

Kostiřová, Zuzana Marie

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Lara Croft as a Spiritual Seeker: Religious and Spiritual Motifs in the Tomb Raider Transmedia Universe

ZUZANA MARIE KOSTIČOVÁ*

Hussite Theological Faculty, Charles University, Prague, Czechia

• zuzana.kosticova@htf.cuni.cz • ORCID 0000-0002-7765-6089

ABSTRACT

In this article, I offer a concise survey of the religious/spiritual motifs identifiable in Tomb Raider. Based on hermeneutics and discursive analysis applied mainly (but not exclusively) to the main game series, I identify a marked influence of both Western Esotericism (in the case of the older games) and Alternative Spirituality (especially in the case of the Survivor Trilogy). Furthermore, there is enough ground to interpret Lara Croft as a spiritual seeker rather than an archaeologist.

Keywords: Western Esotericism; New Age Spirituality; Religion in Videogames; Tomb Raider; Lara Croft

Introduction

In 1996, the first *Tomb Raider* game took the world by storm. The epic success of the game owed mainly to its protagonist, the British archaeologist and adventurer Lara Croft. The original *Tomb Raider* paved the way to the creation of an entire immersive transmedia universe; as of today, it consists of games, comic books, movies, and a cartoon TV series. At the same time strong and feminine, violent and refined, Lara Croft has attracted players' attention; it is no exaggeration to say that she quickly became one of the most famous and most widely known female videogame protagonists. Naturally, phenomenon of this magnitude did not escape the attention of scholars.

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First of all, there were the archaeologists. Together with Indiana Jones, Lara Croft became the epitome of how contemporary popular culture distorts the image of archaeology and archaeologists. Many authors¹ insisted that the esotericism-influenced popular image of archaeology inflicted real damage both on academic archaeology and on the cultures whose heritage the archaeologists studied. Lara Croft tends to be listed among the modern examples of what Feder² calls “pseudoscientific” and “irrational” popular archaeology.³ Cornelius Holtorf⁴ dedicated an entire book to analysing popular archaeology and among other phenomena, he also touched upon *Tomb Raider*. While I rely on Holtorf’s work a great deal in this article, I also hope to add some new perspectives to his approach, mainly in terms of religion. Another group of academics that showed a great interest in Lara were Gender Studies scholars. In the first decade of the 21st century, many studies focused first and foremost on Lara’s gender. Some theorists were elated by the appearance of such a strong, capable, and self-sufficient heroine, especially given the fact that around the turn of the millennium, the realm of videogames was still very male-oriented.⁵ Others, however, thought Lara to be highly problematic, unrealistic, overly sexualised, and/or ultimately not truly female.⁶

While three decades of gender- and popular-archaeology-related reflection on Lara Croft have highlighted many interesting and thought-provoking concerns, it is unfortunately also a fact that the overbearing focus on these themes tends to overshadow other aspects of the *Tomb Raider* trans-media. True, there are many Game Studies analyses focused on the game mechanics and other specific ludological problems. However, when it comes to the question of religion, virtually nothing was written on the

- 1 See, e.g., David S. Anderson, “Crafting a Mysterious Ancient World: The Effects of Theosophy and Esotericism on Public Perceptions of Archaeology,” *Nova Religio* 22, no. 4 (2019): 13-26; cf. Cornelius Holtorf, *Archaeology is a Brand! The Meaning of Archaeology in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Archaeopress, 2007), 7-8, and *passim*.
- 2 Kenneth J. Feder, “Irrationality and Popular Archaeology,” *American Antiquity* 49, no. 3 (1984): 525-541.
- 3 A more positive approach is illustrated, e.g., by Kathrin Felder, “Analysing images of archaeology in entertainment media as a means to understanding and meeting public expectations,” in *Beyond the Artifact, Digital Interpretation of the Past*, ed. by Franco Niccolucci and Sorin Hermon (Archaeolingua, 2010), 367-381.
- 4 Holtorf, *Archaeology is a Brand!*, *passim*.
- 5 Jeroen Jansz and Raynel G. Martis, “The Lara Phenomenon: Powerful Female Characters in Video Games,” *Sex Roles* 56, no. 3 (2007): 141-148, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-006-9158-0>.
- 6 E.g. Helen W. Kennedy, “Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis,” *Game Studies* 2 (2002), www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy; Anne-Marie Schleiner, “Does Lara Croft wear fake polygons?,” *Leonardo* 34, no. 3 (2001): 221-226, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002409401750286976>.

subject until 2017, when Oscar-Torjus Utaaker⁷ published an article about Theosophy, mentioning *Tomb Raider* among the topics in the study of the Theosophical Society. Other articles appeared later, namely David S. Anderson's⁸ study of the effect of esotericism on the pop-cultural perception of archaeology. It should perhaps be pointed out that when it comes to religion, scholarly interest is directed chiefly at Indiana Jones, with Lara Croft playing but a minor role. However, *Indiana Jones* and *Tomb Raider* differ considerably in this respect: while they share an emphasis on supernatural artefacts and a specific approach to history, deeply influenced by Western Esotericism, the *Indiana Jones* phenomenon still has a vital component of the Christian faith.⁹ Conversely, the *Tomb Raider* phenomenon not only fails to manifest a similar influence but has recently developed a highly critical stance towards Christianity, which crystallised most notably in the videogame *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015).¹⁰ What's more, the focus on millennialism, (spiritual) energies, and indigenous utopia contrasted with the decadency of urban Western culture, while other phenomena situate the more contemporary TR products in a broader context of Alternative ("New Age") Spirituality.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to offer a general overview of the themes of religion and/or spirituality as they appear in the *Tomb Raider* transmedia universe and set *Tomb Raider* in the wider context of what Christopher Partridge¹¹ calls "occulture"; that is, the intersection between popular culture, Western Esotericism, and Alternative ("New Age") Spirituality. In the first part of the article, I will explore the core motifs that appear in *Tomb Raider* and put them in the context of Western Esotericism and contemporary Alternative ("New Age") Spirituality. In the second part, I will interpret Lara as a "spiritual seeker". I hope to demonstrate that there is sufficient reason to count *Tomb Raider* among essential and highly influential transmedia "occultural" phenomena that

7 Oscar-Torjus Utaaker, "The Theosophical Society in Religious Studies: A Research Survey," *Alternative Spirituality and Religion Review* 8, no.1 (2017): 77-93, <https://doi.org/10.5840/asrr201742532>.

8 Anderson, "Crafting a Mysterious Ancient World," 13-26.

9 Chris Yogerst, "Faith under the Fedora: Indiana Jones and the Heroic Journey Towards God," *Journal of Religion & Film* 18, no. 2 (2014): 1-33, <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.18.02.07>.

10 *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix 2015.

11 Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, Vol. I. (T&T Clark International, 2004), 62-86, and passim; see also Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture*, Vol. II. (T&T Clark International, 2004), passim.

contain (and thus help to disseminate) Alternative Spirituality in popular culture.

Alternative (“New Age”) Spirituality: A Brief Overview

Before we dive into the problem, however, a few words about Alternative Spirituality are in order. From the cradle of the 1960s and 1970s hippies counterculture, a new religion slowly emerged, building on the bases of Western Esoteric traditions and diverse other sources (e.g. Eastern religions, ancient and indigenous cultures of the world, science, pop-cultural motifs, etc.).¹² Its early phase is usually called the “New Age”, emphasising specifically its millennial streak focused on the expected transformation of global consciousness. Academia caught its development somewhat late on: the first serious analytical works started to appear in the late 1970s when this early phase was practically over. And the problem of terminology immediately emerged. In the emic discourse, the self-denominator “New Age” was gone – and, moreover, its usage in popular discourse started to gather a markedly pejorative meaning, creating a mild slur that no one wanted to identify with. However, academia had just adopted the term, and in the late 1990s, Wouter Hanegraaff¹³ still used the terms “New Age *sensu stricto*” (that is, the 60s and 70s countercultural religion) and “New Age *sensu lato*” (its new mainstream version).

