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1. Introduction

Playing video games is a popular free-time activity among adolescents. Statistics show that Austrian 16–19-year-olds on average spend 15,1 hours weekly playing various video games (Oesterreich.ORF.at 2019). Similarly, the *Jugend-Medien-Studie* revealed that gaming can consistently be considered among their favorite leisure time activities (6-13). Even though video games account for a considerable part of students' leisure time, they are not commonly addressed, much less used, in the classroom. Blume argues this might be due to the fact that teachers receive limited training on the usage of digital media and therefore are reluctant to use it in the classroom (123-125). My thesis argues that this needs to be discussed, as video games offer indeed a huge potential for classroom use, since "games have great potential to build strong bridges between students' out-of-school life-worlds and twenty-first-century curricula" (Apperley and Beavis 1-2). Like any piece of writing or other media, video games are influenced by the ideologies and perspectives of the people who create them as well as the societies and cultures they are embedded in. A patriarchal ideology, for instance, rests on the presumption that women are inferior to men. These subtle or sometimes obvious framings might in turn then shape the worldview of the player. The medium of video games has also oftentimes been called out as a misogynistic space (Beasley and Standley, Cote, Cunningham, Dill and Thill, Downs and Smith, Gray, Han and Song, Jennings). For that reason, this thesis tries to utilize a critical feminist viewpoint within a critical literacy framework to expose misogynistic tendencies within games, such as *Tomb Raider* as will be exemplified in my case study. As a result, video games can and should be critically analyzed from a multitude of perspectives in order to enhance learners' critical gaming literacy. To be more specific, my thesis suggests analyzing a popular video game in regard to the portrayal of its female protagonist. This particular angle has been chosen for the analysis as it holds educational value for two reasons. First, video games have predominantly been a very male-centric medium (Hanus and Dickinson 396). Only in recent years have female protagonists been featured more prominently in games. However, those characters are in some ways still represented in a gender-stereotypical fashion. Second, video games, as stated above, are a substantial part of learners' lives and might thereby influence their view of the world. As a result, they might adopt those gender-stereotypical stances depicted in games. For these reasons, my thesis advocates the need for students to become critically literate in terms of gender sensitive

representations. The general aims of Austrian AHS curriculum suggest that classroom activities should engage in the “research-based examination of historical and current gender differences and stereotypes” (15). Furthermore, students should be able to uncover “gender inequalities and role stereotypes” and to “dismantle gender hierarchical role norms” (11).

Therefore, my thesis draws upon critical literacy theory as well as feminist theory to be able to demonstrate how a feminist analysis of video games can be utilized in the EFL classroom. The aim is to foster adolescents’ critical literacy in the aforementioned areas. As a result, my thesis first provides a literature review on critical literacy and its relation to feminism, video games, and ELT. As a next step, the portrayal of the female protagonist of the 2013 version of the video game *Tomb Raider* is qualitatively analyzed in regard to feminist theories of representation. This research aims to demonstrate how the findings of the qualitative analysis can be utilized to introduce students to gender sensitive critical literacy in the EFL classroom through the study of video games, thereby contributing to illuminating an under-researched field of study and highlighting a pedagogical method that remains largely underutilized in classrooms. In order to achieve this aim, the following research questions have been formulated: “In which way can critical literacy be applied to foster students’ critical engagement with video games and feminism?” and “How is the female protagonist of the video game *Tomb Raider* portrayed from a critical feminist viewpoint?”

2. Literature Review – Critical Video Game Literacy

The following literature review will discuss the theory of Critical Video Game Literacy (CVGL). The discussion of CVGL is grounded in the concept of critical literacy. Therefore, the literature review will engage in a discussion of the most salient theories of critical literacy as well as the unique implications of using video games as texts within a critical literacy framework. First, an overview of the historical development of critical literacy will be given to develop a better understanding of the antecedent field of scholarly research. Second, contemporary approaches and viewpoints within the field of critical literacy will be reviewed in order to utilize them for the definition of CVGL. Third, drawing upon the previously discussed theories a working definition of CVGL for the purpose of this thesis will be provided. Fourth, the importance of feminism as a specific focus of CVGL will be illustrated. The fifth and last chapter of the literature review will discuss advantages as well as disadvantages of teaching CVGL with a focus on critical feminism in an EFL classroom.

2.1. The Historical Development of Critical Literacy

The concept of critical literacy is a complex phenomenon which has been influenced by various philosophical and pedagogical theories throughout its history. However, this historical review will only highlight the most important developments within the field of critical literacy for the purpose of this thesis. A comprehensive historical summary can be found in Luke's article *Critical Literacy: Foundational Notes* (5-8). Critical literacy originates from the philosophy of critical pedagogy. This theoretical approach was initially formulated by Paulo Freire in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (first published in English in 1970). Luke summarizes that Freire's work draws upon Marxist philosophy to advocate for a change of the teaching system in Brazilian schools within impoverished communities. He claims that the educational systems see learners only as passive objects waiting to be given knowledge by the teacher. Their personal lives and experiences are not deemed to be of importance. According to Freire, students should be able to identify, analyze, and critique instances of oppression in their own lives to be able to counteract them. In brief and simple terms, the concrete aim of his educational approach is to teach learners literacy (e.g. reading and writing) in order for them to become agents of social and political change within their communities (Foundational 5-6). Following the genesis of Freire's critical pedagogy, the works of Foucault and Derrida in the

1970s influenced how critical literacy is perceived today. These theories together with Freire's critical pedagogy approach culminated in the primary tenets of critical literacy. Luke summarizes that,

[t]aken together, these diverse foundations have led to: (a) a focus on ideology critique and cultural analysis as a key element of education against cultural exclusion and marginalization; (b) a commitment to the inclusion of working class, cultural and linguistic minorities, indigenous learners, and others marginalized on the basis of gender, sexuality, or other forms of difference; and (c) an engagement with the significance of text, ideology, and discourse in the construction of social and material relations, everyday cultural and political life (Foundational 6).

These principles can still be considered the foundation of most of today's critical literacy theories as they encompass the fundamental essence of critical literacy as a philosophy. Even though critical literacy has always been a pedagogical concept at heart, it was not until the 1990s that it found its way into the EFL classroom. During that time, "a significant number of scholars and educators have argued for the examination of the language curriculum and its re-organization along critical pedagogy lines." They argued that an extended focus on literature in the EFL classroom might increase students' critical thinking skills as well as their creativity. At the same time, they advocated for a change in the curriculum to acknowledge the learners' distinct personal experiences and socio-political surroundings (Stefanova, Bobkina and Sánchez-Verdejo Pérez 253). In the late 1990s and early 2000s critical literacy took another big step forward. At this time, voices were raised to expand the notion of literacy and text. This culminated in the development of a critical media literacy, which incorporated "popular cultural texts [such as] advertising, news, broadcast media, and the Internet" into the critical literacy framework (Luke Foundational 7). Traditional literature is now only seen as a small part of what can be analyzed within a critical literacy approach. Already in 2007, Norton realized that students are confronted with a wide variety of different media and sorts of texts throughout their lives on an everyday basis: "The challenge for literacy educators is to reconceptualize classrooms as semiotic spaces in which children have the opportunity to construct meaning with a wide variety of multimodal texts, including visual, written, spoken, auditory, and performative texts" (10). Similar to the media mentioned above, it can be claimed that video games too are an extremely important part of today's young people's lives. As a result, I suggest including video games into the critical literacy framework. Video games, like any other popular media, are shaped by certain ideologies and their cultural surroundings.

Therefore, they can be considered a rich ground for critical literacy analysis. This notion will be expanded on in the following chapters.

2.2. Critical Literacy – Academic Discourse

This section of the chapter will engage in a discussion of different approaches and definitions of critical literacy. This is done for the purpose of achieving a working definition of critical literacy. This definition will then serve as a theoretical basis for the subsequent chapters of my thesis.

First and foremost, two important theoretical and terminological distinctions need to be addressed: Critical literacy is neither synonymous with critical thinking, nor critical reading. However, both of these theories are encompassed within critical literacy. The theory of critical thinking and its related skills is a broad topic with many different viewpoints and concepts. Yet, critical thinking “can be broadly defined as a set of processes whose main dimensions include the interpretation of the world, self-reflection, intercultural awareness, critical awareness, reasoning and problem-solving, and language use” (Bobkina and Stefanova 685). These dimensions of critical thinking, however, only constitute a small part of the processes of critical literacy. Critical thinking can be considered as the first step or the foundation from which critical literacy is built. Accordingly, Smith states “[c]ritical literacy involves processes of critical thinking for purposes of analyzing and evaluating texts, but critical literacy also involves the interrogation of power structures underlying or contributing to the writing or production of texts” (2).

Similar to critical thinking, the concept of critical reading can be regarded as one element of critical literacy. Critical reading, as a methodological approach in a school context, usually investigates a text regarding identification of author bias and the alteration of a text’s meaning based on the reader’s own background knowledge (Luke Foundational 6). Furthermore, a critical reading approach entices readers to discover hidden meaning, “separate facts from opinions, examine [texts] from multiple points of view, and apply what they have learnt to other aspects of their daily life” (Stefanova, Bobkina and Sánchez-Verdejo Pérez 253). While these processes are also part of a critical literacy approach, critical literacy strives to go further. In brief and simple terms, “critical reading is a search for a verifiable reading, whereas critical literacy is the endeavor to work within multiple plausible interpretations of a text”

(Stevens and Bean 7). Critical literacy builds upon critical reading as it attempts to raise awareness of social, cultural, and political implications of texts as well as the power relations between “readers and writers, texts and language” (Luke Foundational 6-7). Thus, it becomes apparent that both critical thinking and critical reading can be considered as integral parts of critical literacy. Both concepts can be regarded as initial steps towards critical literacy and a foundation from which it can be built.

Furthermore, the difference between being literate and being critically literate needs to be highlighted. Luke and Woods claim that the traditional definition of being literate usually “involves uncritical transmission, decoding, and reproduction of dominant and potentially distorted views of the world” (12). This means readers who are ‘only’ literate in a traditional sense (e.g. knowing how to read and write) are regarded as uncritical and passive absorbers of knowledge and ideologies dictated by the producers of texts. Therefore, Shor advocates for a critical literacy approach, which involves “critiquing ideology by exposing, second guessing, and reconstructing dominant versions of the world provided in literature, literacy textbooks, and everyday texts and interaction” (qtd. in Luke and Woods 12). Shor’s description of the processes of critical literacy can be considered as the groundwork which persists within all different theories of critical literacy (Luke and Wood 12).

The previous paragraph has elaborated on the distinctions between critical thinking, critical reading and critical literacy and has thereby defined what critical literacy is not. The issue of a definition of the contents of critical literacy persists. The remainder of this chapter will discuss different definitions from various scholars in order to arrive at a working definition of critical literacy. For the purpose of organization and readability, the field of critical literacy will be illuminated from three distinct angles. These include how different approaches to critical literacy view text, how they define their aims and objectives and how critical literacy can be applied.

2.2.1. Perception of Text within Critical Literacy

This subchapter addresses how various theories of critical literacy perceive text and what types of texts they consider worthwhile investigating. Regarding the first aspect, many theories of critical literacy take the view that all texts that have ever been produced are imbued with social, cultural, or political ideologies. Accordingly, Luke and Woods argue that “[l]anguage, texts, and their discourse structures are more than neutral or factual

representations of the world.“ Furthermore, they perceive texts as important factors of how readers construct their worlds. However, as stated above, texts are never unbiased. They are riddled with “identifiable ideological interests” and thereby urge uncritical readers to follow their “normative directions.” As a result, critical literacy is seen as a means to unveil those ideologies within texts (9). Correspondingly, it is commonly agreed upon that texts are products of their time. Stevens and Bean summarize that texts are influenced by their “particular historical, social, [technological], and political contexts.“ Furthermore, texts always carry concealed intentions of dominant groups of their particular time, and their meaning is never fully transmitted by the written word alone (6-7). Thus, critical literacy plays a vital role in uncovering these hidden ideologies.

Similar to Luke and Woods, Ferrarelli states in her critical analysis of books for young children that literature “contributes to the construction of an image of the world.” She argues that literature and other media play a substantial part in the construction of people’s identity, their beliefs, values and how they position themselves within society. Children especially are easily influenced by the socio-political structures promoted in books. They can subconsciously affect “how children conceive different social groups, gender and proper and improper behavior” (63-64). Drawing upon Luke and Woods, it can be argued that this is, to a certain extent, true for any uncritical and passive consumer of literature, regardless of age. Furthermore, Ferrarelli highlights another important aspect of critical literacy. Namely the ambiguity and (co-)construction of meaning of texts. In her view of literacy, the ideologies underlying any text are not merely given by the producers and passively absorbed by the readers. On the contrary, she claims the meaning of a text is usually a co-construction of the ideologies within the text and the reception of the reader. It is never pre-given and “always the object of struggle and conflict among social groups for its appropriation and control” (63-64). Even though the reception of a text is no longer regarded as a passive act, uncritical co-construction of meaning still falls prey to the ideologies perpetuated by the text, which could result in incorporating them into one’s own worldview. Therefore, critical literacy is needed to identify, expose and reflect upon these social, cultural, historical, and political influences to allow the reader to engage in conscious meaning-making processes.

Following the emergence of critical media literacy theories, “all forms of text, including digital, film, and television productions” are considered to be worthwhile grounds for critical analysis

(Stevens and Bean 18). However, video games are hardly ever explicitly mentioned as a site for critical inquiry. Yet, like any other type of text video games too are influenced by their historical, political, and cultural circumstances. As a result, they are often permeated by dominant beliefs of their time and may promote certain ideologies. Those ideologies might shape the gamer's identity and view of the world. Therefore, it is important not to exclude video games from the definition of text from a critical literacy point of view and analyze them accordingly.

2.2.2. General Aims and Objectives of Critical Literacy

As the fundamental concepts of critical literacy emerged in the 1970s, there has been much variation within the academic field. Many scholars have shaped and influenced the landscape of critical literacy and have developed their own theories. This chapter will introduce the most salient approaches to critical literacy for the purpose of my thesis and discuss their aims and objectives.

To start this chapter, an important conceptual view on critical literacies needs to be pointed out. Luke insists that generally speaking critical literacies are "historical works in progress" and "[t]here is no correct or universal model" (Luke Foundational 9). However, most models of critical literacy share some basic intentions. They share the "explicit aim of the critique and transformation of dominant ideologies, cultures and economies, and institutions and political systems" (Luke Foundational 5). Furthermore, they intend to make readers experts in examining texts. By enhancing their textual competences, readers should realize how and by whom they or others are being oppressed by certain texts. With that knowledge, they are given the chance to question and reform their social and political status quo (Luke and Woods 9). Since the issues addressed by critical literacy are so manifold, most researchers agree that the aims of critical literacy cannot be defined by a series of certain abilities or exact competences one should possess. Therefore, the aims and objectives of critical literacy are defined rather universally. For instance, Bishop summarizes Morrell's ideas on the aims of critical literacy as follows:

Morrell [...] designated the tenets of critical literacy as: The ability to challenge existing power relations in texts and to produce new texts that delegitimize these relations; a consciousness of the relationship between the dominant culture's use of language, literacy and social injustice; the ability not only to read words but to read the world into and onto texts and recognize the correlation between the word and the world;

and the ability to create political texts that inspire transformative action and conscious reflection. (Morrell Youth qtd. in Bishop 59)

Similarly, from a pedagogical point of view, critical literacy “focuses on teaching and learning how texts work, understanding and re- mediating what texts attempt to do in the world and to people, and moving students toward active position-takings with texts to critique and reconstruct the social fields in which they live and work” (Luke Australia 453). It is seen as an educational approach which “entails debate, argument, and action over social, cultural, and economic issues that matter” (Luke and Woods 16). Furthermore, scholars emphasize the development of critical *consciousness* as one of the most important goals of critical literacy. The concept of critical consciousness refers to taking a critical position as a reader. Having this mindset includes recognizing the “particular historical, social, and political contexts that permeate and foreground any text.” Critically aware readers are actively interested in revealing those influences of a text in order to engage in “a search for justice and equity” (Stevens and Bean 6). Similarly, Borsheim-Black et al. summarize that critically conscious readers seek to analyze texts in terms of underlying ideologies. Additionally, they conclude that most theories of critical literacy usually include three basic categories which are utilized to review a text. These categories include “issues of power, normativity, and representation” (123). The development of critical consciousness can be regarded as one of the most important aims of critical literacy. It highlights the understanding that critical literacy is not a fixed set of skills to be learned and applied in the same way with every text. It is rather seen as a mindset or philosophy one adheres to.

Following the development of critical consciousness, another important aim of critical literacy frequently mentioned in scholarly literature is taking action. Most scholars agree that critical literacy should always encompass some form of action after the analysis of a text. Critical literacy as a certain mindset is seen as a means to enable action taking and even prompt the desire to do so. Such action should focus on achieving equality and inducing socio-political change (Borsheim-Black et al. 123). Likewise, Luke claims that critical literacy should aim at reforming students’ socio-political environment (Australia 453). Bishop summarizes that the purposes and implementations of action taking in critical literacy “involv[e] the consumption, production, and distribution of print and new media texts by, with, and on behalf of marginalized populations in the interests of naming, exposing, and destabilizing power relations while promoting individual freedom and expression” (Morrell Education qtd. in

Bishop 59). As can be seen, critically motivated action taking can be considered an integral part of critical literacy. Trying to change or at least challenge dominant socio-political views by means of producing and distributing one's own texts presupposes profound understanding of the analyzed texts as well as having adopted a critical conscious mindset. As a result, action taking can be viewed as one of the most important goals of critical literacy.

