2 Fantastically real: reading *Tomb Raider*

Tomb Raider [inc. *Tomb Raider* (1996), *Tomb Raider II: The Dagger of Xian* (1997), *Tomb Raider III: The Adventures of Lara Croft* (1998), *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation* (1999), *Tomb Raider: Chronicles* (2000)] Third-person action/adventure. The player controls the actions (running, jumping, walking, climbing, crawling, shooting etc.) of Lara Croft, usually from a third-person perspective. Progress through the game involves frequent jumping of the protagonist from platform to platform. Jump distances are often precise, and measured according to a system of blocks of standard size that make up the in-game landscape. That landscape is realised so as to allow the illusion of three dimensions in which the protagonist can be moved. The games involve a series of quests for various objects that must be retrieved after overcoming obstacles. These might be broadly categorised as either puzzles or adversaries. The emphasis, however, is largely on the use of a range of weapons.

The title of this chapter is offered as more than a weak pun, and with a full awareness that it begins with what appears to be a contradiction in terms. *Tomb Raider* is not, and does not make any claim to be, concerned with the real. Like well-written prose, we may admire its technical achievement, but we do not risk being so taken in by this fiction that we mistake it for fact. Nor does the increasing visual sophistication of the games within the series necessarily amount to an eliding of difference between text and real: the inclusion of ever more fine detail within the game landscape does not imply that we are coming ever closer to the replication of the real. We may become deeply involved in the experience of watching or playing 'as' Lara Croft, but we never undertake a magical

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transformation to 'become' her.[1] This is a fantasy world forever mediated not just by a distance between player and protagonist that is integral to the third-person gameplay (we 'look' not so much over her shoulder, but from above and behind), but by the technology of delivery. When the rain slants down in the opening sequence of *Tomb Raider III* we are in no danger of seeing Lara Croft give an involuntary electronic shudder, or of seeing her pony-tail become sodden and heavy when she emerges from one of her many swimming expeditions. She drips briefly, but this is a visual gesture that has no further effect. There is no such thing as a bad hair day in *Tomb Raider*. Such refinements may be coming in a future episode, and are considered in more detail in the discussion of *Half-Life* in Chapter 3, but whatever the technology harnessed, whatever the ingenuity of the programmers, and whatever the computing power deployed, this will remain an essentially stylised representational version of something that is other than real experience.

What limited claims the game's promoters do make for realism are essentially comparative with other computer games. This game is *more* realistic than earlier platform jumping games such as *Super Mario* or *Donkey Kong*. To draw on the language in which realism is commonly discussed, then its most basic claim to be more realistic than such earlier computer games is that it is not as 'flat' or 'two dimensional', and offers the illusion of three dimensions (at least in terms of the rendering of landscape, if not of character and plot). The *Tomb Raider* landscape 'grid' is always visible, and its visibility is essential to the working out of possible moves. If we make comparisons with other forms of fiction, rather than with other computer games, then *Tomb Raider* is undeniably primitive, and the reader of this form of fiction understands the limitations of its realism just as he or she recognises the supporting architectural grid of the in-game landscape. There is a certain type of movie-goer who takes extreme pleasure in locating breakdowns in the cinematic illusion of the real (the digital watch on the wrist of the extra in the crowd scene of a swords and sandals Roman

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epic, the wobbling polystyrene gravestone set moving by a passing Penguin in *Batman Returns* (1992)), but no one gets similarly excited by the glaring continuity error of an immaculately coiffured Lara Croft emerging bone dry from the water.[2]

Tomb Raider's self-evident artificiality is not in itself a failing that would necessitate its exclusion from the genre of realist game-fictions identified in this study. No critic of the novel or of film would be particularly exercised by the distance that always remains between representation and real, and the essential 'illusionism' of what is commonly termed realism.[3] If the trick of illusion is performed with skill and panache, then we are entitled to applaud, whether we are confronted with a passage of elegant prose, a well-directed scene, or even an impressive moment of gameplay. The nod and a wink to fictionality that features so often in contemporary films and novels that accept and make obvious their own fictionality, and is also a feature of *Tomb Raider*, is intended to spark a certain frisson of complicity in the reader or viewer. That the trick's methodology might be visible can add to, rather than detract from, the experience of reading. It certainly does not render an otherwise realist text somehow unreadable. What is meant by realism here, then, places the emphasis on the 'ism' as much as on the 'real', and is intended to suggest that the 'world' offered by the game is itself internally consistent, realistic in its own terms and according to its conventions. To make this claim is no more radical than claiming that it is possible to locate a core realist impulse within those novels that make such play with the acknowledgement of their status as novels. For those with the inclination, examples can be found in almost any works by Salman Rushdie, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, or Angela Carter, among others.[4] After all, the putative critic of game-fiction must surely be as entitled to the sub-genre of fantastic realism as the literary critic is to his or her magical realism.

The questions of form examined in this chapter follow from the central premise that *Tomb Raider* can be 'read' as fiction,

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and as self-conscious fiction in which serious play is made not just in game terms, but in terms that literary critics would recognise as play with the possibilities and limitations of storytelling. Some aspects of this self-consciousness, it is demonstrated here, are the result of what might be termed deliberate 'authorial' intention or design, and include (but sometimes go beyond) mere parody and pastiche. Potentially more interesting formal characteristics emerge, with the game designers' conscious help or without it, from the meeting of technology with what I variously refer to as 'reader' as well as 'player'. In taking in such questions as how this fiction 'works' in a formal sense, and what the relationship is between this fictional mode and the other fictional modes it draws upon and alludes to, I hope to justify my claim that the *Tomb Raider* series is a representative, however primitive, of a new fictional form.

