Tomb Raider Narrative Analysis

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In 2013, Square Enix released *Tomb Raider* created by the developer Crystal Dynamics as a reboot of the *Tomb Raider* franchise. The game was very well received with the excellent narrative being highly praised, and only a few elements being criticized. Overall, the game developers created a compelling story using classic story structures and a strong, relatable lead. Making great use of story elements such as characterization and immersive environments as well as sequencing events that build character and intensity, and also matching narrative progression to gameplay reveals the reasons behind such high praise. Yet where the game truly shines is in the emotional connection between the player and the heroine that the developers created.

Tomb Raider has a fairly straightforward story. Lara Croft, the heroine of the story, 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.

The characters of the story compose a diverse cast which fulfill many of the seven main character archetypes found in a monomyth, also known as the hero's journey: the hero, mentor,

herald, threshold guardian/henchman, shapeshifter, trickster, and shadow/villain. Lara is the main character of the story and fulfills the hero archetype, as she is the character that must take action to overcome the main conflict of surviving and escaping the island. She is opposed by Mathias, founder and absolute ruler of the Solarii Brotherhood and crazed madman. Though quite villainous and prominent throughout the game, Mathias is a secondary antagonist since he is subservient to Himiko, meaning he fulfills the henchman archetype – a character who blocks the hero and supports the villain's plans – as do his own Solarii followers. Mathias also takes on the role of a shapeshifter – a character who creates tension and uncertainty by changing appearance or behavior – by initially introducing himself as a friendly survivor from another shipwreck and then revealing his true nature by kidnapping Sam. Dr. Whitman also fulfills the shapeshifter archetype. Whitman is an archaeologist and the instigator of the expedition to find Yamatai, who is self-centered, arrogant, condescending, and more interested in the cultists' culture than the welfare of his companions, eventually betraying the expedition by returning Sam to Mathias after she had already been rescued once. Though not physically seen for the vast majority of the game – her spirit only being shown at the climax – Himiko is the main antagonist in *Tomb Raider*. The shadow archetype generates the main conflict, meaning that Himiko is the true villain of the story since she is the one causing the storms and trapping everyone on the island. Himiko also has her own henchmen called the Stormguard or Oni: cursed, undead servants sworn to serve and protect the Sun Queen who attack nearly everyone on sight. Conrad Roth is the captain of the *Endurance* and takes on the role of Lara's mentor and father-figure. Serving as a constant encouragement to Lara, protecting her as a father would, Roth eventually sacrifices himself in order to save her. Alex Weiss is the expedition's technician and fulfills the trickster archetype – a character who is the main source of comic relief. With the many dark

sequences throughout the game, Alex provides some much-needed light-heartedness, but his character remains more than a token for laughs. Lara needs him to walk her through fixing a radio tower and his death serves as the last major turning point for Lara's character. Since Lara is suddenly thrust into the story's conflict without warning, none of the characters actually fulfill the herald archetype to announce the main conflict.

As for the remaining cast, none of them fulfill any major monomyth archetype. However, a couple do take on other types of story archetypes. Sam is Lara's best friend with an outgoing and bubbly personality who is the focal character of the story – a character that becomes an object of desire for everyone. Both sides of the conflict are seeking and chasing after Sam: 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. Jonah, the large, strong, and friendly chef of the *Endurance,* 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. Grim, the tough Scottish helmsman of the *Endurance,* and Reyes, the expedition's abrasive mechanic, don't fulfill any particular archetypes, but they do still serve narrative purposes. Grim stubbornly resists the Solarii and eventually becomes the first character to sacrifice himself to save Lara, strengthening her character as worthy of protection, while Reyes provides a minor source of conflict within the group of survivors, being hard on Lara most of the game but coming to respect her in the end.

