"Fight Back or Die": Rape, Revenge, and the Supernatural in *Tomb Raider*

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In 2012, one of gaming's most recognizable icons, Lara Croft, found herself in an all-too-familiar position—at the center of a controversy around gender and representation in games. In a promotional interview prior to the release of Crystal Dynamics's 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot, executive producer Ron Rosenberg revealed that Lara's origin story included a rape attempt, with the scene featured in the first-look gameplay trailer (Schreier). Rosenberg's interview set off an internet maelstrom that drew a hasty walk-back from the studio. Three days later, studio head Darrell Gallagher asserted that "sexual assault of any kind is categorically not a theme we cover in this game" (qtd. in Gera).

Crystal Dynamics's attempt to downplay the assault is far from surprising—depictions of sexual assault can earn a game an 18+ rating from the Entertainment Software Ratings Board, and pre-launch controversy around sexual violence is likely not what the studio had in mind for its revamped, more progressive take on the franchise. The assertion that sexual violence is not a theme in the game, however, is demonstrably false: the incident at the heart of the controversy, in which Lara is groped and nuzzled by an armed assailant, is sexual violence. But the question of sexual violence as theme extends far beyond this initial incident. Although it bears many hallmarks of its Indiana Jones-style action-adventure heritage, *Tomb Raider* in many ways is a supernatural rape-revenge story, with Lara's first kill—her would-be assailant—setting into motion the events of this game and recontextualizing Lara Croft's character as one hardened by the threat of gendered violence. The rape-revenge premise of *Tomb Raider* is obscured by two narrative choices made by the game's developers. By not subjecting Lara to a physical rape, the developers grant themselves plausible deniability, leaning heavily on public (mis)understandings of what constitutes sexual violence. More insidiously, the developers rely on the estranging aspects of the game's science fiction premise to abstract the sexually violent aspects of the plot beyond an immediately identifiable reading. In other words, using a female, supernatural antagonist as the shadowy force behind the tangible threats Lara faces obscures the ways that *Tomb Raider* subjects Lara to largely male gendered violence with undertones of sexual threat. Upon closer examination, the supernatural force that Lara faces in the games poses a threat to her intersubjective personhood, a danger that feminist philosopher Ann Cahill argues constitutes the psychological harm of rape (132). In this paper, I explore how *Tomb Raider*'s developers use narrative and ludic instantiations of occult forces as devices to obscure the enactment of common tropes of sexual violence and rape-revenge in media. Jacinda Read argues that as filmmakers become self-conscious about how their work falls into feminist theoretical paradigms, their work

shifts, requiring theory to adapt and refocus (246). Likewise, as game developers adapt to calls for more diverse representation and less stereotypical roles for women, our analysis must move beyond obvious instantiations of sexual violence to include a more nuanced understanding of sexual violence as expressed through themes, metaphor, and gameplay.

"I had no choice": Raising the Stakes with Sexual Assault

In *Tomb Raider*, twenty-one-year-old archaeologist Lara is a junior member of the *Endurance*, a reality TV/archaeological expedition to find the legendary kingdom of Yamatai, somewhere south of Japan. The expedition is wrecked upon Yamatai's shores in a storm, only to discover that the island is home to a group of violent cultists called the Solarii, who still worship the legendary Sun Queen Himiko. The main plot arc of the game revolves around the attempts of the cult (which consists of survivors of past wrecks on the island) to kidnap Lara's best friend Samantha for a mysterious ritual, and Lara's attempts to rescue the team while unraveling the mystery of Queen Himiko. *Tomb Raider* is Lara Croft's origin story, and the Lara we meet at the outset of the game is very different from the mature, ruthless Lara of earlier installments of the franchise. Lara is nervous and hesitant; she frequently cries out for help and relies on her older male mentor Roth for direction about what to do next. The player's first act in control of Lara is to light her on fire, whereupon she falls from the ceiling to be impaled on a piece of rebar. Throughout the subsequent scenes, she moves slowly, hunched over and hugging her injured torso, chilled by frigid rain and wearing a wet, ripped tank top. Although of course most video game protagonists begin at a stage of weakness relative to their enemies and environment, Lara is very explicitly framed as vulnerable, an aspect of the story the game's developers focused heavily on in pre-release media (Paul 104).

