Special issue: Before and After Cinema
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Correspondence to Julia Knight and Alexis Weeden
Department of Media Arts, University of Luton,
75 Castle Street, Luton. LU1 3A4, UK.
Digital Stars are Here to Stay

Mary Flanagan

In this age of information technology, who really needs physical, human stars, these Meg Ryans, Jennifer Anistons and Brad Pitts with their less than perfect grins? Why bother reading about them so much - and paying them so much? They ultimately cannot help us, cannot be with us, cannot be ours. Why not fall for a digital star instead? Not just the 3-D characters from films like Antz (Eric Darnell, USA 1998) or A Bug’s Life (John Lasseter, USA 1998), which showcase the voices of physically-bound stars. I mean the 3-D action heroes currently found in computer games: they’re independent of the Hollywood system, maneuverable and agile in the games, and can really get close to you.

Digital stars are better

Digital stars are growing in number, but the first was Lara Croft, the 3-D star of the action game series Tomb Raider (Eidos Interactive, UK 1996). She has become the most popular computer game character of all time. Users control Lara, a female Indiana Jones-style swashbuckling archaeologist, on a global quest to whisk away artifacts from ‘exotic’ locales - fighting for their lives along the way with amazing physical prowess and a few firearms. She is the best-known computer-generated character in Europe and the USA and her creation has brought into existence a virtual star system. As the late 1990s icon, she has been featured on the cover of magazines with Bill Gates and America Online CEO Steve Case, and touted as one of the 50 ‘cyber elite’. ‘She’s developed a persona,’ says Keith Boesky of Eidos Interactive, ‘she’s the first digital character that’s really treated like a person.’ Croft may be compared to a human performer, but she is much more on-screen. She is capable of any physical activity demanded by the game’s incredible situations: backflipping out of buildings, swimming underwater at length, punching tigers, and even biting foes (blood/gore included) - and all barely clad in scanty, skin-tight ‘explorer’ clothing. In addition to her superhuman traits, Lara is quiet and efficient, has great vehicles to ride in, and, unless there is user error, she never needs a second take.

There are many stars to choose from

While Lara Croft is the best known virtual star in Europe and the USA, her ‘existence’ has helped give shape to a developing virtual star system. Other stars are being created to imitate Lara (all well-built women, of course), such as the female superheroes in Drakan’s voluptuous Rynn (Psygnosis, USA 1998), or the Laura character in Enemy Zero (Sega, Japan, 1997). According to veteran gamer and on-
line magazine editor Nikki Douglas, the hubbub around Lara Croft has been great for getting more female protagonists into games. "These female superheroes with large breasts ... they are marketing them to an almost exclusively male demographic, and once they discovered, with Eidos, that Lara Croft and her Croftian stature, and the hype surrounding this would sell games ... once other companies saw the success of that, they decided to jump on the bandwagon." Or you could go with Ultra Vixen, a heroine who needs to be raped in order to play the game. While these types of examples are disturbing, they’re out there, and consumers are paying a lot of money to possess them.

**Digital stars are bodiless and timeless**

Don’t you hate to have your favourite stars age, pictured as they are on tabloid magazines in wheelchairs or after surgery? Digital stars demonstrate less of a paradox when considering the body of the star — they are generally mediated, accessible only through media, and always perfect. The ‘star’ as image is thus already disembodied to some degree, but goes further and represents a true denial of a physical presence. The non-corporeal digital star is a perfect match to a technology of representation and subjectivities that mediate our experience; we use our bodies as a kind of daily interface, why not use a digital character’s body instead?

Digital stars will not know physical age, will not gain weight, and will not have paralysing accidents. They will, inversely, be subject to the outdated of their technology. Unlike a film star’s eternal image on
screen, electronic screen images show age within a year as technology outstrips itself. Though the body model can be refined through the years, remapped into the technology of the time, previous incarnations of stars’ bodies will grow more and more obsolete. In the future, a star’s repertoire will consist of a set of obsolete file formats and media. With the ‘experience’ of a digital star taking place in a continuous present, the star’s histories are erased as quickly as technology is updated.

