

Plot, Participation, and Playing Pretend: Narrative  
Pleasure in Single-Player Video Games

by

Ari Polgar  
Class of 2018

A thesis submitted to the  
faculty of Wesleyan University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
with Departmental Honors from the College of Film and the Moving Image

# Acknowledgements

The whole of this wonderful, exhausting project would not have been possible without a great deal of help from a great number of people, to whom I am infinitely grateful:

Thank you first to my advisor, Scott Higgins, for taking this leap with me into the wild world of video games. None of this would be possible without your guidance, considerate advice, unflagging support, and all those discussions about what your kids are playing. Can I borrow *Breath of the Wild* when they're done?

Thank you to the Wesleyan College of Film and the Moving Image for teaching me everything I know about film and rolling with it when I said I wanted to write about video games instead. Thank you especially to Lea Carlson for being a rock-solid support and an open ear when I needed them most. And thank you to Logan Ludwig for coming to my rescue when technology failed me.

Thank you to Jason Haas and Chris Foster for taking the time to talk with an enthusiastic film student with minimal knowledge about video game scholarship. Your recommendations, feedback, and advice have been more of a help than I can say.

Thank you to Robyn Hope for your recs, suggestions, and unfailing positivity when I had no idea what I was doing, and even when I did. You've been an inspiration from the very beginning.

Thanks to all my friends who have listened to me talk *endlessly* about how cool video games are as still like me. You've been the best sounding boards and sources of encouragement I could ask for. Special thanks (and congratulations) to my co-thesiser Graham, who understands. We did it!

More than anything, thank you to my family. Mom, Dad, Kait, Didi; thank you so much for the edits, and the support, and putting up with me when I spent all break locked in my room. I wouldn't be here without you.

# Table of Contents

*It's dangerous to go alone! Take this.<sup>1</sup>*

<b>PRESS START: AN INTRODUCTION TO GAME NARRATIVE.....</b>	<b>4</b>
A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF GAMES AND GAME STUDY .....	5
<b>1. STEP BY STEP: TELLING STORY THROUGH SPACE, STRUCTURE, AND CINEMATICS .....</b>	<b>15</b>
BRAVE NEW GAME WORLDS .....	18
LIGHTS, CAMERA, CUTSCENE .....	25
HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO PROCEED.....	38
<b>2. LIVING THE STORY: ENGAGEMENT, EMPATHY, AND THE AVATAR STATE.....</b>	<b>45</b>
WHAT'S IN A NAME .....	46
BE A PART OF THE NARRATIVE.....	61
<b>3. WANDERING THE WASTELANDS: PLAYER AGENCY AND THE OPEN WORLD GAME .....</b>	<b>68</b>
PUZZLING THROUGH SPACE.....	71
LAST STOP TO EVERYWHERE.....	80
<b>4. NARRATIVE IN GAMEPLAY: CHARTING NEW HORIZONS WITH <i>UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END</i>.....</b>	<b>91</b>
O BROTHER WHERE WERE THOU .....	94
MIRROR MIRROR.....	106
<b>PUSHING BOUNDARIES: WHAT COMES NEXT .....</b>	<b>112</b>
<b>SELECTED GAMEOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>118</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>120</b>

---

<sup>1</sup> Takashi Tezuka. *The Legend of Zelda*. Nintendo, 1986. Famicom.

## Press Start: An Introduction to Game Narrative

A square of light and a rickety ladder point the way forward. It's a short climb out of the dusty room, full of chests and papers even after hundreds of years, a faded remnant of a city lost to time. The ladder creaks as someone climbs, light streaming in from above, and then Nathan Drake emerges into the open air, standing atop a domed roof and blinking in the sun. He joins his brother Sam at the roof's edge, an old iron railing the only thing between them and hundreds of feet of empty space. Before them stretches Libertalia, a lost pirate city, rediscovered after so long. Its streets and buildings are overgrown, skeletal reminders of those who once lived, once-neat roads and houses overrun with green beneath the blue sky. Mountains rise around them, and wide waterfalls cascade down them as a river threads its way out to the sea. Far in the distance, tucked between two green peaks, lies New Devon, a jewel set in the island's crown. As Nate and Sam marvel at the view the camera cranes back, drifting away until Sam and Nate are tiny figures atop the roof with the whole of the island spread around them, beautiful and enormous and untouched for the past two hundred years. The scene only lasts a moment—there is treasure hunting to get to—but the sensation lingers, the feeling of standing at the top of some brave new world, its people gone but their echoes left in their wake. It's a world made of memory and dust, out of time and larger than life, and as Nate and Sam push on the awe remains, transcending time and space and screen, and in that moment the world of *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* could be as real as the game controller and the blinking PS4 in the corner.

The power of this scene—barely a minute among hours and hours of gameplay—speaks to the impressions video games leave with their players, those that stick long after the computer is turned off or the controller put away. Players hold on to their favorite moments: clever moves in the final fight, conversations had with beloved NPCs, ridiculous solutions to simple problems, hilarious failures, beautiful environments, haunting soundscapes, instances of connection and joy found in play and in participation. Video games, with their emotional depth and narrative involvement, hold as much possibility for storytelling as books or films or radio or television or theatre or any other media one can imagine do. Like all media, they are positioned to tell a unique kind of story—just as there are tales better suited to novels than film, or theatre than radio, video games have their own set of tools and conventions that foster a new narrative experience. By mirroring story and gameplay, games can balance narrative and play pleasures. Through fostering an empathetic relationship between a player and their avatar, and an imaginative relationship between a player and the game world, games invite players in and embed them in their narratives. Altering the relationship between player, avatar, and game space allows developers to tell a variety of stories. It is this triad, and the empathy and imagination that unifies it, that allows for resonant, absorptive stories, producing the participation and presence that character-driven narrative games strive to achieve.

## **A Brief Overview of Games and Game Study**

Games have been around as long as people have thought to play, but video games are an invention of the twentieth century. What began as the digitization of

pre-existing games has since grown into a unique media, one predicated upon player interaction and participation. The most rudimentary video games first emerged in the 1940s and '50s in universities and labs, places where people had access to the computers of the day. Popular gaming arose in the '70s and '80s with the boom of arcades, which offered joystick and pushbutton games. Home consoles began to appear in the '70s, with the famous *Pong* (Atari 1972) and other simple games. Through the end of the '80s, as technology continued to advance, arcades declined in popularity while handheld and 16-bit computer games rose. The '90s marked the introduction of 3-D game graphics, which in turn allowed for new forms of video games, those that relied on depth rather than lateral movement across a screen. Chief among these new game forms were the first-person shooter, the real-time strategy game, and the massive multiplayer online (MMO) game, which grew out of the more rudimentary Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) of the late '80s and early '90s. Arcades faded as home gaming consoles became more popular; gamers stayed in to play rather than going out. Among the games of the '90s was *Myst* (Cyan 1993), a puzzle adventure game that members of the community lauded as an early example of the power and possibilities of video games and game story. Computer and console-based 32- and 64-bit gaming continued through the early 2000s, at which point further improvements in technology (graphics, processors, memory storage, etc.) allowed for the rise of casual gaming, games that could run on computers and—as they became standard—mobile phones. The advancement of computer technology has paralleled the growing complexities of game design and development, bringing games closer

and closer to mainstream popular culture and allowing for the expansion of the modern gaming industry.