Unfortunately, the new emic self-denominator “spirituality” (used without any adjectives), or “spiritual, not religious”, was unfit to replace the former “New Age *sensu lato*”. The way it was usually used in academia was far too general, describing a universal human religious need typically studied by the Psychology of Religion.¹⁴ Meanwhile, the emic “New Age” discourse gave an impression that “spirituality” is not a specific historical religious phenomenon but something universal and fundamental. The emic discourse emphasised the pure, uncorrupted character of “spirituality” as opposed to decadent and power-hungry “religion” that encased free “spirituality” in a prison of oppressive institutions.¹⁵ In the early decades of the 21st century, this discursive reconfiguration of the terms “spirituality” and “religion” gained enormous influence in popular culture (including, as I

12 See e.g. Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament* (P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2012), 37, 52-56, 67.

13 Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Brill, 1996), 97-103.

14 Zuzana Marie Kosticová, “Religion, Spirituality, Worldviews, and Discourses: Revisiting the term ‘Spirituality’ as Opposed to ‘Religion’,” *Central European Journal for Contemporary Religion* 2 (2018): 81-97, <https://doi.org/10.14712/25704893.2018.5>.

15 Kosticová, “Religion, Spirituality,” 81-97.

hope to demonstrate, the *Tomb Raider* universe), and its vestiges reached academia.

Some scholars started pitting “religion” and “spirituality” against each other in their definitions without truly realising the emic context of such a discursive shift.¹⁶ Others, however, were acutely conscious of the situation and felt the need to bring order to this terminological chaos. New terms emerged, such as Paul Heelas’ “Holistic Milieu” or “Spiritualities of Life”¹⁷, Adam Possamai’s “Aquarian perennism”¹⁸ or Steven Sutcliffe’s and Marion Bowman’s “Alternative Spirituality”¹⁹ (a term which I personally prefer). And even though these scholars tried to establish a recognisable academic term that would simultaneously respect the milieu’s self-understanding as “spirituality”, none of these terms really reached universal acceptance, and as of today, this religion still tends to be called “New Age Spirituality.” I believe this is an unfortunate situation, given the slightly offensive character of the term “New Age”. For this reason, I will mostly refrain from using it and will adhere to Sutcliffe and Bowman’s “Alternative Spirituality” instead.²⁰

In the past few decades, Alternative Spirituality has established itself as one of the most prominent religions of the West, being all the more influential since it still remains largely invisible. Most authors agree its most critical doctrinal trait is the belief in a universal, impersonal, ever-flowing spiritual energy, and Christopher Partridge insists that the widespread character of this belief makes it akin to Alternative Spirituality’s “hard orthodoxy”.²¹ Further crucial traits of Alternative Spirituality’s nascent doctrine are holism, usually rendered as binary opposites in balance that

16 See, e.g. Norichika Horié, “Narrow New Age and Broad Spirituality,” in *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion*, ed. Steven Sutcliffe and Ingvild Saelid Gilhus (Routledge, 2014), 99-116; cf. Boaz Huss, “Sacred is the Profane, Spirituality is not Religion: The Decline of the Religion/Secular Divide and the Emergence of the Critical Discourse on Religion,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 27 (2015): 97-103, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341333>; Kostičová, “Religion, Spirituality, Worldviews, and Discourses,” 81-97.

17 Paul Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 27-28.

18 Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture*, 51.

19 Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman, „Introduction,“ in *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, ed. Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 1-16.

20 For further details see Kostičová, “Religion, Spirituality, Worldviews, and Discourses,” 81-97.

21 Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol. II, 11-12; see also Catherine Albanese, “The Subtle Energies of Spirit: Exploration in Metaphysical and New Age Spirituality,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67, no. 2 (1999): 305-325; Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (Yale University Press, 2007), 6, 14-16, and passim.

Heelas calls “dualistic holism”,²² and the belief in an immortal human consciousness, torn between the “ego” (or “lower self”) and the “higher Self”. Aside from that, other less central beliefs may or may not be present in the teachings of a particular adherent of Alternative Spirituality: reincarnation;²³ spiritual evolution and the law of karma;²⁴ millennialism;²⁵ persisting countercultural traits that may even lead to conspiracism (or “conspirativity”);²⁶ the psychologisation of spirituality and spiritualisation of psychology;²⁷ Buddhism-inspired ethics of compassion and love;²⁸ new forms of institutions;²⁹ and others.

Of course, many of these traits originated in Western Esoteric traditions. The relationship between Western Esotericism and Alternative Spirituality was described very early by James Lewis and Gordon Melton³⁰ and further explored by Wouter Hanegraaff³¹ and others. In this article, I will emphasise that while scholars have interpreted *Tomb Raider* (as well as *Indiana Jones*) as an example of the influence of Western Esotericism on popular culture, we can equally argue that the transmedia universe is closely related to Alternative Spirituality and shows some of its core characteristics. These two claims do not contradict each other – after all, Alternative Spirituality is the exoteric daughter of Western Esotericism and still shares many traits with it. And while the influence of Western Esotericism is noticeable in the whole *Tomb Raider* universe, its closeness to Alternative Spirituality intensified between 2013 and 2018 in “The Survivor Trilogy”.³²

22 Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life*, 51, 54, 136.

23 Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol. II, 12.

24 Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 277-290.

25 Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 331-356.

26 Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal, “Conspirativity Reconsidered: How Surprising and How New is the Confluence of Spirituality and Conspiracy Theory?,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (2015): 367-382, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2015.1081339>; David G. Robertson, Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal, “Introducing the Field: Conspiracy Theory in, about, and as Religion,” in *Handbook of Conspiracy Theory and Contemporary Religion*, ed. Asbjørn Dyrendal, David G. Robertson and Egil Asprem (Brill, 2018), 1-18.

27 Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 224-229.

28 Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life*, 35.

29 Jan Kapusta and Zuzana M. Kostiřová, „From the Trees to the Wood: Alternative Spirituality as an Emergent ‘Official Religion’?“, *Journal of Religion in Europe* 13, no. 3-4 (2020): 187-213, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18748929-20211525>.

30 James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton, “Introduction,” in *Perspectives on the New Age*, ed. James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton (State University of New York Press, 1992), ix-xxi.

31 Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 365-410.

32 *Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2013; *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix 2015; *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe 2018.

The Sources and the Method

The official *Tomb Raider* (TR) material can be separated into five main groups.

- The first is the main game series, which comprises twelve independent TPS (Third Person Shooter) games and their respective extra content.
- The second is the *Lara Croft* RPG (Role-Playing Game) series created in the early 2010s, which allows the possibility of multiplayer access.
- The third encompasses movies; there are two Hollywood blockbusters starring Angelina Jolie that were shot in the early 2000s and one 2018 movie starring Alicia Vikander. In addition, a new cartoon TV series has recently been released online; however, at the time of the creation of this article, this content was still unavailable.
- The fourth group consists of handheld TR games developed for the Game Boy console in 2000–2002 and the newer mobile games for smartphones. The mobile games share some important traits with the main game series, but they tend to be very simplified and focused almost exclusively on game mechanics at the expense of the backstory. For this reason, I consider them less important for the analysis of the spiritual content of the TR universe.
- Finally, the fifth group comprises the many TR novels and comic books. While I have studied this material as well, the bulk of the analysis is focused on the primary games and the movies. I have played eight of the main games in their entirety (*Chronicles*, *Angel of Darkness*, *Legend*, *Anniversary*, *Underworld*, *Tomb Raider* 2013, *Rise of the Tomb Raider* and *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*) and seen all the movies. The rest of the primary game material has been studied with the help of available walkthroughs/playthroughs and cutscene recordings.³³

33 “Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light – All Cutscenes (Single Player) HD”, YouTube, retrieved January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7eXDFseINCw>; “Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light Overview and Walkthrough” [full walkthrough portal online], Stella’s Tomb Raider Site, retrieved January 2015, <http://tombraders.net/stella/guardian.html>; “Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light”, Tomb Raider Wiki, retrieved January 2015, http://www.tomb-raider.wikia.com/wiki/Lara_Croft_and_the_Guardian_of_Light; “Lara Croft and the Temple of Osiris – All Cutscenes”, YouTube, retrieved January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjyFmCV3oXM>; “Lara Croft and the Temple of Osiris” [full walkthrough portal online], Stella’s Tomb Raider Site, retrieved January 2015, <http://tombraders.net/stella/temple.html>; “Tomb Raider (1996) Overview and Walkthrough” [full walkthrough portal online], Stella’s Tomb Raider Site, retrieved January 2015, <http://tombraders.net/stella/tomb1.html>;