2.3. Critical Video Game Literacy: A Definition

This chapter will try to elaborate how video games can be made use of in critical literacy. I am calling this merged approach Critical Video Game Literacy (CVGL). My adaptation of critical literacy advocates that video games can and should be considered a powerful site for critical analysis. Consequently, this includes the understanding that video games are seen as being ridden with underlying ideologies. Like any other text, video games can be regarded as products of their specific time and culture. They are produced within certain socio-political contexts and may be influenced by the ideologies of dominant groups of that time (Stevens and Bean 6-7). Therefore, a CVGL approach "would also need to address the broader social, economic and even political forces that constitute the wider game culture" (Buckingham and Burn 329). In this sense, games are also texts in a traditional manner as they are experienced by the player. However, the inherent nature of video games is that they are interactive and possibly changeable texts as player's choices may influence various aspects of a game like the story, character development, gameplay, etc. This dichotomy is addressed by Apperley and Beavis in their article *A Model for Critical Games Literacy* as well as other works and will be elaborated further in the subsequent paragraphs.

This chapter first addresses the games-as-text layer of the CVGL framework. In this view, digital games are perceived similar to film or television productions. However, it needs to be kept in mind that despite their familiarity "games are not simply 'remediated' versions of related forms" (Apperley and Beavis 6). Nevertheless, like other media digital games are produced within certain socio-economical and historical contexts. A games-as-text approach suggests that these context-dependent influences manifest themselves predominantly within the narrative and visual-aesthetic elements (Apperley and Beavis 6). Therefore, these features can be considered productive sites for critical inquiry. Similar to film and television productions, video games have huge fanbases and get much attention from journalism. As a

result, games are situated within a flood of so-called paratexts, ranging from someone's very personal review to critiques in online magazines or videos about the game on platforms like YouTube. Additionally, video game companies put a lot of effort and money into advertising in television, trailer production, billboards, etc. These aspects of video game culture are described by Apperley and Beavis as "the world around the game" (7). They consider advertising as well as the participatory culture of gaming important sites of critical games analysis. These paratexts (e.g. media reportage, postings about fans' reception of a game, the presentation of a trailer video, etc.) all contribute to how a game might be perceived (Apperley and Beavis 7). As a result, they might shed additional light onto the underlying ideologies or socio-political contexts as well as the perception of a digital game and can, consequently, be considered of great use to a CVGL investigation.

Another important notion of viewing games as texts is the consideration of the player. The meaning-making process of video games is not solely dependent on the dominant beliefs conveyed through the game itself. The reader or player is equally engaged in the meaning-making process, which is influenced by their lived experience, akin to any other text. Coinciding with the co-construction of meaning as described in chapter 2.2.1., Apperley and Beavis also suggest investigating "issues of value, ideology and identity" from the players point of view (6). As readers inevitably do with books, gamers co-construct the meaning of the game they are playing as well. They bring their own experiences, culture and ideologies to the game, which in turn determine "how the player is positioned by the game, the ways texts seek to draw players into implied subject positions, and how they take up or resist that positioning." Therefore, a CVGL approach has to raise awareness of "students' own involvement with digital games as players, creators and 'readers', with the goal of critical reflection about practices of play" (Apperley and Beavis 6). It can be concluded that as other texts in critical literacy models, the perception of a game's meaning varies according to the individual student's experiences and the games' own socio-political context.

So far, the basic foundations of CVGL coincide with the beliefs and understandings of other critical literacies. Yet, the question remains why CVGL is needed as a distinctly different type of critical literacy than for example media literacy, with which it shares many similarities. Media and gaming literacy have in common that their notion of being literate is not restricted to the written or spoken word alone. Being able to 'read' media also involves other aspects of

multimodal meaning-making systems (e.g. visual, audio, camera position, movement, etc.). However, there are also unique implications of a critical analysis of video games. The aspects of video games which distance them from other forms of texts or media are their interactivity and possible changeability. Traditional texts are, for the most part, non-changeable. Once a text has been chosen, one cannot alter the written words on the next page or the direction in which the narrative will develop (with the exception of role-playing books or the newly emerging interactive movies on Netflix). Yet, digital games are interactive by nature and 'force' the reader to play. Even more so, a game takes "place *only* through players' actions, so that players literally construct [...] the game as they play [...]" [my emphasis]. Gamers are at the same time consumers and producers of the game they are playing (Beavis 435). For that reason, focusing only on games as text would be to cut a critical analysis in half (Buckingham and Burn 327). To be able to adequately analyze a video game from a critical point of view, one needs to view games as text as well as an experience in which the readers' actions might affect the text. The "games as action" aspect of CVGL highlights the "complex, contradictory relationship between the player and the digital game" (Apperley and Beavis 2). The complexity of critically analyzing a video game derives from the fact that even the same person playing the same game twice might lead to a different textual outcome. Buckingham and Burn describe, in linguistic terms, that games operate "both through the indicative mood (that is, showing us the world) but also in the imperative mood (that is, urging us to take action upon that world)" (327). Those actions might then steer the text's narrative onto a completely different course (Buckingham and Burn 327) and thereby the text of one player might be entirely different from the text of another from this point forward. Apperley and Beavis summarize this notion as the collaborative interplay of the player and the game itself, which in turn produces the final version of said game (2). Furthermore, they differentiate between actions "that follow the rules of the game, and those that shape the rules of the game." The former refers to acts of purely cosmetic or aesthetic change (e.g. changing the avatars' appearance) that have no bearing on the game's narrative or its rules. The latter, however, refers to player actions that directly impact the game's system (e.g. making choices that affect the narrative or change gameplay) (Apperley and Beavis 4). The afore-mentioned contradictory relationship between game and player refers to the fact that

[t]he game software takes on an ambiguous position as an opponent, referee and arbiter, who sometime provides the conflict, but always determines and enforces its

outcome. In many cases the game software is responsible for the actions of all opponents and hazards, which will act only according to their designed remit. In such cases the players' actions are often informed by how well they observe and understand the actions that the software undertakes as their opponent. In multiplayer games this challenge is provided by other players, making the strategies involved considerably more complex. In these cases, the software arbitrates the interactions between the parties, and the physics of the virtual world. Software and players also play cooperatively in single-player digital games centered on building and management. [...] It is the introduction of the action by the game and its mastery by the player that allows the game to proceed. (Apperley and Beavis 2-3)

Consequently, to be able to critically investigate a video game a CVGL approach needs to account for the changeability of the source text and the basic limitations and possibilities of the game's software.

To summarize the previous theories, the games-as-text part of a CVGL framework considers digital games as texts situated within a particular historical setting with its own ideological tendencies. The multitude of paratexts within the gaming culture could be another worthwhile site of critical investigation. Furthermore, the players are seen as co-constructors of meaning as they bring their own lived experiences into the play. A games-as-action approach draws attention to the fact that games are played. They are not fixed works of art, but might, depending on the game, be altered by the reader, ranging from minor cosmetic modifications to transformations on a much larger scale. As Beavis describes, even though an analysis "may initially be focused more in one layer than the other, the model reminds us that both dimensions are integrally connected" (436). In other words, both concepts, viewing games as text and viewing them as action, ought to be incorporated into a CVGL framework.

2.2.3. Aims and Objectives

The next part of this chapter will elaborate on the aims and objectives of CVGL. Similar to other critical literacies, CVGL is not defined as "a set of cognitive abilities that individuals somehow come to possess once and for all" (Buckingham and Burn 328) nor "merely another program to be transmitted to and digested by [...] students" (Jewett and Smith 75). Rather, it is regarded as a mindset or an ideal a person embraces. Furthermore, due to the vast variety of different forms of representation within the medium, CVGL is not seen as a finished model to be applied to every computer game in the same way. However, some basic objectives of a CVGL framework can be synthesized from the aims of other critical literacy models. The first and foremost goal of CVGL is to make students literate within this specific medium. Before a

person can analyze a video game, one must learn to read the specific 'language' of gaming. As a multimodal medium the definition of being game literate includes the understanding that a game might be made up of the following elements: "text, visual-graphic elements, audio elements, game goals, game rules, and scenario design." Additionally, a literate player must "recognize the goals and the rules of a game, understand how the game works, and acquire and apply skills and knowledge to achieve goals by complying with rules" (Hsu and Wang 403). Those competences can be deemed the fundamental prerequisite of CVGL. However, being able to competently 'read' a game does not include the ability to conduct a critical analysis. Therefore, the central goals of CVGL are no different than the basic tenets of most other critical literacies: a CVGL approach stresses the understanding that video games are ridden with underlying ideologies and therefore seeks to unveil and critique "issues of power, normativity, and representation" (Borsheim-Black et al. 123). It aims at challenging those ideologies by taking justice-oriented action. A critical consciousness within CVGL also includes a focus "on students' own involvement with digital games as players, creators and 'readers', with the goal of critical reflection about practices of play" which in turn might lead to them questioning issues of representation and "how representations are constructed and interpreted, through visual means but also through values, voice and competencies as revealed through play" (Apperley and Beavis 6). As can be seen, the aims and objectives of CVGL are not too different from the goals of other critical literacies, except for a few alterations to fit the unique format of this medium.

2.4. CVGL and Critical Feminism

A CVGL approach aims to expose socio-political ideologies within games. Among others, such ideologies often include issues of (mis-)representation of race, class, gender, etc. My thesis primarily focuses on the issue of representation of female gender in commercial computer games. An overview of the relevant literature regarding the subject will be provided in the subsequent chapter. The primary questions this chapter seeks to answer are why issues of female representation should be discussed in the EFL classroom and why a critical video game literacy framework seems to be especially suitable to approach these issues.

2.4.1. Critical Feminism and Video Games

First, a definition of critical feminism will be provided, and it will be discussed how and why the representation of women in media is seen as a worthwhile investigation for the classroom. Feminism, similar to critical literacy, has a long and turbulent history. Throughout, various scholars and theories have shaped and influenced its academic landscape. However, summarizing feminism history and outlining all the important developments within seems to exceed the limitations of this chapter. As a result, a working definition of feminism will be provided. Coinciding with the beliefs of Kenway and Modra, I argue that

the central characteristics of feminism include: The recognition that gender is a phenomenon which helps to shape our society. Feminists believe that women are located unequally in the social formation, often devalued, exploited and oppressed. [...] Feminism is a social theory and social movement, but it is also a personal political practice. (139)

Building upon this definition of feminism, scholars describe critical feminism as a philosophy and practice which tries to battle “many diverse forms of inequity and oppression” by investigating feminist issues and dismantling canonical and dominant beliefs (De Saxe 79) with the goal of empowering students (De Saxe 59). Critical feminist theory is first and foremost an “anti-oppressive theory” which “embodies critical and difference centered perspectives.” In addition, critical feminism strives to base its resistance on “lived experiences and oppositional social movements” (61) and challenges “us to reconsider our existing understandings of knowledge, power and spaces of empowerment” (De Saxe 67). Furthermore, critical feminism is seen as a starting point for other intersecting fields of study, “because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities [...] it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’” (Butler 6). The similarities to the afore-discussed definition of CVGL are evident. I argue that critical feminism is heavily interwoven with critical literacy and shares many of its values and objectives, CVGL can therefore be regarded as a great ground for conducting critical feminist analysis. Further reasons for this claim will be elaborated on in the subsequent paragraphs.

Video games have been around for almost 40 years. During this time span they have gone through many changes and developments. Accordingly, the portrayal of female characters in video games has also seen many transformations. It is a common consensus among scholars of feminist-oriented game research that women have suffered a “long and ongoing history of

suppression and devaluation” within this digital medium (Groen and Tillmann 150, my translation). However, this has not always been the case. The first video games released from 1983 to 1990 did feature almost no sexualized or devalued female characters, largely due to the “simple graphic capabilities of early video game consoles” (Lynch et al. 576). The sexualization of female video game characters started in the mid-1990s as “high-resolution, 3D computer graphics” emerged. The period of the 1990s to the early 2000s was the time in which female characters were most often portrayed in physically sexualized ways. In this time span the “introduction of Lara Croft in the 1996 game *Tomb Raider* may have served as a catalyst for video game developers to feature more sexualized females as a sales tactic to entice male players.” However, since 2006 the industry has seen a decline in the “the sexualization of female characters” (Lynch et al. 576). Even though, the physical sexualization of women has receded to some extent there are still other misogynistic tendencies present in games and its surrounding culture. For example, the number of female characters as primary protagonists of video games has not increased over time. Only 42% of all primary video game characters are women. However, their study also included games in which the players are free to choose the gender of their avatar. Had they only included games in which the playable avatar has a predetermined gender, the percentage would have been lower (Lynch et al. 577). The year 2013 marked a kind of turning point for female representation in video games. This year gave rise to a large number of female-lead games and arguably inspired other studios to follow suit. Most notably the games *The Last of Us*, *Bioshock Infinite*, *Tomb Raider*, and *Beyond: Two Souls* were considered to be game changers of female representation in gaming culture. All of these games featured strong female characters which “played important roles in the gameplay experiences and narratives associated with the games, presenting themselves as female saviors with powerful inherent and learned skills” (Perreault et al. 857). At first glance, “[t]hese characters challenged the female stereotypes that have been pervasive in digital games.” However, upon closer inspection some of these games still exhibited “troubling components of traditional female depictions” (Perreault et al. 857). This fact demonstrates why a thorough and critically aware analysis of this medium is absolutely essential.

An extensive overview of misogynistic issues within gaming culture is provided by Cote in her 2020 book *Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games* (23-24). She argues that “masculinity defines and structures many aspects of games and game culture” (Cote 23). Character design choices, the underrepresentation of women in a pure numerical

way, gameplay mechanics, narrative, etc. are only a few aspects of games in which misogynistic tendencies can be found on a textual level. Within the games' wider context, the notion of masculinity influences elements like marketing, press statements, the perception of gamers, and the men-women-ratio within the industry (Cote 23). In the year 2018 only 24% of all video game designers in the USA (one of the countries with the highest video game production rate) were women (Cunningham 20). Sadly, gaming culture has a long history of "promotion and maintenance of narrow views around what qualifies as a game and who qualifies as a gamer" (Cote 24).

The previous paragraphs clearly demonstrate why video games can and must be considered a bountiful site for critical feminist analysis. The examination of gender issues in gaming culture provides all the elements needed to genuinely engage with a CVGL framework.

2.4.2. Portraying Women in Video Games

The previous chapter elaborated on the reasons why a critical feminism approach works well within a CVGL framework, and some indication has been given towards the way in which women are being portrayed in video games. This chapter will elaborate more specifically on which misogynistic elements of characters have been prevalent in the medium.

One of the most prevailing issues of women's representation in video games is their physical and numerical appearance. As mentioned above, women are largely underrepresented within the medium of video games. Quantitative research of scholars like Cunningham shows that in addition to being presented in sexualized ways and being reduced to passive roles, women "also constitute the minority of playable characters" (Cunningham 21). In terms of physical depiction, Downs and Smith argue that female characters are oftentimes portrayed in hypersexualized ways. They refer to hypersexuality as a "synonym for depictions of overtly sexualized characters in video games" (Downs and Smith 722). This hypertexualization often takes the form of women being depicted "as sex objects, with unrealistic body proportions and considerable amounts of skin" (723-724). Similarly, Jensen and de Castell argue in their review on the construction of femininity in video games that women are repeatedly designed "with oversized breasts and lips and very little clothing" and a generally unrealistic body outline (59). Aside from bodily representation, female characters are stereotyped in numerous other ways. These stereotypes include, but are not limited to, damsels in distress,

femmes fatales, and women as secondary characters and objects of the male gaze¹ (Cunningham 12). While it becomes apparent that most representations of the female gender in video games do not align with feminist perspectives, I would also like to highlight the fact that the relationship between feminism and video games is a complex issue. The most widely known example of such a complex issue regarding feminism and video games is the so-called Lara Croft phenomenon. In brief and simple terms, the Lara Croft phenomenon showcases the ambiguity of female representation in the medium. On the one hand, many people judged Lara Croft, as she appeared in her very first games, as a misogynistic representation of female body form: She was depicted with large breasts and wide hips as well as miniscule waist and scant clothing which people viewed as a sexualized representation of the character. On the other hand, some looked up to her as an empowering feminist icon of the 1990s girl power movement (Cunningham 12). The Lara Croft phenomenon clearly exemplifies the individual readers' co-construction of meaning as described above. It shows that the analysis of a text can never be completely objective as the text's meaning might be different from the perspective of another reader. This also holds true regarding the qualitative analysis in my thesis: in my analysis I can only describe how certain elements of a game can be viewed critically in regard to representations of female characters, while other readers might make an entirely different argument. Again, this demonstrates why it is important to include the students' perspectives in CVGL as well and keep an open and critical mind.

