All the Rage: Digital Games, Female Violence and the Postfeminisation of Cinema’s New Action Heroines

Abstract
Recent years have seen a host of female action heroes punch, wrestle and kick-box their way across our cinema, television, computer and Playst tion screens. While gun-toting superbabes are not a new media phenomenon, this paper argues that processes of aesthetic convergence and intertextuality between digital games and cinema have impacted significantly upon representations of women in the action genre. It is argued that digitisation has accentuated change in two theoretically central and related areas: firstly, in the body shapes of the new *femmes fatales* and, secondly, in relation to their physical capabilities and performance of violence. The paper explores what is at stake in the move away from more realistic action heroines such as Ripley, G.I. Jane and Thelma and Louise toward the current digital revamping of seventies-style, comic-book superbabes such as Lara Croft, Tank Girl, Barb Wire, Catwoman and the heroines of the *X-Men* films. Although the cyber-chicks and riot grrls of contemporary action cinema can undoubtedly be read as both empowering and subversive, it is nonetheless difficult to disentangle them from wider and more ambiguous discourses surrounding gender equality, technology and violence. This analysis posits the figure of the retro-digitised action heroine at the centre of a (feminist) problematisation of postfeminist discourses on gender equality, with particular emphasis on the discursive construction of female violence. It suggests that the recent videogame-inflected images of violent women in cinema, rather than challenging the social taboos that surround ‘real’ female violence, are in fact playing a key symbolic role within a discourse that prioritises an optimistic rhetoric of gender equality over the real relations of power (McMahon, 1999).

Introduction
Historically, discussions about women’s relationship with technology have tended to pull in different directions, with feminists often highlighting the negative consequences for women of men’s domination of science and liberals pointing out the freedoms that scientific developments have afforded women. Ecofeminist concerns about unfettered production and consumption, genetic engineering and nuclear, chemical and biological warfare have tended to frame technology in an exclusively negative light, while socialist feminism has been more concerned with questions of ownership of the means of technological production. Advances in contraceptive and reproductive technologies have enabled western women to enter the labour force and thus gain economic independence, and yet they have also been used to control women through programmes of enforced sterilisation. As radical feminists have been quick to point out, the freedoms associated with the ‘sexual revolution’ also include the facilitation of a global sex industry, whose main commodities are women and children. Similarly, computers have replaced heavy industry to create what is deemed to be a more egalitarian, ‘soft-skills’ workplace, but the ICT industry remains heavily male-dominated and women still earn considerably less than men. Thus, while advances in technology affect everyone’s lives, these effects are
filtered through a set of pre-existing gender structures within society, with the result that they often impact differently upon men and women.

More focused questions about how new media technologies influence female empowerment and disempowerment are no less contentious. According to Claudia Herbst (2004), it is not coincidental that most of the imaging technologies used to create contemporary digital games as well as those applied in reproductive science originate in projects funded by the military. She argues that women’s increased incursion into violence – both real and representational - and disassociation with reproduction (both of which are facilitated by male-dominated technologies) is a dangerous development that threatens both to hyper-sexualise women and to make them more expendable. For many cyberfeminists, on the other hand, the ‘post-human condition’ (Pepperwell, 1995) afforded by information technology and AI is regarded in largely optimistic terms. Theorists such as Donna Harraway, Sadie Plant and Sherry Turkle maintain that new communications technologies free women from the rigid gender constraints of the past by extending their physical capabilities and by facilitating more open and democratic virtual spaces.

This discussion concentrates on one aspect of the technology and gender debate, namely how the themes, aesthetics and narrative logic of digital games have impacted upon cinematic representations of women in the action genre. In an increasingly franchise-led, networked and converging mediasphere (O’Day, 2004), formal and aesthetic synergies have been accelerated and intensified across different media forms and genres, with the result that the boundaries between cinema, video, television, cctv, advertising, trailers and games have become increasingly blurred: these formats have now learned to ‘speak to one another’ in response to a complex culmination of industrial, technological and cultural factors. The popularity of DVD and video over theatrical viewing, for example, has resulted in film becoming increasingly influenced by the styles and codes of television, evident in the growing use of close-up and medium shots (Creeber, 2002). Meanwhile, quality American television programmes such as *The Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under* are becoming more cinematic, encouraged by advances in domestic surround sound, wide-screen and high-resolution television monitors. This converging mediascape, in which mobile phones take photographs and security-camera footage is (re)produced as television entertainment, inevitably entails endless borrowings, citations and reappropriations across different media, communications technologies and artforms.

