Whether you loved the games or not, most people can't deny the tremendous influence that the *Tomb Raider* series holds on today's culture and society. Released in October 1996, *Tomb Raider* by Eidos Interactive and Core Design Ltd. revolutionized the 3D game industry. Not only was it a 3D game, but it also offered something the PC gaming community had not seen before – a third-person shooter with gameplay elements drawn from 2D platform games and an unforgettable heroine, Lara Croft. Lara Croft enjoys fame that many celebrities merely dream of, having over 4,000 Internet homepages dedicated to her, appearing in music videos, comic books, and on June 15th, 2001, she will be on the silver screen. Centering around this phenomenon, we journey into a case history of *Tomb Raider*: a story of its beginnings, the people behind the game, its authority over computer game design, and finally, the technological, business, and cultural influences it possesses over today's society.

Tomb Raider: **The Creators**

In the midst of the electronics and digital entertainment boom of the mid-80s, cities, such as Manchester and Liverpool, England became centers for all that was hot and new. Novel job descriptions of computer game designer lured young, talented programmers worldwide to try their luck in a budding field that promised to shape the future. From this mayhem, a bright star emerged. His name was Jeremy Smith. Filled with inspiration and backed by nine years of industry experience, Smith teamed up with an ambitious group of developers from Gremlin Graphics, a small company in nearby Derby, England, and founded Core Design in 1988. As president and single sales and

marketing professional of this newly-found software development company, Jeremy Smith was set to lead his team to greatness.

Over the next ten years, Core Design aimed for quality instead of quantity of games and only produced a handful of titles. This led to Core's lack of fame outside the middle England region. From a small, ambitious programming studio (the two floors of a roomy townhouse), Smith sought dedicated team members--the first being his own brother, Adrian (then pursuing a career selling computer-design systems). Working together, the two brothers combined their leadership skills and brought the company to a worldwide entertainment business with the help of game creators Andy Green, Robert Toone, Terry Lloyd, and Chris Shrigley. Instead of publishing under its own logo, Core limited itself to the conception and developments of technically demanding games. Also, marketing was left primarily to other companies, so as a behind-the-scenes power, the recognition of Core's talent was delayed.

Core's first best seller happened in 1989 and was an adventure game called *Rick Dangerous*, which might as well have been named *Tomb Raider*. In a Mayan temple setting, the hero of the game, Rick Dangerous, jumped over ruin grates, fought temple guards and explored deadly labyrinths filled with magical artifacts. The ambiance and movements such as running, jumping, battling, crawling and climbing were similar between the 10-year predecessor and its modern counterpart. However, unlike *Tomb Raider,* the game had a typical 2D side scrolling adventure and non-continuous run and jump movements in a fixed screen.

After *Rick Dangerous*, Core continued to work hard to produce technologically sound games which unfortunately, earned small profits. In 1990, Core began marketing

games under its own name and created titles such as *Thunderhawk*, a flight simulation game and *Jaguar XJ220*, Core's first racing game on the Amiga. Before the world took notice of Core, insiders discovered the technical potential of the small developer after seeing their work in these games. Sega, the Japanese video game giant most successful in Europe, became Core's first international partner in 1993. Core began developing for the new Sega Mega CD system and with games like *Thunderhawk*, Core blew away the international programming competition and earned worldwide recognition. Following their work with Sega, other Japanese companies like JVC (Victor Company of Japan, Ltd.) formed partnerships with Core. For the JVC game system Wondermega, Core created *Wonderdog*, which was strangely only marketed in Japan where the game sales went horribly, with an audience that could not relate to the English-speaking characters. Despite an over-abundance of talent, Core Design could not sustain itself financially with the sales of these games. Unfortunately, this was largely due to the failure of the consoles in which they developed for. In Europe, *Thunderhawk* sold about 300,000 units, which happened to be a huge hit for the system, but months later, the hardware was essentially dead. Jeremy Smith said, "The Mega CD was a disaster! We were lucky that *Thunderhawk* was out when there were hardly any other Mega CD games." As a consequence of the financial trouble resulting from unstable hardware, English gaming publisher and distributor CentreGold took over Core Design in 1994.

