

Release Date:
TBA (but not 2011)
Platforms:
PC / 360 / PS3
Genre:
Survival action
Developer:
Crystal Dynamics
Website:
www.tombraider.com
Publisher:
Square-Enix



> *Tomb Raider* will be M-rated, but that doesn't mean the game will feature loads of gratuitous violence and dirty language. The developers opted for this rating to allow them to create realistic scenarios without being limited by the need to keep things family-friendly.

It takes more than just guts to wake up in the morning and decide "I'm going to reboot the *Tomb Raider* franchise, starting with a new Lara Croft." It also takes a hell of a lot of planning and, as Crystal Dynamics would have it, a good sense of timing. With that said, I'd hazard to say that fortitude for public backlash should be pretty high on that list of requirements too. While the *Tomb Raider* series has arguably gone a bit stale over the years, it's still an incredibly popular game franchise with over 35 million sales in total, ranking it number 30 in total game franchise sales worldwide. That's a lot of opinions to contend with. So, when NAG was invited to visit Crystal Dynamic's San Francisco studio, we jumped at the opportunity to get into the minds of the developers and, in the nicest way possible, ask them what the hell they're doing.

As it turns out, Crystal Dynamics is doing a *lot*. This new, boldly-titled *Tomb Raider* isn't just about rebooting the franchise, it's about changing the way people look at Lara, story-telling in games and adventure games in general. It's a statement game if ever there was one, and the developers are extremely keen to take ownership of this refreshed IP to bring Lara into an age of gaming where we aren't all thirteen year-old boys who try to trick the in-game camera to give us up-close boob shots of our favourite heroine.

To give us a taste of things to come, *Tomb Raider* brand manager Karl Stewart and Crystal's general manager Darrell Gallagher took us through two segments of the game called Day 2 and Day 4. The names are not necessarily representative of actual in-game time (it's still early days in development), but they're from an early portion of the game nonetheless.

