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The Player's Journey: Ludology and Narratology in Modern Gaming

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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List of Abbreviations

AAA – Triple A Game; games produced by major publishers as opposed to smaller publishers

AI – Artificial Intelligence

DLC – Downloadable Content

FPS – First Person Shooter

MMO – Massively Multiplayer Online (Game)

MMORPG – Massively Multiplayer Online Role Play Game

NPC – Non-Player Character

PC – Player Character

PVP – Player versus Player

RPG – Role-Playing Game

Abstract

THE PLAYER'S JOURNEY: LUDOLOGY AND NARRATOLOGY IN MODERN GAMING

By Angelica Fuchs

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University 2018

Director: Dr. David Golumbia, Associate Professor, Department of English/MATX PhD Program

This thesis examines the evolution of gaming criticism (specifically ludology and narratology) and games as a medium of expression through the use of case studies. These case studies look at some of the core aspects of four major titles (*The Last of Us, Horizon Zero Dawn,* various BioWare games and *Journey*) and survey how these games work to effectively employ a narrative while maintaining an immersive, intuitive system for the player to interact with. Through these titles, the thesis suggests that in order to gain a full scope of a game's intentions, studies should analyze more than the base story or gameplay, but rather the correlations between them as well as the ways that the visuals and audio aspects interact and enhance the narrative. Furthermore, it suggests the importance of creating gameplay that works with the story in order to ensure that the player always feels as though they have a stake in the outcome of the game, regardless of the nature of the narrative.

The Player's Journey:

Ludology and Narratology in Modern Gaming

I Introduction

Over the past twenty years, the perception of what constitutes a good game has changed. Games have evolved and so too have the academic and developer discussions surrounding them. It isn't just a question of mechanics anymore (although this is still a defining aspect of games which has also become more complex over time), but also a question of what narrative will drive an emotional response from the player. 2D platforms games, which were more focused on in-game mechanics rather than the story behind the actions have evolved into games that now prioritize story just as much as the actual play of the game. 2D games like *Cuphead* (2017), *Stardew Valley* (2016), *Celeste* (2018), and *Limbo* (2010) have deviated from their origins to include complex and emotional stories while still maintaining similar mechanics to their predecessors. With the evolution of games though it has become more difficult to define and analyze exactly what they are as a medium of play and story and which criticism is best suited for studying them. Are video games first and foremost "games," which should therefore be judged by their mechanics, or should they be judged based on their narratives or even as an art form? It becomes a question of defining what exactly the medium is in order to criticize and analyze it. This question of defining the medium and the direction of its growth isn't only an academic question. Within the field, developers deal with a tug of war when it comes to deciding the balance between play and story. One of the major topics of discussion at the 2018 East Coast Game Conference was the idea of ensuring that players don't become bored while interacting

with the game, whether it be with the actual play or the invitation to interact with the story. Alexander Horn noted in his discussion that is important to ensure that the narrative of the studio (and writers) doesn't overwhelm the experienced narrative of the player.[1] His talk focused predominantly on the importance of the player's experience, stating, "The most important thing isn't the designer's narrative but the player's experience"—that the stories the players tell themselves are better and more important than the ones that are implemented by the developers.[2] Developers have to work to strike a careful balance between play and story. Too much play and the player doesn't have a reason for their actions. If there is too much narrative though the player can feel overwhelmed or even bored depending on the way it is presented. When first building a game, developers have different options for expressing their story through the play style and graphics, which can range from a first or third person 3D RPG (role-playing game) style to something that is 2D or incredibly abstract. At what point does one overwhelm the other? In scholarship, a distinct rift runs through academics when they tried to reconcile what video games are and what they can become. The question boils down to: should video games be analyzed through ludology or narratology?

When working with other narrative mediums, co-authorship isn't at the forefront of a writer's mind. They're spinning a story and inviting the reader to join. Although there are suggestions that reading a traditional novel is a joint effort between the writer and the reader as the reader has to decode the author's work, this relationship becomes more codependent when it comes to video games. A player becomes a writer when they play a game—even though they are having the story told to them, they are also an active participant in the journey and outcome of

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[1] Horn, Alexander. "Best Practices in Emergent Narrative Design." Lecture, East Coast Game Conference, North Carolina, Raleigh, April 19, 2018.
[2] Ibid.

the story, even if there is only one predetermined ending. As Espen Aarseth notes in his article, "Aporia and Epiphany in *Doom* and *The Speaking Clock*: The Temporality of Ergodic Art," video games have 'story,' but the story changes not just player to player, but even session to session for a single player based on their choices, even in a linear game.[3] Aarseth states, "[With the ergodic work of art] the experienced sequence of signs does not emerge in a fixed, predetermined order decided by the instigator of the work, but is instead one actualization among many potential routes within what we may call the event space of semio-logical possibility […] This raises an ontological question: Can we then still talk about the same work?"[4] This concept mirrors Wolfgang Iser's ideas on the construction of a text, which promotes the idea of co-authorship between the reader and text. Iser's suggestion of a virtual space that is created between the reader and the text is similar to the space that is created by the player and the game. It is self contained and the player will take from it whatever they will regardless of the intentions of the developers and writers. The way they interpret a particular mechanic or storyline will differ player to player and likewise, the way they solve each puzzle will vary.

Video games are difficult to define, which is why it is so challenging to find a single method for studying them. When discussing ergodic art in particular, Aarseth warns, "The worst kind of mistake an aestetic theory of ergodic art can make is to assume that there is only one type with which to be concerned, e.g., "the electronic text," "electronic literature," etc., with a single set of properties. This is just not the case […]" He then goes on to compare two highly contrasting games, *Doom* (1993) and John Cayley's the poetry generator, *The Speaking Clock*

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[3] Aarseth, Espen. "Aporia and Epiphany in *Doom* and *The Speaking Clock*: The Temporality of Ergodic Art." In *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory*, by Marie-Laure Ryan and Espen J. Aarseth, 31-41. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999. 37.
[4] Ibid., 33.

(1995) to prove this point.[5] The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines "video game" as "an electronic game in which players control images on a video screen."[6] As with Aarseth's definition, it is a broad statement that encompasses a lot of different titles. On Steam you can buy your "standard" AAA game or you can buy games created by a single person or an indie studio. The gameplay and release for all of them would be massively different, and yet they're all categorized as a video game and the scale of judging a game as "good" doesn't vary just because it was a single person producing it versus a large team. Can a minimalist, abstract game be compared to a more stereotypical RPG or FPS game? Perhaps not, but that doesn't mean scholars can't find a method of analyzing both. In this essay I will attempt to find a new methodology for studying games that combines narratology, ludology, and other aspects of what makes a video game a video game through a series of case studies that focus on both the story and play of games. To a degree, game studies does attempt to do this, although game studies is a term that is generally synonymous with ludology, which is defined as the study of games and video games in particular. Since the term is so broad however, encompassing both traditional games and video games, it tends to lean more towards the side of analyzing the mechanics and act of playing, leaving less room for the narrative and artistic side of video game analysis. As an umbrella, game studies does attempt to study video games as a whole, but due to its close association to ludology, it can be a limiting lense. However, a strictly narratological lens wouldn't allow for a full understanding of the game since it would neglect the gameplay and stylistic choices, many of which are created to mirror and reinforce the story. As Michalis Kokonis notes, " […] on the one hand, the so-called narratologists (or narrativists) approach games for their narrative dimension;

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[5] Ibid., 35.
[6] "Video Game." *Merriam-Webster.com*, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/video game. Accessed 6 May 2018.

on the other hand, the ludologists focus attention on the mechanics of the functions of computer games and reject an analysis of computer games as narratives."[7] A good game tries to incorporate every aspect into a coherent piece; things from the tiny movements of an idle player character (PC) to show personality to the dialogue and mechanics of the gathering of resources. It's this unification of elements that allows for the player (in essence, reader) to become immersed in the story that the developers have created. A reader interacting with a novel has to create the world through context given by the writer and while a player already has the world being built for them on the screen, they too have to participate in embodying the protagonist of their game in order to progress the story physically and emotionally. If the player can't connect to the protagonist to some degree, they lose a reason to play. The connection that a player develops with the PC is just as intimate of a connection as a reader develops with the protagonist of a novel. This intimacy comes through experiencing things with the PC and at times even hearing the PC's internal dialogue in much the same way a reader delves into the mindspace of a novel's protagonist. While this melding of experience is achieved through different ways, it doesn't dismiss that both are effective methods of giving players and readers compelling, emotional stories.

This study will begin by attempting to define what ludology and narratology are in modern gaming, as well as giving a brief history of the two in regards to video games. It will then attempt to create a new method of studying video games, which will then be applied to three different types of video games: story-driven games without much player choice (such as *The Last of Us* (2013)), story-driven games with player agency (specifically looking at BioWare games

[7] Kokonis, Michalis. "Intermediality between Games and Fiction: The "Ludology vs. Narratology" Debate in Computer Game Studies: A Response to Gonzalo Frasca." *ACTA UNIV. SAPIENTIAE, FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES* 9 (2014): 173.

and *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017)), and finally games which begin to push the boundary of what a standard video game is (*Journey* (2012)). These games were chosen because they all have a distinct story within the game that a player cannot gain the full scope of simply by reading the summary on the box or through information dumping at the beginning of the game. In all of these games, the story has to unfold through gameplay (this includes through finding codices within the game). I have chosen to exclude games that are on the extremes of the scale such as *The Order 1886* (2015) which allowed for almost no player agency, and exceedingly minimalistic games. I would like to also note that while I specifically chose games that have a story within the game itself, there are games that expand upon their lore outside of the main medium such as *Overwatch* (2016), which uses comics and short films rather than a story mode within the game. Many of BioWare games do this as well thought the publishing of novels to help bridge the time gaps between their games. I have chosen to include BioWare games nonetheless because the majority of the world building is still done within the game and the world building from the novels can often be uncovered through codices and engaging in dialogue within the game. I will however address this issue within the BioWare case section, as there is information that is excluded from the main game that is relevant to the story as a whole.

