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Lara Croft and her sisters

The paper analyses the design of some famous women who appear as protagonists in computer games and in other features on the Internet. Meeting a persona like Lara Croft or one of her internet sisters, one may question whether they are representations of women. Are they rather masculine heroes disguised in female bodies? They are confusing because their bodies are highly sexualised but still their gender is rather ambiguous. But my question is whether these figures that may appear confusing, rather are characteristic of how gender is apprehended in our times?

Lara Croft is a visible front figure of the computer game Tomb Raider (Figure 1). She is definitely a 'she', the way we see her, a female figure of great sex appeal. Tomb Raider was a great success when it was launched in 1996, and Lara became a most popular figure. She has her own life even outside of the game, with web pages, fan clubs, etc. Lara has also become a film star – though in the latter case her role was performed by a woman of flesh and blood. In the game, Lara is always present on the screen, constantly on the move and physically active. Lara's home is a place for exercise, for keeping her body fit and strong. Freedom and independence are what she values most, and travelling is her way to achieve that. Lara is a fighter and a shooting star, confronted with endless fighting and physical trials. In that sense, she reflects other cultural icons displayed in films of the last decade, starting with *Thelma and Louise*, shooting their way within a storyline of the traditional, masculine road movie (Liestøl 2001). And though Lara is the most famous of the tough computer game heroines, she is not alone.

My perspective here is to consider information technology as a key technology and therefore a key symbol of our times. But symbols are not only descriptive or reflective of culture. They are also *vehicles of meaning*, or that which stimulates thinking (Geertz 1973). New technologies can therefore present new models for how things are, and my question is whether contemporary technology provides a new model for how to think about gender.

How we think with things may be illustrated by the two artefacts of a drill and a mix-master (Figure 2). This pair can in fact illustrate a concentrated representation of gender in our time. A newspaper journalist presented the two artefacts under the headline: “When he met her”. This has to do with the artefacts’ different forms, colours, and functions, as well as associations to the contexts they are used in and the people who use them. There is roughness versus purity, hard metal versus the vulnerable plastic, and the aggressiveness represented by the pistol shape of the drill versus the rather peaceful, downwards bent mixer – in other words, a whole range of representations of gender as difference. They display all these differences despite the fact that they use the same type of technology, a small machine that causes something to rotate. The packaging of this machinery is, however, very different for the two artefacts.

The illustration of the mixer and the drill is taken from an exhibition with the title ‘The Gender of Things’ (Oudshoorn et al 2002). The aim of arranging this exhibition was to destabilise the common understandings of gender as well as technology. The artefacts demonstrate that technology is more than useful tools. Technologies are also things with cultural meaning. Also gender is more than sexual bodies and two types of human beings. Gender is a cultural category that we implicitly use to sorting things out.

Another example of how technologies may present new models of reasoning is that when machines produced goods, they supported the idea of a material basis for society. Contemporary technologies, however, reflect the idea that society is built on information and information flows. Information technology is complex, changeable, and multi-functional. As a reflection of our time, it shows that one can have many identities, based on a variety of ‘inner qualities’. People are complex and fragmented in the same way, and in communication online, can choose between different identities (cf. Turkle 1995). In interaction with computers, we learn to relate to the surface: you are the one you present yourself to be.

The human body was previously configured as a machine, whereas it is now increasingly depicted as a cyborg creation. The machine metaphor provided an image of a stable body where each part did its ‘job’, such as the heart working as a pump within a human transport system (Bolter 1984). The cyborg body is, however, a malleable construction of which parts can be reconstructed, exchanged or improved, by such means as cosmetic surgery or organic

transplantation (Balsamo 1996). Thus we have moved towards a perception of the body as 'cultural plastic' (Bordo 1991).