The method I used is essentially traditional hermeneutics and discursive analysis. I adhere to Hans Georg Gadamer's philosophy and method of hermeneutics, and I use it as a fundamental way to understand and interpret texts (including, e.g. movies, games, and other sources).³⁴ Subsequently, I apply Kocku von Stuckrad's approach, in which discursive analysis does not stand alone but is used as a second-order analysis built on rigorous and detailed hermeneutics of the sources.³⁵ In this sense, the games were treated primarily (but not exclusively) as "texts" or stories (or screenplays to an interactive drama). Since Lara's adventures (as opposed to, e.g. non-linear strategy games) feature strictly linear storytelling, there was virtually no problem with this approach.³⁶ The graphic content was also taken into consideration. Conversely, I focused neither on the game mechanics nor on the social implications of the games: my goal was simply to identify the core religious/spiritual motifs of the games and put them into the context of Western Esotericism and Alternative Spirituality. I mainly focused on the phenomenon of supernatural artifacts and the idea that myths are true, which quickly revealed themselves to be the core of the games. However, other themes also emerged during the research, some of which (along with an overview of the chief motifs) can be found in the following table 1.

"Tomb Raider 1 – All Cutscenes HD (1-12)", YouTube, retrieved January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHJuFhcRICE>; "Tomb Raider 2 Overview and Walkthrough" [full walkthrough portal online], Stella's Tomb Raider Site, retrieved January 2015, <http://tombraiders.net/stella/tomb2.html>; "Tomb Raider 3 Overview and Walkthrough" [full walkthrough portal online], Stella's Tomb Raider Site, retrieved January 2015, <http://tombraiders.net/stella/tomb3.html>; "Tomb Raider II", Tomb Raider Wiki, retrieved January 2015, http://www.tomb-raider.wikia.com/wiki/Tomb_Raider_II; "Tomb Raider III: Adventures of Lara Croft", Tomb Raider Wiki, retrieved January 2015, http://www.tomb-raider.wikia.com/wiki/Tomb_Raider_III; "Tomb Raider Story All Cutscenes Movie", YouTube, retrieved January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSkTAbbXKfc>; "Tomb Raider: Last Revelation", Tomb Raider Wiki, retrieved January 2015, http://www.tomb-raider.wikia.com/wiki/Tomb_Raider:_The_Last_Revelation; "Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation Overview and Walkthrough" [full walkthrough portal online], Stella's Tomb Raider Site, retrieved January 2015, <http://tombraiders.net/stella/tomb4.html>.

34 See Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Continuum, 2004), 267-305, and passim; see also Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, "Hermeneutics," in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (Routledge, 2014), 275-284.

35 Kocku von Stuckrad, *Scientification of Religion: An Historical Study of Discursive Change, 1800-2000* (De Gruyter, 2014), 15-19; see also Kocku von Stuckrad, "Reflections on the Limits of Reflection: An Invitation to the Discursive Study of Religion," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22 (2010): 156-169, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006810X512347>.

36 Rachel Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality* (Routledge, 2012), 27-33.

	Artifacts	Myths are true	Ancient culture	Secret society	Lara's past	Some other notable motifs
TR I / Anniversary	The Scion	Atlantis	Atlantis			Correspondences
TR II	Dagger of Xian, the Seraph	Myth of the Dagger		Fiamma Nera		Tibet
TR III	The meteorite artifacts		Antarctica (Hyperborea?)			Aliens, Area 51
Last Revelation	Iris	Egyptian mythology			von Croy	Correspondences
Chronicles	Philosopher's Stone, Spear of Destiny, Iris	Spear of Destiny myth?			(memories)	
Angel of Darkness	The Obscura Paintings, The Sanglyph, Periapt Shard	Nephilim	Nephilim?	Lux Veritatis, the Cabal	von Croy	Esotericism
Legend	Excalibur	Kings of the Round Table	Creators of the sword		the Crofts, Amanda	Correspondences, Avalon
Underworld	Thor's gloves, belt, hammer	Norse mythology	Builders of the ruins (Atlantis?)		the Crofts, Amanda	Correspondences, doppelganger
TR 2013		Yamatai		Trinity	lord Croft, Roth	Weather control
Rise	Divine Source	Kitezh, eternal life		Trinity	lord Croft, Anna	anti-Christian
Shadow	Dagger, Box	Paititi, apocalypse		Trinity	lord Croft	Millennialism
Guardian of Light	The Mirror of Smoke	Aztec mythology				
Temple of Osiris	Osiris' Staff, body parts	Egyptian mythology				Gods fed by belief
Lara Croft: Tomb Raider movie	The Triangle of Light		Creators of the Triangle	The Illuminati	lord Croft, Alex	Buddhism
Cradle of Life movie	Pandora's Box, the orb	Pandora's box			Terry	Native African tribe guarding the box
Tomb Raider 2018 movie	Yamatai			Trinity	lord Croft	

Table 1: Overview
Source: Author's analysis

Supernatural Artefacts and the Truth Behind the Myth

There are two predominant core motifs that are present practically in every game: (a) the concept of supernatural artefacts that are usually endowed with incredible power and (b) the idea that myths are true. Starting with the first of the two, the phenomenon of supernatural artefacts is crucially important not only to Tomb Raider but also to the popular image of archaeology.³⁷ In Tomb Raider's case, the artefacts are usually purely fictitious – the noteworthy exceptions being the Philosopher's Stone and the Spear of Destiny in *Chronicles*,³⁸ Excalibur in *Legend*,³⁹ and Mjolnir in *Underworld*.⁴⁰ In the *Guardian of Light* game (the Mirror of Smoke)⁴¹ and the *Cradle of Life* movie (Pandora's Box),⁴² the artefacts bear the name of real mythological objects, but the motif is reworked to such a degree that it barely resembles the original. However, regardless of the "real" or entirely fictitious nature of the artefacts, the search for them is the strongest motif in the series.

The context in which the central artefact is placed differs slightly throughout the universe. Sometimes, Lara strives to find it in order to use it (*Legend*, *Underworld*, *The Temple of Osiris*),⁴³ while at other times, she just wants to collect it (*Chronicles*)⁴⁴ or get it before her enemies do (*TR II* and both of the Angelina Jolie movies);⁴⁵ she might even be forced to destroy it (*TR I/Anniversary*, *Rise*).⁴⁶ In some cases, the game actually starts with Lara (or someone else) getting the artifact and causing some damage with it; the rest of the game is then dedicated to repairing the damage (*Last Revelation*, *Guardian of Light*, *Shadow*).⁴⁷ It is important to note that the

37 Holtorf, *Archaeology is a Brand!*, 84-90.

38 *Tomb Raider: Chronicles*, Eidos Interactive, 2000.

39 *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive, 2006.

40 *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, Eidos Interactive, 2008.

41 *Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light*, Square Enix Europe, 2010.

42 Jan De Bont, *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life*, Mutual Film Company, BBC Films, Tele München Gruppe, Toho-Towa, Lawrence Gordon Productions, and Eidos Interactive, 2003, 117 min.

43 *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive, 2006; *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, Eidos Interactive 2008; *Lara Croft and the Temple of Osiris*, Square Enix Europe, 2014.

44 *Tomb Raider: Chronicles*, Eidos Interactive, 2000.

45 *Tomb Raider II*, Eidos Interactive, 1997; Simon West, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, Paramount Pictures, Mutual Film Company, Lawrence Gordon Productions, Eidos Interactive, Tele München Group, BBC Films, Marubeni, and Toho-Towa, 2001, 100 min; De Bont, *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life*, 2003.

46 *Tomb Raider*, Eidos Interactive, 1996; *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*, Eidos Interactive, 2007; *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015.