As a young field when compared to other media studies, video game scholarship is somewhat fractured, generally revolving around a series of debates predicated upon defining what games are and what they do. Differing opinions over the definition of “game” and firmly entrenched beliefs about games’ parameters as systems and objects complicate this scholarship. “Games are a mess,” says Ian Bogost, a game designer, scholar, and professor at the Georgia Institute of Technology.<sup>2</sup> That messiness is perhaps the point upon which all game literature can agree. Beyond that, years of study have only just begun to smooth over broad divides between schools of thought, particularly those related to where games stand in relation to older media and whether or not they support stories at all.

Before delving into the spread of literature on these topics, a few definitions are in order. First and foremost is that of *guest*, a term coined by game designer and Carnegie Mellon University’s Distinguished Professor of the Practice of Entertainment Technology Jesse Schell, who uses the term to refer to a consumer of entertainment, be they player, viewer, listener, reader, participant, or something else.<sup>3</sup> The guest is the person for whom media is created; they are the one who buys the tickets to a show, or the book, or the DVD, or the game. Guests are, in that sense, the umbrella group of media consumers. For *game* I use the definition of a classical game offered by Jesper Juul, which is “a rule-based formal system with a variable and

---

<sup>2</sup> Ian Bogost, “Video Games Are A Mess” (speech, Digital Games Research Association Conference, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Jesse Schell, “Understanding Entertainment: Story and Gameplay Are One,” *Computers in Entertainment*, 3 no. 6 (2005): 2.

quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable.”<sup>4</sup> As for *narrative*, the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition will suffice: it is “an account of a series of events, facts, etc., given in order and with the establishing of connections between them.”<sup>5</sup>

The proverbial elephant in the field of game studies is the ludology/narratology debate, and while this particular elephant has nominally been laid to rest, it appears in a majority of game literature and bears repeating, if only to clear the air. As game theorist and sometimes-designer Jesper Juul points out, early game studies “were often conceived as a discussion between narratology (games as stories) versus ludology (games as something unique).”<sup>6</sup> In splitting game scholars between those who believe games exist as wholly unique objects (the ludologists) and those who believe games serve a narrative end (the narratologists), early game academia invented a proverbial fence, on either side of which academics stood staunchly by their opinions. On the side of the narratologists, Janet Murray serves as a figurehead, though her seminal work *Hamlet on the Holodeck* has become somewhat outdated in recent years, to the point that she has released an update to the book.<sup>7</sup> A literature and computer science professor at MIT, her argument defends storytelling

---

<sup>4</sup> Juul, Jesper. *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fiction Worlds*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005. 36.

<sup>5</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*. s.v. “narrative.” Online: Oxford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Juul, *Half-real*, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Murray released *Hamlet on the Holodeck, Updated Edition* in April 2017, reexamining her predictions and giving chapter-by-chapter commentary. As a number of her predictions did turn out to be true—the rise of virtual reality and long-form television are the two most obvious of these—her reexamination is an interesting read.

in video games, claiming that the endgame of participation-based media—of which games are the most prevalent and visible, though virtual reality is quickly catching up—is fully immersive story akin to that imagined by Gene Roddenbery in *Star Trek*.<sup>8</sup> On the other side of the fence, game theorist Markku Eskelinen firmly opposes the idea that a game itself can contain narrative. His game of catch argument—that if he “throws a ball” he doesn’t expect it to “start telling stories”—is a familiar defense of the assumed lack of narrative situations in games in general, and video games by extension.<sup>9</sup> But these arguments, decades old at this point and increasingly outdated, have evolved into a spectrum of intermediate opinions offered by other academics. As the field has matured, a greater and greater number of scholars and designers settle somewhere between the two poles. Schell notably compares the debate to the particle/wave dichotomy of light: it’s both.<sup>10</sup> As with Murray’s re-examination of her early arguments, returning to this old debate requires a more nuanced understanding of the interplay of game and story.

The relationship between gameplay and storytelling is something often discussed even outside the ludic/narrative lines drawn in the sand. Espen Aarseth, Norwegian game theorist and self-proclaimed ludologist, offers a popular perspective when it comes to the interplay of games and stories, suggesting that the aesthetic problem of narrative games is “a conflict between the opposing goals of gameplay and storytelling.”<sup>11</sup> Examining that interplay is useful in breaking down the narrative

---

<sup>8</sup> Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Markku Eskelinen, “Towards Computer Game Studies,” In *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004, 37.

<sup>10</sup> Schell, “Understanding Entertainment,” 1.

<sup>11</sup> Aarseth, Espen. “Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation.” In *First Person*, ed. Pat Harrigan Noah Wardrip-Fruin. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2004), 51.

and mechanical pleasures of video games, though the presumption that gameplay and storytelling are inherently opposed is a hallmark of divisive game academia. Game theorist and media studies scholar Henry Jenkins offers a nuanced rebuttal of this school of thought, suggesting that story is not inherently opposed to gameplay, instead taking a different form in ludic media.<sup>12</sup> Moving forward with these arguments in mind, a spectrum best serves to further discussion, forming a sliding scale of ludology/narratology to be considered on a game-by-game basis. Due to the breadth of game types and genres, it follows that some games fall closer to the ludic end of the scale, while others are more overtly narrative in nature. While a game of catch, as Eskelinen points out, may indeed be a wholly ludic undertaking, there are ludic aspects to be had in playing pretend as well. The wellspring of character-driven narrative games that have emerged through the end of the twentieth and into the twenty-first century herald a brand of game storytelling neither wholly story nor wholly play but something in between. Various games occupy various places upon the spectrum, and the games discussed here I chose specifically for their narrative leanings. Entertaining as games such as *Tetris* (Pajitnov 1984) or *Super Smash Bros* (Nintendo 1999) may be, their play-oriented pleasures are out of place in the discussion of game narrative.

Another preconception in media studies that one must reconsider is the relationship between games and older technology and media. Given the field's relative youth, many of its prominent academics have drifted to game studies from

---

<sup>12</sup> Jenkins, Henry. "Game Design as Narrative Architecture." In *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game*, ed. Pat Harrigan Noah Wardrip-Fruin. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004), 118.

other media. That leads to a coloring of game discussion that tends to assume games are the natural evolution of older art forms, the “next step” of film and television as they become interactive. The argument goes like this: first came literature, then film, then television; games are the next stage of development, augmenting traditional forms of entertainment with the participatory aspect of play.<sup>13</sup> But that is an oversimplification of both the narrative and mechanical possibilities of video games as a storytelling medium. Eskelinen, the consummate ludologist, argues that games are a separate media that must be divorced from older media studies.<sup>14</sup> Such a stance defends games’ distinctiveness; they are unique in the ways they engage with guests, not simply a transformation of film or television. But at the same time, games cannot be wholly separated from preexisting art forms or media. If anything, video games are something of a Frankenstein’s monster: comprised of dozens of parts pulled from older media, stitched together with ever-improving technology, and sent out into the world to awe, shock, and entertain the masses. As with ludology and narratology, the debate regarding where games stand in relation to their predecessors must be flexible: the video game is a unique medium with its own history that also relies on preexisting media to teach guests how to interact with it. Jenkins argues that games are in a transmedial state—that is, they are not wholly one media type or another but rather exist somewhere between them.<sup>15</sup> Jason Mittel, professor of film and media at Middlebury College, takes a similar position, one informed by his background in film and television, arguing that games provide an “intersection of storytelling and play as

---

<sup>13</sup> Aarseth, “Genre Trouble,” 45.

