

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Tomb Raider
Platform: Microsoft Windows, OS X, Linux, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One
Genre: Action-adventure
Release Date: March 5, 2013
Developer: Crystal Dynamics
Publisher: Square Enix
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Rhianna Pratchett, Susan O'Connor

Overview

Published in March of 2013, *Tomb Raider* is not like any game in the Tomb Raider series. It is still beautiful and cinematic, but in this game, we are able to see a completely different Lara Croft. The game tells the story of Lara's first expedition, when she is not yet a fearless and experienced explorer, but an untested young girl who even hesitates to kill a deer. Stuck in a storm, her ship lands on a mysterious island called Yamatai. Lara has to become stronger to save and protect her friends and to escape from this treacherous island.

The game also provides a large environment for players to explore. By reading the diaries dispersed around the island we can perceive various storylines and track the thoughts of multiple players, including Lara herself, better. What she encounters on this island explains how she becomes so brave and strong-willed, grounding the character and inducing player sympathy towards her.

Characters

In *Tomb Raider*, the characters can mainly be divided into three groups – the crew of the Endurance, the Solarii Brotherhood, and Sun Queen Himiko. All three groups are antithetical, fighting for their own goals. The conflicts happening between groups connect different parts of the game plot, and keep pushing the main plot forward.

The Crew of the Endurance:

- Lara Croft – The player avatar; the main character in the game series. In this story she is only 21 years old. With a passion for archeology, she embarks on her first adventure after graduation, to find the mysterious lost kingdom of Yamatai. Lara is beautiful, a free spirit but also naïve. Although she is still young and inexperienced, her inner strength and powerful moral compass compel her to battle through obstacles to rescue her friends in the face of a series of set-backs.
- Conrad Roth – As the captain of the Endurance, Roth always leads others. Once a British Royal Marine, he is both disciplined and physically strong; he is also familiar with weapons, marine adventures and survival techniques. Roth is a mentor for Lara; he teaches her not just how to fight with enemies or how to use a climbing axe, but also trusting in herself and to have confidence in her own beliefs.
- Samantha Nishimura – Lara's best friend. This carefree movie-maker has an unshakable faith in the legend of Sun Queen Himiko, the ruler of Yamatai. Ironically, it is her story that gives Mathias the idea to revive Himiko using her body as the host. Proved to be the descendent of Himiko, Samantha is forced to take part in the Ascension Ritual. The video clips she filmed while on the ship also give Lara the strength to not give up.
- James Whitman – Dr. Whitman is an American archeologist and anthropologist. He graduated from Cambridge University, once hosted a TV show series called "Whitman's World", and is hungry for popularity and wealth. His ambitions make him believe that this adventure in Yamatai will become a good resource for his TV show. He will do everything to realize his dream, including taking Samantha back to Mathias himself when necessary.

The Solarii Brotherhood:

- Mathias – The Shadow archetype in this game. In 1982, due to a storm, Mathias had to land on this island but was unable to leave. After 31 years of being trapped here, he is crazy and bigoted; he cares only about leaving the island, regardless of the cost. Believing reviving Himiko is the only way to save them all, Mathias plans to perform the Ascension ritual using Samantha's body.

Sun Queen Himiko:

- Himiko – Known as the Sun Queen, Himiko used to rule the whole Yamatai. She is beautiful but greedy, and owns the support of her storm guards. She is believed to have the power to control the rain and the sun, and to communicate with the spiritual world. Himiko is the first and the last Queen of Yamatai; once she gets older, she will choose a suitable young female and transfer her soul and power to

the female's body, so that she can be immortal. But her ambition was destroyed by a girl called Hoshi, the last girl she chose. Hoshi committed suicide during the ritual and Himiko's soul was forever trapped in the decayed body. In her fury she created a storm that prevented anyone from leaving the island.

Breakdown

The game starts when Lara is taking her first expedition aboard the Endurance ship. To find the lost kingdom of Yamatai, Lara contests her opinion with Dr. Whitman and successfully persuades others to head to the Dragon's Triangle, east of Japan. But as they approach, a weird violent storm suddenly attacks them and the Endurance is wrecked. All of the surviving crew are washed up on the nearest isolated island. However, while Lara is trying to locate her friends, she is hit and captured by another man. When she wakes up, she finds herself hanged and tied. Determined to escape, she uses fire to burn the rope tying her but gets hurt in the flank by the fall. Enduring the pain, she starts to find the exit of this horrible cave, while witnessing the captor dying by falling stones.

