

• Beaming bad guys down from spaceships is a nice change from enemies just sort of popping into existence for no adequately explained reason.



• Few things in life are more satisfying than thumping a giant spider in the nose with a rifle butt.



• It just isn't an alien invasion until the Striders show up.



• "At this particular moment in time, I don't believe I have a healthier or more deeply felt respect for any object in the universe than this here shotgun."



# TABULA RASA

Quid quid Latine dictum sit, altum videtur\* (\*Anything said in Latin sounds profound)

PUBLISHER: NCsoft DEVELOPER: NCsoft GENRE: MMORPG AVAILABILITY: Retail ESRB RATING: Teen  
 MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard, Internet connection MULTIPLAYER: Massive-scale VERSION REVIEWED: Live v1.0.1.4

## REVIEW

“Tabula rasa,” for those with rusty Latin, means “clean slate.” Which might lead one to expect something truly new from legendary designer Richard Garriott’s *Tabula Rasa*—and makes it a little startling when the game turns out to be such a color-by-numbers MMO. That’s not necessarily a bad thing, but you can cut the irony with a knife.

*TR*’s *Starship Troopers*-ish setting does a lot to set the game apart from its peers. We haven’t had a really solid sci-fi MMO in ages, and *TR* is the best one out there right now. That is, however, a purely aesthetic difference; the nuts and bolts still haven’t changed much. Whether you call them “Boargars” or “Boaroids,” we’re still questing to kill 10 boars for our next armor upgrade. We’re hunting down X of Y, running across the world to talk to Z, and collecting giant spider spleens or...whatever. It’s hard to knock a formula that works, but we’ve been here before.

### WAR IS THE H-WORD

The game’s major departure from expectation is in presenting itself as a kind of MMO/shooter hybrid. It looks an awful lot like one, but that isn’t entirely the case. You’re running around with guns, sure—but success has little to do with aiming or reflexes and everything to do with equipment and die rolls. That doesn’t disappoint, either: We get a fantastic simulation of an action-oriented ray-gun firefight. If you squint a bit, the presentation might almost convince you that the combat has more in common with *Gears of War* than with *EverQuest*.

Call it a healthy sense of battlefield chaos: You’re not left with a bunch of mobs standing around at their spawn points looking bored until they dumbly rush anyone that walks into aggro range. Instead, you get blasted terrain, into which alien dropships teleport squads of grunts—who immediately start picking fights with players and NPCs while mortar bombardments occasionally send groups of combatants flying. I can’t overstate how viscerally satisfying it is to run, dive, crouch behind cover, and pump shotgun rounds into throngs of aliens. The combat—and its success in fostering the illusion of run-and-gun action within the framework of an RPG—is easily *TR*’s strongest point, and it’s the kind of thing that’s never been executed this well or this completely in an MMO. In its guts, *TR*’s still far more of an RPG than an action game...but it can pass for the latter if you want it to.

### CONNECT THE DOTS

The other “creative” touches are mostly inconsequential. Moral choices presented via quests are infrequent, and your decisions never have much impact (deciding whether to turn in or shelter a conscientious objector earns a different choice of loot that you’ll immediately pawn...and nobody ever mentions the incident again). The Logos language,



• It’s a scientifically proven fact that swords are at least 10 times more effective when in the hands of a hot chick.

which consists of collect-em-all pictograms necessary to use certain skills, sounds much more interesting than it is: Your character’s skills are described by sentences stitched together from these pictograms, but you never actually have to learn or use the language yourself. Mostly it just presents a minor obstacle, requiring you to visit a few locations to fetch the appropriate Logos so you can cast whatever spell you’re interested in.

Compared to how satisfying all the running, shooting, and kicking the heads off of aliens are, the noncombat activities in the game fall pretty flat. The crafting system departs from the “learn by doing” model of just about every other MMO out there; instead, your crafting skills advance through point investment. It’s a change I would welcome if crafting skills didn’t draw from the same pool of ability points as combat skills. That—coupled with very few items that are worth crafting in the first place and an anemic in-game economy—paints the entire crafting system as something of an afterthought. It doesn’t do any good, other than to piss off the occasional newbie who doesn’t know better than to try it out.

My chief concern is *TR*’s longevity. At present, the game offers maybe three or four months of content. With little in the way of engaging PVP, useful item crafting, or other distractions for veterans who’ve hit the level cap and cleared out all their quests, the game could easily fade away. On the other hand, the unique combat, interesting setting, and promise of future content updates make it a worthwhile purchase for that subset of MMO players who are sick to death of high fantasy and dial-a-combo combat. •Scott Sharkey

### VERDICT

➤ Could almost convince you that you’re playing a massively multiplayer shooter.

➤ Risks alienating players who want actual shooting—or RPG fans who don’t.

6.5/10

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