



Rise Of The Tomb Raider

Leaping to new heights

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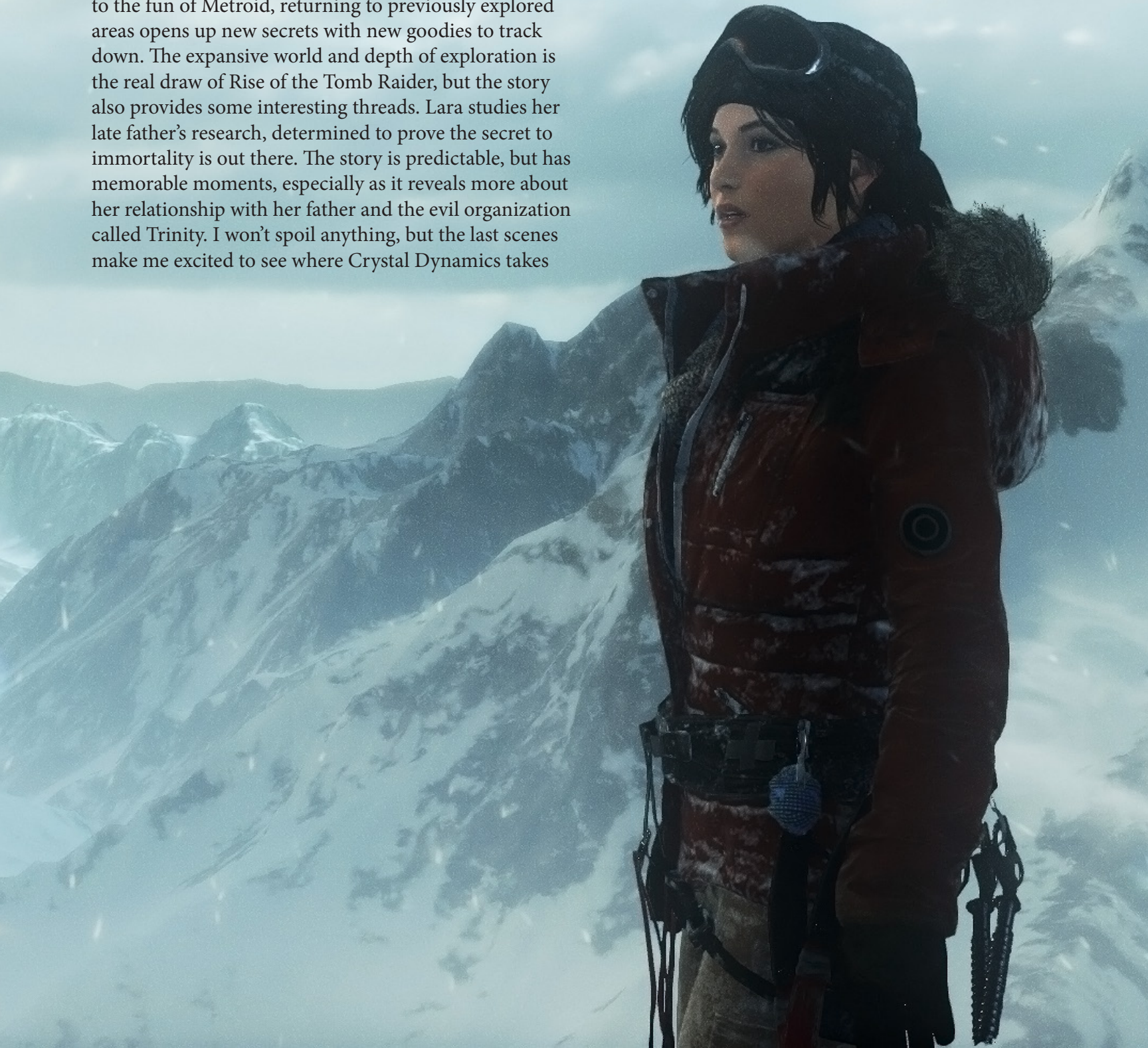
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A familiar wasteland

