

an **Advent**
Calendar interview

Sponge



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December
2022

Miguel: Hi, Sponge! It is holiday time again, and I'm very happy to spend some time chatting with you for an interview that touches on that most special event of the Tomb Raider Community, the Advent Calendar! Thank you for giving me that time. What makes this time of the year important for you?

Sponge (Mario Respondek): Thanks for the interest! What's important to me in the time leading up to the holidays while preparing a calendar is mostly the atmosphere, I guess. As a team project, the calendar shows me every year how much talent and dedication some members of the custom level scene in particular, and the Tomb Raider community as a whole, bring to the table. Seeing so much passion is inspiring. I have also benefited a lot from participating in that annual team project: after learning some basics last year, I have learned a lot more about how to use the new Tomb Editor with the help of the others this year.

Miguel: It's inspiring to hear that you're still learning, since you are one of many legends of the Advent Calendar. This yearly holiday tradition was born in Lara's LevelBase, a German-speaking forum that helped keep TRLE and Tomb Raider alive for so long. This year, Lara's LevelBase was lost due to technical issues. How do you feel about it, as a prominent member?

Sponge: At first I was shocked when I opened my inbox to find an email from Seemeister as the administrator of the website, informing me that the website, including the forum and download section, was lost for good. So I checked for myself and saw the guest book as a last remainder of Lara's LevelBase. I haven't even left a message there yet, because I immediately started to talk to people who were interested in re-uploading material so it wouldn't be lost. I'm sorry the website is gone, and will miss it every now and then. But at the same time, I'm thankful for the commitment that a number of members have shown in this process.

Miguel: Hopefully all the material will be available thanks to the community. That same community had already gotten together to keep the Advent Calendar alive last year and this year as well. Thus, the AC will also stand as a tribute to LLB.

Let's go back a little further, to your first contact with Tomb Raider. How did it all begin for you?

Sponge: Oh, to answer that I have to take you all the way back to the last millennium, to the year 1997, when I was only just in primary school. That is when my family got a separate computer for the kids (i.e. me and my elder sisters) so we could do homework and "play" a rather tedious programme my father had coded to help us memorize the little multiplication table (oh, the flashbacks). The computer was second-hand and the guy selling it threw in a copy of Tomb Raider II, starring Lara Croft. And that's how I got into Tomb Raider (and majored in mathematics in high school).

Miguel: That multiplication table anecdote is just delightful! Apparently, Tomb Raider stuck with you. Did math? Hahaha!

What was the road from TR II to the level editor like? Did it involve a lot of math and clever programming?

Sponge: Well, maths and I have gone through some rough patches on the way to my A-levels, I'm afraid. 😊 Tomb Raider, however, has been somewhat of a constant in my life. After TR II, I played TR III and was enthralled by it. I did not quite acquire a taste for TR 4 with the extensive trip to Egypt then, but absolutely loved TR: Chronicles when it was released in 2000. Now, this installment of the game series came with the Level Editor on a second disc. I did try to handle it, but as a pre-teen who had only just finished primary school, I was in over my head. It wasn't until around 2005 that I gave it a second try. By then, the custom level scene was already in full bloom and there were a lot of forums to exchange ideas, knowledge and experiences. With regard to gaming and programming, I was more intrigued by optics and atmosphere back then. My level building skills could not live up to my expectations, however. This is how I got into building objects to support level designers who actually knew their stuff. My first custom levels were basically born out of show rooms built for objects and textures I had made.

Miguel: How did you first find the community?

Sponge: Believe it or not, I did a Google search to learn more about the level editor and just stumbled upon it. Hahaha

Miguel: Which was the first forum or site that you ran into then?

Sponge: I think TombRaiderForums was on my radar pretty early on, but it must have been Lara's LevelBase where I first registered to actually participate. The community there gave me a very, very warm welcome and has been a good influence on me during adolescence. It also opened doors to other websites for me, some of which still exist (like TRLE.net and TRsearch.org).