Thus, the understanding of gender and gender difference is not as stable as it used to be. Traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity are today often referred to as myths, e.g. all men are not rational, all women are not sensitive etc. These are rather symbolic connections. In popular language, myths of gender mean stories that we should look through; they do in other words not represent the truth about gender. Referring to the concept of myth we should, however, rather consider them as condensed versions of what a culture defines as masculine and feminine, and this is absolutely real, in the sense that symbols and myths are an important part of reality, though this is different from what men and women are and do.

Here studying gender symbolism in new information technology, I'll refer to gender as a mythological system, the way such systems are defined by Roland Barthes (1972): as a self-referential chain of meaning. These chains of meaning are so obvious and so tightly interwoven that they become invisible as constructions of meaning and appear as natural connections. This is exactly the principle of myth: for instance, advertising does not hide or deny women's location in society. On the contrary, advertisements exhibit this location as natural and given. "And this is the common and subtle principle of all myths: they hide nothing, their function is to distort, not to make things disappear" (Barth 1972). In that sense we may consider Lara Croft and her sisters as exaggerations of the feminine body, making it more visible what it is all about.

Initially, I referred to them as amazons, thus to an ancient mythical figure. It is a paradox that so many of the stories on the internet are based on ancient legends – in other words, that new technology is used to recreate ancient times. The storyline of such games generally involves a fight against evil forces, but a difference to old stories about brave knights and ladies to be rescued, some of the most popular conquerors are female personae, or it is a persona that the player constructs by building it up step by step, choosing its qualities, including its gender. I shall start with the amazons, and come back to the latter (gender as a matter of choice).

Figure 9 shows a female body with an exaggerated feminine shape. This female figure has attributes and skills that can be interpreted as traditionally masculine. She appears to be a sort

of ‘action man’ in a body of excessive feminine forms. The most famous of these ladies is Lara Croft: over-dimensional, unconquerable – but the question is, of which gender?

According to the creator of Tomb Raider, Toby Gard: “Lara was designed to be a tough, self-reliant, intelligent woman. She confounds all the sexist clichés apart from the fact that she’s got an unbelievable figure. Strong, independent women are the perfect fantasy girls – the untouchable is always the most desirable” (Cassell and Jenkins 1998:30). Thus, Lara was created to be attractive to men as the main target group, but at the same time also to women. In that sense she is a perfect cross-dresser, and cross-dressing is a most popular activity on the Internet. The anonymity offered on the Net has spurred the curiosity of experiencing, for a man how it is to act as a woman and *vice versa*. In the game, a male player actually is Lara and performs as a woman, and simultaneously he controls her. For women players, she offers the possibility to act like men and to possess desirable ‘masculine’ connotated qualities like courage and strength – while performing in the guise of a firm and fit female body.

Lara Croft has a Norwegian sister called April Ryan (Figure 10), who is the main character in the computer game *The Longest Journey*. The male producers of this game describe her thus: “April is 18 years old, independent, intelligent and beautiful ... She doesn’t have as big tits as figures in other games ... She is attractive, but no sex bomb”. In this adventure game, intelligence is of more importance than force, and in symbolic terms, the amount of intelligence is so to say inversely linked to the size of breasts. Being a sex symbol links to another chain of meaning than intelligence does; the former does, however, link to femininity.

The designers go on to say, like Lara’s creator, that they believe female front figures appeal to both sexes. From this one can conclude that the gender of the figure that the player identifies with may vary; having the right attributes is what matters. Qualities such as beauty, intelligence, and bravery can be placed in both male and female bodies, as long as the body is strong, unconquerable and has an appealing shape.