Crystal Dynamics set a solid foundation when it rebooted the revered Tomb Raider series back in 2013. With a bigger world, more varied combat, and more high-octane action, Rise of the Tomb Raider is better than its predecessor in every way. Just as Lara remains determined to keep moving forward, so does Crystal Dynamics with the franchise. The most exciting parts of Tomb Raider occur as Lara makes her way through harrowing situations, and the stakes have only been increased since the last entry. Expect plenty of close calls, death-defying leaps, and exciting escape sequences; I often felt like I was just escaping by the skin of my teeth. Rise of the Tomb Raider features a quasi-open world that's split between hubs in which Lara is surrounded by resources for crafting along with hidden caves and tombs to explore. She must platform, solve puzzles, and break through obstacles to navigate them. Siberia's brutal, snowy landscapes are great venues to test your survival instincts, offering high points to climb and dangerous wildlife to fend off. The excitement of exploring tombs is one of this sequel's major improvements. They are much more expansive than caves, usually featuring one big puzzle, where you use Lara's tools to eliminate obstacles, and platform using her pickaxe to land big jumps. For example, one tomb was flooded and had me using Lara's rope arrow to get a boat around and find ways to drain the water. The puzzles are deep, requiring you to pay attention to things like water levels and timing your jumps to reach moving platforms. The action excels just as much as the exploration and puzzle-solving. Just when you think it can't get any crazier, it does. I reveled in reacting on the fly, whether it was taking out a swarm of enemies or racing to flee a collapsing tomb. Combat is more strategic now, providing even more ways to tackle every situation. Sometimes you can plot and sneak up on enemies for surprise attacks, and other times they come charging in at you, forcing you to react in the moment. I loved using a stealthy approach, but throwing molotov cocktails or firing an arrow to land a perfect headshot were just as entertaining. Unfortunately, later sequences often feel like Lara versus the world, and get repetitive as you're eliminating wave after wave of enemies. When you're not in

the adrenaline inducing moments, you're searching for supplies and secrets. The world is large and littered with cool collectibles and hidden tombs. Finding documents and murals show points of the interest on the map, but the lack of a minimap is unfortunate since it forces you to pause to check the map. Still, I loved stumbling upon weapon upgrades and collecting resources to craft new gear. That's where Rise of the Tomb Raider excels; you progress by finding a new item or getting a new tool that suddenly changes how you traverse the world. Similar to the fun of Metroid, returning to previously explored areas opens up new secrets with new goodies to track down. The expansive world and depth of exploration is the real draw of Rise of the Tomb Raider, but the story also provides some interesting threads. Lara studies her late father's research, determined to prove the secret to immortality is out there. The story is predictable, but has memorable moments, especially as it reveals more about her relationship with her father and the evil organization called Trinity. I won't spoil anything, but the last scenes make me excited to see where Crystal Dynamics takes

the narrative next. Rise of the Tomb Raider captures the thrill of being an adventurer and leaves you thinking about Lara's next move. You have daredevil sequences, heroic moments, fun exploration, and exciting fights that even Indiana Jones would envy. If Crystal Dynamics keeps raising the bar from here, I can't wait to see what's in store for Lara.

» Kimberly Wallace





This War Of Mine

Despondent days, nihilistic nights

This War of Mine places the player in an unfamiliar role in the war game, controlling a small team of survivors in a war-ravaged cityscape. You don't assume the role of a fearless commando in first-person, or manage troops in a real-time strategy setting; the goal here is simply survival at any cost in a broken down house. The experience is surreal, sitting at your comfortable PC and watching as your team struggles to eat, rest, stay healthy, and stave off crippling depression in a world without morals. The core gameplay loop is simple, a rough cut that feels a lot like other survival games such as Don't Starve or Minecraft. You build essential tools to help you out around the house (like stoves, raincatchers, and beds), and advance your crafting tables to facilitate your goals. You also have to make functional tools – weapons, crowbars, lockpicks – to help with your scavenging. During the day, you're managing the status of your three survivors, a sort of dark Tamagotchi system where you juggle sickness, wounds, exhaustion, and depression. The loop is fun at first, but quickly becomes a repetitive, monotonous chore as you discover how to play, the day functioning as filler content while you wait

for evening to approach. These scavenging missions make up the meat of the game outside the sim-warehouse, as you encounter snipers, gangs, and other desperate people trying to survive. Using stealth, you can avoid some of these encounters, but not all of them, so you want to have a weapon on hand. These interactions often include decisions that will make you feel bad about yourself, delivering the constant message that when survival is on the line, humanity is at its worst. If you can take all the messages and empathy out of This War of Mine, then it boils down to a rather simplistic survival experience that takes around 40 to 50 in-game days to complete. I wasn't expecting to embrace the empathy aspects or some profound message on war, but after a few games, I was drained of any desire to switch to another title and rack up a kill count. It's a fairly depressing experience, but I absolutely respect the title's ability to impact me in ways that games generally don't. I'd recommend this game to anyone looking for an experience that's far outside the norm of what we expect when we pick up and play a new title. You may not enjoy playing This War of Mine in the traditional sense, but I think that's the point.

