

The following sections—*Women and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)* and *Women and Media*—are regular features of *Women in Action*. As these are *Isis International-Manila's* key advocacy areas, we keep track of the discourse on these issues and share them with our readers. Ed.

Genderplay: Successes and Failures in Character Designs for Videogames

by Jane Pinckard

As a woman who plays video games, I've had to think about gender in videogames, because it's so obvious that I'm playing in a boys' world.

The late Dr. Anita Borg taught that technology isn't neutral; tools are shaped by the values and desires of the creators. Often the creators tend to be clueless to the values encoded in their tools, because to them, the tools are transparent—they reflect pure utilitarianism. But to those who are excluded, the tools are highly charged.

This is especially true I think of videogames, where everything from the environment (the marketing and merchandising, the image of the industry) to the peripherals (the laughably phallic joystick, the original Xbox controllers which are too big for my hands, the color scheme of the Xbox) are male-friendly. The attitude seems to be, "Maybe some women play our games, but we don't really know, and frankly, we don't care."

So what are the tools of character design in videogames? Let me take you through some of the values I've noticed encoded in character designs, and how that relates to gameplay in my experience.

Alienation vs. Identification: Necessary Tension

When designing characters, it's important to keep in mind the tension between identification and alienation, because the player is both actor and spectator. This is good tension, it drives a lot of gameplay and innovation. Without identification, you create a game with little emotional impact or drama. That's okay in a characterless game like Tetris, but in games with characters, the characters should probably function as vehicles of something more. Similarly, you need to allow players room for a certain amount of alienation. You want to preserve player identity. How many boys would have played Tomb Raider if they felt that they were taking on a feminine role? Or, what if a kid identified too strongly with the protagonist in GTA3? Maintaining distance is a way of being able to play characters who are not you, and being able to inhabit that genderspace comfortably, without risk of a split personality.

The issue of alienation/identification intensifies, I would argue, in an online multiplayer setting because while one is

free to experiment with multiple characters in a single-player game, in a multiplayer environment, the way others react to you is through your avatar. Therefore some people either take great pains to distance themselves from the avatar, or conversely, create avatars they identify with very closely. I think these behaviours lead to very interesting genderplay in online environments.

Four Aspects of "Genderspace"

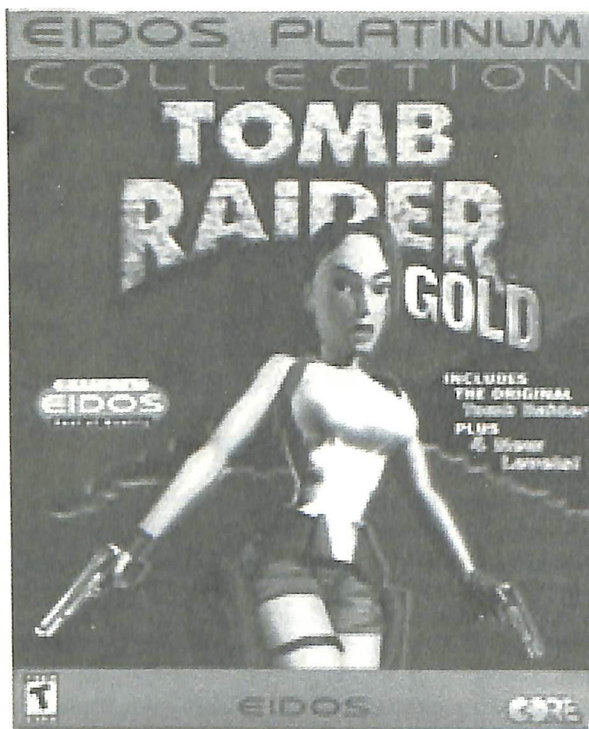
I'm using the somewhat clumsy term "genderspace" because "gender" connotes an either-or, black-or-white proposition. But we often see in games a more fluid range of gender construction, within prescribed limits. The way gender is programmed, incorporated and manipulated describes a "genderspace"—it defines a range for gendered experiences in four ways:

1. The environment around the character outside of the game: the marketing, merchandising and advertising. The image of the character, and how that character is described. The iconic legacy of that character, apart from the actual character as a function of gameplay.
2. The aesthetics of the character. The character's appearance, movements, actions, voice, characteristics.
3. The programmatic aspects of the character. The character's choices, other character's reactions, and the encoded abilities and biases.
4. Character as avatar in a multiplayer environment—a special category. How other characters played by other people react to your character, and how you choose to interact with others.

