

Does Lara Croft Wear Fake Polygons? Gender and Gender-Role Subversion in Computer Adventure Games

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Post-industrial capitalist economies are developing into cultures of “play,” in which a pervasive “play ethic” is superseding the work ethic [1]. According to economist Jeremy Rifkin, as large percentages of the human labor force are rendered superfluous by more efficient technologies, we will need to reinvest value in other sorts of human activities that fall outside of the production paradigm [2]. Even within corporate environments, play is seeping into the workplace: for instance, “strung-out” programmers may blow off steam by participating in a Local Area Network (LAN) deathmatch [3].

Within technoculture and disseminating out across class, ethnic and geographical barriers, younger generations into their late 20s are devoting increasing amounts of recreation time to addictive computer games. Reflecting the re-orientation of society after the decline of print, and later of radio and television, computer games are now socializing the younger generations of post-industrial citizens, reorganizing their worldviews and thought parameters along the axes of fighting games, shooters, adventure games, strategy games, multi-user dungeons (MUDs) and other networked games [4]. At its most extreme, a new type of subject/player is emerging, who takes her or his game play very seriously. This person is often called a “gamer.”

Through the mid-1990s, postmodern and feminist theoreticians, art-and-technology critics and even popular-culture critics largely ignored the increasing popularity of computer games, lending their attention instead to the Web or to the considerably less ubiquitous, less tangible technology of virtual reality. The lack of academic research in the field of computer games can be attributed to two factors, the first being the notion that computer games are merely toys for children and thus properly relegated to the field of pedagogy. The second is an absence of a tradition of research and development at universities for even the technical and craft-oriented aspects of computer games—much of recent innovation has occurred within the game industry outside of university labs. Another factor may be the widespread belief that computer games are violent and unhealthy forms of entertainment and therefore do not merit as much exploration as potentially utopian technologies such as virtual reality.

Ranging this fairly sparse theoretical landscape, my re-

search involving the nascent “third-person shooter/adventure game with female heroine” genre—exemplified by Eidos Interactive and Core Design’s popular game *Tomb Raider*—has led me from gender analysis of film, particularly of the horror film genre, to science fiction, to virtual reality theory, to Internet identity theory, to queer theory, to my own Internet survey of *Tomb Raider* fans [5,6]. I also investigated the subculture of subversive game hacking and the production of game patches, art strategies that provide an opportunity for feminists and hackers alike to influence the formation of new gender configurations. This text is written as a tour guide into a curious terrain with side attractions along the way, both familiar and outlandish. It is not intended to wrap things up in a puncture-proof bubble of thesis, proof and conclusion. Nevertheless, this jaunt through computer game genres, game-player subjectivity and on-line game hacker culture will take us someplace where we will not have arrived without stopping to wonder at various things along the way.

Fig. 1. *Black Widow*. This is an example of the 2D games popular in the 1980s. Spiders and bugs are restricted to moving on the single flat plane of the spider web.



ABSTRACT

The subject matter of this article emerged in part out of research for the author’s thesis project and first game patch, *Madame Polly*, a “first-person shooter gender hack.” Since the time it was written, there has been an upsurge of interest and research in computer games among artists and media theoreticians. Considerable shifts in gaming culture at large have taken place, most notably a shift toward on-line games, as well as an increase in the number of female players. The multi-directional information space of the network offers increasing possibilities for interventions and gender reconfigurations such as those discussed at the end of the article.

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A previous version of this article appeared in 1998 in the on-line graduate student ’zine *Switch* of the C.A.D.R.E. Institute in San Jose, California <<http://switch.sjsu.edu/web/v4n1/toc.html>>.

BEFORE TOMB RAIDER

When one considers the progress that has been made during the [gaming] medium's first 25 years, it is enormous. Even film, another rapidly developing medium, was, for the most part, still black and white and silent after its first quarter century. Comparing Pong to 64-bit CD-ROM-based games, it is difficult to say what even the next five years will bring, much less what the effects of such future technology will be.

—Mark J.P. Wolf [7]

Sometimes a killer body just isn't enough.