Stars like Lara can be yours

Movie stars like Robert Redford probably wouldn’t talk to you if you were both trapped in an elevator, but you can buy digital stars like Lara Croft right off the shelf. You can own her. She’s yours. New digital stars exist only on the computer screen and in the imagination – and in a slew of digital material generated by computer-savvy fans. Screens are captured and manipulated, images are swapped, fictional accounts of the lives of the computer characters, and a host of other property, awaits interested parties on-line. Unlike the cinema star system, the digital equivalent has an enormous grass-roots component, wherein fans take it upon themselves not only to consume but also to recreate and reinvent the mythologies surrounding the star. So, you can own her world (her game), her life-size cardboard cutout, her action figures, her dolls, and her stories via very popular fan fiction.

But you’ll never meet her in the flesh (you might meet imitators), her identity is entirely false, and she has very little personality. If human film stars are by and large inaccessible to their fans except through the culture of commodity that produces them, figures like Lara are even more remote – considering that public appearances, scandals, and personal stories are meticulously planned and generated as publicity and marketing materials from the creator company. Paradoxically, everyone can own Lara for US$40. The public appearance of a human Lara lookalike, a character playing a character that does not exist, does not fulfil the traditional fan’s determination to get closer to the real star, since no one can really be Lara. USA Today reports that Lara Croft has turned ‘into a full-bodied franchise, propelled by exotic, rugged looks and La Femme Nikita moves’. Because Lara really has no lines per se in her action adventure (most words are either yips, yells, or grunts as she attempts near to impossible feats), since we are usually behind her as we control her moves (and therefore has little facial expression), and because she has so few custom tools and no personal artifacts, it is difficult to define her persona – on-screen or off – any more than her creators already have in promotional material. Such undisguised commodification, however, does not turn fans away. In fact, players find quite a lot to say about her as a character, and share this information in newsgroups, chat rooms, game magazines, and e-mail, as well as in paintings, collages, and screen composites.

Curvy, human-size cardboard ‘Crafts’ command store windows. She is featured in game magazines and popular mainstream media alike. Posters, magazines, and web sites depict her in an array of outfits –
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usually less outfit, more ‘skin’ – including a little red ‘Santa-Vixen’ suit that she wore while ‘posing’ on the cover of December 1997’s Time Digital. As a commodity, Lara clearly has been profitable. Successive late-1990s Christmas seasons saw action figures, comic books, and even documents for the Lara Croft movie. One advert for the action figures suggests, ‘It’s every gamer’s dream: To take Lara Croft home and keep her for your very own. So what if she’s only five inches tall?’ Posters and T-Shirts are sold on-line, and Lara has hundreds of unofficial fan web sites – and the number of fans is growing.

While it is strange to think of ‘persona’ as entirely contained within a commercial context, new commodification scenarios sprout up all the time. To keep users amused in between Tomb Raider sequels, rumours of ‘Nude Raider’ filled the internet. Apparently the line ‘Now to get out of these wet clothes’ at the end of the training mode convinced some players that there was a hidden key to finding Lara in the buff – even though players were already rewarded for finishing the game by seeing Lara in lingerie. Eidos quickly quelled the rumour, stating that there is no code in the Saturn, PlayStation or PC versions of Tomb Raider II (Eidos Interactive, UK 1997) that will let you hack into the game and expose her in the nude. However, independent fans continued to circulate faked screens and faux box art until a third-party programmer broke down and wrote a patch that allows users to change the graphics to create the nude heroine. Eidos insisted that this was not an authorised product, yet they did not protest too loudly as the game sold millions of copies.