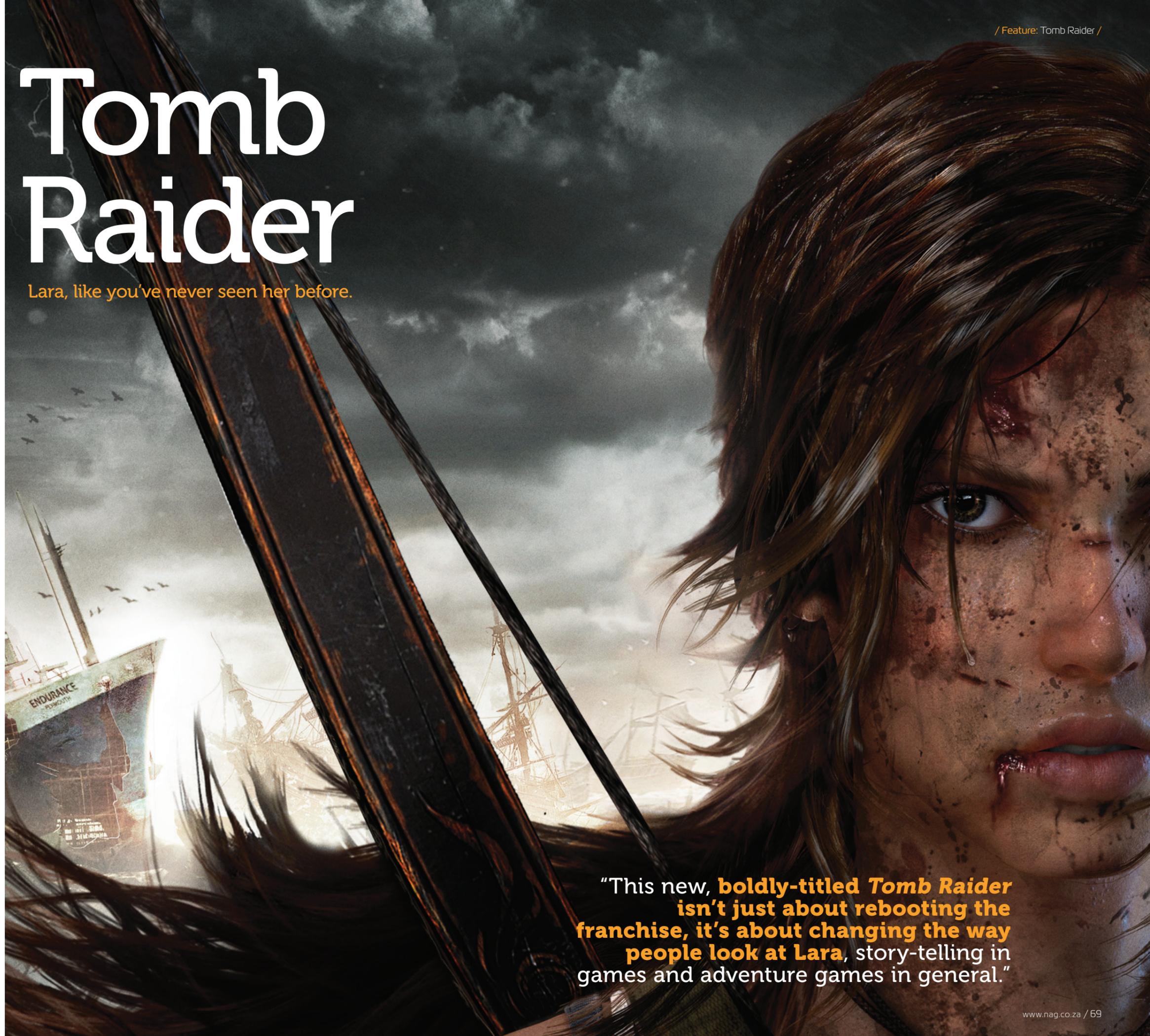
Lara's loading screen's voiceover tells us that she, her mentor Conrad Roth and the rest of the crew of the sea-faring *The Endurance* have been shipwrecked on a small island off the coast of Japan while hunting for treasure. Lara was knocked unconscious and awakens to find herself unarmed, bound from chest to foot, hanging upside down in a cavern lit only by a few burning torches. She's alone but for a few long-rotted corpses that didn't manage to break out of this mess and she decides to make an alteration to her fate. Immediately, the player has control and must swing Lara side-to-side to set her alight, thus burning her bonds and sending her plummeting to the cave floor, where she lands on a metal spike. After a bit of button-mashing, Lara removes the spike from her side which subjects the camera to a blinding assortment of blur effects as Lara staggers out of the cave. It's a shock to see the once near-superhuman adventurer in this kind of vulnerable position. The visuals are gruesome, the cave is claustrophobic and Lara says "shit" a lot.

Whoa. This *is* different. It's almost uncomfortable to watch.

Out of the first cavern, Lara continues through a series of caves and corridors in a desperate attempt to escape to

Tomb Raider

Lara, like you've never seen her before.



"This new, **boldly-titled *Tomb Raider* isn't just about rebooting the franchise, it's about changing the way people look at Lara**, story-telling in games and adventure games in general."

> New allies for a new heroine

Real Name: Conrad Roth
Age: 52
Nationality: British (Sheffield/Southern Yorkshire)
Occupation: Treasure-Hunter/ Expedition Leader
Appearance: 6'1", stocky but athletic

A veteran of two combat tours with the RMC (Royal Marine Commandos), Conrad Roth now puts his unique skills to use as a wreck diver and freelance treasure hunter. Roth is renowned for his hardiness, his proficiency and his willingness to bend the tiresome laws restricting the "trading" of historical artifacts. He will lie, he will cheat and he will go beyond the law's boundaries to ensure that he gets his prize. He commands respect from his crew and no one would dare question his orders. Roth's military training kicks in when things go awry, remaining level headed even in the most chaotic of situations. Roth has gradually acquired a series of ever-larger ships and currently captains a large, well-equipped salvage vessel known as The Endurance. Roth jokingly remarks that he's married to the sea. He dreams of enjoying his retirement aboard a 60-foot yacht – but first he needs to hit his big payday.

