The Historical Changes in the Role of Female Characters

-- Focus on the Main Character Lara Croft's Appearance Modelling Change in the Tomb Raider

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Abstract

The birth of the role of Lara Croft means a revolution in the status of female characters in the game world, which can also reflect the changing attitudes of the world towards women. However, the changes have not eradicated gender stereotype, and even intensified it. This article focuses on Lara Croft as the research object, through the establishment of a model of female characters in the game world, it shows the world's attitudes towards women.

Keywords

Lara Croft; Video Game; Female; Character Appearance.

1. Introduction

According to the statistics, most of the characters in the video game is male role. The number of female characters in the video game is even lower than the subordinate role [1]. Although, there are some of the female characters are famous, the most of them are the secondary role. Such as, Cortana from Halo (Microsoft Game Studios, 2001), Diana from the Hitman (Eidos Interactive, 2000) and Diana does not even appear too many times in the game, and Ada Wong from Resident Evil (Capcom, 1998). However, there are still some video games feature female characters as the main character. These characters are also popular with the game players. This essay will focus on a really famous female character who name is Lara Croft in Tomb Raider (Eidos Interactive, 1996). As time goes on and the computer technology improves, Lara's appearance model has changed a lot.

About the female characters in the video game, most of the appearance models are idealized. These female characters have big breasts and the desirable hips to attract the male players. So, this essay will analyse how Lara Croft's appearance model change and how is the appearance of Lara Croft improved. In addition, this essay will discuss the context of the female in the game industry critically, such as female game players and female game workers, what impact do they have on the video game? Then, this essay will discuss the female character in video games critically. There are six pictures selected for the case study and combine with the background of the female character to discuss what happened to the female character in the video game. At the last, the essay will do the conclusion of the status of female characters in the video games and predict the development tendency in the future.

2. Discuss the Background of the Female in the Video Game World

From the invention of the video game to the present, the video game is dominated by male. Fron, Fullerton, Morie and Pearce mentioned that the game industry has grown largely on men, the

first is the white male and then the Asian male. They even classify women and 'non-player' as 'minorities' [2]. According to these viewpoints, it is easy to see that the female is underrepresented in the gaming world. When people mentioning the video game, the first word that comes to people's mind is probably 'boys' or 'guys'. People may not to think much about 'girls' or 'women' when they are talking about the video game. However, the female player and the female game designer is really existing. Women make up a small percentage of jobs in the gaming industry, and most of them are in management jobs that are not related to technical areas. The main design work and coding work is still done by male [3]. In another aspect, Kafai and Peppler (2011, cited in Harvey and Fisher, 2015, p.579) argues that when women have more opportunities to enter the main section of the gaming industry, then it might break the masculinist geek culture. Though, Harvey and Fisher also argues that the key to the success of game products is the mastery of technical knowledge and familiarity with coding. The problem is the number of women's participation in game education is particularly small [3]. In this point, it is not hard to see that the position of women in the gaming industry is a little contradictory. People are trying to find a balance between men and women in the game world, but the issues is that men and women have different interests. According to Harvey and Fisher says that the participation of women in game education is lower than men [3]. Then, it could be roughly inferred that women are less interested in the game industry or software coding than men. So, finding that balance may be difficult. People want to put women in the position of a dominant role in game creation, it is actually about whether women are paying attention to the gaming industry. If female have less interested in games, male will continue to dominate the gaming industry. On the other aspect, aside from women in the gaming industry, the female game player is also a topic of much discussion.