—back of Tomb Raider CD case

The first computer games displayed simple abstract graphics (Fig. 1), structuring visual on/off-screen space and interactivity in a variety of novel configurations [8]. With ever-increasing graphical processing speed, computer games are catching up to the West's dream of virtual reality, depicted by Jaron Lanier and other virtual reality evangelists, artists and science-fiction writers as a holistic, Cartesian 3D space navigated/created by the individual viewer. In his article "Virtual Reality as the End of the Enlightenment Project," artist and media theorist Simon Penny tracks the humanist gaze of the user in popular con-

ceptions of virtual reality to the subject position inhabited by the viewer of a Renaissance painting. Penny locates a "yearning" for Cartesian illusions rooted in Western culture since the Enlightenment [9].

The actions occurring in this first widely implemented form of 3D game space are not virtual adaptations of everyday social relations, as predicted by early cyberpunk novelists, but codified sets of behaviors particular to certain game genres. In the case of the "shooter/adventure" game, itself a hybrid of what were once two genres (shooter and adventure), player activities are reduced to fighting off attackers, exploring "undiscovered" spaces and solving puzzles.

Until recently, the characters, or avatars, in these games were almost exclusively male, with the exception of the princesses offered as battle trophies in *Prince of Persia*, *Double Dragon* and other games. This notable feminine absence led Gillian Skirrow to locate femininity in the computer game's womb-like tunneling architecture [10]. Enter Lara Croft, the first immensely popular game heroine, of the game *Tomb Raider*, released in 1996 (fig. 2). Although countless fan websites attest to her international status as female "cyberstar," she embodies an impure history quite distant from the networked, non-individualistic and non-competitive, community-

oriented values being promoted by some cyberfeminists on the Internet [11].

THE GENDER MAKE-UP OF LARA CROFT

My approach to the Lara Croft archetype is best served by using an analytical modus operandi that is cyborgian, piecemeal and polymorphous. My analysis does not attempt to fixate the subject in one final position in relation to her or his Lara Croft avatar but allows for a multiplicity of sometimes quite contrary positions and subjectivities. A single subject may morph and oscillate between these positions or roles, or gravitate more strongly toward one player/subject position. With particular attention to gender, I have isolated a few of these positions, delineating some specific patterns of how a player/subject may mesh with her or his avatar. I refer to these as "gender-subject configurations."

Lara as Female Frankenstein Monster

Lara Croft is seen as the monstrous offspring of science: an idealized, eternally young female automaton, a malleable, well-trained techno-puppet created by and for the male gaze [12]. *Tomb Raider* is a "third-person shooter," in which the player actually sees the body of her/his own avatar. In a "first-person shooter," the player's avatar is invisible to her- or himself but visible to other players if it is a multi-player game. The angled "third-person" view of Lara Croft from behind and below and the shifting close-up and wide-angle camera shots effect a visual fragmentation of Lara's Barbie-like proportions. In her 1970 landmark essay "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey described the cinematic mechanisms by which women's bodies are fetishized, fragmented and posited as objects of the male gaze. We see these same cinematic apparatuses at work in *Tomb Raider* [13]. The popular *Nude Raider* patch, a pornographic add-on that removes Lara's clothing, is further evidence of this gender-subject configuration, which posits Lara as fetish object of the male gaze.

The fusion of femininity, death and technology in characters like Lara Croft is a lucrative and enduring formula in capitalist market-based economies, a potent combination noted as early as 1951 in Marshall McLuhan's essay, "The Mechanical Bride" [14]. Lara's lineage can be traced back through nineteenth-cen-



Fig. 2. "The Last Revelation," screenshot from the computer game *Tomb Raider*. (© Eidos Interactive, Inc.) Countless fan websites attest to Lara Croft's international status as female "cyberstar."



Fig. 3. From artist Robert Nideffer's gender-bending Tomb Raider patches. For the on-line exhibit *Cracking the Maze: Game Patches as Hacker Art*, Nideffer prepared these Lara patches, which mix matters up further. These patches question whether Lara is a lesbian butch Mona Lisa or a drag queen who forgot to shave.

tury science-fiction robots, Gothic literature, the female robot in Fritz Lang's "Metropolis," mannequins, blow-up dolls and comic-book heroines. She is a product of the mechanization of bodies; her fetishized synthetic beauty resides in her slick and glistening 3D polygons, evolved from clunky robotic forms into attire more appropriate for the information society [15].

