

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Tomb Raider

Platform: Xbox 360, Xbox One, PS3, PS4, Microsoft Windows, OS X, Linux

Genre: Action-adventure

Release Date: March 5, 2013

Developer: Crystal Dynamics

Publisher: Square Enix

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Rhianna Pratchett (Lead Writer), Susan O'Connor (Writer), Noah Hughes (Creative Director), John Stafford (Senior Narrative Designer)

Overview

Lara Croft is a young archaeologist thirsting for adventure. Setting out in search of the lost kingdom of Yamatai, Lara and her companions are shipwrecked and stranded on an island, eventually discovered to be the home of the kingdom they seek. A man named Mathias leads a violent cult on the island called the Solarii Brotherhood which worships the ancient Sun Queen, Himiko. No one can escape the island due to Himiko's angry spirit – which is trapped in old, decaying remains – causing supernatural storms. In order to break the spell, Mathias wants to attempt an ascension ritual on Lara's friend, Sam, since she is a descendent of Himiko. However, the ascension ritual will destroy Sam's consciousness, replacing it with Himiko's, so Lara resolves that she must fight to save her friend from the cultists. Ultimately, with the aid and sacrifice of some of her friends, Lara perseveres, killing Mathias, saving Sam, and ultimately destroying Himiko's spirit. With Himiko's spirit destroyed, Lara and the few companions that have survived are able to escape the island.

Characters

- **Lara Croft** – Lara is the protagonist of *Tomb Raider*, starting the game as a young, naïve archaeologist in search of adventure. She has a somewhat reserved personality, but is assertive when presented with a challenge. Though initially vulnerable, Lara is sharp, resourceful, adaptable, and driven, growing into a hardened survivor by the end of the game. Whenever she is put under pressure, incredible survival instincts and perseverance are displayed which save Lara's life time and time again. Lara's also protective of her companions, voluntarily putting herself into dangerous situations in order to save them. This strong desire to protect is partly because of her natural characteristics, but also because she feels responsible for the lives that are lost – a typical part of survivor's guilt.

- **Mathias** – Founder and absolute ruler of the Solarii Brotherhood, Mathias is a crazed madman adept at trickery. Trapped on the island, he has managed to survive for 31 years prior to the arrival of Lara and her companions. Initially, Mathias introduces himself as a friendly survivor from another shipwreck, but his true nature is quickly revealed after he disappears with Sam. He is completely insane and bent on resurrecting Himiko's spirit at any cost so that he can finally escape the island. Though quite villainous and prominent throughout the game, Mathias is a secondary antagonist since he is subservient to Himiko.
- **Himiko** – The mystical, ancient monarch of Yamatai known as the Sun Queen. Though not physically seen for the vast majority of the game – her spirit only being shown at the climax – Himiko is the true villain in *Tomb Raider*. She is the reason behind all the events that transpire since her spirit creates the supernatural storms which trap everyone on the island, and she is the evil force that Lara must overcome in order to resolve the conflict. After centuries of secretly transferring her soul into the bodies of priestesses primed as her "successors," one priestess discovered the truth and killed herself during the transference ritual, trapping Himiko's spirit in a decaying body until the events that take place during *Tomb Raider*.
- **Conrad Roth** – A mentor and father-figure to Lara. It's intimated that Roth is a long-time friend of her deceased parents. He's a strong leader, the captain of the expedition's ship, the *Endurance*, and serves as a constant encouragement to Lara, protecting her as a father would. At one point, Roth resuscitates Lara after she passes out from a helicopter crash and stops breathing. He subsequently sacrifices himself to protect Lara by shielding her from an axe hurled by Mathias. At the end of his life, he still desires to encourage Lara as he begins to succumb to his wounds, bestowing his beloved pistols to her as a final gift and telling her, "You can do this. You're a croft."
- **Dr. James Whitman** – Dr. Whitman is an archaeologist and the instigator of the expedition to find Yamatai, planning to film the adventure for the next season of his defunded television show. He is self-centered, arrogant, condescending, and more interested in the cultists' culture than the welfare of his companions. Eventually, Whitman betrays the expedition and takes Sam to Mathias, but then himself is betrayed and tricked by Mathias to approach two Oni warriors, resulting in Whitman's violent death. Through letters that Lara finds, it is also revealed that Whitman planned to take sole credit for the discovery of Yamatai, and after kidnapping Sam, planned to ensure none of the expedition escaped the island. Emerging as the sole survivor, Whitman hoped to gain notoriety, claiming fame and fortune for himself.
- **Samantha "Sam" Nishimura** – Sam is Lara's best friend with an outgoing and bubbly personality. Knowingly the distant descendant of Himiko, she funds the expedition through her uncle and negotiates with Whitman to become the director and cameraperson of the documentary. Throughout the story, Sam is the main object of desire – the person that both sides of the conflict are seeking and chasing after. Himiko, Mathias, and eventually Whitman want to use her for their own purposes while Lara and the remaining crew of the *Endurance* want to save and protect her.