Vladimir strokes Lara's neck during Tomb Raider*'s assault scene. Screenshot from "Vladimir" entry on Tomb Raider Wiki, by user KillerZ. www.tombraider.fandom.com/wiki/Vladimir.*

Games media reporting on the incident often framed it as a "rape attempt" rather than a sexual assault (Hamilton). To be clear, the event that takes place in the game is a sexual assault; although different countries' criminal codes vary in their definition of sexual assault/contact, in Western feminist definitions, sexual assault is understood to extend to a range of non-penetrative acts of a sexual nature (Canadian Women's Foundation). Whether an act of penetrative sexual violence took place or not is, on the narrative level, immaterial; the incident demonstrates that as a woman, Lara can be subjected to types of violence that would never happen to a male counterpart, like *Uncharted*'s Nathan Drake. The point of the incident is to place Lara in a position of extreme, gendered vulnerability, and to create a scenario in which Lara has an ethically permissible reason to first cross the threshold of killing another human being. Although an explicit reference to sexual(ized) violence is never made again throughout the game, heavy emphasis is placed on the gendered nature of the conflict. Per head writer Rhianna Pratchett, Vladimir's assault is the type of violence that Lara faces because of the context of the Solarii: "We're talking about a community on that island which is solely male . . . It felt very right that this character would try those sorts of things. He is trying to terrify Lara as much as anything else" (qtd. in Gibson). This comment seems indicative of the common misconception that sexual violence is about sex and desire rather than about power and control; the idea that an assailant would commit sexual violence to terrify and exert power over Lara is fully consistent with feminist models of violence. In response to the controversy, Pratchett vehemently denied that sexual assault was a thematic arc in the game or that the assault scene was a "character-defining moment for Lara" (qtd. in Gibson). Whatever Pratchett's intentions with the story, it is difficult to accept the premise that the event which sets into motion Lara's transition from a fearful, dependent young woman to a Rambo-esque assassin is not "character-defining," and the frequent references back to Vladimir throughout the game ensures that the player will not forget why Lara must kill all the Solarii.

Throughout the rest of the game, Solarii dialogue reinforces the gendered nature of their conflict with Lara. In overheard conversations and exclamations during combat sequences, Solarii constantly refer to Lara as "just one girl," implying that her gender ought to render her less threatening to them. This framing reminds the player again and again that women are not understood as agential beings in this world. In fact, the only woman besides Lara and Himiko to exercise any significant agency in the story is a former Sun Priestess named Hoshi, whose suicide prevented Himiko from possessing her body. While men on the island may lose their freedom, women's only possible fate is to lose their bodies and selves, and Lara's every action in the game must push against this imperative.[1]

Possession & Bodily Autonomy

Over the arc of the game, Lara discovers that Queen Himiko is a powerful sorceress who has been transferring her soul between sacrificial women's bodies as "vessels" for centuries. The storms which trap Lara and her friends on Yamatai are the result of Himiko's soul being trapped in a decaying body without a new living vessel, which she requires to maintain immortality. All men who crash on the island are either killed or recruited into the cult, while all women are offered

as sacrifices to Himiko and assessed for suitability as a new vessel. Lara's friend Sam is eventually revealed to be a distant descendant of Himiko and is selected to become the next vessel. Lara kills Himiko during her climactic attempt to possess Sam's body, ending the storms and allowing the surviving crew of the *Endurance* to finally escape the island.

The threat of supernatural possession is a common theme in science fiction and horror stories, and it does not always carry gendered implications or a thematic relationship to sexual violence. However, in the context of a narrative that has been so explicitly set in motion by the threat of sexual violence and its constant reiteration in gameplay, the parallels between possession and sexual violence in Tomb Raider merit closer examination. Ann Cahill posits that sexual violence is not only an attack on the physically embodied self but perhaps more critically on the victim's sense of themselves as an agential subject: "Because it renders impossible for that moment the victim's intersubjective agency, rape is a bodily, sexual assault on a woman's underlying conditions of being" (132). In other words, the suspension of autonomy that sexual violence enacts on the victim calls into question their fundamental, existential condition as an individual, permanently altering every aspect of the victim's self.[2] There are clear parallels between the suspension of autonomy that rape enacts in the real world and the conditions under which supernatural possession often occurs in fiction. The possessed, like the rape victim, unwillingly lose control of their physical (and sometimes, inner) self to an overpowering assailant, facing a threat to their existential conditions. And the effects of possession leave long-lasting psychological scars; as Cahill argues, "to know oneself as not only rapeable, but as raped, is to become a different self" (133). Interestingly, Cahill's framing of the rapist's intersubjectivity also bears strong parallels to that of possessing forces like Himiko, where the assailant is subject to a "paradoxical dependency" on the victim to fulfill their establishment of power. Like sexual violence, possession threatens to dispossess its victim of control over their intersubjective reality, conscious but trapped in the prison of their dissociated form. To be clear, I am not arguing that possession as it is presented in *Tomb Raider* is sexual violence, but rather that it bears many thematic parallels and that the way it is constructed in the broader context of the game sets possession up as a metaphor for sexual violence.