Lara Croft: action hero

One consequence of the unusual cross-media penetration enjoyed by *Tomb Raider* has been the transition of Lara Croft from the object of a substantial advertising and marketing campaign, to the vehicle for the promotion of another product. There is even some potential irony in the choice of product that 'her' digital image is used to promote, an energy drink that markets itself on its ability to revitalise a flagging human constitution. The Lucozade campaign, which appeared in the United Kingdom throughout 2000, blatantly acknowledges something that is implied again and again in the games themselves: Lara Croft's fictionality. And in its television manifestation at least, it does so by offering another layer of knowing fiction. In the advertisement a player halts a game to attend, presumably, to some human need or other. The action stops, as it must do, when he leaves his console. But the game-world is not frozen as a consequence of the lack of human input. Lara Croft and her digital adversaries are not frozen on screen, but take a well-deserved break. She drinks the product she is endorsing and, refreshed, is ready to continue with the drama upon the return of the

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player. Several observations spring immediately to mind. Lara Croft is presented, here, no matter how archly, as having a form of existence independent of the player. In this context she is not associated with that other fictional world of the series of games which operate within and through their own internal logic (and in which she is an 'archaeologist-adventurer'), but with another fictional alternative entirely, and one carrying another set of expectations, that of film.

Even though the live-action film version of *Tomb Raider* had yet to go into production, 'Lara Croft' was already acknowledged as a role to be played. The advertisers did not choose to have Lara Croft played by a human actor: this digital Lara Croft is a digital actor. Not only does this conceit that Lara Croft is some kind of 'cyber-babe' starlet, as she has sometimes been characterised in the popular press (even appearing in 'glamour' shots alongside ostensibly real models in *Loaded* magazine) presumably help to shift units, but it also emphasises the manner in which she has come to escape some of the more narrow confines of the computer game as the preserve of adolescents and the socially dysfunctional. Somehow she has entered into a wider public consciousness as icon and image as familiar to a certain age group as any number of Hollywood starlets. She might still be most recognisable to small boys and young men, but she was certainly one of the first widely recognisable 'characters' of computer fictions. The game's publishers had recognised this aspect of their creation as early as on the blurb on the box of *Tomb Raider II*, on which the phrase 'starring Lara Croft' appears five times immediately beneath the main title.

Some of the implications of this intensity of cinematic allusion for *Tomb Raider*'s realism and its relationship with other fictional forms are clear. Ms Croft's antics are no more 'real' than those of any other feature film action hero. She, and the chainsaw-wielding muscle man who is initially chasing her before the action is halted, are only acting. Their mutual antipathy is a fiction. The vicious Dobermans that had also joined the chase are only playing a role. This advertisement plays with the conventions of the know-

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ing self-consciousness of so much contemporary film, television and (particularly) advertising where the seriousness of any genre's claims to be replicating a plausibly realistic other world are deliberately undercut and rendered problematic.

The player within the world of the advertisement might be 'fooled' into thinking that he has control over the actions of the game's hero, but we, the viewers, are given a privileged sight of the 'true' nature of the hero as actor playing a role within a particular kind of fiction, the action movie. He is, in a limited sense, 'directing' the action in a fashion of which he does not appear aware. Which is where, of course, things get a little complicated. Alongside all this playful manipulation with the expectations of various fictional forms, there is little chance of anyone mistaking this Lara Croft for a 'real' human being. *Tomb Raider* stars Lara Croft playing the role of … Lara Croft. Her features are stylised, even within the enforced angularity of the available technology, and her body shape (as has so often been noted) is implausibly engineered to cater for the assumed fantasies, if not expectations, of a largely male adolescent audience. There are obvious reasons why the advertisers choose to make the player of the game 'he' rather than 'she'. The euphemistic phrase 'featuring an enhanced Lara Croft', again from the box notes of *Tomb Raider II*, refers to a form of 'enhancement' that would be familiar to any Californian cosmetic surgeon. But it is not her fictive nature as a visual construct with an exaggerated body image produced through the mapping of digital information that is foregrounded here, but her fictive nature as another example of the action hero that we recognise from film. An audience familiar with Lara Croft's computer game incarnation might be amused, entertained, or indifferent to the shift across media and the blurring of boundaries between her performance within game/televisual/cinematic conventions, but they would hardly be shocked. There has always been something of a cinematic quality to *Tomb Raider*.

The most obvious debt that the *Tomb Raider* games themselves owe to film is indicated in the title of the series, and if that is

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not enough to remind any player of the Indiana Jones movies starring Harrison Ford, then the presence of the occasional rolling ball, spiked traps, comic-book villainous exotic others, and items of mystical significance (the Dagger of Xian and the Armour of Set in place of the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy Grail, among others) should ring the correct intertextual bells. Even the core premise of Lara Croft's adventures, as she engages in a rather muscular form of 'archaeology' that is some distance from what is understood to be common practice in university archaeology departments, is recognisable as one more borrowing from Spielberg's creation. If further proof were needed of the debt owed by the *Tomb Raider* designers to the example of Indiana Jones, then it might be found in the reversal of influence evident in the *Tomb Raider*-like jumping and lever-pulling gameplay that featured in the belated release of *Indiana Jones and the Infernal Machine* (1999).

Tomb Raider, and Lara Croft, is also more than just a rather aggressive Indiana Jones without the whip, and the series finds its inspiration (or, if we were to be theoretically generous, its intertexts) in many places. In its reference to films ranging from horror to gangster to science fiction to kung fu to dinosaur films, among many others, *Tomb Raider* is cheerfully eclectic. *Tomb Raider* is as ready to plunder the visual vocabulary of a wide range of film genres as Lara Croft is ready to plunder whatever building or cave or temple she finds herself in. Mummies shamble forward, muscular thugs tote Uzi sub-machine guns, ninjas spin and twirl, dinosaurs either thud forward menacingly (the T-rex in *Tomb Raider II*) or move with lithe agility (the 'Raptors' in *Tomb Raider III*) in a fashion suspiciously familiar from the live action/computer animation hybrid *Jurassic Park*.