I would also like to highlight two additional forms of sexism in video games: hostile and benevolent sexism. Hostile sexism regards women as objects of male desire and dominance. As Glick and Fiske describe it, "hostile sexism seeks to justify male power, traditional gender roles, and men's exploitation of women as sexual objects through derogatory characterizations of women" (121). Common stereotypes include female characterization in line with the trope of the femme fatale, who uses her sexuality to manipulate men. Benevolent sexism, in contrast, refers to perceiving women as in need of protection by men. It is based on the belief that "because of their greater authority, power, and physical strength, men should serve as protectors and providers" (121). Furthermore, "[t]his protectiveness is particularly strong toward women on whom men are dyadically dependent or over whom they feel a sense of "ownership"" (Glick and Fiske 121-122). Common themes include clichéd and/or

¹ The term "male gaze" was first introduced by Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema".

romanticized gender roles, like a protective father-daughter relationship or viewing women as motherly figures or caretakers. Though these attributions might not seem misogynistic at first, they still stereotype women and press them into traditional gender roles (Glick and Fiske 121). Despite their differences both forms of sexism share the same presupposition “that women are the weaker sex” and “both presume traditional gender roles, and both serve to justify and maintain patriarchal social structures” (Glick and Fiske 121). Both forms of sexism are heavily featured with representations of female characters in video games (Tompkins et al. 248-250; Summers and Miller 1037). To summarize, a variety of misogynistic portrayals of female characters can be observed in video games. However, the question if something constitutes as a demeaning portrayal of women might in some cases not be clearly recognizable and might depend on the worldview of the player. Therefore, in order to conduct a feminist analysis an open and critical mindset is needed to determine which specific elements could be considered displays of degradation of women.

2.5. CVGL and Critical Feminism in the EFL classroom

This chapter will deal with the question why critical video game literacy with a focus on the representation of women should be made use of in the EFL classroom. Additionally, it will highlight benefits as well as downsides of using games in school.

2.5.1. Critical Literacy and ELT

In the English classroom reading is one of the four most important skills. Any teacher’s goal should be to help their students become proficient readers of the English language as well as familiarizing them with various types of texts. However, as Stevens and Bean point out “such a unitary definition of reading, easily quantified through a precise list of cumulative skills, strategies, and behaviors, has long been critiqued for leading to a deficit view of children and their meaning-making abilities” (4). In today’s world being a fluent decoder of texts no longer suffices as the definition of proficiency in reading. Nowadays, reader proficiency should consist of decoding abilities, comprehension skills, and the will to critically investigate texts (Stevens and Bean 3-4). Similarly, Ferrarelli stresses the importance of critical literacy in the classroom as a treasure trove of alternate reading practices and strategies to be taught for the analysis of various media (67). Another aspect of the importance of critical literacy in the EFL classroom is brought up by Cervetti et al. as they draw attention to the fact that the learners

themselves infuse “a text with meaning rather than extracting meaning from it” (5). CVGL advocates the need for students to become aware that they always read texts from their own cultural perspectives and are never only passive absorbers of meaning. Acquiring and embracing this awareness is a crucial step towards developing a critical consciousness, which as previously discussed can be considered one of the most important goals of any critical literacy. However, the investigation of texts alone does not conclude the importance of critical literacy in the EFL classroom. Following the “research, analysis and interrogation of multiple viewpoints on an issue,” students are also encouraged to produce texts which illuminate underlying ideologies of the text in question (Bishop 55). Furthermore, students should be encouraged to devise and engage in “actions focused on social justice outside of the classroom” (Bishop 55). These thoughts have already been taken up on in the Austrian AHS Curriculum as it states in the general education goals that critical thinking skills are seen as one of the four most important competencies and “that learning is more than the individual acquisition and reproduction of cognitive learning content. It is an active process in which young people are enabled to apply their knowledge” (RIS 10, my translation). Furthermore, it states that school should be a place for critical reflection which contributes to students adopting social responsibilities by teaching them that “social phenomena are historically made and created by humans, and that it is possible and sensible to exert a constructive influence on social developments” (RIS 10-12, my translation). Moreover, it claims that lessons have to promote critical thinking skills and taking action in order to contribute to a democratic society in which the values of “humanity, solidarity, tolerance, peace, justice, gender equality and environmental awareness” are upheld (RIS 12, my translation).

2.5.2. CVGL and Critical Feminism in the Classroom

The question yet remains why specifically a critical video game literacy should be utilized to conduct critical feminist analysis in the EFL classroom. I argue that young people might be more inclined to delve into the questions of critical literacy when it concerns texts of their own world. Beavis argues that popular culture texts should be used in class as they offer “the opportunity to tap into the evident pleasure and active engagement often entailed, the ability to build bridges between students’ in- and out- of- school lives, and the rich complexity of much popular culture and the ways in which it rewards close study” (434). Similarly, Dharamshi describes how the use of popular culture, media, social media, toys, and comics is

an invaluable way to engage students with critical literacy (Dharamshi 22-23). As previously established video games are texts of multimodal nature and are increasingly popular among young people. Due to this popularity, they can be deemed to possess great influences on the worldview of the reader. Arguably, most modern media can be considered important agents of change in young people's perspectives due to their excessive consumption. One aspect of young people's view of world that has been and still is forged by various media is the perception of gender. As Groen and Tillmann put it, "media do not [only] pick up on existing gender relations and stereotypes" but largely contribute to the presumptions of gender norms (146). Video games are among the most consumed media in students' lives. As already shown in the introduction, Austrian adolescences spend a lot of time playing digital games (Jugend-Medien-Studie 6-13). The same can be assumed true for teenagers all over the world. Therefore, digital games are considered "to have a strong influence on the players and their perception of the world" and "[a]ccording to various research, it seems like some video games provide wrong and negative ideas about how the female gender should look, feel and be treated (Kondrat 173). Similarly, Downs and Smith voice their concerns that gamers might adopt a games' "attitudes and beliefs about sex roles and gender stereotyping and apply them to real world situations they find themselves in each day." Pupils might then display gender specific stereotyping at various social circles in their lives, like their homes, their school, among friends, etc. (723).

As a result of various media influencing learners' perception of the world, I believe it is imperative that they are introduced to CVGL for them to not simply stay uncritical consumers of texts they frequently engage with. In accordance with Stevens and Bean, I also try to expand the notion of critical literacy to conform to "today's hypermediated world" (4) to offer students the chance to develop "skills and processes demanded in today's information age" (20). Moreover, using texts situated within the lived experiences of learners might encourage them to be more eager to analyze and produce texts to advocate social change (Morrell Urban 248). Digital games, especially, are presumed an important place "for the analysis of inequality and discrimination relationships" while simultaneously they might act "as a field of activity for gender designs beyond binary oppositions." To be more specific, games are seen as great conducts to allow "promising points of contact [with issues of gender], as [they] offer incentives to 'play' with identities, to change perspectives, to dive into new worlds and to expand the [socio-political] horizon [of students] (Groen and Tillmann 154, my translation).

Before concluding this chapter, I would like raise awareness of another important aspect of dealing with feminism in a classroom setting. The fact that feminism is important for male students too. People usually hold the view that the idea of feminism, i.e. the desire to unmask gender inequalities and empower women, is only associated with and made for women. I, however, strictly oppose this belief. Together with De Saxe, I support the idea of men practicing critical feminism by opposing the devaluation of the female gender, refusing to adhere to masculine ideals, and critiquing dominant patriarchal ideologies (62-63). Furthermore, adopting a critical feminist stance within a CVGL framework is especially important for teenage boys. As afore-mentioned video games heavily affect the worldview of the player. Therefore, young men might develop wrong or unrealistic assumptions on how women should look or behave (Kondrat 177). I strongly believe it is imperative to make male students aware of how misogynistic tendencies in media influence their attitudes towards women. It might lead to them holding on to unrealistic worldviews and, in the worst case, to them further supporting patriarchal ideals in their culture.

On account of the previously discussed reasons, I claim that it can be extremely meaningful to utilize video games in a critical literacy framework as they offer vast amounts of different modes of analysis due to their multimodal nature. Therefore, they might serve as a sort of foundation or gateway to other forms of critical media analysis. Furthermore, using video games to introduce learners to critical literacy might be fruitful way to spark students' interest and ensure participation. Moreover, I argue CVGL can serve as a great framework to conduct a feminist-oriented analysis.

2.5.3. Limitations

Despite the importance of CVGL as a curricular activity, there are also some issues with critical literacy approaches in general as well as the use of video games in the classroom which will be elaborated in the following chapter. First, the most pertinent critiques of critical literacy will be discussed.

One of the most significant criticisms of an educational critical literacy approach lies within the issues of proficiency and accessibility. Luke summarizes, to be able to adequately analyze texts a vast array of techniques, specialized vocabulary, and a general high command of the English language are required. According to some scholars, critical literacies often glance over the fact that it takes a considerable amount of time and effort to acquire those abilities.

Moreover, these competences have to be attained for each different type of textual medium (Foundational 8). Regarding accessibility, critics of critical pedagogy argue that in order to conduct critical analysis of a specific text, various other para-texts of the same discourse have to be examined as well. However, therein lies the issue as these scholars claim that an educational environment can neither provide access to many of these discourses nor does it provide the time to inspect them (Luke Foundational 8). Researchers like Luke and Woods attempt to counter this critique. From their perspective it is not the goal of critical literacy to make learners experts in linguistics, discourse analysis, genre analysis and so on. They claim the critics focus too much on linguistic competences and do not credit the students with being able to conduct socio-political analysis, ideological critique and voicing their opinion. Accordingly, they view critical literacy as a way to slowly introduce learners to textual investigative techniques, and they do not view those competences as prerequisites to conduct a critical analysis (14-15). I agree with the perspective of Luke and Woods in the sense that critical literacy should be used to teach students about issues of ideology, textual analysis, etc. In my view they do not need to be experts in every right, it is rather to teacher's job to provide the students with the means and texts to conduct an analysis within the given framework and appropriate to their language level.

Another serious critique of critical literacy models concerns its action-taking component. A number of critics voice the opinion that critical literacy models in school often fail "to put principle to practice" or more precisely "to fully enact [...] critical literacy learning through activist actions in authentic spaces that extend outside of the classroom" (Bishop 57). Socio-political projects are sometimes poorly designed or carried out and therefore "produce unsatisfactory results despite the best intentions" (Bishop 57). Critics of critical literacy suggest that there is one prominent reason for the failure of these projects. They propose the issue lies within the difference of hierarchy between a traditional educational setting and critical literacy pedagogy (Bishop 57). When teachers fail to adapt their teaching style to suit the conditions of critical literacy learning and stubbornly maintain a traditional hierarchical classroom structure any kind of critical learning is inadvertently doomed to fail (Bishop 57). However, I believe this critique functions rather as advice on how to avert problems with critical literacy projects. It serves as a warning for teachers to fully embrace critical literacy pedagogy in every aspect of teaching.

Two other issues of critical literacy are brought to attention by a study conducted by Jewett and Smith. In their study they qualitatively interviewed teachers on their experiences with critical literacy in an elementary school. In my review of the study, I noticed two distinct concerns which were corroborated by all teachers involved. First, they voiced their concerns regarding the issue of acceptance. Most of them “taught in environments that relied on very specific literacy skills from pre-determined curricula” (Jewett and Smith 74). Therefore, they feared the parents’ as well as the administrators’ unease regarding the introduction of critical literacy in the classroom. Both were thought to be having concerns regarding issues of assessment within a critical literacy framework, and parents especially might object to the general notion of discussing controversial topics. However, most teachers found creative ways to circumvent these troubles and put the parents’ mind at ease (Jewett and Smith 74). Nonetheless, studies like this one show that much preliminary work like the persuasion of third parties is needed to be able to conduct critical literacies in the classroom. The second fear some teachers expressed was the matter of teachers feeling overwhelmed. For some the notion that any text’s meaning is influenced by the socio-political environment of their time as well as the readers’ own culture was altogether unfamiliar. Therefore, they felt extremely overwhelmed as they realized how much there is to learn and to know about the historical context of individual texts. Moreover, “as they began to understand that texts were non-neutral and consisted of public and hidden agenda” many teachers questioned their own competences in dealing with texts. One teacher specifically “was concerned that her knowledge of history came from textbooks she no longer trusted and that her knowledge might also be irrelevant or erroneous.” As a result, “[s]he felt overwhelmed with the burden of having to verify everything in classroom textbooks so she would not perpetuate misconceptions to her students” (Jewett and Smith 74-75). This concern is indeed warranted, and it demonstrates how careful teachers must choose and prepare specific texts within a critical literacy project. It also shows that teaching according to critical literacy pedagogy might not be suitable for everyone.

Another issue that I want to outline pertains to the specific use of CVGL, namely the use of video games in the classroom. While, in my experience, gamification, such as learning apps or online quizzes, is being frequently used in the classroom, teachers may be reluctant to use actual video games due to their association with fun and entertainment. Concerns may be raised that students might not engage with the material seriously or may prioritize the gaming

over the intended critical learning objectives. Furthermore, as discussed above, critical literacy on its own is sometimes already deemed to be a challenge for many teachers as they feel overwhelmed, become afraid of making mistakes and having to persuade the parents of the benefits of this approach (Jewett and Smith 74-75). In my opinion, these challenges will only be amplified when combining critical literacy with video games. Similarly, Blume argues that teachers already only receive limited training on the usage of digital media and are therefore reluctant to use them in the classroom (123-125). Last, the practicalities of playing video games in a classroom setting present further challenges, such as the suitable hardware, how to structure lesson plans accordingly and time constraints.

Nevertheless, alternative approaches can mitigate these difficulties. For example, the analysis of Let's Play videos or the use of short, pre-selected gameplay sequences offer viable compromises. Such materials can be paused, replayed, and discussed without the logistical complexity of live gameplay. Furthermore, I argue that many students already possess a high degree of gaming literacy and are already familiar with the mechanics and conventions inherent to video games, making it unnecessary to play actual video games in class. Instead, teachers that feel comfortable utilizing such an approach can focus on guided analysis, thematic discussion, and critical engagement with selected content.

3. A Critical Feminist Analysis of *Tomb Raider*

In this chapter, the qualitative multimodal analysis of the game *Tomb Raider* will be conducted. First, a general introduction to the methodology and a summary of the game's plot are provided. At the beginning of each subsequent chapter, the methodological approach appropriate to that specific part of the qualitative analysis is outlined before the analysis itself is carried out accordingly.

Before describing my methodological approach and conducting the analysis, it has to be pointed out that "little has been done to actively develop a methodological system for the qualitative, critical analysis of video games as texts" (Consalvo and Dutton qtd. in Jennings 159). Due to the mediums' multimodal nature, a qualitative analysis would have to encompass a multitude of different techniques to analyze all aspects of video games adequately. Accordingly, most scholars suggest limiting the investigation to a small number of salient analytical foci significant to the overall purpose of the study. Another issue that makes games difficult to objectively analyze is their ambiguity of meaning. As already established, the meaning of text largely depends on the readers' co-construction. Regarding video games, this becomes even more complicated as every act of play is situational and might produce different texts, based on player choice. As a result, this means "a critic's subjectivity is [also] part of the game text that they read, examine, and analyze" (Jennings 160). As Jennings states, "it is this subject position that informs the meanings that I have generated through my embodied actions as my [video game] character" (160). Jennings would argue that my critical feminist inquiry of two video games is necessarily limited by me being a white, heterosexual, middle-class man. Her point being that another person with different cultural background might interpret certain elements of a video game quite differently (160). However, this fact does not diminish the validity or value of my findings but serves as a reminder to be critically conscious of one's own intersectional positioning.

The following study will review the game *Tomb Raider* from a critical feminist perspective within a CVGL framework. Yet, the question remains why this game in particular has been chosen as the focus of CVGL analysis with a critical feminist focus. This game has been chosen for this study because it is part of a long-lasting series of games and is considered an AAA game. Triple A games are an informal way of classifying games within the gaming culture. Being classified as a triple A game conveys that the game has been produced by a known and

prominent studio, and it can therefore be assumed that the game has been developed under the highest standards, with extensive production resources and was purchased by a large number of people (AAA – USK Lexikon). As a result, I believe triple A games to exert a lot of influence on a vast number of players, which is one of the reasons why they should be critically investigated. The 2013 game *Tomb Raider* is the first publication of a new series of games featuring Lara Croft as the protagonist (three games are currently part of this series). As mentioned above, Lara Croft is a female character with a unique and complicated history within video game culture as well as the feminism movement. The character of Lara Croft has continuously been portrayed in video games since 1996, has been on the cover of over two hundred magazines and even holds a 2001 Guinness Book World Record for the “Most Successful Human Virtual Game Heroine” (Han and Song 30). Lara Croft is without a doubt an important figure within video game culture. Therefore, the 2013 portrayal of the character has to be viewed in relation to her previous representations and even though the analysis will predominantly be based on the game’s actual text it will sometimes also discuss relevant gaming discourse or para-texts. In contrast to the earlier instalments, the 2013 version of *Tomb Raider* has been widely celebrated as a good example of female representation in games (Engelbrecht ch. 1). Another reason for *Tomb Raider’s* inclusion in this study is that it belongs to a series of games, featuring female protagonists, that have been published in 2013 and are believed to have sparked a transition in computer games’ portrayal of female characters (Perreault et al. 844). Moreover, the lead scriptwriter for the narrative of the 2013 *Tomb Raider* game was a female writer by the name of Rhianna Pratchett, which at the time was a novelty in the video game industry and might lead to the assumption that Lara Croft is represented in a non-misogynistic way (Engelbrecht ch. 3). Despite these arguments, I would still like to subject *Tomb Raider* to a critical feminist analysis to discover whether the great portrayal of its female protagonist holds true for all aspects of the game.

The third consideration that has influenced the choice of which game to investigate is the fact that the game adheres to a linear, non-changeable level design. This means that players cannot alter the narrative by choice nor by venturing freely within the game’s world. The decisions of the in-game characters are all scripted and have been deliberately designed by the games’ developers. As a result, I am able to circumvent or reduce some of the difficulties of video game analysis. For example, it is easier to examine the narrative and character development of the protagonists as player choice has been eliminated in this regard. However,

the gamers' decision-making ability is not entirely removed. Player decisions might still determine the physical appearance of playable characters, as well as certain features of gameplay, like which actions to take when. I deliberately made this decision to detect misogyny implemented by the games designers without having to account for the endless possibilities of player interaction with the narrative or the games rules.