<sup>14</sup> Eskelinen, “Towards Computer Game Studies,” 37.

<sup>15</sup> Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture,” 123.

mutually reinforcing and potentially coordinated aspects of a transmedia franchise.”<sup>16</sup> That is, narrative aspects may be used in gameplay and game aspects may be used in traditional narrative to support each other, fleshing out franchises over multiple complementary media sources. This argument exemplifies the ways in which games interact with, and pull from, other media, and the unique form of guest engagement that stems from such an intersection. The variation creates a spectrum of influence in game design and discussion; much as some games fall closer to the ludic end of the spectrum than the narrative, some games pull more obviously from older forms of media while others strive to use conventions in unexpected and unique ways.

Existing literature indicates that game academia most benefits from acknowledging the spectra of various perspectives, including work done by members of the community. As a younger and highly technical medium, practitioner expertise is equally important as academic scholarship. Some of the most nuanced arguments and observations comes not from theorists but from game designers, developers, and even players who use the time spent creating and using games to inform and guide their theories. Games are unique for their distance from their elders and also for the way they use and shape older media. They can trend toward narration or undiluted game challenge in equal part. Historically, the breadth of game study presents arguments best solved by acknowledging the middle ground. Games chart new territory with their absorptive and participatory aspects while drawing from cultural tradition, a melting pot of media and technology ripe with potential.

---

<sup>16</sup> Jason Mittel, "Playing for Plot in the *Lost* and *Portal* Franchises." *eludamos* 6, no. 1 (2012): 12.

Due to the narrative focus of this study, the games discussed here predominantly AAA (“triple A”) games. AAA is the informal classification given to games with the highest development budget; those I selected are popular, well-known titles with overt narrative designs and goals. This selection covers multiple game genres and styles, with the goal of examining a cross section of character-driven narrative games, those in which the game presents a player with a story via protagonist whom the player controls. Games played in preparation and study include *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment 2010), *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics 2015), and *Uncharted 4: A Thief’s End* (Naughty Dog 2016), with further research and data stemming from prior personal and secondhand game experience, as well as online “Let’s Plays” and walkthroughs<sup>17</sup> offering additional information. For the most part, games were played only once, save for the instance of *Rise of the Tomb Raider* where a console change required repeated play time.

This thesis argues for the narrative merit of video games and seeks to lay out the means by which games tell meaningful stories unique to the medium. In the first chapter I lay out the traditional tools and conventions of video game storytelling, examining the novelty of space and participation in digital storytelling. In chapter two I examine the role of the avatar, and the relationship between guests and the player character, with particular emphasis on how empathy serves to simulate involvement and suggest—or outright offer—player power within the game. In chapters three and four I present case studies. Chapter three examines *Fallout: New Vegas* and how story and system interact in open world games, while chapter four returns to *Uncharted 4*:

---

<sup>17</sup> Videos, mostly on YouTube, where a player goes through a game, either with or without personal commentary.

*A Thief's End* to delve into its close alignment between story and gameplay and the possibilities it offers for games going forward.

Stories give people access to other worlds, other lives. They invite people in, make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. Powerful and memorable, they leave lasting impressions on their audiences, and games are no different. Narrative in games is neither an unwieldy beast or the endgame of all digital game design, but rather an incipient form of storytelling with its own rules, conventions, history, and possibilities. It is neither a must-have nor something to be avoided. It, like any other form of narrative, is a changing medium brimming with potential, standing ready to tell its own stories.

# 1.

## Step by Step: Telling Story Through Space, Structure, and Cinematics

Over the years, video games have begun to accrue a set of conventions and tools, standards that influence game story and style to prime audience expectations. Use has shaped these tools to emphasize different objectives and systems, and with them games can present a variety of genres and, by extension stories. The tools in a game designer's toolbox help them achieve a number of goals, only one of which may be player engagement and narrative pleasure. The broad scope of game genres includes adventure games, roleplaying games (RPGs), simulation game, real time strategy games, sports games, and other subgenres including massive multiplayer online games and the entire umbrella of non-digital games (i.e., tabletop RPGs, party games, etc.). Stylistic differences further alter how games are played—platformers, first-person shooters, isometric games, choice-based or linear cinematic games and more create different game experiences. Each genre and system have their own strengths, weaknesses, and conventions which designers use, defy, and reinterpret as the industry grows and develops, allowing for a variation of storytelling forms. Multiplayer games will not provide the same sorts of narratives as cinematic RPGs, and isometric strategy games emphasize different narrative aspects than open world simulation games.

Focus here lies on character-focused narrative driven games, those in which the guest plays as the central character of an authored narrative. The goal of such games is almost universally to absorb and immerse the player in gameplay and narrative, to give a player a sense of control over the story that unfolds. *Immersion* refers to the sensation of being both present within a game world, also called *spatial presence*, and emotionally invested in a game story, also called *involvement*.<sup>18</sup> A game's ability to achieve such a conceit comes from the believability of player agency and power to enact change within the game. Participation is one of the primary experiences that character-driven narrative games sell, the potential to play through a summer blockbuster (or murder mystery, or space conquest, or rediscovery of a lost civilization—the trappings change from game to game and more broadly from studio to studio, but the concept remains the same). However, the degree of participation, and way in which player agency is expressed, changes depending on the type of game story present.

An *authored* game story is one that has been designed and implemented by developers, whose plot progresses from point A to B to C and so on. Usually they are traditional RPGs, though other genres also fall under this umbrella. They progress linearly along a series of main quests, sometimes augmented by side missions and sometimes not, moving towards a fixed endgame. Beneath the umbrella of authored games, progress can be linear, choice-based, or somewhere between the two. Following this logic, a first-person shooter such as *Half-Life 2* (Vale Corporation 2004) qualifies as a character-driven narrative game, as do such games as *Dragon*

---

<sup>18</sup> Madigan, Jamie. "The Psychology of Immersion in Video Games." In *The Psychology of Video Games*, 2010.

*Age: Origins* (Bioware 2009) and the post-apocalyptic *Fallout* series. A number of text-based adventure and indie exploration-style games function as ancillaries to the cinematic focus of the games discussed here, which are *Rise of the Tomb Raider* and *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*. Both these games are character-driven and have linear narratives, making them well-suited examples for studying narrative systems. Augmented by other AAA games, they offer solid understanding of game design tools used to invite narrative enjoyment.

