

## **The Social Cyborg Video-gaming and the Dismantling of Gender Distinction.**

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### **Abstract**

Alan Danielou says that “The hermaphrodite, the homosexuals and the transvestites have a symbolic value and are considered privileged beings, images of the Ardhanarishvara”. This desire to transcend the bodily limitations and embrace the physical perfection of the “other” is sought after and satiated through different mediums like cross dressing and in recent times, through video games.

Cyberspace and gaming have long been heralded as a new space of resistance through which people—particularly those subjects oppressed through traditional interactions—can transcend the physical and socio-cultural biases present in face-to-face interactions. For women and as well as men, the Internet and gaming have always offered an androgynous environment where they can pose as entities of the opposite gender, try on different gender identities, and create new fluidities in gendering the self.

**Keywords:** Cyber-bimbo, gender boundary, gaming, transgendering, Oedipus, Laxmi-Narayan, hermaphrodite, Freud, console cowboy.

Not only gender, but also sexuality has certain hegemonic normative connotations set out within society. This notion of hegemonic sexuality as well as the way in which the body incorporates and expresses hegemonic gender and sexuality is presented by gender theorist Judith Butler. Nachtraglichkeit describes the ways in which an infantile experience that is either incomprehensible or traumatic is nonetheless somehow retained by memory unconsciously and reactivated at a later time in a different context. The notion comes from

an early stage in Freud's speculations and was used to explain the mechanism of hysteria, in which a traumatic early experience is reactivated in terms of a less traumatic later provocation. Signification involves the constant reactivation of significant material in new and unpredictable contexts, which thus produces new significance and new meanings. In Sophocles' drama the unfolding of the tragedy involves Oedipus' gradual discovery of his own guilt. This in Freud's explanation is: "the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father" (Interpretation of Dreams). Freud argues that the power of this artwork lies in the ability of the poet to force us into a transferred recognition of what he calls "our own inner minds." Those same impulses (to patricide and incest with the mother) are still lurking yet "suppressed" within all of us. Oedipus' unconscious guilt stands figuratively for our own unconscious guilt. "Like Oedipus, we live in ignorance of these wishes, repugnant to morality, which have been forced upon us by Nature, and after their revelation we may all of us well seek to close our eyes to the scene of our childhood" (Interpretation of Dreams). Lacan's version of the triangulated Oedipus complex (mother—child—father) combines Freud's theory with structural linguistics, developed as we have seen particularly from the theories of Saussure, Levi-Strauss and Jakobson. Symbolisation thus acts as an introduction to the world that is at the same time an introduction to the concept of "lack". The introduction of a meaningful element disrupts the perfect unity of the imaginary relation, which only has the sense of a perfect unity by virtue of the meaningful element that excludes perfection. The experience of lack is therefore intrinsic to human existence. This "lack" manifests itself not only as "penis envy" in females but in the males, a subconscious desire to adopt the elaborate body of the female and its physicality. This new queer identity potentially subverts stable distinctions between identification and desire and also by extension, the secure and heavily defended polarities of masculine and feminine subjectivity.

The desire to transcend the gender typification imposed by society has always been present throughout the ages. Goldman writes of transsexualism in Hindu literature: "Few cultures have accorded this phenomenon so prominent a place in the realms of mythology and religion as has that of traditional India." Queer manifestations of sexuality, though repressed socially, squeeze their way into the myths, legends and lore of the land. Many deities in Hinduism and Indian mythology are represented as both male and female at different times and in different incarnations or may manifest with characteristics of both genders at once such as the Ardhanarishvara (The Lord whose half is a woman) created by the merging of the

god Shiva and his consort Parvati or the hermaphroditic Laxmi-Narayan. This form of Shiva represents “the totality that lies beyond duality” and is associated with communication between men and women or between beauty and physical prowess. Changes of sex and cross-dressing also occur in myths about non divine figures. One such figure is Shikhandi, a character in the Mahabharat. During the Kurukshetra war, Bhishma recognised him as Amba reborn and refused to fight “a woman”. Accordingly, Arjuna hid behind Shikhandi in order to defeat the almost invincible Bhishma. In the Javanese telling, Shikhandi never becomes a man but is a woman equal to a man and is the wife of Arjun. Arjun himself is an example of gender variance. When he refused her amorous advances, the nymph Urvasi cursed him that he would become a “kliba”, a member of the third gender. Arjun took the name Brihannala and dressed in women’s clothes and taught the arts of music, singing and dancing to the princess Uttara and her female attendees of the city ruled by king Virata. In some stories Shiva asks Vishnu to take the Mohini form again so that he can see the actual transformation himself. Stories in which Shiva knows of Mohini’s true nature have been interpreted to “suggest the fluidity of gender in sexual attraction” Therefore, the “completeness” of an androgynous identity has always been looked upon as one of symbolic perfection from classical antiquity.