- **Angus "Grim" Grimaldi** – Grim is a tough Scotsman and longtime friend of Roth who serves as the helmsman of the *Endurance*. Though a grizzly seaman, Grim is fond of Lara and keen on telling stories to Sam for the documentary. On the island, Grim stubbornly resists the Solarii, eventually becoming the first character to sacrifice himself to save Lara from the cultists.
- **Alex Weiss** – As the expedition's technician, Alex is a likeable, energetic hacker who, while brilliant, is prone to being lazy. Alex also has a crush on Lara, though it is only hinted at. With the many dark sequences throughout the game, Alex provides some much-needed comic relief, but his character remains more than a token for laughs. Lara needs him to walk her through how to fix a radio tower and his death serves as the last major turning point for Lara's character. Ultimately, Alex becomes the third character who dies in order to protect Lara, causing Lara's resolution in her quest of protecting her friends.
- **Jonah Maiva** – Jonah is the large, strong, and friendly chef of the *Endurance*. In many ways, Jonah fulfills the "gentle giant" archetype, playing peacekeeper for the group of survivors and being a dependable, forceful companion in conflict. Jonah is a good friend to Lara and believes her theories when few others do. He also is spiritual and is able to sense that there is something unnatural about the island long before anyone else.
- **Joslin Reyes** – The expedition's abrasive mechanic, Reyes, comes off as a callous individual. She's quick to anger and hard on Lara most of the game. Having a romantic relationship with Roth, the relationship between her and Lara only worsens after his death, as Reyes blames Lara. However, by the end of the game, Reyes respects Lara for all that Lara does to help them survive.
- **The Stormguard (Oni)** – Himiko's cursed, undead servants, the Stormguard, also known as Oni, are sworn to serve and protect the Sun Queen. They are a hostile faction who attack nearly everyone on sight, including members of the Solarii Brotherhood. For the most part, the Oni simply serve as additional obstacles to protect Himiko's remains.

Breakdown

Tomb Raider makes great use of story elements such as characterization and immersive environments as well as sequencing events that build character and intensity, matching narrative progression to gameplay.

The game begins with a short cutscene that provides some set-up for the story. While Lara is relaxing in her cabin, the *Endurance* begins to be torn apart by a violent storm. After being pulled from a flooded corridor, Lara leaps from a sinking part of the ship to Roth, but the rain causes them to lose their grip. Lara falls into the water below, eventually washing up on the shore of the island. On the beach, Lara sees her companions and attempts to call out to them through the storm, but is knocked out from behind and dragged away. She awakes, hanging

upside down and tied up in a cave littered with corpses. At this point, the player is given control of Lara, entering as the player into the game's main conflict of escaping the island.

To escape her bonds, Lara swings into a burning fire successfully destroying the rope, but falls on a metal rod, injuring her side. Lara trudges forward, horrified by her surroundings and in great pain. Using a torch and other items around the cave, Lara is able to open a passageway where she sees daylight but, in turn, causes the cave to start collapsing. In the process of finding an exit to the cave, Lara is accosted twice by the man that kidnapped her. Both times she is able to kick him away, seeing him crushed the second time by a boulder while she scrambles to escape. Through these events, Lara's fear and vulnerability are established in addition to her perseverance and resourcefulness.

After making it outside, Lara finds Sam's pack, providing some relief and assurance that Sam is alive and traveled in the direction Lara is headed. Eventually, she pulls out Sam's camcorder while taking shelter from the rain. At this point, Lara watches a recording taken before the shipwreck which shows Roth agreeing with Lara's hunch to search for Yamatai in the Dragon's Triangle – where the storm was – against Whitman's dissent. After Lara rests some and remorsefully hunts a deer for sustenance, Roth makes contact over the two-way radio that is also in Sam's pack. Relieved that Roth survived, Lara lets down and releases the emotion she's been holding in, distraughtly relating the events of the cave to Roth and blaming herself for the shipwreck. This display of emotion makes Lara relatable to players, letting them empathize with her humanity. Roth tells Lara that he's spoken to the others, that they're regrouping at his location, and encourages her to just keep moving. With the knowledge that her companions are alive, Lara continues onward and hears Sam and Mathias speaking over a radio to Reyes who says the other survivors are coming to get Sam. Upon being reunited, Sam and Lara are relieved to see each other, but Lara is apprehensive of Mathias. Mathias claims to be a shipwrecked teacher who has shown a kindness to Sam by bandaging her wounded leg, which eventually puts Lara at ease. While Sam recounts the legend of Himiko to Mathias – a story Lara has heard many times – Lara's exhaustion takes over and she drifts to sleep. However, when Lara awakes, she worrisomely finds that both Sam and Mathias are gone.

