

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Tomb Raider
Platform: Playstation 3
Genre: Action/Adventure
Release Date: March 5, 2013
Developer: Crystal Dynamics
Publisher: Square Enix
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Rhianna Pratchet (Game Writer), Noah Hughs and Cory Barlog (Creative Directors).

Overview

Tomb Raider is the latest in a long line of games dating back to 1996. This installment of the franchise takes players back to the origins of the game's protagonist, Lara Croft. It presents the story of Lara's origin from college student to globe-trotting archeologist, packaged in a challenging puzzle platformer adventure for players to enjoy. Shipwrecked on a supposedly deserted island, Lara fights to rescue her friends from a crazed cult of Sun Queen worshippers, and in doing so grows into the action-adventure heroine that has influenced the video game industry for over twenty years.

The environment and storyline provide a rich landscape for Lara to explore and offers audiences all the nostalgia of old Tomb Raider adventures while still keeping the gameplay fresh with new features. The game also allowed designers to address previous accusations of over-sexualization of Croft by designing a younger, more realistically portrayed main character for a modern audience. This allows the game to be revitalized past its earlier popular roots and into a more relatable, sleek future.

Characters

The cast of Tomb Raider can be broken down into three opposing factions: the crew of the *Endurance*, the Solarii Brotherhood and the terrifying Stormguard. The game's heroine Lara Croft heads up the survivors of the shipwrecked *Endurance* as they fight their way the island's many obstacles to escape with their lives. Their opposite number are a cult of ruthless men called the Solarii Brotherhood who want to resurrect a long-dead Sun Queen named Himiko to harness her power. The descendants and survivors of

numerous other ship and plane wrecks on the island, the Solarii are lead by Mathias, who uses all of his capabilities to capture Lara's friend Sam for the purposes of transforming her into Himiko's living vessel on Earth. The third group involved in the struggle for Yamatai are the Stormguard, a group of warriors who protect the Sun Queen as she remains trapped inside her corpse and slaughter anyone that would try and tamper with her rest. The key figures in three-sided battle for the power of the Sun Queen are:

- **Lara Croft** - The main character and avatar, Lara Croft is a student archeologist out on her first adventure in the South Pacific. Opinionated, beautiful and strong-willed, Lara is dedicated to her work and intent on finding the lost kingdom of Yamatai, despite the opinions of veteran archeologists that the island is unfindable. Once her ship crashes on Yamatai, Lara endures horrific trials at the hands of both nature and the Solarii Brotherhood as she tries to rescue her friends and secure a way off the island.
- **Conrad Roth** - A former military man, Roth is former British Royal Marine and friend of the Croft family accompanying the archeological expedition. He is an expert in combat and survival, but his injuries put him out of commission after the shipwreck and he must rely on Lara to survive. The two have a strong student-mentor relationship which Lara draws on to survive.
- **Samantha "Sam" Nishimura** - Twenty-two year old documentarian Sam Nishimura is Lara's college friend and the daughter of the Nishimura family and descended from the people that once inhabited the island of Yamatai. Sam is the effective damsel in distress of the story; a bubbly and open young woman, she is kidnapped by Mathias and the Solarii to first be burnt in an Ascension ritual and then inhabited by the Sun Queen's spirit as her rightful inheritor.
- **Mathias:** A man in his late fifties, Mathias (or Father Mathias as he is also known) is the leader of the Solarii Brotherhood on the island. Mathias is a survivor of a plane crash on the island in 1982, after which he discovers the story of the Sun Queen and created a cult around himself to capture Himiko's power for himself. Once the *Endurance* crashes on Yamatai, Mathias hears Sam tell the story of her ancestry tying her to the island and realizes that she might be the key to his escape.
- **Stormwatch (Oni) Stalker:** The terrifying club-wielding leader of the Sun Queen's Stormguard samurai warriors, the Oni Stalker is a huge monster of a man clad in traditional armor who protects the body of Himiko on Yamatai.

Breakdown

Tomb Raider follows the origin story of Lara Croft, a brilliant British aristocrat turned university archeologist on the trail of the lost island kingdom of Yamatai. She leads a team aboard the *Endurance*, including television personality Dr. James Whitman, documentarian Sam Nishimura, former Royal Marine Conrad Roth and his crew, Alex Weiss, Joslin Reyes, Jonah Maiava and Angus Grimaldi. While several of the crew is skeptical about the possibility of discovering Yamatai, Sam hopes she will find the

ancient kingdom, as it was once the home of her ancestors and the resting place of the ancient powerful Sun Queen Himiko.

