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Body Movin': Ecocritical and Postcolonial Readings of the Travelling Body in the *Tomb Raider* Series

Ciało w ruchu – ekokrytyczna i postkolonialna lektura podróżującego ciała w rozrywce interaktywnej na przykładzie serii *Tomb Raider*

Abstract: When Lara Croft travels, she travels light – sans suitcase, but in most cases with enough firepower to take opposing forces ranging from dinosaurs to bloodthirsty locals. However, her big guns seems often unnecessary titillation, for she can manage very well without them thanks to her exquisite acrobatic and hand-to-hand combat skills. She will vault over any obstacle, swim across rapid flowing rivers and abseil the steepest ravines. Lara Croft's travels are often as physical as the virtual world would allow. That physicality returns our attention to the oft forgotten aspect of travelling namely the body of the traveller, not only defined by its position in space, but also by the ordinary and extraordinary circumstances of its biological interaction with the surrounding environment.

In this paper I would like to explore the interplay between the body of the traveller and contexts it is located in. These contexts range from the narrative and gameplay aspects of the *Tomb Raider* series, but also go beyond the border of the game and are realised in the transformative and reflective cultural milieu of the game. In particular I want to focus on the representations of Lara Croft as an archetypal "action girl" and "adventurer archaeologist" and how these representations are realised in reference to the changing (maturing?) video game environments. In the framework of postcolonial and ecocritical theories I want to explore the dyads of body/the purported exotic, body/natural environment, as well as physical/mental aspects of travelling.

Keywords: Game studies, ecocriticism, postcolonialism, travelling body

Abstrakt: Kiedy Lara Croft podróżuje, podróżuje lekko – bez walizki, ale w większości przypadków z wystarczającą siłą ognia, by stawić czoła przeciwnikom, od dinozaurów poczynszy a na krwiożerczych autochtonach skończywszy. Jednak jej pokaźna broń wydaje się często niepotrzebnym dodatkiem, ponieważ doskonale radzi sobie bez niej dzięki swoim wysmientym umiejętnościom akrobatycznym i walki wręcz. Potrafi przeskoczyć każdą przeszkodę, przepłynąć rwącą rzekę i zjechać po linie z najbardziej stromych wąwozów. Podróże Lary Croft są często tak fizyczne, jak tylko pozwala na to wirtualny świat. Ta fizyczność zwraca naszą uwagę na często zapominany aspekt podróżowania, a mianowicie na ciało podróżnika, nie tylko zdefiniowane przez jego położenie w przestrzeni, ale także przez zwykłe i niezwykłe okoliczności jego biologicznej interakcji z otaczającym środowiskiem.

Autor niniejszego szkicu stawia sobie za cel zbadanie wzajemnego oddziaływania pomiędzy ciałem podróżnika a kontekstami, w których się ono znajduje. Konteksty te obejmują narracyjne i gameplayowe aspekty serii *Tomb Raider*, ale wykraczają również poza granice gry i dają się poznać w transformatywnym i refleksyjnym środowisku kulturowym gry. W szczególności autor koncentruje się na reprezentacjach Lary Croft jako archetypowej bohaterki akcji i archeologa-poszukiwacza przygód oraz na tym, jak te reprezentacje są przedstawiane w odniesieniu do zmieniających się (dojrzejących?) środowisk gier wideo. W ramach teorii postkolonialnych i ekokrytycznych zamierza zbadać dualizmy ciało – rzekoma egzotyka, ciało – środowisko naturalne, a także fizyczne – mentalne aspekty podróžowania.

Słowa kluczowe: game studies, ekokrytyka, postkolonializm, podróżujące ciało

There are many games that dwell on the topic of travelling. The journey is taken up as a quest for lost treasures, lost loved ones, or lost meaning. In my opinion, however, among multiple examples there is only one game that perfectly establishes the premise of this paper. In *Katamari Damacy* (Namco, 2004) we “play a tiny cosmic prince charged with rebuilding the universe by rolling up matter. Using a sticky ‘katamari’ ball to pick up mass, you start with relatively small items, but soon progress to larger and larger ones” (Chang 2016, 219). Every object that we gather while rolling through the world forms our accumulated body – both in the literal sense of our actual physical representation, but also in the metaphorical one. This seems to be suggested by the very title – *Katamari Damacy* can be translated as an agglomerated soul.