II Defining Ludology and Narratology in Gaming

Due to the complexity and emergence of modern games (which I am defining as games published between the early-mid 90s to today), scholars have been attempting to create a critical lense to study video games with. The two main schools attempting to define the new medium are narratology and ludology. With the rapidly improving graphics, engines, and storage systems being developed, video games are evolving and further defining themselves as a medium each

year. Developers are now able achieve more complex stories and creations and continue to improve upon the foundations of the medium. With these improvements, both mechanically and narratively, both narratologists and ludologists have valid arguments for why their lense is most appropriate for studying video games. With the development and further narrowing of game studies, a few notable scholars attempting to create a definition are Gonzalo Frasca and Jesper Juul (who argue for a ludology heavy lense) and Marie-Laure Ryan (a prominent narratologist). These early scholars in the field helped to create the base scholarship and call for more focus on the emerging medium of play and artistic and narrative expression. This debate however between narratology and ludology spanned into the late 2000s and despite the creation of a working middle ground through the ludonarrative lense there are still echoes of the debate in scholarship. Likewise, as previously stated, the term ludology as a whole has expanded, coming to be synonymous with game studies (and video games) as a whole. The term, however, is still problematic in that it still includes all games, not just video games. The definition of video game that I will be using for this particular essay is a digital game that can be experienced on a computer or console through a visual representation. It requires player interaction through built in mechanics to progress. Like with the traditional definition of games, it must have a set of fixed rules (both mechanical and narrative) that are conveyed to the player so they can work within the defined parameters to complete the game (be it a narrative completion (such as with a RPG game) or activity completion (such as with a round-based FPS game)). Although this can't be measured, I will also state that for my definition, at least with games published within the last fifteen years, the player should be invested emotionally in the outcome of the game, whether it be to the narrative or the completion of a mechanical task. My definition for the purposes of this essay will follow that of the Merriam-Webster dictionary's and will exclude board games,

although I will further narrow my scope to exclude digital versions of board games as well. It should be noted that when I mention board games I'm not talking about tabletop RPGs such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, which could potentially be seen as a precursor to the modern RPG video game. The development of more complex narratives in-line with those seen in games like *Dungeons and Dragons* has lent credence to the argument that games need to be studied for their story. However, it could be argued that only looking at the narrative aspects of the game would be remiss since it would exclude the interface and play aspects, which are central when it comes to looking at video games versus traditional tabletop games. Without intuitive and interactive controls, video games would be little more than an interactive movie. The interface within games instead allows players to immerse themselves in the world more than a board game or movie could ever allow. Therefore, wouldn't looking at the play aspects and thus a ludological perspective be the ideal for studying games?

This leads me to one of my main questions: how can we look at this new text (and should it even be considered a text)? The first step is to define what the new text is. As previously stated, video games incorporate elements of both play and story, making it different from other visual story mediums such as comics or movies. Participation with comics and movies could be considered passive when compared to participation with video games. The act of reading or viewing is active, but the story will happen regardless of the viewer or reader's choices whereas with video games, the way the player overcomes each obstacle changes depending on, as Aarseth states, the current player's session.[8] The order that a player completes a puzzle could change each time they play a game—in the dungeon, they could go visit the left room first and then the

[8] Aarseth, Espen. "Aporia and Epiphany in *Doom* and *The Speaking Clock*: The Temporality of Ergodic Art." In *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory*, by Marie-Laure Ryan and Espen J. Aarseth, 31-41. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999. 33.

right room the first time they play, but the next time they might skip both rooms entirely and just go straight without searching for extra items.

While I attest that there was a debate between ludology and narratology, some scholars push against this. Gonzalo Frasca notably discusses this in a brief essay regarding the divide, aptly calling it "Ludologists love stories, too: notes from a debate that never took place." To say that the debate never took place seems a little unfair, but Frasca does bring up a number of excellent points regarding game development and criticism in the field and as he explains, "My article proposed using the term "ludology" to describe a yet non-existent discipline that would focus on the study of games in general and videogames in particular. I[t] was a call for a set of theoretical tools that would be for gaming what narratology was for narrative."[9] Frasca is correct: a new tool is needed for this new medium of authorship, expression, and play. To simply use narratology to study games would be to ignore half of the text. However, to use ludology in the original sense would also be too limiting. Frasca is already attempting to broaden and further define the term and is calling for others in the field to do the same, specifically looking to narratology (he notes though that Marie-Laure Ryan has done this already)[10]. In response to Frasca's article, Michalis Kokonis expands Fransca's argument and states that the debate between ludology and narratology is doing more harm than good. As Kokonis states,

> If narratologists set out to explore the narrative dimension of a game with story, as its starting point in their approach, and ludologists respectfully focus on gameplay to discuss the gaming experience, there remain three other traits that could very well require a different theoretical approach: theories of representation, aesthetics or perception for

[9] Frasca, Gonzalo. "Ludologists love stories, too: notes from a debate that never took place." In *DiGRA conference*. (2003): 2.
[10] Ibid., 3.

> computer graphics; theories about the transmission and reception/function of sound for the audio aspect of games; and theories of the new digital media for the issue of interactivity regarding the interface/mode of communication of the games with their user.[11]

Games need to be looked at from multiple different angles; attempting to use just narratology or ludology would be counter productive when trying to understand the text as a whole. Kokonis' statement suggests that even combining the two approaches might not be enough.

Following Kokonis' suggestions, if a new approach to study games is created, it would has to allow for scholars to analyze multiple aspects of the game without it becoming too unwieldy, as it has to cover at a minimum the story, play (in terms of both player interaction and game interface), audio (including sound effects, music, and vocal performances if applicable—not all games use audio or all aspects of it), and visual properties in order to get a full picture of the text. It could be argued that player interaction would have to be another aspect separate from the interface, but I contend that the two aspects should be combined for this theoretical new approach since they are interdependent. These are all aspects that a developer would focus on when creating a game and a player would notice while interacting with the text, so it makes sense that likewise, someone critically studying a game should do the same. These aspects are what help to create an emotional core for a game: a theme that permeates the development and eventual play of a game that a player will experience. It is this aspect that makes video games different from traditional games and why video games require a different critical lense for analyzing. Players are experiencing games in real time with their avatar (the game's protagonist

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[11] Kokonis, Michalis. "Intermediality between Games and Fiction: The "Ludology vs. Narratology" Debate in Computer Game Studies: A Response to Gonzalo Frasca." *ACTA UNIV. SAPIENTIAE, FILM AND MEDIA STUDIES* 9 (2014): 177.

or the player's digital representation). Players gain emotional satisfaction from games through the completion of story elements (such as the completion of a quest or the revelation of a plot point) and mechanical achievements (such as getting a one-shot sniper kill in a FPS PVP game or completing a particularly challenging puzzle or dungeon). It is this emotional connection that defines modern gaming and separates it from its origins. The medium is evolving and so too the scholarship within it.

III Story and Play: Case Studies

Based on reception and awards, what constitutes a good game? There are numerous Game of the Year awards, some which are player driven, others which are chosen by a team of editors or judges. *The Last of Us* (2013), *Journey* (2012), *Mass Effect 2* (2010), and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) all won IGN's Game of the Year award. You'll find many of these games (or others in their series) on other Game of the Year lists as well. What makes them stand out from the dozens of other AAA titles released during their particular year? Is it their mechanics or story? Or does it have to do with the overall player experience while playing? This section will focus on analyzing the following games to determine what made them such compelling plays and will attempt to find their core values: *The Last of Us*, *Horizon Zero Dawn*, the *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* franchises by BioWare, and *Journey*. All of these games have a strong narrative core, although each game goes about expressing their story in a different way. *The Last of Us* is linear, focusing particularly on the relationship of the two protagonists Joel and Ellie. *Horizon Zero Dawn* invites the player to discover the story through the exploration of the world. It is driven by the protagonist's curiosity, which draws the player into uncovering the buried history of the world. The *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* franchises reward players for building up

relationships between the PC and party members and play like a *Dungeons and Dragons* campaigns with a high degree of player choice and multiple outcomes. *Journey* is a game with no spoken dialogue and very little instruction, requiring play and experimentation in order to uncover the story. While these games are similar in terms of style (being predominantly action-adventure RPGs) they each tell their respective stories through different mechanics and interaction styles. It should be noted that I have chosen games that have a strong narrative core and ludonarrative harmony. There are plenty of other games that have done well critically that don't have a strong narrative element, but for the purpose of my analysis, I have chosen these since I believe they are generally player friendly games in terms of being balanced with the elements that were mentioned at the end of section II. They are also games that are generally well known and therefore easily accessible. The case studies will look at the games through a ludonarrative lense generally, but they will also look at other aspects, such as how the graphics and sound are working with the play and narrative to complete a rounded, emotionally-charged game.

a. The Last of Us

The base story of *The Last of Us* isn't new. It is a story about surviving a zombie (or zombie-like) outbreak after a mutant *cordyceps* fungus infects the country. This particular version of the zombie story deals with an outbreak that is transmitted via a bite or through the inhalation of the *cordyceps* spores. The overall concept of it being a story about how a pair of unlikely companions survives the apocalypse isn't new either. It is how the story is delivered and the underlying questions and themes that make it stand out, especially for a video game. As Amy Green begins in her article, "The Reconstruction of Morality and the Evolution of Naturalism in *The Last of Us,"* "Naughty Dog's 2013 Playstation 3 title, *The Last of Us* provides a clear and

compelling case that videos games can stand as powerful, thematically rich, and complicated narratives expressing the turmoil and fragility of human culture in the same way as their literary and film counterparts do."[12] Green goes on to explain that like a book, *The Last of Us* can be "read" and notes that because the player joins the story through play they are more invested overall.[13] *The Last of Us* is an intense game. It's filled with emotionally charged scenes delivered through a mixture of voice acting and motion capture.[14] As IGN's review of the game states, "Voice acting is not only consistently superb, but the game's graphical beauty makes the events of The Last of Us overflow with realism. Everything that happens is immediately more memorable, more powerful, and more poignant because your surroundings are so believable."[15] There is a constant, underlying tension, even when the player is exploring the open wilderness because the game trains the player to always be suspicious of calm or peaceful moments. This unblinking resolve starts early on in the game when the player is taught that no character is safe, even PCs. GameSpot's review notes how, "Thrust in a lawless world, you feel the ache of a society gone to seed. *The Last of Us* stretches

Fig. 1. The Last of Us, *The Last of Us*. Source: Naughty_Dog, *The Last of Us Dec 10 – VGAs1*. December 9, 2011, Digital Image. Available from: Flickr, https://www.flickr.com/photos/naughty_dog/ 6484012229/in/album-72157628351324573/ (accessed May 7, 2018).