We may say that these game personae are female according to the sign of their bodies, in the sense that the body is not considered as nature but that bodily features are not only nature but also basic symbols of gender. Thus, we recognise them as female personae on the ‘outside’, whereas their qualities and practices would rather be conceptualised as classically masculine. If they represent a new femininity, what type of masculinity could these female game

personae make a contrast to? Since they have qualities conventionally recognised as masculine, should then a counterpart be a 'feminised' masculinity, or rather one that is 'more masculine' in the sense of even tougher than her? In the same vein, it is hard to tell if April is more or less feminine than Lara. She may be considered less so because the female attributes of tits, thighs and buttocks that make Lara 'more feminine' than any woman are less well developed in her case. April may, however, appear as more feminine because even if she is tough and brave, she is depicted as both sensitive and vain. Lara embodies overall qualities like drive, aggressiveness and force, which are attributes with masculine connotations. The exaggerated feminine attributes have made some draw the conclusion that this particular version of 'femininity' is not based on a model of women but on male fantasies of them. We find, however, a mix of traditional qualities and new ones. The body shapes are traditional, but linked to a new hardness of body and mind. Is this a male fantasy? It can also be said to be a contemporary ideal among young women. A psychiatrist working with eating disorders, states that the new ideal among women is to have not only a firm, but a hard body (Skårderud 1999). This implies, in extreme cases, getting rid of the soft parts and getting down to the bones. The question is whether eating disorders are apprehended as deviance or as an expression of femininity in contemporary culture. In the terms of a Norwegian social anthropologist (Solheim 1998), eating disorders are a 'sexually transmitted disease' of contemporary culture, that is, a soft body is associated with weakness whereas hard exercise and little food produces a desirable hard body. If so, these game personae do not represent masculinity hidden within a female body. The hardness may instead represent a new ideal of the female body.

Another relevant icon of the female body is the Barbie doll - often despised but definitely ambiguous - not unlike the Spice Girls and their 'girl power'. Barbie's body is feminine but not soft. "Hers is a body of hard edges, distinct borders, self control. It is literally impenetrable" (Urla and Swedlund 2000). Barbie is another female hard body, associating control and mastery with the contemporary female body and is in this sense similar to the computer game heroines. Still, Barbie is definitely not a cross-dresser.

The combination of feminine and masculine in Lara's case could be referred to a mismatch between her "exterior" qualities, i.e. the feminine signs of the body, and her "interior" qualities, i.e. interests, values and feelings with masculine connotations. Lara looks feminine on the outside, but likes to kill. We may, however, ask if this is an outdated question. It

touches on the idea of a stable identity which should be in accordance with how one looks, to be given credibility as an authentic person. However, according to the American psychologist Sherry Turkle (1995), we have in our encounter with computers, learned to take things at face value. Things 'are' what they are on the surface. Or do we still expect that particular 'interior' qualities should match a body that is recognised as either feminine or masculine? To discuss this point, I shall take my last example, which is the computer game *The SIMS* (Figure 11).

The SIMS is a very popular game, despite the fact that it is not a traditional shooting or discovery game, but is about the trivialities of everyday life. Playing it involves tasks such as furnishing the home, cooking and going to work. The social relationships between the game personae are also important. In contrast to Lara Croft and her 'sisters', these personae look like ordinary people. Externally they are men and women, but the player decides on their 'content'. As a player, you start with outer attributes such as hair, clothes, and skin color, and then go on to choose personality characteristics based on five variables: *neat, active, outgoing, playful, and nice*. The player uses a scale from 1-10 to decide how much of each of these qualities a game persona will have, and these choices have consequences for how they manage in the game. The point is that these choices are completely independent of the gender of the chosen figure. You do not choose a pre-produced entity with given qualities. Thus, personal qualities are not connected to gender. Externally, the figures have traditional gender attributes, but these women and men can be 'filled up' with inner qualities independent of their external gender attributes.

In this talk, I have been looking for ideas that are embedded in and presented by new technologies. In the end, my question is which model today's technology promotes as a *model for* contemporary understandings of gender. The above examples show that, in the world of computer games, the 'external' gender signs of the body are separated from the 'internal' attributes of the game personae. Moreover, it is assumed that both women and men will identify with the strong winning types, independent of their 'external' gender, that is, if the protagonist is identified as a man or a woman. Based on these examples, I would suggest that contemporary technology supports the following model for gender today: And that is, gender as an 'empty shell' which can be filled with desirable attributes and qualities based on personal preference.

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