Beyond their character-focused narrative driven status, *Rise of the Tomb Raider* and *A Thief's End* share a number of similarities: they are single-player RPGs from well-known studios, they are the most recent releases of well-loved franchises, and they are treasure-hunting action-adventure games. Both feature an intrepid protagonist who seeks their fortune while evading and outsmarting a rival group, one better supplied and more powerful. *Rise of the Tomb Raider's* Trinity, like Shoreline in *A Thief's End*, largely serves as cannon fodder for the player character and their allies. These games marry myth and treasure-hunting tropes as old as the sound serial to craft lovingly-detailed stories. Both use high-quality graphics and visual verisimilitude to encourage believability and lessen the work the player must do to imagine the world and the situations. On the surface, the two seem astoundingly similar, something fans have pointed to with varying attitudes, ranging from gratitude that *Tomb Raider* is doing the same thing as *Uncharted* but with a female protagonist to discontent that they are too alike and there is no real difference in playing one or the other. But with dissimilar narrative treatments, and alternate means of encouraging player immersion, the two offer notable differences that separate the

games. They vary in their mechanics, gameplay-narrative integration, and overall player experience and enjoyment, as can be seen by examining how developers use the tools at their disposal in unique ways. This chapter examines the systems, conventions, and tools developers employ to craft game story, beginning broadly with how the novelty of game space affects story and then honing in to examine the specific shorthand games use, with particular focus on the cutscene as a narrative unit, and player agency in both linear and choice-based games.

## **Brave New Game Worlds**

Space is perhaps the greatest innovation when it comes to video game storytelling, serving both as a tool and a complication. Games, and by extension game stories, are often spatial; the interaction between the player character and the game world serves as the primary means for players to relate to narrative. From movement to background art, camera placement to level design, games revolve around space. Space organizes progress, suggests change within the game world, and ties fictive game design to comprehensible rules and mechanics, which build game systems. *Mechanics* are the constructs of rules or methods designed for interaction with the game state, thus providing gameplay.<sup>19</sup> Game *systems* comprise of the set of mechanics related to certain actions or outcomes within a game.<sup>20</sup> Through space, games allow the most basic level of player engagement, placing them within the game world. Space solidifies the fantastic elements of games and game stories (i.e., the

---

<sup>19</sup> Sicart, Miguel. "Defining Game Mechanics". Game Studies. 2008.

<sup>20</sup> This is everything from assigning skill points as a part of a leveling system, to pressing x to jump as part of a traversal system, to reaching a certain percentage of positive or negative karma as a part of a reputation system.

fantasy treasure hunts, the science fiction worlds, the fantasy tropes, the impossibility of traveling through space or teleporting or fighting dragons or living in a city at the bottom of the ocean or whatever other fictions a game contains) with the real aspects of rules, affordances, and limitations.

This is because games are both real and fictional; game worlds make the impossible interactive and the interactive logical.<sup>21</sup> Game space is the first contact a player has with interactive gameplay; once a player has control of the player character they can access space. This freedom makes games fundamentally different from older forms of narrative media: where story organizes space in most media, in games it is space that organizes story. Some games are more spatially-rich others—the player can spend hours poking around maps in *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (Bioware 2017) or running around the post-apocalyptic nuclear wasteland of Las Vegas in *Fallout: New Vegas* but has only so much content to examine in the uniform dungeons of *Dragon Age 2* (Bioware 2011) or the smaller-scale maps of *Tomb Raider* and *Uncharted*. But no matter how railroaded progression is (i.e., how little freedom the player has to explore the game world), the cause-and-effect patterning of narrative in games—and particularly in open world or discovery type games—is organized not temporally but spatially. When recounting game narrative, people often describe things in terms of space rather than time.<sup>22</sup> “I was in the valley, and then I fought a bear and went through its cave and found an old Soviet outpost, and I entered the outpost,” etc. Save for specific instances where a game times its events or quests, time rarely makes a fixed measurement for plot advancement. In its place, space and discovery are a

---

<sup>21</sup> Juul, *Half-real*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Hope, Robyn. "Ok So Here's What I Figured out About Castlevania." Tumblr, 2018.

concrete way to suggest forward progression and noticeable change, which gives players a sense of control and participation.

Space works in game stories the way time works in other forms of narrative. Variation in the time it takes a player to complete challenges create a misalignment between game time and real time, so games do not force a uniform temporality. To do so would limit player freedom and consequently immersion. Space, however, remains separate from time while offering concrete proof of change, mimicking the position time occupies in older storytelling media. Space can introduce changes in the game world, presenting the effects of events without being tied to time passage. The site of an early-game battle can be returned to later in gameplay to examine the smoldering ruin left behind, as in DLC from *Dragon Age: Origins*. Returning to the central location of *Mass Effect 3* (Bioware 2012) following certain main quests results in changes from previous in-game events, up to and including the slow repair of the location following an attack. These changes, tied to player actions rather than a specific amount of time spent in game, are classical examples of using and changing space to highlight story progression.

Leaving one space and entering another can likewise suggest progress. Travel introduces transit time, if only because life experience and other media time to move between locations. The specifics of how long said travel takes is less important; it is the understanding that time passes that introduces change and progression. As the specifics of travel time are not specified, progression remains spatially based, progression based on the change in location rather than the time taken to get there. An example of this comes again from *Dragon Age: Origins*, where the player character

will be ambushed after traveling three times. Where the player goes does not matter; they can go the next town over or all the way across the map, but only once they have traveled three times will the ambush trigger. Temporal progress is suggested, and game progress is achieved, through changes in space. By unlocking, exploring, and leaving spaces again, games organize progress, forming a cause-effect chain that suggests a story unified by level design. Expanding access to the game world introduces new spaces, skills, and story moments as a player levels up, presenting narrative development.

This is particularly true of open world and exploration-based games, those that emphasize space. Plot serves as a guideline more than a requirement. These games are also constrained by rules in the same way that tabletop games without a Game Master function through systems and without a guiding hand. *New Vegas*, and the *Fallout* games in general, are examples of open world games whose quests are primarily organizational, serving as a way to keep the player from wandering aimlessly. Quests suggests areas of a map to explore, presenting the bones of a story which organizes spatial exploration. *Rise of the Tomb Raider* is more linear than *Fallout*, but it too offers continuous gameplay in a somewhat-open world. As they progress through the game, the player has greater access to explorable space, which consequently provides them with more resources and more opportunities to gain experience and level up. The game does not move directly from one challenge to another but rather lays them out progressively and allows time for player exploration and discovery in between. The player can collect materials, craft items, and explore regions as much as they would like without directly engaging with the story. Fast

travel allows transport between “camps” within the same level, sidelining narrative cohesion in favor of pleasurable play. When such wandering is possible, game story again serves as an organizing principle, a way to guide the player through aimless freeplay. *A Thief’s End*, on the other hand, is strictly authored and region-locked.<sup>23</sup> But because it lacks *Rise of the Tomb Raider’s* free travel mechanic, moving—from America to Scotland to Madagascar to an island in the Indian Ocean—stands in for the passage of time, indicating that days and weeks are passing without requiring a specific amount of time be spent in any one location and allowing for a more traditional understanding a narrative time, instead of the delineation between “discovered” and “undiscovered” that organizes plot progression in *Rise of the Tomb Raider*.