Vermeulen, Castellar, Janssen, Calvi and Van Looy maintain that because the number of the female game player is lower than male players. This leads to women being perceived as not part of the game or as being less competitive than men. According to the research from the article by Vermeulen, Castellar, Janssen, Calvi and Van Looy, such stereotype might also lead to women's lack of confidence and create nervousness when they play video games and competitions with male game players [4]. However, there is another research which is the study of the impact of violent game on game players. One of the statistics in the article "Video Game Violence and the Female Game Player: Self- and Opponent Gender Effects on Presence and Aggressive Thoughts" showed that female game players make up 40% of the game market, which means that there is a large number of female game players [5]. In addition, the data of female gamers was generated in 2006, there were plenty of women playing video games in twelve years ago. Although, the stereotype of women does not belong in the game is still existing. In this case, we could see that the existence of female game players in the society is despised. Based on the data that the female gamer account for 40% of the total. This is a huge number which is a nearly half proportion, the proportion of 40% should not be ignored. Therefore, there are some ideas may help us to understand why female game players is despised. Thomas and Walkerdine mentioned that the research which shows that girls play games to socialize, and boys are enjoy the game itself and engage intellectually with the games [6]. Henwood (1998, cited in Beavis and Charles, 2007, p.692) argues that women and men differ in their acceptance of software engineering courses [6]. The difference is that women are more subjective in accepting knowledge in this course than men, men are better able to grasp the main content of the course. According to the idea above, it can be inferred that women's perception of video games and coding is weaker than men. Because when they are playing the game, their focus is not really on the game itself and their understanding of software engineering might be excessively subjective. Because of these factors, it may cause those women are neglected in gaming industry. Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson and Consalvo explained that the female

gamer's interests and purposes are different with male gamers and women spend far less time and less types of games than men [7]. Thus, the neglect of women is understandable.

In addition to the female game players themselves, there is also a lot of discussion about female characters in the video game. The role of female not only have arguments in the real world, but female characters in the game are also treated "unfairly".

3. Discuss the Context of Female Character in the Video Game

Since the early stage of the game development, the positioning of female characters in the game has always been weak. Braun and Giroux (1989, cited in Lynch et al., 2016, p.567) argues that female characters in 1980s video games are mainly playing the role of gender-stereotyped. Although, when entering the 1990s, the video game industry has been sharply developed, the female characters were still not objectified [8]. The investigation presented that most of female characters in the video game have the bare body and their clothing styles are not appropriate for in-game missions. Moreover, about the design of the female character's body shape, they all have busty breasts and tight hips [8]. Thus, it can be seen that the bias against women in the game world is particularly strong. It can even be said that women are used as a tool to attract men (male game players), and it is also a kind of disrespect to the female image. However, there is a reason that why is the game industry not treating the female character with enough respect. The game company may use "sex" as a sales strategy, using sexy women to attract male game consumers [8] According to the idea above, we can see that the main sales target of the video game is assumed to be male, thus ignoring the existence of female game players. Then, this raises an interesting question. If the game is primarily marketed to men, why does the game company not directly design the main character in the game as a sexy female role? In this way, male players could interact with a sexy heroine throughout the whole game experience. Besides, male game players are not the absolute purchasing power of the game industry, there are still many female game players. As mentioned at the beginning of the article, female players account for 40% of all game players [5].

In fact, recently, there are many games that are dominated by women. For example, Claire Farron (codename is Lighting) in Final Fantasy XIII (Square Enix, 2009), Faith Connors in Mirror's Edge (Electronic Arts, 2008), Lara Croft in Tomb Raider (Eidos Interactive, 1996) and more. Next, this essay will discuss the history of the main character Lara Croft in Tomb Rider from 1996 to present. At the same time, it will also explain the Lara Phenomenon.

4. The female character Lara Croft in Tomb Raider

Firstly, Lara Croft is the main character in the video game which called Tomb Raider. At the very beginning, Tomb Raider was released in October 1996 for the Saturn (it is a home video game console), and then Tomb Raider released on PlayStation and PC. Lara Croft was designed by a young designer named Toby Gard who were the former designer in Core Design. She is an athletic and independent adventurer, and also, she loves collecting ancient artefacts [9]. In the early 1990s, it was a big challenge to have a strong and powerful female role in the video game as the main character. However, until after the game was released did Core Design realize that how successful it was [9]. According to the success of Tomb Raider, or the character Lara Croft has been shaped successfully. It is not hard to see that (male) game players are very tolerant of the female character. It can even be seen from the sales volume of more than seven million units that (male) game players are ecstatic about Tomb Raider and Lara Croft [9]. In this way, we can speculate that the game player seems to be more attractive to a powerful female character. Besides, combine with Eastin's argument that female game players account for 40% of the total number of game players, Tomb Raider and Lara Croft attract more than just the male game player [5]. So, the female character may be able to please all game players. The female character

satisfies male's desire for sexy female roles, and it might also make female game players feel more comfortable or more involved in the game. However, in the case of the success of the game, Lara Croft's appearance design is really satisfactory?