Meanwhile in London, Eidos Interactive slowly made its way into the gaming industry. Founded in 1990, Eidos began its roots in the field of video compression technology. At the time, the firm was barely known, even to industry insiders until 1995, when the company moved into the entertainment software market with the acquisition of

Domark, Simis, Big Red, and the CentreGold Group, which included Core Design and US Gold. Eidos CEO Charles Cornwall had brilliant timing, acquiring the above-mentioned firms that were known worldwide when they had financial difficulties. Cornwall followed this acquisition by letting go distribution element, Centresoft, as part of his strategy to focus solely on developing and publishing. Cornwall and his managers sought out potential video game developers and gave them strong financial backing for CD-ROM development, which was often worth millions. In this partnership, the developers still remained independent in their creativity, but profited from the technology and marketing of the mighty parent operation.

As top developer for Eidos, Core Design was working on its most ambitious project yet prior to the time of its acquisition in 1993—*Tomb Raider*. As a development company instead of a sales company, Core set up a working atmosphere that allows the technicians and creative staff maximum freedom. An independent team discusses every game idea and presents their ideas to Jeremy Smith. After receiving an approval from Smith, the Core founder, the game moves on to the next step.

Toby Gard, lead designer/animator for Core, and his team are credited with having created the original plans for Lara Croft and *Tomb Raider*—originally planned to be a 3D version of *Rick Dangerous* with a revamped hero. For months, their plans were to have the hero look like Indiana Jones. However, after Jeremy Smith saw the character, he thought George Lucas would disapprove due to copyright issues. Then, Gard and his team reworked the hero and after a few weeks, Gard came back with Lara Croft. Founder Jeremy Smith tells *Prima Games* that he was skeptical of the heroine. Upon being presented with Lara, he "looked at the monitor in disbelief and said something like, 'My

God, now that's a woman. You can't be f***ing serious!'" In an explanation for his skepticism, he said, "There weren't any girls in video games at all then… other than in Japanese games. Sure there were a few single women figures, for example in *Virtua Fighter*, but still no games that completely revolved around a heroine." However, Gard was convinced that a female heroine was the way of the future and fought to get Lara to be the main character. In an interview, Gard was quoted saying that men of their target audience preferred to play with women in action and "beating" games. Eventually, Gard convinced Smith to approve, and soon, Lara Croft was born.

Birth of Lara Croft

Prior to introducing Lara to Jeremy Smith, Gard and his team played around with many different models and ideas for the heroine. Originally, the Australian comic figure Tank Girl(see Figure 1) and the American pop-beauty Neneh Cherry inspired the graphic artists. In using Tank Girl as a model, the focus was on Tank Girl's attitude. She's a

punk renegade who lives in a post-nuclear war world and enjoys cruel violence. However, it was agreed upon that Tank Girl's looks were too wild to be appealing to most men. The heroine of *Tomb Raider* was to be the ultimate combination of a tough attitude mixed with sexy and sweet looks. It was only later that Lara developed into a visually independent game character with a personality of her own.

Figure 1. Tank Girl

As a starting point, a character called Laura Cruise was proposed, but later her name was thrown out because "she sounded too American." After the name change to Lara Croft, the team followed through with a strong effort to make her British. Lara Croft

was given a biography and history that reflected an English education and upbringing. For example, Croft is a graduate of Prince Charles' alma mater even though the school exclusively accepts men.

After the paper representation of Lara Croft was finalized, designers at Core worked on the 3D-Lara as we know her today. In *Tomb Raider,* her actual character model was only made up of a few polygons (since game graphics hardware wasn't too sophisticated at the time), but they generally looked like what they were meant to be. See Figure 2.
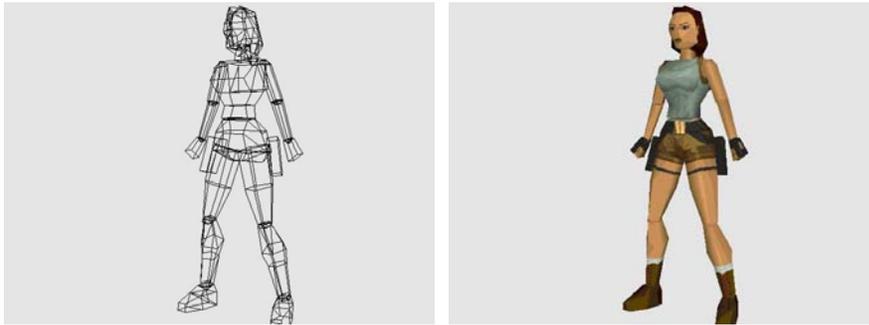
Physically complete, Lara Croft simply lacked a voice and a personality. In order for all players to relate to and care about her character, much effort went into making Lara as real as possible. First, a nationwide audition was held by Core Design to find the perfect voice for Lara—a female with an upper-class accent and a voice that is strong, but sweet. Ballet teacher Judith Gibbins, 36, received the part and remains hidden behind the scenes, contracted to never make public appearances to preserve Lara's image. After providing a voice for Lara, the next step was to define her personality. Toby Gard's initial character description included sentences such as "Lara likes to work with underprivileged children and the mentally disabled. She has a degree in needlework and