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[12] Green, A. (2016). The Reconstruction of Morality and the Evolution of Naturalism in The Last of Us. *Games and Culture, 11*(7-8), 745.
[13] Ibid., 746.
[14] Gamasutra. "Video: How Naughty Dog did the motion capture for The Last Of Us." Gamasutra. December 22, 2016. Accessed January 25, 2018. https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/288334/Video_How_Naughty_Dog_did_the_motion_capture_for_The_Last_Of_Us.php.
[15] Moriarty, Colin. "The Last of Us Review." IGN. June 05, 2013. Accessed May 02, 2018. http://www.ign.com/articles/2013/06/05/the-last-of-us-review.

on for hours, forcing you to endure the suffocating atmosphere and unrelenting despair that citizens of this world have become accustomed to. And that time spent navigating the desolate wasteland draws you deeper inside. You read letters from people who have long since disappeared, meet groups who have created a rickety social structure to help them survive life's many threats […]The Last of Us is a singular adventure that looks the downfall of humanity in the eyes and doesn't blink."[16]

The game begins right as the outbreak starts. There is no tension. It's a calm night and the player witnesses a brief cutscene featuring Joel and his young daughter, Sarah. Then the game begins. The player starts off as Sarah just as she wakes up in the middle of the night to a phone call from her uncle who tells her to go get her dad. The call is abruptly ended as the line goes dead and like with any good survival horror game, the player is then prompted to explore the seemingly desolate house. Information about the current state of the setting can be found through the exploration of the house. It's the small things like the TV broadcast, the flashing of the small explosions through the windows and the vibration of the controller that accompanies each flash that immerse the player into the world that Sarah has woken up to. She eventually finds her dad just as he shoots the neighbor who is attempting to break into their house after the neighbor's been infected. The family struggles to make it out of town, switching from Sarah's perspective to Joel's about halfway through. Just when it seems like they'll make it, a soldier from the military who has been sent in to contain the situation shoots Sarah. Sarah dies in Joel's arms and the title screen plays. This is the tutorial level of the game, spanning about 15-30 minutes, and it doesn't end how the player would expect. The protagonists aren't Joel and Sarah, a father and daughter, as the story initially leads the player into believing. The game instead delivers a punch, luring the

[16] Shea, Tom Mc. "The Last of Us Review." GameSpot. October 15, 2014. Accessed May 02, 2018. https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/the-last-of-us-review/1900-6409197/.

player into thinking that they have succeeded or will succeed in escaping the city, especially given all of the other smaller red herrings such as Joel and his brother carrying his daughter after she breaks her leg. If anything, it is the brother who is set up to die after he briefly gets separated from Joel and Sarah. Instead, they player receives the same shock as Joel as he watches the soldier shoot his daughter after he receives orders to shoot anyone who tries to leave the town. It sets up a bitter and somber game, nothing like the rest of the tutorial level, which feels fairly standard so far as zombie survival games go. It shows the player that this isn't just a game about survival and suggests that no character is safe, no matter how long a player spends with them.

Fig. 2. The Last of Us, *Ellie with a Rifle*. Source: Naughty_Dog, *Joel and Ellie rifle.* October 22, 2013, Digital Image. Available from: Flickr, https://www.flickr.com/photos/naughty_dog/10425885165/in/album-72157628351324573/ (accessed May 7, 2018).

The majority of the game takes place twenty years after the initial outbreak. Joel is now a veteran smuggler who agrees to help sneak a young girl named Ellie out of a Quarantine Zone controlled by the military and to the hideout of the Fireflies (a revolutionary militia group). It is eventually revealed that Ellie is immune to the *cordyceps* fungus and that she has decided to join

the Fireflies in hopes of finding a cure. Like many other zombie-style apocalypse games, this isn't a new plot convention. Having a single person as the cure who has to be defended and taken to scientists or someone carrying the vaccine is a timeless trope that works every time to build up hope and suspense. However, as with the other "standard" tropes within *The Last of Us*, the game manages to twist this as well in a conflict that goes beyond simply having Joel protect and guide Ellie while building a relationship of necessity and healing along the way. It isn't a pretty relationship—its incredibly messy and they're both forced to confront their past as they work together to overcome various obstacles. Joel and Ellie are both trying to work through the grief of losing a loved one. For Joel, it's the loss of his daughter and the fear of getting attached to Ellie. For Ellie, it's the death of her friend and trying to balance the idea of being a child in a world where children have to act as adults. It's a game that doesn't hold back and the "victory" at the end is a selfish partial win that leaves many things unsaid between the two protagonists.

Ideally in a zombie tale, at the end of the story, the protagonists would get the cure to where it needs to go, be it in the form of a serum of some kind or a character's blood. In *The Last of Us* the cure can't be derived from the blood because the *cordyceps* fungus lives in the brain. The only way to attempt to find a cure is to extract it, which will kill the patient. This wouldn't be a problem if the patient weren't a fourteen-year-old girl that the player has spent hours getting to know, building up a relationship with her just as much as Joel has. As Green says, *"The Last of Us* takes 20–25 hr on average to complete, meaning that its story arc, development of characters, and exploration of complex thematic and symbolic elements far exceed any film, and rival an entire first season of a standard, 1-hr American network show. The story, if written in

prose, would reach novel length."[17] The player is forced to join Joel while he decides whether to save one girl or all of humanity. Ultimately, both the player and Joel choose the prior, in spite of Ellie's wishes. *The Last of Us* isn't a neat, clean game with a feel-good ending. It is realistic and gritty and it relies on the characters and their choices to drive the story even more so than the

Fig 3. The Last of Us, *Ellie watching Joel*. Source: Naughty_Dog, *shotgun ellie anticipation.* June 4, 2012, Digital Image. Available from: Flickr, https://www.flickr.com/photos/naughty_dog/7339373994/in/album-72157628351324573/ (accessed May 7, 2018).

obstacles that the player is forced to overcome. The player sees the relationship between Joel and Ellie play out bit by bit through their chatter during exploration and during cutscenes. Some conversations are fun, showing a budding father-daughter relationship. Others show the darker parts of their relationship and their conflicting ideologies. By the end of the game, the player has to question whether or not Joel chose correctly and whether Joel is ultimately the true villain of the game for taking away the hope for a cure and denying Ellie's wishes (and for slaughtering a number of scientists and doctors working with the Fireflies along the way). This isn't the first

[17] Green, A. (2016). The Reconstruction of Morality and the Evolution of Naturalism in The Last of Us. *Games and Culture, 11*(7-8), 746.

time in the game where Joel has watched someone around him sacrifice themselves for the "greater good" of humanity. His friend (and lover) Tess chooses to go out on her own terms after being infected, buying Joel and Ellie time to escape because she believes that Ellie is the cure that the world has been looking for. Joel is a character who generally isn't emotional (unless the memory of his daughter is brought up). As Green describes him, he is "marked by strategy and logic" which is seen multiple times through play and cutscenes.[18] He has no issues with killing humans if it means surviving to live another day. And yet, at the end of the game he makes a selfish decision to save Ellie over humanity "a relatively small choice—one man saving one teenager for whom he has become a surrogate father. Yet his choice reverberates, potentially across all of humanity."[19] His choice may be championed by the player, who has spent hours getting to watch Joel and Ellie's relationship build, or rebuked because of the morality of it, but ultimately it was an emotional decision that helps to score the humanity of the game.

For a game where character choice is so important, the player has almost no actual control over the progression of the story. The narrative is entirely linear with a predetermined story that has been performed by actors through motion capture cutscenes and recorded dialogue that is periodically triggered through exploration that helps to build up Ellie and Joel's relationship while they travel. Most of the levels are organized with walls and debris acting as a trail to lead the character to whatever the ultimate destination is. The environment within the game is fairly realistic, based in part on the speculative research done in the book, *The World Without Us* by Alan Weisman, which explores how nature would begin to take over if humans

[18] Ibid., 750.
[19] Ibid., 751.

were no longer present.[20] The developers took time to show the decay of our society, taking careful note of how different materials would react to nature's reclamation. Cutscenes occasionally interrupt the exploration of this post-apocalyptic world. Likewise, the player has the option to stop in rooms or to search around to uncover more information about the current world or to find loot that can be used to help ease the advancement of the game. Most of the information found throughout the world comes in the form of recordings, wall paintings, or journal entries left behind by now deceased individuals that give the player clues about the days after the outbreak. Many of these also hint at the more ominous motives and history of the Fireflies, such as records left behind by a doctor about previous cases of immune individuals who were essentially dissected.

Mechanically, *The Last of Us* plays similarly to a lot of other survival-horror games. Most problems are solved through the elimination or avoidance of infected people (many of which have different behaviors to which the player has to learn to adapt). Furthermore, there is a crafting system that requires the player to pick up ordinary objects in order to create weapons, items to help create distractions, or to regenerate health. Players learn how to craft more items as the game progresses through finding schematics. This crafting is all done in real-time, combining the narrative and play aspects to create tension for the player. While most problems in the game are solved through this mixture of violence and crafting, there are a few notable points where the player has to solve puzzles by switching between the two characters Joel and Ellie. These puzzles stand out in the game and eventually lead to a major plot point at the very end of the game. Early on, Joel learns that Ellie can't swim, so any time the player encounters a body of water, they have to switch between Joel and Ellie's perspective in order to find or create a raft or

[20] Weisman, Alan. *The World Without Us*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martins Press, 2007.

pathway that Ellie can use. This is done successfully multiple times through the game until near the end when the two are trapped in a submerged bus after trying to escape some infected people. Unlike other times in the game where Ellie's AI usually has her run to a safe location, she find herself swept up in the water as well and Joel (currently the PC) has to play out failing to save her. This eventually triggers a cutscene with Joel trying to revive Ellie before being knocked out by the Fireflies. Because this scene was divided into a mixture of expected play (the player expects Ellie to find safety or expects to be able to save her if they win the level) and forced cutscene, it is far more intense than it would have been if it had been just an extended cutscene.

