ Now the patriarch of a “Nintendo Family,” I did not dwell on this error but noticed how it showed the difference between Mario and Lara Croft as characters, presented through the game mechanics. After his introduction to the Lakitu Bros., Mario must enter the castle to search for the princess. Because the castle door is at the top of the screen, Mario is now facing the player, and the directions from the grassy field have been shifted. Should the player press “up,” to go forward from Mario’s perspective, or “down,” to go downward on the screen from the player’s perspective? Press up, to go the way Mario is facing, as I did, and you’ll leave the room: up, on the screen, is where the door is. This early failure to navigate Mario causes him to accidentally follow Bowser’s mocking instructions to just turn around and leave. This failure sends a strong message: you are not navigating Mario from Mario’s perspective. You are navigating Mario from the camera’s perspective, Lakitu’s gaze, offered to you by the game as a model to perceive Mario’s world.

This moment of learning that the joystick represents the player’s understanding of direction on screen, not Mario’s subjective sense of direction, may seem small and obvious, but I’ve been playing *Tomb Raider*, so I’m used to how the player must press the arrow for the *direction Lara is facing* to navigate her, even when she is facing the game camera from a cramped hallway, like Mario is in this moment, like she appears in the opening of *She Puppet*. It’s a difficult thing to get the hang of from today’s game design conventions, but I’ve apparently internalized it in my adventure with Lara to the point where, unthinking, I press “up” to make Mario go “down” into the room, and he just walks out. I remember how difficult this lesson was to relearn from Lara as I played the original *Tomb Raider* as released on Steam and the 2024 *Tomb Raider I–III* remastered editions. I’ve been instructed by so many games using Mario-like controls since these early games.

To return to the discussion of the game object as chess piece in the ludological world of gaming, reading tutorial sequences in *Tomb Raider* and *Super*

Mario 64 shows the extent to which it would *not be possible to replace Lara Croft with Mario and have the same game*. Sure, Lara Croft could be navigated using Mariolike controls, but I would argue that her original *Tomb Raider* controls, and the way they assert her power, helped her become such a subjectified game character in the minds of players and of critics. In 2004 Aarseth had somewhat presciently called for a Mariolike understanding of the player character in all gaming, which has in fact become dominant. However, it does not apply to the early games of Lara Croft, not to her character as understood metatextually within and around the game, and not to the game mechanics of *Tomb Raider*. This discussion of Croft as a “chess piece” and others pitting game mechanics against all of representation has had long-ranging consequences, and is one of the focus points of queer critique in video game theory. Reading Lara Croft against Super Mario also seems to disprove it. If you cannot tell the difference between Mario’s doll-like body in an open field and Lara Croft’s utter mastery over the game world through her own viewpoint, can you say you are really analyzing game mechanics?

THE TRANS MALE GAMER

As I relate Lara Croft and the male gamer in the 1990s to my own experience, I must admit in this era I looked less like Carta Monir’s father, and I sounded less like the founders of video game studies than I was like the millennial kids playing video games on the Santa Monica pier, being studied in classrooms, or videotaped in suburban living rooms shown in Marsha Kinder and Walter Morton’s documentary *Notes from the Turtle Network or Playing with Power*.⁴⁹ Looking at the video ghosts of these kids, trying to answer questions like “who would like this TV show more, boys or girls?,” I feel the friction between the highly binary childhoods of 1990s American kids in the toy aisles of pink and blue, who the kids on the screen seem to be, and the unrepresentable interiority of children, whose gender worlds could be so much more expansive than they appear on the surface. Lara Croft and the male gamer represent the opposing sides of a gender binary that influenced early video game studies because it was relevant to the authors’ experiences of the 1990s. What challenged commentators about Lara Croft is the same thing that fascinates me: how Lara Croft and the male gamer could be one person, uniting in the game interaction, or possibly, outside of it. Despite the misogyny of this world, it’s fun to play as a female character, maybe even more so, as Sandy Stone mentioned, if you aren’t actually a woman outside the game, if that misogyny is “misdirected,” if you can tell

yourself you are in on the joke.⁵⁰ As Stone pointed out in the 1990s, though, playing as a woman is not the same as being a woman, cis or trans.