Similarly, in this article I would like to take up this dual perspective on the somatic aspect of travelling. While *Katamari Damacy* may be interpreted as a comment on the voracious and aimless consumerism, it also encapsulates two interrelated perspectives on the journeying body. First, the ‘katamari’ ball, in a truly colonial fashion, creates itself from the detritus of the invaded space, hoovering all and everything on its path into somatic universe – a Bakhtinian act of encountering the world by devouring it. Secondly, its agglomerated self is a consequence of the environment that surrounds it. The body is the land and the land is the body. Both these perspectives are what makes *Katamari Damacy* a perfect encapsulation of my premise. The old truism that travelling broadens our horizons seems even more mundane if we look at what travelling does to our bodies and what our bodies do to the places through which we travel. Consequently, the main question of this article is how the

postmodern travelling body is represented in video games, particularly those that strive for realistic representations of both the environment and the player character. My thesis here is that in order to move beyond simplistic representations visible in earlier forms of the medium, in more modern games, the body of the traveller becomes incorporated into various processes of the land travelled. The body becomes a patchwork, a hybrid, an agglomerate of what is human and what is environmental. The body influences and is influenced by the encounter with the land. The particular focus of this analysis is the new *Tomb Raider* series (2001–2007) since these games pay particular attention to both aspects of the question – the physicality of the digital body, and the journey as a sum of corporeal experiences. While the amount of scholarly interest given to Lara Croft character is truly monumental, this paper will attempt to go beyond the heroine in question, and this time look into the background for all the heroics.

Lara Croft's body is special. It is special because it exists simultaneously in multiple dimensions. As Helen W. Kennedy observed: "It is (...) increasingly difficult to distinguish between Lara Croft the character in *Tomb Raider* and Lara Croft the ubiquitous virtual commodity used to sell products as diverse as the hardware to play the game itself, Lucozade or Seat cars" (2002). Lara Croft's body is, for better or worse, an aesthetic object, to be gazed upon and brought to life through that gaze. It is a narrative object that is supposed to tell a particular version of the game story, using props such as clothes, weapons, and other tools of tomb raiding trade. In later games, the body itself – its flesh, sinews and bones – all become the narrative material. It is the player's avatar, a prosthetic entity, suspended between the game-world (digital body-movement) and the real world (controlling interface). Finally, it is a cultural object, telling stories of the worlds beyond computer screens – stories of technological progress, of shifting players' perceptions, of changing cultural paradigms. Each dimension exerts its gravitational pull that shapes, distorts and reconfigures the travelling body in question. Each dimension influences which objects clump to the soul and become a part of somatic universe.

The first dimension, the one closest to the skin, are technologies available to game creators. This aspect is directly related to how the body looks, behaves and changes through the journey. While in the early games Lara Croft remained unchanged by even the most terrible circumstances, in the more modern entries into the franchise her body adapts and answers to the surrounding environment. Lara's clothes are one of these answers. In the early games, the skimpy outfit of shorts and a clingy top accentuated a lot of things, but definitely not Lara's concern for the weather. In later games, the protagonist's clothes seem more adjusted to the environmental conditions instead of just the player's hunger for (preferably naked) flesh. That seemingly small accommodation leads us to an observation concerning the game medium as a whole. All sartorial changes are to some extent related to what the designers want to show. However, they are significantly more influenced by what the designers are able to show. In early games, limited development resources resulted in limited wardrobe. This, in turn, resulted in the focus on, colloquially speaking, getting the most bang for the buck with the consequent titillating outfit. Drake Stutesman notes that “[f]ilm costume design started at the lowest end of the taste scale, Hollywood” (2011, 18). Similarly, following the tradition established by cinema, early video games were rarely concerned with sartorial appropriateness, as long as the clothes (or lack thereof) looked good. On the other hand, bigger and more established studios that worked on later games could focus on developing more varied costumes. Still, even considering the widespread tendency towards increasing immersion by increasing the “realism” of the image, the “looking good” factor has remained significant. Esther MacCallum-Stewart observes that

Lara is to-be-looked-at, and early versions of her avatar were specifically designed to appeal to young male audiences. (...) She is still a sexualised character; albeit with a slightly broader sexual appeal. (...) Lara's 2013 body is slender but athletic. She has a dusting of freckles and smears of dirt, but she is still attractive in a very normative manner. (...) She is fit and muscular without overstepping current ideals of athletic womanhood (2014).