As with the mechanic of Ellie being unable to swim, the designers were clever in their decision to have certain mechanics in the game be automatic, allowing for some other decisive plot points to feel more realistic than if they had been the only cutscene in contrast to the other typical uses of said mechanics in the game. Whenever Joel climbs over an object such as a ledge or through a broken window, an unavoidable animation ensues. The player cannot react at all while Joel is moving through this animation. They can't shift, reload, or even cancel moving through the window or over an object and they can still take damage. For the most part this seems unimportant for the first half of the game—just a mechanic the player has to be aware of if they're surrounded by enemies and don't want to get picked off. Likewise, there is another mechanic where the player is forced to repeatedly press a command while stuck in a grapple animation. They have to do this to fight off their opponent while still hopefully avoiding any other enemies attacking. This changes at the end of the *Fall* section of the game, while Joel and Ellie are trying to escape enemies in a university that they believed the Fireflies might be using. Joel is tackled near a window and the player is given the command to grapple. The player does this but before they can succeed the game seamlessly switches into a cutscene where Joel and his

opponent are both unbalanced and knocked out of the window. His attacker immediately dies and Joel is impaled. The game forces the player to continue through Joel's perspective until a time skip ensues. If the player doesn't have the *Left Behind* DLC (which shows the immediate aftermath of Joel's injury, Ellie's attempt to care for him, and flashbacks to when she was originally bitten), then the game skips to *Winter* at which point the player is now playing as Ellie. Because of the previous events of the game, the player can't be certain that Joel will survive. By this point in the game the player has been introduced to at least four different characters who have joined the current PC and have died despite seeming to be immune due to age or character development. The game has inspired a realistic uncertainty. The player has come to understand that there is nothing they can do to change predetermined effects but by this point they are also invested in the outcome of the character's stories. By the time that players realize this though, they have already developed an empathy for the protagonists and a willingness to see the story through, despite the potentially grim ending. This uncertainty, hope, and fear even drives the player to continue on through the game.

Games without player agency can come off as stiff or flat. This is something that linear, narrative driven games without player-choice have to carefully balance or else risk the player feeling useless. *The Last of Us* attempts to deliver a strong, compelling story with immersive lore that could have been spoon-fed to the player through long, awkward and mandatory dialogue. Instead, the player has to explore if they want to learn more. The majority of the story is conveyed through the chatter of the two protagonists in short conversational bursts that are more about their developing relationship than the hard science of the world. *The Last of Us* succeeds as a survival horror game because the developers kept the player in mind while working on each major unavoidable plot point. They knew there were sections that they needed to have a decisive

event and rather than relegate these events to a cutscene, they gave the player hope that they can succeed because they've succeeded every other time before doing this exact same thing—so to have it *not* work this one time when it matters makes the impact that much more. The game is truly immersive, which is why it is such an effective game. It makes use of all aspects—the graphics, score, sound effects, lighting, mechanics, and story to create a compelling game for the audience to experience.

b. Horizon Zero Dawn

Like *The Last of Us*, *Horizon Zero Dawn* has a set story but unlike *The Last of Us* the open world design allows for a flexible narrative that can be discovered through exploration and play. A player can choose to do a dozen side-quests (which act as mini-stories) instead of engaging with the main story or they can choose to do the exact opposite. *Horizon Zero Dawn* relies on the strong voice of the protagonist Aloy to help carry the story no matter what narrative decisions the player ultimately makes. Having a strong central character is what makes *Horizon Zero Dawn* stand out as an open world action RPG as opposed to *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), which is similar in the sense that it is an open world RPG with a high number of narrative player decisions, but it lacks a PC with an overt personality and drive. Both games offer player decision and different tones for the PC whenever a decision is made but *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*'s protagonist(s), the Dragonborn, are designed to be a blank slate that players can easily imprint on whereas Aloy, while still given different tonal options, still has a set base personality. She can be "clever," "compassionate," or "pugnacious" based on the dialogue choices offered to the player but no matter what choice she makes she still remains a distinct character who values curiosity and exploration. Balancing open world exploration with a set

story opens up a number of narrative choices for the player and allows for each playthrough to be different while still setting a single, strong story.

As previously stated, *Horizon Zero Dawn* follows the character Aloy as she attempts to answer two critical questions: who was her mother and what caused the destruction of the "Old Ones"—or us. Through these two questions players are effectively given the tools to explore the world that Guerrilla Games has produced for the player, one filled with machines fashioned after animals and decaying, nature-reclaimed elements from our world. IGN's Lucy O'Brian describes the game as "one of those games [that leaves an indelible mark on the memory], and it carves out a unique identity within the popular action-roleplaying genre. Coupled with wonderfully flexible combat and a story that touches on unexpectedly profound themes, I found it hard to tear myself away from Horizon even after I'd finished its main campaign some 40 odd hours later."[21]

Fig. 4. Horizon Zero Dawn, *Horizon Zero Dawn*. Source: PlayStation.Blog, *Horizon Zero Dawn: Photo Mode*. February 28, 2017, Digital Image. Available from: Flickr, https://www.flickr.com/photos/playstationblog/33164058405/in/album-72157677320209044/ (accessed May 7, 2018).

[21] O'Brien, Lucy. "Horizon Zero Dawn Review." IGN. February 20, 2017. Accessed May 02, 2018. http://www.ign.com/articles/2017/02/20/horizon-zero-dawn-review.

Where the core of *The Last of Us* is the relationship between Joel and Ellie, *Horizon Zero Dawn* relies solely on the game's protagonist and the environment to drive the narrative and the player through the story. There isn't as much direct conversational interactions, so instead the player has to work through different puzzles and side quests to unlock the lore of the game. The merging of exploration, play, and story is evident even at the start of the game. The game begins with a young Aloy trying to connect with the other members of her clan, despite being born into exile due to her lack of having a mother (which is a key factor in her society, which is matriarchal). She watches other children her age collecting berries with one of the adults and mimics them, bringing the berries as an offering to the woman in hopes of receiving the same affection and attention. However, the woman instead immediately tells the other children to go away with her and explains to one of them as they're leaving "She's an outcast to be shunned." One of the children lingers, watching her, but he is led away as well. After seeing the reactions of the other clan members, particularly that of the woman, she runs away and accidentally falls into a cave, which she learns belonged to the "Old Ones". In doing so, she's introduced to the first hints of the world's past and the player is shown the basic mechanics of the game, which are

Fig. 5. Horizon Zero Dawn, *Aloy finds the Focus*. Source: Gamer's Little Playground, *Horizon Zero Dawn All Cutscenes (Game Movie) PS4 PRO 1080p*. February 27, 2017, Digital Image. Available from: YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeN-icSgvG0 (accessed May 7, 2018).

slowly built upon as Aloy grows up. Essentially, the game ensures that the player is constantly learning alongside of Aloy, which creates a stronger connection to her as the protagonist and creates a logical reason for the player and Aloy to be learning the game's various mechanics. Aloy's strong voice, curiosity about the "Old Ones" and her personal quest to discover her mother act as the anchor in what could otherwise be a very dizzying game. Keith Stuart wrote a brief article regarding Aloy's drive, noting that unlike a lot of other game protagonists,

> Aloy, is not so much motivated by some grand mission to save humanity (though that sort of comes into it), she is motivated by intellectual curiosity. She is fascinated by the mechanized monsters roaming the landscape and the ruins of an ancient technological culture that she first discovers as a child, and she wants to learn more. Her interactions with the world, the characters and the wider narrative within it, are all personal rather than heroic. In short, she acts like a human being.[22]

Aloy acts as a perfect protagonist because like the player, she wants to explore the world around her and she's discovering things with the player. This is incredibly effective in a game like *Horizon Zero Dawn* where the story could very easily have fallen into the trap of just "saving the world." The game allows Aloy to be selfish though and to have human desires outside of discovering the various antagonists. While her intellectual ventures are related to the core of the story and do help to defeat the antagonist, the fact that she is allowed to have her own desires makes her stand out from other games which run with the "Chosen One" trope. *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* for example draws the protagonist into the main quest line because of their birthright as the Dragonborn—they are the only one physically capable of saving the world. Aloy does fall

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[22] Stuart, Keith. "Dawn of a new era: why the best video games are not about saving the world." *The Guardian*. April 19, 2017. Accessed February 01, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/apr/19/horizon-zero-dawn-why-best-modern-video-games-are-not-about-saving-the-world.

into this trope as well due to her heritage but unlike the Dragonborn, her heritage is part of her overall character arc and the player is invited to become emotionally invested in her quest to discover her heritage because this discovery is shown to be her drive—not saving the world. The Dragonborn simply is "Dragonborn" and there is no emotional payoff from discovering this fact. Aloy however spends the entire game trying to discover who she is and the player is invited to join her in trying to discover how her story intertwines with her quest to save the world. Her quest to discover her heritage is the primary quest while the adventure to save the world is secondary. In essence, an emotional payoff is created for saving the world via the primary quest of discovering Aloy's mother and past. As Stuart points out that, "This shift in focus from the mythic/epic to the personal seems to indicate a maturing medium – video games are gathering the confidence to think about conflict and motivation in more complicated ways."[23]

Where the story and protagonist stand as some of the greatest strengths of the game, they also unfortunately hinder the game at times. Unlike *The Last of Us* which attempts to unify the games cutscenes through player action and expectation, *Horizon Zero Dawn* can at times leave the player feeling trapped due to the lack of options within different cutscenes. While the player is given emotional options and different conversation threads through the dialogue system, ultimately these moments are stiff and at worse, they take the player out of the action. There are a number of major plot points within the game where the action is literally yanked out of the player's hands and given over to a cutscene that the player is forced to watch but in which they may not participate. They may be given the option either before the cutscene or after to engage in combat or to have a brief conversation with options but overall the satisfaction of finishing off some bosses is given up to a premade visual in lieu of allowing players a choice. The most

[23] Ibid.

notable example of this comes at the end of the game where the player engages in a standard (what should be a) mini-boss fight before they are supposed to engage with the final boss. However, as soon as they defeat the mini-boss and move to engage the final boss they are forced into a cutscene that lasts almost seven minutes during which time the player can only engage visually with the text. This is, in part, due to the number of storylines being wrapped up within the cutscene. The story has to conclude the fight with Aloy's nemesis, the search for her mother, and the epilogue. While it is an incredibly emotional cutscene that gives closure to Aloy and the player for one of the major storylines it takes the play out of the game. There are a number of different paths the developers could have taken with the ending to give more player agency, things as small as adding different emotional choice options but instead the developers opted for a singular, unified ending that every player has to experience regardless of any previous choices. In a way it negates all previous player agency and at worst it makes the journey feel forced and gives the player the sense that there is only an illusion of choice. In a game where the player has so far been shown as the most important aspect due to the sandbox format of the narrative and gameplay, it is a little jarring to be unable to do anything at this point.