If one were simply to play the often vacuous game of identifying intertexts, then even the most basic consideration of the game's gun-wielding, athletic, and attractive hero should bring to mind the 'strong women' of Sigourney Weaver's Ripley from the *Alien* series (1979, 1986, 1992, 1997) and even the eponymous heroes

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of Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991). And it is worth noting in passing that some of *Tomb Raider*'s general appeal might have its source in its allusion to such figures: a move that allows a veneer of (post)feminist respectability in the portrayal of a 'strong' and independent female lead character in what remains, in essence, a 'shoot-'em-up'.

But *Tomb Raider*'s designers are not just borrowers of plots and props, the fine detail, or even the basic premise of such films. Instead, they deploy some of the techniques of film-making themselves. And, as film is something other than the visual replication of lived experience as if what happens on screen were simply an alternative 'real' visual experience, so this game requires its audience, reader, or player, to acknowledge a complex formal grammar in order to be able to read it. Much of the time spent playing *Tomb Raider* leaves the player fixed at a point directly behind its protagonist, directing actions from non-omniscient distance. The usual cinematic variation of shifts from close-up to long-shot has some echo within the game, and a few keystrokes shift the point of view to that of the protagonist herself. In the later games binoculars and night-sights allow close-ups of the game landscape rendered through the formal cinematic and televisual convention of the circle of focus surrounded by black space. Such points of view, essential to the gameplay methodology of the series, are joined, however, by far more interesting moments in which cinematic and game modes merge.

The most obvious importation of cinematic strategies can be found in the cut-scenes, those excerpts of computer animation (often referred to as FMV, or Full-Motion Video sequences) that replicate cinema film in an obvious way. Such formal set-pieces serve to move what little plot there is along, acting most often as buffer-zones between essentially similar spaces in which the player will still have little freedom of movement beyond the usual walk, run, sprint, swim, jump, grab, push alternatives. They provide what basic characterisation there is in such games, as well as allowing the protagonist the opportunity of indulging in the same kind of

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lame and scripted wise-cracks that pass for humour in the action movies of Arnold Schwarzenneger, Bruce Willis etc. In some ways they are similar to those often tiresome pauses between frenetic action in which plot is explained slowly and carefully to both protagonist and audience in a certain kind of action movie. In addition there is often evidence of a display of the programmer's technical virtuosity, an attempt to push the limits of what is realisable within the technology of the moment that generates the same aesthetic appreciation as the finely realised illusion of the skilled draughtsman or painter, or, to draw a closer analogy, the purely technical level of achievement that has contributed to the success of computer-animated films such as Disney's *Toy Story* (1995) or *Toy Story 2* (1999), or Pixar's *Antz* (1998) and still informs discussion of each successive wave of movies of increasing technical sophistication.

One partial example of such an FMV cut-scene should suffice to demonstrate their essentially cinematic quality, as well as their often derivative character. *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation* opens with a level designed to introduce the player to the major possible moves that the protagonist can make. An adolescent Lara Croft jumps and runs and climbs according to the instructions of a substitute father figure, the self-styled archaeologist-adventurer Werner Von Croy. For once, and presumably because of her tender age, she is denied the arsenal of weapons she usually has access to. Upon completion of the level, in which Lara Croft and Werner Von Croy have raced to recover an item known as the 'Iris' from a temple complex in Angkor Wat, control of Lara's actions is removed from the player and an FMV sequence rolls. In a manner reminiscent of the squabbling between the two Doctors Jones in the second Indiana Jones film, Lara Croft shows caution about pulling the lever that will expose the Iris from its concealment within a globe-like structure, while Werner Von Croy is impatient and calls on his greater experience and maturity to persuade her to do as he commands. This is how what follows is described on one of the many

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unofficial *Tomb Raider* sites that exist on the Internet:

> Lara pulls the lever, and the globe opens like a sliced orange revealing the Iris as a walkway descends to create a path from the outer ledge to the center of the now open globe. Von Croy walks out to the center of the now opened globe and reaches to pick up the Iris.
>
> Von Croy: 'Have faith in experience child and you will learn more than simple …'
>
> Von Croy stops talking as the entire structure trembles. Lara struggles to stay on her feet and says: 'As you were saying?'[5]

An earthquake tips Werner Von Croy over, and his leg is caught on one of the segments of the globe. He is left dangling in space as the globe segments begin to close. Lara Croft at first attempts to run away, then has a moment of conscience and makes a futile effort to help, and finally barely escapes as the temple is sealed with Werner Von Croy still trapped inside the globe. One last plaintive cry of 'Werner' and the action fades. Cut to a long sequence in which a 'mysterious' female figure investigates ruins in the desert until the legend 'Egypt, present day' appears on screen.

What we have here, then, is immediately recognisable as a method of plot establishment and advancement that makes the most of some of the graphics capabilities of the game engine in the replication of a cinematic experience. The camera had been active throughout the cut scene, mood music had set the forbidding scene, and the geometric form of the globe had enabled some fairly impressive, and yet not too complex, animation. In story terms, Lara's maturity is marked by her recognition of the fallibility of her mentor/father figure and her spotless moral credentials are established as she looks back on the apparent entombment of Von Croy with as much regret as the programmers' limited visual palette and the girlish voice-over can generate. A rivalry and grudge is established between Werner Von Croy and Lara Croft (for we *know* he is not dead, just as we *know* Lara will escape at the last moment) that will

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drive a particular kind of plot forward. As a bonus, the cut-scene also provides a logical explanation for the walking stick and limp that join Von Croy's middle-European accent and his wire-frame glasses as sure signs of his villainous status.

Whether this is simply 'bad' fiction, or undertaken with tongue firmly in cheek in the spirit of parody or pastiche, is largely irrelevant. Indeed, what it foregrounds most forcefully is the weakness of FMV as the delivery system of an interactive or collaborative (human *and* computer) form of fiction. Instead it suggests that what one gets in contemporary computer games is a level of dialogue that is laughably predictable, and a mobilisation of clichés that might make even some of Hollywood's finest action movie directors squirm.