Space can also be used outside of mainline quests to organize cause-effect chains that simulate story, something called *emergent narrative* or emergent storytelling. Emergent games are “not pre-structured or preprogrammed” in the way of traditional linear games but rather stories that take shape “through the game play.”<sup>24</sup> These are games where random encounters and player exploration creates a chain of cause and effect that suggests a story or story events. In the broad sense, games that use emergent narrative are sandbox games such as *The Sims* (Maxis 2000) or *Minecraft* (Mojang 2011), where there is no general narrative but rather an explorable world where a player can do, within the rules of the game<sup>25</sup>, anything. Any

---

<sup>23</sup> Meaning levels are region-specific; a player, once passing a level, cannot return to a previously-visited space within the progression of the story, unlike in *Rise of the Tomb Raider* where a player can hop between regions regardless of where in the game’s story they are.

<sup>24</sup> Jenkins, “Game Design as Narrative Architecture” 128.

<sup>25</sup> Inside the rules and sometimes outside them; modifications (mods) and cheats allow players to change things in a game from surface-level aesthetics (clothes, colors, textures, etc.) to the content of

narrative that consequently emerges from a sandbox world is created and organized by the player, who crafts a story by slowly creating patterns in the world. These cause and effect stories do not adhere to the epic and linear narratives found in cinematic games, nor are they narrative in the traditional, authored sense of older media. But they are still considered a form of narrative within the gaming community, one where the player is in control. It is more akin to a form of play one might find on a playground, with a few key rules—this stick is a sword, the bench is prison; this figure in *Minecraft* is a king and here is his castle. Progression is a haphazard shift from one action to another, without overarching plot but whose events move from A to B to C in a narrative fashion. In this sense emergent narrative is akin to tabletop games, those without a Game Master to organize story that instead rely on a system of rules to guide progression.

Well-known game studios have begun to lean into this system-based storytelling in an attempt to introduce narrative in open worlds. *Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout* publisher Bethesda utilizes such a system, notably in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) and the newest *Fallout* games, by allowing players to level up and specialize without completing the mainline quests, instead crafting side narratives that emerge as players progress. Though not the main story, developers designed the game with these meandering, player-guided options in mind.<sup>26</sup> Other games, such as *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor* (Monolith Productions 2014) and its sequel *Shadow of War* (2017), have implemented systems where player actions have multiple small-

---

the games themselves (new forms of traversal, experience gains, how NPCs interact with player characters, etc.)

<sup>26</sup> Sawyer, Josh. Choice Architecture, Player Expression, and Narrative Design in *Fallout: New Vegas*, GDC. 2012.

scale effects on the game world, slowly but surely creating a unique gaming experience that uses the micro scale to affect the macro, building a player-specific world without the necessity of following specific quests. This means a player has more agency and power within a game's story, without the limitations of authorship. Because none of the changes enacted by the players are large-scale, smaller variations in worldstate and unique quest outcomes create greater individuality in each playthrough of a game. This in turn individualizes a player's experience. Power and agency offer their own brand of enjoyment, one predicated upon tangible, player-driven change. Though these narratives are unconventional, they retain the chain of cause and effect one expects in storytelling, and their power to craft a unique world introduces a novel enjoyment. *Shadow of Mordor* makes a particularly noteworthy example of this, largely because the game's narrative is dynamic.<sup>27</sup> Each individual, random encounter allows for a number of outcomes. The game utilizes space, exploration, and the mechanics of gameplay to craft an emergent narrative, one that emphasizes interactivity and the player's power. The system—the gameplay mechanics, the random encounters, the exploration, and other technical aspects of the game design—organizes progression, making it a strong example of a more fully interactive story. The player's decisions and actions drive a multi-branched, emergent narrative.

Though space offers intriguing and unique methods of narrative organization and progression, on its own it is limited. Even emergent narrative relies on the player, putting onus on the guest to create story for themselves. For games seeking to provide

---

<sup>27</sup> Brown, Mark. "Telling Stories with Systems." In *Game Maker's Toolkit*, edited by Mark Brown: YouTube, 2015.

authored narratives—be they choice-based or linear—while emergent aspects can give players a sense of participation and agency, other means must be found to produce and guide story. In the majority of character-driven narrative games, these means of storytelling include dialogue, background text, and the most well-known and -used convention of gameplay storytelling: the cutscene.

### **Lights, Camera, Cutscene**

Power up near any narrative game and sooner or later a cutscene—a narrative sequence that provides a transition between periods of gameplay<sup>28</sup>—will play.

Cutscene are a staple of narrative games, moments where the game steps away from skill challenges and mechanics to invite the player to spectate as the story unfolds.

The so-called “intertitles” of video games, cutscenes are a shorthand, familiar to those whose expectations have been conditioned by older media, such as film or television.

However, interrupting player control to share pre-packaged story beats undermines immersion, which earns the cutscene a great deal of flak across the board: players complain about being removed from gameplay and unable to participate; critics deride clunky gameplay-cutscene transitions; and even developers speak of cutscenes as something to be avoided, or masked at the very least. Yet the utility of the cutscene, and its continued presence in spite of these complaints, suggests it does more than merely break suspension of disbelief and bandy players between one play state and another. Improvements to both technology and methods of gameplay storytelling over recent years have begun to indicate what a cutscene can do, if used

---

<sup>28</sup> *Harper-Collins Dictionary*, web., s.v. “cutscene.”

meaningfully. For now, intertitles make an apt comparison. As in the early days of cinema, games have concocted a familiar shorthand based on older media to transmit meaning. Cutscenes are a familiar and comprehensible way to share exposition and narrative beats, offering game objectives, introducing characters, and sketching story through imagery and sound akin to film, though without the continuous emotional resonance.

This is because games are not simply “interactive” films but rather a mesh of media: the audiovisual storytelling of a film, the textual narrative of a book, the auditory spaces of radio dramas, and the aspects of challenge and achievement that belong solely to the game as a form of play. This interweaving, as is the case with other so-called mixed media before it, has begun to fuse, presenting as a unified whole rather than a creature of many parts.<sup>29</sup> Among such a *mélange*, the shorthand of the cutscene is an understandably useful narrative device. They are comprehensible to a player raised on film and television, and present information within the scope of a game, so it makes sense that games would use them to present narrative to a player. This holds doubly true when there is a single overarching narrative driving game story, as is the case with character-driven narrative games. Cutscenes are familiar, informative, and even engaging, an admirable quality of an engagement- and participation-based medium.