However, this time the aesthetics are tempered by at least some attempts to adjust both sartorial and anatomical aspects of representation to some version of reality.

Moreover, the accumulative aspect mentioned earlier is also present in two different formats. First is the wear and tear of clothes, resulting from various (mis)adventures that befall Lara Croft. Considering the amount of damage received, the apparel seems surprisingly durable. Nevertheless, the environment still does leave a mark on the traveller. “Narrative” clothes speak about the character of the person that wears them. Again, it is not a new storytelling technique. Chaucer used the discourse between societal mores concerning proper garment and stylisation of his pilgrims as a character building tool. Laura Fulkerson Hodges notes that

[t]orn garments, a step beyond threadbare, represent some sort of degradation – moral, economic, or social – self-inflicted, inflicted on wearer by others, or by circumstances. In other works (...) torn garments are the sartorial representation of the effect on the wearer of someone’s death (2005, 180).

Indeed, in many games from the *Tomb Raider* series, the most “narrative” wear and tear coincides with the literal or metaphorical downfall of the main character. As a consequence, the players also receive a tangible reminder that they have, indeed, partaken in an adventure, that their actions had consequences. These accumulated objects also play a role in the metagaming aspect. In most cases, after completing a particular stage of the game, players gain access to different outfits. From then on they can pick and choose what the character is going to wear. Here the change of clothes plays the role of a memento, a physical embodiment of the road travelled – both in the narrative sense and as the player’s experience with the game.

Changes of the sartorial nature are better understood when we look at the matter from the perspective of ecocriticism. It is easy to notice that the representations of the natural environment shift throughout the franchise. In the early games nature constitutes merely a coat of varnish

on the platforms that Lara traverses. It is motionless, static, exchangeable – it is less an environment and more a background. In the later games the situation changes. Now the environment becomes an active participant, necessitating adjustments on the part of the player as well as greater consideration for the surroundings. Nature reacts to our bodily presence in the adventure – a cliff that we jump on may crumble, and we solve many puzzles by interacting with the environment. Through that process players receive an enhanced sense of their presence in the virtual reality of the game. Alison McMahan notes that:

[m]ost scholars and scientists seem to agree that total photo- and audiorealism is not necessary for a virtual reality environment to produce in the viewer a sense of immersion, a sense that the world they are in is real and complete (2014, 68).

What is, however, necessary is that

(1) the user's expectations of the game or environment must match the environment's conventions fairly closely; (2) the user's actions must have a non-trivial impact on the environment; and (3) the conventions of the world must be consistent (McMahan 2014, 68–69).

Taking that into account it may be stated that the ecocritical representation of the environment as an agentive force goes hand in hand with the increase in players' experience of an immersive world.

However, nature is still perceived predominantly as a sum of resources that exist for the sole purpose of exploitation and utilization. This pragmatic aspect is particularly visible when we look at another agglomerative feature of the game, namely the crafting system. Lara Croft plays here the role of Robinson Crusoe, who, shipwrecked and alone, with God's help and his own perseverance was able to eke a sustainable existence. In the later games of the *Tomb Raider* franchise, players are able to efficiently and ingeniously overcome any difficulties by creating objects. Very much like the magic ball in *Katamari Damacy*, Lara

ends up running around encumbered by various helpful items. The base materials for these tools are usually ripped away from the natural environment. Metaphorically speaking, the travel journal of Lara Croft is carved in the skin and bones of the animals she kills. Moreover, the true costs of such rapacious acquisition of natural goods is hidden, in a similar fashion to Kate Rigby's vicar of Selbourne, who "planted four lime trees between his house and the butcher's yard opposite, 'to hide the sight of blood and filth'" (2002, 151). In *Tomb Raider*, the player can skin animals by waving a knife in the vague vicinity of the corpse. Through a process that looks like a shamanistic ritual, Lara conjures up stylised icons representing the formerly living tissue.