As mentioned above, video game analysis is a complicated issue. Many researchers have acknowledged "the lack of methodologies of critical analysis" for digital games (Consalvo and Dutton ch. 1) and researchers have been developing methodological toolkits in accordance with their chosen focus and their specific games (Jennings 159). Thus, in order to analyze *Tomb Raider* adequately in regard to my thesis specific focus, I have developed my own methodological categories. The game *Tomb Raider* will be examined according to four categories – Visual Representation, Narrative, and Gameplay – which, on the one hand, have been synthesized from across different research on feminist and/or video game analysis to encompass the most common sites of misogynistic issues in the medium. On the other hand, my own personal experience also influenced the development of these categories as I have previously played the game myself three times. During these playthroughs I already noticed certain aspects of the game which I considered worthwhile of critical analysis. Consalvo and Dutton consider it an essential component of any qualitative video game inquiry that researchers have at least played the game themselves and have not just watched it being played by others (as one would watch a movie). The playing of a game and its critical reflection are fundamental elements of qualitative game analysis (ch. 1). I agree with their opinion, and I played the game thrice in the span of five to three years ago. For this study, however, I use a non-commentary walkthrough on YouTube as the primary source material², because the non-commentary video ensures that the only audio present is the audio of the games. Even though the game is played by someone else, I did not deem it necessary for the purpose of this study to re-play the game myself in its entirety as the narrative and most other elements of the game in the YouTube walkthrough are exactly the same as in my own playthroughs. I did, however, replay certain parts for purposes of gameplay analysis. Differences might only occur in regard to gameplay and physical appearance of the protagonists, for which I will provide

² For purposes of readability and clarity, I am referencing the game title rather than the poster's username in in-text quotations, together with the time stamp from the YouTube video.

visuals or other means of exemplification. The three categories of this study and their specific features will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

Before delving into the analysis itself, the concept of agency has to be addressed separately, as it is a complex and multifaceted issue because it is heavily related to both gameplay and narrative. Precisely, because of this connection to both aspects of game analysis, video games agency could not be ascribed to either one of them alone. Therefore, I have chosen to shortly describe the methodology of agency separately from the other categories, however in the actual analysis issues of agency will be discussed in both sections. Agency is commonly defined as a person's capability to carry out actions determined by their own free will. A positive and feminist-inspired notion of agency includes the following three concepts, namely the "capacity to manage actively the often discontinuous, overlapping or conflicting relations of power", the "ability to act in an unexpected fashion or to institute new and unanticipated modes of behavior," and "the capacity of the individual to engender change within the socio-cultural order" (McNay 315, 410, 784). This study's analysis of female agency in video games will therefore discuss whether and how women are able to act independently and in what way their actions might challenge gender norms, but also in how far their agency is influenced by other characters or gender stereotypes placed upon them. As afore mentioned, the agency of a video game protagonist is always an interplay of agency as presented by the narrative and agency as carried out through the limitations and possibilities of gameplay. An analysis of agency can therefore be described as a sort of culmination of the narrative and gameplay methodological approaches as it connects and combines many of their individual elements and puts them into a synthesized perspective. Furthermore, narrative and gameplay representations of agency might conform with one another but might also be contradictory.

In general, I will try to keep the three categories of analysis separate, however overlaps will occur. Mostly the interplay of narrative and gameplay will be difficult to separate from one another in certain aspects. For these special instances I will reference the chapters in my thesis which elaborate the second side of the analysis in greater detail.

3.1. *Tomb Raider* – Plot Summary

Prior to the analysis, a summary of the game's plot will be given to provide context for certain elements of the following multimodal analysis. The game *Tomb Raider* is a third-person action-

adventure game and can be considered an origin story for the new version of Lara Croft. The 21-year-old archaeologist dreams of finding the lost city of Yamatai in the legendary Dragon's Triangle, near Japan. Due to her wealth, she is able to fund an expedition with a small crew on the ship called The Endurance. This crew consists of her best friend Sam who is a descendant of the last Queen of Yamatai, her mentor Conrad Roth, renowned archaeologist Dr. James Whitman, boatswain Grimm, cook Jonah, mechanic Reyes, and technician Alex. Due to a storm the crew are shipwrecked on an unknown island and Lara is separated from them and abducted by an unknown assailant. She manages to escape and discovers throughout the game that the island is populated by an extremely violent, radical, and all-male cult, who call themselves the Solarii Brotherhood. The cult leader, Father Mathias, abducts Lara's best friend Sam to magically transfer the soul of the last ruler of Yamatai, Queen Himiko into her body. He believes doing so will end the unnatural storms surrounding the island which are preventing everyone's escape. However, at a later point in the game it is revealed that the undead Queen Himiko is the real antagonist as she purposefully controls the storms and wants to possess Sam's body to regain her full potential and unleash untold horrors upon the rest of the world. Therefore, Lara's main quest is to rescue her best friend from her captivators and to get all her friends off the island. During her journey she faces many hardships, like getting shot at, maneuvering instable structure, falling off dangerous cliffs, etc. and must kill an abundance of enemies to progress the game. As an origin story and action-adventure game, the plot as well as the gameplay focus predominantly on Lara's emotional and physical development. In the beginning, she is portrayed as scared and insecure, often avoiding death only by luck and repeatedly calling for help, but throughout the game she quickly adapts and learns to overcome any obstacle or adversary she is presented with.

3.2. Visual Representation

The first category of my feminist CVGL analysis is physical representation. The female body in mainstream media is often depicted in idealized and unrealistic beauty standards. Moreover, women in media are usually valued exclusively for their standardized beautiful appearance and not for "their intellect, ambition, personality, [or other] unique traits." Accordingly, those media contribute to the stereotyping of how women should ideally look and dress (Frechette and Kosut 16-17). There is, however, a huge gap between the idealized beauty of the female body portrayed in media and reality (Higgins 58-64) and research suggests these unrealistic

portrayals effect women's and men's perception of the female body shape in negative ways (Barlett and Harris; Dill and Thill; Miller and Summers; Gestos et al.). As a mass medium video games too contribute to the inaccurate and idealized representation of women. Jansz and Martis affirm that most video game characters, both male and female, primary or secondary are portrayed with generally well-shaped bodies, meaning thin, muscular and of average height. Only a minority of characters are portrayed in shapes that do not adhere to common beauty standards. Furthermore, many characters, but especially playable characters are white (146). Of all these characters, women are most commonly portrayed in a sexualized fashion with exaggerated bodily features and in regard to how they are dressed (Lynch et al. 577). This representation produces an "image of women that is constructed upon male desires and fantasies" (Gandolfi and Sciannamblo 338). For those reasons, it becomes apparent why a focus on physical representation of the female protagonists is a relevant and meaningful aspect of this study.

The first aspect of physical representation which will be applied to the games is an analysis of the protagonist's bodily shape and how these shapes might confirm or refute misogynistic ideologies. To be able to determine and discuss possible tendencies of sexualization this study uses a combination of categories synthesized from across different literature. Usual parameters of analyzing the female body in regard to sexualized appearance include unrealistic body proportions such as disproportionate breast-, waist- and hip/buttock size, as well as sexual movements (Martins et al.; Downs and Smith; Lynch et al.).

The second focus of the female protagonist's physical appearance part of the analysis is their clothing. The clothing of a female character can suggest much about underlying sexist ideologies. First, the apparel or lack thereof might suggest an objectification of the woman wearing it. A lot of cleavage, short pants and belly-revealing upper body clothing are seen as indicators of attempts to depict women as sexual objects (Beasley and Standley 284-285) and encourage "interactive male gaze" (Hoffswell). Interactive male gaze is a characteristic unique to digital games and is made up of three distinct aspects. The players ability to choose a playable female character's clothing, the possibility to move the camera freely and positioned them in voyeuristic angles (i.e. looking down at the cleavage or at the buttocks) and the ability to completely control the actions of the character, depending of course on the limitations of the gameplay (i.e. making them take a shower, making them die on command, etc.) (Hoffswell

26-27). All these possibilities of gaming are potential grounds for the patriarchal oppression of women and need to be carefully and critically examined. The second aspect of clothing that I believe should play a crucial part in a critical feminist analysis of video games is the “appropriateness of attire” (Downs and Smith 726). Female characters in games are significantly more often depicted in inappropriate clothing for the task at hand than their male counterparts (Downs and Smith 729). For example, Lara Croft could wear a bikini in every game up to 2008. This outfit has no gameplay changing effect and is obviously only available “as a means to openly objectify her” (Engelbrecht ch. 3). Therefore, appropriateness of attire will be defined “as the degree to which garments worn by a character [are] suitable and functional with respect to the task at hand” (Downs and Smith 726). The third focus of physical representation in video games relates to the theories of benevolent and hostile sexism. More specifically, how clothing and other means of physical representation might lead to gender specific stereotyping. Hostile sexist representations of female characters often feature “overtly sexual/dark allure, provocative appearances, and powerful portrayals” (Tompkins et al. 240). The most common stereotypes associated with this representation are the femme fatale, seductress, evil temptress or sexual villain, etc. Women’s clothing falling into the category of benevolent sexism often include “traditionally feminine appearance/outfits, sweet/innocent personalities, and submissive/subdued portrayals” (Tompkins et al. 240). These most frequently associated stereotypes are wife, mother, daughter, or damsel-in-distress. Through the symbolic clothing of female characters their identity can be reduced to the afore-mentioned cliché roles and thereby it can be argued that female attire might contribute to the patriarchal desire to impose male gender norms.

Drawing on the criteria described above, the following section applies them to the analysis of Lara Croft's visual representation in the game *Tomb Raider*. The character of Lara Croft is traditionally portrayed as a sexualized object. She has repeatedly been featured in short and tight clothing, with exaggerated and feminine bodily features and even in dialog she has been sexualized and objectified (Han and Song 35-37). However, the 2013 incarnation of Lara (see fig. 1) has been widely celebrated as a less misogynistic representation of the female body compared to previous appearances of the character in older *Tomb Raider* games (Bezio 123).



Figure 1: Innocent outfit (Raiding the Globe: <https://raidingtheglobe.com/games/crystal-dynamics/tomb-raider/outfits>)

The new version of Lara Croft is a white, arguably attractive woman with a thin and athletic body. However, she possesses none of the features usually linked to hypersexualized appearances of female characters in video games (e.g. large breasts, tiny waist and wide hips). While her physical appearance adheres to normative ideals, it is neither sexualized nor disproportionate. In fact, Lara's physicality has been modelled after the body of actress Camilla Luddington and her face after actress and model Megan Farquhar (MacCallum-Stewart ch. 4). Furthermore, it has to be pointed out that the 2018 movie adaptation of this game features Alicia Vikander in the role of the famous female archaeologist. The bodily statistics of this real-life actor (166cm and 53kg) are very similar to the ones of video game Lara (168cm height and 56kg) (Engelbrecht ch. 3). Therefore, I agree with Engelbrecht and

MacCallum-Stewart that even though Lara's body is presented in a somewhat idealized manner and is difficult to achieve without extensive training, the character still possesses a shape which is plausible to attain in reality (ch. 5). Moreover, the context must be considered. *Tomb Raider* is an action-adventure game and Lara faces many physically challenging obstacles throughout the game. Therefore, the argument could be made that in this specific context a less athletic body would have been unrealistic (Engelbrecht ch. 3; MacCallum-Stewart ch. 5). As a result, in terms of pure body measurements, despite her feminine features adhering to conventional beauty standards, the character of Lara Croft is neither overly sexualized nor is she portrayed in a hyper-masculine manner.

The next section of this chapter will discuss the clothing choices of the 2013 *Tomb Raider* game. Lara's outfits have always been a big part of any *Tomb Raider* game. In nearly every game the player can choose from a variety of outfits to dress the character. While some of these attires are clearly useful and appropriate for an explorer to wear, some, like a golden bikini or an evening dress, are surely not. Even the more appropriate outfits are often "skin-tight and revealing," had "no impact on the gameplay" and are "merely cosmetic" (Engelbrecht ch. 3). All these different types of clothing in previous *Tomb Raider* games accentuate Lara's sexualized feminine features and can be used to "as a means to openly objectify her" (Engelbrecht ch. 3). In the 2013 remake of the game franchise, the players can also acquire different sets of garments as they progress through the game. However, it seems to be noteworthy that these so-called skins are not included in the base game. They can only be acquired through the purchase of the Definitive Edition, or they can be purchased individually, each costing 0.79 Euro (Steam – *Tomb Raider*). In total, seven different outfits can be bought for Lara, all of which can be viewed on the *Raiding the Globe* website. I have provided visual examples of two outfits for the following discussion.



Figure 2: Sure Shot outfit



Figure 3: Mountaineer outfit

(Raiding the Globe: <https://raidingtheglobe.com/games/crystal-dynamics/tomb-raider/outfits>)

No outfits that can be worn by the 2013 version of Lara are skin-tight or revealing. Furthermore, they do not sexualize her feminine features and seem to be appropriate for the tasks she faces. In fact, all skins highlight a certain aspect of Lara's survival abilities. The Sure Shot outfit underscores her skill with the bow, the Mountaineer outfit puts an emphasis on her ability to scale mountains, the Hunter gear stresses her capability to remain unseen by the enemy and so on. However, while these pieces of clothing are definitely designed in relation to Lara's core survival skills, their application remains purely cosmetic. None of these costumes have any impact on the gameplay (e.g. being better at climbing or shooting with the bow) nor do they make any difference for the character other than changing her visual appearance to the player's liking. This and the fact that these new outfits have to be bought add a new layer to the discussion of Lara's attire. Being able to buy Lara superficial clothing ascribes Barbie-doll-like properties to her and thereby implying certain gender stereotypes (McArthur 386, Engstrom and Kosut 390-392). The critique concerning Lara's pointless clothing choices was also voiced by fans and critics alike, which led to the game developers including outfits with gameplay effects in the subsequent game (Engelbrecht ch. 3). Again, from a visual standpoint, the skins seem appropriate and non-problematic: however, the fact

that in a game, pieces of clothing and even armored gear (Guerrilla outfit) have no effect whatsoever can be viewed as rather problematic.

Even though Lara's appearance and looks have been desexualized in the 2013 *Tomb Raider* game, the game still sexualizes her body in the way her body is and can be positioned in relation to the camera. In some instances, the in-game camera position during cut scenes or tasks like climbing up a ladder still frequently focuses on her breasts and buttocks. In the radio tower sequence of the game Lara can be seen climbing said radio tower for a duration of over one and a half minutes (*Tomb Raider* 01:50:00-01:51:45). During that scene, in which player interaction is limited to only pressing one button to get the character upwards, one can observe many different instances of Lara being objectified by the camera position. The camera is often placed directly above the subject, allowing the player to peer into her cleavage from above (*Tomb Raider* 01:50:07) and in other parts of the scene the camera is positioned right below her highlighting her behind and nothing else (*Tomb Raider* 01:50:37-01:50:41). Additional examples of this sexualized camera positioning can be seen throughout the game (*Tomb Raider* 00:01:25-00:01:30; 00:14:40-00:14:52; 02:27:42-02:27:54). In many of those instances, Lara is shown from a high angle, looked down at by the player. As mentioned above, player interaction is extremely limited, and it has to be specifically pointed out that the gamer's decision-making ability relating to camera movement is completely disabled during these parts of the game (usually it is possible to move the camera according to player's choice). Therefore, it has to be assumed that the person(s) responsible did, consciously or not, position the camera in a sexualized way adhering to the principles of the traditional cinematic male gaze (Hoffswell 22-23). Furthermore, the *Tomb Raider* game also allows the player to engage in the medium-specific interactive male gaze (Hoffswell 26-27) or the "gamic gaze" (Phillips 104) and have been doing so for a long time as all the older Lara Croft games feature the same voyeuristic opportunities (Han and Song 35-37). This phenomenon refers to the fact that during traditional gameplay sequences the gamer has free control over the movement of the camera and the video game allows them to zoom-in very closely on Lara's private body parts and thereby position themselves in a voyeuristic viewpoint.

3.3. Narrative

This section of the critical investigation examines the game from the perspective of the overarching narrative, how the primary female characters act within it and which stereotypical narrative tropes of women can be encountered. Players do not just watch the story of a game but rather “they are living it in real time” which might lead to a greater immersion into the fictional world and a more powerful emotional identification with the characters (Cote 122). Sadly, video games still predominantly target a male audience and as a result the narratives feature mostly male perspectives (Perreault et al. 848) and utilize archetypical motifs of character development which usually “derive from sexist underpinnings” (Lynch et al. 567). Therefore, it is important to assess how female protagonists are portrayed within games narratives to unveil possible misogynistic dispositions so that the players do not adopt them.

This study’s narrative analysis is based on the methodology of Perreault et al. In general, narrative analysis is described as “a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form” (Riessman 11). The focus of this type of investigation lies predominantly with the plot of the games. Within the plot I am trying to examine how the female protagonists are “narratively contextualized” by identifying themes, motifs, and archetypes in which they operate. These motifs will then be exemplified by providing a detailed analysis of scenes that contribute to this theme within the game (Perreault et al. 848-849). Other important methodological approaches, more specific to a critical feminist narrative investigation have been adapted from Kirby. These include exploring the physical, intellectual, and emotional attributes of female protagonists and their relation to the gender stereotypes (Kirby 467) as well as an investigation of how said protagonist is portrayed in relation to other female and male characters of the game (Kirby 464).