After narrowly escaping from the cave, Lara soon starts to find other survivors of the Endurance. On the road, she bumps into Samantha, who says she was saved by a man called Mathias. Sitting by the camp, Lara is so relaxed and tired that she falls asleep while Sam is still telling the legend of Himiko, the Sun Queen, to Mathias. To her surprise, when she wakes up, she finds both Mathias and Sam gone. Lara soon encounters other survivors (Alex, Reyes, Jonah, and Grim) after that. They hear what happened and decide to act in groups. While exploring the island, Lara and Whitman find hints demonstrating this island is Yamatai. But they are found quickly by the Solarii. Lara escapes and is forced to kill people for the first time in order to survive. She finds and saves Roth, on her way to find others. At his encouragement, Lara climbs to the radio tower and successfully calls one helicopter for help. However, the helicopter is attacked by the storm as well; both of the pilots die. Lara now knows they cannot leave by air.

With Lara's hope dissipating, Sam calls for help – Mathias is the leader of the Solarii Brotherhood and is going to use her body to revive the Sun Queen. Lara promises to rescue her and makes her way to the palace. With Grim and Roth's aid, she reaches and tries to stop the ritual, ending up with herself captured. However, Lara escapes and causes series of explosions under the palace. The whole palace is set alight and verging on total collapse. Lara saves Sam while Mathias is away and warns her not to take the helicopter. With enemies behind and no other way to escape, Lara sees Roth in a helicopter he calls, who wants her to jump over to leave the palace before it collapses. Lara does, but once she gets on the helicopter, she forces the pilot to land, but it is already too late. The storm wrecks the helicopter, and Lara passes out. As Roth is trying to revive her, Mathias and his people arrive as well. Roth dies to protect Lara from Mathias.

Lara feels guilty. She starts to rethink everything using the sources and map she finds in the palace, and becomes certain that the way to leave must have something to do with Himiko. After regrouping with the others, she tries to tell them her thoughts and casts some suspicions on Whitman, but no one believes her. Lara decides to join Alex, who goes back to the wrecked Endurance for some tools, but finds that he is injured and stuck. At last, Alex gives Lara the tools and asks her to go. He sacrifices himself by exploding the Endurance, allowing Lara to be safe from the relentless attack by the Solarii.

Lara decides to find more hints about Himiko. She enters a tomb and finds a samurai who once committed seppuku. He once led the Queen's Stormguards. Lara knows from his letter that the ritual is actually not transferring the crown, but the soul, the original Sun Queen's soul. It is the priestess's suicide that stopped the last ritual, resulting in Himiko's soul becoming trapped in her old body. Her fury at being trapped is what causes the strange storms. While Lara is heading back, she hears her friends under attack and Sam is taken by Whitman. Reyes apologizes to Lara for not believing her. They drive to monastery to save Sam.

While Lara secretly climbs near, she sees Mathias sacrifice Whitman to sneak into the monastery. Lara fights with Solarii and the Stormguards and finally gets closer to the top, where Mathias is performing the Ascension Ritual. She shoots and kills Mathias in self-defense, and uses a torch to destroy Himiko's old body. The ritual is stopped and the storm abated. The survivors have the chance to go home, but Lara decides to continue with her own adventure.

The story is quite straightforward, not including many reversals, but with numerous emotional moments. It eloquently depicts the transformation of Lara Croft. In the beginning we see her fear and weakness from the QTE when she first kills a person, and the cut scenes when she has to face Grim, Roth and Alex's deaths. But later on we see how loyal and courageous she is. We see her maturity when she tells Reyes and Jonah to have her back outside instead of refusing them to come together directly. The experience Lara has on this island dramatizes her character growth, giving her a sympathetic origin story, humanizing her and fixing this game as core to the franchise as a whole.