Miguel: It is interesting to me that you seem to have never posted on TombRaiderForums, while only posting less than 100 times (mostly about the Advent Calendar) at the TRLE.net forums. Were you much more active on LLB, or on Discord more recently, or do you not post often in general?

Sponge: That is true. While TombRaiderForums is great for consuming information on ongoing projects (I highly recommend their Screenshot Showcase and Object Showcase), my active use of forums has been limited almost exclusively to Lara's LevelBase. In the late 2000s, I was active there almost on a daily basis, but my general usage of forums has gone down a lot over the past years. Brief visits aside, I have not used forums like the ones on TRLE.net, TombRaiderForums, or TRForge.net at all over the past six months. Nowadays, my contact to the *Tombraiderverse* is mostly limited to groups or DMs on Discord and WhatsApp.

Miguel: *Tombraiderverse*! I love it.

Now that you have this interview to reintroduce yourself to all the people who are mostly found on forums (and anyone from the *Tombraiderverse*, really), can you tell us: who is Sponge?

Sponge: My account as Sponge is a part of me that I created as a kid simply to get creative without spending a lot of money on art supplies. This account and the people it has brought me in touch with have accompanied me through formative years, contributing to my growth and change as a person. For what it's worth, this creative outlet has made me more self-confident, decisive, and a better team player over the years. Mostly, however, exercising this hobby as Sponge allows me to get into a creative flow that has some somewhat meditative qualities to it. Maybe people who have watched TRLE building streams will agree. Nowadays I don't get into the flow as much as I used to as a young adult anymore. Even so, creating objects for custom level projects of mine and/or others, or participating in creative team projects like the Advent Calendar and the preparations to Back to Basics contests are sure to get some enthusiasm out of me.

Miguel: That's a great answer, Mario!

It was pretty early on in your building and object production years that you started contributing to the Advent Calendar. It is an indication of your attraction towards creative team projects. How did you first come into contact with the AC? How did you join the project for the first time?

Sponge: Thanks!

In 2005 I tried to participate in the Advent Calendar for the first time. Someone on the forum had asked me if I was interested (probably agnes, masha, or Zickenalarm). It was such a shot in the oven! My goal had been to make my début custom level for Lara's LevelBase Advent Calendar, but I was utterly unprepared and underestimated the work and time this would take. I eventually quit at the last minute. Back then, agnes was in charge of the calendar along with Thierry, and I still remember how shocked she was when I DMed her the bad news. Except for a single room that got preserved in a playable title level that masha released that year, the game I was working on never got released. But you learn from your mistakes, right? So one year later, I managed to programme my début level Niklaus Day in time for a release in the Advent Calendar of 2006.

Miguel: Wow, I never knew you had a delayed start to your AC adventure.

What are your earliest fond memories of your Advent Calendar contribution?

Sponge: One memory I am fond of is when I released my first custom level, and people saying that was the cutest outfit they'd ever seen.

Another is from 2008, when my entry was chosen as the background image for the Advent Calendar. BaGi was running the calendar back then and sent me a mouse pad with the image printed on it. I still have that one, actually [see images below, page 3].



Miguel: Those are good recollections, and the last one has something physical to hang onto. In this increasingly digital world, even a minimalist like myself can see the value of an iconic mousepad 😊

Was that outfit an early customized work of yours?

Sponge: It was! After some experiments with the skin_joints object I had an outfit with open hair, which gave Lara a friendlier look and so, with a coat added and a red bow in her hair, this became the outfit for that Advent Calendar custom level [see images below, page 4].



Miguel: That's really cool!

After your début level, you participated with two levels in 2007 and another one in 2008. After that, you didn't contribute with a level in 2009. Were you still helping the AC project in other ways, or did you just take a break?

Sponge: I really couldn't say, I'm afraid. A few years ago, I made some graphs and figures on the calendar, including participants sorted by year, but with Lara's LevelBase gone, there's no longer a way of checking for details like if I participated behind the scenes.

Miguel: Do you recall which year you started having more of a coordinating role in the Calendar?