The premise of the story also forms a connection between the tangible violence Lara faces from Vladimir and the other Solarii and the existential threat of Himiko's possession. As Himiko's embodied agents in the game world, the Solarii frequently reference their instructions to either kill or capture Lara. Lara spends a significant portion of the game trying to rescue Sam, who is repeatedly captured by the Solarii.[3] In one scene, Lara is speaking to Sam over a walkie talkie when Sam is recaptured by the cult, frantically screaming "no" as Lara stands by, helpless to respond. Even if the threat of sexual violence against Sam is never made explicit through her kidnapping, her extreme helplessness is heavily gendered and connotes undertones of sexual violence. All of this serves to cement the connection between the violence of the gameplay and the threatened violence of the narrative, Sam's existential death through Himiko's possession.

Hostile Environments and Loss of Control

Tomb Raider further manifests the notion of a loss of control of self through the design and interactivity of the game's environments. Navigating the gameworld in *Tomb Raider* alternates between free exploration around relatively open spaces, like a valley or a village, and narrow, high-speed traversal sequences along predetermined paths. In her trapped form, Himiko's primary power is the ability to exert control over the weather and environment, which is reflected in the traversal sequences of the gameplay, where she constantly leverages the environment to foil Lara's attempts to move through the island. Throughout the game, Lara must run through tight, constrained pathways that unexpectedly crumble, explode, or otherwise disintegrate, requiring the player to correctly perform a sequence of jumping, climbing, and swinging maneuvers to avoid death. From Lara's perspective, navigation of the game world is dominated by the experience of a loss of control over her body, as she paraglides through dense forests and is thrown time and time again down cliffs, waterfalls, and collapsing buildings. Lara is constantly pushed to the edge of her ability to maintain control, and the consequences of failing to maintain that control are sexualized. Should the player fail a navigation maneuver, Lara is subject to a vast array of grisly horrors that many have described as torture porn (Brown), frequently depicting Lara being impaled through the head or neck. These are often accompanied by writhing, loud gasps, and breathy moans from Lara, eroticizing her suffering. The player is invited to take pleasure in Lara's loss of control at the hands of a hostile environment, even as their gameplay renders them complicit (Blythe Adams 61).

Throughout the game's narrative, Lara and the player learn about Himiko through diegetic texts such as journal entries, statues and carvings, and other characters like Father Mathias, the leader of the Solarii. As Lara gradually uncovers Himiko's history and discovers the secret to her immortality, Himiko is positioned as a dangerous antagonist motivated by anger and a desire to reclaim her power. But Himiko herself barely exists in the gameworld; we never read a diegetic text written in her own voice, we never hear her speak, and we see her only briefly, when Lara stabs Himiko's corpse to stop her from possessing Sam. Perhaps most unusually for a video game, Himiko is an end boss that the player does not fight—Lara stabs Himiko in a cutscene and never battles her directly. As a villain, Himiko serves as a kind of false front, giving a narrative veneer of conflict between women while all the actual gameplay conflict occurs between Lara and men, and Lara and the environment. Himiko's supernatural, imprisoned condition provides a narrative condition for a female antagonist without the ability to act, necessitating male agents who subsequently dominate the game's landscape under the guise of a woman's direction.

The game space of *Tomb Raider* has been designed specifically to extend Lara's body (Ahmed 58)—many tombs, ancient ruins, and other supposedly human-made spaces can seemingly only be traversed with Lara's specific sets of tools and abilities. Yet these gameplay spaces are also chronically prone to systematically suspensending Lara's bodily control and exposing her to sexualized brutality from an environment expressly oriented toward harming her. Throughout the game, the theme of loss of bodily autonomy is reiterated again and again not only through the possession elements of the storyline, but through a gameworld and mechanics that create a holistic

ludonarrative experience of loss of control over the (gendered) self, an experience whose gendered nature is obscured by Himiko being a woman.