**Remediating gender**

It is not surprising, therefore, that digital games have reappropriated or ‘remediated’ many of the features of mainstream cinema (Rehak, 2003). In particular, action cinema’s proclivity for fighting, violence and spectacle has been an obvious source of inspiration for the shoot-em-ups and competitive quests that characterise many video and computer games, and recent discussions about PS3 and Xbox 360 focus heavily on high-definition cinematic experiences. In this scenario of ‘leaky boundaries’ (O’Donohoe, 1997), the relationship between these media has grown more reciprocal, and cinema has, in turn, become increasingly seduced both by the technical features of games as well as their narrative and aesthetic qualities. As Bolter and Grusin (1999, p15) point out, “What is
new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion [i.e. remediate] older media and the ways older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media.” Films such as Run Lola Run (1998), Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (2001) and Lara Croft Tomb Raider: the Cradle of Life (2003), Resident Evil (2002) and Resident Evil: Apocalypse (2004), X-Men (2000) and Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within (2001) borrow both directly and indirectly from game culture. In Run Lola Run, the impact of digital games manifests itself in the film’s ‘interactive’ narrative structure and in the insertion of animation sequences. In Tomb Raider and Resident Evil, game stars Lara Croft and Alice come to life in a complex cinematic indexing not of an imagined pre-game ‘reality’ upon which the games were based but rather of the ‘original’ digital fantasy worlds.

This deliberate reappropriation of the aesthetic features of games is particularly evident in the film Tomb Raider, in which Lara’s “drawing weapons mid-somersault, swallow dives into water, forward rolls to reverse direction...are signature moves of the experienced player”5. As in the game, when she places items near her backpack, they disappear from her hands. Similarly, Resident Evil and The Final Fantasy films are replete with visual and thematic references to the Biohazard, Resident Evil and Final Fantasy video games6. Even action films which make no direct reference to digital games have become increasingly influenced by game aesthetics. In Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon and The Matrix, for example, the use of CGI and wirework-based stunts enables actors to move through fantasy landscapes in which they - like player-controlled game characters - run up walls, roll across rooftops and jump/fly from building to building. Clearly, the new forms of hyperrealism afforded by bullet-time and time-slice techniques and CGI special effects do not impact exclusively on female action heroes. However, they have had an especially significant impact on media representations of women because they have facilitated a particular (re)conceptualisation of female power, which is not merely coincidental with but is also deeply implicated in the cultural politics of postfeminism.

According to Tasker and Negra (forthcoming, 2007), “Postfeminism broadly encompasses a set of assumptions, widely disseminated within popular media forms, having to do with the ‘pastness’ of feminism, whether that supposed ‘pastness’ is merely noted, mourned or celebrated.” Unlike second-wave feminism, therefore, postfeminism cannot be understood either as a distinct mode of political activism or as a coherently developed ideology but rather as a set of discursive responses - often serving contradictory agendas - to the perceived successes and failures of feminism. Significantly, it is largely through the realm of cultural rather than political expression that postfeminist discourse has taken hold. As Tasker and Negra (ibid.) explain, “Postfeminism does not always offer a logically coherent account of gender and power but through structures of forceful articulation and synergistic reiteration across media forms it has emerged as a dominating discursive system.” For this reason, the authors differentiate between “feminist politics and a broadly taken-for-granted postfeminist culture”. However, they are keen to stress that feminism has always operated at the level of cultural expression and that postfeminism, despite its eschewal of the political, can always be engaged with politically.
Broadly speaking, postfeminist culture is characterised by a number of key developments. The first and most visible of these is its capitulation on feminism’s rejection of the sexual objectification of women. This is defended using a number of arguments - men are also objectified, regressive portrayals of women are ironic, feminism robbed us of our (innate) femininity – some of which suggest a return to essentialist concepts of gender identity and most of which are deeply enmeshed within the logic of consumer capitalism and commodity fetishism. One outcome of this volte-face is that women no longer need to be liberated from the cosmetics and fashion industries since freedom, in the postfeminist scheme of things, is most readily expressed in terms of the ability to consume (‘because you’re worth it’). Perhaps the most important defining feature of postfeminism, however, is the widespread acceptance of the myth that gender equality has been won, since it is upon this optimistic rhetoric of the ‘level playing field’ (McMahon, 1999) that many of the more flagrant inequities and contradictions of the contemporary ‘genderscape’ can best be justified. Now that what is (re)imagined as a harsh, censorious feminism is past, the dual discourses of equality and empowerment facilitate a more flexible, playful and tolerant discussion of gender: it has thus become acceptable to claim that men are from Mars and women are from Venus, to frame heterosexual relations within a war-of-the-sexes discourse or for women to retreat from public life because it is taken for granted that these are empowered choices. At the level of cultural representation which, as Tasker and Negra rightly point out is postfeminism’s central discursive arena, these developments have facilitated the normalisation of hypersexualised images of girls and women, a phenomenon described by Ariel Levy (2005) as ‘raunch culture’ and by Pamela Paul (2005) as a process of social ‘pornification’.