The comparison of Lara Croft to the callipygian Super Mario shows how hypergendered must-play characters exist in many forms and afford many forms of gender play not limited to the way those genders are discussed in usual society. Do we always fantasize about violence toward women, and submitting to men? Or do we sometimes play with the fantasy of dominating a masculine man, or submitting to a feminine woman? Are these urges that might be described as queer in a heteropatriarchal frame but are undoubtedly shared by many cisgender heterosexuals, found in games? The central importance of characters like Lara Croft and Super Mario to gaming suggests these reversals are important to the play function of games itself, as part of its ability to help us understand the world.⁵¹ The empowered subject/object relationship of the player to the patriarchal Mario is as much a consensual and pleasurable fantasy for the player as submission to Lara. To compare Super Mario to Lara Croft brings forward a gendered lesson about the ludology of patriarchal representation and gaming; not that narrative framing doesn't matter nor that cultural and political associations are irrelevant to the technical world of computer fiction, but that exceedingly patriarchal frames can in fact surround male characters with little agency, while sadistic and misogynistic frames can surround female characters whose power in the game space over the player is in fact absolute. Power does not adhere to strict male/female binaries in every case. Masculinity and femininity can be inhabited by a variety of genders, without violence against women's bodies being inevitable.

The transness of the male gamer and of Lara Croft are retrospectively necessary frames for recognizing the actual transness of the 1990s. Cisness, derived from a white supremacist and colonially enforced Victorian gender system, is newer than what we would call transness in human history.⁵² We assume and are told by *Tomb Raider* that Lara Croft is a woman, but my experience shows there could easily be a person who looks exactly like her, who is a man. If the male gamer plays as Lara Croft, inhabiting her psyche, maybe she is a version of him, and maybe that's not a problem. Readers of gamer genders may observe masculine and feminine representations and game mechanics but cannot be sure of the gender the gamer is bringing to play. When thinking about how a male would use Lara's hyperfeminine body as a conduit to adventure, how he would be separated from her, but, pleurably or angrily, would submit to her will and serve her needs, I think about how for many years I saw my own body as such a vehicle, a feminine thing, not really a woman, but kind of so, needing

protection, needing my support, and needing my submission. I felt encouraged, growing up in the 1990s and 2000s, to read my own body through cis and heterosexual frames, interpreting it as a female other, not another version of a male or masculine body. I was scared to go through top surgery, telling myself, following transphobic things I had watched or read, that I was hurting my chest, or cutting it off, as opposed to reshaping it. I worried that I was hurting “a woman,” actually myself.

My chest is still there now. It’s just a different shape. Games of the 1990s, retrospectively interpreted by queer and trans fans, are also a different shape. Tifa Lockhart from *Final Fantasy VII* (Square Enix, 1997) starts off with a similar body type to my younger self and to Lara, but that hasn’t stopped my queer and trans friend group headcanoning what her life would be like with top surgery, not to mention the obvious fact that Cloud Strife is trans, the endless queering and transing of games by their players. Games afford play with subjectivity and interpretation and afford experimentation with gender and transgender, meaning that game, character, and gamer genders are pleasantly flexible. The trans or queer male gamer has the opportunity to assert multiple gamer masculinities adding to those already discussed and performed in game studies and game culture, and so does any gamer of any gender. Neither Super Mario nor Lara Croft made me the gender I am, but playing with gender in games and in life is a pleasure no one should be denied. How you play these gendered games, whether they entice, frustrate, or frighten you, might reflect your own desires, your own identity, or its pleasurable reversal. The transness of gaming is not exclusive, or mandatory. Finding a part of yourself through play could be the first step to embodying that self in reality, or not. ■

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NOTES

1. Amanda Phillips, *Gamer Trouble: Feminist Confrontations in Digital Culture* (New York University Press, 2018).
2. Jenn Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, eds., *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* (Indiana University Press, 2017). See also Anna Everett’s foreword in Malkowski and Russworm, *Gaming Representation*.
3. Anna Anthropy, *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form* (Seven Stories Press, 2012); Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Bo

Ruberg, "Videogames, Queerness, and Beyond: Dispatches from the 2014 Queerness and Games Conference," *First Person Scholar*, February 18, 2015, www.firstpersonscholar.com/videogames-queerness-beyond/; merritt k ed., *Videogames for Humans: Twine Authors in Conversation* (instar, 2015); Teddy Pozo, Bo Ruberg, and Chris Goetz, "In Practice: Queerness and Games," *Camera Obscura* 32, no. 2 (2017): 153–63; Bo Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, eds., *Queer Game Studies* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Bo Ruberg and Amanda Phillips, "Special Issue—Queerness and Games, Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games (Introduction)," *Game Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018), https://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/phillips_ruberg.

4. Phillips, *Gamer Trouble*.

5. Soraya Murray, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender, and Space* (I. B. Tauris, 2018); Josef Nguyen, "Reconsidering Lost Opportunities for Diverse Representation," *American Literature* 94, no. 1 (March 2022): 85–86.

6. See "Samus Aran in *Metroid*," LGBTQ Video Game Archive, September 4, 2015, <https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/2015/09/04/samus-aran-in-metroid/>.

