

FORMAT REVIEWED

PlayStation 3

OTHER FORMATS

360, Wii, PC, PS2, DS

PUBLISHER

Eidos

DEVELOPER

Crystal Dynamics

REVIEWED BY

Simeon Paskell

YOU STILL WOULD TOMB RAIDER UNDERWORLD

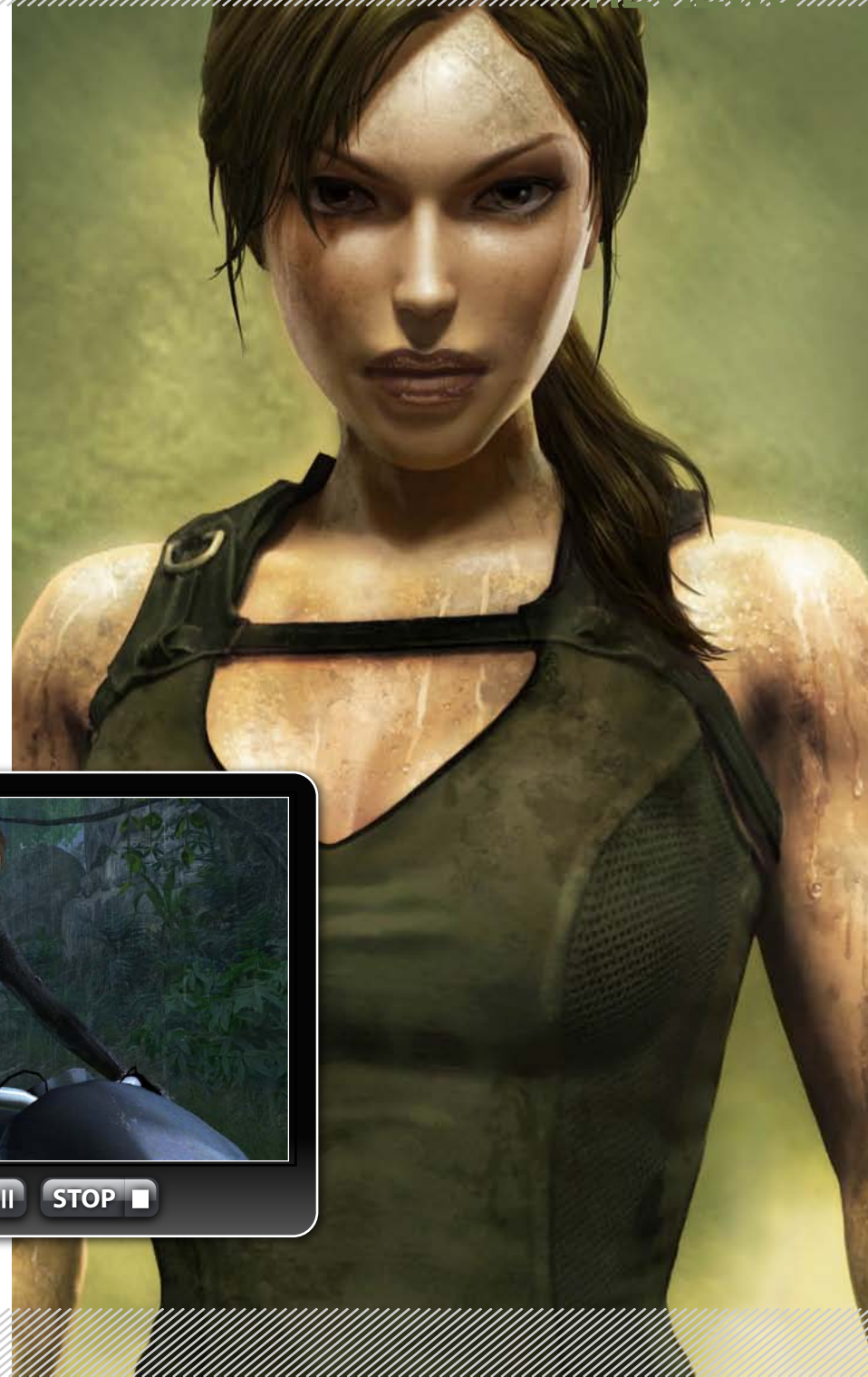
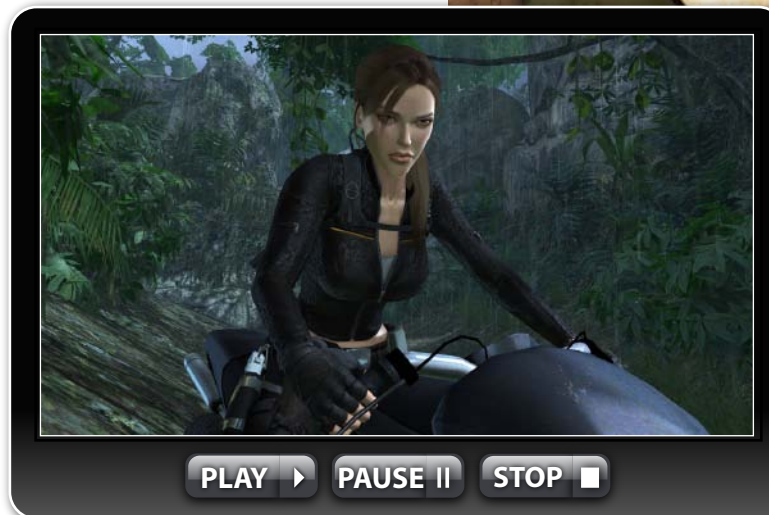
It can't be easy being a popular icon; just ask Britney! While *Tomb Raider's* famously buxom heroine, Lara Croft, has never publicly shaved her head during a high profile meltdown, she has had more than her fair share of hair-raising moments, from the series low point of *The Angel of Darkness* to the lacklustre movies. Since *Tomb Raider: Legend* put the series back on track, Croft fans have only had an anniversary remake of the original to tide them over, so there's a lot riding on the shoulders of *Tomb Raider: Underworld* as the first wholly original current generation *Tomb Raider*. And on this occasion developer Crystal Dynamics has, for the most part, risen to the challenge.