Some feminists view Lara the female Frankenstein monster as a disturbing trend in computer gaming culture, where boys and men are permitted to develop unrealistic ideals of female body type, or to dispense with relating to human women whatsoever, replacing them with easily controlled virtual female bots [16]. But as has been formulated in gender studies and queer theory in response to earlier feminist scholarship, this reading may in some ways be very necessary, but it does not take into account player/subject positions other than that of the heterosexual male.

Lara as Drag Queen

The predominantly male players of games like Tomb Raider are drawn into identification with the female avatar, immersed in the combat and puzzles of the game. Here the computer game "avatar" operates as an externalized Lacanian "mirror image" of the subject [17]. In his essay "The Mirror Stage," Lacan identifies the key moment when an infant first

recognizes her or his reflection in the mirror, engendering the formation of ego, a perception of the self as a member of the symbolic order or rules of society/language. This perception of self extends and develops throughout the individual's lifetime. Similarly, over the course of a game, the construction of the player's feminine identity emerges from the reflective connectivity of the player's identification with the avatar's movements in the game space (a sort of alternate "mirror" reality). Rigid gender roles are broken down, allowing the young boys and men who constitute the majority of Tomb Raider players to experiment with "wearing" a feminine identity, echoing the phenomenon of gender crossing in Internet chat rooms and MUDs.

According to Net psychologist Sherry Turkle, virtual contexts can provide a safe zone for gender experimentation, without the more difficult social consequences of going drag in "real life" [18]. Turkle argues that even heterosexual Internet users can benefit in "real life," therapeutically and socially, from inhabiting the other gender's skin on-line. Sandy Stone takes the discussion of multiple and cross gender virtual characters a step further by making the case that virtual characters are multiple selves that extend outside the flesh body into cyberspace. Rather than portraying these multiple selves as fictitious characters who mask an individual player's sin-

gular core "real life" identity, Stone perceives these multiple personas as extensions of the many different roles we play on- and off-line, part and parcel of the natural condition of schizophrenia that we all inhabit [19].

Tomb Raider as a single-player game, however, does not afford the live social feedback loops inherent in MUDs and chat rooms—social responses that contribute as much to identity building and "gendering" as the act of "dressing up" in drag [20]. Nevertheless, the male player navigates Lara's voluptuous female figure through the cavernous architecture of the game much the way a drag queen navigates her ultrafeminine form along a runway (Fig. 3), fake polygonal breasts thrust defiantly forward, accompanied by breathless feminine pants and commentary. ("Ah hah!" exclaims Lara every time s/he finds a "secret.") And although the game lacks in multi-player social response, there are occasions where Lara/the player finds herself/himself interacting with non-player characters. Animals, monsters, dinosaurs and human characters exhibit certain behaviors in combat that Lara/the player must learn to interact with. Human non-player characters sometimes impart information that is key to puzzle solving, although usually at these junctures the game shifts to a cinematic, narrative, "anime" mode, which precludes involved player interaction.

Carol Clover has constructed a less affirmative reading of male-to-female cross-gender identification in slasher horror films than Stone and Turkle did in their explorations of on-line cross-gender role play. Clover focuses her attention on "the final girl," the protagonist in films like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2* [21]. According to Clover's analysis, in this particular genre of horror film the "final girl" alone survives bloody conflict, her "phallicized body" operating as a "stand-in" vehicle for the male viewer's repressed (never acknowledged) homoeroticism. A similar concern arises with male Tomb Raider players—none of the players who responded to my survey were willing to admit to a cross-dressing relationship with Lara. As cross-gender avatar identification becomes more common in various computer games, I suspect (or at least I hope) that the boundaries between "real life" gender norms and game gender norms will become more fluid, allowing for gender experimentation to become more openly accepted in mainstream culture.