> If the game can be summarised in one word to express what it represents, that word would be "character". Lara is undoubtedly the star of the show, and the developers want the player to experience her growth right from the beginning by being along for a challenging adventure that will constantly push her beyond her comfort zones.

the outside. A clanging noise nearby tells us that Lara is not alone. As she moves through the space, the dynamic camera shifts position to give players a cinematic feel. Lara's expertly-crafted animations show us how terrified she is, but her frequent monologue lets us know that she's determined to survive. She grabs a torch and uses it to burn down some rubble that blocks her path. There's an explosive barrel to remind us that we're still watching an action game and not something out of the *Silent Hill* series; this is similarly helped by an activated ability called Survival Instinct that highlights nearby paths and interactive items. When Lara becomes submerged in water, her torch is extinguished and it becomes imperative for her to find a source of fire to re-ignite it.

While crawling through a small space, Lara's foot is grabbed by a savage human with a mean-looking bladed weapon and a penchant for wearing bones. A QuickTime event has Lara shake off her attacker and kick him in the face before she can escape. Soon after, Lara is in what the developers call The Den. Here is the first "puzzle" that the player is faced with. Lara must escape the Den by destroying the explosive barrels at the bottom of a water chute. Simple enough, but sliding down the chute extinguishes her torch. She needs to find another way to

ignite the barrels. This is solved with a combination of activating physics-based pulleys and containers, burning key objects and making use of the buoyancy of wooden crates that are floating along the underground river (presumably from the shipwreck).

Soon after, during Lara's escape of the cave, she's faced with a few more QuickTime events like dodging tumbling boulders and another friendly local that "just wants to help" by murdering her. When she does make it to the surface, she's greeted with a view of the coastline – littered with shipwrecks.

What we just witnessed was a survival game sequence, one of the types of gameplay experiences in which the player will partake. These sequences are fast-paced, scary and require the player to keep a cool head if they want Lara to survive. They're quite different from what we know *Tomb Raider* to be but they're exciting. They're also not mutually exclusive, as we see in the game segment called Day 4, which focuses more on "classic" *Tomb Raider* level traversal while mixing in plenty of new stuff.

The day begins with Lara finding her mentor Conrad Roth. Since we know nothing (so far) about Lara's parents in this version of *Tomb Raider*, he's immediately identifiable as the father figure, and, wielding dual pistols while he fights off a pack of wolves, reminds



"These sequences are fast-paced, scary and require the player to keep a cool head if they want Lara to survive. They're quite different from what we know *Tomb Raider* to be but they're exciting."



This is the bit where Lara has to swing to set herself alight. This action is deliberately designed to be counter-intuitive, with the purpose of taking the player outside of their comfort zone within the first minutes of gameplay.



Conrad Roth



us strongly of the Lara from previous games. Roth doesn't fare too well, however, and as the wolves scamper off he collapses to the ground. He calls on Lara to find a radio transmitter and first-aid kit, which can be found in the wolves' nearby den. Lara is not keen to go in. She's still unarmed and unconfident, but a bit of urging by Roth convinces her that she needs to find the courage to help her friend or else he will die. The animations, voice-acting (temporary as it may be) and cinematics help convey the emotion and conflict that Lara undergoes. When she eventually sets off, one can't help but feel pride that she's decided to overcome her fears.

Using her Survival Instinct ability, Lara can see glowing wolf prints along the ground indicating that she needs to climb to the top of a cliff to get to the wolves' den. In this area, we're shown a number of ways for Lara to reach her goal, including manoeuvring through the small ruined Japanese village at the cliff's base, climbing directly up certain rocks or creeping across the unsteady remains of a long-abandoned World War 2-era aeroplane. The rain is pelting down on the area and particle effects all over give the impression of a strong storm. Lara moves awkwardly, as though she's unsure of her climbing and jumping abilities, but that doesn't stop her from leaping large gaps and surviving long falls to the ground. She can also scramble up ledges and even change her direction in mid-air. We're told that as Lara unlocks new skills and improves her abilities (through an as-yet undecided experience points system), as well as when she unlocks new equipment, her level traversal abilities will improve. With these improvements, she'll be able to reach new locations

that were previously blocked from her, by travelling back to base camps from previous parts of the game. At those base camps she'll also be able to upgrade and assemble equipment.