Of all the more cinematic digressions from gameplay, however, the cut-scenes are probably the least interesting in formal terms as game-fiction gives way to a form of ersatz movie-making in which the player has minimal investment or involvement. One area where cinema and gameplay merge without the abrupt, complete and extended loss of player control, and the associated elimination of the illusion of freedom of action, is in the movement of the in-game camera and angle of shot, and the use of the sound track to heighten tension. At its simplest, this sees the vision of the protagonist and/or the player directed towards some otherwise missable space or object, or a shift in background music or noises alerts the player to the imminent arrival of an adversary. At its most complex, entry into a new area sees the in-game camera move away from the protagonist and engage in the kind of long travelling shot usually to be found in big-budget Hollywood productions. Even in miniature, such as during the 'death-slide' sequence of *Tomb Raider II*, when the full depth of the canyon below is revealed in a sweeping camera shot, this can be impressive. Through such sequences the player might, again, enjoy a privileged view of otherwise obscured levers, blocks, doorways, or traps, and plot points might be made, but the effect is often primarily one of the

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generation of aesthetic enjoyment, and the dropping of hints about how to proceed is combined with an often spectacular technical realisation of the game world. The sight of a low-flying Stealth Bomber passing at close quarters in the Area 51 section of *Tomb Raider III*, for example, does not merely signal the kind of adversaries the player is about to face, but is undeniably impressive in and of itself.

At its most successfully realised, such as in the Venice section of *Tomb Raider II*, such a merging of cinematic visual realisation with gameplay interaction by the player results in the production of something akin to a personal mini-movie, a cinematic vignette that is only produced as a result of, or reward for, player interaction. Such moments conceal the shift from active to passive participant ‘in’ the action. Having explored the limits of Venice and opened doors and cleared obstacles in the standard fashion of such games, the player is left in a position where he or she must race a speedboat through the canals in a race against the clock before the exit to the next area is closed. The debt that the level designers and programmers owe to the cinematic exploits of James Bond become obvious as the speedboat clears two ramps to land on a line of gondolas, swings through a narrow passage and hurtles through the level’s exit gate to the accompaniment of the last few chimes of the bell that had signalled the countdown. Although there are alternative methods of movement from the Venice canals area into the next area (and I shall return to consideration of their implications a little later in this chapter), none are as aesthetically pleasing or so fully demonstrate one possibly unique kind of fiction that can be created within such game-fictions. It is the initial concealment of this series of discrete moves, the piecing together of clues as obscure as any found in detective fiction, with all the readerly pleasure that accompanies such delayed disclosure within text, that leads to the final reward of the fully realised sequence. Unlike the cut-scene FMV sequences there is no single trigger that transforms player into viewer, and this moment of gaming cinema requires

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the continuing active participation of the player if it is to be successfully realised.

Tomb Raider as quest narrative

For all the claims made here that one can see the first stirrings of a new fictional form within *Tomb Raider*, it should not be forgotten that it owes just as much, if not more, to other forms of game as it does to other forms of fiction such as film. One basic genealogy that also highlights the 'fantasy' rather than 'realist' roots of the game might trace a line of descent from those fantasy wargames played with cast-metal miniatures of orcs and dwarves and dragons, through table-top role-playing games, making the leap into its first digital incarnation in the text-based adventures that appeared on such early dedicated games machines as the ZX Spectrum (and who will ever truly forget the frustration of playing the pioneering Spectrum adventure *The Hobbit* (1982), and being told, yet again, that 'Thorin sits down and starts singing about gold'?) Text-based adventures suffered in comparison with more visually sophisticated games, and the virtually static 'point and click' adventures that emerged out of adventures like *The Hobbit* seem to have been all but superseded by *Tomb Raider* and its imitators.

Any such formal system of rules that govern interaction between players inevitably have much in common with the 'rules' of storytelling. Table-top role-playing, perhaps still most commonly associated with the sub-Tolkienesque 'Dungeons and Dragons' (a game-system that has since made a commercially successful transition to computer format, notably in its incarnation as *Baldur's Gate* (1998)) has, particularly, had its fair share of claims made for it that it represents a 'new' form of storytelling. In such a game the players interact through speech (rather than necessarily by moving pieces on any kind of board) with a game environment controlled by a referee-cum-mediator usually termed a 'Dungeon Master'. The interaction between players and referee could, theoretically, lead to the creation of a free-form story in which, allowing only for the

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internal logic of the game and its rules, almost anything might happen. The illusion of near-total freedom of action that such games allowed in the abstract was, however, often at odds with the restrictive reality of many of the commercially available supplements and adventures. In many ways these bore more than a passing resemblance to the levels to be found in *Tomb Raider*: underground rooms and passages (the 'Dungeon') populated by traps, adversaries and the occasional helper who must variously be disarmed, overcome, or persuaded to offer aid. All too often, these games descended (at least in personal memory) into little more than a sequence of 'open the door, kill the monster, grab the gold, open the next door, kill the monster, grab the gold …' The more formulaic of such games also gave rise to what one would have to hesitate to term 'literary' by-products in game-books that rarely transcended something like the following (imaginary) example:

> *You have entered a room in the dungeon in which there is an extremely ugly creature asleep on a bed of straw. Beside it is a sword, and it is curled up around a pile of gold.* Do you:
>
> Attack the creature? (Go to page 24)
>
> Attempt to steal the gold without waking the monster? (Go to page 116)
>
> Return the way you came as quietly as you can? (Curse yourself for your cowardice and then go to page 11)

Tolstoy, or even Tolkien, it wasn't.