Cutscenes must navigate their position as both narrative units and moments of interruption, both help and hindrance. Familiar as they are, these scenes—some of

---

<sup>29</sup> Early cinema makes an apt comparison here; people used to speak of movies as a mix of theatre, dance, novels, music, etc., but now such aspects have come together, and film is understood as a cohesive, unique medium.

them stretching up to half an hour<sup>30</sup>—remove players from the interactive experience, relegating them to the viewer’s seat while the designers steer the game toward its predetermined destination. This unique question of how to shift between player-centric participatory gameplay and externally-authored cutscenes raises legitimate concerns over player experience. It boils down to the problem of defining what is necessary and what is sufficient to engage players on a mechanical and narrative level.

The core complication of the cutscene is that switching back and forth between the roles of player and viewer complicates the relationship between guest and game, requiring a mental swap that diminishes the ideal absorption of gameplay. It requires the players to see characters both as extensions of themselves and as others, both spectating and participating. This is not altogether uncommon in other forms of media, but the emphasis on participatory gameplay emphasizes this shift, and the misalignment between states of gameplay. While this sort of twin perspective might suggest a deft hand when it comes to filmmaking, it often weakens player-game integration, altering the immersive aspect of a player’s experience, interrupting both spatial presence and emotional involvement. Above all else, games must hold attention through the cutscene, because to lose that attention means losing player absorption, and perhaps overall enjoyment.

While such an argument holds true for all styles of gameplay—as with other media, guest attention and enjoyment lead to concrete things such as sales and profits and a marketable fan base—the necessity of guest absorption is particularly important

---

<sup>30</sup> *Metal Gear Solid 4*, at 71 minutes, holds the Guinness World Record for the longest cutscene sequence (as well as the longest single cutscene, 27 minutes in length).

for character-driven narrative games. A player cannot simply tune out during gameplay the way they might while watching TV or listening to a radio show. The direct participation of gameplay requires the player be fully engaged with gameplay, and mechanical outcomes (victory, in most cases) need somehow reflect a sense of progress. In the case of progressive games—so-named because their stories progress on a level-by-level basis authored by game designers<sup>31</sup>—this absorption typically works the same way it does with filmmaking. Cutscenes provide opportunities for visual storytelling, building a narrative framework that informs the player of characters and settings, encouraging empathy with a sympathetic protagonist whose story is engaging not only because the player is the one completing it but also as a unique tale.

This introduces the difference between gameplay absorption and story absorption. Participatory gameplay works by engaging the player with the mechanics of the game, the pushbutton actions and reactions a player makes to guide their player character, suggesting player placement within the game. Largely simulation-based, such absorption stems from the parallel of acting as a player and a character. *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, with a dedicated system for discovery, collection and crafting, offers an example of this brand of absorption. *A Thief's End*, on the other hand, frontlines narrative absorption with a fleshed-out story that reflects gameplay. Given that gameplay tends to be more versatile than story, gameplay absorption often supersedes, or at least interferes with, narrative absorption. Participatory gameplay can make use of the tools of narrative, whereas narrative cannot always make use of

---

<sup>31</sup> Juul, *Half-real*, 5.

gameplay. Visual detail in particular is important: the “cinematic” aspect of games refers not only to the narrative experience but also graphic quality. More and more often, cinematic games both linear and choice-based are acclaimed for the detail and realism of their graphics, catching up to popular cinema as technology improves.

Such attention to detail creates another means of absorption, one slightly less concerned with narrative/gameplay boundaries, and thus it has the potential to aid both. Realistic graphics encourage believability, requiring less work on the player’s part to imagine the world. It narrows the amount of background players must supply for themselves, which has the twin outcome of de-personalizing game story while also encouraging engagement with the authored story the developers write. Though less unique, the narrative is equally if not more engaging. This is a trick that Naughty Dog, the studio behind *Uncharted* (and the critically acclaimed<sup>32</sup> character-driven narrative game *The Last of Us* (2013)) goes to great lengths to implement, especially for the games they have produced for “next gen” consoles—i.e., the eighth generation of gaming consoles produced by Microsoft and Sony, the biggest gaming systems that are currently on the market. Naughty Dog and other big-name studios—Bethesda, Ubisoft, Bioware, Square Enix, etc.—have been able to increase the level of detail in both gameplay and cutscenes so that they are equivalently rendered, which designers see as a way to aid player absorption. The mud on *Uncharted* protagonist Nathan Drake, for example, or the scuff marks on Lara Croft’s jacket in *Tomb Raider*, or the flapping of fabric in the breeze in *Assassin’s Creed: Origins* (Ubisoft 2017), or

---

<sup>32</sup> The game has won no fewer than 122 awards, including the BAFTA Game Award for Best Game in 2014 and a Writer’s Guild of America award for its writer and Naughty Dog creative director Neil Druckmann

Aloy's hair in *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games 2017), or the waving grasses of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt 2015) may not be vital parts of either skill challenge or narrative structure, but the ability of game designers to include that level of detail allows for a realism generally agreed to encourage immersion.<sup>33</sup>

Along the same lines, the smoothness of cutscene transitions has been lauded in recent years, especially with the advent of smarter, larger next gen consoles. Flowing seamlessly from cutscene to player-controlled gameplay is something developers at Naughty Dog pride themselves on; it mitigates the jarring switch from gameplay to cutscene that developers seek to avoid. The relative lack of a cut and absence of black frames in *A Thief's End*—the usual precursor to a cutscene that cues the player to know they are no longer in control—allows for a near seamless shift between gameplay and spectatorship, helping to lessen the unpleasant sensation of being removed from the driver's seat, so to speak. It is the first, simplest step to eliminate the disconnect between gameplay and cutscenes. After all, if there is no clear delineation between player control and game control, the player remains more fully engaged in the action of the cutscene, with the tacit understanding that at any point they may be required to act. This continued awareness grants a greater sense of player control and participation. It is certainly not the only means of suggesting player power during narrative moments, but it is a step toward balancing player engagement during gameplay and narrative moments, a balance that narrows the distance between play and story. By continuously feeling that they have power to enact change through cause and effect, a player may settle more fully into a game.

---

<sup>33</sup> Naughty Dog. "Pushing Technical Boundaries." In *Making of Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*, edited by Naughty Dog LLC: Sony Computer Entertainment America LLC, 2017.

In a typical linear-cinematic game, cutscenes serve as a narrative framework upon which skill challenges are laid. Games shift between mechanical skill challenge, which can be broken down by gameplay style—point-n-shoot, logic puzzles, traversals, etc.—and third-person narrative. Cohesion between the two comes not only from seamless transitions, but also from strength of narrative, characters, and visual storytelling. Nathan Drake, protagonist of *A Thief's End*, is by many accounts an archetypal character without much to distinguish him at first glance from other swashbuckler treasure hunters of the Indiana Jones variety. Yet the game gives him depth by encouraging engagement with his story and empathy with Drake as a protagonist. He is treated not only as the vessel a player operates but also as a multi-dimensional character, the lead of a “playable summer blockbuster.”<sup>34</sup> Interaction with other characters fleshes out his personality, something augmented by Naughty Dog’s distinct use of motion capture performances.