Sponge: There was a bit of a process involved, I think. At some point in time, I think it was 2011, masha and Technik and I took over the management of the Advent Calendar. Then my role grew as masha began to focus on other hobbies in between 2015 and 2017, so that Blu and I took over. This year, however, my role has been smaller than usual due to some changes in my RL. Thankfully, vandersweater and tombrailerxii swooped in!

Miguel: Thankfully, indeed! I'm a fan of their work, especially vandersweater who's helped me personally quite a lot!

Looking back at all these editions, at least 13, which are the moments that come to mind? What makes you smile when you think about the people and the projects over the years in the Advent Calendar?

Sponge: Playing/testing our Advent Calendar levels comes to mind. The voice recordings in Three Ghost Stories by Raidermatty are just iconic! I also still have to smile thinking of the rock-paper-scissors puzzle that DJ Full added to the 2019 team level Christmas in Seville, for instance.

Miguel: Many players will have the same memories and recall your work alongside big builders from TRLEs history. After all, you released 11 collaborative levels so far, and seven of the 14 AC levels you released were collaborations, with such people as Clara, masha, Jesus C. Croft, LoreRaider, Mr XY, tombraxii, Talos, AgentXP, DJ Full, dinne, Dreamfall, and Matie.

What are the tasks you like doing the most in these collaborations, and which ones do you prefer to leave room for other creators? What would you say are the big differences between working alone and working with these accomplished builders?

Sponge: For what it's worth, I feel like animation, texture and object design are my forte. When it comes to flip effects, scripting, or thinking up gameplay, however, other creators have skill sets that are better suited.

Working by yourself makes you more independent (regarding what object slots you can use and which ones are occupied etc.) but the input you get from building with accomplished builders brings you forward in the long run. I have learned a lot looking at what the others built in their parts of our team projects, but also from them looking at my bits and giving me some advice.

Miguel: You participated in other collabs outside the Advent Calendar, especially with Clara and masha, as a part of the famous CMS team. The Jerusalem Project - The Cherubim are Calling is one of the best collaborative efforts ever. What can you tell us about the team and your role in it?

Sponge: The Jerusalem Project was an exceptional project indeed! Likewise Clara, masha and I were an exceptional team! We had been in touch for a while by me doing some commissioned work for Clara in terms of customized objects, and masha helping me out with camera sequences in my first attempts at level building. When someone dropped out of a team project of four members, they approached me and asked if I would like to join up. This is how our LMXA [Lara's Magical Xmas Adventures] custom level set came to be. The three of us grew as a team and after meeting in person at the annual Tomb Raider meetings in Germany we learned that we vibe as persons, too.

We got pretty much as thick as thieves, to the point that we used to spend about ten days a year together with masha's family in their home in Colmar, France [see pictures below, page 6]. I still cherish those memories of building levels at a table together, spending the Sabbath together, binge-watching the 24 series together... masha has a very unique style of thinking up creative puzzles, and her bright mind allows her to transfer these ideas into a TRLE setting. This is how the game became so rich in riddles to solve. Clara knows her stuff in story-telling and sound. Her efforts in logically structuring singular events in the game into a coherent story, scripting dialogues to stress certain ideas, and cutting music to accentuate it all have made this game very entertaining. My forte has always been building objects that help convey the feeling of a place and add to the atmospheric effects of the game.

As a team, I believe we will also have to mention Larson when it comes to the Jerusalem Project. He has certainly raised the bar when it comes to flip effects, which have generated options that incontrovertibly added to the JP becoming one of the best-rated custom games since the year 2000. Likewise, our testers, especially Michael Otto, provided us with feedback that helped us make improvements in the building process.



Miguel: It's very nice to get an insider glimpse into the process behind these "labors of love". Would The Jerusalem Project be your favorite collaboration? Or would you mention other levels that were particularly pleasant to build alongside other people?

Sponge: Actually, Ice Age 3 - 24 - Nothing left but Ashes is my favorite, but the recent Advent Calendar team projects have been very nice to work on, too!