likes to travel." This concept has been slightly altered along the way to make her more appealing and her current biography is much more detailed as well, telling the story of how Lara came to be. Lara comes from a wealthy family: the daughter of an English Lord. She was on her way to a skiing vacation, when her plane crashed. The only survivor of the crash, Lara was forced to struggle on her own for many days in the Himalayas until she somehow managed to make it safely back to England. Since then, Lara has dedicated her energies to developing her athletic skills and her knowledge of archeology. She is a writer and an adventurer, who has explored the world over, collecting and searching for ancient artifacts. This biography has helped Lara's character become more believable as well as increased her universal appeal to both men and women.

Lara Croft and her *Tomb Raider* Adventures

Having an attractive character does not necessarily make a popular video game - the game must be able to speak for itself. Toby Gard(Lara Croft's creator), told *Edge* Magazine, "All the successful characters have the same thing in common: a good game. You cannot have a good character in a crap game because then everyone would perceive the character as crap too. It's exactly the same as a character in a film. It's not the costume they are wearing or what their face looks like, it's what they do and how they do it." (Poole 150). While her curvaceous figure is Lara's most obvious characteristic, Eidos claims that it is more her personality that makes her so popular and that it is *Tomb Raider*'s gameplay that merits the success of the trilogy. With Lara's character design finished, Core Design set out to complete their biggest project yet--*Tomb Raider*.

Much planning went into the game's design. The storyline for *Tomb Raider* was based on Core's previous project, *Rick Dangerous*. While Rick's search remained inside Mayan temples, Core expanded Lara's search for mythical artifacts to a wide variety of exotic locations. *Tomb Raider* became a 3D-adventure/action game comprised of levels representing different quests. The player controls the protagonist, Lara Croft, keeping her alive as she solves tricky puzzles, shoots at animals and evil villains, and steals the prized artifact.

The game interface and controls were described as "easy to learn, hard to master" by *Gamezilla Online*. There are two modes that the player could operate in: a look and action mode. During action mode, different keyboard-strokes are used for different actions such as crawl, walk, jump, swim, and climb. One way that many players get familiar with the controls is through selection of a level called, "Lara's house". This is a training level included in the game where the player can master Lara's skills in timed tests and obstacle courses.

Technology improvements allowed Core a great amount of creativity and flexibility in game designing. As opposed to earlier 2D computer games, where the action was viewed either from above or from the side as if on a flat surface like in *Prince of Persia*, *Tomb Raider* is three-dimensional, giving the environment real depth and atmosphere. New hardware and software allowed Core to place more focus on the protagonist, making Lara Croft the game's star. Core introduced a viewpoint of the player as that of a camera, which follows Lara in a short distance, looking at her from behind at all times. In most other 3D games at the time like *Doom*, the player looks out of the eyes of the protagonist, only seeing his/her weapon on the bottom of the screen or

the hand holding it at the most. In these games the player is more apt to identify with the protagonist whereas in *Tomb Raider* it is more of a joint adventure between the player and Lara, the player being "encouraged to identify with her situation as you would with an action hero on the big screen" (Bradley 15).

Aside from its original gaming perspective, reviewers also praised the graphics and sound of *Tomb Raider*. The graphics of *Tomb Raider* was rated well--one of the best for the PC in 1996. Core used a 3D engine that could rival *Quake*'s. Much effort was put into filling the backgrounds with detail. For example, when in the cave, everything around Lara was made to look as natural as possible and fit to meet one's expectation. There are pools, stalactites, stalagmites, cave-ins, bears, and bats. In addition, the monsters and people are well rendered. Martin Iveson who idolized the audio from games such as Grim Fandango and Zelda 64 created the sound of Tomb Raider. Most of the sounds in *Tomb Raider* were pervasive and mood setting. Particularly effective is the music in the cavernous areas. The whistling of the wind as well as other effects help immerse the player in the *Tomb Raider* gaming experience. In addition to the atmospheric audio, there were also sound clips of Lara Croft and her infamous sighing and humorous "unhh" every time she hit a wall.