47 *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation*, Eidos Interactive 1999; *Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light*, Square Enix Europe, 2010; *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2018.

artefact is almost always actively used (or destroyed): this moment usually marks the game's climax. The only notable exception is the *Chronicles* game, where the artefacts are simply collected, and only the Spear of Destiny is actually used.⁴⁸ Aside from the main artefact, Lara may also collect "relics" or "rewards", a game mechanic that is important and present not only in the main games but also in the games for portable devices (e.g. *Relic Run*, *Tomb Raider Reloaded*).⁴⁹ However, these minor relics are almost never an object of special interest in the game and have no supernatural powers. They may provide an insight into the backstory, however. In *The Survivor* trilogy,⁵⁰ the collected notes and objects greatly enhance the player's understanding of both the plot and the fictional world in which the game is situated.

Only one game lacks the artefact completely: *Tomb Raider* 2013.⁵¹ True, the body of the evil undead queen Himiko may be considered a "supernatural artefact" as well, but I believe that it makes much greater sense to classify Himiko as "undead". Moreover, the absence of a supernatural artefact in *TR* 2013 is fully in line with the plot of the game. *TR* 2013 is designed to be a prequel to the whole *Tomb Raider* universe, showing how the young Lara Croft became a fearless adventurer and artefact hunter. The game introduces her as a young university-trained archaeologist with a deeply sceptical mindset; during the game, we see her slowly opening up to the possibility of the existence of the supernatural. This shift from "non-believer" to "believer" culminates at the very end of the game, right before the final level, when Lara herself converts another sceptic in the remaining crew, Reyes the engineer, that there are supernatural forces at play. Finally, Reyes takes a leap of faith and decides to trust Lara that unless they get rid of the undead antagonist, they will never be able to leave the cursed island. While Reyes represents the rational, practical Western mind, the character of Jonah the cook embodies the exact opposite. The New Zealander trusts his instincts and intuition, which both tell him that there is some kind of supernatural evil hidden on the island of Yamatai. The importance of this highly positive character is illustrated by the fact that Jonah is the only *TR* 2013 character that appears in *TR* 2013's two sequels (*Rise*⁵² and *Shadow*⁵³), once again in a very positive role.

48 *Tomb Raider: Chronicles*, Eidos Interactive, 2000.

49 *Relic Run*, Square Enix Europe, 2015; *Tomb Raider Reloaded*, CDE Entertainment, 2023.

50 *Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2013; *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015; *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2018.

51 *Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2013.

52 *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015.

53 *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2018.

However, by far the most important incarnation of the “believers” is Lara’s father, Lord Richard Croft. With this character, we get to the second most important trait of the Tomb Raider universe: the idea of the truth behind the myth. Throughout the games (especially *Legend*, *Anniversary*, *Underworld*, *TR 2013* and *Rise*),⁵⁴ Lord Croft acts as the symbolic representative of this fully esoteric/spiritual idea that “myths are true”. *Tomb Raider 2013*’s ending consists of Lara saying that her father was right and both she and the academia were wrong about everything: “I’ve been so blind, so naïve. For years I resented my father. Doubted him like the rest. He was right about so much! I just wish I could tell him that now. There are so many mysteries I once dismissed as mere stories. But the line between our myths and truth is fragile and blurry.”⁵⁵

In this sense, many of the games (and the movies and comic books) emphasise the contrast between Lord Croft and his conservative scholarly opponents. In the opening scene of *Anniversary*, we get to listen to a fraction from Lord Croft’s diaries in which he states that no one believes in the existence of Atlantis and Lara is the only person who might be open-minded enough to take it seriously. In *Legend*, we have the opportunity to further understand the position of Lord Croft among the scholarly community – the search for his wife (who vanished to Avalon through a supernatural portal) destroyed his reputation.⁵⁶ Again, in *Rise*, the game’s intro features bits and pieces of Lord Croft’s writings and diaries referring to the existence of the immortal soul, the afterlife, the quest for immortality, and, most importantly, “the truth behind the myth”.⁵⁷ This is not scientific truth, however, but perennism. According to Lord Croft, there is “something more profound”, something that lies at the heart of many myths and stories”, “the key to unlocking everlasting life”.⁵⁸ In this sense, Lord Croft is both a traditional archaeologist and a singularly open mind that can go beyond the limits imposed upon humanity by the conservative academia. Yes, sometimes the truth behind the myth is grisly and depressing (such as the image of “Avalon” in *Underworld*).⁵⁹ However, the supernatural is time and again proven to be real and tangible.

This is perhaps a good opportunity to note that the actual fate of Lord Richard Croft (and Lara’s parents in general) is not “canonically” estab-

54 *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive, 2006; *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*, Eidos Interactive, 2007; *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, Eidos Interactive, 2008; *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015.

55 *Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2013, final cutscene of the game.

56 *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive, 2006.

57 *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015, game intro.

58 *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015, game intro.

59 *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, Eidos Interactive, 2008.

lished. Different movies, games, comic books and other content offer different explanations for what happened to them. Usually they are already dead (the only exception is the last *Tomb Raider* movie,⁶⁰ where Lord Croft dies in front of the audience), but the reasons for their deaths and the culprits responsible for it differ each time. This is significant. The inconsistency of the main characters' fates and all the mutually exclusive versions of Lara's life story stand in sharp contrast with the repeated and consistent insistence that myths have a core of truth and that our world has a supernatural dimension. True myths and supernatural artefacts, as opposed to relationships and details of personal life stories, are the actual canonical core of the *Tomb Raider* transmedia universe. Lara's biography can be altered – but never the existence of supernatural phenomena.

Just as in the case of supernatural artefacts, Lara's acceptance that myths have a core of truth may play the role of either an important plot twist or even the climax of the game. In the course of the two game series, we get to encounter a great many myths that are revealed to be true: the designers generally took inspiration from real-world mythology or history, albeit mostly highly altered (e.g. *Guardian of Light*: the game is supposed to be inspired by real-world Aztec mythology, but the actual result is almost entirely fantastical).⁶¹ In cases where less exotic and more widely-known settings have been chosen, the designers usually tried to conserve the structure of the myths and use their inner logic to create a "truth" behind them. Such is the case of both of the Egyptian games with the evil Set as the antagonist (*Last Revelation* and *Temple of Osiris*);⁶² the same approach can also be found in *Legend*, where the designers kept the outlines of the notorious Round Table mythology but played around at their leisure with the less known Tiwanaku material, inventing entirely fictional queens and myths.⁶³ The *Angel of Darkness* is a special case since, unlike the other games, it was directly and consciously inspired by Western Esoteric traditions, meaning that esoteric motifs abound there (secret societies, alchemy, weird experiments, mutants). The central motif of "myths are true" is connected with the existence of the Nephilim.⁶⁴

60 Roar Uthaug, *Tomb Raider*, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures, Warner Bros. Pictures, GK Films and Square Enix, 2018, 117 min.

61 *Lara Croft and the Guardian of Light*, Square Enix Europe, 2010.

62 *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation*, Eidos Interactive, 1999; *Lara Croft and the Temple of Osiris*, Square Enix Europe, 2014.

63 *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive, 2006, Tiwanaku level.

64 *Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness*, Eidos Interactive, 2003.

Ancient Cultures, Secret Societies: Perennism, Millennialism, and Energy

Apart from the two main themes, other esoteric/spiritual motifs are also frequent in the *Tomb Raider* universe. One of the most important traits is the phenomenon of an ancient, highly evolved Atlantis-like culture, sometimes even directly identified as Atlantis. It is important to note that the motif has been present in the *Tomb Raider* universe ever since the first game; the original *Tomb Raider*'s plot⁶⁵ revolves around Atlantean rulers, and one of the levels is even set in the ruins of Atlantis. In general, Atlantis (or its equivalent) is seen as a preexistent and forgotten ancient mother culture of the civilisations of the ancient world, one based on supernatural power/advanced technology, which has left behind a legacy of powerful hidden artefacts and monumental ruins (see, e.g. the phenomenon of *eitr* in *Underworld*⁶⁶). This interpretation is in full accordance with the theosophical and post-theosophical interpretation of Atlantis, sometimes including the myth of its destruction through the abuse of power and/or supernatural technology.⁶⁷ While *TR I/Anniversary* openly identifies the ancient culture as Atlantis,⁶⁸ in *Legend* and *Underworld*, it remains unnamed.⁶⁹ However, the similarities of *Underworld*'s Andaman Sea ruins to *Anniversary*'s visual rendering of the interiors of the Great Pyramid of Atlantis are striking, and the presence of the evil Atlantean queen Jacqueline Natla is also suggestive. The ancient Antarctic culture of *TR III* or the forgotten creators of the Triangle of Light in the *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* movie are less clearly archetypal in this context.⁷⁰ While the *TR III* motif is likely inspired by Hyperborea, the movie's ancient culture is barely characterised at all.⁷¹

In any case, it is important to note that the designers consciously emphasise the resemblance between mythical "Atlantean" locations and the real historical sites that appear throughout the games. The designers en-

65 *Tomb Raider*, Eidos Interactive, 1996; see also *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*, Eidos Interactive, 2007.