Miguel: Let's talk a little bit about your solo levels. You've also built several, especially for the Calendar. Do you have a favorite?

Sponge: My favorite among the levels I have built is Runes of Dawn. This was a side project of mine that really had time to grow, and I feel now, with the little update after the initial release, that game is now my favorite.

Miguel: No wonder, since it got such good reviews, with words like "brilliant" and even "perfect" standing out! Of course you are an Advent Calendar icon, yet Runes of Dawn was an Easter release, the first in your three AspideTR Easter Time collaborations. How was that like, adding another yearly thematic project to your CV?

Sponge: I think I just slipped into it at some point. Blu as one of the site administrators at AspideTR got very invested in the Advent Calendar over the years, so I started to explore AspideTR a little more, and the Easter Time project has proven itself to be a lot of fun.

Miguel: An interwoven community is a stronger community!

There's a really interesting release of yours. In fact, it seems to be your only solo release that is not in the Advent Calendar, the Easter Time, or a competition. It's The Forgotten Project, which seems to be an earlier building attempt. Is that right? Tell us about it.

Sponge: You are absolutely right! It used to be a showroom where I just added some objects like that beautiful dandelion by karlo002. I remember experimenting a bit with the editor (building higher than one room in altitude, etc.) and objects (re-texturing, animation). This is what my first attempts at this hobby looked like.

Many, many years later, I found this project while cleaning up on my hard drive. It made me laugh but at the same time I felt like sharing it so that new builders can see that there's a process of getting better at something.

Miguel: That's always one of the purposes of my interviews, too: showing new builders how experienced builders survived the trials and tribulations of TRLEs.

For Auld Lang Syne is the only level you released for a competition, in this case Complex Simplicity. Tell us a little bit about it, "for old times sake"? 😊

What led you not to participate in other competitions? Would you take part in the future?

Sponge: Competitions have their perks, like a building kit you can use to build your level. This saves a builder so much time! I am a very slow builder of levels, however, so the deadlines that come with each and every competition make me weary. For Auld Lang Syne was an exception of sorts, because on the one hand, I was approached directly when illyaine asked if I wanted to participate. On the other hand, there were other builders, like Zickenalarm, whom I got to know personally around that time, who were taking part in the competition. So there was an ounce of positive peer pressure involved.

Miguel: You are aware that Advent Calendars and Easter Time releases have strict deadlines, right? Hahaha 😊

Speaking of builders and influences, tell us about some builders you look up to, who influence you.

If there are any other influences (like other games, films, books, shows, etc.) let us know too, please!

Sponge: Yes, but instead of just the one deadline given in a contest setting, those group projects have 24 of them, so you can have your pick! 😊

Oh, there are quite a few! I find levels that are rich in custom objects very inspiring, like the ones by Piper, Miss Kroft, Ranpyon and Jesus C. Croft, for instance. The same goes for custom levels that feature new moves for Lara, like the games by PH or tombraderxii. Then there are custom levels that I try to learn from in terms of aesthetic design, especially when it

comes to using colors and lighting. Horus, Mr XY and AgentXP are builders I look up to because of this, among others. There are more builders that have been a positive influence to me in terms of gameplay ideas, easter eggs and humorous elements, too, like the collaborative works from the TRForge Advent calendars.

Whenever something moves me, it's likely that I will take something from it into my collections of ideas for future projects. I'm sure many builders have a few folders full of pictures, snippets, music ideas and texts on their computers or in print. People who have followed the Buffy series might find a hint to that in my games here and there. Another example is the owl part of my Icy Winterdream, which was inspired by the early Harry Potter films/books and video games. The part with the ice caves and polar bear, however, was influenced by the Golden Compass film/books. I've also included some Silent Hill references in a collaborative work only very, very recently.

Miguel: You seem to be very aware of your inspirations, which are pretty broad. Nice!

Looking at some more recent builders, whose work draws your attention the most over the past couple of years? Do you play custom levels by new builders these days?