Since technology has changed at a lot from 1996 to present, the appearance of Lara is definitely a huge change. However, is there any change in the stereotype of the female character? There is a set of pictures to show that the appearance of Lara Croft in Tomb Raider, see Figure 1-6.
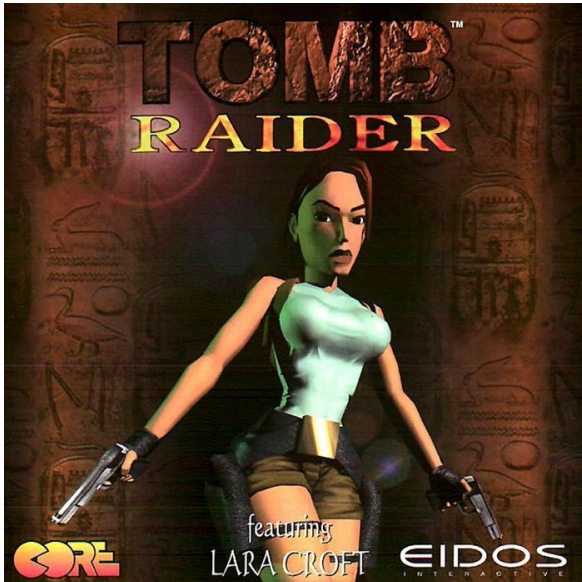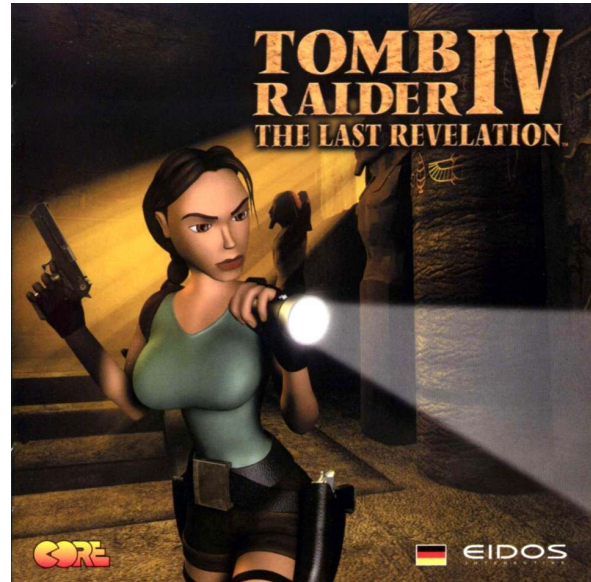

Figure 1. The poster of Tomb Raider (1996)

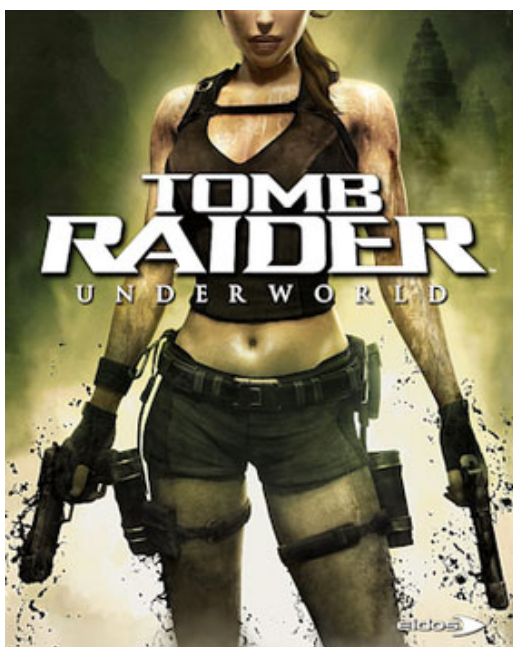**Figure 2.** The poster of Tomb Raider 4 (1999)

Figure 3. The poster of Tomb Raider: Underworld (2008)

Figure 4. The poster of Tomb Raider: Anniversary (2007)

Figure 5. The poster of Rise of the Tomb Raider (2015)

Figure 6. The poster of Shadow of the Tomb Raider (2018)

This set of pictures, two in the 1990s, two in the 2000s, two in the 2010s. Firstly, the obvious difference is that the CG technology increases with each passing day. The details are more and more exquisite, so that people could even see scars and the blood on the body of Lara. Next, from the 1990s to the 2000s, we can see that her breasts are very plump, and she is wearing a vest and very short shorts, her body is mostly bare. Technically, this kind of dress is not suitable for the mission and adventures. As Downs and Smith (2010, cited in Lynch et al., 2016, p.567) argues that game designers tend to be designed with female characters partially nude and the clothing style is not reasonable [8]. However, such a design has indeed become one of the key factors in the success of Tomb Raider (1996). Although, the early version of Tomb Raider is not as realistic as the current games, it was still very attractive at that time.