Tomb Raider shares this propensity towards a linear passage forwards with an extended but similarly finite range of options for moving the action along. Part of the immaturity of computer games as fictional form alluded to in Chapter 1 can be located in the extent to which animate problems (or 'other people') are best 'resolved' in that fashion memorably described by Harrison Ford's pre-Indiana Jones character in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) as termination 'with extreme prejudice'. Pacifism, or even kindness to

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animals, has little place within this fictional world. In *Tomb Raider*, if it moves your best option is usually to kill it, and the expectation according to the internal logic of the game is that you should do so. If something does not move, and yet appears to differ from the decorative eye-candy of the surrounding walls and ceiling (levers, pulleys, ropes, differently shaded blocks, differently textured surfaces), then it can usually be moved, manipulated, or climbed. The separation of significant detail from insignificant detail is not just a contributor to readerly pleasure in game-fictions (as it is, for example, in the recognition of the detective novel's 'red herrings') but is essential to the furthering of plot (as if the reading of detective fiction would grind to a halt until the correct discrimination is made between clue and red herring). At its crudest, this kind of gameplay can be just as formulaic as that found in the fantasy game-books, and, when one has exhausted all the pushing and pulling possibilities available, the player is usually left with no alternatives but walking onwards or making a number of jumps of standardised length and height to gain access to new areas of the level.

Radical alternatives are rarely allowed in normal gameplay, although there are several moments when going in with all guns blazing is less than advisable (leaving monkeys alive in *Tomb Raider III* can allow them to lead the player to less than obvious locations; not shooting any of the monks in the Tibetan monastery in *Tomb Raider II* makes the game a lot easier to complete). But one cannot stray too far from the 'correct', and circumscribed, path. One can, in the main, only perform actions that have been predicted or allowed for by the game-fiction's designers. For all that Lara Croft is presented as a species of archaeologist, for example, the possibility of capturing the Tyrannosaurus rex, or even photographing it, is not allowed within the terms of the game. *Tomb Raider*'s realism does not cater for many of the eccentricities of human behaviour, nor allow Lara Croft to engage in much irrelevant activity. This protagonist never sits down and starts singing in the middle of a

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quest. Nor does she sleep, eat, defecate, or (disappointingly enough for Lucozade) often feel the need for an energy drink.

To dismiss *Tomb Raider*'s fictional credentials as a result of its basic linearity of progression, for the apparent limitation of freedom of action, or even because of its violent approach to problem solving, however, would be to miss the implications of an alternative, and literary, line of descent that might be traced for this kind of game-fiction. We should recognise not just the extent to which J. R. R. Tolkien and his imitators inspired so many of the fantasy role-playing and text-based adventures that came before *Tomb Raider*, but the root source of so much of that fiction that is to be found within the folk tale form. And it is through an examination of the points of correspondence with, and deviation from, the formal characteristics of the folk tale, particularly as they are expressed within quest narratives, that we can begin to see a new form of storytelling emerge in *Tomb Raider*.[6]

In many ways *Tomb Raider* conforms to the generic conventions of the folk tale, and particularly the quest narrative, and wears many of its folk tale credentials on its sleeve. Lara Croft may not be a Jack, or even a Jill, but she has much in common with the princely heroes of many quest narratives. She is, after all, an orphan of aristocratic stock, the daughter (so the basic back-story to the games to be found in the manuals informs us) of Lord Croft. She lives in the contemporary equivalent of a castle, even if her mansion has a swimming pool rather than a moat. In several of the games in the series she 'starts' from this point (it is the equivalent of *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation*'s Angkor Wat training level in both *Tomb Raider II* and *III*), before moving on to an extended quest which might be broken down into a series of smaller folk tale quest narratives or plot fragments. Despite the more or less contemporary trappings of the *Tomb Raider* series (usually to be found in things you can shoot things with, or things you can drive) and its otherwise unstable 'historical' locations (a distinctly contemporary Area 51, what looks like a near future/post apocalypse

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London, and a 'primitive' island society of indeterminate location in time within *Tomb Raider III* alone), the *Tomb Raider* series has one foot firmly situated in the land of folk tale.

Strange beasts walk abroad, dragons stir in their lairs, and every 'tomb raiding' expedition is presented as quest rather than housebreaking and petty larceny. As in *Tomb Raider* there are few extraneous or irrelevant encounters within the folk tale quest narrative: anyone or anything encountered will prove to be either an adversary or a helper. Overcoming adversaries through violence is virtually mandatory and, as in *Tomb Raider* or any amount of contemporary *Rambo*esque versions of the quest narrative, there is no ethical or moral problem with such violence. Like the overcome adversaries of the quest narrative, the corpses that should litter the landscape of *Tomb Raider* simply fade from the story, and the screen, and disappear. The occasional riddle must be solved. Often an object must be retrieved (as in the quest for the Holy Grail, or in the inverted quest to dispose of Tolkien's One Ring). The unstable 'anytime' setting of *Tomb Raider* carries an echo of the 'Once upon a time …' invitation to listen, or read, of the folk tale.

The satisfaction of such stories, at least at the level of the discrete plot fragment, rests not in matters of plot sophistication, but in matters of the sophistication of telling. The question is never *will* the prince overcome the dragon but *how* will the prince overcome the dragon? Once the player has recognised the obstacle at hand (a dragon), and quite possibly failed to react in the appropriate manner (you die: the story is badly told), he or she might simply reload the game from the last point at which it was saved and attempt the moment of telling again and again until satisfied (you live: the story is told properly). What larger plot there is is irrelevant. As such the player of the game is engaged in the creation of a form of fiction at variance from conventional or written tellings. The game-fiction is no more 'authorless' than any other form of fiction, but this is the most 'writable' of texts, with the player/reader

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actively engaged in the construction and telling, and not just the reception and decoding, of the tale.