The analysis will primarily be conducted with reference to two aspects which have been determined in advance. These categories are again hostile and benevolent sexism and their connoted stereotypes. In a narrative context, women who are portrayed as sexually and otherwise dominant over other women and men may signify hostile sexism conforming to stereotypical representation as femme fatale and so forth (Tompkins et al. 248). The benevolent sexist representation of women stems from a strong sense of “ownership” of women as well as the belief that “because of their greater authority, power, and physical strength, men should serve as protectors and providers” (Glick and Fiske 121-122). Therefore,

benevolent sexist themes in narratives include women's reliance on male figures to save, protect, or help them. The most common literary theme ascribed to benevolent sexism is the damsel in distress trope (Tompkins et al. 248). Other stereotypes often include cliché and romanticized gender roles. Women's identity is largely reduced to the role of wife, mother, daughter, caretaker, and generally family- and home-centered lower status roles (Glick and Fiske 121-122).

Another aspect that is highly relevant for narrative and dialogue analysis is the discussion of characters positions on screen. I appropriated this method of analysis from critical movie analysis as video games often feature so-called cut-scenes which are basically short movie clips in which the player's interaction is completely disabled. In these scenes it seems appropriate to utilize theories of critical film analysis in order to expose common techniques to objectivity or degrade women. Predominantly, the concepts of shot composition, camera angles and camera movement will be investigated as they can be used to convey certain meaning (Giannetti 9-17). For example, a person being filmed in a high camera angle suggests that this person feels or seems weak, helpless, and vulnerable (Giannetti 12). Whenever this technique is, for example, used from the perspective of a man looking down at a woman it implies superiority and inferiority of the depicted characters, respectively. I suggest that video games might utilize similar cinematic techniques in their cutscenes as well which might promote dominant male ideologies.

With the analytical framework now established, the following section turns to the analysis itself. As a linear action-adventure game and an origin story for the new Lara Croft *Tomb Raider* focuses immensely on storytelling. These kinds of games feature a lot of spoken and written dialogue and focus more on the plot and character development than other games (Sloan 129). The plot in *Tomb Raider* is mostly driven by cut scenes and dialogue during gameplay. In fact, the entire game entails about two and a half hours of plot-essential dialogue, as can be exemplified by a variety of YouTube videos that tried to provide a movie version of the game by ridding it of all non-plot-essential gameplay (Gamer's Little Playground, Gilleand). In other words, only because of this abundance of cut scenes and dialogue within the game can Lara Croft be defined as a character with her own personality, feelings, goals etc. and becomes more than an "empty signifier" for the player to use (Engelbrecht ch. 3). As

Lara is equally defined through the narrative as the gameplay, a narrative analysis of the game is a requirement.

As described above, the fundamental storyline of the whole game is Lara's emotional and physical evolution from a scared and insecure shipwrecked adventurer to a hardened and capable survivor. The game developers obviously wanted to tell this exact story as the player has absolutely no control over the plot-related decisions Lara makes. As a result, it can be expected that the developers' ideologies heavily influence the game's narrative which makes it an abundant site for CVGL inquiry. As Lara's evolution as a person can be regarded as the focal point of the story, I deemed it necessary to make it the main aspect of the game's narrative analysis.

Tomb Raider's story can be categorized as a 'from zero to hero' narrative, a classic in the action-adventure genre of both the cinema and video game culture. In this construct the (usually male) protagonists begin their adventure "lacking the resources or the abilities needed to achieve their ultimate goal" (TVtropes). Through overcoming hardships during their long and arduous journeys, they often experience personal growth and learn the necessary skills to become the hero in the end (TVtropes). Lara's journey within the game revolves around similar cornerstones as a typical male protagonist's 'from zero to hero' plot. In the beginning she is only the survivor of a shipwreck with very limited survival skills, and in the course of the game, she learns to adapt to her new situation. She becomes a great survivalist but also an accomplished killer in order to defeat her enemies and free her captured friends. The abilities she acquires, especially the mastery of five different weapons and fighting styles (bow, gun, rifle, shotgun, and brawling), can be seen as her "imitating the male [action] hero's stereotypical behavior" (Han and Song 39). From a point of view purely focused on gameplay, it could indeed be argued that Lara Croft is being portrayed in a hyper-masculine manner which promotes male-centric ideologies (Kline et al. 246-251). However, considering the narrative, Lara seems to be a more nuanced character and different from her male action-hero counterparts. While it is true that *Tomb Raider* is also "focused around strongly gender coded scenarios of war, conquest, and combat" (Kline et al. 247) as Lara fights and kills all enemies she is confronted with, but at least at first, she does so reluctantly. Throughout the first half of game, she tries talk to her adversaries to find peaceful solutions to their conflict as exemplified by her shouting pleas like "Please, you don't need to do this" during gun fights

(*Tomb Raider* 01:14:54-01:14:58). Obviously, she fails to bring about peace and at some point in the game, her pleas for negotiation stop. Nevertheless, this is a narrative element that distinguishes her from other male videogame protagonists. Another moment that highlights her empathy within a stereotypically male activity is the scene in which she first has to kill a deer to survive. First, she tells the deer that she is sorry and during the skinning and gutting of the animal she keeps a rather apologetic and remorseful facial expression (*Tomb Raider* 00:21:03-00:22:02). Shortly afterwards, she finds the main group of her friends for the first time after being shipwrecked and is clearly relieved to have done so (*Tomb Raider* 00:31:20-00:31:55). As mentioned above, at this time she has already displayed stereotypical male actions such as hunting, foraging, shooting, killing and patching up her own wounds (*Tomb Raider* 00:19:40-00:22:03). Despite her apparent independence and competence to look after herself she has a “need for the group to provide a network of security to aid her in times of danger” (Perreault et al. 851). Therefore, this scene juxtaposes both her masculine and feminine attributes as well and consequently contributes to Lara being a complex and round character (Perreault et al. 851). Through Lara Croft’s general empathy and emotional appeal with her opponents, her femininity is brought into play in a sensitive and not exaggerated manner and counters her hyper-masculinization. I specifically mention the non-exaggeration of her empathy and concern for others as an overuse of this type character trait could be seen as an example of stereotyping women as caretakers and overly ‘soft’ beings (Glick and Fiske 121). Therefore, it is highly significant that her empathy is being used to provide a counterweight to her more masculine traits, because portraying her as overly masculine could be interpreted as reflecting a fear of female characters appearing ‘too male’, potentially alienating a hetero male audience. Similarly to what Kirby observed about the on-screen character of Katniss Everdeen (a female hero sharing many parallels with Lara Croft), Lara cannot be classified solely within either of those categories as her character is a more complex one (467). Another element of the game that adds to Lara’s complexity is the fact that throughout the game forty-two archaeological artifacts can be found. These are then analyzed by Lara in the form of an inner monologue (*Tomb Raider* 01:24:30-01:24:49). This feature of the game showcases her intellect and scholarly knowledge in the field of archaeology which also adds to her complexity as a person, sets her apart from the stereotypical gun-blazing male action heroes and furthermore counters her hyper-masculinization.

Another important part of narrative analysis is the study of visual planes. How a character is portrayed on-screen and within the frame can have a huge impact on its narrative representation. Cut scenes in the game often make use of high and low angle shots. In brief and simple terms, “[h]igh angles tend to make people look powerless, trapped. The higher the angle, the more it tends to imply fatality” (Giannetti 12) and “low angles can make characters seem threatening and powerful, for they loom above the camera – and us – like towering giants” (Giannetti 14). In many cut scenes, male figures are taller than Lara, literally towering over her as the camera assumes an over-the-shoulder low angle position from Lara’s POV. Sometimes the camera also switches to an over-the-shoulder high angle position from the men’s POV, suggesting Lara’s inferiority and their dominance (*Tomb Raider* 00:27:48-00:28:31; 00:40:20-00:41:20; 00:41:27-00:41:42). Furthermore, men usually take up more space of the frame than Lara or other female characters. Sometimes they even exceed the bounds of the frame, which is a technique used to make them seem larger than life, big and powerful while at the same time giving the other female character in the frame less space and thereby insinuating a sense of imprisonment (Giannetti 69-72). Within a critical media analysis framework this of course makes sense for the antagonists and other enemies as they are supposed to convey a sense of threat and danger. However, this technique is also used in cut scenes with other male members of the crew who are, in a narrative sense, less important than Lara, yet in the beginning of the game she is often placed in the edges of the frame or in the background of a shot when talking to men (*Tomb Raider* 00:40:50-00:40:55). While these techniques could be seen as problematic and signs of putting the female protagonist in an inferior position, they do serve a specific narrative purpose. These techniques were used deliberately as they underline Lara’s current state of mind: insecure, overwhelmed, and afraid. Therefore, I do not view these techniques as problematic at the beginning of the game as they visually emphasize her ‘from zero to hero’ storyline.

However, near the end of the game Lara is still found at the edge of the frame, which is most evident in a cut scene in which she is re-united with her friends. Even after handling many difficult situations, fighting for survival, and becoming a strong and independent character, Lara is still being put in an inferior position as opposed to the other male characters in the center of the frame. Additionally, even in the discussion between her and the other survivors she does not speak up and voice her reservations and suspicions towards Dr. Whitman, even though from a narrative point of view she should be confident enough to do so (*Tomb Raider*

04:53:05-04:54:55). Moreover, it is interesting to observe that when there are other women with her in the frame, Lara is in the center, and the other female characters are at the edges. However, when a man enters the frame, he often takes center stage and Lara is pushed to the edges (*Tomb Raider* 04:47:37-04:48:06).

Even though, narratively the story of Lara Croft follows the classic ‘from zero to hero’ storyline, the visual appearance of Lara in cut scenes oftentimes does not concur with this development. As a result, I believe that Lara as a female protagonist is not done justice in this aspect of the game and it could be seen as dominant patriarchal ideologies being promoted.

3.3.1. Damsel in Distress

Another classic literary device used in *Tomb Raider’s* narrative is the damsel in distress motif. Most of the survivors of the shipwreck are at some point in the game in need of rescue by Lara and thus the player. However, following McInnes,

[a]lthough all of the game’s secondary characters and members of the Endurance crew can be considered damsels – as Lara rescues all of them except Whitman at some point in the game – there are three main damsel-in-distress narratives the game works to queer: the rescue of Conrad Roth (and his subsequent rescuing of Lara); the failed rescue of the geek male “tech guy” and Lara’s admirer, Alex; and the successful rescue of Sam, Lara’s best friend and the only true damsel of the game’s narrative (71-72).

Lara is, up to a certain point in the game, also a damsel herself. She is oftentimes rescued by her mentor and father-figure Conrad Roth. However, the dynamic between Lara and Roth is not a classic damsel in distress situation. A stereotypical damsel usually waits to be rescued and is completely passive while the rescuing party is active. Therefore, in a “traditional damsel-in-distress narrative, there is a clear power imbalance” (McInnes 75). Yet, the relationship between Lara and Roth is more complicated than that and will be elaborated on in chapter 3.3.3. In terms of the damsel in distress motif it suffices to say that they rescue each other frequently throughout the first third of the game. Even in situations in which Roth saves Lara she is not completely passive and always the catalyst of her own saving, as Roth mostly does not physically help her but rather provides tips and verbal support on how Lara can get out of difficult situations herself (McInnes 75-76). In situations in which Lara saves Roth he is also never completely passive as he can fend for himself. The help Lara provides for Roth is, at the beginning of the game, of a care-giving nature as can be observed in a cut scene in which Roth fights off wolves (without Lara’s help) but is wounded, Lara bandages him and

procures medicine for him in the following quest (*Tomb Raider* 00:53:50-00:55:35). In these specific scenes Lara's actions put her in a stereotypical 'female as caregiver' role and can be considered a benevolent sexist portrayal of the character.

Towards the end of the game, the male character Alex Weiss becomes sort of a male damsel in distress as well. Throughout the game, Alex has been built up as a fearful, tech-savvy character with a hinted-at romantic interest in Lara. In the last third of the game, he is tasked with procuring equipment to repair a boat to get off the island. However, he fails and is pinned down by fallen debris in the hull of a ship that has run aground. Lara tries to save him but ultimately fails to rescue him before too many enemies engage them in combat. Alex then hands her the needed tools and sacrifices himself to save Lara (*Tomb Raider* 05:29:00-05:32:48). While at first the sequence has all the markings of a gender-reversed damsel in distress situation, I argue that the scene still promotes male dominance. Alex, who up until this point has been portrayed as an anxious and fearful character, gets the chance to heroically sacrifice himself and save Lara at the same time. These 'cowardly lion' and 'heroic sacrifice' tropes as well as the farewell kiss of a female character given to the hero before battle or sacrifice (*Tomb Raider* 05:32:22-05:32:27) are classic motifs of male-centric media. I even argue that through Alex telling Lara what to do "Get the tool!", "Go!", "Now!" (*Tomb Raider* 05:31:24-05:32:48), her agency is taken away. Furthermore, by this sequence being a cut scene the gameplay hinders Lara's as well as the player's intervention and respectively also robs them both of their agency. In this instance, the narrative as well as the gameplay features contribute to a loss of Lara's agency.

Another salient aspect I is the suggestion that Alex may be viewed as a representation of the assumed geek male player base. McInnes argues that Alex's visual attributes like wearing glasses, having scientific tattoos, and wearing a shirt with tech imagery, as well as his personality invoke a stereotypical "'nerdy guy' persona" (77). She then continues to suggest that this "characterization as an idealized 'geek masculine' character, a projection of the gamer – and perhaps game developer – into the game space of *Tomb Raider*" (77). Furthermore, his attraction towards Lara also supports this point of view as Alex being a representative of the stereotypical gamer in the game itself falls in line with the longstanding obsession of real-life gamers with the character of Lara Croft (McInnes 79). When adopting this point of view, his death and saving of Lara is given additional significance. If it is assumed

that Alex portrays the real-life gamer in the game, it can be argued that his saving of Lara can be viewed as the assumed male player saving Lara as well, this time not through controlling Lara herself, but through representation by Alex (McInnes 81). Furthermore, the kiss Lara gives Alex before she leaves can hence also be regarded as Lara kissing the stereotypical geek male identity and therefore the assumed male player himself, finally fulfilling a longstanding fantasy of the male player base.

Finally, the character of Samantha Nishimura can be considered the one true damsel in distress of this story. Sam is Lara's best friend and a descendant of the last queen of Yamatai, which makes her a princess. Towards the end the narrative predominately revolves around the rescue of Sam as the antagonists believe her to be the key to getting off the cursed island by transferring the soul of the last queen into Sam's body. Sam's rescue is the focal point of the entire game's narrative as she is the crewmember that was most difficult to search for and rescue. Even after the first successful rescue by Lara, Sam was abducted again, signifying her narrative importance (*Tomb Raider* 02:33:30-02:34:03; 02:37:55-02:38:20; 03:29:00-03:29:15). In the final act of the game, Sam even has to be rescued from a tower in a monastery on top of a mountain, "bound to a stake and gagged, rendered immobile and silent" (McInnes 85) and dressed in white wedding attire, making her quite literally a passive princess locked up in a tower, arguably the most stereotypical representation of a damsel in distress (*Tomb Raider* 06:52:00-06:52:31).

An analysis of Sam and her role in the game is complex. On the one hand, the game must have a goal at the end, and the narrative has to come to a conclusion. This is provided by Sam's final rescue and the escape from the island. Furthermore, in terms of Lara's character development, which is also the theme of the entire game, having to rescue her best friend and overcoming various obstacles in the process allows for narrative opportunities to highlight Lara's emotional and physical journey. On the other hand, the whole set-up of Sam being a princess and "a true damsel-in-distress in every sense of the word" (McInnes 85) can be viewed as rather problematic. First, the rescuing of the literal princess from a tower can be seen as hyper-masculinization as Lara is put in a stereotypical masculine position which promotes male-centric ideologies (Kline et al. 246-251). However, as already discussed at the beginning of this chapter ascribing hyper-masculinization to Lara as the protagonist of an

action-adventure game is a complex issue and will be again elaborated on in the gameplay chapter.

Furthermore, the game's player has to be taken into account when discussing Sam's role as a damsel in distress. I argue that by deliberately making her a passive princess to be rescued from a tower the game caters to an assumed male player base. Even though the main character is female the narrative of a damsel in distress still contributes to dominant male ideologies of having to protect the weaker sex (Tompkins et al. 248). Narratively speaking it would have been no different if Sam had not been a princess or in need of saving at all at the end of the game. There are many other ways the final act could have been construed.

3.3.2. Lara's body – Narrative

As the second part of the narrative inquiry, I analyze how Lara's body shapes the development of the story. I have chosen to discuss her body in this chapter instead of chapter 3.2. visual representation as throughout the game the plot also revolves around her body as how she and others control her body also functions as an exemplifier of her narrative development.

Before examining Lara's emotional and physical development, the concept of identifying with a character has to be discussed as it will be important for the subsequent analysis. Video games, like other forms of media, try to create main characters that the players are able to identify with. To which degree a player is able to identify with a certain character is usually dependent on a combination of different factors. Drawing on literary studies, a reader/player has to feel a certain level of sympathy for a character. This can usually be easily achieved by the character being physically or emotionally similar to the gamer. Second, "empathy for a character who is in a particular situation" tends to create strong feelings. Third, "attraction to a character who is a role model for the [player]" is seen as a way of prompting affection. Of course, "[i]dentification is a [deeply personal] psychological process" to which many other factors may contribute and therefore it can never be fully defined (Jannidis 24). Even though Lara Croft and the majority of the player base might not share many physical similarities, assuming that most of the players are male, most probably share a lot with her cognitively. Lara's 'from zero to hero' narrative arc, being inexperienced and getting better as the story progresses, is a classic staple of video game narration and a storyline many players may be able to relate to. Moreover, the gameplay mechanics of learning better skills throughout the game allow the player to develop their skills alongside Lara, which in my opinion strengthens

identification with her. Additionally, Lara's situation probably makes most players feel compassion towards her. She is shipwrecked on an island full of dangers and has to rescue her friends – a story that is easily understandable and may lead to many players being sympathetic to her. Lastly, I argue that Lara can be seen as a role model even for the predominant male player base. As already mentioned, Lara imitates typical male action hero manners which might lead to many players seeing her as a role model as well (Han and Song 39). In conclusion, all the above-mentioned factors most likely contribute to a strong identification with the main character by most of the player base.