"Run you bastards! I'm coming for you all!": Rape-Revenge in *Tomb Raider*

Further evidence for a reading of *Tomb Raider* with sexual violence as a core theme is its aesthetic and thematic relationship to rape-revenge films. In her analysis of the "revisionist" rape-revenge genre, Claire Henry identifies a loose iconography of rape-revenge, almost all of which is evidenced in *Tomb Raider* (4). Despite her significant shift to more realistic body proportions, Lara is still a conventionally beautiful white woman; relative to everyone else in the game she is scantily clad; she is often shown mud-covered or wet; she has many guns at her disposal. The key themes of rape-revenge, trauma, and transformation are explicitly at the center of the narrative, and her death animations border on torture porn, another staple of rape-revenge. In fact, the only aspect of the genre iconography that is fully absent is the femme fatale presentation of the heroine. Unlike previous versions of Lara, whose sexuality was often obscured but at least alluded to, *Tomb Raider*'s Lara has no sexuality to speak of, no stated romantic or sexual interests, and no sexual agency. That this Lara is much less a femme fatale than her predecessors can likely be attributed to the efforts of *Tomb Raider*'s female-headed writing team to address some of the more egregiously sexist aspects of her portrayal.

If, as Henry argues, the pleasures of the rape-revenge genre emerge from both the expectations and affect of revenge, *Tomb Raider* catapults the filmic pleasures of the genre to a new level with the ludic ones, as the player revels in their increasing proficiency at killing Lara's enemies in new and interesting ways. Alison Young argues that the "law" of the rape-revenge genre is the need for lex talionis—the idea that the world cannot be set right until vengeance is achieved (17). The need to enact revenge against Himiko and her cultists is structured into the narrative: Lara cannot protect Sam from being possessed without working her way through the cultists to kill Himiko, and the crew of the Endurance cannot return to the outside world until Himiko is killed and the storms cease. But *lex talionis* also provides a justification for the violence of the gameplay. As we see in Lara's traumatic response to killing Vladimir, the act of taking a human life is meant to be a major transitional point in Lara's backstory, and throughout the rest of the game, she repeatedly states that she is killing only in self-defense or to save the lives of her companions. This narrative justification is distinctly out of line with the combat gameplay, as Lara's skill tree progression allows her to expand her arsenal of violence and as the player earns trophies for killing enemies in increasingly creative ways. The conventions of first-person shooter games, which tend to treat enemies as disposable bodies (Blythe Adams 122), project *lex talionis* in *Tomb Raider* to obscene levels. Because Himiko and the Solarii's antagonism is so tightly entwined and resolved simultaneously (with Lara killing the Solarii leader Father Mathias and Himiko in the same cutscene), we never have to grapple with the question of whether the Solarii's masculine violence would exist without Himiko's power, conveniently collapsing the physical and spiritual threats to women's personhood into an easily resolvable epilogue.

Conclusion

The positioning of the undead Sun Queen Himiko at the top of a cult otherwise completely composed of violent men helps to obscure the highly gendered orientation of violence in *Tomb Raider*. In this framing, the men in the cult are able to target Lara and Sam in ways that are very specifically related to control over their gendered bodies while maintaining the façade of conflict between women. Himiko's supernatural control over the island's weather and environment puts her in a constant position of power over Lara's body, subjecting her to a gauntlet of eroticized torture, while Himiko's absence from the game as an actual agential being relegates her to the position of figurehead, allowing the game far wider license to brutalize Lara. Situating Lara's quest to kill every member of the Solarii and avenge the (sexual) violence done to herself and other members of the expedition inside the narrative frame of Himiko's possession of Sam obscures the many ways that this is a rape-revenge story. Through these design choices, the narrative of the game hinges around a threat of the loss of (female-gendered) self as agential individual, in a context that opens with the threat of sexual violence, while still allowing the writers and studio head to claim that sexual violence is "categorically" not a theme in the game.

Notes

1.   There is one other woman in the story, a member of the crew of the *Endurance* named Joslin Reyes, who is not subjected to this imperative, presumably because once the Solarii discover Sam, they no longer have need for sacrifices. Reyes never leaves the larger group of the crew, never acts independently, and does not figure into the narrative aside from some minor conflict with Lara about the right course of action for the group.

2.   Notably, Cahill argues that it is the process of healing from trauma, not the trauma itself, that produces the transformed self, an element of the process that is typically overlooked in rape-revenge narratives where revenge stands in for healing.

3.   See Blythe Adams for an excellent examination of the game's tepid attempts to lampshade Sam's damsel in distress status and the stymied queer potential of Lara rescuing her.

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