The implementation of harvesting and crafting elements into the game emphasises the dominant human spirit, which even in the most dire situation is able to overcome difficulties. However, this overcoming is achieved always at the cost of the other – in this case the natural environment. What is more, the human spirit remains untainted by the "blood and filth" of its own actions. The milestones of the journey are thus marked by objects created and destroyed, by animals skinned and plants uprooted. The travelling body not so much traverses the natural space, but violently reaps and tears through the environment. Lara Croft is more than just a female Crusoe – she is the virgin goddess of the hunt, subjugating her dominion, yet untouched by its earthiness.

This adaptability is in turn shaped by the gravitational pull of the cultural dimension. The archetypal "action girl" persona of the early games matures into an apparently more down-to-earth and fully fledged character of the more recent games. As Esther MacCallum-Stewart noted: "The arrogant action-heroine with biologically impossible proportions has been replaced by a young, fit twenty-something with a lot of money and grand aspirations, but not very much knowledge" (2014). This transformation is done on several levels. First of all, the narrative in recent games is presented as a prequel to the narrative in earlier games. This allows the older Lara to still be an awe-inspiring seasoned traveller, while giving the writers an opportunity to show character growth. The journey that Lara undertakes when she is young constitutes the crucible

that shapes her as a person. Secondly, attempts are made to “humanise” Lara not only physically (or rather anatomically), but also mentally and narratively. The physical aspect is quite visible when we look at the changing character model. The mental aspect, on the other hand, is based on the character’s emotional responsiveness to the events of the narrative. Old Lara would only laugh in the face of danger, but younger Lara displays a much broader palette of emotions. Finally, the third aspect is tied to the very reason the “action girl” is, well, acting. Here, however, certain pitfalls became apparent quite early. After all, a tomb raider must live up to its name.

The colonizing aspect of Lara’s journey is clearly visible in the very title of the franchise. The early games in the series offered very little reason behind robbing ancient graves – unless, of course, one considers greed a viable reason. Later games on the other hand take some pains to justify all this tomb raiding. We are not robbing graves, but exploring the past of an ancient, female¹ ruler, with the help of her – also female – descendant. We are not looting, but trying to stop an ancient cult from obtaining sacred items. We are not plundering, but trying to walk off PTSD. Even with all those fanciful explanations the gist of the matter remains the same – tombs are going to be raided, and loot carried away.

These explanations may sound simplistic and indeed they are. And that is because *Tomb Raider* is not a careful examination of the post-colonial past and present, but a video game, a tourist landscape, a post-colonial virtual reality. Therefore, the explanation that seems most viable is even simpler. Lara Croft raids tombs because players like shiny things in large quantities. That explanation is much more useful than the surface narratives presented above, since it tells us more about the mind of the player. The drive to acquisition and amassing of goods is not something that sets gamers apart from society, but rather an incessant discourse of accumulative culture writ large. While writing about the collection of another hero of the acquisitive, William Randolph Hearst, Eco observes:

¹ A fact that, for some reason, is very much emphasised.

the striking aspect of the whole is not the quantity of antique pieces plundered from half of Europe, or the nonchalance with which the artificial tissue seamlessly connects fake and genuine, but rather the sense of fullness (...), the masterpiece of bricolage, haunted by *horror vacui* (2014, 23).

This fear of empty spaces is particularly pronounced in interactive entertainment, since our actions there may be already perceived as a guilty pleasure of time wasted, of adults playing with toys. Therefore, all actions must have consequences, and every single moment of play must be crystallised into the greatest ploy of post-modern capitalism – a digital object. In this ploy certain trends visible in post-modern society are ever emphasised. Jonathan Chapman notes:

[i]n this oversaturated world of people and things, durable attachments with objects are seldom witnessed. Most products deliver a predictable diatribe of information, which quickly transforms wonder into drudgery; serial disappointments are delivered through nothing more than a product's failure to maintain currency with the evolving values and needs of their user (2014, 139).