This sudden lack of choice become especially prominent if the player has completed most of the larger side quests, such as clearing out the bandit camps with Nil or if you've gone through the trouble of finding Olin. In the case of Nil, Aloy discovers along her journeys with him that while he does use his talents for killing bandits (and only bandits as of the time you meet him) there was a time where he didn't particularly care who he killed and goes on to admit that he simply loves killing and the thrill of combat. It's heavily implied that he gets a sick high from it which they player has the choice of reacting either positively or negatively to through Aloy. If the player clears out all of the bandit camps with Nil they are eventually given the

option to choose whether or not to fight Nil in a "friendly combat" to the death. Should they choose to fight him the player is forced to kill him. If they decide to not fight him he will live, respecting Aloy's wish not to fight. Aloy's decision of whether or not to kill Olin is no less dicey. Olin is in part responsible for the death of many of Aloy's peers and her father figure Rost. However, the player discovers that the only reason that Olin was complicit with their deaths was because his family was being held hostage. After tracking Olin down, Aloy (and the player) are given the choice of either killing Olin or letting him live. Regardless of what choice the player makes, they are prompted to go try and find his family. In both cases, there is a payoff for the player's choice—their decision has an impact on the game both in the game's world state and emotionally for the player. These two choices (among others) train the player to think that certain plot points in the game will have a major decision offered and payoff. Therefore, the game's ending creates a schism. The ending is instead treated like a minor quest and the lead up makes it fall short. This becomes especially evident given how much time and effort is put into making sure that Aloy is a strong character that players would want to connect with.

When pitching the game, Guerrilla Games' director Mathijs de Jonge stated that the game had three key pillars that defined the game, "Aloy was first. Then she had to contrast against the other two: beautiful, lush nature and the machines. It was really important to make the whole thing feel coherent and deliver a unique experience to the player."[24] Guerrilla Games succeeded in making a protagonist that players wanted to experience, which is why the ending's lack of agency and Aloy's lack of reaction during the final fight makes the final boss fight so flat. The final cutscene where Aloy finds her heritage is rewarding since it allows Aloy to complete her

[24] Brotherson, Corey. 2017. "The Creation of Horizon Zero Dawn's Aloy, as Told by Guerrilla Games." Web log. *PlayStation.Blog*. Sony. February 13. https://blog.eu.playstation.com/2017/02/13/the-creation-of-horizon-zero-dawns-aloy-as-told-by-guerrilla-games/.

true quest and thus, allows the player to experience the bittersweet triumph with her. The cutscene after the battle is simply a celebration of victory—they player may get satisfaction from seeing their allies alive and well, cheering and standing alongside of them, but finding satisfaction with the actual defeat of the antagonist is more difficult, especially given that it is revealed that the player and Aloy didn't actually defeat the antagonist and that they were betrayed—something that Aloy is unaware of and thus far, most of the game has been experienced alongside of Aloy. The player doesn't get to share her emotional reaction, which is a key component of this particular game's design up to this point.

Fig. 6. Horizon Zero Dawn, *Entering the Cauldron*. Source: Angelica Fuchs, *Horizon Zero Dawn™_20170712001930*. July 15, 2017, Digital Image.

That stated, the only reason this ending falls flat is because the other build-ups within the game have been so successful. Every other reveal or victory has been met with a reaction from Aloy or her companions. The player experiences Aloy's emotional struggles in much the same way a reader would experience those of a novel's protagonist's feelings since Aloy often vocalizes her thoughts. This, when paired with the voice acting, score, and the game's face

renderings, make a strong, encompassing narrative. The environment ties in with Aloy's curiosity and thus drives the player to want to interact with it and the game as a whole. This is often shown in reviews, which state how the game promotes the idea of movement both in terms of exploration and plot, which help to make it stand out as an open world, combat-based game. O'Brian states, "A sense of urgency is established from the get-go, as Horizon's premise is a big mystery that begs to be solved. The questions raised by protagonist Aloy and the primitive, feral machine-infested open world she inhabits kept me guessing throughout: *what's at the centre of it all?* […] Horizon's combat is its most compelling feature, thanks to the variety found within 26 distinct species of animal-like machines that roam its great far-future expanse."[25] Like with *The Last of Us*, crafting within the game is done in real time, prompting a yet more urgency and need for strategy when confronting the machines within the world. The set up of traps and the need for stealth help to make each confrontation unique and create a stronger sense of verisimilitude within the universe. A player can't simply pause the game to use a few health poultices. They have to evade the machines while applying their healing items, using other items all the while to stun enemies to give them a chance to flee and set up the encounter to go in their favor. All of these aspects helped to make *Horizon Zero Dawn* a compelling play that merges many of its ludic and narrative aspects.

c. BioWare: *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect*

This section of the case study will be focusing specifically on BioWare games as a whole and in particular, *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009), *Dragon Age 2* (2011), *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), *Mass Effect 1* (2007), *Mass Effect 2* (2010), and *Mass Effect 3* (2012). *Mass Effect Andromeda* (2017) will be excluded since it stands external to the overarching story of the *Mass*

[25] O'Brien, Lucy. "Horizon Zero Dawn Review." IGN. February 20, 2017. Accessed May 02, 2018. http://www.ign.com/articles/2017/02/20/horizon-zero-dawn-review.

Effect series. Likewise, the DLC endings for each game will be excluded since they were not included with the base game (this includes the *Tresspasser* DLC for *Dragon Age: Inquisition* which is integral for understanding the ending of the game).

Dragon Age is a fantasy RPG series that follows a different PC for each game. *Dragon Age* is set in the world of Thedas. In *Origins*, the PC is a Grey Warden (which also happens to be the character's name whenever another player or NPC refers to them) who is tasked with trying to stop a phenomenon known as 'the Blight', which is essentially the invasion of demon-like monsters known as Darkspawn. *Dragon Age 2* follows the PC Hawke who is a refugee of the Blight. Hawke goes to the city of Kirkwall and end up getting involved in the city's politics. They ultimately become the "Champion" of Kirkwall after defending the city from invasion. However by the end of the game they are seen as either a messiah or pariah after the tensions between Templars and Mages, two warring factions, boil over into chaos. The final game in the series, *Inquisition*, takes place almost directly after the events of *Dragon Age 2* and follows a character who becomes known as the "Inquisitor." They are tasked with trying to seal a rift between the physical world and the Fade (which serves as the home of demons, magic, and dreams). *Mass Effect* on the other hand is a sci-fi RPG that follows a single PC throughout the entire series. Commander Shephard is a well-respected N7 Alliance Marine who stumbled upon a threat to the galaxy. They become the first human Spectre (an elite unit that serves the Citadel Council) in order to pursue this threat.

The *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* series allow for a high degree of both character and story customization. While there is a "quick start" option that will allow the player to choose a premade protagonist, it isn't uncommon for a player to spend a large amount of time fiddling with the customization options. They are able to choose the character's race (in *Dragon Age*—

there is only one option in *Mass Effect*), gender, looks, and class, as well as their specific backstory (in *Mass Effect* they choose during customization scene; *Dragon Age* backstories are tied to the character's race and class). While both games share similar building options (and even some of the same models and animation rigs since they are both built in the same engine) their fundamental starting points and the long-term repercussions of them vary drastically. *Dragon Age: Origins* in particular allows for the player to choose between three races and a melee or magical class (if they're playing an elf or human). Depending on their race and class, the player is given four different potential openings that set the backstory for their character. Echoes of each backstory can be felt throughout the game no matter which character the player ends up choosing and it becomes implied that the other potential "protagonists" died since the mentor Duncan isn't there to save the potential protagonist and serve as their call to adventure. As such, any tasks that the other protagonists might have done are left incomplete or at the worst possible state (such as various NPCs being dead or antagonists escaping). Doing this allows for every play through of *Dragon Age Origins* to be unique. This is further amplified by the dialogue system, which, unlike *Horizon Zero Dawn*, does create lasting repercussions for the player/character that can span across multiple games. The rest of the *Dragon Age* games and *Mass Effect* games do this to a lesser degree. Most of the backstories only vary slightly but they allow for different potential dialogue options, some of which are only available if the player is playing as a specific class, race, or gender. *Dragon Age: Origins* was easily the most ambitious though in terms of potential replay value and story variation. As IGN's Jeff Haynes's review of *Dragon Age: Origins* states, "Incredibly deep and expansive, *Dragon Age: Origins* is one of those titles that can easily swallow up dozens of hours of play and keep you coming back for more. […] This is the kind of adventure that fantasy RPG fans have been hoping that BioWare

would deliver; a game with a ton of re-playability and an incredibly vivid world that is the start of an impressive franchise."[26] It should be noted, however, that Hayes does suggest that due to the complexity and ambitious nature of the game, there are certain aspects that can become repetitive. Given the scope of the game, this is understandable. Most of the repetitive aspects he notes were within the quest the various quests and the nature of them, "Even though the results of your actions vary, it can become a bit stale. Not every single city needs Macbeth, King Lear or other Shakespearean styled machinations to drive the action forward."[27] Hayes also notes that the game lacks mechanically. While he praises the tactical mode for combat, he suggests that the overall combat system and difficulties are boring, even if there are multiple ways to engage enemies (real time, through the paused tactical menu where the player can manage what each of their allies do in combat, and using the radial menu to change up combat abilities).[28]

While combat is certainly part of the game, the focus of these two trilogies relies heavily on the concept of co-authorship with the player, emulating a digital version of *Dungeons and Dragons* to an extent. The narrative designers serve as the DMs and the players are invited to play through their campaign. While *Horizon Zero Dawn* does allow for co-authorship thanks to the sandbox format of the quest and exploration systems, ultimately there is only one potential ending. *Dragon Age: Origins* for example has four potential main endings for the player but even those branch off and have variations based on the player's decisions both when building their PC and through the choices they make during the game. Each game's ending has a lasting impact on the player as well if they choose to continue playing through the series. Each sequel offers the player a choice to import a "world state," which will change how the game starts in conjunction

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[26] Haynes, Jeff. "Dragon Age: Origins Review." IGN. November 3, 2009. Accessed May 02, 2018. http://www.ign.com/articles/2009/11/04/dragon-age-origins-review?page=1
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

with their new protagonist. In *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the third game in the *Dragon Age* series, if the player decides to import their previous world states from the first two games, they will have different NPCs that they can interact with based on things such as political choices made by previous protagonists or whether a NPC (or even PC) died in a previous game.