Sponge: I'm sure the inspirations I am aware of are only the tip of the iceberg.

There are certainly builders whose work I gravitate to, like AgentXP. However, there are new builders, too, with whom I can feel the draw. One of them is ilariacraft, who just popped up out of nowhere last year with games that take your breath away!

Miguel: It was a pleasure to see ilariacraft come into the scene!

Life has some weirdly poetic – but also tragic – turns. A few years ago, a beloved member of our community passed away. Unfortunately, others have passed too – yet I'm speaking of mugs, Pat Chancey.

One of those poetic turns came over a year after mugs's passing, when A Summer Adventure was released in the Advent Calendar of 2018. Another one came in the form of House of Horrors, a little over one year ago.

Christmas is the time for love and fond memories. Tell us a little bit about mugs, and how you were involved in those posthumous releases of hers.

Sponge: Pat and I got to know each other through working on the blog attached to the Lara's LevelBase website in 2008, I think. My job there was to translate texts from German into English and vice versa. She would always proof-read the English version and give me some feedback, which turned out to be helpful to me well beyond my tasks on the blog team. We have also worked closely together on several editions of the Advent Calendars and the Back to Basics preparations.

Like for many others, her passing in August 2017 came as a shock to me. We'd known each other since I was a teenager, after all. Then her sister Carol made me this huge gift by sending me the hard drive from Pat's computer. On it, I found two projects that had not yet been released.

One of them was basically ready and had actually already undergone a first testing phase: A Summer Adventure. Since many works of mugs were released in the Advent Calendar over the years, I thought keeping with that tradition would make sense.

The other project on her hard drive was a project named HoH (which I interpreted as House of Horrors). That one was a map of a house and surrounding grounds bare of lighting (except for an ambient light that reminded me of a day with an overcast sky) and with no objects in it. This one left a lot of room for gameplay ideas, and it took me some time to think of a story I thought Pat would have liked.

Miguel: It was a beautiful homage, and I'm sure mugs would have liked it indeed!

Besides the Advent Calendar, you were a part of the team behind the Back to Basics competition a few times, like in 2018, when the whole team dedicated it to mugs. Tell us a bit about the experience behind preparing the BtB and how maybe this is somewhat of an invisible, maybe underappreciated, work.

Sponge: Thank you!

Working on the BtB packages is so much fun: you get a topic (normally chosen by the community) and then you are free to provide any textures and/or objects and/or sounds that pop into your mind. This kind of liberal setting really spurs on my

creativity. Everybody has to be kept in the loop of course, so that an overlap in the object slots available in TRLE can be avoided.

It may be true that the authors of the objects and textures in the package won't get a lot of attention in the end, but their work certainly does. To me, seeing my objects being used in BtB custom levels is a kind of compliment because it means that, to some degree, my work is appreciated for itself.

I think Jesus C. Croft has rubbed off on me with his attitude of giving to the community and allowing people to use his work in basically all the ways they can think of. Heaven knows it wasn't always like that for me. To be honest, I still feel protective sometimes of material I've made uniquely for my own TRLE levels. Though, when people ask me if they can use some of the stuff from my custom levels, I usually avoid those feelings by creating a slightly different version especially for them.

Miguel: It seems way more fun than I expected, which is great!

We're at the finish line now. Thank you for giving me so much of your time!

I just wanted to give you the chance to close the interview with a few words for any newcomers, people who may find out about you through the interview in the coming months or years. What do you wish to say to new builders and players joining our community in the future?

Sponge: Thank you for bearing with me for so long! 😊 Some of your questions were very deep and gave me a reason to self-reflect about things in a way I hadn't before. Other questions took me back to my first attempts at this hobby. This interview has somehow highlighted what is important to me about this recreational pursuit.

Thank you for the chance to close this interview with a few words to new builders and players. Well, I can only recommend them to join the TRLE community. I've experienced the Tomb Raider community in general as quite diverse and welcoming, so chances are you will find people who vibe with you among its members. Lean into that, learn from each other. That's all I gotta say. ^^