Searching and shouting for Sam and Mathias, Lara stumbles into a bear trap and must fend off an attack from a wolf. Jonah, Alex, Grim, Reyes and Whitman then find her and they decide to separate into two groups, most of them going after Sam and Mathias, while Whitman and Lara search for the missing Roth. While exploring, Lara and Whitman are captured by the Solarii, Whitman surrendering without a fight, demonstrating his self-serving nature. While other captured survivors of the *Endurance* are attempting to escape the Solarii and being massacred, Lara tries to sneak away but is forced to kill some of the Solarri to survive. Killing for the first time hits her hard.

Lara's emotional distress after her first kill is one of the best moments in the game, but the gameplay afterward causes dissonance. During the next few minutes, Lara subsequently kills seven more people with little to no emotion. At this point, the lack of emotion is explained away by Lara mentioning to Roth "it's scary just how easy it was [to kill the men]." While this shows how quickly Lara must adapt to her horrifying circumstances – and that Lara is capable of adapting – those few minutes in between feel dissonant with previous events. Lara instantly

transforms into a composed killer with hardly any time spent on showing the transition. The game quickly rushes past this point and keeps the momentum moving forward which diminishes the negative effect of this dissonance, but in the moment, it is distinct.

Regardless, this is a major turning point for Lara's character. She's less vulnerable now, a little less afraid, and slowly beginning to grow in confidence.

After escaping, at last, Lara finds Roth, and with his encouragement goes to climb a radio tower to call for help. When a plane attempts to respond, Lara hears a voice say "no one leaves" in Japanese and a sudden storm causes the plane to crash.

After unsuccessfully trying to save the pilots, Lara continues to seek out Sam while also searching for a way off the island. She encounters the Oni and learns about the Sun Queen's ascension ritual as well as Mathias' plans to perform the ceremony on Sam. While infiltrating the Solarii fortress, Lara runs into Grim, but they are separated and he's taken hostage by the Solarii, who attempt to get Lara to surrender by threatening his life. Though Lara is willing to submit, Grim instead sacrifices himself so that Lara can escape. Eventually, Sam is rescued, but Roth must then sacrifice himself to protect Lara from Mathias. This devastates Lara and leaves her feeling quite guilty. Not long afterward, Alex also sacrifices himself to let Lara escape with needed tools from the *Endurance*, causing Lara to resolve that she can't let anyone else die. This is the last major turning point for Lara's character. Up until this point, Lara has been subtly growing, becoming more confident in her abilities and gradually facing enemies more directly with less fear. With this resolution, Lara has nearly completed her transformation into a hardened, confident survivor, only needing to complete the final step of overcoming the main conflict.

While each sacrificial death impacts Lara in the narrative, their impact on the player is not as strong as it could've been if the supporting characters had more character development. Lara's character is the shining element of the narrative, with her journey and growth pulling the player into the story. Many emotional scenes humanize Lara in a way that is uncommon in video game heroes and the connection a player has to Lara's humanity is what is truly remarkable about *Tomb Raider*. While the other characters compose a diverse cast, they are not nearly as well developed as Lara. At times, it feels like they are only plot devices for Lara's character development rather than characters necessary to the plot, especially when three of them sacrifice themselves within the span of a couple hours of gameplay. Most of the characters are likeable to an extent, and they do an excellent job of reflecting and demonstrating Lara's character through their interactions. Yet, because they are pretty static and have little to no growth, players are not very invested in them. Being emotionally connected to Lara, players will still care about the other characters to a degree because of Lara's concern for her companions, but their sacrifices lack direct emotional impact on the player.

