[Tomb Raider to Survivor, Reimagining Lara Croft](#)

written by Emily Lee | June 30, 2014

When Square Enix first announced its reboot of the *Tomb Raider* franchise I was both intrigued and cautiously optimistic. The promos and information that were revealed showcased a very different Lara Croft from her predecessor, and one that served as a comparable female analogue to contemporaries such as Nathan Drake of *Uncharted* or the various leads of the *Far Cry* series. I was hopeful to see a female protagonist that could ultimately shake the confines of being an overly sexualized and unrealistic caricature, and one that wasn't merely identified by their gender, a tradition that was most notoriously cemented in the industry by this very same franchise.

While it's difficult to be too critical of such an antiquated IP, Lara of old lacked a great deal in the department of characterization. She was a scantily-clad akimbo-wielding explorer who was known more for her ridiculous anatomy then any sort of personality. That is not to say the franchise was without merit though.

As an early entry into 32-bit consoles, it was one of the first games to truly explore spatially interacting on a three-dimensional plane rather then the confines of two-dimensional platformers or the top-down view of isometric titles which by and large dominated the catalogs of the previous generation of consoles such as Super Nintendo or the Sega Genesis. To an extent even much of the 32 bit catalogs were still reliant on these older conventions given the primitive nature of 3D modeling and graphics at the time. The tomb exploration which consisted of traversing puzzles on a three dimensional space provided groundwork for future titles such as the rebooted *Prince of Persia*, *Assassin's Creed*, and even stealth titles like *Splinter Cell* which utilized similar ledge climbing mechanics into their core gameplay.

Square Enix's decision to reboot such a decayed franchise is initially perplexing and it's made even more questionable when it's one without a strong fan-base. The average gamer's opinion of Lara Croft is probably as critical if not more then that of actual critics. Among recent female led games such as *Portal 2*, *Remember Me* or *Mirror's Edge*, Lara Croft simply feels out of touch.

Coupled with financial troubles by both Square Enix and the industry at large at the time (i.e. bankruptcies of both THQ and 38 Studios), it seemed like at the very least, it was a risky move to invest in a franchise that really wasn't looking to be reinvented or reintroduced back to the public. That said, the initial reveal of the new *Tomb Raider* was intriguing for myself and others because it was a "far cry" from the Lara of old.

It's probably accurate to assume that the new *Tomb Raider* reboot was more a reaction to the successes of other similar male-led franchises like *Far*

Cry and *Uncharted* then any strong desires to reinvigorate the older franchise. A decision that is more likely rooted in attempting to borrow its namesake rather then properly remaking it. And this is far from a bad thing. The end result was quite an intriguing and well crafted game, one that wasn't limited by the criticisms or canon of the franchise it was born from. And also ultimately redefining Lara Croft to be a consistent as well as intriguing complex character.

"I'm not that kind of Croft."

Lara's mentor within the game tells her in assurance that "you can do it Lara, after all you're a Croft" to which she replies "I'm not that kind of Croft". While narratively this alludes to her family and their pedigree in archeology and exploration, it also seems to point to the notion that "this" Lara is fundamentally different then the Lara of old.

While it would be inaccurate to say that Lara is unattractive, the emphasis is no longer on objectifying her nor relying upon her sexual or visual appeal. Lara trades in her scantily-clad get-ups typically consisting of some combination of short shorts and skin-baring tops for the more casual and realistic combination of baggy cargos and tank-top. The game itself seems to center more upon closeups of Lara's face then showcasing her body placing attention on her as a character instead of an object. Even the AMD exclusive technology in *Tomb Raider* TressFX (which turns her hair into individual strands instead of the typical larger polygons), aims to center the viewer's attention to Lara's facial region which is a constant mixture of emotion and conflict.

Much like the landscape of Walker's face in *Spec Ops: The Line*, Lara goes through a similar visual transformation. Instead of staying porcelain clean like in titles past, Lara holds onto every scar, scratch, and bruise she endures through her trials. Lara's face and skin are constantly covered with abrasions, dirt, blood, and grit. The recent [announcement trailer](#) for *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (this game's sequel) at E3 shows Lara during a therapy session clearly suffering mental trauma with an inability to return to normal day life. Her hands being one of the few visible parts of her body are covered in scars new and old. Crystal Dynamic's commitment to not place Lara in a sort of limbo like many fictional characters in games and other media provides meaningful progression past singular titles and across a franchise. When done right, it works wonderfully like can be seen with Ezio going from a brash youth to wisened old man in *Assassin's Creed 2* thru *Assassin's Creed: Revelations*, or Solid Snake aged to the elderly "Old Snake" from *Metal Gear Solid* thru *Metal Gear Solid 4*.