In an early scene, for example, Drake eats dinner with his wife, Elena, plays *Crash Bandicoot*<sup>35</sup>, and longs to go back to the treasure-hunting life he has given up. This yearning—something that drives the first half of the game’s story—is presented entirely visually within the bounds of a cutscene. The Naughty Dog developers use traditional cinematic methods of suggesting emotion and character goals, cutting between a picture of Malaysia on the wall and Drake’s distant gaze to highlight the connection between the two, while Elena’s voice fades out in the background. The

---

<sup>34</sup> Naughty Dog. "The Evolution of a Franchise." In *Making of Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*, edited by Naughty Dog LLC: Sony Computer Entertainment America LLC, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> A clever reference to the old Naughty Dog IP, something of a nudge-nudge wink-wink to the dedicated Naughty Dog follower, not to mention a way to embed the player in the game world right off the bat by playing a game within a game.

detail walks a line between game and film, fleshing out Drake as a character and using cues the audience is familiar with to craft an engaging protagonist. Joking with his wife in act one sets up their relationship for the eventual breakdown that occurs in acts two and three, when she discovers that he (and, by extension, the player) has been lying to her about his promise to leave treasure hunting behind. Then in act three, this carefully-crafted relationship encourages empathy when Drake and Elena slowly, awkwardly talk out this breach of trust—all while navigating a difficult logic puzzle to move their Jeep up a cliff. The emotional resonance and narrative framework come through cutscenes, moments of story and emotional beats that structure the challenge aspect of the game, everything from playing Crash Bandicoot to pulling the right sequence of levers to lift a car up a mountain.

Both skill challenges and character beats offer pleasure, which can roughly be divided into skill pleasure and story pleasure. Skill pleasure is that empathy-less thrill of succeeding in the challenge: figuring out which lever to pull, defeating that one guard just out of reach, or using skills in a new combination to achieve victory. Story pleasure is the investment in story-driven conflict and resolution revolving around characters, emotional reactions crafted predominantly through cutscenes and character interaction. These two pleasures work best when they parallel each other, such as when the player solves the mechanical puzzle to get the jeep up the mountain and Drake solves his story problem by working out the conflict with Elena. Though the sequence mixes cutscene and gameplay, the two states flow into and reflect each other, something called *ludonarrative consonance*—the compatibility between gameplay and story, where game system works to connect gameplay with narrative.

The term is used to contrast the term *ludonarrative dissonance*, which was coined by former LucasArts creative director Clint Hocking in a 2007 blog post.<sup>36</sup> The cliff sequence in *A Thief's End* is one such example of the concept. Story and gameplay parallel each other, and the twin resolution of reaching the destination mechanically and emotionally pays off nicely. Narrative beats encourage investment for the story's sake, and gameplay then serves as an augmentation and reflection for the narrative.

Cutscenes can offer challenge objectives and directions for victory outside the narrative arc, but the quality of visual storytelling within the *Uncharted* franchise, and the integration of narrative beats and gameplay challenges, allows each to emphasize the other. *A Thief's End* is able to use its cutscenes as a viable, empathy-inducing narrative framework because the skill challenges cohere with character goals.

Through cutscenes a player understands what puzzles they are trying to solve as well as the character's wants and needs behind gameplay challenges. The thrill of discovering a treasure or a new location or a solution is compounded by knowing *why* Drake seeks his objective. Engagement is not split between "being" Drake and "watching" Drake; it is divided between solving Drake's problems and rooting for him to solve them himself, a narrower gap to bridge. The game fosters immersion by connecting spatially-based gameplay with emotionally-oriented narrative involvement. Cutscenes form an emotional and narrative core to the game, organizing interpersonal and mechanical challenges and thus allowing for the solving of problem spaces, further solidifying the player's position as the action hero, mastering space and winning the game.

---

<sup>36</sup> Hocking, Clint. "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock." Click Nothing, 2007.

But *A Thief's End* is one example of many, and not all games make the same design choices. *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, for example, relies largely on procedure and mechanics to seat the guest in the role of protagonist Lara Croft. The game places greater emphasis on environmental interaction, utilizing space and system to highlight simulation rather than depending on its authored narrative. To aid this, it has a number of time-sensitive mechanics, where an action must be performed within a certain amount of time or Croft fails and it is game over. Most of these are trap- or traversal-related; something in the environment shifts suddenly—a trap triggers, or a wall collapses, or the path begins to crumble—and Croft (and consequently the player) must immediately shoot the trap, or jump to safety, or run in a certain direction to avoid death and the interruption that comes with a game over screen. This means that gameplay requires constant attention and awareness; a player cannot simply wander but must pay attention to their surroundings, ensuring engagement with the game.

*Rise of the Tomb Raider* also uses a skill-point system of leveling where players can specialize as they level up. It is, in a sense, a “game-ier” game than *A Thief's End*—one that places its focus on gameplay experience and character specialization rather than narrative and emotional connection. The game offers skill challenges wholly unrelated to the story, extraneous puzzles and obstacles that have little by way of narrative but are rewarded with experience points and other items. This means cutscene narrative has less work to do to connect player and character; mechanics bear a greater part of that particular burden. Cutscenes do not fall away, but they serve as an organizational framework, and engagement largely happens

through mechanical gameplay. This has the effect of minimizing the necessity of the cutscene. Croft's story takes a backseat to game mechanics, offering the player greater freedom in play. This applies both to things the player cannot control—the game has a built-in day-night cycle as well as a weather cycle that offers a semblance of verisimilitude—and those the player can, such as crafting, exploration, etc. One can collect every single item in an area, or participate in extraneous challenges, without paying mind to the narrative arc or being interrupted by moments of pre-packaged story. The generally consistent participation of *Tomb Raider* allows for a looser narrative structure. Cutscenes set up general scenarios, like Croft's race to discover treasures before the shadowy Trinity organization, or the complicated relationship she had with her father, without deep focus on character empathy or narrative engagement.

Instead, the continuous feeling of acting as and for Croft achieved via game mechanics keeps players engaged with the character and the game scenarios. Jumping from a crumbling wall of ice to safety does more to mirror the character's adrenaline-surge success than the mysterious backstory of Trinity or Croft's desperate search for some unspecified treasure. Story details come through in bits and pieces as the player explores an area: in dialogue around Croft and in texts and recordings the player discovers hidden throughout an area, all of which can be ignored or avoided.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, player goals are elucidated by metatextual game orders, things like experience points, challenge directions, inventory, weapons, and level objectives,

---

<sup>37</sup> Personally, I managed to completely avoid a great deal of exposition upon replaying an early level by stumbling headfirst into a combat encounter before I could overhear the soldier's conversation about what exactly they were doing in the area; this in no way impacted the satisfaction of getting all those bonus points for a stealth kill.

which appear on-screen in a heads-up display—the various text and symbol notifications one sees on screen during gameplay—rather than being suggested through narrative, either ambient<sup>38</sup> or within cutscenes. While cutscenes can introduce new narrative information, the mechanical level of engagement means they sometimes are redundant. An example of this is a scene that takes place early in act two, where Croft talks to Jacob, a local of the region—somewhere in Serbia—about the Trinity soldiers working nearby. The cutscene serves as an information dump, but a player who has been paying attention and poking around the facility they were just in already has a sense of what is going on and who these people are, information gleaned through items collected or ambient dialogue. The cutscene merely stands to solidify player knowledge and introduce new objectives that are immediately reiterated through the user interface. The emotional stakes are low, and Croft’s character gains little depth through this conversation. Jacob is mysterious, but there is little to be said for emotional engagement in the scene.<sup>39</sup>

In *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, gameplay pleasure does not depend upon the cutscene. Croft’s story engages the player via gameplay mechanics and interaction with the game world instead. Collecting, crafting, hunting, exploring, and other non-narrative play evokes the gameplay enjoyment of accruing points and making tools, and consequently succeeding in more challenges. Hunt, craft, or discover enough and the game rewards the player with points to spend in one of three categories—survival,

---

<sup>38</sup> That is, the story cues hidden in conversations, or objects discovered, or other things that are story-focused but not specifically gameplay or cutscene.