Much has been written on the representation of women in both digital games and recent action cinema (Graner Ray, 2004; Dietz, 1998; O’Day, 2004; Haskell, 2004; Flanagan, 1999; Flanagan and Booth, 2002; Whelehan, 2000; Levy, 2005; Tasker, 1998), with substantial focus on the female body and physical manifestations of power. Crucial to this debate as these are, it is also important to note that the postfeminist dynamics of many recent digital games and action films operate beyond character representation. Indeed, it can be argued that, at a much deeper and broader level, digital games eclipse a singularly postfeminist logic or worldview. Firstly, most (action, adventure, shooter, racing, fighting and sports) games assume a level playing field in which characters must use their superhuman skill, speed and strength to compete for the ‘prize’. In these scenarios, the roles played by women range from being the prize itself to the adoption of much more active and violent roles, in which women stand an equal chance of winning. Gender difference, however, is always heavily coded, not only through the overt sexualisation of female characters but also in terms of how they fight and act: (stereo)typically, male characters are “slow, strong and good with their fists”, while female characters are “fast, weak and good with their minds”. In this scenario of ‘unlimited’ choices, manifestations of female violence are equated with female power and are played out in a highly exaggerated and fetishised manner. Similarly, an antagonistic rapport of one-upmanship tends to underscore male-female relations. This construction of the genderscape, which is by no means limited to - but seems to become peculiarly amplified in - the digital game medium, is highly conducive with postfeminism’s tendency to celebrate female aggression (provided it is sexually coded) rather than to problematise violence, whether...
male or female. As Claudia Herbst (2004, p41) points out in her discussion of Lara Croft, both postfeminism and videogame culture overlook the fact that violence “undermines the structure necessary for equality to flourish. Scenarios damaging to the foundation of equality cannot simultaneously advocate equality.”

Much like postfeminist discourses on gender equality, therefore, most videogames present us with a technology-facilitated fantasy world in which power relations based on class, gender and ethnicity are erased. They endorse the same logic of competitive individualism – a ‘meritocracy’ blind to the impediments of social prejudice - that lies at the heart of neo-liberal economics. Moreover, the capacity of digital games to facilitate acts of self-transformation, whereby players can choose different clothing, facial features and hair styles as well as physical and psychological characteristics for their avatars, is highly compatible with a broader culture of consumerism, in which personal fulfillment can be bought through image makeovers, cosmetic surgery and self-help therapies. The explicitly masculinist subject matter of digital games is being increasingly configured as gender-neutral or the ‘norm’, with games aimed at the female market defined as special interest, in much the same way as female-oriented films and novels have been straight-jacketed into the ‘chick-flick’ and ‘chick-lit’ categories. Interestingly, such essentialist underpinnings are also evident in some of the academic literature on game culture.10

Finally, game culture revels in a postmodern aesthetics of parody, pastiche and irony, which again is not merely coincidental with postfeminist culture. According to Tasker and Negra (ibid.), “The pre-emptive irony that McRobbie pinpoints as a defining characteristic of postfeminist culture evidently chimes with the parodic play associated with postmodern aesthetics.” As Imelda Whelehan has so cogently illustrated, using irony to underscore postfeminist culture’s many precarious and contradictory ‘trouble spots’ has served as a useful escape clause or defense mechanism against claims of sexism, elitism and gender essentialism. All of the core tropes of postfeminism – choice, freedom, sexual aggression, a return to gender essentialism, competitive individualism, objectification of the female body, blindness to the masculinist nature of ‘normative’ forms of cultural expression and the eschewal of prejudicial barriers to equality – are also key features of most (male-oriented) digital games. The remainder of this paper explores in more detail how game-influenced technologies in cinema have different consequences for female characters than they do for male ones.