Through the course of the game, Lara's body and appearance undergo heavy changes. At the beginning, her body and clothes are clean and without scars or tears (*Tomb Raider* 00:28:18) but as the story progresses, she is mangled and damaged by various dangerous situations leading to her body becoming muddy and scarred (*Tomb Raider* 04:47:40), which signifies her development from being an inexperienced rookie to becoming a battle-hardened survivor. However, when analyzing Lara's body in relation to the narrative, the most significant and controversial moment to discuss is the infamous attempted rape scene. Close to the beginning of the game, Lara experiences sexual assault by an enemy lieutenant called Vladimir. Quickly summarized, Vladimir first captures Lara, binds and verbally silences her: "Silence, girl!". He then proceeds to run his hands over her shoulder and face. His sexual harassment is then interrupted by another crewmember attempting escape. He kills the man, hits Lara on the head and tells her to stay put (*Tomb Raider* 00:41:32-00:41:55). In the following gameplay sequence the player navigates the still bound and concussed Lara silently through the chaos and helps her find a hiding spot. Vladimir then finds Lara and gets her to come out of hiding by threatening her with a gun. He touches her again, she kicks him in his private parts, he grabs her by her arms, yanks her on a wall and sniffs her neck in an audible and invasive fashion, which prompts Lara to bite his ear off. In the ensuing struggle, they both try to reach for his gun and ultimately Lara gets a hold of it and shoots Vladimir in the face at close range, if the player can manage to pass four quick time events³ in rapid succession (*Tomb Raider* 00:43:25-00:44:40). This event functions as the catalyst of the game's 'from zero to hero' narrative "and sets the tone for the rest of the game, marking a significant transition from young, fragile shipwrecked archaeologist to an armed survivor, wary and afraid, but ultimately

³ Quick time events are gameplay sequences in which specific buttons have to be pressed fast and in correct order.

willing to do whatever it takes to survive” (McInnes 40). The game’s developers have even defined it as such in interviews and called it the “Crossroads” scene during the 2012 E3 conference (McInnes 40). This sequence sparked a huge controversy right after its first appearance; “[f]eminist and non-feminist players alike reacted to the trailer by calling out the company and the game for its depiction of sexual assault” (McInnes 40). The question was asked why sexual assault is deemed necessary as an igniting factor of a female protagonist’s narrative development. Additionally, the fact has to be addressed that choosing the Russian name Vladimir for the first villain Lara and the player encounter is a clear sign of stereotypical friend-enemy dualism which has obviously been implemented to reinforce familiar geopolitical stereotypes and establish an immediately recognizable antagonist.

This scene is supposed to be the turning point in Lara’s narrative in which she decides to fight back and become a survivor (McInnes 40). However, I argue that making attempted rape the catalyst for her personal growth is highly problematic. Using “sexual violence against women to create a compelling plot point” (McInnes 42) and driving her to become a woman not afraid to kill are markers of a hostile sexist narrative. Through this scene, the whole game could be read as Lara becoming a “vengeful victim” killing all the exclusively male enemies as revenge for her attempted rape and thereby decreasing her agency as she is not acting on her own volition but rather “reacting and responding to a scenario thrust upon her by another” (McInnes 49). Similarly, Phillips argues that this “eroticized encounter” positions her within a stereotypical “rape-revenge” narrative (133). Another disturbing layer added to this scene can only be observed, when the player fails a quick time event during this interactive sequence. If Lara fails to wrestle free of her captor, she is pressed against a wall and choked by Vladimir (cakeachievable 01:20-01:43)⁴. The choking, however, only lasts a few seconds, and the scene ends on Lara still breathing, making it the only death scene in the entire game that does not show Lara as being definitively dead (cakeachievable 00:00-11:27). If that idea is spun further, it would indicate that she stays captured and probably faces additional sexual assault. Moreover, it can be observed later in the game that the attempted rape at the beginning has obviously left its mark on Lara. In this scene Lara has been captured again and is being dragged away by two men. On a bridge she wrestles herself free and jumps off the bridge into, from her perspective, a small lake of unknown depth filled with blood. While I agree with McInnes

⁴ As the death scenes are not a part of the YouTube video used as the primary source material, another video was chosen here.

in viewing this scene as Lara reclaiming her body from her captors and gaining agency (64) it could also be read as an extension of the previous attempted rape sequence. As a result of this traumatic experience, Lara decides to jump, knowing that there is a high probability of ending her own life in the process, rather than facing even the slightest possibility of capture and sexual assault again. Moreover, it is questionable that such a narrative catalyst is even deemed to be necessary for her to become the bad-ass, gun-wielding protagonist she had already been in previous games. Male protagonists do not have to face sexual assault to have a justification for killing thousands of enemies (McInnes 47). There is no other reason besides her sex that Lara had to face sexual assault in order to make her narrative more compelling.

Subsequently, the scene's most significant issues lie in its naturalization and inevitability. That a young female character has to endure such sexual aggression functions as a way to further perpetuate sexist "hegemonic ideas of femininity and female sexuality" as well as ideas of "male dominance and aggression" (McInnes 43). This scene maintains a culture of narrative expectations, a "universally naturalized code" (McInnes 44) of sexual assault of women and the dominant belief that women could never be action heroes without having to endure some kind of traumatic event. Additionally, as already mentioned above the game tries to make Lara as relatable as possible so that the player base can easily identify with her. However, I argue that the attempted rape scene severely disrupts this process of identification for many players. Such traumatic events could evoke discomfort, resistance or even rejection from players as most players would not wish to experience this themselves, not even through an avatar nor would they want this to happen to their playable character. Arguably, identification with Lara is being broken, undermining the intended narrative engagement. Furthermore, this scene could also be interpreted as facilitating benevolent sexism. Yet, it also functions as a call to action or cause for more involvement for the player. The attempted rape scene may trigger feelings of protection as well as vengeance in the assumed male player base. Both reasons, however, suggest Lara's inferior position as she has been captured and cannot help herself. The male player is needed as the literal guiding hand to protect her from additional assault and all other dangers and exact revenge on the exclusively male enemies.

3.3.3. Roth and Lara Relationship

As already hinted at, Lara's and Roth's relationship is a difficult one to define. It encompasses many different motifs and juxtapositions such as the motif of Roth being a father figure, both

being alternating damsels in distress, and most importantly the discussion of Lara's independence and agency.

The theme of a father figure is heavily featured within the game. Lara is sometimes referred to as following her presumed dead father's footsteps as an archaeologist and adventurer. Moreover, "Lara is also frequently encouraged by other characters that her father would be proud of her" (Engelbrecht ch. 3). However, within the game the most prevalent father figure is her mentor and her father's best friend, Conrad Roth. Even though McInnes argues that "for the most part, Roth treats Lara as an equal with Lara's *age and inexperience* as the salient differences between them, not her *gender*" (McInnes 74), I believe that her gender and as a result her inferred role as his "daughter" do play a crucial part in analyzing their relationship and its narrative implications.

Early on in the game, her long-lasting relationship with Roth as a father figure is highlighted as they recount a story when Lara made an archaeological finding as a 5-year-old and showed it to him. He then reassures her by telling her, "You got great instincts, girl" and compares her to her real father (*Tomb Raider* 01:19:00-01:19:43). This scene functions as setting up Roth as a father figure and emotional connection for both the player as well as Lara. This theme is also emphasized in other scenes where Lara first contacts Roth via a walkie-talkie is very insecure and afraid even crying out like a child to a father "Please, come and get me!" Roth then comforts and helps her restore confidence in herself and her abilities (*Tomb Raider* 00:23:15-00:24:20). In another scene not much later, he again encourages her to do a difficult task and tells her who she is by making an allusion towards her dead father "You can do it Lara, you're a Croft" (*Tomb Raider* 01:02:12-01:03:50). At the very beginning of the game in a flashback to a time in which the crew is still on the boat a discussion between Lara and Doctor Whitman can be observed. Lara provides arguments on where she believes the island is located and Whitman does not listen to her and even belittles her - a defining trait of this character and his narrative role. However, they ultimately follow through with her advice, but only because the decision is made by another male – Roth (*Tomb Raider* 00:17:05-00:18:50). In these scenes Roth often functions as a savior from others as well as her own doubts. All these sequences perpetuate the assumption that women are inferior to men and feed into the myth of women needing a father-figure to save them or that only through the approval and support of the father figure are they able to believe in their own worth.

Roth's support goes even further than just giving Lara confidence boosts as he continually guides and sometimes even commands her throughout the first two thirds of the game. In the following paragraphs it will be discussed how Roth's guidance influences Lara's narrative agency. In the so-called tutorial area of the game Roth's voice often echoes in her mind, reminding her of already learned survival techniques (*Tomb Raider* 00:20:30-00:20:41). While the purpose of such a tutorial section at the very beginning is an essential step for any game as the player learns the necessary basic gameplay mechanics it can be questioned why this needs to happen through Roth. Narratively Lara has already acquired these survival skills, and the player could have been given the information by hearing her inner monologue. Instead, it is Roth's voice that is the foundation and catalyst for her survival story, lessening her agency in the process.

Throughout the game Roth's guidance continues sometimes in person as they occasionally find each other but most of the time, he guides Lara through the walkie-talkie with which they are in contact with. Roth often talks in imperatives and gives Lara precise instruction (*Tomb Raider* 00:48:15-00:48:25; 01:04:07-01:04:15). Moreover, other men also tend to give Lara instructions and try to reassure her by telling her what to do. For instance, Alex telling her how to make technical equipment work (*Tomb Raider* 01:14:40-01:14:51) or Jonah encouraging her once again by telling her that her "instincts are a strength" and she needs to "trust them" (*Tomb Raider* 04:21:20-04:21:44). Furthermore, Roth sometimes guides her as well as the player through certain passages by telling her exactly what to do, when to move and which enemies to take out as she sneaks through enemy territory and he provides support with a sniper rifle. Throughout this gameplay sequence he utters phrases like "Stop, don't move. They'll see you. Wait!", "Go now!", "Stop, hold it.", "Move!", "Lara, get out of there. There's too many!" and so on (*Tomb Raider* 03:24:57-03:26:21) not only reducing Lara's narrative agency but also the player's agency as well as when Roth's commands are not followed the game ends with her being caught and killed instantly. He also saves her life by shooting the man trying to kill her (*Tomb Raider* 03:25:50-03:25:58) being yet another example of how a father figure protecting a female protagonist perpetuates "the familiar trope of a heroic man rescuing a damsel-in-distress." (Stang 163). I, however, argue that by Lara stating, "Thanks for the cover, I think that makes us even." (*Tomb Raider* 03:25:44-03:25:48) referencing her saving him from wolves earlier in game does mitigate the damsel in distress trope here as it exemplifies their interchangeable roles of damsel and rescuer as already discussed above.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that “[e]very time a crisis occurs, Roth provides vital guidelines for Croft and fulfils the symbolic role of father figure” and even “[o]ther male characters, such as Alex Weiss or Angus Grimaldi serve to [...] sacrifice themselves to rescue her” (*Tomb Raider* 03:18:30-03:19:10; 05:29:00-05:32:48). These motifs ultimately create a tension in Lara’s portrayal as an empowered female action hero, preventing the emergence of an authentically female hero and instead reinforcing traditional male hero narratives (Han and Song 39).

When discussing Lara’s and Roth’s relationship in the light of agency it has to be considered that there are several instances of Lara fighting for her agency by detaching herself from Roth’s commands. A first turning point for Lara is the scene in which she repairs the signal tower and is able to contact a plane that has already been searching for the shipwrecked survivors. The pilot then asks her for a visual to be able to locate her exact position. She then says to herself “Right, need a signal. A fire. Fuel, flames – I can do that.”, signifying the first instance of her producing an idea without male support over the walkie-talkies or through Roth talking to her in her memories (*Tomb Raider* 01:53:00-01:54:00). Another sequence related to Lara’s development of agency follows shortly after. The rescue plane has crashed on the island as well killing the pilot in process, but the co-pilot survived. He sends out a call for help which is picked up by Lara’s walkie-talkie. She meets up again with Roth telling him that she intends to save the pilot to which he replies that she cannot save everyone, and they need to think about their own people and make sacrifices. He then goes on to define sacrifice as “a choice you make” to which Lara replies “I can’t choose to let him die, Roth!” (*Tomb Raider* 02:04:44-02:05:48). This signifies the first instance of Lara completely defying Roth, contesting his morals and opposing his plans going even as far as literally breaking free from his grip on her arm as he tries to hold her back (*Tomb Raider* 02:05:23-02:05:33). McInnes too views this scene as “a significant point in Lara’s growth, as it marks the first time she is exercising her own will. Until this moment, she has been following the instructions of Roth and the other Endurance crew members” (62). Furthermore, this scene stands out from the rest as through their discussion of choices they inadvertently also talk about Lara’s agency within the narrative framework. Lara openly questions Roth’s idea of what she should do and by remarking that she “can’t choose to let him die,” she exerts her agency within the narrative. This development continues as later on as Lara now commands Roth while telling him what she is going to do “Set up a signal, I’m going in for Sam and the others.” (*Tomb Raider* 03:22:02-03:22:20). Even when Roth doubts her plans by asking “Are you sure about this, Lara?” she

stands her ground and proclaims “I’ll get them. I’ll come back. I promise.” (*Tomb Raider* 03:26:35-03:26:50).

While these narrative developments can be seen as Lara asserting herself as an action hero with agency, they are to degree diminished by Roth’s death and the narrative arc leading up to it. After rescuing most of the other crew members Lara is left stuck in a burning building. She manages to outclimb the fire and is rescued by Roth, who was able to acquire a helicopter. This scene presents a parallel to the beginning of the game that underscore Roth's narrative role as Lara's protector. One of these scenes is marked by failure, the other by success. At the beginning of the game, Roth is unable to save Lara as the ship breaks apart, failing to pull her to safety (*Tomb Raider* 00:01:12–00:01:30). In contrast, the later scene shows him successfully rescuing her from a burning building by catching her as she leaps toward a helicopter he has secured (*Tomb Raider* 04:15:31–04:16:15). This later success not only mirrors the earlier moment but also serves to redeem his initial failure, thereby reinforcing his function as guarding father figure within Lara’s narrative arc. However, this scene also highlights yet again the non-passive damsel in distress motif as Lara also performs an act of great physical strength (jumping a great distance) contributing to her own rescue. Unfortunately, the helicopter soon crashes due to the unnatural storms of the island and Lara is left unconscious with seemingly no pulse. Roth then provides CPR and is able to resuscitate her. During the ensuing confrontation, Roth physically drags a passive and injured Lara to safety, single-handedly fending off attackers. His actions culminate in a self-sacrificial death, as he gives his life to protect Lara’s (*Tomb Raider* 04:17:20-04:19:25). This scene aligns with the trope of the selfless male action hero who dies to save the female protagonist, being the only moment in the game that momentarily casts Lara in the role of a true damsel in distress. While this reinforces traditional gendered narrative structures, it also serves as a critical moment in Lara’s development as Roth’s sacrifice can be seen as diminishing Lara’s narrative agency. Up until Roth’s death, Lara’s story could be interpreted as a feminist coming-of-age story. She evolves from a sheltered young woman, guided and protected by a paternal figure, into someone gradually discovering her own strength and agency. However, Roth’s death complicates this reading. Rather than achieving independence through her own volition, Lara’s final push towards emancipation appears to be triggered by circumstance rather than conscious choice. This is underscored by her emotional outburst “I can’t do this without you!” to which Roth yet again responds with a final motivational affirmation: “You can do this. You’re a Croft!”

(*Tomb Raider* 04:18:49–04:19:25). His words, intended as empowerment, ultimately reinforce his role as the catalyst in Lara’s transformation, thereby subtly undermining her autonomy and suggesting that her emancipation is not entirely self-driven, but rather bestowed upon her through the legacy and encouragement of a male figure. Following Roth’s death, Lara steps into a leadership role among the remaining crew members and begins to exhibit significantly greater narrative agency. No longer guided by a father figure, she independently determines her course of action, even when it conflicts with the opinions of others (*Tomb Raider* 04:40:25–04:41:05). She also makes decisions in the best interest of the group (*Tomb Raider* 06:11:04–06:12:44), actively shaping the remaining events of the game, most notably the final rescue of Sam.

At its core, *Tomb Raider* tells a story of female independence and growing agency. Lara’s transformation from a hesitant survivor into a decisive leader reflects a significant step toward more empowered female representation in video games and in many ways, the game can be seen as a positive example of this shift. However, this narrative is not without its flaws. Moments that undercut Lara’s agency such as her dependence on Roth’s guidance or the sexual assault she has to face reintroduce elements of passivity and misogyny that complicate the game’s otherwise empowering narrative. As Perrault et al. observe,

Lara’s dependence on her friends for help and survival displayed how she and other female leads were not autonomous. The significance of the submissive traits of females in early games may influence the occasional humility of female characters in contemporary games. Rather than emphasize female characters as submissive and voiceless, the games should layer their personalities with aspects of humanity and community, adding a vital dose of complexity that will carry games—and female depictions—forward. (855–856)

Tomb Raider offers glimpses of this complexity but also illustrates how old patterns still persist. For this reason, the game and others like it must be viewed critically. Engaging with such texts in an educational setting would allow students to explore how female representations in games evolve, where they fall short, and how they might be improved. Ultimately, fostering CVGL can empower players to question narrative conventions and advocate for more nuanced, authentic portrayals of gender and agency.