Fig. 7. Dragon Age: Inquisition, *Dialogue Wheel*. Source: Angelica Fuchs, *Dragon Age™_ Inquisition_20160128234158*. February 2, 2016, Digital Image.

This co-authorship is further expanded by the different relationships the PC is able to build with each game's supporting cast. Kristine Jørgensen highlights this in her article, "Game Characters as Narrative Devices. A Comparative Analysis of 'Dragon Age: Origins' and 'Mass Effect 2.*'"* "[*Mass Effect 2* and *Dragon Age Origins*] focus on the development of supporting characters. The effect is games that are able to integrate interesting narratives into game play. By equipping supporting characters with agendas of their own, the games have allowed a coherent narrative experience that is dependent on the motivations of supporting characters instead of that

of the player character."[29] Jørgensen goes on to explain that in these games, the player is invited to not only be the hero in terms of leading the party and making major world decisions, but also through conflict negotiation.[30] In contrast to *The Last of Us* and *Horizon Zero Dawn*, it isn't the protagonists that the player is designed to become emotionally attached to but rather the plethora of companions and the bonds that are formed between them. They aren't merely sidekicks or heavy-handed plot pushers. Every character that joins the PC's party has their own reason for being there and sometimes its not immediately obvious or good. Jørgensen notes, "*DAO* and *ME2* base companions on well-known templates and stereotypes, but make them interesting by giving them additional, and often surprising personality traits that are presented little by little throughout the game. Instead of fleshing out the uniqueness of a companion from the very beginning, the games use recognizable templates to ensure a familiar first impression."[31] In *Mass Effect 2* for example, the player can recruit Jack, aka Subject Zero, who is a known criminal that shows little to no empathy. Initially she comes off as violent and extremely antisocial and her profile doesn't help this impression as it sets her up to be viewed as a psychopath. As the game progresses and the PC Shepherd has more interactions with Jack, the reasons for her personality and crimes are revealed. Where previously a player might have felt hesitant to like Jack (or may have even felt they were a little cliché), they then learn that Jack has a tragic past and most of their actions have understandable reasons even if they don't mesh morally with the PC's standards (depending on the personality they've decided to roleplay for their PC). BioWare likes to twist the stereotypical, expected tropes. In *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the character Blackwall

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[29] Jørgensen, Kristine. "Game characters as narrative devices. A comparative analysis of dragon age: Origins and Mass Effect 2." *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture* 4, no. 2 (2010): 315-331.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

comes off as a sympathetic, wise, and almost regal despite his often humble actions. He's introduced as a member of a respected order that literally sells their lives to protect the world. It is then later revealed that Blackwall actually stole his name from the real Blackwall after the real Blackwall died. The Blackwall that the player has come to know is in reality a murderer and deserter who has been attempting to change his ways (it's up to the player to decide later whether to believe that Blackwall really has changed).

As the player explores the world (both in *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect*) they are given the option to recruit these different allies. Some are mandatory to the plot and cannot be avoided (although the player can choose not to have them in their active party at times) while others can only be triggered through exploration or interactions. Likewise, not every party member is a permanent addition to the player's team. Since each party member has their own agenda, the player has to interact with their companions in a way that is agreeable *to them*. *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* use an approval system, which the player has to use in order to gain favor with their companions. Higher approval allows for rewards such as romance and close friendship dialogue options, side quests, and in the case of some party members, maintaining their status as party members. For example, in *Dragon Age: Origins* the player has the option of recruiting the assassin Zevran Arainai after he fails to assassinate the PC and their party. If the player chooses to recruit him instead of killing him, the player has to build up their approval rating with Zevran through private conversations, gifts, and NPC interactions that he approves of. If the player fails to get a high enough approval rating, then eventually Zevran will choose to rejoin the assassins and the PC will be forced to kill their once companion. In later games BioWare changed the approval system so the player can no longer actively check what their actual approval rating is.

Fig. 8. Dragon Age: Inquisition, *Approval System*. Source: Angelica Fuchs, *Dragon Age™_ Inquisition_20160417013434*. February 2, 2016, Digital Image.

Players see messages on the screen indicating "approval" or "disapproval" but they have no way of telling exactly where they stand on the scale. While this adds uncertainty to the game, it also allows for players to build up relationships more naturally and forces them to consider their decisions more carefully for the long run since they aren't getting an exact numerical value on the approvals and disapprovals. Whereas in previous games it were it was easy to know when to go back to a previous save state to fix a bad dialogue choice that caused a party member to be offended, now players have to guess based on the options given in direct dialogue between the PC and companion and the general tone of their past interactions.

One of the issues with having a game that relies so heavily on the narrative is that it is easier for the play to clash with the narrative of the game, in essence creating what Clint Hocking, a creative director in the gaming industry, calls a "ludonarrative dissonance" in his

2007 blog post, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in *Bioshock*."[32] In the article he expresses the idea of a ludic contract, which is essentially the player acknowledging the rules of the universe in order to play and progress. This concept is expanded to also encompass the moral, narrative rules of the game. For example players in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* will find that there is no consequence for attacking anything out in the open world during their exploration. If they attack rebel mages, they will not be inhibited from supporting them later on and vise versa for the Templars. There lies part of the problem though: the mechanics of the game aren't matching with the lore. The world's lore would suggest that killing rebel mages would make it difficult to later ally with them, especially if the PC did so as a mage themselves.

The *Dragon Age* franchise as a whole has difficulties when it comes to ludonarrative dissonance whenever mage lore and mechanics are involved. It essentially boils down to inconsistencies between the narrative and what actually happens in the gameplay itself. In *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Dragon Age 2*, if the PC character or their companions are mages it is blindingly obvious thanks to their long robes and giant staff, yet in *Dragon Age: Origins* when the player goes to talk to Alistair for the first time he will always say, "Wait, we haven't met, have we? I don't suppose you happen to be another mage?" He will say this regardless of whether you are obviously a mage or a dwarf (which is the only race in Thedas which can't be mages). This interaction could be taken as him being facetious as he is a notoriously snarky character, but throughout the game it seems as though no one can see the PC's attire regardless of how obvious it is. *Dragon Age 2* takes this a step further when the PC Hawke speaks with the Templar Cullen, who is utterly oblivious to Hawke (if they're a mage) or Hawke's mage

[32] Hocking, Clint. "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock." *Click Nothing* (web log), October 7, 2007. Accessed February 8, 2018. http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html.

companions, despite being tasked with capturing and guarding all mages. By the point in the game where this conversation is triggered, Hawke will have already gotten the very obvious robe mage armor and staff that was used in the previous game. In a world where mages are so carefully regulated and feared as abominations, it makes sense that mechanically the game would have to actively create a narrative dissonance in order for the PC and their mage companions to achieve anything, but it still creates a break in the game's lore, especially when a NPC will point out the issues of rogue mages in the same breath as complimenting a mage PC for their work. With Hawke in particular this issue is further amplified when the game's antagonist Meredith (another Templar) points out that she's known that Hawke was a mage all along, but seemingly she did nothing about it. It could be argued that her reason for not doing anything was because by this point in the game Hawke is a rich, respected man within Kirkwall, but it seems like an odd exception to make given her harsh stance, not to mention that Hawke has been running around Kirkwall for years using magic on the streets in combat prior to his climbing the social ladder. This little issue might have been overlooked if *Dragon Age 2* didn't center around the conflict brewing between the Templars and mages that eventually boils over at the end of the game. Other instances of ludonarrative dissonances within *Dragon Age* in particular include characters being injured by or ingesting the blood of darkspawn which is supposed to be poisonous unless prepared in a certain way (which is used to create the Grey Wardens and give them their abilities). In combat during *Dragon Age: Origins*, the PC and their companion Alistair are immune, but none of their other companions should be. As with most games, combat doesn't leave a lasting effect on the character beyond lower health. The developers could have experimented with a debuff for companions who aren't immune after fighting with darkspawn, but instead the game opted for a standard combat model. Another minor break is the way that

NPCs react to what should otherwise be “foreign” or “odd” races such as the dwarves, Dalish elves, or Qunari. While there are some specialty dialogue options that become available to each of these races and some NPCs do have unique acknowledgements, for the most part these characters are able to operate as if they were human warriors no matter where it is that they go. Realistically a dwarf might get some odd looks, the Dalish would be talked down to, and the Qunari would be flat out feared after their attempted invasion of Kirkwall. This is something that Hayes points out,

> The largest issue that I had with the Origin feature is that some of the background elements fade away too easily as the game progresses, becoming little more than an afterthought. For example, many of Ferelden's citizens are extremely prejudiced against elves, but this bias eventually just disappears. Considering that a portion of the game revolves around uniting Ferelden against the Darkspawn, it would seem like you'd have to address these issues of racism somehow, especially if you happen to be an elven character. Simply tossing these endemic problems aside without any attempted mediation or resolution seems unrealistic and forced, and insults the plot of the game.[33]

While this issue is addressed a little more thoroughly in later games, it is still often glossed over in favor of advancing the plot and allowing for the player to have free range within the world. Most allowances in the game that create this ludonarrative dissonance are created specifically to ensure that the player can have a full experience regardless of what class (or race) they choose. It falls into the ludic contract that the player agrees to when they begin the game.