Strongest Element

The strongest element in *Tomb Raider* is the character development. The timeline of this game is set on Lara Croft's first expedition. At this time, she is only 21 years old and she just graduated from university. She knows nothing about surviving and adventuring; she has no experience and she has no idea how tough this expedition will be. That's why when the Endurance is wrecked and she is left alone, Lara is so hesitant and

weak-hearted. She feels gross and scared when she takes the bow from a decayed body. She feels sympathetic and bad when she hunts a deer for its meat. She feels guilty and distraught when she first kills a man, even though she is just trying to protect herself. But as the game goes on, we can see Lara's incremental change. She becomes more loyal and fearless; she learns to fight back. She witnesses her friends', and most of all, Roth's death. Nevertheless, she is not crushed by them, she finds inner strength. At first she cries and is distressed, blaming herself on bringing them on this expedition. But she grows up, decides to take responsibility and steps forward. In the end, she is no longer the young girl whose hands shake as she kills a deer, she transforms into a confident adventurer and skilled survivor. *Tomb Raider* creates a different, but more realistic Lara Croft. This Lara Croft's coming of age story shows her struggle and tough work, which makes this character more attractive.

Unsuccessful Element

A big problem with *Tomb Raider* is its ludonarrative dissonance. To convey a weak and inexperienced image of Lara, this game shows a lot of cut scenes about how she hesitates and persuades herself. At first, when Lara hunts a deer for food, the game gives us an animation showing Lara's compassion when seeing the deer's struggle. However, after this cut scene no matter how many deer – or other animals – we kill, Lara will never say a word or express any anxiety again, even when we press the interaction key.

The same problem happens later, when Lara first kills a man. After a series QTE actions, she struggles to shoot him to death. Then there's a cut scene – Lara coughs badly, knits her brows, falls down to the ground and cries "Oh god.". She looks so scared and guilty at that time. But right after that, she kills every enemy in that scene. This way does make the game more exciting, but players may feel inconsistency if there is no transition state from extreme fear for killing to no fear at all.

Highlight

The game's narrative highlight is in the middle of the game, when Lara runs out of the burning palace and finds Sam in danger. She tries to help Sam, but is trapped by Solarii soldiers. One time she narrowly escapes by using a grenade launcher. After that, she starts to take the initiative. When the soldiers cry out when she gets a new weapon, Lara shouts out, "That's right! Run, you bastards! I'm coming for you all!", instead of keeping silent like she used to do. Lara does not want to kill anyone at first. She feels bad and guilty even if she is just fighting back. But this time is different – she is truly angry; she is subtly transforming. It's never a wise choice to shout out while fighting, since that may reveal her position and turn the situation against her. However, this time she does. These three lines show us Lara's change; it becomes a watershed. The lines pull the

players into the game world, to make them feel what the character is feeling, and to make them worry about what the character is worrying about.

Critical Reception

The critical reception to *Tomb Raider* is overall complimentary. Its unsatisfactory multi-player mode is a main failing point. But nearly all the reviews agree with its well-written game narrative with successful character development.

IGN gives this game a 9.1 out of 10. They state, “The single-player rarely makes a misstep, and though Lara's quick transformation into a hardened killer seems at odds with the narrative at first, the game quickly moves past it.”¹ Gamespot gives it a lower ranking, 8.5, pointing out that except for Lara’s development, the story is predictable.

Nevertheless, Gamespot does praise how the story makes Lara transform into an adventurer. They summarize, “It doesn't try to rewrite the book on third-person action adventure games. But with its excellent controls, engaging heroine, thrilling combat, and fascinating setting, it doesn't need to.”² Both of the reviews do not avoid the weakness in the narrative, which is Lara’s too quick transformation, but they all approve its well-built game plot and as a result, this slight disappointment will not become a fatal point to the whole game narrative.

Lessons

- **How to tell a good story?** *Tomb Raider* is an action game, but the way it tells the story is not only limited to cut scenes. We can see storytelling in the diaries and documents all over the island, in the dialogues between characters while we still take control of Lara, in her own muttering and her different attitudes towards the same situation. There is storytelling everywhere. *Tomb Raider* chooses to show the story to players, rather than just telling.
- **How to build a charming character?** As one of the most successful points in the whole narrative, *Tomb Raider* shows how Lara Croft changes during the game. It shows her struggle and her vulnerability, instead of the invincible hero like of other third-person action games and former *Tomb Raider* games. In the game, there are two cut scenes, both showing Lara standing in front of the mirror, but one appears at the very beginning and the other appears near the ending, when she is no longer inexperienced and naïve. This contrast directly shows her change and transformation, likely to induce profound player sympathy for her.

Summation

Tomb Raider is not perfect. But it is a game worth playing. This game may not be the best game in the whole *Tomb Raider* series. However, its character development of

Lara and its skillful environmental storytelling are reasons to take another look at the narrative of this well-constructed game.

Works Cited:

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