After the incredible initial success of *Tomb Raider*, Core Designs hurriedly began developing *Tomb Raider II* and *Tomb Raider III*, released in November 1997 and November 1998, respectively. Unlike the original *Tomb Raider*, *Tomb Raider* II and III focused on extensive combat scenes, ignoring the virtues of atmosphere and stronger emphasis on tricky puzzles. Many reviewers frowned upon the quality of the follow-ups, but the public and media seemed as if they could not get enough of the *Tomb Raider*

series and Lara Croft. Sales for the first three Tomb Raiders were recorded at an incredible 17 million copies, helping boost sales of Sony PlayStations and 3D graphics cards for PCs.

Although the successive *Tomb Raider*s were a financial success, Core Design was unsatisfied with the negative reviews and decided to go back their root beliefs: quality over quantity in games. In creating a *Tomb Raider IV*, Core focused on a design that would echo the original *Tomb Raider*. Lara returns to Northern Africa, where the series originated. However, Core aimed to avoid making this installment a rehashing of the original. Many new features were included such as the new weapons (crossbow, grenade launcher, and sniper rifle), new moves (ability to shimmy around corners and swing on ropes), and new features (ability to combine items in inventory). Instead of combat scenes and elaborate levels, *Tomb Raider IV* offers smaller locations and a stronger emphasis on story development and tricky puzzles.

Meanwhile, Eidos continued to market Lara Croft and the continued *Tomb Raider* series. Millions were awaiting the fourth installment of *Tomb Raider* and Eidos decided to make the most of their opportunity. When *Tomb Raider IV* finally hit stores on November 1999, you were also able to pick up a Lara Croft comic, a Lara Croft candy bar, and a Lara Croft action doll. Selling briskly was a Pokemon-esque Lara Croft card game, as well as *Lara's Book* by *Generation X* author Douglas Coupland. In addition to all the merchandise were talks of a Lara Croft movie from Universal Pictures and 60-ft.-tall Croft wall paintings in major cities across America.

In November 2000, the latest installment of the series, titled *Tomb Raider: Chronicles* arrived. The game continues from *Tomb Raider IV: The Last Revelation*,

where the ending left players uncertain on whether Lara survived. *Chronicles* begins at Lara's memorial, where her close friends have gathered to discuss their memories of her. In *Chronicles*, separate adventures are played as each friend remembers a time in Lara's adventures.

Although there were minor improvements, the overall game design seemed to deteriorate in innovation and creativity as the series progressed. Many argue that quick profits played a huge part in motivating the latest updates. Problems that existed in the original *Tomb Raider* failed to get fixed in the sequels. One of the main problems is that texture resolution is quite low. For example, if you get close to a wall, a great deal of pixelation can be seen. In addition, there are glitches in the outdated engine such as apparent clipping problems when you walk in front of an object and can see beyond that object.

Despite its faults, the series generated over $500 million in sales since its 1996 debut. The success of the series earned Core Design and Eidos Interactive worldwide attention, and Lara Croft soon became a household name. With her rise in popularity, a whole new video game culture emerged and today continues to flourish.

The Fame of Lara Croft: Her Cultural Impact

After *Tomb Raider*, Lara Croft became a cultural icon appearing in numerous magazines, websites, music videos, commercials, comic books, and now finally movies. Magazines touted her as a symbol of the current developments in multimedia technology. *The Face* magazine featured Lara Croft as the "Silicon Chick: Bigger than Pamela

Anderson, Wiser than Yoda", idolizing her figure as well as character. Never before was a virtual character featured on so many non-game-related magazines.

In addition to being promoted by print, Lara Croft took on the music scene. According to Eidos Interactive, the rock band U2 was so taken with Lara in *Tomb Raider* that they requested for Lara to come on tour with them. In result, Eidos produced a special video clip and sent Lara on the PopMart world tour that started on April 25, 1997. Following that performance, it was discovered that Lara Croft had many more music industry fans - a progressive album with electronic music and games samples was released titled *A Tribute to Lara Croft*. Organized to follow the release of *Tomb Raider* II, artists such as Yello, Jimi Tenor, Depeche Mode, Faith No More, Moby, and Apollo 440 gladly provided their songs for use without remuneration.

The Internet also helped in spreading Lara's appeal. Numerous unofficial websites are dedicated to pictures, discussions, news, and fan-fiction about Lara's character and the *Tomb Raider* games. There are pages filled with comments about Lara's tight hotpants, her seductive hip-sway, her curve-hugging top, thigh holsters, and all her other fashionable accessories accompanied by a huge number of pictures of Lara in all possible positions both with and without a wide array of designer clothes.