Breanne Fahs and Michelle Gohr have explored how Cyberfeminist founders like Sadie Plant (1997), Susan Luckman (1999), Anna Munster (1999), and Donna Haraway (1991) have long purported a utopian vision of cyberspace where gender inequalities would cease as soon as the virtual world became accessible to women. “cyberspace has the potential to allow communicants to become disinhibited from sexualized bounds and explore true freedom of expression” (Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, and McGuire 1986, 160). In this feminist utopia, online interactions between men and women “transcend the socialized constraints on their communicative expressiveness and adopt a more androgynous style of interaction” (Sussman and Taylor 2000, 391).

The introduction of a female protagonist in the figure of one ‘Lara Croft’ took the world of virtual reality to a whole new dimension and opened multiple debates and generated feminism and literary criticisms. Lara Croft is the monestrous offspring of science, an idealised eternally young female automaton, a malleable, well trained techno puppet created by and for the male gaze” (Schleiner 2000) Technology becomes a means of extending or transcending the body as the final site of the monstrous feminine other, as well as providing opportunities for the playing out of fantasies of conquest and control of the “other.”

In the game, it is the player who determines the actions, so the involvement as a first person is much greater than with other media forms- “the computer functions as a projection of certain parts of the mind... producing the uncanny effect of the computer as a second self” (Sofia 1999). Thus, interaction with and immersion in the game “affords users the narcissistic satisfaction of relating to a technological second self”, in the case of playing Tomb Raider with a female second self (Sofia 1999). The relation between a male player and Lara when playing a game could be seen as analogue to the relationship between Case and Molly in Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1984). Case is a “console cowboy” who is able to “jack in” to Molly’s sensorium and experience her actions and sensations- she becomes an extension of his nervous system. Through this transgendering process, the Lara/ player interface is open to two possible queer readings. One is that she is a female body in male drag- a performance of masculinity that undermines its reliance upon a real male body and highlights the instability of masculinity as an identity. Or conversely, Lara could be considered a female drag performed in that the bodily signifiers of femininity are grossly exaggerated to the extent where they threaten to collapse. “When drag exposes... is the “normal” constitution of gender presentation in which the gender performed is in many ways constituted by a set of disapproved attachments or identifications” (Butler 1993) However, this transgendering process can only be argued through if we agree that Lara is in fact a feminine subject in any real sense. Lara’s femininity is immediately and irrefutably countered by other phallic signifiers. The fact that Lara has no sexual or romantic encounters within the game also suggests that Lara is not the object of male desire only as has been debated profoundly. But it also means that Lara has no sexual identity or subjectivity. It seems much more likely that the pleasure of playing as Lara are more concerned with mastery and control of a body coded as female within a safe and unthreatening context. However, Jones identifies these seductive and powerful female characters are providing complex resources for both fantasy and identification as stable gender roles are eroded. Playing as Lara enables engagement of the male gamer with an active female fantasy figure providing opportunities for exploration of alternative versions of themselves. For Jones, the popularity of these games and the female characters is a positive sign of greater gender flexibility and a general license to experiment with alternative identities.

Breanne Fahs and Michelle Gohr provides the example of cyberspace promoting taken-for-granted gendered scripts, consider the phenomenon of online gamers choosing an “idealized” corporeality—the body they would most want to inhabit—and how such bodies

often conform to the idealized corporeality of patriarchal society. While this may seem to be a site through which transgendered individuals find solace from the corporeal constraints of society (see Hegland and Nelson's 2002 work on transgender identity manifestations in cyberspace), "though many of the cross-dressers presented [in the study] are clearly conscious of the messages they send, they nevertheless prefer to dress to the extremes of femininity and embrace age-old stereotypes that conflate femininity with an overt sexuality" (156); "Creating (such) an identity that is meant 'to be looked at,' and solely for the purposes of consumption by the male gaze does little to erase the imprint of male desire on the female body so deeply-rooted in culture, history, and social convention" (157). Thus, although the Internet and anonymous spaces theoretically offer its users liberation, too often participants bring pre-existing biases and cultural understandings of gender, further degrading the understanding and conceptualization of acceptable gender performance. Such moments represent not only individual choices in using technology, but also instances where the patriarchy of the "outernet" meets the patriarchy of the Internet with intensified ferocity.

As the balance between "reality" and "cyberreality"—or the Internet and "outernet"—continues to fluctuate, questions arise about how cyberspace and gaming and specially the online form of it will continue to alter social relationships, politics, leisure, and conceptualizations of gender and selfhood.