While the developers made good use of these character archetypes to compose a diversified cast, the characters other than Lara are not nearly as well developed as she is. As Keza MacDonald of IGN wrote, the supporting cast seems two-dimensional in comparison because Lara's character is so well realized (2013). At times, it feels like they are only plot

devices for Lara's character development rather than characters that are necessary to the plot, especially when three of them sacrifice themselves within the span of a couple hours of gameplay. 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 character had more character development. 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. Most of the supporting cast only have character arcs where their circumstances change and the few that have slightly deeper arcs, like Whitman and Reyes, only have minor changes in their attitudes or beliefs. 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 actions lack direct emotional impact on the player.

The static nature of *Tomb Raider*'s supporting cast also 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. Character consistency is important to have for believability's sake since players will recognize when characters' actions are out of line with who they are. While *Tomb Raider'*s cast is very consistent – with Lara's character as the only one that experiences any substantial amount of growth – the element of surprise suffers.

Lara's character is the shining element of the narrative, with her journey and growth pulling the player into the story. She experiences a character arc of deep growth that fundamentally changes who she is at her core, starting off as a vulnerable and naïve girl, then doing whatever she has to in order to survive and to save her companions, finally changing into a hardened, confident survivor by the end of the game. Many emotional scenes humanize Lara in a way that is uncommon in video game heroes making the connection a player has to Lara's humanity the most remarkable aspect of *Tomb Raider*.

A good example of an emotional, humanizing scene is found in the first few minutes of the game. After washing up on the beach from the shipwreck in the beginning of the game, Lara is knocked out from behind and taken to a cave by an unknown assailant. She awakes, hanging upside down and tied up in a cave littered with corpses. To escape her bonds, Lara <u>swings into a burning fire</u> at 3:50 in the hyperlinked video successfully destroying the rope, but falls on a metal rod, injuring her side (Tomb Raider, 1). Horrified by her surroundings and in great pain, Lara trudges onward using the objects around her to eventually open a passageway to the outside but, in turn, causes the cave to start collapsing as she escapes. Lara is accosted twice by the man that kidnapped her during these events, but both times she is able to kick him away seeing him <u>crushed the second time</u> by a boulder at 8:40 while she scrambles to escape (Tomb Raider, 2). A little while later, after Lara finds Sam's pack, rests some, and remorsefully hunts a deer for sustenance, <u>Roth makes contact</u> over the two-way radio that was in the pack at 23:39 (Tomb Raider, 3). 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.

The game developers use events like these to develop Lara's character and make her relatable to players. In the cave, Lara's fear and vulnerability are established in addition to her perseverance and resourcefulness, and Lara's display and release of emotion to Roth let players empathize with her humanity. The developers could've chosen to have Lara react to these events with little or no emotion, but by choosing to establish her character in this way, Lara has much room for growth and the player can begin to connect and relate to her through familiar human emotion. Lara is motivated by both primal and personal stakes – her own survival and protecting her friends – which players are able to empathize with, and when confronted with tragedy, triumph, or intense situations, Lara responds with realistic emotion. During lulls in the action, Lara also periodically writes journal entries which provide deeper insight into Lara's own thoughts, letting the player further connect with Lara and further humanizing her character. 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 ludonarritive harmony where the player's desires are usually in line with Lara's. In the midst of danger, Lara is willing to do whatever it takes to survive, even if she initially doesn't want to engage in danger in the beginning of the game. 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.

One of the most impactful moments occurs while Lara is seeking Roth after their conversation over the radio and is captured by the Solarii. 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 Solarii to survive. Killing for the first time hits her hard. After an intense struggle with a cultist, at 4:54 Lara is barely able to push a pistol away from her own face

toward his and shoot straight through his skull (Tomb Raider, 4). 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. This is the first major turning point for Lara's character and the way that human emotion is displayed in this scene is gripping as it shows a real reaction to a traumatizing event. Particularly in this scene, Lara feels like a real person to the player, not a superhuman avatar, enticing the player's empathy and immersing the player deep into the story.