The level of both physical and mental abuse Lara takes is almost ludicrous but works within the framework of the game. She breaks bones, gets impaled by a piece of rebar, and gets thrown around like a ragdoll down cliffsides and mountains. She is anything but graceful or the confident heroine one would expect. She moves clumsily through her surroundings, is constantly looking around nervously regardless of player input and often botches jumps where the

player must make a split second reaction to prevent her falling to her death. Unlike the near superhuman stamina and athleticism of the protagonists of such franchises like *Assassin's Creed*, Lara feels and moves realistically. Every cliff or jump overcome feels like a struggle, and this manner of gameplay both serves to highlight the learning process for both Lara and the player.

Lara is anything but static and is very much alive regardless of the player giving direct input. She will reach out for walls for support, her eyes track to objects of interest regardless of where the player is aiming the camera, and she goes in and out of cover fluidly without any need to press a button. The lively AI of Lara helps in making her both a separate entity from the player as her own unique character, as well as aid in immersing the player as Lara further in contrast. Unlike conventional game PCs, Lara doesn't merely feel like an avatar for the player. Personally I found myself in a sort of middle ground between being an actively engaged controller of action and a spectator similarly to when watching a film or reading a text. I might control Lara to an extent, but she was still very much her own person unlike for example, playing through a game like *Skyrim* that is typically entirely representational of myself in some fashion especially given its robust character customization in combination with plentiful opportunities for role-playing.

Given the nature of the reboot and that *Tomb Raider* is an origin story at heart, the harsh island serves as a sort of crucible. A catalyst to spur Lara into a widely different character then she starts as, much in the same fashion as Oliver Queen in the TV series *Arrow* which also coincidentally strands Queen on an island which serves to turn him from a rich irresponsible playboy into an incredibly disciplined and focused masked vigilante. For Lara it serves to take her from player surrogate to toughened survivor in a believable manner. Because of this, the player relationship with Lara shifts dynamically from start to end. At the onset, Lara is much like the player being someone who isn't built or capable or surviving such a harsh crucible. Through the various struggles and tests she is pitted against however, the player seemingly steps out of Lara's shoes to more spectate or direct her actions, then be fully immersed within them.

"A Survivor Is Born"

❌The issues with the old Lara surpassed simply her exaggerated physical traits or sparse characterization. The dissonance between what player's and the narrative expected Lara to be were often at odds with the way in which she was presented through both her characterization and the gameplay. The reboot provided an opportunity to rectify this and reharmonize Lara to synchronize back up with the game itself. Crystal Dynamics definitely seem to have taken the opportunity by redefining Lara from an entirely selfish ego-driven heroine, to one that is conversely selfless and more morally in line with the demands of the narrative that calls for a hero role to be filled.

Contextually, the narratives in many of the past titles work under a similar framework as the reboot. It sees Lara put in a position where she must stop a great evil or power from being exploited. As the very title of the franchise

suggests, she was a tomb "raider", someone who wrongfully breaks into an area they do not belong to steal valuables. Lara was not a scholar or academic motivated by greater purposes such as Indiana Jones or its many other derivatives, rather it was about financial gain. Of which was clearly and gaudily displayed in various previous titles of the franchise by both her lavish manor and in her life style and demeanor.

The new Lara while younger is also one that players can connect to far more easily. Like the player, she is uncomfortable with the situation she has been put in and doesn't already have the expertise to handle it. Also, Lara is now an academic who is indeed motivated by other things besides money. Dr. James Whitman a celebrity archaeologist and the leader of the expedition provides a counterpoint to both Lara and also serves as a criticism of the Lara of old. A supposed explorer who is fueled by ego and greed, rather then academic discovery.

