

Video Game Review: ‘Tomb Raider: Underworld’ Buries Treasure With Awkward Gameplay

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on December 22, 2008 - 12:19pm

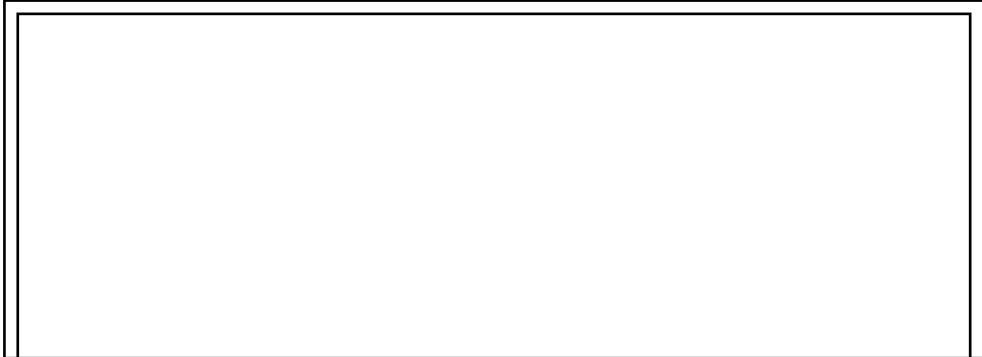
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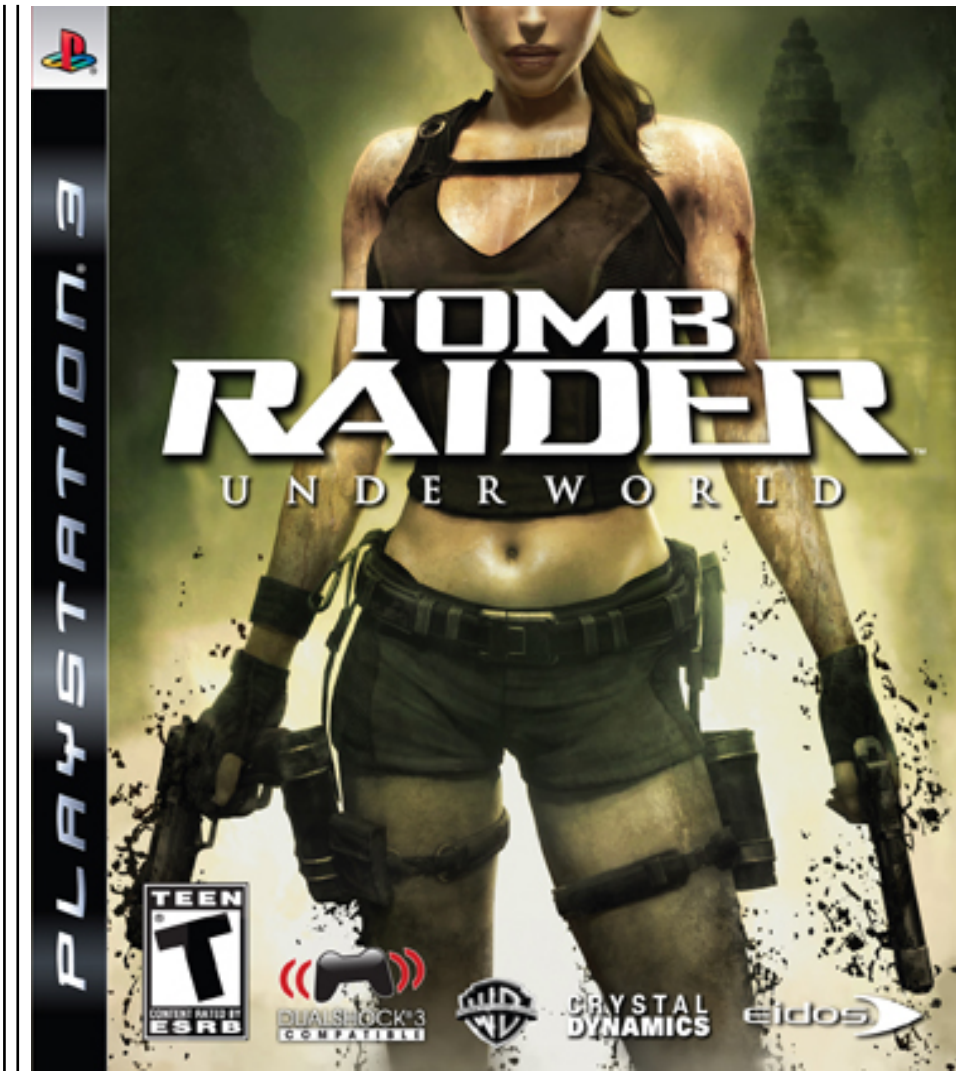