Underworld starts with a bang; or more precisely, with the Croft Manor exploding into flames. This literal deconstruction of Lara's home smacks of a developer looking to shake things up, to tear down the old and replace it with a re-imagined *Tomb Raider*. The opening is certainly attention grabbing, but is somewhat disingenuous in its message. Her home may be in tatters, but the game that follows is classic *Tomb Raider*; and that isn't such a bad thing, especially with a game that looks and sounds as glorious as this.

The *Tomb Raider* series has always had exploration at its core, feeding on our desire to see what waits for Lara around the next bend, and in this respect *Underworld* is particularly accomplished. Locales are hugely varied but always in line with the *Tomb Raider* canon, and it is difficult not to be impressed by the lavish detail in which they are rendered. Generally solid and often breathtak-

ingly sumptuous, Crystal Dynamics' utilisation of the processing power available is evident in every texture, floating dust particle, shaft of light and sweeping vista. A level set on the coast of Thailand had our jaws hanging agape, and an unhealthy amount of time was spent simply admiring the view – a regular occurrence in *Underworld*!

Similarly grandiose is the level design which wrings out as much variety as the mechanics will allow without losing sight of the game's core values. From leaping through the smoking embers of Croft Manor, to plunging into the depths of an *Endless Ocean*-esque Mediterranean en route to a competently delivered jungle motorbike ride, *Underworld* is not short of ideas.



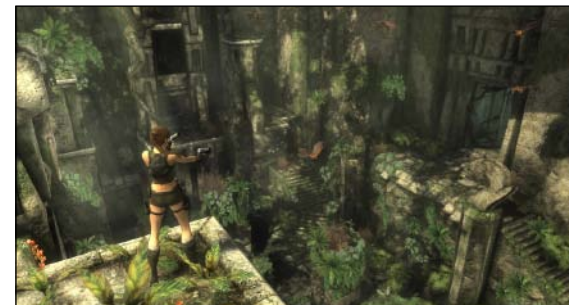
“IF YOU CAN OVERLOOK
THE SHORTCOMINGS
THERE'S A LOT HERE TO ENJOY”



Importantly, navigating the impressively rendered Lara around the exotic environments is, for the most part, an exhilarating pleasure. Death-defying leaps, nail-biting heights and a dynamic zip-line help Lara live up to her reputation as the female Indiana Jones, and all are fairly intuitive to execute. Combat, on the other hand, is somewhat perfunctory and a long way away from the visceral engagements of the PS3's so-called 'Bloke Raider', *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*.

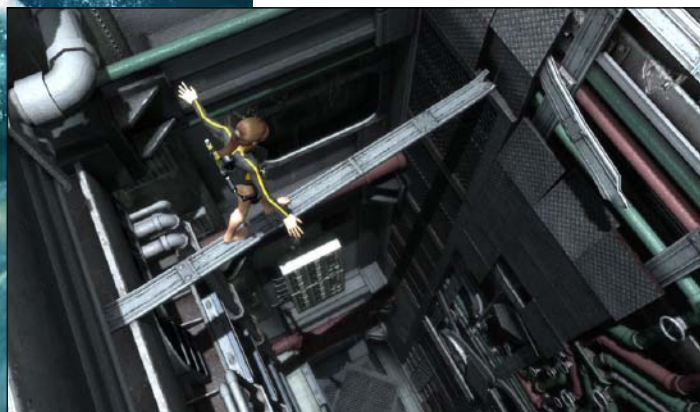
It is saddening that, despite *Underworld* getting so much right, it makes such a fudge of some of the basics, with the most notable criticism being the camera. For the eighth game in a long running series, the drunken, jittery lens through which we are forced to follow Ms Croft is unforgivable, and although not game-breaking, when the camerawork goes wrong it does so spectacularly. On more than one occasion we were literally unable to find Lara on the screen as the camera was having a fracas with a wall, and even when it is functioning properly, it often fails to give you enough range of movement to fully examine your environment. From this stems the game's other big bugbear - frustration.

As a result of the inconsistency in interaction with the incredibly detailed environments coupled with the wayward camera, it can be



difficult to see exactly what you have to do and where you have to go. While a hint system is included - giving either cryptic clues or more concise instruction - this often states the obvious and proves to be little help. The inclusion of the system suggests that Crystal Dynamics' were aware that hitting dead-ends would be an issue, yet it is disappointing that they chose to apply a band-aid rather than deal more directly with the problem. A 3D map is also included but, again, the usefulness of this is limited. Environmental puzzling, fathoming out huge, ancient machinery and picking your way through crumbling temples is central to the experience, but getting stuck in the same room, falling at the same points and being forced to repeat the same sections will undoubtedly test even the most patient of gamers.

Placed alongside its predecessors, *Tomb Raider: Underworld* holds up extremely well. The narrative is gloriously hammy (focusing on some twaddle about Thor's hammer and Avalon...), puzzles are well thought out (if at times slightly obtuse), and when everything comes together it's extremely impressive and a visual feast. Unfortunately Lara's fingertips slip off the ledge of *Underworld* being the definitive *Tomb Raider* experience, with rough edges (which also include some fairly dramatic bugs and idiotic AI) marring the experience. If you can overlook the game's shortcomings, there is a lot here to enjoy; it's just a shame that these shortcomings weren't ironed out before release.



VERDICT ★★★★★