» Daniel Tack



The Witcher 3

Adventure with a touch of magic

*Geralt of Rivia is always searching for something. Whether he's looking for work, deadly monsters, or his memories, Geralt is constantly throwing himself into danger and overcoming the odds. At the end of *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*, he recovered his lost memories, finally remembering his last moments with his love, Yennefer. Now he's out to find her. CD Projekt RED surprised fans at the Game Awards in December with a trailer debuting a new second playable character: Ciri. After playing the opening three hours of Geralt's latest adventure, we discovered just how important Ciri is. She's not just another person to find; the fate of the world rests on Geralt keeping her safe.*

by Kimberley Wallace

THE MYSTERIOUS CIRI

Ciri is a weapon of war. "She is the only person who can save the world, basically," says senior game designer Damien Monnier. Geralt must track her down before the Wild Hunt, a group of ghostly figures, finds her and uses her for destruction. Geralt has a long-standing personal connection to Ciri, acting as her father figure. He takes her under his wing and teaches her how to fight and survive in a cruel world. In *The Witcher 3*'s opening, Geralt flashes back to his time mentoring Ciri at Kaer Morhen, a keep where witchers train. From the first moment we see her, it's clear that Ciri is a bit rebellious. Her teacher is Vesemir, one of the wisest witchers around, but he's fast asleep in a chair with Ciri nowhere in sight. Geralt wakes him up, and Vesemir explains that she refuses to do what she's told. In the distance, Ciri is in the courtyard; she sneaked off to do some combat training on her own. She's blindfolded and balancing on a beam as a huge log swings at her. This scene showcases a different side of Geralt's personality than we've seen before. We're used to seeing him act like a confident smart-mouth, dealing with lowlifes and corrupt leaders. Here, he's sternly letting Ciri know of missteps as any mentor would, but you can tell he cares about her – even throwing in a few jokes to make her smile. The moment also provides a glimpse into Ciri's per-

sonality. Her cockiness reminds me a bit of Geralt's, and I like that she's not intimidated by him. In fact, she's extremely strong-willed and smart, with the ability to think on her feet. The next area serves as the tutorial, and CD Projekt RED has obviously listened to fan feedback. If you were turned off by *The Witcher 2*'s drawn-out introduction, *The Witcher 3* has much better pacing. The tutorial lessons are fast, easy to grasp, and fit into the storyline. Geralt tries to set an example for Ciri in training, but I was more intrigued by how sinister this seemingly innocuous moment becomes. Geralt notices something awry with a training dummy and finds blood dripping from it; he pulls back its fabric and confirms it's a person. You can feel the tension as he looks anxiously for Ciri, then sees the Wild Hunt coming in on a ship. A sinister voice yells, "I've waited for this, White Wolf," and goes lunging toward Ciri. At that point, Geralt wakes up; though the sequence began as a flashback, the appearance of the Wild Hunt is more of a premonition than fact. Geralt is worried – when he's dreamt about Ciri before, she's actually been in danger. CD Projekt RED confirmed that more flashback sequences occur, revealing more about Ciri and her relationship with Geralt. The team has also stayed

true to the Witcher books. The books predate the video games, but CD Projekt RED says it's kept Ciri's history and personality in mind. Ciri is playable at certain points to give players a different perspective. "Allowing you to play as Ciri will make you understand the struggle," Monnier says. You won't constantly be switching back to her though; the team reserved this for key moments. Switching the perspective also allows CD Projekt RED to shake up the gameplay. Ciri's a faster fighter than Geralt, but she's also more fragile.

ENTERING A DANGEROUS WORLD

On Geralt's quest to find Yennefer, I finally get to explore the open world. Geralt has a horse to cover ground quickly (as well as sign posts for fast travel). The horse has a stamina meter, so you can only gallop at top speed for a short period. If you hold down a button, the horse automatically dodges obstacles in its path, so you don't need to steer. The horse also has a fear meter; if you get it too close to enemies, the horse gets spooked and tosses you off. I notice beautiful mountains in the distance as I travel, but the cruelty of the world soon takes over as I witness a griffin attacking a merchant. The merchant hides under his carriage, but his poor horse has no protection. The griffin is devouring it alive. Geralt chases the beast away and helps the merchant back to his feet. When given the option, I decide not to ask for money in exchange for the assistance, which later nets me an extra discount at his shop. The merchant tells me of a nearby small town where his cousin owns the inn. When I ask about Yennefer, he says he hasn't seen her, but it's possible she's stopped there. The town is nothing extravagant, but it's still lively. People are working the fields, kids are playing and singing in the streets, and geese are fluttering about (you can actually chase them if you want). I make my way to the tavern, where I see thugs starting a fight, saying the town is Nilfgaard territory now. War brings out the worst in everyone, including these locals who can't seem to agree what's best for their town. As a witcher, Geralt attracts attention everywhere he goes, and his mere presence is raising tensions. Vesemir warns him not to start