When they enter the dangerous Dragon's Triangle, the *Endurance* is attacked by a brutal storm at sea and destroyed. Narrowly surviving death in the wreck, Lara is captured on shore only a short distance from the surviving crew and awakens hanging upside down inside a cave decorated with corpses. She narrowly escapes the cave's collapse and soon discovers that Yamatai is not as deserted as she originally thought. Along with natural dangers like packs of wolves, the place is occupied by a murderous cult known as the Solarii Brotherhood. These brutal men round up the survivors of the *Endurance* for execution while their leader, Mathias, kidnaps Sam right out from under Lara's nose after hearing her tell stories of Queen Himiko. Lara escapes the Solarii as they massacre members of her crew, but not before she is forced to shoot Vladimir, one of Mathias's men, to escape a possible sexual assault.

As Lara quests through the jungle to rescue Sam and find a way off the island for herself and her crew, she discovers that the supernatural power of Queen Himiko to control the weather is keeping everyone on Yamatai prisoner. Even worse, the Queen's cannibalistic guards, the Stormguard, slaughter the Solarii and anyone else they believe may be a danger to the Sun Queen's final resting place. Lara discovers that Mathias intends to use Sam to host the trapped soul of Queen Himiko so he might take control of that weather power and escape the island once and for all. Battling her way through trials and obstacles, as well as the loss of several crew members and friends, Lara reaches Sam in time to stop the ritual, kills Mathias and destroys Himiko's remains, ending the Sun Queen's control of the weather. The surviving *Endurance* crew escapes Yamatai, but Lara is forever transformed by the experience, left fascinated by the terrible ancient wonders she's discovered.

The story of Lara's adventure is a powerful mesh of advanced puzzle-platformer action and character-driven storytelling that unveils the evolution of Lara Croft from a young, inexperienced college girl into a strong-willed woman who will do anything to survive. The game's narrative spends extensive time at the beginning establishing Lara as a character before the true action even begins, using the tutorial level inside the cave to let the player experience Lara's fear and uncertainty. It utilizes quick time events and cut scenes to play out the evolution of Lara as she discovers the horror of the Solarii's activities and the dangers Yamatai represents, presenting more control to the players as time goes on and as Lara evolves into a more capable survivalist within the game world. This allows players to experience the evolution of the character in a hands-on way that goes side-by-side with the mechanics of the game. A perfect example of the marriage between this narrative progression and the typical character growth mechanics in a game is the evolution of Lara's skills throughout the gameplay. As Lara grows narratively, players unlock skills to become more efficient until she is a skilled hunter, tracker and

fighter. By the time Lara sails away from the island, the players have experienced her growth in an almost organic way that marries the mechanics to the story very well.

Lara's journey is not without its pitfalls however. The game relies heavily on tropes often used in stories meant to create what are typically called *strong female characters*, which causes the narrative to suffer slightly. Lara is forced to kill a person for the first time while fighting off what is coded to be an assault with serious sexual overtones, a commonly used cliché in stories with female action heroes. The supporting cast is also treated as emotional crutches or sacrificial lambs in the narrative, important only in their relationship to Lara's evolution. Multiple characters are also killed off in game in heroic gestures to save Lara, which become increasingly less impactful after the second or third time (examples: Roth, Grim, Alex). Even her friendship with Sam Nishimura is obviously created simply for Sam to be the damsel in distress, coded as the best friend rather than the love interest to Lara's rescuing heroine.

Perhaps the most glaring problem in Tomb Raider comes in the form of the intense violence included in the game. Though a certain level of blood is expected in a game that features guns, bows and arrows, and giant samurai cannibals, the gratuitous level of gore displayed in Tomb Raider is distracting from the game itself. For example, with each death scene the player is treated to Lara's graphic demise, complete with blood splatters, impalements and whimpering death spasms. This level of brutality seems out of place and unnecessary, especially in a game intent on creating so much narrative empathy with the main character. While design intent might have aimed to get players to try and protect Lara from such dastardly fates, the violence level pulls the attention from the story and into the gratuitous bloodshed.

Despite all of these difficulties, Tomb Raider shines in its homage to the previous games in its gameplay and level design. The design of the challenges on Yamatai are meant to invoke memories of previous tomb raiding challenges, with returning motifs like collapsing caves, hidden historical artifacts and the always-present hungry pack of wolves. Lara's first interactions with these staples of the Tomb Raider franchise tie this prequel to the seventeen years of previous games that built the series its fan following and yet still remain easy enough to access for new players just coming aboard. The game also takes previously clunky action gameplay and provides seamless fighting, jumping, climbing and exploring mechanisms to allow players to discover everything Yamatai has to offer. The environmental design lets the island tell its own story in lush detail, from the hidden tombs Lara can discover to the horrific rooms of bodies left behind by the Stormwatch. They merge seamlessly with the evolving narrative structure to make Tomb Raider an intense prequel that reinvigorates and honors a well-loved staple of video game history.

