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SEPTEMBER 1997 £2.80

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ESQUIRE

GIRLS WILL BE BORGS

Rhona Mitra is real-life Lara Croft, *Tomb Raider* star

All the while I'm talking to Rhona Mitra, I keep thinking about Dolph Lundgren. Admittedly, it is not the reaction of a sane man. I think things would be different if, as planned, we'd met for tea at The Ritz. Face to face with Rhona, I'm sure I'd have thought about Lara Croft, star of the phenomenally successful computer game *Tomb Raider*.

A running, jumping, strategising, gun-toting, wolf-wasting, unfeasibly pneumatic Bit Girl who's left a trail of blistered thumbs (and, one imagines, strained wrists) in her wake, Lara has turned the *Raiders of the Lost Ark*-style

sawn-off shorts and Timberlands. And she fills out her new role as well as any flesh-and-blood woman capable of standing without assistance could be expected to.

So if we'd met, I'm sure I wouldn't think about anything but Lara. But schedules mean we're talking on the phone and I'm thinking about the action hero remembered for doing time as a punching bag for Sly Stallone and Grace Jones.

To be more specific, I'm thinking about Dolph Lundgren when he appeared on Jonathan Ross's *The Last Resort*, to plug his new role, as He-Man in *Masters of the Universe*, a film spun off a successful line of plastic toy figures. Ross was merciless: how did Dolph get into character – by hanging round toy shops? He produced a He-Man figure and made the bamboozled meat boy engage in a press-up competition with him.

I wonder if Rhona should expect something similar. Still, I'm sure she can take care of herself. Before we talk she's had a day of media training and is clearly hyped up to stay on-message and discuss only Lara. Enquiries about her past and previous acting (you may have seen her in Jilly Cooper's TV schlockbuster *The Man Who Made Husbands Jealous*) are rebuffed. Even a query about her age is pushed aside. "I'm old enough," she says. "Old enough to kick your ass."

Very Lara. Rhona thinks her resemblance to the computerised action girl is more than physical. She's been through the same experiences. According to *Tomb Raider*'s back story, upper-class English rose Lara was the sole survivor of a plane crash in the Himalayas. So what has Rhona been through? She isn't saying. She wants to talk about Lara's appeal, something she feels she knows from the inside.

She is, says Rhona, "a girl with a focus". She gets on with the task in hand, that being some Indiana Jones business involving lost antiquities, nasty wolves and dodgy Frenchmen. "People think she's a bit of a Tank Girl – she's not. It's not about attitude. She's just got an agenda."

Those who see Lara as a sort of silicon sister to the Fab Five, a Cyber Spice, are also wrong, says Rhona. Lara has moved to the next level in the girl power game (post-Spice then). "Her main asset is she's enigmatic, so people can use their imagination and that's what makes the game so successful."

Others would differ on what Lara's main assets were. The games press have used their imagination in a rather basic way, unleashing a stream of "get your bits out for the lads" slaving, predictably followed by web sites featuring mocked-up nude shots and claims that if you wiggle your joystick in a particular way while playing, you can get Lara to do the game naked.

Rhona says she and Eidos (the game's publishers – it's designed by Core) don't encourage this. (There must be another reason why the single's called "Naked".) Does she worry about measuring up to Lara? Presumably she'll be packing a seriously padded bra to her public appearances. "No I won't," she says, adding that she doesn't need to. "Which will please a lot of people, I'm sure."

Padded bra or not, will Lara be able to thrive in the real world? Superficially, the precedents don't look good. In the early Nineties, *Mario* mania gave us an abysmal spin-off movie starring the hapless Bob Hoskins. But Lara represents something rather different. She's a next-generation games icon, the plaything of an older group of players. *Mario* and *Sonic* were kiddie culture and crossed over most easily into Saturday morning cartoons. An older (slightly hipper) crowd play *Tomb*



game she inhabits into a late Nineties phenomenon. She's graced the cover of *The Face*, been the subject of a poster campaign and appeared on the video walls behind U2's PopMart tour.