‘Boys’ games in drag’

Of all contemporary media forms, digital games arguably display the highest levels of investment in exaggerated gender stereotypes and cater (with the exception of pornography) to the most male-dominated media market. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that their influence on cinema (the Internet Movie Database currently lists 217 recent films which are ‘based on video games’11) not only reinforces gender stereotyping but also revives a masculinist spectatorial position within the grammar of cinema. Given that in game-playing the dynamic of first-person identification is arguably more explicit than in other, less interactive media, not only psychologically and emotionally but also physically (Grodal, 2003; Lahti, 2003), there also appears to be a higher level of investment in the protagonist’s gender. Discussions about gender substitutions tend to
expose this tension: for example, the author of a recent article on female game characters in *Edge* magazine asks rhetorically, “Can you imagine a female character swaggering away from a spot of group sex with a big grin and a health boost?” which indicates a clear delineation in the construction of male and female sexuality, whereby sexually-voracious female characters are acceptable only within certain constraints. Clearly, the success of a small number of female game protagonists, of which Lara Croft is the progenitor, indicates that men do not necessarily have a problem with playing female leads. According to Herz (1997, p182), the majority of games with female protagonists are “brilliant boys’ games in drag, and 95 percent of the people playing them are guys”. This may suggest that game-playing is a potential site for the performance of fluid gender identities. A more plausible explanation, however, is that players are unfazed by the airlifting of sexy female leads into a masculinist-defined and controlled ‘genderscape’, since the libidinal logic of game-playing remains essentially unchanged in this process. It is also possible that male players can oscillate between positions of identifying with a (male) character and controlling a (female) character.

Clearly, much empirical work remains to be done on processes of identification and spectatorship in relation to the new action heroines of both games and cinema. For the purposes of this paper, however, what is of interest is the apparent ease with which the kick-ass *femmes fatales* of digital games and ‘action babe cinema’ (O’Day, ibid.) have gained a foothold in the popular imaginary. Their acceptance by male audiences may partly signal a growing acceptance of female empowerment in the material world. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine that it is not linked to the increased sexualisation of female characters in these genres. As Graner Ray (2004, p104) explains in relation to game characters, “Male avatars are very often presented with exaggerated signals of youth and virility, such as broad shoulders, slim hips, and well-muscled arms. They are not, however, presented as hypersexualised. They do not display anything that indicates sexual receptiveness, such as an erection, red lips, or heavily lidded eyes, and their sexual organs are not enlarged to unrealistic proportions.” By comparison, most female game protagonists either fit the dominatrix mould or fall into the category of infantilised sex objects, evident in games such as *Red Ninja: End of Honour, Sega Ages 2500 Vol.1 - Phantasy Star: Generation:1, Final Fantasy: X-2 and Lifeline.* Manuals and catalogues such as *How to Create Virtual Beauties* (2004), *Virtual Beauties 2020* (2002), *Digital Beauties* (2001) and *Femme Digitale: Perfecting the Female Form on Your Computer* (2003) serve as a clear reminder that the pouting, wide-eyed icons of cyberspace (and increasingly of action cinema) are predominantly male creations. They thus dovetail male-dominated markets (computers, games, pornography) in ways that foster the mutual interdependence of technology and the eroticisation of women. According to Mary Flanagan (1999), the “obnoxiously sexualised female star” of contemporary digital culture is, “by virtue of her existence bound to erotic codes and interpretation through the means of her production.”

This is not to say that these ‘digital beauties’ cater to an exclusively straight male gaze: the successes of feminism have clearly allowed for the expansion of cultural norms, whereby many action movie / cyber heroines have been reappropriated as lesbian or feminist icons. However, while the iconography of cult games such as *Kiss Dolls*
(interactive striptease games featuring pre-pubescent anime females) or Ultravixen (a game whose narrative logic sanctions the rape and torture of the masochistic superheroeine) has become increasingly commonplace in the wider cinematic, televisual and music-video culture (Flanagan, ibid.), sexually fetishised male cyberstars authored by women, if such creations even exist, have made no such transition into the mainstream. The stark transformations to which female action heroes have been subjected become clearer when we compare the new heroines with earlier iconic figures such as Sarah Connor in The Terminator (1984), Ripley in Alien (1979) and Demi Moore in G.I. Jane (1997). These characters challenged both aspects of Mulvey’s (1975) dictum that men act and women are looked at: not only were their physical capabilities based on realistic, though impressive, acts of strength and endurance, but they also eschewed a (highly sexualised) male gaze. Devoid of make-up and dressed in torn vests and combats, they worked out hard to achieve the bodies that would enable them to survive. In the gameworld and postfeminist scheme of things, however, the super-achieving body is taken for granted. Both female action and female objectification have been radically exaggerated: the increased borrowing of game aesthetics has accentuated the sexual attributes of female action heroes, while the use of CGI, animation and timesplice / bullet-time techniques has bolstered their narrative agency in ways which, arguably, embody some the central paradoxes of postfeminist thinking about gender: for example, that women are free to self create, even though these characters are the products of male/masculinist fantasy; that female empowerment is a given, even though it is unavailable to most women; or that acts of violence and sexual servility are empowering, even though they are, in reality, damaging to both women and men.