Breanne Fahs and Michelle Gohr comments that "Cyberspace is out of man's control: virtual reality destroys his identity, digitalization is mapping his soul and, at the peak of his triumph, the culmination of his mechanic erections, man confronts the system he built for his own protection and finds it is female and dangerous" (Plant 1996, 181). Because women could insist upon anonymity, cyberfeminists labeled the Internet as "an idealized public sphere; a space epitomizing the heralded 'level playing field'" (Luckman 1999, 41). She also argued that critical interrogations of the Internet must continue in earnest, primarily because access to the Internet remained gendered, classed, raced, and geographically located (Luckman 1999). Additionally, speaking of the potential to destabilize all identities, Haraway (1991) warned that "the socialist feminist cyborg does not need to be young, Western or well-educated to be able to utilize her position to pry open the fissures in the hegemony of the white, capitalist patriarchy. Rather, the socialist feminist cyborg recognizes not only difference in aesthetic and social senses but, more importantly, she does not take for granted a particular set of ostensibly privileged class locations"

As the proficiency or expertise of the gamer increases, the game characters may become an extension of the player himself and in the game Lara Croft, Lara's separateness as a female body is eventually obliterated. "Engagement is what happens when we are able to give ourselves over to a representational action, comfortably and unambiguously. It involves a kind of complicity, we agree to think and feel in terms of both content and conventions of a mimetic context. In return, we gain a plethora of new possibilities and a kind of emotional guarantee" (Laurel 1993). Thus the technology (including Lara) becomes a mask which signals our participation in an artificial and utopian reality and simultaneously "signals that we are role-playing rather than acting as ourselves" (Murray 1997). In its limited space, the game world allows a transgression of social and cultural norms and the blurring of sexual identities.

These virtual "babes are lurid postmodern signifiers per excellence, endlessly available for resignification and providing multiple possibilities for narcissistic pleasure. When the game is mastered, the player experiences Lara's mobility, agility and athleticism as his own" (Morton 1999). What Irodu, Lara and Date all highlight, is the willingness on the part of the male to invest erotically in fictional characters. Femininity is thus finally exposed as an empty signifier, a sign without a referent. "The phantasmic mobility of virtual bodies not only satisfies our infantile desire for omnipotence and omnipresence, but can provide hallucinatory satisfaction to those whose real body's mobility is impaired in some way. Between the self and the other, subject and object, permits quasi-tactile manipulation of computational objects that exists on the boundary between the physical and the abstract" (Sofia 1999). This collapse offers a promise of a utopian subjectivity which is free from the constraints of fixed gender boundaries. When the mind of the gamer can romp through forests, caves or ancient temples in the corporal body of an idealized female.

Thus, in this complex relationship between subject and object, it could be argued that through having to play Tomb Raider as Lara, a male player is transgendered: the distinction between the player and the game character are blurred. One potential way of exploring this transgendering is to consider the fusion of player and game character as a form of queer embodiment, the merger of the flesh of the male player with Lara's elaborate feminine body of pure information.

Breanne Fahs and Michelle Gohr in their seminal work *Superpatriarchy Meets Cyberfeminism: Online Gaming, and the New Social Genocide* have explored that contrary to some of the more utopian visions of cyberspace, Shimanoff (1980) has suggested that,

while behaviors in face-to-face interactions are rule-governed through direct, language-based “male power displays,” online spaces only utilize latent gendered characteristics of language as status indicators and thus serve to bolster lopsided power dynamics along gendered lines. Thus, the cyberfeminist assumption that cyberspace offers a safe, androgynous environment, free from male or female bias, overlooks the basic nature and history of how the Internet was born. Cyberfeminists collectively argued that cyberspace, rather than creating a hyper-masculine reality, actually frees women to choose gender more consciously, present themselves in ways unimaginable in the physical realm, and experiment with gendered personalities in a relatively safe and constructive space that wards off traditional policing of gender. If women choose to perform as “men,” they can do so freely and without restraint. Women can try on power (Plant 1997). They can assume different identities, races, genders, sexual identities, classes, locations, and nationalities. They can enter and exit virtual spaces previously denied them. They can access information about, and become middle-gendered / androgynous beings free from traditional gender norm constraints. As Suler (2002) argued, “people choose a specific communication channel to express themselves” (459). Perhaps cyberspace offers an infinite space for development and resistance to traditional gender roles, as women continually choose different “channels” for expression. “Cyberfeminist authors contend that it enables a transgression of the dichotomous categories of male and female, constructing transgender or even genderless human identities and relations” (Zoonen 2002, 6). Contemporary cyberfeminists recognize the inherent value in a potentially genderless gaming and online space for the development and growth of our social selves (Burgess 2009), Also noting that gaming and the Internet have inherited a vast number of gendered problems due to its inception within a patriarchal culture (Terry, Calvert 1997; Daniels 2009; Brophy 2010). Still more, embracing androgyny has the power to destabilize gender as a totalizing category of experience (Luckman 1999); if people can recognize gender as a performance (Butler 1990), this may undermine patriarchy’s ability to promote unspoken and unseen hierarchies and “truths” about women and men.

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