Due to the overall complexity of the narratives and backstory within these games, the developers also run into the issue of trying to balance how much information to put into each

[33] Haynes, Jeff. "Dragon Age: Origins Review." IGN. November 3, 2009. Accessed May 02, 2018. http://www.ign.com/articles/2009/11/04/dragon-age-origins-review?page=1

game. While each game stands as its own complete work for the most part (a few require DLCs to finish the full story such as *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and the extended cut of *Mass Effect 3* after player outrage over the original ending, which like *Horizon Zero Dawn*'s ending, made it seem like all choices within the game never actually mattered for the final outcome)[34] many of these games have outside works that facilitate and help to build up to the next game. For *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, a game filled with tense politics, a casual gamer—even one who has played through the previous two games—wouldn't necessarily have all of the information to understand some of the relatively important issues within the game. The novel *Asunder* acts as a prequel to the some of the events of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. It describes one of the starts of the mage rebellion (outside of the one in Kirkwall that is seen in *Dragon Age 2*) and introduces the character Cole who becomes a major companion in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. It also sets up the conclave, which isn't mentioned in *Dragon Age 2* and which the aftermath of can be seen at the start of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. While the player can infer the details of the conclave through dialogue and finding codices through gameplay (it was intended to act as a peace talk between the Templars and rebel mages), there is no way to know that Cole ever existed prior to *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and furthermore, his later quest to find his friends from *Asunder* make little to no sense to the casual gamer. Cole's very existence isn't entirely explained either in the game whereas *Asunder* works to completely explain his origins and abilities. Further, Cole's abilities are the same as other characters of the same class within the game, which essentially erases the idea that he is supposed to be different. There are some differences with his animations to help indicate this difference within the game, particularly with his stealth ability. When other

[34] Thier, Dave. "Why Fans Are So Angry About the Mass Effect 3 Ending." Forbes. March 14, 2012. https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidthier/2012/03/14/why-fans-are-so-angry-about-the-mass-effect-3-ending/#4da50fb7775f

characters in his class vanish, they have a slight shimmer to them. Cole on the other hand becomes translucent looks closer to the spirits in the game than other rogues. This is a small detail, but it does help to bridge the gap between the narrative and ludic dissonance. While a casual gamer can certainly still enjoy the game and Cole without having read *Asunder* some very glaring questions are answered through reading the book. There is also the issue that by having these important narrative moments outside of the game, it breaks the illusion of control that the player assumes they have when entering into one of the *Dragon Age* games. It sets a base world that happens, regardless of player choice. *The Masked Empire* is another book that serves as a prequel to *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and it details the Orlesian Civil War, which is another major conflict that the player becomes entangled in when they play *Dragon Age: Inquisition.* Without this novel, the player is simply thrust into the "political intrigue" of the Orlesian court after occasionally dealing with some of the fall out during open world exploration. For the most part the player is given a very watered down (and sometimes false) version of events and forced to make a major decision regarding the future of the Orlesian government.

While it is nice to have the world expanded outside of codices and awkward conversations, it's frustrating for players to be forced to pay for more media in order to have the complete game. This feeds into the argument about having required content within DLCs which as previously stated, BioWare has done with their *Trespasser* DLC. Should the extra content all be within the main game (even if it means creating a game that takes much longer to complete) or should it be maintained as a DLC or novel? If this content is regulated to DLC or novel status though, at what point should the player be forced to pay for it if the content is required for understanding the actual story? Further, should this content even be considered, particularly when it is a novel, when judging a video game's overall success (especially since novels remove

the play and player agency from the game)? In general, DLCs are understood as "plus" content—extras that enhance the story rather than being required to understand it. It could be argued though that by having this content as DLCs or novels, it allows for the developers to make full, well made games whereas longer games with all of the content could run into delays or feel overstuffed. It is one of the many dilemmas of creating lore heavy RPG games. Developers have to balance the play with the information delivery while also maintaining a strong correlation between the mechanics and lore so they don't cause the player to fall out of the game due to ludonarrative dissonance. This becomes particularly relevant when dealing with outside material that drastically alters how a player views a companion within the series since the developers chose to make the companions one of the main focuses of the game.

In the case of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the player has the option to recruit Cole. Depending on their narrative choices within the game, his appearance can come about in two different ways: either while the PC is trapped within nightmares that are created by an envy demon or shortly before the Inquisition's stronghold is invaded. Either way, Cole assists the PC and earns a degree of trust for this, despite his odd way of talking and phantom-esc abilities. He disappears for a short time before once again reappearing during a meeting with the advisors. At this point, the player is given the option to either recruit him or send him away. Some of the advisors will suggest to send him away since he's clearly not human. If he is recruited, the player will discover that he is odd, but overall good intentioned despite his abilities and status as a non-human. He can read thoughts and emotions and uses this unique skill to help people feel more at home or ease to ease their suffering if they're dying. Ideally, he simply wants to help out the Inquisitor and their allies in any way he can, as explained by his statement, "I want to help. I can be hard to see. I can kill things that would hurt people." This statement hints a little bit at the

other side of Cole that is rarely seen within *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. In the game, the player generally sees the Cole that hides weapons so they can't hurt people or stews vegetables to help remind someone of home. He is soft spoken, naïve and child-like. Eventually, the PC learns that Cole is actually a spirit and they can choose to either make him more or less human by encouraging him to make an emotional decision. Around this time, the player will also have the option to complete a separate special quest from Cole to find his friends, who up until this point have barely been mentioned, nor do they get much elaboration after being assisted. This is all information that is available within the game that can help the player make an informed decision about the status of Cole within their party and the opinion of him both within the game and outside of it. Within the novel *Asunder*, the reader (previously player) learns that Cole was never actually Cole to begin with. The real Cole was a mage who died within the dungeons of the Val Royeaux Circle of Magi. The spirit who became Cole helped the original Cole as much as he could while he was still alive, but eventually became entangled in his memories until he unintentionally assumed his identity, ultimately forgetting that he was a Spirit of Compassion. He became the Ghost of the Spire, a specter who roamed the halls of the Circle of Magi. While there, he killed mages who asked for a quick death rather than facing the erasure of Tranquility or abuse by the Templars. Although his actions were well intentioned, from the point of view of a few other protagonists within the novel, he is still identified as a murderer. A reader (and player) might choose differently when deciding whether or not to have him as a companion based on this expanded history since it might not fit with the morals of the PC they designed. They might also change their opinion on whether or not to make him more spirit-like or human during a later quest given that the choice involves him confronting a figure that was mentioned in the novel *Asunder* but not as much in the game. The emotional impact of that confrontation is

stronger if the player has read the novel and it makes Cole's choice far more sympathetic (no matter which one he makes).

In a game where the companions are the core, information like this is required since it helps to compensate for the lack of depth that the PC has. The companions are the emotional backbone of BioWare games and the game provides incentives to learn about them and make them happy. For the most part, BioWare does a good job of this. Scenes where the player has to choose one companion over another are made even more difficult because of these connections that they've forged. It's this aspect and the various narrative paths that makes *Dragon Age* and likewise *Mass Effect* stand out within their genre of RPG.

d. Journey

Fig. 9. (Top) Journey, *Journey Menu*. Source: Angelica Fuchs, *Journey_20180507184720*. May 7, 2018, Digital Image.

Fig. 10. (Bottom) Journey, *Journey Controls*. Source: Angelica Fuchs, *Journey_20180507184854*. May 7, 2018, Digital Image.

There isn't a single word of dialogue in the 2012 indie game, *Journey*. However the game still manages to express a full emotional story arch with a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end. The game begins with the sound of wind, a giant sand dune in the left corner with three stones perched on top, and a low sitting sun. There is a gentle rumbling and the player is invited to push 'x' to begin a 'New Journey.' The screen goes white, a violin begins to keen, and an

expanse of glittery sand slowly fades in before cutting away to reveal a large, empty desert. There is a streak of light that rolls across the land and then the camera pans down to show the PC—a red-cloaked, masked figure with glowing white eyes sitting in the desert. Through a visual indication, the player is invited to tilt their controller to shift the camera and to push forward on the left joystick to move forward. The only indication of which direction to travel in is the three stones from the beginning perched just on the horizon.

Fig. 11. Journey, *Journey Title*. Source: Angelica Fuchs, *Journey_20180507184950*. May 7, 2018, Digital Image.

The PC slowly climbs the hill to the stones and the camera zooms out to reveal a large glowing mountain in the distance overlaid with the title 'Journey' and a solemn violin. The opening of *Journey* is unique in that it never explicitly tells the player what to do or where to go except through the actual design of the game. Visuals presented in the opening cutscene suggest a general direction and the first few minutes give a few vague control instructions but beyond that the game is left entirely up to the player to explore. Without dialogue or instructions to carry the

game's story, the game relies on the visuals, music, and intuitive design to help lead the player through the journey.

The objective in *Journey* is simple and implied at the beginning of the game: travel to the mountain. There isn't an implicit reward for doing so such as new robes or better stats (although there are opportunities to gain both)—which is another way that this game differentiates itself from other games of the same scale. The player never once initiates combat in the game and is given no means to actively fight back if an enemy confronts them. The only means of escape a player has is to jump/fly and they can only do this if they have enough energy to do so. Even then, no matter how close the danger gets, it is almost impossible for a player to fail—and yet the player will feel the building tension and fear as flying guardians with spotlight eyes swim overhead. They'll rush to the fires as their avatar called the Traveler (although they are never explicitly named in the game itself) starts to slow down, the cold eating away at their scarf (and in essence, life-force) and panic when the Traveler crumples to the ground, the edges of the screen drawing inward.