However, Lara's popularity cannot be explained with her bodily features alone. When playing the game, many players admit to feeling an almost protective instinct for Lara. "Men in today's society have relative few opportunities to show their He-Man qualities," explains Hamburg psychologist Oscar Holzberg about the protective behavior toward the virtual woman. "As a result, youths are reaching toward extreme sports and the unreal computer game characters. Only in that world, everyone can be his own hero."

Although Holzberg's reasoning only works for males, Eidos estimates that approximately 20-25 percent of *Tomb Raider* purchasers are female, proving that women play *Tomb Raider* as well and aren't bothered or turned off by Lara Croft's looks. According to female-gamer discussion groups on *Tomb Raider*, Lara Croft's appeal comes from her "butt-kicking" attitude - she takes fate into her own hands and survives adventures without help from brave (male) companions. For this reason as well, *Emma*, a woman's magazine, has endorsed Lara Croft as a feminist.

Despite her character's realism, one of the reasons why she fascinates so many people is that she is *not* real, only existing in virtual reality - an unexplored realm with seemingly infinite possibilities. She remains one of the first computer animated characters outside of films given a complete 'real life' personality. By letting her give interviews, printing autograph cards for the fans and hiring a real life body-double to represent Lara at different occasions such as the Electronics Entertainment Expo, Eidos has been quick and thorough to comply with the fans' desire to make Lara as real as possible. However, according to Jeremy Smith, founder of Core Design, Lara Croft will forever look like a video game character. "We feel that we can make Lara significantly different to the way she is now, without making her sort of real-life, by only going up to say twelve to fourteen hundred polygons," says Smith. "You don't *need* to go any higher than that--because you'll probably lose some of that feel for her, for how she is now. With PlayStation2 technology we'll be able to smooth her off, without changing the aesthetics that work" (Poole 153).   Core firmly states that Lara Croft will forever remain a virtual girl.

Without a doubt, the success of Lara Croft had an enormous impact on the gaming industry. Many virtual ladies follow in the wake of Lara Croft's success to conquer mankind. It could be argued that Croft paved the way for other femme fatales found in recent video games. Popular games such as *Drakan: Order of the Flame* (August 1999), *The Longest Journey* (November 2000), and *Oni* (November 2000) all take after Lara's example, offering a strong and physically attractive female protagonist. See Figure 3.

Figure 3. Rynn from *Drakan: Order of the Flame,* April Ryan from *The Longest Journey*, Konoko from *Oni*

Tomb Raider and the Future of Gaming

Plans are already underway for the next *Tomb Raider* in the series, which may not even be titled *Tomb Raider*. Developed for the PlayStation2, the new *Tomb Raider* takes advantage of the improved technology, "PlayStation2 can do this camera-blurring where you can home in on the central character and the view-distance at the back is blurred," says Jeremy Smith. "Can you imagine the possibilities that that's going to open up? It's going to give you a depth of field that's so huge it's just like opening up a whole new door into gaming. Games are gonna have great depth--depth and atmosphere" (Poole 203). In addition to a rich background, Lara Croft's look is also improved, adding more polygons to her face and body. See Figure 4.

Core plans to take a different approach for the PlayStation2. Instead of using the third-person shooter genre, Lara Croft will be involved in several episodic adventures that span a length of five to ten years. *Tomb Raider Next Generation* will be like an adventure game, where there'll be interactions with other characters through dialogue, therefore shifting the game more towards story instead of action.

The success of the new game design will depend on the integration of the three factors discussed in this case history: technology, culture, and business. Following the example of the original *Tomb Raider* series, Core Designs and Eidos Interactive should continue to use the three aspects in the video game industry. Improvement in graphics and console technology ensured better gameplay and kept players interested. Successful marketing strategies by Eidos and great timing of *Tomb Raider*, coming out every year before Christmas, also helped business. In addition, there existed a key partnership between Eidos Interactive and Core Designs, where Core was given creative freedom in game development while Eidos handled all marketing. Finally, fans and the media created an underground culture idolizing the game and the heroine--Lara Croft. Since her modest beginnings in 1996, Lara has become a part of a massive media blitz, making her a household name and pop culture icon. Whether or not the world has had enough of Lara Croft and the *Tomb Raider* series, their impact on our culture and society is undeniable.

Figure 4. Lara Croft's new look for the PS2

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