Lara as Dominatrix, Femme Fatale

Lara's leather boots "are made for walking," her holster belt is tight, and her arsenal of ammo, pistols and assault rifles is at her fingertips. Some male game players in my survey indicated an affinity for the victims of the female computer game protagonist. (In *Tomb Raider*, these victims are mostly animals—unfortunate lions, rats, monkeys and occasional dinosaurs.) These players likely derive masochistic pleasure from Lara's repeated destruction of her enemies and their consequent death cries and throes of agony.

This subject configuration is also apparent in plug-ins and patches for games available on the Internet, for example, the patch entitled "Amazons and Female Robertas" for the first-person shooter called *Marathon*. "Amazons and Female Robertas" replaces the male alien attackers in *Marathon* with ridiculously well-endowed, bare-breasted Amazons. Being attacked by one of these Amazons may be as close to a session with a live dominatrix as some masochistically inclined gamers will ever come.

Lara as Positive Role Model

Lara Croft can present for women and girls a possible entry point into the male discursive domain of computer games. Similar to the creation by male science-fiction writers such as Alfred Bester and Samuel Delany of tough female heroines in cyberpunk fiction, predating the emergence of female science-fiction writers and a female readership, the appearance of female heroines in computer games, albeit male constructions of femininity, can be seen as a first step, an invitation for women to play computer games. The second step would be for women and girls to begin to influence the construction of their virtual counterparts in computer games through greater participation in gaming culture and a higher level of involvement in the industry.

In the sense that "being a bad girl can be good for women" (the logical inversion of Deborah Tolman and Tracy Higgins's article, "How Being a Good Girl Can Be Bad for Women"), violent, capable and sexy women like Lara Croft might be better role models for girls than the few games that have been targeted specifically at girls, such as *Ms. Pacman*, *Barbie Fashion Designer* and the nonviolent, social games produced by Purple Moon [22]. Whatever else she may be, Lara does not fit the "bimbo"



Fig. 4. *Otakon Doom Wad Screenshot*. This screenshot shows *Otakon Doom*, a patch for the classic first-person shooter *Doom*, with a female anime fighter named Priss <<http://www.netaxs.com/~sleet/otakon/doom.html>>.

stereotype (the vapid battle-trophy princess common to earlier computer games). Lara's character profile is that of a highly educated and adventurous upper-class British woman, as adept at combat techniques as at puzzle solving (the actual skills developed through game play). Game play itself is an important pedagogical tool as a prime motivator for boys to learn computer skills, not to mention the more abstract values and modalities of competition, collaboration, strategizing and puzzle solving that are imparted through game play. From a feminist perspective, it is important for women not to be excluded from this cycle or from the positions of influence in the larger information sector that will be increasingly tied into an "education" in gaming/computer-geek culture.

Lara as a Vehicle for the Queer Female Gaze

Why should fantasy experiences of violence be exclusively a heterosexist and/or masculine domain? Cogent female heroines like Lara Croft or lesbian television idol Xena, "the Warrior Princess," offer women an opportunity to indulge in the abject pleasures of violent bloody conflict. In her book *Skin Shows*, Judith Halberstam describes a process of "interpretive mayhem" embodied in gothic and horror monsters. In the chapter entitled "Bodies that Splatter," she reappropriates the female horror-flick heroine as a vehicle for the queer female gaze, applying Michel Foucault's and Judith Butler's theories of subjectivity and gender formation to "Stretch," heroine of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2*

[23]. She writes, "The technology of monsters when channeled through a dangerous woman with a chainsaw becomes a powerful and queer strategy for activating and enabling monstrosity as opposed to stamping it out" [24]. What Halberstam is arguing for is a queer space for slippage between binary gender categories that allows for "monstrous" genders to emerge.

The queer female gaming subject also delights in the abject annihilation of her foes, in the adrenaline rush of combat, the exchange of cuts, shots and blows that rupture the body surface of "the other" (not to mention the eventual satisfaction of seeing the enemy's corpse lying in a pool of bitmapped blood on the ground). Violent computer games and horror films reverse the score on Julia Kristeva's "abject," the disgust and repulsion for that which transgresses boundaries between self and other, subjecthood and objecthood, order and the unclean, law and deviance [25]. In the fantasy realm of *Tomb Raider*, the abject is transformed from repulsion to visceral thrill, opening up a queer channel to pleasure for the female gamer.