Tomb Raider: Critical Failure of Character Environment

An example of failure in the marketing environment around a character was the promotion and release of the early Tomb Raider series—games which should have been breakthrough girl games.

I never played Tomb Raider, though it looked fun and a female protagonist seemed exciting. Outside of fighting games, there have not been a lot of games starring strong women. But I was immediately turned off by the way Tomb Raider was marketed and talked about. It was clear that I wasn't supposed to identify with her. For that matter, the game seemed to go out of its way to assure young teenage boys that they shouldn't identify with her, they should just ogle her.



It's not the fault of the packaging. Okay, so her breasts are lethal weapons, but I like the cover art. It shows she's strong, tough, an adventurer, and solo—she doesn't need a man! She owns those guns, and she knows how to use them. What's not to like?

The hype surrounding Lara Croft, which was gross, and undercut her image as strong smart archeologist and reduced her to a sex kitten. Where are her guns now?

The image was the cover art of a NextGen issue on how games are growing up. I rather think it demonstrates how immature gaming culture was at the time, and even now.

The reviews and previews obsessively focused on the male gaze traversing her body, more than the gameplay. She was just a toy to play with, not an avatar to identify with or a personality to inhabit. The message was not: "Hey, girls, an empowered woman to play in a game!" Instead, the message was: "Hey, boys, check out this chick's boobs while you lead her around a dungeon!"

Quotes from four different reviews:

1. "Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation" puts you back into the Daisy Dukes of Lara Croft, archaeologist and adventurer...Lara fans may rejoice as Last Revelation also offers...the chance to play a Lolita version of Lara, budding breasts and all.
2. Nevertheless, the opportunity to guide the buxom, if not

slightly deformed, Lara is reason enough for many to traipse through Egyptian catacombs and battle supernatural entities.

3. "Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation" puts you back into the hip-hugging cargo shorts of Lara Croft, archaeologist and adventurer, as she takes on evil in Egypt. TLR also offers ... the chance to play a Lolita version of Lara, budding breasts and all.

4. This landmark title set the realm of gaming ablaze with its stunning protagonist, the buxom Lara Croft. A marketing person's dream, Lara combines the no-nonsense spelunking fun of Indiana Jones with the brazen sensuality of a pinup queen. Gameplay consists of you leading the heroine through various tombs and catacombs in search of artifacts and treasure.

Note the language of alienation—you are always leading her, guiding her, while studying her form—you are not taking on her role. (See related essays: "Does Lara Croft Wear Fake Polygons?" by Anne-Marie Schleiner and "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo?" by Helen W. Kennedy.) I consider this the great wasted potential of Lara Croft: she could have transformed the videogame cultural landscape. Eidos, you really blew it—you alienated all the girls who would have *loved* this game.

Aesthetics of Sexy Girls: Beach Volleyball vs. Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance

Highly sexualised characters are not immediately a turnoff for females, though. It depends entirely on the context. For example, the notorious "DOA: Extreme Beach Volleyball" rather shocked me when I heard the sounds of it at the Tokyo Game Show last year. "What the hell is this game?" I thought. I admit, it was mind-numbing to be confronted by a ten-foot image of girls feeding each other strawberries in extreme close-up. (If you like, download the hypnotic movie clip of extreme volleyball action.)

But it's an absolutely gorgeous game. It does a marvelous job of articulating characters. Their movements are fluid and beautiful, their voices, well-acted. Each of them has a (albeit none-too-deep) personality, which comes out in their gestures—they stamp or cross their arms when they get frustrated, they jump up and down when they get excited, or laugh triumphantly in gleeful victory.

And it's totally transparent! It's a pin-up game—you can't argue with that. And, as a pin-up game, it's an outstanding success. It's silly, it's like a beach-bunny movie, a "men's magazine." The domain is explicitly for men, and that's okay. Nothing wrong with that. It's an honest game and I don't feel offended by it.