Objects are craved when we do not possess them,² enjoyed for a brief moment when we find them, and gone with the game over. Again, this is not the nature of a game, but the nature of the game. Later in his examination, Eco argues: “But Hearst’s castle is not an *unicum*, not a *rara avis*: It fits into the California tourist landscape with perfect coherence” (2014, 24). Virtual tourism is a part of that virtual geography as well. The agglomerative aspect of loot is the physical embodiment of experiencing a journey, a memento of triumphs, the literal emotional baggage that players bring back from digital realities. Or, to return to the examples discussed, the video game medium rationale is primary, while narrative reasons are only secondary. McLuhan was once again proven

² Particularly visible when after the game level ends, we are informed how many objects we did not find.

right – the medium, whether we talk about real world or digital tourist traps, carries much greater weight than the content.

What also becomes visible when we analyse the subject beyond its surface notions is the pull of the commercial dimension – the established franchise necessitates the existence of certain unchangeable aspects. It is difficult to imagine *Tomb Raider* without tombs and raiding. Other aspects are less obvious, but perhaps even more important in the great scale of thing. These are visible both in the way the game is played – the body in motion, as well as the narrative direction – the body versus the exotic. The body, however, changes not only in the way it looks, but also how it reacts to the environment. This mark of the exotic on the body is a prevalent trope in literature. As Charlotte Mathieson observes:

Time and again, men return from journeys abroad – undertaken for a range of reasons and to a variety of locations – having become browned, bronzed and burnt by the sun: men are “tanned and retanned by the sun” (Peter Jenkyns in *Gaskell’s Cranford* 206), perhaps with a “healthy bronze upon his face” (George Fairfax in Braddon’s *The Lovels of Arden* 7), or coloured “a bronzed and coppery tint by perpetual exposure to meridian suns” (Prodder in Braddon’s *Aurora Floyd* 232), to become, like Allan Woodcourt, “a brown, sunburnt gentleman” (Dickens, *Bleak House* 710) (2014, 323–334).

A tan, however, is no longer enough to denote a well-travelled person. What kind of postmodern adventure would it be, if we did not end up with a collection of scars to prove our mettle. Consequently, in the later games of the *Tomb Raider* franchise, it is also the very body of the protagonist that becomes susceptible to the dangers of the land. Thus, the story of hardships is written on the skin of the traveller. Accidents, falls and other mishaps lead to bleeding wounds, bruises and bodily trauma that to some extent affects the way we play. We shiver when we are cold and need to warm up by the fire. We limp after a fall. With our hands tied behind our back, we sneak around, robbed of full agency. The simulated living body of Lara is made real not through its photo-realistic graphics, but through the cause and effect chains that bind the body to

the narrative and the gameplay. We fall together, we bleed together. As Kristeva observes:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay does not signify death (...). These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being (1982, 3).

When travelling through *Tomb Raider's* environments, we collect clothes, tools and precious objects. But it seems that the most important collector item is body trauma – the journey engraved into our living tissue. MacCallum-Stewart observes that this approach gives

the player more of a sense of Lara as a physical entity; her deaths, in particular, lack the rather comedic note of earlier, and are instead visceral and unpleasant. This combines to give the player a sense of Lara as a person within a more real landscape – whereas early games often had a rather ethereal sense to each level; here Lara crosses and recrosses a much more tangible space (2014).

Lara lives not through her action hero's imperviousness, but through her vulnerabilities.

That weakness is, however, a deceptive one. It plays a role in the story: it humanizes the character, it makes the struggle real. But its possibly most significant meaning is realised when, once again, we see the medium behind the content. Lara is not just a character, not just anybody. It is an avatar, a shared soma of the game-world and the player. Many critics have praised the turn from the objectified character of the early games, towards what one reviewer called “a laudable female protagonist” (Chambers, 2013). But the objectification is still there, albeit of a different flavour. In the past we had a digital power-harlot, awesome and larger-than-life. Now we receive a little sister to patronizingly lead through all the trouble she has landed herself in. It is true that her vulnerabilities exist to humanize the character. But that argument becomes quite un-

sustainable with the ludo-narrative dissonance visible quite early in the game. Lara, captured by evil cultists, kills one of them in a struggle to break free. She is visibly shaken by that act. She then proceeds to rather graphically murder everyone who stands in her way and no single tear is shed. The narrative character building is sacrificed on the altar of visceral gameplay. This discrepancy reveals the more significant meaning of bodily harm in *Tomb Raider*. Visible wounds and trauma serve as a tool for making players invest emotionally in the narrative. In a way, the game teases us with a beautiful body and quickly asks menacingly: “You wouldn’t want anything bad to happen to it, right?”³ The narrative blackmail is the nature of the medium. As Barry Atkins observes:

[a] degree of authorial responsibility is also passed to the reader in the possibility that the story might be told in a clumsy manner (the protagonist suffers damage, runs into walls, falls off a ledge, the player is forced to use medical packs to heal a wounded protagonist etc.) (2003, 44).

The flesh is weak, but the necessity to pull the player into the story remains strong. But it is not only we who suffer, for Lara is, after all, the goddess of the hunt. And so we hunt animals. We hunt people. And in the corpses that they leave behind the final part of our agglomerated body is to be found. Kristeva observes that:

A decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, a transitional swarming, inseparable lining of a human nature whose life is undistinguishable from the symbolic – the corpse represents fundamental pollution. (...) it must not be displayed but immediately buried so as not to pollute the divine earth” (1982, 109).

Logic that prevalent in the medium becomes quickly apparent – the cultists we encounter are ferocious and merciless, therefore, we can and

³Emphasised by *very* graphical death animations of Lara, played when we fail a particular task.

should murder them with little to no concern. Their corpses “show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (Kristeva 1982, 3). But following Žižek’s reasoning, “through fantasy, we learn how to desire” (1992, 6). And the *Tomb Raider* fantasy teaches the player to desire the corpse. It is turned from abject into Lacan’s “object of desire.” The corpses of our enemies are the unliving reminder of our martial prowess, the throne of bones for the player to sit upon. Even more, they become re-incorporated in the economy of the game, since players can loot corpses and acquire objects necessary to complete the story. In fact, when we were to look at this aspect from the perspective of ecocriticism, it would make a certain amount of sense. Matter in nature is in constant flux, and honey flows from the lion’s skull. In the necrophiliac fervour players no longer fear, but now crave corpses. We become the biblical “[c]orpse fanciers, unconscious worshippers of a soulless body, (...) preeminent representatives of inimical religions, identified by their murderous cults” (Kristeva 1982, 109). We take from the dead what we need, and only that allows our journey to continue.

The main question of this paper was that of the representations of post-modern “realistic” travelling body in digital entertainment. The thesis posited that what we often see in video games is an amalgamated entity, a hybrid which is both the representation of the land and the body. The conclusion goes beyond that, since in the case of video games discussed, the representation seems to be more than the sum of its parts. The process of amalgamation is not just stitching together of two elements, since both parts reflect back on each other in significant ways. What is more, this transformation speaks not only of the body and the land, but allows for a better understanding of a complex medium, understood here not only as technology, but a social process. Travelling through the land of *Tomb Raider* may be a traumatic process. The digital body of the player is smeared with dirt, blood, gore and subjugated to all possible kinds of trauma. *Tomb Raider* message seems quite idiosyncratic. Stealing is good, as long as you have reasons, and killing is fine, but headshots are better. But this is not faulty design, or a lesson in depravity, but, once again, the legacy of an idiosyncratic medium. The game messages attempt to balance morality and game logic, with various

degrees of success. No matter the value of these lessons, what is most interesting here is the way the story is told. It is not the content, but the medium. The story, written on and with the body of the traveller, refocuses attention on the physical aspect of travelling. The interrelations of the body and the environment may be brutal and unsightly, but they do emphasise the irrevocable ties between the human and the natural. The body is moving, but it is moving through a very specific medium. Like in *Katamari Damacy*, the journey here is a process of conscious and unconscious acquisition, material and immaterial accretion. Tombs are raided and more is gathered than just loot and bruises. Travelling bodies collect thoughts, gather mementos and memories, they are marked and they leave a mark. Travelling bodies invade and are invaded. Travelling bodies agglomerate the dust of roads travelled and it remains as a visible strata on travelling souls.

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