Nor is Lara Croft exactly the same kind of invincible hero that one finds in either quest narratives or action movies. In *Tomb Raider* we 'care' about this protagonist enough to keep reading the text because of her fallibility and her fragility. Action heroes and the heroes of quests do not die (it is a central given of the genres), and yet the movie-maker or storyteller must constantly place the hero in a position of tension where death appears to be a possibility. The player, however, is 'only human', works with the expectations of the action hero or quest narrative genres (the hero *should not* die), is aware of a tension that exceeds that available within film or prose narrative (the hero *might* die), and can only achieve the satisfactory closure of the plot fragment by conforming to readerly expectations (the hero *does not* die). Apparent responsibility for whether this particular Tinkerbell 'lives' or 'dies' rests, as with the conceit of J. M. Barrie's stage production of *Peter Pan*, with the audience. A degree of authorial responsibility is also passed to the reader in the possibility that the story might be told in a clumsy manner (the protagonist suffers damage, runs into walls, falls off a ledge, the player is forced to use medical packs to heal a wounded protagonist etc.), or as Lara Croft is manoeuvred with fluid grace as she jumps and rolls and shoots, this story may be very well told indeed. Along with the normal readerly pleasures of advancing the larger plot and finding out what happens next, the reader of game-fiction can share in some of the pleasures of the creation of the well-turned phrase or the elegant sentence as the boundary between reader and author becomes blurred.

Another area where the *Tomb Raider* quest narrative differs from the formal workings of its oral or literary antecedents is in the limited illusion of freedom of choice offered that works against the expectations of linearity. Options might be restricted to the essentially prosaic 'Which weapon shall I use?', 'Shall I pause to pick up the object on the floor?', or 'Which exit shall I leave by?',

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but the illusion of choice exists, and for all the third-person gameplay of *Tomb Raider* this places the emphasis on the first-person control available. It might even be argued that the authorship of 'good' game-fiction of this type (in terms of readerly satisfaction) depends on getting the balance right between that illusion of choice (leaving the telling to the player) and the appropriate placement of enough clear markers of plot progression for the player to find and so move on (a matter of authorship). However sumptuous the visuals and however gorgeous the rendition of the backgrounds, it would be a strange individual indeed who is satisfied with endlessly wandering around a level from which all adversaries have been eliminated, all levers pulled and all blocks pushed.

The plot-markers that are encountered, then, inform the player or reader of the type of story to be told. The player then undertakes the telling of this small-scale story and is rewarded by being able to advance to the next plot-marker, and sometimes with a near-cinematic vignette such as the Venice canals sequence in *Tomb Raider II* discussed earlier in this chapter. The game also provides a number of methods of gauging just how good a reader and/or teller the player is. Like the aristocrats of popular imagination, Lara Croft never carries cash with her, and the game's alternative capital (that can be both hoarded and spent) comes in the form of the flares, medical packs, ammunition, and objects that are acquired and 'spent' as the game progresses. The excess that the player sustains provides a measure of success. In addition, the game contains numerous 'secret' areas (often referred to as 'Easter Eggs') that are a little off the beaten track or difficult to access. That many of the secrets are hardly secrets at all, and might be blundered into without intent, hardly matters. It is possible to make progress within the game, and even to complete it, without gaining access to any such secrets, and so their acquisition is another method of keeping score, and another indicator of the player's ability as reader. It is as if a novel contained areas of sub-plot that were cordoned off from the main body of the narrative, and accessible only to those readers

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who somehow prove their sophistication of reading. An analogy might be found, perhaps, in the intertextual play of some contemporary fiction where recognition of an authorial reference to something outside the novel (a play, another novel, a film, a song, a political speech etc.) adds a further element to the readerly experience. But the seamless integration of the secrets of *Tomb Raider* into the major narrative, and their democratic accessibility (one does not have to be familiar with the entirety of world literature, music, cinema, or politics to access these secrets) makes them of a different order entirely.

There may be little opportunity for Lara Croft to engage in truly irrelevant action, but *Tomb Raider*'s designers have embedded some irrelevance into combinations of movements that almost amount to a variant form of secret. The first time that Lara Croft performs a graceful handstand or swallow-dive, moves not described in the manuals and likely to have emerged out of an accidental combination of key strokes, the player might be impressed as well as surprised. The availability of such actions, and the presence of secret areas that 'we' discover where 'lesser' players might miss them makes this, potentially, an almost competitive form of text. But, as in life, there is little point in having access to a secret if one cannot share it with someone else. It is more or less commonly accepted that the consumption of other cultural products (again, I am thinking primarily of film, television, and novels) is not an entirely solitary experience. As the flourishing of readers' groups for the discussion of literature in contemporary Britain indicates, the reading of novels generates a desire to share one's understanding with others, and the massive expansion of available television channels has only reduced, but not eliminated, the workplace or social post-mortem of the following day. No visit to the cinema in company is complete without a sharing of impressions. And so it is with the computer game, where discussion of what one has found that others might have missed, or the discussion of where one has become 'stuck' is the meat and drink of conversation in the

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playground, the workplace, the letters pages of games magazines, and (increasingly) in the chatrooms of the Internet. It is in this communication of not only what is necessary to complete a particular game-fiction, but also what it is possible to achieve within any game-fiction, that one can detect the most radical departure of game-fiction from other fictional forms.

Beating the system

What has been discussed up to this point might best be described as the conformist reading or playing of a game-fiction like *Tomb Raider*. The linearity of the game's essential structure and the limitations of possible movements are respected by the 'ideal reader' posited so far. It is possible to imagine a more or less perfect reading of the game, with all secrets discovered, all items picked up, and the journey undertaken from beginning to end at speed. We can also throw in a few handstands and swallow-dives for the sake of elegance. The illusion of many possible outcomes, that will be stressed as a potentially positive characteristic of game-fiction throughout this volume, however, would encounter the negative closure of the singular.