Then, we can see that there is a great change about the appearance of Lara in 2010s. First of all, the clothing style of Lara looks much more reasonable. The poster (see Figure 5.) shows that Lara wearing a warm jacket, a scarf, cargo pants and boots, the background is in the mountains in extremely cold weather. The poster of Shadow of the Tomb Raider (2018, see Figure 6.) shows that the weather might be warm, and we can see some sparks on the poster, and Lara wearing the vest and cargo pants. According to these two posters, the dress of Lara looks much more suitable for fighting. In other words, it looks more professional and more like an adventurer. Then observe Lara's shape design, her breasts are not as exaggerated as before. In terms of Lara's body proportions, she looks more like a real woman. Thus, Tomb Raider in 2010s is in sharp contrast to the previous work.

Combine with Behm-Morawitz and Mastro's investigation, they maintain that the most of women are designed to be wearing low/revealing necklines and vest. The design of the female's body is particularly idealized, such as the larger breasts and a smaller waist [10]. The design of Lara Croft in Tomb Raider before 2010s is in line with Behm-Morawitz and Mastro's arguments. So, we can see that Tomb Raider has greatly improved the portrayal of the female character (Lara) in 2010s, from an exaggerated appearance design to a more objective and more realistic design. Therefore, the gaming world has created a phrase called the Lara Phenomenon.

5. The Lara Phenomenon

The Lara phenomenon is mainly presenting a trend that is dominated by women in the video game [11]. Because in the early days of the game industry, game companies always use male characters as the main role of the video game. Now, there are many video games started to use female as the main character and the most typical example is Lara Croft in Tomb Raider. The emergence of Lara Croft paved the way for the subsequent female characters in other video games [11]. In the previous game studies, researchers (De Jean, Upitis, Koch and Kim, 1999; Kafai, 1998, cited in Jansz and Martis, 2007, p.142) found that the female character might help girls accept the characters in the video game may have an impact on children, characters may affect the child's personality development [11]. Consequently, it is easy to see that the development of female characters might really important. Especially children in their developmental stages, video games need to give them the right values and worldviews. Thus, firstly, Tomb Raider has made a good start in game industries. Although, the initial design for the appearance of Lara Croft was idealized. Through the content of posters of Tomb Raider, it is not hard to see that game designers made the appearance of Lara Croft is more realistic. From the design of the body shape to the design of the clothing style, these changes in detail make Lara closer to an adventurer.

Jansz and Martis mentioned that according to their research, the result shows that women are becoming more and more important as the main character in the video game. However, there are still some gender stereotypes are existing in the video game [11]. On the other hand, the Lara Phenomenon has helped a lot in the development of female characters in the video game. We can see that the design of Lara Croft is still improving, which means the future also has a lot of room for improvement in the design of female characters.

6. Conclusion

The design of female characters in video games is still in a stage of improvement. Although, we have seen an excellent product like Tomb Raider. This has not completely eliminated some issues of the gender stereotype. The video game player could still see the idealized female body shape, even if they occupy a dominant position (protagonist) in the game. On the other hand, with the development of the game industry, people could already see a large number of female-

led video games. From this point of view, that is a good start for the revolution of female game characters.

As a phenomenal game product, Tomb Raider has been making changes to Lara Croft. There is still a long way to go for the entire game industry to locate female characters into a most appropriate position, whether it is from a women's body shape design or clothing style design. As the number of female game players grows, the design of female characters needs to be more careful, and the female game player may also help with the design of female characters. Because male game players are not dominate the video game industry, the opinions of female game players are increasingly important.

All in all, people could see the progress and improvement of the game industry. I believe that people want to play more games which the design of characters is more objective and realistic. Male characters and female characters should be equal to satisfy all kinds of game players.

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