Lara is no longer a tomb "raider," and narratively once things take a turn for the worst, academic interests get pushed to the wayside as well, and Lara realistically refocuses her attention on saving both herself and her fellow crewmembers. The discoveries of the island Yamatai and the Sun Queen Himiko are never the main focus, rather they naturally come as a result of Lara's struggle to rescue Sam. Ultimately the reboot shifts away from simply identifying Lara by her appearance or occupation, and actually makes her an interesting and consistent character. One who isn't singularly motivated, rather is fueled by a complex mix of emotions and priorities.

The game's storyline could roughly be split into two acts with the first half showcasing Lara coming to terms with the desperate situation she has been put in, and eventually transitioning into an extreme survivalist mentality. The second half and the main focus of the narrative explores the connections between the history of Yamatai and its ties to her friend Sam, of whom she is trying to rescue.

The main narrative is a bit more difficult to dissect primarily because I felt it wasn't that central to the game's experience. *Tomb Raider* was by and large a game focused on one individual's journey and the main narrative if anything, merely provided the framework for this to take place. With that said, the most blatant facet that comes across is that it seemingly seems derivative of many other male-centric games that puts the player in a classic "damsel in distress" scenario. Much like how Mario is constantly trying to save the princess from either Donkey Kong or Bowser, here Lara is attempting to save her friend Sam from mad worshipers of Himiko.

It's hard to not be reminded of the anime *Revolutionary Girl Utena* which has the female lead wanting to be the classic prince to the extent of even wanting to save her own princess from peril. With the case of rebooted Lara, I didn't find that she was merely masculinized or gender-blind however. She had proper depth of characterization and reacted differently then say Jason in *Far Cry 3* who experienced similar trials and his own transformation. Also the way in which she interacted with other characters male or female seemed

to showcase both realistic and varied relationships.

The new reboot does pass the Bechdel test for whatever that is worth. Although it's honestly hard to imagine it not passing given the context and environment of the game. But that said Lara does have meaningful interactions with both Sam and Reyes, the two other female characters in the game. And like Lara, neither of them are particularly defined by their gender, appearance, or occupation. Sam while clearly cast as a princess to be saved isn't merely a plot device to spur Lara into action in line with the classic "Women in Refrigerators" trope, rather she is her own complex and multifaceted person. Others like Reyes actually have their own struggles and narratives that doesn't solely place Lara in a central spotlight.

Ironically this can't be said for all the male characters, a couple of which are extremely stereotypical such as Jonah as essentially the token ethnic on board being a Maori with all the cultural artifacts an outsider would expect them to have: tribal tattoos, mysticism, beads, funky haircut, and being slightly overweight but no complex personality or motivations.

At its core the narrative strives to take Lara from an average individual into a person that can believably do the things she does by the game's conclusion. Through the various trials and tribulations, Lara becomes hardened and gains the skills needed to survive and succeed. In this the game is definitely successful with both the player and Lara becoming believers of the odds surpassed by game's conclusion.

"Tomb" Raiding and its namesake.

Spatially *Tomb Raider* excels past its contemporaries in breaking the rigid and often artificial feel of its various interactive spaces. Popular open world titles with similar parkour or climbing mechanics such as *Assassin's Creed* have failed to break the threshold of convincingly disguising their sandboxes as real worlds. When jumping from building to building, or scaling a tall wall to jump to another ledge, often the paths are set up in such a way to provide and ensure fluid movement. Because of this, gaps often have similar distances, and things will generally fall into straight lines and angles. Players will often also find that certain ledges and other protrusions are seemingly placed conveniently where they are expected to go.

Tomb Raider does an admirable job breaking away from this by more organically drawing paths for the player to follow. Jumping from one wall to the next often isn't in a straight line, but at a slight angle making it unsure whether or not it's a distance that can be cleared. One of the issues I ran into personally with *Assassin's Creed* later into its franchise was that the climbing was completely mindless given it was always obvious where the player could and was expected to go. In *Tomb Raider*, a degree of danger and anxiety has been reinserted to ensure something as extreme as scaling a cliff thousands of feet above doesn't become mundane or monotonous.

In previous entries of the franchise, much of these interactions took place in close proximity in interior areas such as caves, dungeons, or tombs. Contrary to the name of the franchise, the new *Tomb Raider* doesn't really

feature "tombs" that heavily. While this has been a common area of criticism from older fans of the series, I personally found this to be irrelevant.