For a game with such a simple objective and little tangible rewards, what drives players to push through the narrative and to continue to interact? What made it win so many awards? *Journey* is a game of emotions, illustrated through lighting choices, sudden realizations through exploration and discovery, and the musical score. As Ivan Mouraviev describes it, "The design of *Journey* foregrounds music as an important component of the playing experience, inevitably linking music to the game's broader narrative, and to its intimate, co-operative play […] This music is interactive, able to adapt in real-time to player input and changes in game state."[35] The

[35] Mouraviev, Ivan. "The Synchretic Network: Linking Music, Narrative, and Emotion in the Video Game Journey." *Nota Bene: Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Musicology* 10, no. 1 (2017): 65.

music rises and falls with each arc in the narrative, giving the player a roadmap to the stakes in each level. When quick, light, music plays while the player is surfing down sand dunes with kite-like creatures along side of them, they know that this is a light moment of wonder in the narrative where the protagonist is seemingly excited or going in the right direction. They are invited to enjoy the moment and appreciate the art of the game without fear of danger or being forced to pause to solve a puzzle. Other times, the music becomes more pensive and careful, such as when they are initially exploring or trying to find the answer to a puzzle. The music remains somewhat upbeat in these moments though even as the Traveler runs through what they

Fig. 12. Journey, *Beginning*. Source: Angelica Fuchs, *Journey_20180507185009*. May 7, 2018, Digital Image.

later learn are the desolated remains of their civilization. When the player is shown mural visions of civilizations' history, the music remains pensive and perhaps even a little sad, but particle effects and cues of lighter sound effects still leave the player feeling as though they achieved something, even as the horror of the mural's implications set in. While most games do have sets of ambient music tracks to play in the background to hint at things such as danger, approaching

destinations, or general settings, most of the time this music is quiet and generally acting more as a suggestion or cue to facilitate other narrative and play elements. Without dialogue or text, *Journey* has to strictly rely on the music to be the voice. The music itself becomes the narrative of the game. Mouraviev explains, "*Journey* facilitates both free and restricted play: players determine how the game's action unfolds in a strongly interactive and therefore personal way, while the game also guides them through a singular narrative. This personalization occurs through music, primarily as players perform calls for gameplay reasons and to communicate with each other."[36]

Mouraviev mentions the "calls" and the use it has for players to communicate. *Journey* does function in part as a multiplayer game. Within the world, players occasionally will come across other traveling avatars. These other Travelers however don't feature a username/nameplate and there is no option for a chat window. This is likely to keep the player centered in the atmosphere of the game—nameplates featured in most MMOs would detract from the aesthetic mood of *Journey*. The game doesn't indicate to the player until the endgame credits that these other Travelers were players as well. Its only after the game is completed that the player learns who it was that they played with (it should be noted that this feature requires an internet connection and that there are some playthroughs where the player will meet no one). Since there is no chat feature, players can use the musical chirps their Traveler makes in order to communicate with other players. These sung chirps have no meaning but are the player's primary tool (other than jumping) for interacting with the world around them. Chirps can summon the fabric-like sprites of the world that power the Traveler's lifeforce, reveal murals, and create bursts of energy that boost them upward. They also allow for the player to show

[36] Ibid. 72.

excitement when meeting other players or to try to give directions such as "follow me" through jumping and constant chirps. Between the changing soundtrack and potential for meeting other players, even though the actual journey never strictly changes, each playthrough will be different for the player.[37]

At the East Coast Game Conference in 2017, Game Writer C.J. Kershner gave a talk titled, "Songs of Solitude: Telling More Story with Less" in which he spoke about the way some games use narrative minimalism to express their story. He defines it as the reduction of the plot and exposition elements into their most basic forms while still maintaining a high degree of descriptive or suggestive power.[38] He gives the examples of *Journey*, *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005), *Inside* (2016), *Dark Souls* (2011), *Portal* (2007), and *Monument Valley* (2014) as effective minimalistic games and states that each of them contained the following elements:

1. isolation
2. derelict spaces
3. sense of wonder
4. companionship
5. transformation[39]

By using these elements effectively, the games could get across the story effectively without having to divulge everything through codices. Instead, the player is given the chance to learn the story strictly through interaction with the visuals, mechanics, and audio aspects of the game. The player is left with strong impressions of what the underlying story is, which, depending on the

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[37] Ibid. 73
[38] Kushner , C. J. "Songs of Solitude." Lecture, East Coast Game Conference, North Carolina, Raleigh , April 19, 2017. http://www.polyhedronproductions.com/2017/05/03/polyhedron-ecgc-2017/
[39] Ibid.

story being told, can be more effective than overtly stating the story the way a lot of games do through information dumps. Based on Kushner's points, *Journey* fits the conditions of a well-made minimalistic game. *Journey* is a game centered on the impression of isolation. For the most part, the Traveler doesn't meet any others of its kind along the way. They aren't given a name through the narrative or an explicit identity beyond the implied status as a member of the lost civilization. Following on the theme of isolation and going into the derelict spaces, the Traveler

Fig. 13. Journey, *Isolation*. Source: Qix666, *Journey_20180507185009*. May 7, 2018, Digital Image. Available from: GameFAQS, https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/ps3/997885-journey/images/212 (accessed May 7, 2018).

often finds themselves in either open deserts, frozen wastelands, or ruins. Using these derelict environments, the game is able to create a sense of wonder through the immense expanses, detailed structures, particle effects, or the interactions with the fabric sprites.[40] These fabric sprites (as well as other similar beings) act as the companions through the game, briefly showing

[40] Ibid.

up and heightening the sense of solitude whenever they are gone.[41] Kushner defends the transformation state of minimalistic games as characters undergoing enlightenment (apotheosis) and/or destruction (kenosis).[42] The Traveler undergoes both enlightenment and destruction during their journey. At one point, the Traveler seemingly dies, collapsing into the snow. Everything seems hopeless. There is almost no light and the screen is almost completely overtaken by snow. All the player can see is the distant beacon of the mountain and the shadowy graves of their fellow Travelers. Then, the screen goes completely white and remains that way until slowly, the dark, vague shapes of larger Travelers begin to appear around the collapsed form of the PC. The music begins to pick up again and the dark shapes are revealed to be the white prophet-like Travelers seen throughout the game. The Traveler's form is lifted up and their scarf is restored, longer than before. They begin to glow bright and then they shoot off into the dark clouds overhead. Leading up to this moment is the destruction of the Traveler. The music is almost tense or muted and the wind and lightning cracks take up most of the audio. They seem to fail. Then, they transform again as the larger Travelers appear, allowing the Traveler to finish their journey. This transformation and overall structure is mirrored in the construction and naming conventions of the soundtrack. The first track is called 'Nascence,' which is followed by 'The Call,' suggesting the budding of a Hero's Journey. There are multiple movements titled 'Confluence' throughout the soundtrack. Titles like 'Threshold,' 'Decent,' and 'Atonement' further define the narrative journey built into the musical experience of the game. It is the second to last track though that solidifies the Traveler's transformation: 'Apotheosis.' Since the narrative is never explicitly stated, it is intrinsically tied to the interaction with the game. Even

[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.

though there isn't a single spoken word of dialogue, the ludic mechanics are the driving force for the player's interaction with the underlying narrative.

The conclusion of the game suggests a literal transformation but the player is never given a decisive sense of what exactly the ending of the game is. At the end of the game, the Traveler makes it to the top of the mountain and they walk into a bright light framed between a pass that is the same shape as the light that the player has been following since the start of the game. The Traveler fades and the player is given a vision of a field of graves set within stone, one settled right at the center of the screen. The mountain appears in the distance once again and out of it a light bursts out and starts to travel over the land while the credits play—the same shooting star-like light that was seen at the start of the game. The camera follows this light through everywhere that the player ventured, occasionally showing other Travelers along the way. The title of the track for the ending of the game is 'I Was Born for This,' mirroring the name of the first track. It suggests a cycle of transformation through deconstruction and rebirth. The overall story and objective of *Journey* is simple but the construction and material itself creates a complex story that invites players to openly explore within the limited rules, gently guiding players through the intended narrative without being obtrusive with things such as awkwardly placed walls or invisible barriers. It is designed in a way that makes the player feel like it was their decision to move towards the mountain or to avoid the guardians. *Journey* is a game of suggestion and it employs this tactic effectively.

III Conclusion

Although ludology, narratology, and the combination of the two still tend to be the driving forms of criticisms for video games, it is the effectiveness of these working together that creates an emotional response within a player and this in part is what helps to constitute a good

game. Each section from the case studies focused on a different, defining aspect of each respective game and even games which superficially could be considered similar in terms of playstyle were overall quite different. By analyzing what was effective and was not effective for the various games using the criteria mentioned in the second section, each case study expressed the different core values of their respective games. The combination of effective play, story, audio and interface (with generally an emphasis on one) is why I chose these games for the case studies to analyze the various ways that video games convey meaningful experiences. Each game developer chose a core aspect that they wanted to focus on when developing the game and that became the pillar of its development. What defined each of the aforementioned games though and made them stand out to players and critics alike was the developers ability to ensure that players created an emotional connection to the game, be it through the protagonists, companions, or settings. Games are at their core immersive. They don't encompass a player the same way that a narrator in a novel does, but the impact is nevertheless just as substantial because of the agency that players received through the ability to interact with the story. The player in essence takes control of the story and creates their own narrative. This play aspect is what helps to ensure the effectiveness of this. Whether it be through a first person perspective or third, the player is the one in control of how they experience the game's overarching narrative. Novels and other traditional mediums on the other hand tend to limit the experience in that extent—which isn't to say that they are inferior to the emerging medium. Some stories are more effective as novels or movies because of the difference in immersion style. Stories are tailored to fit their respective mediums and that is fine. That said, video games are reaching a point where their play and narrative can be expanded upon, allowing for a greater depth of co-authorship. The emergence of VR and an expanding market for character driven games has started to give rise to a new

renaissance of games that employ as many aspects of the medium (music, setting, lighting, motion capture, etc.) as possible to create a whole, encompassing experience for a player that attempts to offer them the same journey that books and movies do. Game creation isn't static or limited to a single person, even if a single person develops the game. Like with a novel, a game can't exist without a player (i.e. reader) and like a novel, a player won't continue unless they are given a connection or reason to do so. Stories stay with people, be they received through a novel or through a game or even a game's score. This experience is amplified because of the additional aspect of control that a player is given, even if the game is linear with only one potential story such as the case with *The Last of Us*. It is important, therefore, for games to continue to progress and refine as a medium and for critics of games to continue to evolve with the medium to fully explore their nuances and impact.

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