Indeed, descriptions of such 'perfect readings' are published by the games manufacturers themselves, in computer games magazines, and on Internet 'walkthrough' sites. Manufacturers and publishers have also been known to squeeze a little extra profit from the need for such perfect readings if you are to be able to complete many games. As Rex the dinosaur is shocked to discover when he stumbles across a commercial walkthrough in a toy store in *Toy Story 2*, the solution to a game is often inaccessible from within the game itself, and the player is forced to buy a second product. Even leaving aside the similar feelings of betrayal as trusting player or reader that the need for such secondary texts inspires, the commercially available walkthroughs expose the mechanistic bare bones of the game's structure. What follows is a fairly typical example taken from a magazine walkthrough for *Tomb Raider III*

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published in February 1999:

> Go around the corner and quickly kill the dog and thug before entering the doorway in the centre. Stand on the weak floor to the right to fall through. Pull the block towards you and then climb out. Drop down the other side and follow the path along and climb out to the right. Go to the end and around the corner. Here you'll find two switches to the right.[7]

And so on. In some ways it is as if a novel arrived in a box in which are to be found a jumble of sentences on small slips of paper. Context, and an awareness of the kind of novel that we are attempting to read (through the cover illustration, the blurb, the content of individual prose fragments, and the presence of a few introductory paragraphs), would allow the piecing together of some passages according to authorial design, but there would be inevitable false turns and wrong steps. Only with the purchase of an addendum that mapped out the correct order for the piecing together of text could one be confident that the reader had read the novel 'properly'. It is unlikely that such a novel would attract a large readership. This is not Dadaist poetry or the cut-up texts of William Burroughs, where the random juxtaposition of prose fragments produces the aesthetic product: one is always reminded that a coherent structure exists within the game-fiction, and that the inability to read correctly (most dramatically illustrated by the 'death' of the protagonist) is a consequence of a failing of reading.

The presence of the 'save game' option, and its frequent use by players, indicates a recognition that it is common to read 'badly', at least in the short term, and that to do so indicates something other than 'illiteracy'. A failure of reading that is not quickly resolved results in frustration as there is a collapse into unreadability, and the player of a commercial game-fiction is more likely to blame faulty authorship than his or her own reading ability. The presence of 'cheats' that allow the player to skip forwards in text or acquire a full inventory of weapons and accessories are, as their name im-

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plied, an unsatisfactory intervention that similarly indicates a failing of reading.

A perfect reading and playing through of even such a technically accomplished game as *Tomb Raider*, if accomplished in one sitting and captured and then replayed on video, perhaps, would make for a rather long and tiresome computer-animated film of fairly low quality. The extent to which *Tomb Raider* was a mechanistic authored narrative that channelled the reader through the basic binary options of 'correct' and 'incorrect' choices would be blatantly apparent, and the computer game would appear to be unable to lift itself out of the ghetto in which it is confined as an immature and inferior form of visual entertainment whose only feature of passing interest would be the sense in which the text can only be activated 'correctly' by a reader who demonstrates sufficient 'skill'.

A rather different vision of the possibilities of game-fictions emerges, however, once we consider the existence of a different kind of reader who does not merely conform to, but transgresses, the limitations of the authored (and authorised) narrative. The realism of *Tomb Raider* is, as already noted, a stylised visual illusionism, and yet it displays an internal coherence that adds equivalents of physical laws (only certain doors can be jemmied open with the crowbar, only certain blocks may be pushed or climbed, for example) to simulations of physical laws (gravity points 'down', there are limitations on how fast one can sprint, how far one can jump). The resemblance of the game landscape as a recognisable simulation of a real world, its visual realism, allows common sense to govern gameplay (falling on spikes hurts; one cannot walk on water; if you are on fire, diving into water will (probably) extinguish the blaze) that further establishes limits. Within the game one must always be aware of such laws and apply such common sense, just as one must always be aware that deviations from the linear progression of the game are only temporary, and at some point one must move on in the 'correct' fashion. Must, that is, unless this is one of

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this second type of posited reader of game-fiction, what might be termed the 'subversive reader'.

The subversive reader is also likely to be, or to have been, the ideal reader already discussed. He or she will be well aware of how one 'should' complete the game, but will deliberately reject any notion that this is the only way the game-fiction can be read or played. Such a reader works within the internal logic of the game-world to evade the limitations imposed by the 'legitimate' authors (level designers and programmers) to engage in a little 'illegitimate' authorship himself or herself. Such potentially subversive activity can range from the relatively minor (taking the pacifist option, for example, and refusing to draw guns on any opponent) to the extreme (the exploitation of programming errors, or 'bugs', to short-circuit the linear plan laid down by the game designers). The new possible emplotments (interestingly entitled the 'expert's challenge' on at least one *Tomb Raider* site) are often posted as additions to Internet walkthroughs. There is no other form of fiction where the subversion of authorial design allows for the retention of a coherent narrative and has become a common form of reading.

A little such subversion, of course, is actively encouraged by the design of some levels, indicating the recognition of the producer that an element of open-endedness and an extension of the illusion of freedom of action might be as important to the success of the game as its strong drive through a clearly linear emplotment. One such moment when *Tomb Raider*'s designers have obviously moved to accommodate the more subversive impulses of their audience can be found in Lara Croft's mansion home in *Tomb Raider II*. The Croft mansion is used as a training level in several of the *Tomb Raider* games, and variously features an assault course, a swimming pool, and a gym in which players can familiarise themselves with the basic game moves. The house and grounds can also be explored, and the basics of puzzle solving and button-pushing are introduced. The house is also free of any other animate presence except for a butler controlled by the game's artificial

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intelligence (unless one counts the use of the mansion as a final climactic level following the 'false ending' of *Tomb Raider II*). For all that the frail and elderly butler, who follows the player's moves around the mansion carrying a rattling tray of tea things, might be a gentle dig at transatlantic expectations of how an 'authentic' British aristocrat might live, he is also an irritant. His persistent shadowing of the player's progress, and the obstacle he presents to movement as he doggedly attempts to present tea to the lady of the house, prove frustrating to many players. In the training level of *Tomb Raider II* Lara Croft does not have access to any weapons, so the standard (and unsubtle) method of dealing with a 'problem' is not available. The solution to this particular 'servant problem' however, is not particularly difficult to work out. Move Lara Croft to the kitchens, open the door to the walk-in meat locker and enter. Wait for the butler to bring in his tea tray. Leave rapidly and press the button to close the door. Problem solved.