Once Lara reaches the top of the cliff, the game returns to another survival-type sequence, in which Lara is inside another cave, while wolves dart around her as distant, snarling shadows. She soon finds the required items and heads outside, but gets knocked down by a wolf and the player must beat another QuickTime event to have Lara shove off the wolf and eventually stab it to death. It's an oddly emotionally moment for Lara, considering the number of wolves the character has killed in previous games. This Lara is quite different, however, and apologises to the animal's corpse with mixed notes of regret and triumph. After all, if she hadn't killed the wolf, she'd be dead.

Our brief time watching the game (sadly, the developers weren't ready to give us direct control) was incredibly interesting. I went in there fairly certain that I knew what to expect, but left the studio with the impression of a game quite unlike any *Tomb Raider* I'd seen before. I couldn't shake the feeling that it felt like a combination of later *Resident Evil* games and the *Uncharted* series, but with very definite *Tomb Raider* aspects about it. It's still early days – the code we saw was a vertical slice from the early alpha stage of development – and regular combat wasn't even touched on in the slightest, but if things keep up, this next *Tomb Raider* will set a very high benchmark for competing titles and the rest of the series alike.

GeometriX



> Darrell Gallagher



> Karl Stewart



> Redefining the past

In her younger years, Lara spent a good deal of time accompanying her parents on numerous archaeological expeditions. Her time spent in various exotic locales imbued her with an insatiable passion for the unknown and worldly experience far beyond her years. Lara is constantly driven to seek answers to ancient mysteries. Her father attended Cambridge, but Lara chose to avoid the traditional establishment by studying elsewhere – a place where she could forge her own path. Lara eventually exits university a practical, sensible young woman: but no amount of practicality could prepare her for the challenges she will face on her first expedition. Soon after graduating, Lara boards a ship called The Endurance to embark on her first great adventure. Captained by Conrad Roth, The Endurance sets off in search of lost treasures off Japan's coast. Lara believes this expedition will yield a discovery of massive significance and she will finally make her mark on the world. A vicious storm cuts her ambitious dreams short when it rips The Endurance in two and sends Lara overboard. This is where we step in and meet this vulnerable, believable new Lara.

Interview

with general manager Darrell Gallagher and brand manager Karl Stewart

NAG: Please tell us what you do at Crystal Dynamics.

Darrell Gallagher: I am studio head at Crystal.

Karl Stewart: I'm global brand director for *Tomb Raider* and the studio. Darrell is responsible for the entire management of the studio and this particular project. Between the two of us we manage the brand and how it's taken to the outside world.

NAG: What is it about the previous *Tomb Raiders* that you think needed to change?

DG: Mainly we talked about that we had felt that the character had become almost a superhero – that you knew exactly what to expect with the character because you'd seen her so many times before. You knew that if she got into a situation that she's very capable: she'd overcome some opponents or animals, then she'd make a sarcastic remark and move on, and she'd be in a beautiful location at the same time. Then she'd move from location to location. While that was good, it was also something that we felt we needed to move on from to make it interesting and from a character standpoint, she'd become too predictable. We wanted to build a character that was more relatable, more human, has flaws, is challenged by situations, where you're not sure that she's going to come out on top or not, and it would challenge the very expectations of the character that people had come to know and love.