7. See "Birdo in *Super Mario Bros 2*," LGBTQ Video Game Archive, September 11, 2015, <https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/2015/09/11/birdo/>.

8. See "Vivian in *Paper Mario*," LGBTQ Video Game Archive, September 11, 2015, <https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/2015/09/11/vivian/>; Logan Plant, "Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door Remake Restores Character's Trans Identity," *IGN*, May 21, 2024, www.ign.com/articles/paper-mario-the-thousand-year-door-remake-restores-characters-trans-identity.

9. I assume he is referring to Princess Toadstool, the "object" of *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), who became a playable character only three years later in the American release of *Super Mario Bros. 2* (1988). But there are many more examples of gaming's "damsel in distress" trope in video games. See, for example, Feminist Frequency, "Damsel in Distress: Part 1—Tropes vs. Women in Video Games," YouTube, March 7 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6p5AZp7r_Q.

10. Cited in Mary Flanagan, who cited from Gregory Kallenberg, "J. C. Herz: What's in a Game," *Austin-American Statesman*, Austin 360.com, July 10, 1997, www.austsin360.com/tech/browser/071097.htm. See Mary Flanagan, "Mobile Identities, Digital Stars, and Post-Cinematic Selves," *Wide Angle* 21, no. 1 (January 1999): 77–93, at 90.

11. Cael M. Keegan, *Lana and Lilly Wachowski* (University of Indiana Press, 2018).

12. Flanagan, "Mobile Identities," 89.

13. Flanagan, "Mobile Identities," 83; citing Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990), 38; via Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Constantine V. Boundas (Columbia University Press, 1990), 265.

14. Helen W. Kennedy, "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo: On the Limits of Textual Analysis," *Game Studies* 2, no. 2 (December 2002), www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/. Emphasis mine.

15. Kennedy, "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?"

16. Kennedy, "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?"

17. See Cael Keegan, "Against Queer Theory," *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (2020). Judith Butler is a nonbinary scholar, but, "appearing under the sign of the lesbian," was perceived as a cis woman by many scholars of the time. Judith Butler, "Imitation and

Gender Insubordination,” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (Routledge, 1991).

18. Allucquère Rosanne [Sandy] Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (1995; MIT Press, 2001).

19. Jon Lebkowsky, Paco Xander Nathan, and Dave Demaris, “Bait and Switch with Sandy Stone,” *Mondo 2000*, no. 11 (1993): 53–58, at 56.

20. Stone’s term. See Sandy Stone, “The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (Routledge, 2006), 221–35.

21. Lebkowsky, Nathan, and Demaris, “Bait and Switch with Sandy Stone,” 57.

22. Cael Keegan, “Getting Disciplined: What’s Trans* About *Queer* Studies Now?” *Journal of Homosexuality*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1530885>, p. 4.

23. See, for example, “The Girl Can’t Help It” sequence in *Pink Flamingos* (dir. John Waters, 1972); Divine’s dance in the street in *Female Trouble* (1974); and the sequence where Divine’s character is raped by hippies in an alley in *Multiple Maniacs* (1972).

24. See, for example, Unity Documentation 2022.3, “GameObject,” accessed February 27, 2024, <https://docs.unity3d.com/ScriptReference/GameObject.html>.

25. Martha C. Nussbaum, “Objectification,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24, no. 4 (Autumn 1995): 249–91, at 257.

26. Espen Aarseth, “Genre Trouble,” *Electronic Book Review*, May 21, 2004, <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/genre-trouble/>.

27. Carta Monir, “Lara Croft Was My Family,” *ZEAL* August 5, 2017, <https://medium.com/mammon-machine-zeal/lara-croft-was-my-family-ca4e2b8daf12>, cited as a paper zine copy, bought 2024.

28. Sandy Stone’s description of new/digital media as prosthesis has been expanded by disability studies scholars, who examine the role of the prosthesis in technology studies generally and continue Stone’s examination of the relationship between disability, medicalization, and transgender. See, for example, Allucquère Rosanne [Sandy] Stone, “Split Subjects, Not Atoms; or, How I Fell in Love with My Prosthesis,” *Configurations* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1994): 173–90; Stuart Blume, Vasilis Galis, and Andrés Valderrama Pineda, “Introduction: STS and Disability,” *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 39, no. 1 (2014): 98–104.

29. Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

30. James Newman, “The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame: Some Thoughts on Player-Character Relationships in Videogames,” *Game Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002), www.game-studies.org/0102/newman/.

31. An example of her procedural masculinity in Phillips’s analysis. See Phillips, *Gamer Trouble*.

32. Controls observed in the original PC *Tomb Raider* (1996) before switching to the rerelease on PS5, which seemed to work similarly. In the rerelease, there exists the option to switch from these controls more similar to the original, called “tank controls,” to “modern controls.”