GAME PLUG-INS AND PATCHES AS PROTO-FEMINIST HACKER ART

It's nice to think of artists as hackers who endeavor to get inside cultural systems and make them do things they were never intended to do: artists as culture hackers.

—Brett Stalbaum [26]

The Internet provides the technoculture researcher with a visible mapping of desire, digital evidence of an internationally shared lust for the Nude Raider patch [27]. A Web search for Nude Raider produces innumerable fan sites requesting the Nude Raider patch and displaying Nude Raider screen shots (1,072,226 hits from one search with the Excite search engine). An older version of the official Tomb Raider homepage itself even contained a link to the Nude Raider patch. Nude Raider strips Lara Croft's already scant clothing to reveal polygonal tits and ass as she fights her way up the game levels, operating within the bounds of gender-subject configuration No. 1: Lara as fetish object of the male gaze. Not all game patches so explicitly echo or reinforce a particular feature of the original game—in the case of Nude Raider, an exaggeration of Lara's synthetic erotic appeal. A concentrated Web search on almost any shooter produces a stratum of alternate and more subversive game scenarios in the form of game plug-ins and patches offered freely from fans' personal websites. Some game companies, like Bungie, developers of Marathon, and id Software, developers of Doom and Quake, have even capitalized on this widespread hacking by packaging software with their games that makes it easier to manipulate and create new game scenarios.

Some of the more amusing patches created by hacker artists—and they often create more than one—include one for the first-person shooter Doom that morphs the attackers into monster-sized chickens and kangaroos, another Doom patch entitled “Barney and His Minions,” and the Marathon patch that replaces the game characters with Gumby dolls of various colors [28]. These patches undermine the extremely macho codes of interaction in these games by replacing the standard adult male characters with androgynous animals and goofy children's fantasy characters. Although a category of “feminist game-hacker art” would be premature, since there are very few women participating in this realm of cultural production, there are female protagonists in patches that predate Tomb Raider, Resident Evil and Vigilance [29]. The *Marathon* Infinity patch “Tina Shapes and Tina Sounds” replaces the protagonist, Infinity Bob, with a female. A Japanese Doom patch entitled “Otakon Doom” (Fig. 4) replaces the protagonist with a Japanese anime girl fighter named Priss.

These patches suggest that the boundary between game patches and official games is permeable, that not only do game patches subvert and diversify gender stereotypes in official games, but that game-hacker artists also influence the kinds of gender-subject configurations that will inform the production of future games. As such, game patches not only provide an index to what may be the next Tomb Raider, they offer a possible strategic means for feminists to participate in the formation of new gender configurations. From Lara as female automaton to Lara as drag queen, Lara as dominatrix, Lara as girl-power role model and Lara as queer babe with shotgun, a new range of subject positions will emerge in on-line game hacking culture that challenge given gender categories and adapt them to the diverse gender sensibilities of men, women and others.

APPENDIX

Anonymous Tomb Raider Survey

(Distributed by Andy Schleiner to 30 respondents over e-mail from April to May of 1998)

Directions: This is not a joke. Please answer the short list of questions as accurately as possible. Mark the multiple choice ones with an x.

1. Age:
2. Sex:
Male
Female
3. You are:
Single
In a Couple
4. You are:
Straight
Gay
Bi
5. How long have you played video games?
6. When playing Tomb Raider my relationship to the protagonist, Lara Croft would be best described as:
 - a. I identify with her and feel immersed in the game world.
 - b. She is a puppet that I am conscious of watching and controlling
 - c. I sympathize with other characters/monsters in the game when Lara Croft annihilates them
 - d. Other (Please describe)
7. When I play Tomb Raider I feel: (Please mark all that apply)
 - a. tough
 - b. superhuman
 - c. swift
 - d. strong

- e. girly
- f. sexy
- g. sadistic
8. A 3D virtual woman like Lara Croft is attractive because:
 - a. she has perfect body proportions
 - b. her polygons turn me on
 - c. she has a plastic 3D look
 - d. she knows how to fight and use her weapons
 - e. other (Please explain)
9. Would you like to have a wider selection of characters to choose from in Tomb Raider?
 - a. If yes, which of the following:
 - b. men characters
 - c. more women characters
 - d. male monsters
 - e. female monsters
10. Have you ever used the Nude Raider plug-in?
11. If yes, why were you attracted to it and did it fulfill your expectations?
12. Have you ever played a character of the opposite sex in a MUD?