3.4. Gameplay

This section analyses the game in terms of the primary character's gameplay. This includes the maneuverability and possible actions of characters as dictated by the player and how that might relate to forms of misogyny. These will also be investigated in terms of stereotypical action or roles of women.

The term gameplay in this study refers primarily to the actions taken by the playable character through the input of the gamer. It might also involve other aspects of gameplay mechanics. Those can, however, only be established and analyzed in a bottom-up process, as most gameplay mechanics are unique to their specific game. Kirkland identifies three basic categories of gameplay in his analysis of the *Silent Hill* game series, which I believe to be highly relevant for my thesis's investigation as well as some of the *Silent Hill* games feature female protagonists and many gameplay aspects similar to *Tomb Raider* for example puzzle solving, fighting with weapons, etc. The gameplay of any *Silent Hill* game primarily consists of the "abstract processes of spatial navigation, weapons triangulation, and puzzle solution that the games demand" (Kirkland 168). Within these categories, certain features of gameplay might be identified which suggest traditional feminine ideas like beauty, elegance, submissiveness, etc. Such feminized gameplay might be conveyed "through game mechanics, structure, and goals, irrespective of or potentially working in opposition to character or avatar design" (Kirkland 168-169). Furthermore, in their analysis of *Metal Gear Solid V*, Gandolfi and Sciannamblo describe, how certain gameplay elements have undoubtedly been designed to invite the male gaze. The game deliberately allows the player to "zoom in on [the female characters] cleavage." It is undoubtedly a deliberate mechanic implemented by the game's producers as the female figure in question "will wink and position herself in a more sensual way" thereby positioning her as an "object of desire" (339). It is, however, equally problematic to portray female characters in a hyper-masculine way as presenting a woman in a masculine way forces a stereotypical patriarchal representation onto a female protagonist. Kirkland, concurring with Herz's critique of female action heroes, doubts "the progressiveness of female avatars who feature only in 'masculine' video games" (Herz 182 qtd. in Kirkland 169). Video games are viewed as catering primarily to male desires. Many games consist of elements like navigation, the elimination of enemies and the overcoming of barriers in the widest sense and thereby they contribute to "typically male drives to kill, conquer, and colonize" (Kirkland 170).

This male-centeredness of the gaming industry can also contribute to the construction of a militarized masculinity as gameplay has continuously been built “around strongly gender coded scenarios of war, conquest, and combat” since the earliest days of gaming (Kline et al. 247). One of the main reasons for this focus on gameplay built around militarized masculinity is the fact that games have for a long time been produced by men for men. Additionally, the profit-driven video game industry realized that combat is easy to plot, design and program as well as the fact that “violence is a cultural idiom that requires no translation within increasingly transnational entertainment markets” (Kline et al. 251). For these reasons, playable female characters are also oftentimes put into masculine roles and perform militarized actions to make them more accessible to the predominant male player base. As established, the gameplay of female characters in overly feminine as well as hyper-masculine ways promote male dominant ideologies. Therefore, the question remains what a considerate or gender sensitive gameplay of women in video games might look like. Together with Kirkland, I agree that an analysis of gameplay alone does not recognize the intricacies of playing a video game. Gameplay can never be analyzed on its own as the actions of a character are always dependent on context provided by the narrative (178-179). A gameplay action might suggest stereotypical gender coded features being ascribed to the female protagonist, yet the narrative might undermine or even subvert these as I will illustrate with the following analysis of gameplay in *Tomb Raider*.

3.4.1. Militarized Gameplay

Tomb Raider is an action-adventure game and as such it follows certain genre-specific principles. Generally speaking, the concept of gameplay emphasizes that games consist of meaningful decision-making. For play to occur, players must be given choices that matter, whether through long-term consequences or short-term effects, ensuring that their decisions have a noticeable impact on the game world (Sloan 131-132). In *Tomb Raider* specifically, Lara “is frequently placed into obstacle courses [...] running (and regularly falling) through collapsing buildings and down mountainsides in increasingly action-packed sequences” (Sloan 177). The gameplay also heavily relies on fight sequences against overwhelming odds. Furthermore, “[t]here are collectible items such as documents and relics that flesh out the world of the game, various maps like Geothermal Caverns or Coastal Forest that demarcate the boundaries of the game space the player can physically move about in and explore”

(McInnes 34-35). *Tomb Raider* also allows players to enhance Lara's combat abilities by upgrading her weapons and acquiring unique gear through specific narrative events. Players can also unlock skills across three categories (Survivor, Hunter, and Brawler) using experience points, with each category divided into progressively advanced tiers. This system reflects Lara's narrative and gameplay development, as she evolves from an inexperienced archaeologist into a skilled and resilient survivor (McInnes 35). The following paragraphs are going to highlight how these gameplay features can be critically analyzed within a CVGL framework.

As already discussed above, games with female protagonists often portray their protagonists in a hyper-masculine manner. *Tomb Raider*, like many other action games, is structured around mechanics such as exploration, combat, and obstacle removal, which align with the "typically male drives to kill, conquer, and colonize" (Kirkland 170) suggesting a militarized masculine gameplay experience (Kline et al. 246-251). First, it has to be acknowledged that *Tomb Raider* can most definitely be categorized as a militarized gameplay experience.

However, this militarization of the gameplay is undercut by other narrative factors that balance overly masculine and feminine traits, portraying her as a nuanced character. As a result, the militarized gameplay cannot be considered in isolation but must be analyzed in relation to the wider narrative framework. In general, it can be claimed that the gameplay also mirrors the overall narrative of female emancipation and growing agency. As mentioned above, the skills the player can unlock are divided into three categories (Survivor, Hunter, and Brawler). Within each of these categories, up to nine skills can be purchased through skill points that are acquiring by reaching a certain amount of experience points from killing enemies, solving puzzles, and finishing quests. The survivor tree focuses predominately on skills that help Lara and the player find more resources in the world. The hunter tree aims at enhancing her combat abilities with ranged weapons (bow, pistol, shotgun, and rifle) while the brawler skills boost her abilities in close combat with her pickaxe. The most useful skills are locked behind a so-called skill tree prerequisite or tiered unlock system, meaning that in order to be able to acquire better skills a certain number of lesser skills have to be invested first (*Tomb Raider* 00:22:44-00:23:15). This gameplay structure underscores Lara's 'from zero to hero' journey, deliberately pacing her development so that neither the player nor Lara can accelerate her narrative development. The design further ensures that it is impossible to earn

sufficient experience to unlock all skills during, for instance, the first act, thereby reinforcing a gradual and organic development of her abilities in line with the narrative.

Furthermore, the acquisition of specific abilities and weapons is closely integrated with the narrative, as Lara gains access to them only at predetermined moments in the story, typically following scripted cutscenes. Lara's use of weaponry also presents an intriguing point of analysis, particularly in relation to the ways her femininity shapes the gameplay experience. When Lara first obtains her pistol during a cutscene, she is immediately forced to use it; not using it would result in a death scene and the end of the game (*Tomb Raider* 00:45:16-00:45:52). While the usage of a gun in order to fend off adversaries is a typical male action hero trope and could be seen as the first instance of Lara stepping into a more masculine role, it is undercut by her shouting "Stay away from me!" (*Tomb Raider* 00:45:16-00:45:52) or "Please, you don't need to do this" during another gun fight (*Tomb Raider* 01:14:54-01:14:58), giving the enemies an opportunity to flee. As already discussed in the narrative analysis, these scenes highlight the interplay between Lara's masculine and feminine qualities, contributing to her depiction as a multidimensional character (Perreault et al. 851). Her empathy and attempts to reason with opponents express her femininity, counter-balancing hyper-masculinization.

Moreover, Lara's gender also plays a role in the combat gameplay itself. The gameplay at the beginning is more stealth-oriented. Although Lara is given a gun early on, it can be claimed that the game discourages its use as enemy placement often encourages a stealthy approach. Additionally, ammunition is a scarce commodity, preventing players from relying solely on firearms to eliminate all threats in the first act of the game. This scarcity, combined with level design that rewards coyness (killing opponents stealthily rewards the most experience points), frequently incentivizes the player to revert to using the bow or silent melee kills, emphasizing the game's initial focus on careful, strategic engagement rather than brute force (*Tomb Raider* 01:23:49-01:23:35). These design choices mirror Lara's transformation from an inexperienced castaway to a seasoned survivor, as her early reliance on stealth arises from her initial lack of physical strength and combat experience to confront her male adversaries directly.

Furthermore, it has to be noted that equipping a female protagonist with a bow as her initial and primary weapon reinforces long-standing myths of femininity by associating women with

elegance, precision, and indirect forms of power rather than brute force (Beauvoir 222-223). Moreover, the gameplay as well as the skills that can be acquired also imply a gendered view of gameplay as instead of becoming physically stronger Lara becomes more adept in using the resources available to her, becomes smarter or more experienced in fighting and surviving. This is for example depicted by her getting out of traps and other dangerous situations on her own and discovering creative ways of fighting by herself like using rope on arrows to pull down support beams of old structures or making fire arrows (*Tomb Raider* 02:01:10-02:02:28; 02:49:04-02:51:15). Additionally, the fact that Lara acquires and upgrades gear on her own from so-called scraps displays her ingenuity and resourcefulness throughout the game as well (*Tomb Raider* 00:19:33-00:20:27; 00:56:10-00:57:30; 06:20:24-06:21:17). Another aspect of the gameplay that contrasts the stereotypical behavior of masculine action heroes is Lara's frequent engagement with puzzles and riddles in order to advance the narrative. While such elements can be considered a classic staple of adventure games, in *Tomb Raider* they inadvertently serve to emphasize Lara's intellectual abilities (*Tomb Raider* 02:30:00-02:32:05; 02:58:00-02:58:52; 03:51:05-03:54:10; 05:04:30-05:07:30). This display of intellect is further demonstrated through her archaeological expertise. Her archaeological education is brought into play as throughout the game archaeological artefacts can be found. These are then examined and analyzed by Lara through an inner monologue demonstrating her intellect, education, and analytical skills (03:07:31-03:07:44). While these design choices could initially be interpreted as placing Lara within a gendered framework of gameplay, it is essential to consider the later stages of the game as well, which will be examined in the following paragraph.

Through gameplay as Lara becomes more competent in defeating adversaries, even enemies comment "It's just one girl! – That one girl is kicking our ass!" during fights, signifying that Lara has become a force to be reckoned with (*Tomb Raider* 03:00:44-03:00:50). This transformation is reinforced by her "gradual escalation in violent behavior – first Lara kills a deer, then a person, and then a lot of people," marking a steady intensification of both her skillset and willingness to employ lethal force (MacCallum-Stewart ch. 4). Eventually, stealth ceases to be the predominant mode of play. In many instances the enemies are already aware of Lara's position due to cut scenes before the start of the fighting sequence. The gameplay now invites a more direct approach of gun-related violence, which is also emphasized by the abundance of oil barrels in the latter half of the game, which encourage the player to let them

explode and heighten the now overtly aggressive and arguably male dominated tone of combat (*Tomb Raider* 03:00:44-03:01:12; 03:17:05-03:18:24).

Another aspect of the gameplay that recognizes Lara's transformation from a scared shipwreck survivor to an expert fighter are the progressively stronger and harder to kill adversaries. In earlier encounters she combats lightly armed and relatively easy-to-kill opponents, but as the narrative advances she faces increasingly more difficult enemies, such as heavily armored shield-bearers (*Tomb Raider* 01:43:20-01:43:57), a huge enemy lieutenant (*Tomb Raider* 05:24:36-05:25:14) and, towards the end, even supernatural Oni warriors⁵ (*Tomb Raider* 06:47:58-06:50:11). While this kind of enemy progression is a common feature in action-adventure games, serving as a mechanic to maintain player engagement and challenge, it takes on a deeper significance in *Tomb Raider*. In this game, the intensification of combat difficulty highlights her narrative arc. Each new enemy type becomes a gameplay obstacle as well as a narrative device, narratively and mechanically signaling that Lara has acquired the skills necessary to confront opponents that would have caused her death earlier in the story. This interplay between narrative and mechanics transforms a stereotypical action-adventure gameplay feature into a meaningful storytelling device that underscores her evolution into an expert fighter.

Towards the end of the game even Lara herself comes to terms with being a battle-hardened warrior and comments on her acquired skills, strength and increased violent behavior. Throughout various cutscenes or fighting sequences she yells threats like "I'll make them pay!" (*Tomb Raider* 03:19:06-03:19:17), "Run you bastards, I'm coming for you all!" (*Tomb Raider* 04:05:20-04:05:32), "Die, you son of a bitch!" (*Tomb Raider* 05:24:36-05:25:14) and "All right you bastard. Show me what you got!" (*Tomb Raider* 06:22:55-06:23:00) signifying a stark contrast to her trying to reason with the enemies at the beginning of the game (*Tomb Raider* 01:14:54-01:14:58). Moreover, even the opponents can be heard discussing how afraid they are of Lara because of how many of them she has already killed and how much trouble she has caused (*Tomb Raider* 04:57:15-04:57:55). These developments together with the gameplay features of Lara becoming more adept at fighting display her own acceptance of taking up the role of a capable protagonist. The increasing difficulty of combat sequences and the improvement of her skills are not only gameplay features, but they also narratively signify

⁵ The Oni are ancient undead Samurai warriors that Lara has to fight in the latter third of the game.

her evolution towards becoming an independent character. This aligns with the common story-telling technique that “a character is attributed specific traits at the beginning of a narrative, but other traits are subsequently added that may not conform to the original characterization, thus subverting the first conception of this character” (Jannidis 15). While it could be argued that the narrative and gameplay towards the end of the game exhibit factors of hyper-masculinization because of the increased brutality of her actions and the extended militarizing of the gameplay, this development is counterbalanced by her abilities remaining grounded in practical, physical skill rather than supernatural power as well as her caring and loyal character traits, “seemingly blending masculine and feminine sensibilities” (Perrault et al. 852). As a result, Lara’s ‘from zero to hero’ storyline is not a simple adoption of a traditional masculine motif, but a more complex narrative arc contrasting the vulnerable survivor at the beginning and the formidable combatant at the end, thus creating a cohesive story in which her evolution to a female action hero feels narratively earned, thematically consistent, and mechanically reinforced.

In general, it can be argued that gameplay is influenced by the gender of the protagonist. In the beginning, the game perpetuates the idea that Lara lacks the strength to face male enemies head on, thus encouraging stealth-oriented gameplay over head-on combat. Even when fighting opponents head-on, she rather dodges attacks than blocks them. While these skills remain the same for the whole game, the gameplay becomes more militarized as the story progresses as shown above. She faces more enemies, which is reinforced by the gameplay itself at a certain point, as it does not allow for stealthy approaches anymore, signifying her development into a battle-hardened survivor. While this puts her in a more masculine position at the end, it does not constitute hyper-masculinization as her previous development in the narrative has to be considered as well. Overall, Lara’s representation in the game strikes a careful balance between traditionally masculine and feminine traits. While the gameplay often demonstrates physical strength, combat skill, and resilience often associated with masculine action heroes, these qualities are complemented by narrative moments of emotional vulnerability, empathy, intellect, and resourcefulness. This nuanced portrayal can be viewed as resisting one-dimensional gender stereotypes (Perreault et al. 855). Therefore, while the gameplay’s portrayal of gender is not without its flaws, it can generally be considered well balanced as it supports the game’s central narrative arc.

Nevertheless, the gameplay still has to be viewed critically, as certain mechanics still perpetuate gendered assumptions.

3.4.2. Lara's body – Gameplay

As discussed above, the narrative is closely tied to Lara's body. The attempted sexual assault marks a crucial moment that can be viewed as substantially reframing the story. This scene influences players' perception of her and positions her body as a central narrative device staying significant throughout the game. This chapter will analyze how the gameplay is constructed around Lara's female body as well.