Unfortunately, the gameplay that immediately follows causes dissonance. During the next few minutes after 6:20, Lara subsequently kills seven more people with little to no emotion (Tomb Raider, 5). At this point, the lack of emotion is explained away by Lara mentioning to Roth at 9:03 "it's scary just how easy it was [to kill the men]" (Tomb Raider, 6). 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. In MacDonald's review, she calls this narrative dissonance "jarringly instant" as Lara too quickly transitions "from terrified survivor forced to take a life to head-shot happy killer" (2013). MacDonald points to this as the narrative's only significant weakness (2013). At this point, the gameplay and narrative quickly rush forward, keeping the momentum moving along which diminishes the negative effect of this dissonance. Although this dissonance is distinct, the game developers might have intentionally wanted this transition to be jarring to enforce the desperate nature of Lara's situation – she either adapts or dies. Yet, taking the time to show the emotional

impact of each subsequent kill (or lack thereof) would have made it easier for the player to believe in Lara's transformation since each step toward it would have been witnessed.

Regardless, ludonarrative harmony is kept throughout the vast majority of the rest of the story and the growth in Lara's character feels organic. Gameplay elements such as solving puzzles seamlessly integrate into the story, demonstrating Lara's ingenuity 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. The last major turning point for her character occurs when Alex dies and Lara resolves that she can't let anyone else die at 30:51 (Tomb Raider, 7). 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. On the path to the climax, how much Lara has changed over the course of the game is apparent with her declaring to her enemies at 4:33 that they won't stop her and to get out of her way (Tomb Raider, 8). Lara finally completes her journey to becoming a survivor by killing Mathias, destroying Himiko's remains, saving Sam and dispersing the supernatural storms trapping them on the island. Lara doesn't passively survive, she actively overcomes every obstacle thrown at her, growing into a hero that is able to directly resolve the main conflict.

Conflict is the fuel of every story where someone wants something but is blocked. In *Tomb Raider,* the main conflict is that Lara wants to escape the island she and her companions are shipwrecked on, but are blocked by Himiko's enraged spirit. Additionally, saving Sam is an

important secondary conflict where Mathias actually is the main villain. His desire to sacrifice Sam in order to escape the island generates this conflict. With this secondary conflict, the game developers create an interesting dynamic where Mathias provides a strong villain character while still remaining a henchman in the main conflict. He's smart, powerful, threatening, initially unapproachable, and has a skewed self-image. Though insane, Mathias' motivation is actually believable as he wants to escape the island he's been trapped on for over 30 years, no matter the cost. Lara must grow over the course of the game to defeat him, ultimately resolving both the main and secondary conflicts during the climax. Both conflicts also play to Lara's main objects of desires, namely to survive and escape the island and to protect her friends. Lara is able to congruently achieve her desires by destroying the source of the barrier keeping everyone on the island and saving Sam's life.

The main conflict of *Tomb Raider* is introduced very quickly to the player. Halfway through the beginning cutscene, the player is presented with the island at 1:52 (Tomb Raider, 9). 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. In the traditional three-act structure, the setup occurs in Act I including an inciting incident – the moment when the hero becomes aware of the main conflict – and ending when the hero commits to resolve the main conflict. Both of these moments are already covered by the *Endurance's shipwreck* at 0:22 and Lara fighting to survive at 1:07 (Tomb Raider, 10, 11). When players take control of Lara at 3:26, they are already in Act II of the narrative where the confrontation of the conflict occurs since Lara is already determined to escape and survive (Tomb Raider, 12). However, after Lara escapes the cave she awakes in, she finds Sam's pack and camcorder. The game developers use this camcorder to present 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 effectively supplies information to the player during breaks from the action rather than all at the beginning, when players are eager and impatient to start playing. Providing background information in this way also allows the game developers to keep the beginning cutscene focused on important plot exposition – information that the player needs to know in order to understand and appreciate the story. All the knowledge gained from the camcorder videos is information that could wait or is incidental, so the game developers "seed" it throughout Act II. In doing so, they create a concise and compelling introduction that doesn't feel like an exposition dump of extraneous information. Act II then comprises most of the game, presenting increasingly challenging obstacles to Lara and the player. Ultimately, Act II ends toward the very end of the game before the climax when Himiko is defeated. The information that Lara uses to defeat Himiko is "planted" beforehand at the end of Act II. By establishing specific details that will be important later in the story so that it doesn't come out of nowhere, planting affects the story's believability. Therefore, the game developers plant the idea that the ascension ritual can be interrupted at 24:21 so that when Lara torches Himiko's remains, it makes sense to the player (Tomb Raider, 13). It's not a subtle use of planting, but it provides explanation as to why Himiko's spirit doesn't still possess Sam after the ritual is stopped. Act III – the resolution – begins at this point at 25:01 when Lara has the epiphany of how to stop the storms: she must destroy the body Himiko's spirit is trapped in (Tomb Raider, 14). Act III then contains the climax and the ending cutscene afterward.