While continuing to explore a way of escape, Lara finds a letter written by the deceased Stormguard general that reveals the true nature of the ascension ritual. It explains that the enraged Sun Queen's spirit is trapped in a decaying body, causing the raging, supernatural storms. Realizing that Mathias wants to offer Sam as a new host to Himiko's spirit, Lara,

concerned, returns to camp to check on Sam. Unfortunately, Whitman has betrayed the group and returned Sam to Mathias.

Determined to save Sam, the remaining members of the group, Lara, Jonah and Reyes, head to the monastery to give chase. Lara witnesses Mathias trick Whitman into getting killed by the Oni and subsequently fights her way through both Solarii and Stormguard to arrive at the top of the monastery where Mathias is performing the ascension ritual. Lara then kills Mathias and destroys Himiko's remains to save Sam, ending the ritual and dispersing the supernatural storms. With the storms dispersed, Lara, Sam, Reyes and Jonah are able to finally escape the island and Lara's journey is complete.

Although the bulk of the story of *Tomb Raider* is predictable, it is presented in an engaging, quickly immersive, and compelling way with great characterization. Halfway through the beginning cutscene, the player is presented with the island. Having an incredibly short, impactful first act to "hook" players is common in many great games; it immediately captures the player's interest and gets the player to the action as fast as possible. However, the camcorder that Lara finds in Sam's pack presents an extended set-up throughout the second act that is uncommon in games. In quiet moments between the action, more information is periodically given through recordings of events on the *Endurance*. This makes the story feel more complete and supplies information to the player during breaks from the action rather than at the beginning, when players are eager and impatient to start playing. During lulls in the action, Lara also periodically writes journal entries. These entries provide deeper insight into Lara's own thoughts, letting the player further connect with Lara and further humanizing the character.

The gameplay interacts well with the narrative, keeping the player involved in important moments of progression. Quick Time Events (QTEs) are often used at critical narrative points, such as Lara's first kill, to let players have some control in pivotal moments rather than force players to watch Lara succeed without them. However, the QTEs can be intrusive. If the player fails the QTE, a gruesome death scene is shown and the player must repeat the sequence. Repeated failures result in frustration for the player, distracting him or her from immersion into the story. Some QTEs are used well and add to the connection to the story, but some are just infuriating and divert player's attention from the narrative. On the other hand, other elements such as solving puzzles seamlessly integrate into the story. Lara's ingenuity is demonstrated through the player's actions in completing the puzzles that are required to continue onward. Additionally, as Lara grows through the narrative, gameplay abilities grow with her, unlocking new skills and weapons to help her hunt, fight, and survive. This adds to the sense of growth for the player, letting them take new actions fitting for Lara's trajectory toward becoming a hardened survivor.

As for the setting, the environmental element of *Tomb Raider* works incredibly well with its narrative. From ancient monasteries to World War II-era bunkers to shanty architecture, the environment creates a sense of entrapment and a danger that has persisted for many years. Many structures are in a state of disrepair, newer ones are crudely constructed with materials that could be found on the island, and human remains are prevalent. It's apparent that in addition to the Solarii, for many centuries, those who have come to the island have never left, often meeting a violent end. By integrating this lurking danger into the exotic setting, the emotion of the

narrative is bolstered. The environment secures the idea that Lara truly is in danger of never escaping and perishing on the island, which is the underlying fear behind many of Lara's emotions.

While the game has its flaws, the player's emotional investment in Lara diminishes their importance. Lara's journey to becoming a survivor is not only hers, but the player's as well.

Strongest Element

Lara's characterization and growth throughout *Tomb Raider* is the strongest element as it draws the player into the story through connection to the character. Lara is motivated by both primal and personal stakes – her own survival and protecting her friends – which players are able to empathize with. When confronted with tragedy, triumph, or intense situations, Lara responds with realistic emotion. While Lara often displays emotion, the emotion itself is never displayed as a weakness. Though Lara's character is initially shown as vulnerable, she's also shown to have grit and determination, ultimately overcoming any threat thrown her way. All these things humanize Lara in a way that players can connect to while letting Lara remain a strong heroine. By Lara being relatable through emotional impact, players become invested in the character on a level far beyond that of a simple player avatar. This investment creates a strong ludonarrative harmony where the player's desires are usually in line with Lara's. She may not initially want to kill animals or people at the beginning of the game, but in the midst of danger, Lara is willing to do whatever it takes to survive. As the game progresses, the player's efforts of keeping Lara safe are rewarded with character growth, further strengthening the connection between Lara's character and the player, pulling the player farther into the story.