For contrast, take "Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance." This game has an example of a hyper-sexualised non-player char-



acter so over the top it jarred me out of an immersive experience. It happens at the beginning of the game, which is always critical for setting the mood, tone and boundaries of gamespace (Will Wright has said that a player can “sniff out the gamespace” of a game in the first five minutes).

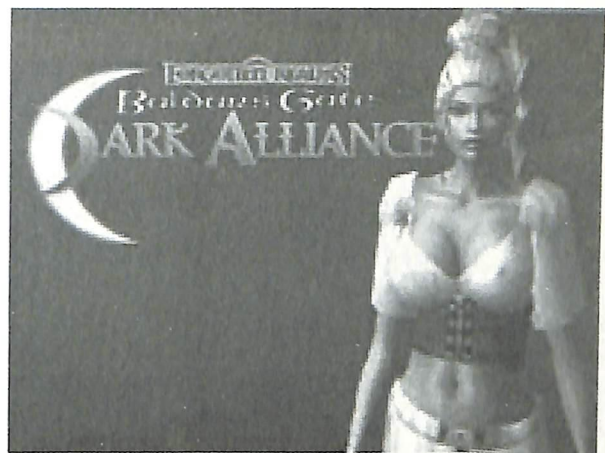
The previous cutscene is dark and forboding—you’ve been knocked on the head and all your possessions were stolen. It’s dark in the great city of Baldur’s Gate. You walk into a nearby tavern, seeking shelter and help, only to be confronted by a soft-core porn extra in a nearly transparent top jiggling her boobs at you. You can see her nipples! WTF? She sidles around, swinging her hips, while she tells you anxiously about the rats in her basement—the scene is beyond ridiculous. Justin and I burst out laughing, we just couldn’t believe it.

It would be different if “BG: DA” had been packaged as a sexy silly game, because then I would have expected that, and enjoyed it (the artists did a great job with her jiggling boobs). But in this case the totally out-of-context, out-of-character sex-kitten image of the tavern keeper mars the beginning of the game. It’s so pandering, so obvious, so immature, and above all, so completely unnecessary. Justin and I have often considered writing to the artists to ask them, “What were you thinking?”

Arcanum: Programmed Feminine Wiles

One of my favorite PC role-playing games is “Arcanum.” What I like about it is that the gender you choose for your character affects the paths open to you as you play. When you first choose your character, choosing male adds one point to your strength and takes one point away from your constitution (the baseline is 6 points in each category). If you choose female, you get one point deducted from your strength but a one point bonus to your constitution. The biological basis of this might be questionable, but the scheme adds to the variety of character-creation.

One of the quests in the game involves gaining entrance into a gentleman’s club. In this steam-punk Industrial Revo-



lution world, attitudes are still very sexist. The doorman at the gentleman’s club won’t let my female elf in. But I have a special letter from the owner. At that point, the unhappy doorman allows the lowly female into the club, although he cautions me to make my business quick.

I got that letter, incidentally, by sleeping with the slimy and lascivious owner of the club. I had the choice to beat him up for it, but my character was too weak to take him on, so I chose the sexual way out. Brilliant!

I like it when the game “knows” that I’m female, in deeper ways than the programmed “barks” (that is, when the soldiers at the gate shout “Get her!” or “Get him!”). The range of difference in gameplay would of course depend on the context of the game. In the Star Trek universe, for example, we are supposed to believe that the future of humankind has eliminated sexism (and racism, and all other -isms) so it would make sense for non-player characters to be fairly indifferent to your sex.

Sophitia Alexandra: Beautiful Barbarian

One word of caution: don’t design characters whose attributes are tied too closely to gender. There’s the danger of stereotyping. For one, why are females always archers, elves, and thieves? Part of the fun of a game, as I’ll talk about in the next section, is being able to play with gender stereotypes. Give the player as much choice as you can while keeping the play balanced. When I used to play tabletop RPGs, I loved playing the huge, dumb, but beautiful female barbarian. I wanted to be female, because I feel attached to that gender emotionally; but I love playing fighters, because they get to do the most fun stuff in the early game, and it’s easier if you’re not very experienced. Keep in mind that the majority of women are not hardcore gamers—yet—so they might appreciate a few more heavy-hitting Sophitia of “Soul Calibur”-types to play. Starting out as a magic user, as the only female character in “BG: DA” has you do, is tough for beginners.