Popular titles such as *GTA* no longer are defined by their namesake. Both *GTA V* and *GTA IV* while still featuring motor vehicle theft in line with the series' title *"Grand Theft Auto"* are not beholden to it nor is it central to the games' narratives or significance. If anything at this point, its become a sort of dissonant fragment of gameplay left over from the past. Franchises like *Saints Row* as well have diverged from the original entry's intents and frameworks to such an extreme level but still fundamentally function well. Neither *Saints Row the Third* or *Saints Row IV* took place anywhere near "Saints Row" or within the larger city of Stillwater. It also went from a game primarily about gang warfare and thug life to one about being the President of the United States battling aliens after the destruction of Earth in its most current title then dropping hints that the future followup would involve time travel.

More importantly however, a franchise like *Saints Row* despite its stark divergence still held onto a degree of its core identity outside of its narratives or setting. With the new *Tomb Raider*, while there has been a shift from claustrophobic and dark interior spaces to the more open world, it has still successfully transcribed its core systems into its new spaces.

On variance and gameplay consonance

With games like the first *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age Origins*, Bioware set a strong precedent for establishing varied and complex characters as something players wanted. The lack of strong variance in both lead and side characters hasn't been an issue localized only by gender. Even examining the multitude of male leads, the lack of range is staggering with the vast majority playing into a small number of basic archetypes.

With both *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age Origins*, both the player character and the rest of the main cast were extremely varied in a way not commonly seen within the medium. *Mass Effect* being a game that takes place in a space-operatic setting showcased characters from a wide array of sociocultural backgrounds with uniquely different belief systems and personal agendas. Often these characters were at odds with one another because of cultural differences and racist ignorance. Depending on play, these characters could either overcome their issues whether they were internal to their own belief conflicts of external to other characters, or boil over to catastrophic results. Sexual orientation as well was something that wasn't limited to heterosexuality solely, rather seemingly promoted a more pansexualist approach with characters of varied preferences, also leaving this open for choice to the player character.

Dragon Age Origins included much of this as well in addition to varied moral stances that were in direct odds with other characters. Unlike *Mass Effect* that promoted a sort of diplomatic form of interaction that could see every character reach a point of understanding, in *Dragon Age* often it was something that had no perfect outcome. Certain actions could raise respect with one character but lower it with another. As the protagonist, you had to

choose carefully how to proceed and who out of your band of party members you valued most.

This was in complete contrast to its followup *Dragon Age 2* or *Mass Effect* which allowed players to take a more completionist gaming stance and gain the full respect of all characters. With *Dragon Age Origins* characters were their own entities not centralized to the whims of the game's needs or player. Much like in *Tomb Raider*, neither Lara or any of the other crew are simply catalysts or objects. All of them have proper characterization and not simply as a means to attain achievements, win-states, or progress the narrative.

Ultimately the newly reimagined Lara works well because she has imperfections. She is no longer the rigid and cocky overly skilled mercenary of the past, rather a recent grad who has been thrust against immense odds. Failure is guaranteed seen both in the constant amount of deaths players will definitely experience (most of which are quite brutal) and within the narrative that sees Lara fail to save her friends more often then she succeeds.

Simple inclusions such as her inabilities to flawlessly climb or move gracefully play into her characterization as an unsure and inexperienced participant in the uncommon ordeal she finds herself in. *Tomb Raider* is one of the few games that have actually successfully created a high degree of consonance between its gameplay and the game's characterizations and narrative. There was never a feeling that an action or interaction by Lara was ever out of sync to serve against immersion.

This past E3 announced and revealed a plethora of exciting titles. Both Tom Clancy games come to mind, the new *Rainbow Six Siege* and *The Division*, also *Far Cry 4*, and *Hotline Miami 2*. But the title that got me most excited was *Rise of the Tomb Raider*. Partially because it was completely unexpected but also because the announcement trailer pointed in all the right directions. Lara has retained a degree of abuse and damage from *Tomb Raider*, and all signs seem to indicate that character progression will continue instead of stagnating or simply restarting like many games tend to do. *Tomb Raider* was definitely a solid entry on its own and left me with a taste for more.