This differs from the usual run of *Tomb Raider* gameplay in several significant ways. The mansion exists outside of the major game-plot, and is a space in which there is no imperative, or even opportunity, to 'progress'. There is no absolute need to dispose of the butler. The player is not necessarily following the 'correct' course by locking him in the meat locker, and even in this largely amoral game-world it is possible that to do so is to indulge oneself in the childishly subversively enjoyment of the 'incorrect' in locking a frail old man in a refrigerator while one goes out to play. But there is another undeniable satisfaction of player as reader at the discovery of what amounts to another 'secret' sub-plot. It is another sign of the sophistication and expertise of one's reading, and the absence of the imperative (I have completed a story fragment because I *can*, not because I *must*) adds to readerly satisfaction.

That players would attempt to circumvent the butler could hardly have come as a surprise to the game's designers. In the target-range addition to the assault course in *Tomb Raider III* they even work with the expectations of player abuse of the butler in

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having him wear targets on his front and back, and he suffers the indignity of being knocked down again and again by his employer as she practices her gunplay. But such moments within the game of excess and surplus, whether deliberately 'authored' or not, mark a departure from other forms of fiction. The realism of the *Tomb Raider* game environment may be limited and circumscribed, but once within its fictional frame the player can act in ways the programmers and designers could not have foreseen.

There is something undeniably satisfying, for example, about gaining access to an area of the game landscape that the designers obviously had not prepared for, if only to be treated to the sight of areas of missing backdrop or a collapse of the illusion of three dimensions and solidity. Similarly, finding ways of taking vehicles into areas that the designers had not predicted generates a certain subversive pleasure. Such pleasures are necessarily short-term, however, because of their almost inevitable detachment from the linear progression to which a player will have to return. It is only the relative inaccessibility of such areas, and the feeling that one is confounding authorial intention rather than meekly submitting to it, that makes them of interest rather than a source of frustration.

What is striking is that the game-fiction does not necessarily collapse into meaninglessness when the player or reader attempts to subvert authorial design. Recognition of the limitations of *Tomb Raider*'s essentially linear emplotment, particularly that individual episodes or levels are entered and exited, usually, through single points, does not prevent the subversive reader from tearing up the 'intended' plot and constructing his or her own narrative. If we return to consideration of the Venice level of *Tomb Raider II*, we can begin to see how this works. The player enters the canals area from a specific point in a motorboat, and even a little exploration identifies the single exit point – a firmly closed gate protected by underwater mines. As the player explores further, the doors and gates that must be opened, levers pulled and opponents that must

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be shot all make themselves known in one way or another. The presence of a 'spare' motorboat offers a hint as to how to dispose of the mines that bar the exit. The allusions made to the Bond films in the Venice levels, with their exotic 'holiday destination' setting, ominous 'Mr Big', henchmen in suits, and the presence of a fast boat in a landscape in which there is some suspiciously ramp-shaped architecture, all point to the intended grand finale already described.

The subversive reader will not be ignorant of the plot markers that are tugging at his or her consciousness, and will usually be able to complete the level as ideal reader, but will also be aware that it is possible to attempt to read or tell this story fragment in a different way. The most basic of progressive plots is obvious: I have entered by point A, and must leave by point B. What one does at points in between, however, is open to readerly intervention. One might miss out on the full visual spectacular of the sub-Bond cinematic finale if one finds a way of swimming out of the level, rather than taking the speedboat route, but one has access to the pleasure of subversion. One might be making things far more difficult for oneself if one refuses to engage with all the henchmen and dogs that patrol the level, but one has rejected authorial dictat and exercised a form of readerly freedom. It is in this exploitation of the game-fiction's realism to write a variant narrative that the interaction between reader and text foreground the more radical possibilities of this as a form of fiction. *Tomb Raider* might, as yet, be limited in the freedom of action and open-endedness it consciously allows, or produces without intent, but its players and readers have already recognised, and exploited, the ability that this form of game-fiction allows to subvert the clear distinction between the act of reading and the act of authorship.

Notes

1 The full implications of any sense of possible 'immersion' in the computer game are dealt with at length in Chapter 3 in relation to *Half-Life*.

2 This is not true of sloppy programming, rather than the conventions

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of representation established throughout the series. *Tomb Raider*'s first five outings have all been accused, to a greater or lesser extent, of being 'unfinished', with a tendency for Lara Croft to be able to move her limbs through apparently solid objects such as walls and doors. While it is easy to see why so many players find this frustrating, it can also contribute to the pleasures of subversive reading I discuss in the final section of this chapter.

3 See Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London: Methuen, 1980). Belsey's account of the 'classic realist text' of nineteenth-century fiction sets out as a significant corrective to some of the misunderstandings that accompany literary realism.

4 The standard literary-critical term for such fictions that self-consciously foreground their fictionality is 'metafiction'. See Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984). Rushdie, Marquez and Carter have sometimes been grouped together under the apparently tautological title of 'magical realism' that does not necessarily so much inform as suppress recognition of the variety and difference on display within the works themselves.

5 This walkthrough was originally to be found at www.tomraiders.com (accessed September 2001), a site now no longer operational. Another site that provides a similar walkthrough can be found at www.azerista.com/tombraider/wthtrlr–2.php (accessed November 2002).

6 Making such a move at this point in my study inevitably allows me to introduce those basic approaches to narrative that are usually referred to as structuralist (focusing on the structure of the text), and form the intellectual base of narratological approaches to texts. What follows essentially emerges from that body of work pioneered by Vladimir Propp in *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1968). See also Tsvetlan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977).

7 Unsigned article (1999), '*Tomb Raider III*: Full solution', *Ultimate PC* 19, 132–51, 140.

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