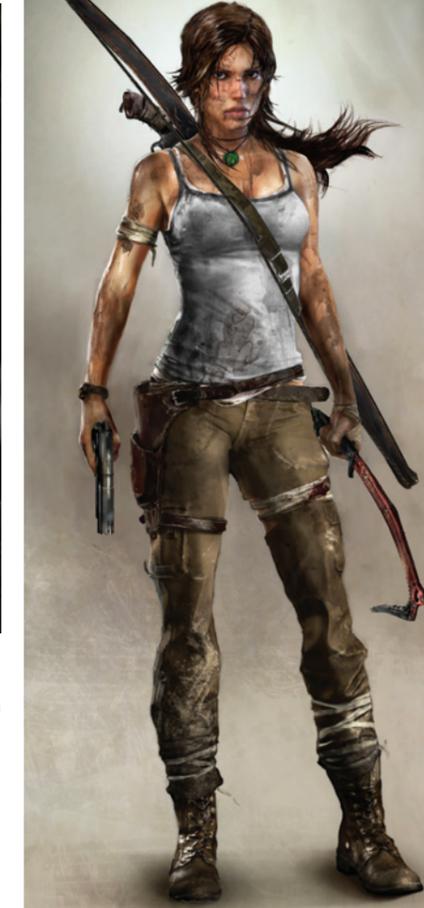
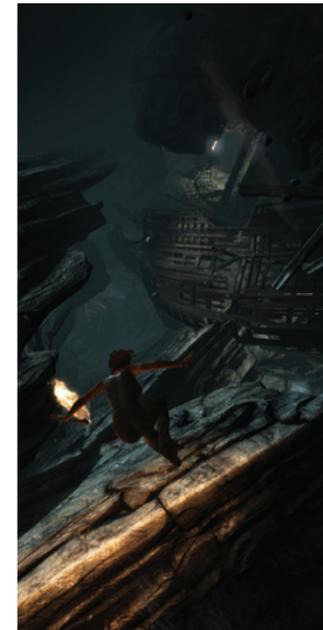
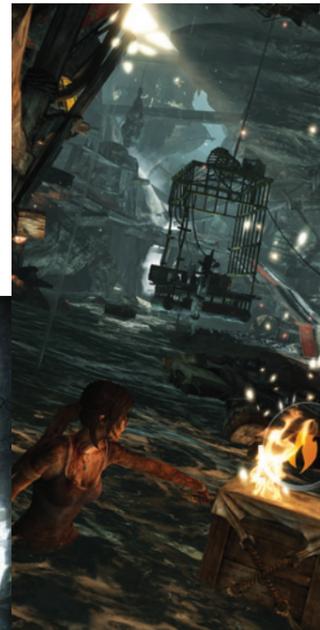
KS: Videogames haven't really had the same roundabout effect that movies

have had, whether it's James Bond or Batman or Superman. The characters go through a cycle where they have to be culturally relevant. Adam West was an awesome Batman for that time. Then Michael Keaton made a great Batman until George Clooney and Val Kilmer came along and all of a sudden Christopher Nolan's version of Batman with Christian Bale. We felt that Lara's been around for quite a long time; she's never had that revelation where she's become culturally relevant. Up until *Underworld*, we had the pillars of a character, the pillars of an experience, but it needs to be redefined so that people today play it. Our goal is that by the time you finish the game you will feel that this is a *Tomb Raider* for today, that this is a *Tomb Raider* for "me" and for previous *Tomb Raider* players.