Unsuccessful Element

An unsuccessful element in *Tomb Raider* is predictability in the narrative. The static nature of *Tomb Raider*'s supporting cast leads to a lack of a surprising twist in the characters. While Dr. Whitman goes from being aligned with the crew of the *Endurance* to betraying them and joining forces with Mathias, the change in allegiance doesn't shock players. Whitman is a very two-dimensional, narcissistic character who always acts out of self-interest and self-preservation, so his actions are not unexpected. Neither are Mathias' actions. Though players don't know Mathias' true nature upon first contact, they are naturally suspicious of an unknown character, especially since Lara has already been kidnapped once by an unidentified stranger on the island.

Events such as the plane crash are also predictable. Though not a result of the supporting characters, players instinctively can tell that the plane will not succeed in saving any of the survivors. They may not know the exact means by which the plane will fail, but it's too early in the game for resolution, so players are still expectantly waiting for disaster to strike.

Highlight

Lara's first kill is an incredibly impactful moment. After an intense struggle with a cultist, Lara is barely able to push a pistol away from her own face toward his and shoot straight through his skull. Lara pushes the gurgling cultist off and stands up ready to take another shot until the cultist breathes his last. Then Lara, covered in blood and on the verge of tears, falls to her knees gasping and retching, finally exclaiming "oh god" before she begins to regain her composure. The way that human emotion is displayed in this scene is gripping as it shows a real reaction to a traumatizing event. Lara feels like a real person to the player, not a superhuman avatar, enticing the player's empathy and immersing the player into the story.

Critical Reception

Tomb Raider was well received with most reviews hovering around a score of 9 out of 10. It was nominated for numerous game of the year awards, though it ultimately did not win any. The narrative and Lara's character development are usually highly praised, but the moments after her first kill are often critiqued.

- **IGN – Keza MacDonald – 9.1/10:** In her review, MacDonald commends Lara's character development, but writes that the supporting cast seems two-dimensional in comparison because Lara's character is so well realized. She says that the period of narrative dissonance caused by Lara's "jarringly instant" transition "from terrified survivor forced to take a life to head-shot happy killer" is the narrative's only significant weakness. Overall, MacDonald regards the game as "well-written, sympathetic, exciting, beautiful and just incredibly well-made."
- **Wired – Nate Lanxon – 9/10:** Lanxon writes that the story of *Tomb Raider* isn't deep but it is good. He mentions Lara's quick change in killing, but says it's up to the player to decide whether it's "a criticism of storytelling or simply a writer's way of saying Lara had to learn to be tough fast." Overall, he highly praises the game, saying it was compelling, balanced, and comprehensively brilliant.
- **Game Informer – Matt Miller – 9.25/10:** Miller says that *Tomb Raider's* story "takes a few predictable turns, but it's easy to forgive as the tale weaves through exotic locales, fun character interactions, and amazing set-piece moments." He applauds Lara as a great lead, claiming that few games have managed such a likeable and relatable protagonist. Ultimately, he calls *Tomb Raider* one of the best action adventure games that he has ever played.

Lessons

- Creating a hero with strong development, growth, and emotional connection can drive a game's narrative and help players overlook flaws. If Lara was a distant, static character,

Tomb Raider would lose much of its appeal. Her humanity and her journey of maturity are what make the narrative compelling.

- A game's strengths can point out the game's own weaknesses. Lara's abrupt change after her first kill isn't a game-ruining flaw, but compared to her strong portrayal throughout most of the narrative, it stands out as a part that could've been improved.
- Spending a little extra time on a character's transition can resolve dissonance. By taking the time to show the emotional impact of each subsequent kill (or lack thereof), it would have been easier for the player to believe in Lara's transformation since each step toward it would have been witnessed.
- Good pacing can help believability. While Lara's change after her first kill does stand out as too abrupt, the impact of the dissonance is diminished by the story quickly moving forward. Those few minutes may feel wrong to players, but their thoughts are soon diverted to another part of the story.
- Narrative and gameplay can complement each other well, but they can also create dissonance with each other. The story and gameplay progression in *Tomb Raider* go hand in hand, but sometimes QTEs can break immersion.

Summation

Tomb Raider is a powerful example of a game driven by narrative and character. The game presents cutscenes of past events that feel natural and utilize Lara's humanity to the fullest. It's surprising how effective and successful emphasizing Lara's character is, drawing players through the game and into the story. Creating a character that is so emotionally compelling is not easy, but *Tomb Raider* does it well. The game is not without its flaws, but it was certainly well received and worthy of high ratings. The story of Lara's journey to becoming a survivor is one that is made to last.

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