CHICAGO – The best way to explain my reaction to “Tomb Raider: Underworld”, the latest next-gen console adventure for the legendary Lara Croft, can be summed up with an anecdote. After taking a break from the game and playing a few other titles I need to review and, of course, having my daily “Rock Band” practice, I said to myself, “Where was I again in Underworld?” I answered my own question depressingly with “Oh yeah, I was frustrated and annoyed.”



Now, that may be too much of a blanket statement. There are things to like about “Underworld”, but absolutely horrendous camera control, repetitive puzzles, and a genuine lack of fluid gameplay or a story worth caring about make this mission for Lara Croft one of her most disappointing. “Tomb Raider: Underworld” looks and sounds amazing, but once the player picks up a controller, the visual and audio excellence falls away, leaving nothing but an empty chamber.





Lara Croft is instantly recognizable around the world from her series of games and even the Angelina Jolie vehicles that tried to make her an action heroine for the big screen. But is she still relevant in the gaming world? Developer Crystal Dynamics had an opportunity with “Underworld” to both remind old fans what they loved about the franchise and bring new PS3 and Xbox 360 owners to the world of “Tomb Raider”.

On a conceptual level, the developers of “Underworld” made some wise decisions. They didn’t turn “Tomb Raider” into the genre du jour. They could have easily made “Underworld” a shooter, but they kept the focus on puzzle-solving, something that should satisfy fans of the franchise. Yes, you still have to kill an odd amount of giant lizards, sharks, and tigers, but the majority of “Underworld” is spent trying to get deeper into tombs, caverns, etc. to find treasure and solve puzzles. You really are a tomb raider.

Visually, “Underworld” is a beauty. The levels are detailed and stunning to look at, even if they start to look a bit too much alike after a while. Even more impressive is the sound design. It’s not often that a score stands out for a game, but the music in “Underworld” is quite beautiful. The symphonic score is probably the best thing about the game. It’s an orchestral beauty that would rank among the best film scores of the year. I can’t remember the last time the music stood out in a game like it does in “Underworld”.

What kills “Underworld” for me is simple - the camera is nearly impossible to control. “Underworld” features a standard camera control with the right analog stick, but there are times when you’re literally going to have to wrestle with it to see where you’re going. And considering how much of the game involves jumping from ledge to ledge, not being able to even aim Lara in the right direction to make the jump can lead to some frustrating game sessions. The amount of times you’ll literally have to guess if there’s anything in front of you when you hit the jump button is unacceptable in today’s market.



And the plot of “Underworld”? Eh. It starts with an explosion in Croft Manor and moves back through a series of events that led up to that date, but the plot is incoherent and impossible to follow. One minute, you’re in an underwater cavern dealing with a mythical treasure, then you’re on a boat shooting people, and then you’re dealing with the aforementioned tigers. And it’s all got something to do with Lara’s

missing mother. The story's not so much impossible to follow as it is impossible to care about.

Reaction to "Underworld" will depend on what you're looking for in a game. "Tomb Raider: Underworld" should have included an intriguing story with easy-to-use gameplay and a seamless camera control to really show off its beautiful graphics. That didn't happen. But it's still a visual and auditory beauty. The movement, the sound design, and the environment are all beyond criticism. If you can pull the camera out of the wall long enough to appreciate them.

'Tomb Raider: Underworld' was released by Eidos Interactive and developed by Crystal Dynamics. It is rated T (Teen). The version reviewed was on PS3, but the title is also available on XBox 360, Wii, PC, and Nintendo DS. It was released on November 18, 2008.



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