References and Notes

1. Sandy Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995) p. 9.
2. Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995) p. 236.
3. A deathmatch is a multi-player shooter game played between a small number of combatants.
4. Marshall McLuhan, “The Gutenberg Galaxy,” in *The Essential McLuhan*, Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingron, eds. (New York: Basic Books, 1995).
5. Tomb Raider came out in 1996, followed by Tomb Raider II; Tomb Raider III; Tomb Raider: The Lost Artifact; Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation; and Tomb Raider: Chronicles. The game is soon to be the basis for a major motion picture. There are rumors of similar games soon to be released.
6. The survey is included in the Appendix to this article. The survey contains multiple-choice questions in respect to different power relations between game player and avatar. The survey also collected demographic information regarding the gender and sexuality of game players. The survey was distributed to Tomb Raider fans on the Internet from April to May of 1998.
7. Mark J.P. Wolf, “Inventing Space: Toward a Taxonomy of On- and Off-Screen Space in Video Games,” *Film Quarterly* 51, No. 1 (1997) p. 22.
8. See Wolf [7].
9. Simon Penny, “Virtual Reality as the End of the Enlightenment Project” (1992) <http://www.art.cfa.cmu.edu/Penny/texts/VR_Dia.html>.
10. Gillian Skirrow, “Hellvision: An Analysis of Video Games,” in Colin McCabe, ed., *High Theory/Low Culture. Analysing Popular Television and Games* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester Univ. Press, 1986).
11. Judy Malloy is one of the early pioneer artists in this area. See <<http://www.eastgate.com/people/Malloy.html>>.
12. Chris Csikszentmihalyi, lecture presented at San Jose State University in April 1998.
13. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cin-

ema," in Constance Penley, ed., *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

14. Marshall McLuhan, "The Mechanical Bride," in McLuhan and Zingron [4].

15. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Random House, 1976) p. 106.

16. See Csikszentmihalyi [12].

17. Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage," in *Ecrits: A Selection*, Alan Sheridan, trans. (New York: Norton, 1977).

18. Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995) p. 10.

19. See Stone [1] p. 92.

20. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) p. 33.

21. Carol Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992) p. 61.

22. Deborah Tolman and Tracy Higgins, "How Being

a Good Girl Can Be Bad for Women," in Nan Bauer Maglin and Donna Perry, eds., *Good Girls/Bad Girls* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1994).

23. Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1995) pp. 138–177.

24. See Halberstam [23] p. 143.

25. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982) pp. 1–5.

26. Brett Stalbaum, interview in *Rhizome*, 1 May 1998.

27. A game patch is sometimes merely a bit of code that fixes a bug; patches do not always radically alter a game.

28. Many of these humorous Doom wads are available at <<http://www.geocities.com/TimesSquare/5759/doom.html>>.

29. Some exceptions are cultural hackers from the fine art rather than the popular art arena, including the Australian women's artist group VNS Matrix and my own Marathon hack, Madame Polly. Also, as it is sometimes difficult to identify gender on the Internet, there may be women game hacker artists,

although until now my leads have turned out to be men with feminine names.

Manuscript received 28 September 1998.

Anne-Marie Schleiner is a writer, artist and on-line curator. Her work investigates the domains of avatar gender construction, computer gaming culture and hacker art. She has produced artworks and texts for the Web and print venues. She has exhibited artworks and on-line curatorial projects at such art venues as the Public Netbase Center in Vienna and Kiasma Museum in Helsinki. She has often contributed as a writer and editor to Switch, an electronic art journal based in California. She is an affiliate member of the artist corporation c5 and teaches interactive arts at TechBC in Vancouver, Canada.

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