66 *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, Eidos Interactive, 2008.

67 Zuzana Marie Kostířová, „Singularita versus Atlantida: Nástin současných mileniálních techno-utopických a techno-dystopických proudů,“ in *Apokalypsa nebo transformace? Mileniální koncepte v minulosti i současnosti*, ed. Zdeněk Vojtíšek (Dingir, 2014), 79-96.

68 *Tomb Raider*, Eidos Interactive, 1996; *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*, Eidos Interactive, 2007.

69 *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive, 2006; *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, Eidos Interactive, 2008.

70 West, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, 2001.

71 *Tomb Raider III*, Eidos Interactive, 1998.

forced this similarity (most apparent in *Underworld*⁷²) by massively disregarding the topography and architectural/artistic style of the archaeological sites they took as inspiration. For this reason, the depiction of actual ancient cultures in *Tomb Raider* ranges from reasonably acceptable (e.g. some parts of the Roman ruins in *Anniversary*⁷³ and/or the exteriors of the Maya jungle city in *Underworld*⁷⁴) to wholly imaginary (e.g. Ghana, Tíwanaku, and Paraíso in *Legend*⁷⁵). This freehand approach opens up a great deal of space for creating visual similarities where the plot needs them, likening old Thai ruins to fictional monuments of ancient Scandinavia and linking Nepal Buddhist temples to the pre-Colombian civilisations of the Andes. The result is the overwhelming impression that everything is parallel to everything and that a common truth is hidden behind world history and mythologies. Naturally, this is in full accordance with some of the core ideas of Western Esotericism and Alternative Spirituality (such as perennism, correspondences, and concordances).

Another crucial motif throughout the *TR* transmedia universe is the theme of secret societies. These appear in *TR II*, *Angel of Darkness*, *Rise*, *Shadow*, in the first and third movies and some of the comic books.⁷⁶ In *TR II*, it is the Fiamma Nera, an imaginary cult of the Xian Dagger;⁷⁷ in the *Angel of Darkness*, we even get two imaginary secret societies, the Cabal of the Black Alchemist (whose goal is to revive the Nephilim) and Lux Veritatis (the monastic order that strives to prevent this).⁷⁸ In contrast to these three entirely fictitious societies, the *Lara Croft Tomb Raider* movie features the notorious Illuminati as chief antagonists.⁷⁹ Finally, *Rise of the Tomb Raider* introduces Trinity, another important secret society that Lara fights against.⁸⁰ As the name suggests, Trinity is a Christian organisation (even though in *Shadow*, we also meet its local South American branch that worships the Maya god Kukulcan). Although the phenomenon of secret societies has been tied to Western Esotericism for centuries, in *Tomb Raider* the image is linked to contemporary conspira-

72 *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, Eidos Interactive, 2008.

73 *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*, Eidos Interactive, 2007.

74 *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, Eidos Interactive, 2008.

75 *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive, 2006.

76 *Tomb Raider II*, Eidos Interactive, 1997; *Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness*, Eidos Interactive, 2003; *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015; *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2018; West, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, 2001, 100; Uthaug, *Tomb Raider*, 2018; *Tomb Raider: Archiv*, vol. 1. Comics Centrum, 2017.

77 *Tomb Raider II*, Eidos Interactive, 1997.

78 *Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness*, Eidos Interactive, 2003.

79 West, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, 2001.

80 *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015.

cism and its idea of evil elites that secretly exercise power over the whole planet and must be stopped before it is too late.⁸¹ In *Rise*, Trinity is explicitly described as an “ancient violent sect that designs on controlling the future of humanity”.⁸² Interestingly enough, the need to fight against such evil secret societies is sometimes linked to specific millennial events that threaten to bring about some kind of end of the world. We see it in *TR I/Anniversary* with its concept of “the seventh age”,⁸³ in *Last Revelation* with the “millennial constellation”,⁸⁴ and in *Shadow* with the cataclysm Lara started when she took the artefact at the beginning of the game.⁸⁵ The link between conspiracism and millennialism is well known,⁸⁶ and the way Tomb Raider represents it suggests it is set in the context of contemporary Alternative Spirituality (or “conspirituality”) rather than in Western Esotericism.⁸⁷

Another motif with a clear spiritual dimension is what Wouter Hanegraaff⁸⁸ calls the “spiritualisation of psychology and psychologisation of the spiritual”. This type of content is most frequently expressed through the story of Lara’s family (most importantly *Legend*, *Underworld*, *Rise*, and all three movies⁸⁹) and/or mentors and old friends (most notably, *Last Revelation*, *Legend*, *Underworld*, and *TR 2013*;⁹⁰ see also *Rise* and *Shadow*⁹¹). *Legend* primarily revolves around the mysterious disappearance of Lara’s mother, Lady Amelia Croft (related to the narrative about the supposed tragic end of Lara’s best friend Amanda);⁹² *Underworld* explains what happened to her more comprehensively and adds details about

81 See, e.g. Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (University of California Press, 2003), 1-14.

82 *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015, game intro.

83 *Tomb Raider*, Eidos Interactive, 1996; *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*, Eidos Interactive, 2007.

84 *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation*, Eidos Interactive, 1999.

85 *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2018.

86 Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 15-38.

87 Asprem and Dyrendal, “Conspirituality Reconsidered,” 367-382; Robertson, Asprem and Dyrendal, “Introducing the Field,” 1-15.

88 Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, 224-229.

89 *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive, 2006; *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, Eidos Interactive, 2008; *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015; West, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, 2001; De Bont, *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life*, 2003; Uthaug, *Tomb Raider*, 2018.

90 *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation*, Eidos Interactive, 1999; *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive 2006; *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, Eidos Interactive, 2008; *Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2013.

91 *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015; *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2018.

92 *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive, 2006.

Lord Richard Croft's death.⁹³ *Underworld* also retakes and creatively uses the *TR II Anniversary* motif of Doppelganger (Lara's evil mirror image created by Jacqueline Natla) and uses it as a powerful antagonist;⁹⁴ a similar theme of selfishness and inner evil appears in *Shadow*.⁹⁵ Although the motifs differ, and each one represents a new take on Lara's life story, all invite Lara to leave her past behind and free herself from the snares of her evil tendencies. The games thus bring up a host of important pop-psychological motifs: the Jungian Shadow, old family-related psychological wounds, and the pursuit of closure and inner peace. In *Beneath the Ashes* and *Lara Croft's Shadow*, the downloadable extra levels of *Underworld*, the Doppelganger is finally freed from the power Jacqueline Natla holds over her and turns against her creator, leaving Natla to die in the poisonous *etir*. The game thus symbolically frees Lara not only from her obsession with the death of her parents but also from her own dark and dangerous side.

Further esoteric/spiritual motifs that appear throughout the *TR* universe consist of classical esoteric disciplines (astrology, alchemy, most notably in *Angel of Darkness*⁹⁶), extraterrestrials (*TR III*),⁹⁷ the spiritual implications of evolution (*TR III*),⁹⁸ and shamanic powers (Himiko's weather control in *TR 2013*).⁹⁹ Naturally, the games also swarm with images of supernatural monsters and the undead, sometimes related to the games' spiritual dimension. For example, "the deathless ones" in *Rise* are the undead guardians of the city of Kitezh who protect the Divine Source that keeps them alive.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, the undead creatures in *Underworld* are dead bodies animated by *etir*, the strange substance that serves as a source of supernatural energy.¹⁰¹ The idea of a magical substance that can either create the undead or help humans to defy death is closely linked to Alternative Spirituality's core concept of energy.¹⁰² While the undead themselves can hardly be considered a spiritual motif, the logic behind their creation certainly is one.