The above-mentioned changes of Lara's body signifying her transition into a capable survivor, first being relatively clean and uninjured (*Tomb Raider* 00:28:18) and then becoming dirty and scarred (*Tomb Raider* 04:47:40), are brought about through gameplay. These physical alterations are only caused by Lara constantly being shot at, cut, or burned, falling down, having to climb mountains or swim through rivers, etc. Therefore, it can be argued that "the game world of *Tomb Raider* is built on the destruction of female bodies" as "the game focuses on the pressures exerted upon Lara's body as she moves through the game world to rescue her friend" (McInnes 56). Furthermore, there are many instances in which Lara's body is used as an object of "male dominance and aggression" (McInnes 43). Throughout the game, the player is often faced with quick time events which, when failed lead to the death of the character. In *Tomb Raider* deaths are extremely brutal, horrific, and sexualized. Following Luke's advice, for these scenes I have opted to also utilize para-texts in the form of two additional videos as the walkthrough video used for the majority of the analysis does not feature Lara's deaths (Foundational 8). These death scenes seem to have become their own type of YouTube video as by searching "*Tomb Raider* death scenes" a myriad of videos of all the different *Tomb Raider* games can be found, ranging from a few hundred thousand to up to 2,6 million views (cakechieveables, calloftreyarch). In many of these death scenes, Lara is being pierced and penetrated by phallic objects like shafts, spears, arrows, etc. (cakechieveables 00:00-00:17; 01:10-01:17; 03:06-03:18; 03:20-03:49; 04:13-04:48; 05:02-05:17; 06:12-06:36), choked to death or her throat being otherwise pierced (00:48-01:09; 01:20-01:43; 02:16-02:29). Moreover, these deaths are unnecessarily prolonged. After failing the quick time event it could have been designed in a way that the player sees Lara falling towards a sharp object with the screen fading to black; however, the way it has been designed

the camera lingers on Lara's struggling movements for an average of three to four seconds (cakeachieveables 06:21-06:25; 06:31-06:35). Even narratively, Lara's body is penetrated by phallic objects as this scene of falling onto a metal rod is inevitably a part of the story that cannot be prevented by the player (*Tomb Raider* 00:04:00-00:04:16). Additionally, some death scenes even feature sexual assault in the form of caressing Lara's body by touching her face, hips, and neck (cakeachieveables 00:00-00:17; 01:20-01:44). The question has to be asked for which purpose these scenes were designed other than a dominating and sexualized view of Lara's body, because as Phillips states "the developers went to great lengths to animate unique deaths for Lara during live play, a notable creative decision within the complicated economy of resources that constitute a digital game" (134). Clearly, the creation of these scenes during the game's development "derive[d] from sexist underpinnings" (Lynch et al. 567) and were created with a male target audience in mind (Perreault et al. 848). Furthermore, I concur with McInnes in considering these scenes "voyeuristic at times" and regarding them to be "more like torture porn than death cutscenes" (58).

As described in the narrative analysis, it is easy to identify with Lara. The player's bond with Lara's body is also strengthened by the immersive user-interface as there are no health bars in the game (which in other games indicate how hurt a character is). Instead "damage done to Lara's body manifests as blood spatters on the screen" implying "a merging of avatar eye with camera lens" as on-screen blood spatters are usually used in first-person games. Furthermore, in many death scenes or other sequences in which Lara's body is put through an immense physical exertion the colors on screen become increasingly de-saturated and greyish as Lara gets closer to death. The controller in the player's hands also begins to vibrate as Lara experiences extreme pain intensifying identification with her (Phillips 134-135). As stated above, most players usually wish no harm to come to their avatars, because "even though Lara reincarnates after dying, her deaths are gratuitous, and the player might try to avoid allowing her to die" (Engelbrecht ch. 3). While such violent death scenes may "increase her sense of vulnerability and her realism as a character, which is a transformation from the invincible postfeminist 'supergirl,'" (Engelbrecht ch. 3) they may also contribute to perpetuating misogynistic tendencies through the repeated destruction of Lara's body. They can also be regarded as "a reminder, perhaps even a warning, about the frailty of a woman's body" (Phillips 134). Therefore, these violent death scenes invoke the players' desire to protect Lara, which could be seen as benevolent sexist scenarios. Either way, these horrific, sexualized, and

unnecessary death scenes perpetuate a culture of misogyny among players as these scenes were specifically designed to feature these sexualized deaths.

3.4.3. Agency

The last part of the gameplay analysis is going to focus on agency. It will discuss how the interplay of gameplay and narrative sequences influence the player's/Lara's agency, respectively.

As already mentioned, the game *Tomb Raider* is exclusively played in third person. The player controls Lara and sees her full body on screen. The point of view the player takes in games usually determines how a player perceives the character they control. A first-person point of view "can be considered a form of role embodiment" as "the player becomes the character" in the game while a third-person point of view "can be considered a form of role fulfilment" as "the player gets to control a character that also has some autonomy of its own" (Sloan 126). Additionally, the game's environment has also been designed in a way that decreases Lara's as well as the player's agency. Throughout the game there are obstacles like cliffs, mountains, buildings, etc. that Lara simply cannot overcome. These areas are either off limit by design or only accessible through special gear acquired later in the story. In these instances, Lara's and the player's agency are fully aligned as Lara and the player are prohibited from entering a certain area at the same time through the same gameplay mechanics. Furthermore, there are many cases in which Lara does undertake a huge jump and at the end "she will grab onto a ledge with only one hand, and the player needs to act fast to prevent her from falling to her death" which further diminish her agency while amplifying the player's control over her (Engelbrecht ch. 3). Interestingly, these instances of gameplay appear throughout the game until the very end, no matter how proficient Lara becomes at climbing or jumping (*Tomb Raider* 00:12:06-00:12:10; 00:59:02-00:59:10; 04:58:30-04:58:42). As a result, it can be argued that this area of gameplay implies vulnerability and mitigates the masculinity ascribed to her in other aspects of the gameplay. This repeated emphasis on vulnerability continually invites male players to care for and protect Lara. Therefore, the third-person gameplay and the restrictions of the environment in *Tomb Raider* combined with other aspects of the game (death scenes, interactive male gaze, etc.) may lead to the players either regarding Lara as an object of male desire or a frail woman who may invoke thoughts of protection in the assumed male player base.

As the player usually has complete control over Lara's movements, actions, and the camera itself it could be argued that from a gameplay perspective the virtual character's agency is fully dependent on the player's choices. However, as previously shown, the game features an abundance of cutscenes in which the player can do nothing at all. Therefore, as the player does not govern all of Lara's actions, it could be argued that she maintains some sort of agency from the player. Additionally, there are also more subtle moments in gameplay in which Lara takes control and agency from the player. As McInnes observes, Lara frequently

responds deftly to her environment: gliding her hand along a rock wall as she runs alongside it; shielding her face if the player moves her too close to flames; steadying herself on a ledge if she is in danger of falling off. In these ways, she seizes opportunities to prevent her death when the player didn't notice or didn't care to. These dynamic responses remind players that even if they are not paying close attention to the game's environment, Lara is, and she is smart enough to know what to do should the player fail to guide her. (64-65)

These details exemplify how Lara is not just a mere avatar to be played with but her own character, with a certain degree of agency within the game's world detached from the player. This is illustrated as well by other modes of gameplay that change throughout the game. For example, as the game progresses Lara becomes more adept at climbing and jumping on her own. In the first third of the game, she oftentimes "collapses on the ground for a moment to recover from the hard fall" (*Tomb Raider* 01:08:54-01:09:01; 01:46:05-01:46:08). Later on, she manages to prevent injuries from falling by rolling after landing (*Tomb Raider* 04:59:24-04:59:33), a technique she developed on her own without player interference or gameplay prompts. Furthermore, Lara discovering new weapons (*Tomb Raider* 01:30:55-01:31:07) and acquiring new gear (*Tomb Raider* 02:01:10-02:02:28; 02:49:04-02:51:15) also always happens without player input, removing the player's agency for a short amount of time. While these changes in game mechanics could simply be read as mirroring her gradual growth from inexperienced rookie to an expert athlete it also highlights "that she is highly capable and has a degree of bodily autonomy as she is responding even when the player is not" (McInnes 65).

To summarize, any discussion of gameplay is highly dependent on the individual player's choice. Any player has the power to change how Lara operates within the game's world to a certain degree, for example whether she acts more aggressively or stealthily during fight phases (MacCallum-Stewart ch. 4). Still, *Tomb Raider* can be considered an example of a militarized gameplay experience as is the standard for many action-adventure games. While

this may lead to the assumption that Lara is portrayed in a hyper-masculine way, I believe the balancing of her female and male traits within the narrative counteracts viewing her as a merely hyper-masculine protagonist. Furthermore, Lara's agency in *Tomb Raider* is not always completely dependent on the player's actions. There are many instances, narratively as well as mechanically, in which Lara regains agency and frees herself from the player's control. However, other aspects of gameplay need to be viewed critically. Most prominently, the so-called death scenes. Contrary to other action-adventure games, these death scenes as well as other cinematic sequences in *Tomb Raider* put a lot of emphasis on the destruction of Lara's body which could be interpreted as providing voyeuristic opportunities. Furthermore, in some instances of gameplay the player's help or control is needed to save Lara from certain death which diminishes her agency and implies benevolent sexist tendencies. However, ascribing specific meaning to gameplay features is inherently subjective. At best, only assumptions can be made about which mechanics may reinforce particular perspectives or ideologies. Ultimately, the interpretation of Lara's character is contingent upon how players perceive their relationship with her and how they choose to navigate the game. Some may objectify her, deliberately subjecting her to repeatedly experience the violent death scenes, others may choose to regard her as a frail damsel in need of protection, and still, some may identify with the role of Lara Croft and actively contribute to her transformation into an expert survivor as the narrative intends.

5. Summary

As proposed in the introduction, my thesis' research is guided by the following two questions: "In which way can critical literacy be applied to foster students' critical engagement with video games and feminism?" and "How is the female protagonist of the video game *Tomb Raider* portrayed from a critical feminist viewpoint?"

The first question has been thoroughly discussed in the literature review. First, a brief summary of the historical development of critical literacy has been provided. While nowadays critical literacy theories usually engage with "all forms of text, including digital, film, and television productions" (Stevens and Bean 18), video games are not often explicitly mentioned. Therefore, it has been suggested that video games have to be included in the critical literacy framework as well, as they are shaped by certain ideologies and their cultural surroundings like any other type of media. Furthermore, my thesis analyzed the aims and objectives of general critical literacy in order to then distill its own definition of critical video game literacy. In a general critical literacy framework, students have to develop a critically conscious mindset with which they are then able to analyze texts in regard to underlying ideologies. Subsequently, critical literacy theories then propose that an action has to be taken to reveal and challenge the dominant views, making students facilitators of critical literacy.

For the purpose of my thesis, a working definition of critical video game literacy had to be provided. A CVGL approach draws predominantly from theories of critical media literacy as video games are very similar to other forms of digital media. However, the defining difference between video games and for example movies is their interactivity. The gamers, within the limitation of the game's mechanics, construct the game as they play it, making them reader and creator of their specific gaming experience at the same time (Beavis 435). While games can be analyzed like other media in terms of how the game studio structured certain mechanics or the narrative as well as in regard to its paratexts, this co-construction of meaning between the player and the game always needs to be taken into account. Furthermore, it has been argued about why critical feminism has to be considered an integral part of a CVGL approach. To summarize, the gaming industry, whether in game design, game development or even in the player base, has always been dominated by male ideologies (Cote 23-24). Women have been underrepresented in this medium for a long time and when women were featured in games most of the time they have been portrayed as sexual objects, femme

fatales, or damsels in distress. As a result, I argue that through a CVGL approach students in an ELT classroom can be made familiar with the concept of feminism and may be inspired to uncover misogynistic tendencies in other forms of media as well. Engaging with video games in an ELT classroom is seen as especially suited to introducing children to critical literacy as they are most likely already familiar with this type of digital media and video games have a very engaging appeal to them.

The second research question has been explored by the analysis of the 2013 version of the video game *Tomb Raider*. The methodology for this analysis has been synthesized from various approaches like qualitative video game research, narrative analysis, critical movie analysis, and theories of hostile and benevolent sexism. The visual analysis of the character of Lara Croft showed that the 2013 version of the character is not portrayed as sexualized as her previous iterations. While the new Lara can be considered a beautiful woman with a fit and slim body her bodily proportions are not overly exaggerated and are realistic to achieve. Furthermore, Lara's clothing has been examined and even though the clothes are not too revealing and do not support sexualization they should still be viewed critically as changing Lara's outfits has no bearing on the gameplay and therefore ascribes barbie-like properties to her. Additionally, through the game's mechanics the players are able to engage in voyeurism by placing the camera in positions that expose Lara's private body parts. The narrative analysis revealed that even though the game's story can be seen as Lara's journey from a young inexperienced castaway to a strong independent survivor it is not without underlying misogynistic bias. Sequences like the infamous rape scene or her dependency on a father figure's guidance undermine the otherwise empowering narrative. The gameplay analysis showed that even though many gameplay features may be considered militarized gameplay which may put Lara in a hyper-masculine position they are heavily intertwined with the story's development and help support the narrative arc. Both the gameplay and narrative serve to depict her as a well-rounded character being neither too stereotypically feminine nor too masculine. However, other gameplay features like the violent death scenes must be viewed critically as they either allow players to sadistically mutilate Lara's body or perpetuate benevolent sexist tendencies of men wanting to protect frail women.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, limitations of my particular thesis have to be acknowledged as well. Video games research is inherently limited as it is only possible to hypothesize which actions or decisions other players might make during their playthroughs and analyze them accordingly. Due to constraints of length the critical analysis is limited to only one video game, which restricts the generalizability of the findings even within the *Tomb Raider* game series. Furthermore, a practical EFL classroom implementation of a CVGL approach could not be conducted. Finally, selecting a different game that offers more player choice could have resulted in a more complex analysis.

In light of these limitations, future research building on the topics explored in this thesis could pursue several directions. Comparative studies analyzing two or more games featuring female protagonists would allow for broader conclusions regarding issues of representation across the medium. Additionally, another study could compare different representations of the character Lara Croft throughout the *Tomb Raider* game series. Further research could also extend the CVGL framework to address other issues than feminism, such as imperialism or racism. Another interesting approach would be to compare games with female protagonists to similar games with male leads in order to examine how gender influences visual representation, narrative, gameplay design, and agency. Furthermore, a large-scale project could address player identity in greater detail. As already stated above, factors such as gender, cultural background, political beliefs, prior gaming experience, and personal values, etc. can significantly shape how a game is perceived. Therefore, it could be analyzed how different players respond to the same content in immensely different ways. In addition, future thesis in EFL didactics could focus on practical educational applications of an CVGL approach by investigating how video games can be meaningfully integrated into teaching, how critical thinking can be taught to students using CVGL, and how learners and teachers handle such an approach in practice.

Finally, analyzing gameplay always involves a degree of subjectivity. My own perspective, shaped by personal ideologies and beliefs, inevitably framed this analysis as well. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the value of engaging critically with video games. On the contrary, it is highly significant to learn how to critically analyze games, especially within an ELT context. Teaching students to question games can foster a more nuanced understanding

of underlying ideologies and may even encourage learners to approach other popular media with a critical mindset as well.

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8. List of Figures

Figure 1: Innocent outfit. "Tomb Raider (2013) Outfits." *Raiding The Globe*, <https://raidingtheglobe.com/games/crystal-dynamics/tomb-raider/outfits>. Accessed 17 Dec. 2025.

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Figure 3: Mountaineer outfit. "Tomb Raider (2013) Outfits." *Raiding The Globe*, <https://raidingtheglobe.com/games/crystal-dynamics/tomb-raider/outfits>. Accessed 17 Dec. 2025.

9. Appendix

9.1. Abstract (English)

This thesis examines *Tomb Raider* (2013) through a critical feminist lens. Drawing on existing research in critical literacy, the thesis first develops a framework of critical video game literacy which accounts for the specifics of digital games. It is then argued that video games, as influential cultural texts, require critical feminist analysis due to their persistent patterns of gendered representation. Furthermore, such an approach is suggested to be especially valuable in the EFL classroom, where video games can be used to foster critical awareness of gender and representation. The critical feminist framework is then applied to a qualitative analysis of *Tomb Raider* (2013), focusing on the visual representation of the protagonist, narrative structures, and gameplay mechanics. The analysis reveals a mixed portrayal of its female lead: while the game presents moments of agency, complexity, and character development, it simultaneously reproduces problematic and misogynistic conventions. The thesis concludes by emphasizing the importance of critically engaging with video games both in research and in educational practice.

key words: critical literacy, feminism, video games, *Tomb Raider*

9.2. Abstract (German)

Diese Arbeit untersucht *Tomb Raider* (2013) aus einer kritischen feministischen Perspektive. Bezugnehmend auf bestehende Forschungen zu Critical Literacy entwickelt die Arbeit zunächst ein System für Critical Literacy in Videospiele, welches die Spezifikationen digitaler Spiele berücksichtigt. Des Weiteren wird argumentiert, dass Videospiele als einflussreiche kulturelle Texte aufgrund ihrer anhaltenden Muster geschlechtsspezifischer Darstellung eine kritische feministische Analyse erfordern. Darüber hinaus wird vorgeschlagen, dass ein solcher Ansatz besonders wertvoll für den Englisch Unterricht ist, wo Videospiele genutzt werden können, um ein kritisches Bewusstsein für Geschlechterrollen und Repräsentation zu fördern. Die qualitative Analyse von *Tomb Raider* (2013) wird dann anhand des kritisch feministischen Gerüsts durchgeführt, wobei der Schwerpunkt auf der visuellen Darstellung der Protagonistin, den Erzählstrukturen und den Spielmechaniken liegt. Die Analyse zeigt eine gemischte Darstellung der weiblichen Hauptfigur: Während das Spiel Momente der Handlungsfähigkeit, Komplexität und Charakterentwicklung präsentiert, reproduziert es gleichzeitig problematische und frauenfeindliche Konventionen. Die Arbeit schließt mit der Betonung der Bedeutung einer kritischen Auseinandersetzung mit Videospiele sowohl in der Forschung als auch in der pädagogischen Praxis.

Schlagwörter: critical literacy, Feminismus, Videospiele, *Tomb Raider*

9.3. Erklärung zum Umgang mit KI

Hiermit versichere ich, dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit selbstständig verfasst und keine anderen KI-Hilfsmittel als die angegebenen benützt habe. Für die Erstellung der Arbeit habe ich folgende Hilfsmittel generativer KI-Tools (ChatGPT) zu folgendem Zweck verwendet: Thesaurus, Übersetzungshilfe, kontextbezogenes Wörterbuch.