Rather than liberating women from conventional concepts of beauty, therefore, the creative ‘freedoms’ afforded by CGI and CAD have further pushed the female form into the realm of the unattainable. The impossible combination of waif-like legs, page-3 size breasts and lightly muscled arms that characterises the comic-book/cyber-vamp aesthetic evident in Charlie’s Angels, Barb Wire, Resident Evil, Tomb Raider, BloodRayne and Heavy Metal 2000 thus complements postfeminism’s relentless problematisation of and quest for the ideal female form, the solution to which is an endless make-over project supported by consumption (of clothes, cosmetics, diet plans, gym memberships, beauty treatments and cosmetic surgery)14. Perhaps even more ominously, however, digital technologies have also played a crucial role in the recent feminisation of violence. The transition from real heroines to retro-digitised ones has facilitated cartoonishly violent performances, whereby women display an astounding ability, propensity and licence to kill. Today’s Angels, Laras and Buffys are significantly angrier and more destructive than their glossy-lipped sisters of the seventies: they don’t just kick ass - they kick hundreds of asses. According to Marc O’Day, the de-pathologising and professionalisation of female violence represents a progressive departure from rape revengers such as Baise Moi, I Spit on Your Grave and Thelma and Louise. However, the argument that the ‘de-gendering’ of violence brings us closer to gender equality is a precarious one.

Re/de-gendering violence
Firstly, the idea that letting women into the killing club constitutes equality not only subverts second-wave feminism’s long association with pacifism but also rolls back
feminist scholarship's deconstruction of the myth that aggression and violence are innately male. By decoupling violence from the power structures within which it operates, postfeminist imagery has reconstructed violence as gender-neutral but in a way that signals a radical departure from feminism’s understanding of violence primarily as a problem of the patriarchal construction of masculinity. To normalise or de-gender violence thus suggests that it no longer needs to be tackled as a problem of gender-based oppression, since it is now implied that women are or can be just as violent as men. This approach also overlooks the fact that female violence, as it is enacted in the social world, is still a deeply uncomfortable subject. Women who are violent towards men whom they know, such as Lorraine Bobbitt, are instantly mythologised as psychotic man-haters, while women who attack or murder total strangers are beyond comprehension. The multiple crimes inflicted by men on unknown female victims, on the other hand, are simply part of the daily news. Quoting a spokeswoman for Women in Prison in Britain, Clare Longrigg (2004) explains, "Women killers are punished twice over: once for the crime, and once for not behaving like women." The stories of real female murderers such as Myra Hindley, Rosetta Cutolo and Aileen Wuornos have sent shockwaves through public sensibilities in a way that those of their male counterparts rarely do. According to Longrigg (ibid.), "It's as though the crime represents the dark heart of society. Because we give women special status as nurturers and accord them the virtue of passivity, we tend to take it personally when a woman commits a violent act."

There is an important relationship between these ostensibly contradictory discourses, whereby in the 'real' world, female violence is transgressive and depraved, yet on the screen, it is sexy, sassy and liberating. Far from contradicting one another, the latter effectively serves to obscure the former by deflecting real social anxieties surrounding female violence. Thus the appeal of impossibly powerful, ass-kicking women lies not only in their failure to pose a significant threat to the status quo or to disrupt the 'sensory-motor logic' (Deleuze, 1986) of the action genre but also because they work to conceal both the more banal and the more barbaric inequities that continue to exist between men and women. According to Claudia Herbst (ibid.), “In technologically enhanced images of popular culture, women are encouraged to turn violent against men, against each other, and to be indifferent about the violence directed against themselves. In reality, women are far more likely to be the target an assault because they tend to be physically weaker than their aggressors. Amidst the rhetoric of empowerment, it is often overlooked that damage done and hurt inflicted on this side of the screen is real. Women’s onscreen ability to survive serious physical assault largely unscathed inadvertently implies tolerance of violence against women.” For Herbst, women’s ‘empowerment’ through weaponry and simultaneous disassociation with reproduction – facilitated by developments in military, computer and reproductive technologies and epitomised in Lara Croft’s physical coding as hyper-sexualised and hyper-violent but non-fertile - are therefore particularly dangerous for women.