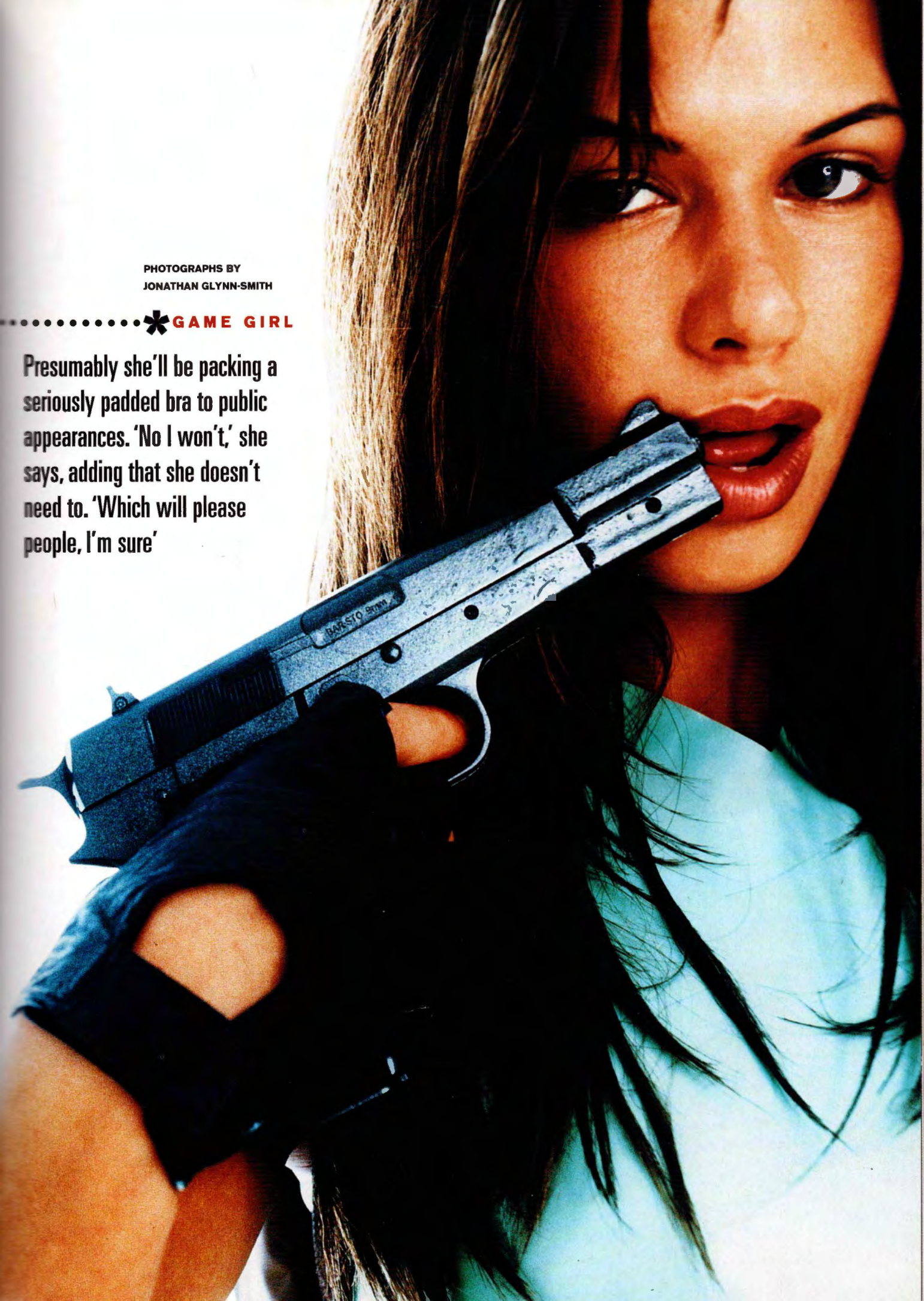
She is now about to make that final evolutionary leap, off the screen and into the real world (or rather into old media), something previously done by the likes of Nintendo's Mario and Sega's Sonic the Hedgehog. A single, "Naked" (a pop/indie/cyber thing – think Republica – produced by Dave Stewart and Nick Thorp, formerly of Curiosity Killed The Cat) is released on 1 September. An album is on the way (to coincide with the pre-Christmas release of *Tomb Raider 2* which features Lara in a wet suit and bikini). A film is being talked about.

At the centre of this will be Rhona Mitra, the woman chosen to slip on Lara's signature outfit of T-shirt,

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JONATHAN GLYNN-SMITH

.....* **GAME GIRL**

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Raider, which is why a music spin-off seems like it might work. A film might also stand a chance, because the game aspires to a kind of cinematic realism.

That said, it's hard not to be wary about all this. One of the attractions of video game characters is that they're empty shells filled out with players' projections. When someone else is writing a script, developing a character, it's a different game. Beyond that, you could argue Lara's real charm is that she isn't real. Faced with her fantastic computerised form, flesh can't help but be a little anticlimactic.

Perhaps the sensible thing to do would be to keep it hyperreal, have Lara only as a computer presence, such as Kyoko Date, the computerised pop idol currently wowing Japan. An Eidos spokesman says the company is aware of the difficulties and is going slow — there won't be a film until they have the right script.

"I understand people are wary about this perfect character being brought to life," adds Rhona. "But I know that I'm her and it will be all right. I'm not insane, by the way." I'm sure she isn't, though you wonder what her mental state will be after yet another public appearance in front of an audience of spotty teenage knob twiddlers. Perhaps, like Lara, she'll just knuckle down and get on with the task in hand. **JIM McCLELLAN**

CYBER SPICE
Rhona Mitre gives as good as she gets against the original English rose. Fantasy made flesh does work. Umm... except when it's the Mario Brothers, or Sonic, or He-man...