Digital stars are practical

Croft and stars of her league may indeed be cultivated like a human star, but they are much more on-screen – and do not need costly stunt doubles to perform their incredible moves. From the standpoint of a producer, the practical appeal and advantages of using disembodied virtual stars is immense – particularly when compared to human stars who make absurd demands, get arrested, or cause unwanted scandals. In addition, there is great financial benefit. While film actors demand higher salaries as they become more popular, virtual stars do not – although the designers of virtual stars do make salary demands, these amounts are generally much less than those of a rising star in the Hollywood system. Virtual stars can also make ‘appearances’ in all types of media forms simultaneously, and since there are no physical restrictions, the character can be captured doing just about anything without the hassle of stunt workers or safety concerns. Finally, there is a guarantee of quality. Since nothing is ever live, performances can be calculated precisely and tested repeatedly. If a particular rendering or action is not desired, it can be erased and replaced with another.

Digital stars are what you want them to be

It is no wonder players begin to feel close to digital characters like Lara considering the time spent playing computer games. The average playing time is much longer than the average cinematic experience; sometimes hundreds of hours are required to finish a game. In addition, the relationship develops around the ‘player-played’ duality. A
Many players perfect their emotions onto the image of Lara during gaming.

digital star won't have a personality that gets in the way of your relationship. When challenged to make Tomb Raider a multi-player experience, the designers showed reluctance to break the one-on-one relationship the user has with Lara. To the idea of allowing multiple users in the game, designer Adrian Smith responded: 'The interaction is between the player and Lara; it's a very personal experience. Having seven or eight Lars running around on screen would detract from the whole atmosphere of the game'. Lara is pure image, surface. Projection of one's emotions onto the central character in a personal way while gaming is widespread. Perhaps it is because of this that players of the game are compelled to create a dimensional character through fan discourse and fantasy, to create a complete experience out of these surfaces - an inner core of meaning in a post-spectacle fabrication.

Lara is described in ways that could postulate her as a religious icon and fetish artifact. The sheer amount of religious references cannot be ignored in the rhetoric of the marketing material and fan culture surrounding Croft. According to GamePro's web site, 'Shrine to All Things Lara', 'To know her is to love her. To love her is to want more of her. ... For all of you Laraddicts who just can't get enough of Tomb Raider's hot heroine, we've compiled this handy page - or shrine, or temple'. A cult of virtual sexuality (rather than personality) has blasted up around the 3-D female. Since the media cannot use quotes from her or recount her activities beyond her pretty surfaces, there is very little the media can use besides more and more images of Lara Croft. And her image is in high demand.

The digital star offers so much more than the conventional physically-bound star of the cinema. We will see more of these stars, we will have one-on-one relationships with them, and they will develop further to fulfil our fantasies. Like the virtual characters described in novels by Pat Cadigan and William Gibson, they will begin to have more than image appeal. They appeal instead to a new sense of 'agency' - yet always an agency directed to the fulfilment of our fantasies.
Notes

1 Lara, conquering the wilds of China to find the Dagger of Xian, plays out a colonialist fantasy long represented by narratives such as those featured in the Indiana Jones series (1981, 1984, 1990), King Solomon's Mines (1937, 1950, 1985) and many more. The adventure in Tomb Raider II is a recreation of the myth that Westerners must rescue the East's past.

2 Since the release of the action/adventure game Tomb Raider from England's Core Design and USA parent company Eidos Interactive in 1996, but more importantly from the subsequent smash hit Tomb Raider II in 1997, and Tomb Raider III in 1998-99, Lara is the world's most popular virtual star. Her games have sold over six million copies – one of the best-selling video game series in history – and she has appeared on over 80 magazine and newspaper covers.

3 Mike Snider, 'Tomb Raider blasts into Virtual Stardom,' USA Today, 17 December 1997, 1D.


5 Snider.

6 Croal, N'Gail and Jane Hughes. 'Lara Croft, the Bit Girl: How a Game Star Became a 90's Icon', Newsweek, 10 November 1997, 130, no. 19, p. 82.