I am very curious about “Deus Ex 2: Invisible War,” where you are able to choose to play either a male or female

protagonist. Team captain Harvey Smith has long been a proponent of emergent gaming, and he's a feminist besides. The game should be interesting from the perspective of gender programming. He has also said that the game is designed in such a way that you can, if you choose, finish it without killing a single person. In theory, both violent girls and pacifist boys can enjoy this game!



Drag in Dark Age of Camelot: Gender in Interaction

Justin and I often play "Gazing on Stonehenge." The practical matter is that the characters in this play, especially on the role-playing servers we tend to visit, are nicer to girls. They are more courteous, helpful, generous and attentive to the problems of a newbie. Everyone who plays the game knows, at a basic intellectual level, that the person controlling the avatar may be male or female; but for convenience's sake, ignore the disconnect and choose to treat other characters as they present themselves. Thus Justin has run into his share of "You-are-so-beautiful-M'lady" flirting, which he roleplays through. After all, that's the fun of the game.

But on top of that, Justin likes to explore not just the game world, but another level—the gender world. Ever the rebel, he likes to subvert norms, play against type, radicalise expectations. On Midgard, a harsh, snowy landscape where I played a Viking warriorress, Justin joined me as a massive troll shamaness. "You don't see female dwarves or trolls in Tolkien," he says. "All the trolls are genderless, which is to say, they are male." His character may have a hulking frame, but she has a gentle healer's disposition.

In another server on the sunny plains of Albion, Justin plays an enchantress who caught the eye of a young paladin. I asked him whether he responded to the paladin's tentative flirting. "Well, sure," he said. "I would say, 'Thank you for the necklace, M'lord' and 'Thank you for the necklace—again, M'lord' because that's part of the game." Who knows? The paladin could well be the avatar of a young woman halfway across the world.

One discovery: When I led parties as a female character, I found it uncomfortable to maintain authority. I found myself incorporating more group consensus, occasionally

adopting a firmer hand when certain party members grew insubordinate. But my one lone male character—although he was but a slender elf—had a much easier time maintaining authority. Leadership came more naturally. People even expected it.

I would like to see more experimentation with genderless or gender-ambivalent characters in this area. In MUDs and MOOs, one can often create a third sex and invent a pronoun and refer to oneself always with that pronoun (and insist others do that same). In these science-fiction and fantasy-themed online worlds, it's perfectly plausible that ungendered, ambiguously gendered, or bi-gendered races exist. That would add a new dimension to gender play, which I'd like to explore. Some women feel uncomfortable playing female in certain virtual worlds. I haven't personally been insulted or offended as a female avatar, but I have certainly had some unwanted attention directed my way. And yet I feel not quite right playing as a male character either. A third gender—or a third choice, whether gendered or not—might be an alternative, a way to explore sexual anonymity. I wonder if players would feel too uncomfortable? But the domain of games is unbounded by physical realities, including biology. Why not take advantage of this?

Final Thoughts

I don't want to see a shelf of pink boxes of "girl games." I just want to see better games in general—games that are more thoughtful, more provocative, more interesting, with better character design.

Some suggestions you hear over and over again in the research around what girls want out of games are "open-ended," "less-goal oriented" and "co-operative play." These are the themes that most adult gamers seem to want too. Friends who are game developers and designers don't necessarily want to see bouncy boobs (although there's a place for that, sure); they want evolved gameplay, emergent gameplay—with great characters. Set up some rules and let the players play with both the gamespace and the genderspace, however they wish. Don't push girls away from games like "Tomb Raider" just because you're afraid boys won't like to identify with Lara. Don't insert gratuitous sex—or for that matter, violence. Make it *mean* something. Don't bind gender with too many built-in characteristics, but let girls be girls in your game. Allow a lot of different types of female characters, not just thin, pretty, busty ones.

The end result isn't just going to appeal to women, it'll appeal to a lot of people across the board who want smart, fun, engaging games.

Source: <http://www.gamegirladvance.com/archives/2003/04/16/genderplay_successes_and_failures_in_character_designs_for_videogames.html>, 16 April 2003