any trouble, but to ask around about Yennefer. Of course, nobody is willing to help, so Geralt taps into his power to charm people. I run into a scholar with some information, and he says he wants to write a book on war. I can either tell him he's crazy or encourage him. I go for the latter; I hope this ends up being a cool choice that bears fruit later on. I find out that I need to talk to the general for more information on Yennefer, but on my way there, I get distracted. A crazy old lady is shouting about her missing pan, and I embark on my first sidequest. She tells me a weird man asked to borrow her pan; he took it, along with her house. Now it's locked and she can't get in. She's worried something bad happened inside. This is an easy job for a witcher. I tap into the telekinesis power and blast the door open. Using his enhanced senses, Geralt goes into sleuth mode, examining objects and allowing you to slowly piece together what happened. What I like about tapping into this power is how the answers are rarely predictable. In this case, the man was writing a letter and needed the soot from the pan for ink. I retrieve the pan, but not before realizing the man also killed someone. The evidence? A dead body in the house. I let the lady know the bad news, but give her back her beloved pan, and she pays me for my troubles. I finally reach the general



and talk to him. As with most people you run into in the Witcher universe, he won't give me the info I need until I do him a favor. That griffin I saw earlier? I'm supposed to kill it. To gain an edge in the impending encounter, I also need to track down an herbalist and a hunter. Again, I get distracted on my way to them, and help out a man on the road who lost an important chest full of medicine. Once again I use my witcher senses to locate it, and I find a man slain by arrows nearby – arrows that belong to the quest-giver. He's a murderer, and I return and accuse him of it. He explains that he's just serving his men in a time of war and needed the medicine to keep them alive. I am given the option to keep the chest or return the medicine. I give the man the benefit of the doubt, but I do enjoy how the situation once again had surprising results – I'm left to second-guess my instinct to trust the quest-giver. I find the hunter's shack, but he's not home. Thankfully, my witcher senses let me follow tracks to him, and he's found a dangerous group of wolves. I agree to help him and we take out a pack, then he shows me the griffin's nest. I investigate and then head to the herbalist, who is helping a recent victim of the griffin. The situation is helpless:

This woman is going to die. Geralt can't even use his powers, because he doesn't know how a human body would handle them. I promise that the deaths end here, vowing to take the ugly bird out – but first I need to swim to the bottom of a lake to get the herbs I need. Swimming is easy and with a tap of a button you can dive down and explore for hidden items. You have an air meter, so you can't stay underwater for long, but it's pretty generous. The basics of the griffin showdown The basics of the battle system haven't changed; you use strong and weak sword attacks, along with magic like igni and quen. Steel swords are best used on human enemies, while silver swords slay monsters. Before I battle the griffin, I gain access to the crossbow. This will come in handy to injure the griffin while it's flying, forcing it to land. Right off the bat, I notice the combat is smoother than it was in past games. This is something that CD Projekt RED was set on improving due to fan feedback. "The combat is much more fluid now, much more responsive, much more accessible, but still is a challenge to master," says senior environment artist Jonas Mattsson. It doesn't feel drastically different, but it's an improvement that fans



will appreciate. The griffin circles above and I ready my crossbow, trying to steadily aim and hit it before it moves. My successful shot knocks it down and I start using igni, engulfing the beast in flames. The ensuing battle has me relying on a handful of strategies. Each time it takes to the air, I shoot it down with the crossbow; when it's on the ground and charging at me, I ready quen (a protective shield) to avoid extra damage, then alternate between igni and melee attacks. At one point, the griffin flies away and I chase it to a high ledge to finally kill the massive creature. This feels like a feat in itself, and I get a trophy that provides bonuses when equipped. I also level up for my efforts. You can put your skill points into a wide variety of areas, such as combat, signs, and alchemy. Each category has its own skills and different tiers. For instance, in the "general" category, you can put points into increasing your max vitality or increasing your resistance to poison. You then equip the skills and attach a mutagen boost to increase their potential. My work with the griffin is done and I head back for my reward. The general tells me that Yennefer has been in Visma all this time – a day's ride away. Before I leave town, I visit the tavern

one last time and witness a violent scene. Tensions are high over the war, and some people can't forget the casualties the Nilfgaard caused to claim the land. An old lady is getting her head slammed into the table for showing support to Nilfgaard. The scene is so brutal that I cringe and look away as the blood on her forehead grows, each hit sounding worse and worse. Thankfully, Geralt breaks up the fight and tends to her. He then tries to leave the town, but thugs ambush him and Vesemir on their way out. I don't have patience for this, so I go for the arrogant dialogue option and say how stupid they are for thinking they can take me on. I kill the three with ease, and the fight ends with a severed head. After the fight, Yennefer suddenly appears with a proposition – but I'll let you learn the details for yourself. This is the first hands-on that CD Projekt RED has offered with The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, and I feel confident about its direction. The dialogue and voice work is fantastic, and the side stories littered throughout the world are intriguing. I found myself just wanting to explore every nook and cranny. Hopefully, the rest of the game can match the thrill I had for the first hours. I can't wait to play further, experience more choices, and see which of the 36 endings I get.