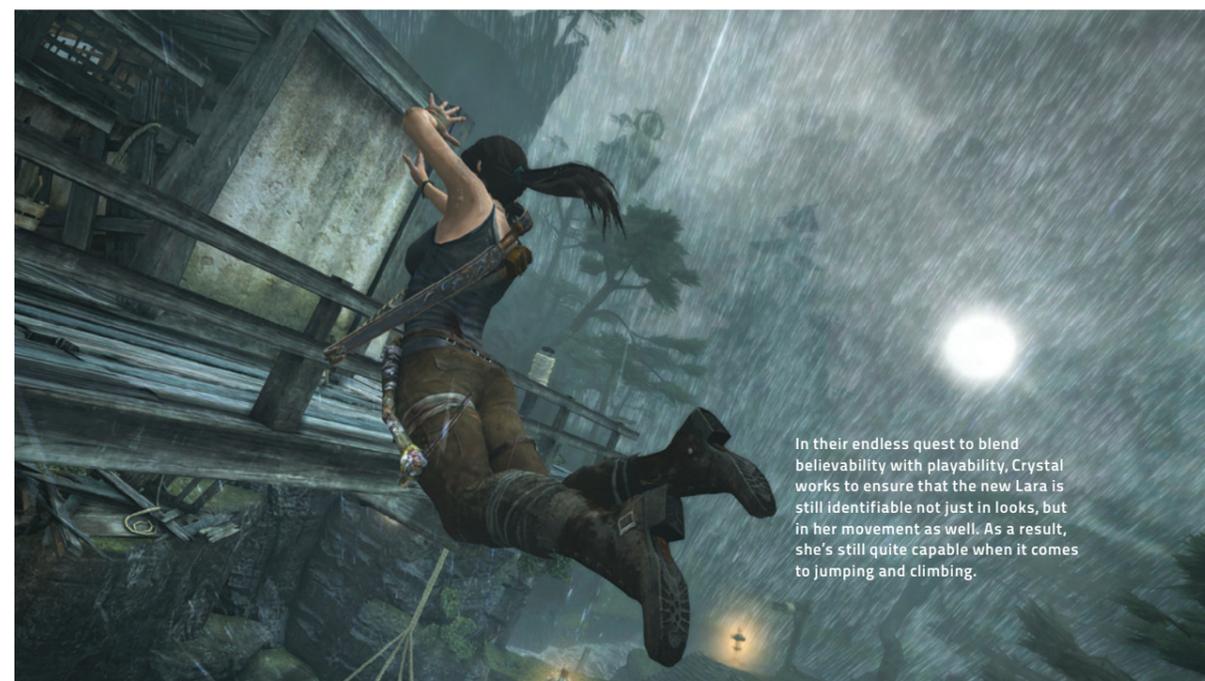
NAG: You've mentioned that the current voice actor is a placeholder; why is it so difficult to find the right voice of Lara?

DG: The voice acting is very much a connection to a digital character. It is the human part of a digital character. So, getting that voice acting to be absolutely perfect in terms of the casting, delivery, reliability and ensuring that the quality we want comes through, is very important for us, and that's why we're really taking our time with it.

KS: The voice has to be of that age as well. Lara says in one of the cinematics "that wolf's got nothing on a broken bottle" so we're positioning a whole different Lara – a Lara that worked in a pub. She's straight out of college so she has to have what goes with a woman straight out of college.



"...we're positioning a whole different Lara – a Lara that worked in a pub. She's straight out of college so she has to have what goes with a woman straight out of college."



In their endless quest to blend believability with playability, Crystal works to ensure that the new Lara is still identifiable not just in looks, but in her movement as well. As a result, she's still quite capable when it comes to jumping and climbing.

It's important because once you define that voice, that voice will be the voice for quite a while. The last thing you want to do is keep changing it with each game because you lose affinity with the character. So, trying to find the voice that, when you see that girl's face in real life, you'll be like "that's the one; she's of the age." As you move to the next game she'll progress. This is not just one game: it's creating a franchise.

NAG: Beautiful and exciting locations have always been an important part of *Tomb Raider* games. What is significant about the location in this game?

KS: The location is an island, and the crucial thing about the location is that it's a character in itself. This location allows us to strip the character of Lara right down to the bare bones of what survival means. Having a character that goes from Egypt to Barcelona to all these different places doesn't allow you to truly define that character and get to that raw emotion. For us the setting of it being an island allows us to go through so many ups and downs without the distractions of going around the world.

DG: Having range within one setting is obviously very important. We really want to make sure that the island has personality – that it has different characteristics depending on what location you are in on the island. That range can exist in one space. In terms of the different flavours that you get from world-trotting, our aim is to present variation and infuse different flavours

into the island yet remain cohesive at the same time.

KS: And I think you'll see over that we'll lay in enough mystery that you won't want to leave the island, although you have to.

NAG: Can you tell us about some of the story-telling mechanics you're using in the game?

DG: It's a mix of traditional story-telling mechanics in games in the form of cutscenes, but using very advanced techniques such as motion capture, a motion-captured camera and great voice acting, but also trying to tell the story in-game through her dialogue and her expressions. Not just relying on cutscenes to tell a story, but to also try and develop the character in-game through her dialogue and acting and through her physicality. Seeing that progress over the story arc is something you don't see in games very often. In most games you start off as a bad-ass, big muscular guy or a Space Marine or something, and that's what you end up as.