(Gun)smoke and mirrors
Technological developments, and more specifically the stylistic excesses afforded by CGI, have thus facilitated powerful cultural images of women who ‘have it all’, while statistics continue to indicate that for real women ‘having it all’ means taking lower-paid,
part-time work and doing the second shift with children and housework. Paradoxically, however, it is a common feature of much postfeminist discourse to blame feminism for landing women with this ‘double burden’, while refusing to acknowledge that the real source of this problem lies with men’s unwillingness to take equal responsibility for housework and childcare (Kimmel, 2006). In this scenario, it would seem that media technologies have given rise to an impressive and far-reaching cultural discourse of female empowerment – more virtual than real – in which technological progress has come to stand in or compensate for a lack of substantive ideological progress. Arguably, the very idea that hyper-violent comic-book heroines could be signifiers of profound and complex political, economic and social change is in itself a typically postmodern, postfeminist conceit in its privileging of surface styles and images over evidence of persistent material inequities. The sexual and violent hyperbole of girl power, far from being removed from reality, is in fact a key symbolic part of a reality which understands female violence as both abject and sexually fascinating.

It does not necessarily follow, however, that action heroines cannot inspire, entertain or enlighten female audiences. As Flanagan and Booth (2002, p3) have commented in relation to the female characters of cyberfiction and digital games, “A picture of cyberspace as complex and contradictory develops; a space in which there is oppression as well as room for tactical and oppositional manoeuvres”. Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* is an interesting case in point. Although CGI, wirework stunts and time-splice techniques are used to enhance Beatrice’s physical powers in the numerous fight sequences, her sleek, boyish physique and tracksuit and trainers seem to disavow the possibility of a fetishistic male gaze. According to Molly Haskell (2004), Tarantino’s new women “are not women simply airlifted into male roles, with the traditional characteristics intact, but action roles conceived for women with women’s sorrows and women’s biology, in which they show the strengths and limits of their sex.” Interestingly, Aaron Anderson (2005) points out that the location of epic combat sequences in mundane, domestic settings generates a self-reflexive discourse on the way in which we think about (the cinematic performance of) violence. Haskell’s (ibid.) claim that *Kill Bill* is a “kind of parable of women’s empowerment” alludes to a more self-reflexive, symbolic use of violence, which is not so much about getting even with men, while at the same time turning them on, as it is about revealing Beatrice’s honourable character and astounding inner strength (Anderson, ibid.). Ultimately, however, the extent to which *Kill Bill* serves to normalise (female) violence or to encourage audiences to question their own preconceptions about women and violence is difficult to determine.

**Conclusion**

In 1986, Molly Haskell wrote that, “The closer women come to claiming their rights and achieving independence in real life, the more loudly and stridently films tell us it’s a man’s world.” Yet the past twenty years have witnessed something of a *volte-face* with respect to this dictum, whereby the *femmes fatales* of games and their remediation in cinema increasingly suggest female power and domination. The new icons of girl power undoubtedly offer queer pleasures to some and are inspirational in their attempts to
debunk myths about the ‘weaker sex’. However, citing them as evidence of female empowerment ultimately serves to deflect attention away from the real operations of power. Like Lara’s computer-generated breasts, such claims are simply too big to be true and, as daily newspaper reports should continue to remind us, real women cannot kick-box their way out of rape, abuse and prostitution. The creative liberties facilitated by digital technology certainly have massive transformative potential in their ability to appropriate and parody, rather than imitate or internalise, characteristics traditionally considered masculine or feminine. Within the constraints of a postfeminist-defined gender order, however, hot babes in hot pants would appear (re)present a worst-of-both-worlds scenario: as sexual objects who unquestioningly accept and internalise masculinist, patriarchal values in exchange for power or the illusion of power.

