

Video-Game Heroines Can Kick

By CHRISTOPHER FERGUSON

IN 2013, the Tomb Raider franchise saw a significant reboot of the Lara Croft character, who slays bad guys by the dozens while seeking out mysterious treasures. You may remember the older Croft, dressed as an adolescent male fantasy in short-shorts and a tank top that emphasized her well-developed chest. That changed with the makeover. The character is still athletic and attractive, but now she looks like an actual young woman rather than the anatomically impossible hourglass who seemed to be hiding her kidneys. Rhiana Pratchet, lead writer of both the 2013 reboot and the 2015 sequel *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, explained that Crystal Dynamics, like other software companies, is responding to demands for better representations of strong female characters in games.

While there's been widespread popular discussion of these gender representations, it's a matter that scholars have only begun to study. As they wade into the topic, the substantial research on the effects of violence in video games might point to both productive approaches and possible pitfalls. In the debates over video-game violence, research results have often been distorted to suit political agendas. In the gender discussion, scholars, gamers, and cultural critics alike would do well to keep their scholarship and advocacy separate.

It bears mentioning that there are already some admirable female game characters. Along with the new Croft, Alice of the horror game *Alice: Madness Returns*, Chell from the sci-fi game *Portal*, Heather Mason of the survivor-horror *Silent Hill 3*, and Jade, a photojournalist in the action-adventure *Beyond Good and Evil*, are all laudable heroines.

But there's no denying that, particularly in genres like shooter games, female characters are rare, and when they appear they're often damsels in distress or decorative temptresses within the male-centered storylines. The cultural critic Anita Sarkeesian highlighted this cleverly in her *Damsel in Distress* videos, part of her *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* series. Her efforts were greeted with harassment and threats, playing into a controversy dubbed *Gamergate* that spilled into the SXSW festival. A 2009 census of characters in 150 leading video games, conducted by Dmitri Williams, of the University of Southern California, found that female characters were grossly underrepresented in



WIKIPEDIA

The Lara Croft character in the Tomb Raider franchise got a makeover in 2013, responding to demands for better representation of strong females in video games.

video games and often conformed to thoughtless standards of beauty. In 2014 the failure of the game *Assassin's Creed: Unity* to include playable female characters in its multiplayer mode, purportedly because they would have been too difficult to animate, aroused significant anger.

Why is the industry alienating the 44 percent of its players who are female? That might be partly explained by genre. That is, women and girls are less inclined than men and boys toward violent

Sexism's Butt



shooter games, though that's a generalization, and there are plenty of female shoot-'em-up fans. But do certain genres cater to the stereotypes of a male audience, or do women and girls avoid some genres because of those stereotypical depictions? Most game developers themselves are men, so it's possible that the issue is less intentional sexism than a lack of diversity among the designers. Add in the fear of taking risks on games that differ from formulas already shown to be profitable, and the institutional barriers to female-lead action games may be considerable.

We have to distinguish between moral objections and dubious claims about public health.

ACTIVISM in these matters can be effective, as the International Committee of the Red Cross has shown. In 2013, concerned with representations of war crimes in video games, the Red Cross reached out to developers to better represent the dilemmas and consequences faced by soldiers. The organization took a moderate stance. It didn't blame video games for violence in society or claim that games harm children. It merely asked whether there might be better ways to represent the realities of battle. The game industry was receptive to those concerns. The Red Cross worked with Bohemia Interactive to produce *Arma 3*, a video game designed to present war-crime scenarios realistically. The Red Cross has also been included in game-development conferences to present its perspective.

Critics of game violence have often claimed that the games harm children, but that allegation has proved off the mark. A recent meta-analysis that I conducted, published in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, found no evidence that video games, violent or not, harm children or make them aggressive. Serious youth violence has fallen sharply during the video-game era, and little evidence has emerged that youth behavior has worsened in general. That should serve as a caution as scholars, consumers, and cultural critics approach the issue of gender portrayals in games. Claims of pervasive influence on players might be a logical and rhetorical trap.

A 2015 study by Johannes Breuer and colleagues at the University of Cologne found little evidence to suggest that exposure to sexist games

promoted sexism among German players 14 and older. Similar conclusions from future studies would undermine the argument that sexist games are anathema because of their purported effects.

Does that mean we shouldn't be concerned about that sexism? Of course not. We have to distinguish, however, between our moral objections and the objections based on dubious claims about public health.

With weak or uncertain data, the latter approach would probably backfire, because it's easy to dismiss hysterical claims that are proved false. It may be more useful to think of games less as agents of change than as reflections of societal sexism and misogyny.

Put another way, let's clarify our goal. Is it to promote more and better representations of female characters in games? Or is it to eliminate all games with sexist depictions? Those goals may not seem mutually exclusive, but they might be at cross-purposes. Promoting positive female portrayals is easier than trying to eliminate negative portrayals. The latter course could stray into censorship, meddling regulation, and thought control.

Besides, if our goal were to eliminate sexist representations, why stop at video games? Shouldn't all books, movies, and TV shows that portray women in a negative light be campaigned against? As a recent Austrian study suggests, there's little evidence that games have more influence on consumer behavior (which is to say, virtually none) than books or television. Telling people they can't or shouldn't play a game is rarely effective. Suggesting that they might want to play something better — hey, look at this new release over here! — is more constructive.

TV shows with women in strong leading roles (*The Blacklist*, *Homeland*, *Quantico*, *Supergirl*) have had great success, offering a cultural and business model for producers. I think the same will happen with video games. Lara and Alice have opened the door, but the field still awaits its breakthrough blockbuster. It would be lovely if cultural change happened through calm reason and discussion. But more often it happens through our wallets, and that works, too. ■

Christopher Ferguson is co-chair of, and an associate professor in, the psychology department at Stetson University.