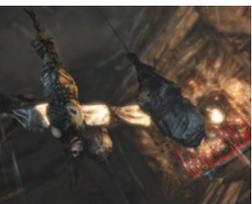
The thing that's interesting to me in this game is that we're actually starting with somebody who requires development, who has a character that is very human, who has to go through experiences that actually define her. Those are the sorts of things you don't see in games very often – the arc from one sort of person to seeing how they become somebody else through the pressure they're under and situations they're in.



> Brian Horton



> Karl Stewart



Interview

with art director Brian Horton and brand manager Karl Stewart

NAG: I noticed during the demonstration that the level traversal points like ledges and bridges are well integrated into the environment. How do you go about creating environments like that?

Brian Horton: What we do is try to create a rule set that's clear enough: that people can start to intuitively figure it out. In the first level there really aren't many places that you *can* go – it gives you the illusion of some kind of freedom but the choices are limited. It lets us spend more time making the world feel more alive with a lot more set dressing. The goal always is to come up with a clear focal point where you want the player to go and that gets them in the direction until they see the next focal point. You're trying to always lead the eye with new focal points. In the case of the first space that you saw – The Den – you can see the altar and beyond into the distance. A lot of that just comes down to careful staging and lighting to help lead the player through the space.

NAG: Can you talk about the process of creating the new Lara?

BH: The goal was to start not with the surface qualities but who she was as a character and then go from there. We knew we wanted a younger Lara, but not just make her younger but make her more believable. Once we had those tenets in mind we said that believability is the goal, and then we want a younger face so we put in a lot of effort softening those features. Also, it allows her to have a different character, she's not just a hardened, experienced adventurer; she's more of an aspiring archaeologist, so having her start there was important.

In terms of her clothes, we wanted to make clothes that felt more pragmatic and natural to what you'd wear while on an expedition so it's not so much an outfit but a collection of practical clothing. They do have iconic aspects to them – things you can recognise – but in general they tend to be much more practical.

NAG: The art direction in this game is one of the biggest departures from previous games in the series. What was the inspiration for this approach?

BH: We started with the story – we knew it'd be darker in content and we knew it was going to have a lot more gravitas and the style that we went with was more of a contrast of light and dark. The team was very-much inspired by a group of painters called the Hudson River School. They had this very dramatic atmospheric light and areas of shadow and storms off in the distance. It's that play of light, darkness and sort-of stormy danger that inspired a lot of the aesthetics of the environments.



"In terms of her clothes, we wanted to make clothes that felt more pragmatic and natural to what you'd wear while on an expedition ..."

NAG: The animations look very believable; Lara moves a bit awkwardly and definitely not as heroically as before. Could you tell us about the animation process?

BH: The cinematics are motion-captured, but the performances that you see are mostly handled through Brandon Fernandez and his crew of animators. It's all built on a layered animation system; you're never seeing any one piece of motion at a time – it's a composite of many layers that deliver that performance. We think that, like when she brushes her hand against the wall as she gets close to it, all of those layers help make Lara feel connected to the space. She stumbles sometimes. All of these are little layers that we can add throughout the game. Even though the player has full control, it gives them that extra level of believability. That was an important aspect to us. It's not just the way Lara looks; it's the way she moves as well.

KS: The key thing to note here is that we're showing you a point in time in the story. As she progresses, obviously she'll become more competent and with that comes her ability.

NAG: Her animations will reflect her abilities?

KS: Exactly where she is in the story arc, yes. She won't always act the exact same as what you saw today.

NAG: Lara never falls into the uncanny valley; she looks alive but never creepy or weird. Can you talk about what it takes to create such a character?

BH: Thank you. One of the things we did was, early on we did work purely from concept about the amalgamations of characters. We knew we wanted versions of her, and we knew we wanted her to feel more believable. There was a lot of reference and gathering and in the process of creating the character we sort-of go "who'd I cast in the role of Lara Croft?" You go through those exercises and you come up with an amalgamation of different people that you think would embody the spirit. At the end of the day we have to come up with a version of her that feels unique to her. It's not that we're trying to avoid the uncanny valley, but that we're trying to breathe a certain amount of life into her always. **NAG**