At best, the cyberbabe-inflected heroines of contemporary cinema can be understood as fantasies about the possibility of a more gender-fluid future. New game characters such as Jen in *Primal* and Jade in *Beyond Good and Evil*, who are significantly more athletic and less sexualised than Barb Wire and Lara Croft, may signal a move away from the dominatrix-inspired fantasies that were prevalent at the height of Lad Culture. Whether *Kill Bill*’s more playful and sophisticated “gender transactions” and “thefts” (O’Day, ibid.) are merely an exception or whether, as Haskell more recently suggests, the closure of *Kill Bill Vol. 2* signals “a passing of the torch” and the “birth of a new myth” remains to be seen. Barbara Creed (2000) claims that the digital revolution has, to a large extent, freed film from its ties to history and the physical world. Like all technological developments, however, this can – and does - have both liberating and restrictive consequences for women. In the realm of cultural representations, the freedoms afforded by digital technology have served a predominantly counter-feminist / postfeminist agenda by advancing exaggerated myths of equality, while at the same time reinforcing highly consumer-driven, nip/tucked and airbrushed images of female beauty. In effect, the stylised hyperbole of action cinema’s techno-babes works to conceal the real failures of technology to address the actual causes and effects of gender inequality. Contrary to claims that women have hijacked the action genre, it might in fact be more plausible to suggest that many recent action movies have hijacked feminism.
Bibliography


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Paul, Pamela. Pornified: how pornography is transforming our lives, our relationships, and our families, Times Books/Henry Holt, 2005.


Filmography

Alien (UK, 1979)
20th Century Fox / Brandywine Productions Ltd.
Director: Ridley Scott
Producer: Gordon Caroll, David Giler, Walter Hill
Colour, 117 mins.

Baise Moi (France, 2000)
Director: Virginie Despentes Coralie
Producer: Philippe Godeau
Colour, 77 mins.

Barb Wire (USA, 1996)
Dark Horse Entertainment / Polygram Filmed Entertainment / Propaganda Films
Director: David Hogan
Producer: Todd Moyer, Mike Richardson, Brad Wyman
Colour, 98 mins.

Charlie’s Angels (USA, Germany, 2000)
Colombia Pictures Corporation / Flower Films (II) / Global Entertainment Productions GmbH & Company Medien KG / Tall Trees Productions
Director: McG
Producer: Drew Barrymore
Colour, 98 mins.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (Taiwan, Hong Kong, USA, China, 2000)
Asia Union Film & Entertainment Ltd. / China Film Co-production Corporation
Director: Ang Lee
Producer: Li-Kong Hsu, William Kong, Ang Lee
Colour, 120 mins.

Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within (USA, Japan, 2001)
Chris Lee Productions / Square Co. Ltd. / Square USA
Director: Hirononu Sakaguchi, Moto Sakakibara (co-director)
Producer: Jun Aida
Colour, 106 mins.

G.I. Jane (USA, 1997)
Caravan Pictures / First Independent Films / Hollywood Pictures
Director: Ridley Scott
Producer: Roger Birnbaum
Colour, 124 mins.

I Spit on Your Grave (USA, 1978)
Cinemagic Pictures
Director: Meir Zarchi
Producer: Meir Zarchi, Joseph Zbeda
Colour, 100 mins.

**Kill Bill Vol. 1** (USA, 2003)
Miramax Films / A Band Apart / Super Cool ManChu
Director: Quentin Tarantino
Producer: Lawrence Bender
Colour, 111 mins.

**Kill Bill Vol. 2** (USA, 2004)
Miramax Films / A Band Apart / Super Cool ManChu
Director: Quentin Tarantino
Producer: Lawrence Bender
Colour, 136 mins.

**Lara Croft Tomb Raider** (UK, Germany, USA, Japan, 2001)
British Broadcasting Corporation / Eidos Interactive Ltd. / KFP Produktion GmbH & Co. KG / Lawrence Gordon Productions / Mutual Film Company / Paramount Pictures / Tele- München (TMG) / Toho-Towa
Producer: Lawrence Gordon
Director: Simon West
Colour, 100 mins.

**Lara Croft Tomb Raider: the Cradle of Life** (USA, Germany, Japan, UK, Netherlands, 2003)
British Broadcasting Corporation / Eidos Interactive Ltd. / Lawrence Gordon Productions / Mutual Film Company / Paramount Pictures / Tele- München (TMG) / Toho-Towa
Producer: Lawrence Gordon
Director: Jan de Bont
Colour, 117 mins.

**Resident Evil** (UK, Germany, France, USA, 2002)
Constantin Film Produktion GmbH / Davis-Films / Impact Pictures / New Legacy
Director: Paul W.S. Anderson
Producer: Paul W.S. Anderson, Jeremy Bolt
Colour, 100 mins.

**Resident Evil Apocalypse** (Germany, France, UK, Canada, 2004)
Constantin Film Produktion GmbH / Davis-Films / Impact Pictures
Director: Alexander Witt
Producer: Paul W.S. Anderson, Jeremy Bolt, Don Carmody
Colour, 81 mins.

**Run Lola Run** (Germany, 1998)
X-Filme Creative Pool, Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) / arte
Director: Tom Tykwer
Producer: Stefan Arndt
Colour, 117 mins.