Throughout these three acts, much of the monomyth structure is also reflected. The monomyth has twelve stages: (1) the depiction of the hero's normal world, (2) the call to

adventure when the conflict is presented to the hero, (3) the initial refusal of that call, (4) meeting with the mentor that provides motivation and encouragement, (5) crossing of the first threshold where the hero commits to the adventure, (6) a subsequent series of increasing challenges related to the overall conflict, (7) the approach to the site of major, possibly the main, conflict, (8) the supreme ordeal where the hero faces death in the "belly of the beast," (9) the reward for surviving that ordeal, (10) the hero trying to return with the reward to the ordinary world with dark forces in pursuit, (11) the resurrection where the hero seemingly dies but actually survives, and finally, (12) the return to the ordinary world with final rewards and punishments being doled out. The first two stages are contained in the beginning cutscene, at 0:00 and 0:22 respectively, when Lara is shown going on the adventure and then being presented with the conflict by means of the shipwreck (Tomb Raider, 15, 10). There is no refusal of the call (3); Lara's refusal would be giving up and letting herself die. After being pulled out of a flooding corridor on the *Endurance*, Lara sees Roth, her mentor, at 1:05 standing across a gap encouraging her to jump to him (4) (Tomb Raider, 16). A moment later, Lara fully commits to the adventure (5) at 1:07 showing a determined look in her eye, steeling herself to run toward the gap in preparation for the jump (Tomb Raider, 11). The majority of Act II would then be considered the sixth stage of the monomyth with the seventh beginning at 1:12 when Lara must fight through hordes of enemies leading up to the climax of the story (Tomb Raider, 17). The supreme ordeal (8) then is the climax at 11:54 when Lara defeats both the primary and secondary antagonists. At this point, only the rewards for surviving and returning to the ordinary world (9) apply since Lara saves Sam and escapes the island with her and the couple of other companions who have survived (12), leaving out tenth and eleventh stages. The game developers wisely did not use those two stages at the climax since events in the secondary conflict already reflect them.

Before the climax, Sam has already been saved from Mathias once, but is taken again by

Whitman's betrayal off-screen, revealed at 31:02 (Tomb Raider, 19). Having another false

victory at the climax would take away from its impact and make the player feel as if the game

developers were trying to trick them. The way that the game developers used these structures

work well to tell the story, progressing events and characters.

In addition to great story structure, the game developers also created a world that works

well with the narrative of the game. The world is internally consistent with realistic physics and

supernatural storms being exclusively controlled by Himiko. Actions seen in the cutscenes are

consistent with gameplay, and what actions the player is allowed to do never changes beyond

steady gameplay progression. Additionally, the environmental element bolsters the emotion of

the 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 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.

Tomb Raider is a powerful example of a game driven by narrative and character. The

game developers craft a compelling narrative by using traditional story structures in effective

ways. 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 is

certainly 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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