Strongest Element

The narrative of Tomb Raider is, for the most part, a linear exploration of Lara's origin story. Yet where many games suffer by letting the players feel the weight of that kind of linear structure, Tomb Raider provides smaller narrative goals that are intense enough to keep players on the edge of their seats and distracted from the overall game structure. One such example happens when Lara must travel across the island alone to repair the radio transmitter so she can use the radio to signal a passing plane for rescue. When Lara finally succeeds, the player celebrates with her for achieving this goal. Yet almost immediately that success is snatched away when the Sun Queen's storm dashes the rescue plane out of the sky. This series of narrative peaks, twists, successes and tragedies turns Tomb Raider into a multi-act character drama rather than a gate-kept linear level progression that can become frustrating overall.

Unsuccessful Element

The element that falls flat within this incarnation of Tomb Raider lies in the level of gore one encounters throughout the game that goes far over the top. From the moment Lara wakes up swinging upside down in a grimy cocoon to her journey through an abattoir of severed bodies at the Oni's temple, the player is repeatedly reminded through the environmental design just how horrific they should find the island of Yamatai. Instead of pushing the point home, however, the gratuitous use of flying body parts and homicides distracts from the overall action-adventure narrative. The most extreme example comes during a quick-time sequence in which Lara is swept down a debris-strewn waterway. Should the player miss any of the quick-time sequence, Lara is viciously impaled on a protruding spiked log. Players must watch Lara wriggle in her death throes for several seconds as she cries out in pain before the game allows you to reload. While violence is expected in an action-adventure game, this level of gore distracts and pulls players out of the narrative instead of adding to the game experience.

Highlight

One of the key moments in the Tomb Raider narrative is Lara's capture by Mathias's henchman Vladimir. The scene occurs early in the game, as Lara is captured while seeking out her friend Sam. She must first watch as members of the *Endurance* crew are shot so she has a chance to escape, only to be recaptured and menaced by Vladimir. This scene is pivotal because Lara is forced to fight off the assault and eventually must shoot Vladimir to save her own life. While the scene is framed as the pivotal moment of transformation for Lara from girl to survival-minded heroine, the scene presents some overtones that could indicate to the player that Vladimir intends Lara sexual harm. This kind of narrative content can be very disturbing for some players and falls into the common narrative trope of a woman becoming a hard-nosed fighter due to surviving sexual assault. Instead of abusing this commonly used story hook, the game frames the content so that any sexual assault intent from Vladimir is not explicit; the narrative instead becomes about the need to survive rather than the need to survive a potential rape.

That fine line in the narrative makes the scene impactful to Lara's development without falling into an obvious and controversial cliché.

Critical Reception

Critical response to Tomb Raider was overall positive upon its release in March of 2013. The game was hailed as a well-developed, character driven story that promoted Lara's personal evolution as the focus of the game experience. Many praised that Lara is given the opportunity in the game to show weakness and pain, fleshing her out as a woman out of her element rather than relying on false bravado like typical action heroes. This sort of human vulnerability seemed to be a universal trait praised by critic, who noted that it added a degree of realism to a game that could have otherwise been loaded down in supernatural and fantastic elements that would drag it into the unbelievable. The fact most often criticized was the extreme violent content of the game, including the seemingly morbid fascination with Lara dying awful, bloody deaths. Many returned to the question of Lara's fight with Vladimir and the potential sexual elements to the assault and wondered if the game didn't emphasize Lara's vulnerability too much by causing her undo suffering to provoke an audience response. Despite this issue, the game received stellar marks for its narrative development of Lara's origin and its marriage to the home-driven level designs in the story of Yamakai.

Lessons

- **Discovery Through Lara's Eyes:** Tomb Raider employs a more human-centered storyline while de-emphasizing the supernatural and fantastical elements of the game. By focusing on Lara's story of personal evolution, the narrative allows the players to come to terms with the supernatural elements along with Lara and therefore makes them more believable and palatable.
- **Crafting An Authentic Origin Story:** A large portion of this game's appeal comes in the creation of a believable origin story for a beloved video game character. The designers crafted the saga of Lara's transformation in a way that is not only authentic as a stand-alone human story of survival, it also does homage to the legacy of the adventure-heroine Lara Croft of the previous seventeen years of Tomb Raider games.
- **Sometimes, Less Gore Is More:** The balance of how much blood and violence is necessary in a game to create the narrative atmosphere needed for a game's story is a delicate choice to make. While action games are expected to have some violent content, the gore included in Tomb Raider became excessive enough to distract players, pull them out of the narrative experience.

Summation

The Tomb Raider series has had a tremendous impact on the video game industry, from its sales to its contribution to the discourse about female character representation and the role of female protagonists in an often male dominated market. By reviewing the ways

the 2013 Tomb Raider prequel approached the building of a video game legend from her narrative origins, we can see the attempt to put a modern social and gameplay stamp on an aging franchise. Though it perhaps stumbled in its attempt to create too much empathy with players by enacting vicious in-game maiming on Lara, the game overall shines as a beautiful example of intense environmental and character-focused storytelling.