93 *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, Eidos Interactive, 2008.

94 *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, Eidos Interactive, 2008.

95 *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2018.

96 *Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness*, Eidos Interactive, 2003.

97 *Tomb Raider III*, Eidos Interactive, 1998.

98 *Tomb Raider III*, Eidos Interactive, 1998.

99 *Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2013.

100 *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015.

101 *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, Eidos Interactive, 2008.

102 Albanese, "The Subtle Energies of Spirit," 305-325; see also Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 14-16; Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol. I: 73-74, 80, Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol. II: 12.

From Organised Religions to Spirituality

Until *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, traditional religions only appeared sporadically in the *TR* universe. While there are few or no instances of Islam or Judaism, there are several motifs of Eastern spirituality. For instance, in *TR II*, Tibetan monks try to prevent the power-hungry emperor from using the Dagger of Xian;¹⁰³ thousands of years later, the same monks help Lara against the evil Fiamma Nera. In the movie *Lara Croft Tomb Raider*, Lara visits a Buddhist temple in Cambodia: the monks miraculously heal her wounds with strange herbs and give her spiritual counsel.¹⁰⁴ The image of both Tibet and Buddhism accentuates ancient magic and wisdom together with a general impression of deep peace and spiritual accomplishment (implied, for example, in the movie by the reverence with which Lara treats the abbot). Other than that, Lara frequently visits the East throughout the games and comic books (e.g. Nepal in *Legend* and Thailand in *Underworld*). The positive image of Eastern spirituality is in general accordance with its appreciation by Western Esotericism and Alternative Spirituality.¹⁰⁵

Initially, the image of Christianity was equally as positive. Until *Rise*, Christianity only appeared sporadically in *Tomb Raider*. In *Chronicles*, we meet the character of the brave Irish priest, Father Patrick, and we get to steal the Spear of Destiny that plays the role of one of the key artefacts.¹⁰⁶ In *Angel of Darkness*, Lara learns about the implicitly Christian order of *Lux Veritatis*.¹⁰⁷ There are also some Christian motifs in the Cornwall level of *Legend* (e.g. the collectable relics that look like Christian crosses).¹⁰⁸ All these mentions of Christianity were either neutral or positive; until 2015, there was no open hostility.

The situation changes in *Rise of the Tomb Raider*.¹⁰⁹ The game tells the story of a “Deathless Prophet” (obviously inspired by the story of Jesus Christ) hunted for almost two millennia by the evil Trinity. The texts scattered throughout the game suggest that the Trinity dates back to the early Church, and acts as a secret army for “someone in the Vatican”. The Deathless Prophet appears in Syria, where he preaches, miraculously heals the ill, and attracts many faithful. The situation “enrages the elite” and the

103 *Tomb Raider II*, Eidos Interactive, 1997.

104 West, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, 2001.

105 Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, Vol. I., 87-118; Albanese, *A Republic of Mind And Spirit*, 330-393.

106 *Tomb Raider: Chronicles*, Eidos Interactive, 2000.

107 *Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness*, Eidos Interactive, 2003.

108 *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive, 2006.

109 *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015.

“Church in the West,” which finally notices the Prophet and sends Trinity soldiers to hunt him down and kill him. The Prophet and his people flee from Syria and march to the North, finally settling in Russia and founding the mysterious city of Kitezh. Ever since then, the Prophet’s Remnants (led by Jacob, who later turns out to be the Deathless Prophet himself) protect the Divine Source, the secret of eternal life, which is supposed to hold a fraction of God’s soul (but is in fact a rare rock imbued with a strange energy depicted as rays of blue light or blue flames). The game ends with Lara killing the antagonists and destroying the Source, after which Jacob dies peacefully and the Remnants are finally free.

The image of Christianity is noteworthy here. The main antagonist, Trinity commander Konstantin, is very devout to the point of fanaticism: he prays often and has stigmata on his hands, which, albeit false (made by his sister Ana in his sleep to make him believe he is God’s chosen one), in one case miraculously bleed. The motif of religious fanaticism was already present in *TR 2013*,¹¹⁰ which depicts Solarii, a violent group of sun worshippers that formed on the isolated island of Yamatai. Lara slowly learns that the reason behind the mad behaviour of the Solarii is the horrifying initiation rituals the men must go through. The system was devised by their leader, Father Matthias, who discovered that the undead queen Himiko does not let anyone leave the island; his blindly obedient followers help him in his struggle to revive Himiko and thus lift the curse. While the game obviously works with the strongly stereotyped image of a violent “cult”, the backstory still provides a believable ground for the Solarii’s behaviour. In *Rise*, however, the Trinity’s fanaticism is not really explained; it is just stated. Furthermore, its only possible source is their zealous Christianity and the desire to eradicate heresy.¹¹¹

Given that the Deathless Prophet is but a thinly disguised image of Jesus Christ, the resulting image of Christianity is a paradoxical one. The positive characters (Jacob and the Remnants) live peacefully in an idyllic valley sprinkled with old ruins and see God in the wind, the woods, and other natural phenomena (a pantheistic streak closer to Alternative Spirituality than to Christianity). The original miracle of Jacob’s resurrection (which repeats over and over for two millennia) is brought about not by God’s miracle but by a supernatural energy radiating from a strange material object. Regardless of the Remnants’ belief that the Source contains a piece of God’s soul, Jacob explicitly states that “the Divine Source is not divine”. Both Jacob and the Remnants exhibit very little Christian

110 *Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2013.

111 *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015.

devotion; we only see it when Jacob heals the mortally wounded Jonah and paraphrases the psalms while doing so.

Nevertheless, the game implies that Jacob's healing abilities are not the miraculous working of God but the result of his contact with the supernatural Divine Source. Conversely, the image of strong Christian faith embodied in the character of Konstantin (and in other Trinity characters we learn about from the in-game documents) is connected with fanaticism, violence, intolerance, and the desire for power. All these traits are linked to the context of the secret, hierarchical, strictly organised, paramilitary Trinity. What's more, even the urban character of a culture is presented as somewhat problematic. The Remnants see the builders of Kitezh as those who forgot that God is in nature and started to build cities and organisations in the likeness of those they knew from the Roman Empire. The player meets many residues of the Deathless' fanaticism and learns from Jacob how power-hungry they were. I propose this is, in fact, Alternative Spirituality's contrast between idyllic wilderness and decadent urban civilisation, which is one of the important characteristics of spiritual holism.¹¹²

In sum, both the close association of the supernatural with (spiritual) energy¹¹³ and the highly negative image of organized urban Christianity strongly suggest an increasing influence of Alternative Spirituality on the *TR* transmedia universe.¹¹⁴ It is, however, noteworthy that this dichotomy is not exclusively directed against Christianity per se (after all, the Remnants, at least in the first centuries after the appearance of the Prophet, are somewhat "Christian" too); instead, it is directed against "religion" understood as an organised, authoritative, hierarchical system. The whole Survivor Trilogy revolves around organized religion, "cult", and fanaticism – we see these characteristics embodied as the Solarii in *TR* 2013, Trinity in *Rise*, and the cult of Kukulcan in *Shadow*.¹¹⁵ Finally, there is the added dimension of the patriarchy. Even though there are some significant female antagonists (Himiko in *TR* 2013¹¹⁶ and Ana in *Rise*¹¹⁷), both the Solarii and the members of the Trinity (including the Kukulcan

112 See e.g. Zuzana Marie Kostířová, 2012: *Mayský kalendář, transformace vědomí, dva světy a rovnováha* (Malvern, 2011), 133-217; Kapusta and Kostířová, "From the Trees to the Wood," 187-213; for a more complex analysis of Christian motifs in *Rise of the Tomb Raider* see also Zuzana Marie Kostířová, "Lara Croft jako fenomén okultury," *Salve* no. 3 (2024): 15-26.