33. mattie brice theorizes the role of the game designer or game master as a domme to the player's submissive, inspired by games like the lesbian fantasy *Encyclopedia Fuckme and the Case of the Vanishing Entrée* (Anna Anthropy, 2011, rereleased as *Fuck, Eat, Kill* in 2022). See mattie brice, "Play and Be Real About It: What Games Could Learn from Kink," *Alternate Ending*, July 31, 2014, www.mattiebrice.com/play-and-be-real-about-it-what-games-could-learn-from-kink/.

34. Claus Pias, "The Game Player's Duty: The User as the Gestalt of the Ports," in *Media Archaeology*, edited by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (University of California Press, 2011), 164–83.

35. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (October 1975): 6–18, <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>. This essay opened up space for feminist discussion of representation in film studies, in a way that editors Jen Malkowski and TreaAndrea M. Russworm of the *Gaming Representation* anthology hoped could be expanded in video game studies in a "Laura Mulvey moment." This moment consists not of the article itself, but the field and debates made possible by its existence. Teddy Pozo discusses whether this call applies to queer and trans games in "Queer Games after Empathy," *Game Studies* 18, no. 3, <https://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/pozo>.

36. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

37. Malkowski and Russworm, Introduction to *Gaming Representation*.

38. Like the mild-mannered, nerdy, and traumatized Mark (Carl Boehm) in *Peeping Tom* (dir. Michael Powell, 1960) who stabbed his victims to death with a tripod.

39. Nussbaum, "Objectification." Nussbaum argues fungibility is frequently consensual, such as in a bathhouse or glory hole where sexualized bodies mingle and interchange in erotic and pleasurable ways. The removal of Lara Croft's sexuality makes for a less pleasant version of fungibility.

40. Espen Aarseth, "Genre Trouble," *Electronic Book Review*, May 21, 2004, <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/genre-trouble/>. See also Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

41. Janet Murray, "The Last Word on Ludology v. Narratology," *Inventing the Medium*, June 28, 2013, <https://inventingthemedium.com/2013/06/28/the-last-word-on-ludology-v-narratology-2005/>. She said one would have to have "a mind of winter" to view Lara this way.

42. Stuart Moulthrop, "Stuart Moulthrop's Response," *Electronic Book Review*, May 21, 2003, <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/stuart-moulthrops-response/>.

43. Espen Aarseth, "Espen Aarseth Responds in Turn," *Electronic Book Review*, May 21, 2004, <https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/espen-aarseth-responds-in-turn/>.

44. His original Japanese name, *Jugemu*, comes from a Japanese *rakugo* story about a boy with a long name. Heinz Morioka and Miyoko Sasaki translate *Jugemu* to "life without end." Heinz Morioka and Miyoko Sasaki, *Rakugo: The Popular Narrative Art of Japan* (Harvard University Press, 1990), 53.

45. Nicholas Sammond argues of characters like Mickey Mouse that they are not *like* minstrels; they *are* minstrels. Considering this, it is interesting to see an Italian American caricature like Mario take the place of the blackface minstrelsy performance of Mickey

Mouse. Euro-American immigrants performed in blackface as minstrels, but Mario appears mostly without these performative tropes. See Nicholas Sammond, *Birth of an Industry: Blackface Minstrelsy and the Rise of American Animation* (Duke University Press, 2015).

46. Luigi is pronounced similarly to 類似(るいじ), referring to resemblance or similarity.

47. There is also a team of completely invulnerable characters including Yoshi (the male dinosaur who lays eggs), for players who prefer less challenge.

48. I did ragequit, but only because I had to get back to this writing, you see.

49. Uploaded to Vimeo as “PlayingWithPower-1” by Henry Jenkins, <https://vimeo.com/117309063>.

50. See Noah Zazanis for a discussion of the tumblr-influenced “misdirected misogyny” as a term in trans studies. Noah Zazanis, “On Hating Men (And Becoming One Anyway),” *New Inquiry*, December 24, 2019, <https://thenewinquiry.com/on-hating-men-and-becoming-one-anyway/>. Zazanis also draws on trans male theories of the body including Henry Rubin, “Reading Like a (Transsexual) Man,” in *Men Doing Feminism*, ed. Tom Digby (Routledge, 1997); and Cameron Awkward-Rich, “Trans, Feminism: Or, Reading like a Depressed Transsexual,” *Signs* 42, no. 4 (2017).

51. Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (MIT Press, 2014).

52. For a reframe of trans studies to focus on the problems of cisness, see Marquis Bey, *Cistem Failure: Essays on Blackness and Cisgender* (Duke University Press, 2022).