*Terminator, The* (USA, 1984)
Hemdale Film Corporation / Cinema 84 / Euro Film Fund / Pacific Western
Director: James Cameron
Producer: Gale Anne Hurd
Colour, 108 mins.

*Matrix, The* (USA, 1999)
Groucho II Film Partnership / Silver Pictures / Village Roadshow Pictures
Director: Andy Wachowski, Larry Wachowski
Producer: Joel Silver
Colour, 136 mins.

*Thelma and Louise* (USA, 1991)
Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) / Pathé Entertainment
Director: Ridley Scott
Producer: Mimi Polk Gitlin, Ridley Scott
Colour, 129 mins.

*X-Men* (USA, 2000)
Director:
Producer:
Colour, 117 mins.

*X-2* (USA, 2003)
20th Century Fox / Marvel Enterprises / The Donners’ Company / Bad Hat Harry Productions
Director: Bryan Singer
Producer: Lauren Shuler Donner, Ralph Winter
Colour, 133 mins.

**Gameography**
(All information from www.mobygames.com)

*Barb Wire* (1996/II)
No information available

*Beyond Good and Evil* (2003)
Ubisoft Entertainment
Platform: GameCube, PlayStation 2, Xbox

*Biohazard aka Resident Evil* (1996)
Capcom Entertainment, Inc.
Platform: PlayStation, Saturn, Windows

Square Co. Ltd.
Platform: PlayStation 2

Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Prophecy (2002)
Ubi Soft Entertainment
Platform: Game Boy Advance

Eidos Interactive Ltd.
Platform: PlayStation 2, Windows

Lifeline (2003)
SCEI
Platform: PlayStation 2

Primal (UK, 2003)
Sony Computer Entertainment Europe
Platform: PlayStation 2

Vivendi Universal Games, Inc.
Platform: PlayStation 2

Resident Evil 2 (1998)
Capcom Entertainment, Inc.
Platform: Dreamcast, GameCube, Nintendo 64, PlayStation, Windows

Resident Evil 3: Nemesis (1999)
Capcom Entertainment, Inc.
Platform: Dreamcast, GameCube, PlayStation, Windows

Resident Evil Zero (2002)
Capcom USA, Inc.
Platform: GameCube

Resident Evil 4 (2005)
Capcom Entertainment, Inc.
Platform: GameCube

SEGA Entertainment, Inc.
Platform: PlayStation 2
It should be noted from the outset that digital games discussed here are primarily traditional console games. As Sheri Graner Ray (2004) points out, online games are considerably more gender-inclusive and 70% of casual online gamers are female.

For recent reports on women’s use of ICTs, see Strategies of Inclusion: Gender and the Information Society (http://www.rcss.ed.ac.uk/sigis/).

See cybergrrl.com, webgrrls.com and riotgrrl.com for examples of online cyberfeminist fora.


Tomb Raider Trivia link on Internet Movie Database (http://www.imdb.com, accessed 7th April 2006).

For detailed examples of references to the original games, see the Trivia links for these films on Internet Movie Database (http://www.imdb.com, accessed 7th April 2006).

Tagline for l’Oréal’s advertising campaign ‘Different for Girls’, Edge magazine, September 2006, p.70.

Perhaps the most overt example of this is Gender Wars, a GT Interactive title, which presents a future in which men and women strive to annihilate one another.

While some authors acknowledge that the lower number of female gamers and the strict gender divisions that characterise game preferences are attributable to early social conditioning of boys and girls (Graner Ray, 2004), others advance an unquestioningly gender-determinist account of male and female preferences and playing styles (see Justine Cassel, cited in Herz, 1997). While game developers desperately seek to expand the market by trying to figure out what
kinds of games women would like to play, there is little if any consideration given to the possibility that non-violent, strategy-based games might also appeal to large sections of the male population who have no interest in action or violence.

11 See http://www.imdb.com/keyword/based-on-video-game/?start=1&sort=rating, accessed 22.11.06.
13 The book description for Femme Digitale boasts, “Here you’ll discover an international digital beauty pageant of sexy CGI women in a full range of techniques: Lara Croft-style action adventurers, surreal fantasy Amazons, biker-chicks as gleaming and tough as the hogs they’re draped over, wide-eyed rock-and-roll pixies, and more.”
14 Note how magazines such as Heat and Now present confusing and contradictory messages about ideal body weight by scolding celebrities for being too thin one week, and the next week showing close-ups of their cellulite and ‘muffin tops’.