113 Albanese, "Subtle Energies of Spirit," 305-325; Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 14-16.

114 Kostířová, "Religion, Spirituality, Worldviews, and Discourses," 81-97

115 *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2018.

116 *Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2013.

117 *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015.

cult) are exclusively male. This naturally makes a lot of sense since the gender aspect is closely tied to the inner logic of the entire *Tomb Raider* transmedia universe, which is built upon the motif of one young woman fighting against a host of violent men. The Survivor Trilogy only needed to add the background dimension of religious fanaticism to the male hostiles. As I mentioned in the introduction, scholars have been discussing the gender aspect of the works ever since the late 1990s. However, its connection to the reinterpreted understanding of “religion” (cast as violent, fanatical, patriarchal, and devoid of freedom) is entirely new to *Tomb Raider*. I would like to stress that even though Western Esotericism can undoubtedly be highly critical of Christianity, this specific discursive reframing is not explicable by comparison with Western Esotericism only. I suggest it stems from the discursive competition between Alternative Spirituality and Christianity, clearly favouring the former.

Lara Croft as a Spiritual Seeker

To complete this survey of religious motifs in the *Tomb Raider* transmedia universe, I would like to address one final issue: the interpretation of Lara Croft as a spiritual seeker. While she is usually characterised as an “archaeologist”, there is an explicit and conscious distance between her and academic archaeology. Many critics point out the erroneous image of archaeology as it appears in *Indiana Jones*, *Tomb Raider*, the *Mummy* movies, and other pop-cultural products. It is, however, apparent that the creators of *Tomb Raider* are clearly conscious of what real academic archaeology looks like.

First of all, Lara undeniably has archaeological training. We get to see a glimpse of her student years – first as a young girl in Cambodia with Werner von Croy in *Last Revelation*,¹¹⁸ second as a young archaeologist at the Paraíso site in *Legend*.¹¹⁹ Further on, in *TR 2013*, we meet young Lara as a part of an archaeological team sailing the Dragon Triangle and trying to find and excavate the fabled island of Yamatai. Although we do not actually get to see her doing archaeological work, it is strongly implied that she knows how to, and has actually done so many times.¹²⁰

Second, there is a marked presence of “real” archaeologists who are contrasted with Lara. The first and foremost representative of “real” archaeology is Lara’s father, Lord Richard Croft. There are constant reminders of his profession throughout the games, and in *Legend*,¹²¹ one of the

118 *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation*, Eidos Interactive, 1999.

119 *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive, 2006.

120 *Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2013.

121 *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive, 2006, Ghana level.

levels is set at a Ghana archaeological site that Lord Croft excavated himself (leaving both field notes and extensively catalogued materials). Another example of a “real” archaeologist is Werner von Croy, who is actually introduced as Lara’s mentor and teacher and plays the role of the chief antagonist in *Last Revelation*,¹²² similarly, both *Legend*¹²³ and *TR* 2013¹²⁴ portray an archaeological team Lara is part of. It can be said that academic archaeologists tend to be portrayed as weak, cowardly, and/or close-minded: the most notable example would be the leader of the Yamatai expedition James Whitman in *TR* 2013, a neurotic and cowardly man obsessed with his own career and public image.

Another noteworthy example is Lara’s assistant, Alistair Fletcher (*Legend, Underworld*),¹²⁵ a bookworm who is notoriously unable to finish his enormous PhD dissertation. Alistair is supposed to embody a typical academic, a bookish type with a strong sceptical streak who does not believe myths to be true. While he is not a negative character, he is still somewhat similar to Whitman in his weakness and cowardice: both men represent a striking contrast to Lara’s bravery and strength. Interestingly enough, Alistair ends up being killed by Lara’s Doppelgänger (or her “evil self”) in *Underworld*.¹²⁶ In general, all of the academics are portrayed in the traditional scholarly way with no adventurous traits whatsoever. They contrast strongly with Lara Croft, who, as one of the opening sentences in *TR I / Anniversary* famously states, “only plays for sport.”¹²⁷

To sum up: unlike Indiana Jones, Lara Croft’s actions and characteristics are not based on a misled popular image of archaeology. On the contrary, the game designers had a good idea of what a real archaeologist looks like – yet, they consciously portrayed Lara Croft very differently. Although she has a vast knowledge of history and linguistics, and had extensive archaeological training, she left the academic environment long ago. What is she instead? A traveller, an adventurer, and, as I hope to show, a spiritual seeker. This is eloquently summed up in the opening scene of *TR I*, when we meet Lara for the first time.¹²⁸ She sits on a couch in a hotel in Calcutta and reads a magazine: when she puts it down, we see that the front page features a photo of her overpowering a Big Foot. Unlike

122 *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation*, Eidos Interactive, 1999; see also *Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness*, Eidos Interactive, 2003, where von Croy mysteriously dies.

123 *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive, 2006, Paraíso level.

124 *Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2013, introductory chapter.

125 *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive, 2006, especially Cornwall level; *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, Eidos Interactive, 2008.

126 *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, Eidos Interactive, 2008, the fire cutscene.

127 *Tomb Raider*, Eidos Interactive, 1996, and *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*, Eidos Interactive, 2007, opening cutscenes.

128 *Tomb Raider*, Eidos Interactive, 1996, opening cutscene.

Indiana Jones, who is explicitly framed as an academic archaeologist and whom we repeatedly see teaching students, Lara Croft is never directly associated with the academic or university environment. She does no excavation, no uncovering of ancient architecture, ceramics or bones, no scribbling of field notes, no preservation of finds, no teaching, or publishing in academic journals. What is more, she completely lacks scholarly interest in the locations she visits, even previously undiscovered sites such as Vilcabamba, Yamatai, Kitezh, or Paititi (*TR I/Anniversary*¹²⁹, *TR 2013*,¹³⁰ *Rise*,¹³¹ and *Shadow*,¹³² respectively). We may even argue that sometimes she deliberately vandalises the sites. She reads inscriptions (e.g. in *Legend* or *Rise*)¹³³ but never makes a single note; she collects relics but only to showcase them in her manor as trophies or souvenirs (*Anniversary*).¹³⁴ Her house is full of books, but she never writes anything (except popular accounts of her adventures).¹³⁵ The contrast with actual archaeologists appearing throughout the *TR* universe is clear: Lara is not meant to be seen as an archaeologist.

But what *is* she then? For one, she is an adventuress. In his book *Archaeology is a Brand!*, Cornelius Holtorf¹³⁶ analyses the popular image of archaeology and distinguishes four main themes the discipline is usually associated with. There is the “A” theme (the archaeologist as an adventurer), the “D” theme (the archaeologist as a detective who deciphers cryptic texts and/or locates lost sites), the “R” theme (the archaeologist making sensational revelations) and the “C” theme (the archaeologists’ duty to protect and care for sites and finds). As we have seen, we can find all of them except for the “C” in the *Tomb Raider* games and movies. Lara certainly is a brave adventuress, the games do abound with different puzzles and mysteries, and there are more than enough spectacular revelations.

The “R” theme is of particular interest here. Holtorf insists the revelations always work in relation to the “A” and “D” themes and that an element of mystery is present in the popular concept of archaeology.¹³⁷ He

129 *Tomb Raider*, Eidos Interactive, 1996, and *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*, Eidos Interactive, 2007, Vilcabamba level.

130 *Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2013.

131 *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015.

132 *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2018.

133 *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive, 2006, Tiwanaku level; *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015.

134 *Tomb Raider: Anniversary*, Eidos Interactive, 2007, Croft manor.

135 In *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive, 2006, Croft manor, we can appreciate the magnitude of Lara’s library and Lara’s commentary “I’ve read all of these”.

136 Holtorf, *Archaeology is a Brand!*, 63-94.

137 Holtorf, *Archaeology is a Brand!*, 84-90.

cites a prime example of the “R” theme: Erich von Däniken and his popular books interpreting ancient mythology, monuments and artefacts as a result of the presence of extraterrestrials on Earth.¹³⁸ In the *Tomb Raider* universe, Lara keeps uncovering secret truths behind ordinary ruins and myths. Holtorf briefly mentions the connection of the “R” theme with esotericism but does not elaborate on the argument further. Later, he briefly mentions the dangerous side of archaeological revelations, which is the risk of disturbing the unknown and unpredictable forces hidden deep in the old ruins.¹³⁹ Again, all this is clearly present in the TR universe. Sometimes Lara mishandles an artefact or inadvertently unleashes evil forces (*Last Revelation*,¹⁴⁰ *Shadow*¹⁴¹), but more frequently, the culprit is a rival tomb raider or amateur adventurer of some kind.¹⁴²

Taking Holtorf’s analysis one step further and building on his brief mention of esotericism, we can say there is an “S” theme present in the popular image of archaeology: the theme of spirituality or the truth behind the myth. In the *Tomb Raider* universe, we have seen how reliable historical and archaeological information intertwines with spiritual concepts stemming from Western Esotericism and Alternative Spirituality. In this sense, Lara’s journeys have one crucial aspect of extreme importance: power. Lara looks for artefacts not to study them but to uncover their supernatural powers and use them (or stop her antagonists from doing so). Holtorf shows the binary opposition between the passive archaeologist and active hero in comparing the “A” theme and the “D” theme. However, there is the element of supernatural power at play, and academic knowledge is just a tool to get it. The truth Lara is looking for is not a theoretical understanding of mankind’s history. It is both supernatural and essentially practical. It is not only to be found; it is to be *used*.

In this sense, Lara Croft is not a scholar but a seeker. In *Rise*’s opening cutscene, Lord Croft explicitly uses the word “seekers of truth” to describe the pioneers and adventurers brave enough to venture beyond the ordinary and thus “define the future of mankind”.¹⁴³ And “seeking” is a profoundly spiritual concept. Building on the theories of Robert Wuthnow and Wade

138 See also Kostířová, 2012, 66-73.

139 Holtorf, *Archaeology is a Brand!*, 89.

140 *Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation*, Eidos Interactive, 1999.

141 In *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, Square Enix Europe, 2018, Lara unleashes an apocalypse by her desire to acquire ancient Mexican artefacts.

142 For example, in *Tomb Raider*, Eidos Interactive, 1996, evil Atlantean queen Natla aims to misuse the Scion to bring the Seventh Age; in *Tomb Raider: Legend*, Eidos Interactive, 2006, Lara’s friend Amanda manages to save herself from drowning by conjuring a demonic creature by means of an ancient pendant.

143 *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Microsoft Studios and Square Enix, 2015. opening cutscene.

Clark Roof, Steven Sutcliffe¹⁴⁴ has demonstrated that Alternative Spirituality enthusiasts understand their spirituality not as a fixed state but as a sort of a hero's journey towards self-development and fulfilment. Originally, the phenomenon of "seekers" has been critically reflected in academia in the famous concept of the "spiritual supermarket"; that is, the idea that one can deliberately pick and choose from any available spiritual content. From the perspective of traditional religions, this may seem superficial and irresponsible. However, we need to distinguish here between "dwellers" (who accept or are supposed to accept all their religion's doctrine and "dwell" in it) and "seekers," whose faith is a perpetual journey that is the destination in itself.¹⁴⁵ Lara's endless search for truth (as well as her endless search for closure) can be considered a powerful cultural expression of seeking.

Furthermore, the seeker is not limited to an inner journey. In fact, in many cases, the journey is physical as well as spiritual, featuring extensive travel or even something that can be fittingly described as a "pilgrimage".¹⁴⁶ Both ancient ruins and indigenous cultures feature prominently as the destinations of these travels – be they Egyptian pyramids, Indian ashrams, Tibetan Temples, Maya cities, South American ayahuasca ceremonies, etc. There is also an added material dimension to all this travel, which consists of collecting souvenirs and objects (local clothing, drums, crystals, vessels, medicinal herbs, symbolic objects such as scarabs and ankhs, etc.). Against the background of these contemporary spiritual practices, Lara Croft is certainly not an archaeologist, but a traveller, an adventurer, and, first and foremost, a spiritual seeker. She is on a perpetual journey to find both the truth behind the myth and the tangible objects embodying it. The archaeological sites, real or fictitious, are just a stage of this journey.

Conclusions

To answer the two questions posed at the beginning of the article, the conclusions that can be drawn from the study of esoteric and spiritual motifs observable in the *Tomb Raider* series are fourfold. First, despite a significant portion of entirely fictitious content, there is also undeniably a plethora of themes in *Tomb Raider* with a direct or indirect relationship to religion. Among them, the presence of powerful artefacts and the idea that

144 Steven Sutcliffe, "'Wandering Stars': Seekers and Gurus in the Modern World," in *Beyond New Age: Exploring Alternative Spirituality*, ed. Steven Sutcliffe and Marion Bowman (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 17-36.

145 Sutcliffe, "Wandering Stars," 17-36.

146 See e.g. Eric Cohen, "A Phenomenology of Tourists Experiences," *Sociology* 13, no. 2 (1979): 179-201.

“myths are true” especially stand out. Other motifs consist of the notion of preexistent civilisation, a conspiracist and millennial image of evil secret societies, and motifs combining spirituality with psychology and self-development, etc. Second, the original themes inspired by history and real-world mythology are frequently rewritten and visually adjusted to accentuate similarities between cultures. In this process, the game designers sometimes suggest or even explicitly point out the perennialist idea of the existence of a common ground or a common origin in one ancient, highly developed culture such as Atlantis. While the connection between *Tomb Raider* and Western Esotericism (namely Theosophy) has already been suggested, I hope I have demonstrated that there is also a clear link to Alternative Spirituality. While in the older games the connection was relatively weak, it has gathered strength ever since *Legend* (2006) and has so far culminated in the Survivor Trilogy (*Tomb Raider* 2013, *Rise of the Tomb Raider* 2015 and *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* 2018). The two most notable traits of this increasing influence of Alternative Spirituality are (a) the stress on (spiritual) energy and its sources and (b) an increasingly hostile stance against organised religion.

Finally, I have argued that the *Tomb Raider* universe does not show Lara Croft as an archaeologist. Instead, the designers created a clear-cut and conscious distance between Lara and traditional university-based archaeologists. The context of the in-game world and Lara’s actual behaviour suggest that she is no scholar. In fact, she is much closer to a spiritual seeker or even an Alternative Spirituality enthusiast. Both the search for hidden spiritual truths and powerful supernatural objects (combined with an unscholarly disregard for the sites and a lack of interest in archaeological finds outside of the “relics”) clearly label her as such.

For this reason, I believe that Holtorf’s eminently useful typology should be expanded to contain the “S” theme, in which the pop-cultural image of archaeology converges with Western Esotericism, Alternative Spirituality, and possibly other religious currents (such as contemporary Paganism or Transhumanism). In this sense, the *Tomb Raider* transmedia universe is an excellent example of Partridge’s “occulture”, and it is a pity that its incredibly rich religious material tends to be somewhat overshadowed by scholars’ overwhelming focus on Lara’s gender.

Appendix: List of relevant game series, movies, mobile games and comic books

Main game series

Tomb Raider (1996)
Tomb Raider II (1997)
Tomb Raider III (1998)
Tomb Raider: The Last Revelation (1999)
Tomb Raider: Chronicles (2000)
Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness (2003)
Tomb Raider: Legend (2006)
Tomb Raider: Anniversary (2007) – remake of *TR I*
Tomb Raider: Underworld (2008)
Tomb Raider (2013)
Rise of the Tomb Raider (2015)
Shadow of the Tomb Raider (2018)

Tomb Raider movies

Lara Croft: Tomb Raider (2001)
Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life (2003)
Tomb Raider (2018)

Mobile games

Relic Run (2015)
Tomb Raider Reloaded (2023)

Comic books

Tomb Raider: Archivy, vol. 1. Comics Centrum, 2017.
Tomb Raider: Archivy, vol. 2. Comics Centrum, 2017.
Tomb Raider: Archivy, vol. 3. Comics Centrum, 2018.
Tomb Raider: Archivy, vol. 4. Comics Centrum, 2018.