<sup>39</sup> He comes back later as the immortal mythic leader of the cult whose holy object Croft seeks; this revelation gives his scenes more weight, but the delay of the reveal leaves the set up generally unengaging.

hunter, and brawler—that grant bonuses and new skills, continuing the mechanical leveling system in a way completely unlike the story-centric *Uncharted* but just as enjoyable in its own way. Story plays a smaller role, that of a frame for skill challenges. Croft’s character arc—discovering that she has become part of a larger conflict, and that the trauma of her past is related to the organization currently searching for the same relic as her—is largely background noise to enjoyable gameplay. Unlike *A Thief’s End*, the story does not mirror the action; it simply suggests why the player is performing these actions, which are in turn pleasurable and engaging in and of themselves.

To create engaging gameplay, *Rise of the Tomb Raider* utilizes skill challenges different from those of *A Thief’s End*, priming the player for an alternate form of engagement and showcasing how developers use different tools to create different game pleasures. *Rise of the Tomb Raider* puts greater emphasis on the player-environment relationship, as can be seen in the discovery and crafting mechanics that *A Thief’s End* lacks. Compared to *A Thief’s End*, cutscenes in *Rise of the Tomb Raider* are pared down to allow for more gameplay connection. They appear often at the beginning and ending of levels, while in-game and ambient dialogue fleshes out the narrative for those who care to take the time to discover it—another difference between the story-driven *Uncharted* game and the play-driven *Tomb Raider*. Despite their similarities, the importance given to different aspects of player engagement suggests different ways to craft enjoyable play experiences: through a deep attention to narrative and empathy fleshed out through the cutscene

and mirrored in gameplay, or through engaging play and reward-based skill challenges that mitigate the importance of the cutscene in game story and pleasure.

### **How Would You Like To Proceed**

Not all game narratives are linear with fixed narrative progression authored by developers. In the choice-based game, while authorship still plays a role, players have the option to respond within the narrative, making decisions and changing the outcome of the game. Here, cutscenes work differently from traditionally linear narratives because they are not wholly divorced from player-controlled gameplay. Cutscenes are instead moments in the game where players have the opportunity—within reason, or the game’s rules—to alter the story, informing avatar characterization and making concrete plot decisions that have a range of repercussions. With regard to player options, most choice-based narrative games utilize “dialogue wheels” that allow players to effectively craft a personality for their character, which can range along a spectrum from benevolent and law abiding to sneaky, blunt, and even malicious. The choices a player selects are a way to impose their vision upon the game, crafting an avatar who is not a pre-built character like Drake or Croft but instead customized to fit the player’s ideal character, within technological and game-specific limitations. Thus, character creation is as important to choice-based games as graphic detail is to absorption; it allows for a certain level of verisimilitude and customization that creates a unique game experience. Character customization is a way for a player to exert power over the game space and story outside of narrative moments, affecting change on the game world as a whole.

But beyond designing a character, choice-based games offer the players a modicum of narrative control, something that draws audiences but may also limit player absorption in gameplay because it problematizes and incentivizes social scenarios. The narrative choices a game may offer range from large-scale decisions, such as choosing political powers to ally with or killing off a game companion (both of which happen in the climax of the third act of *Dragon Age 2* and have induced a great deal of speculation and debate among fans) or small-scale changes, like missing out on a mission that would get the player a better deal with a merchant or boost their reputation. Whether large or small, the primary difference in mechanizing player choice and narrative progression is that it means player participation does not stop when gameplay stops. Cutscenes remain a part of play. There is a sort of strategizing required of these so-called “social” or “narrative” encounters, the cutscene serving as its own conflict scenario. Though they are not fights in the traditional sense, they are still encounters that require solutions. The Bioware games offer numerous examples of this, particularly through the companion approval system. In *Dragon Age 2* certain companions will approve or disapprove of certain actions and responses to varying degrees; players might make decisions—to ally with one faction over another or complete a quest in a less-than-honorable manner—in order to appease a companion and consequently unlock their powers, rather than to stay true to their character.<sup>40</sup> Subsequently, cutscenes function as another aspect of gameplay, something of a logic puzzle: to get certain outcomes, certain choices must be made, at times without clear

---

<sup>40</sup> This become even more complicated once romances are brought into it; players may mine quests for companion approval/disapproval to engage in a friendmance (an approval-heavy romance) or a rivalmance (a disapproval-heavy romance).

knowledge of which choice will lead to which outcome.<sup>41</sup> Navigating narrative decisions in cutscenes requires an understanding of characters and situations (or a good walkthrough guide). While choice-based games allow for a roleplaying experience akin to tabletop RPGs like *Pathfinder* or *Dungeons & Dragons*, they are narrower in scope due to limitations of game technology.<sup>42</sup> Truly major decisions often get pared down to either/or choices for ease of design. For example, the major choices offered in the final act of *Dragon Age 2* are to ally with *either* the Templars *or* the Mages<sup>43</sup> and to *either* let a companion go *or* kill him; there's no middle ground or third option like one might find in a traditional tabletop RPG.

This dichotomized choice can interfere with player immersion, because the limited dialogue options and solutions often require players to make a decision they would not consider or select if given an unimpeded choice, interrupting both narrative investment and game absorption. While active gameplay conforms to rules that are easy to adapt to, the rules within a cutscene are not always so easily understood or easy to follow. In *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, for example, the player can climb tree trunks with branches but cannot scale trees without branches; in *A Thief's End* environment cues players where to go and how to solve problems. These are rules easily understood, logically motivated and justified within the game world. The game

---

<sup>41</sup> The Telltale Games have some particularly heinous examples of dialogue wheel options not lining up with in-game responses; the famed "glass him" from *Wolf Among Us* (Telltale Games 2013) is an instance where players, thinking they were offering a character a drink, ended up smashing a glass into the man's face. Whoops.

<sup>42</sup> They are also limited by the multimedia surrounding games and game canon, but the canonicity of a playthrough is something most fans face with the good cheer of an Orwellian doublethinker.

<sup>43</sup> One being a knighthood-esque order dedicated to protecting common folk from magic and the other being a group of peoples historically restricted to studying in isolated towers for fear of their powers harming the public. There's a great deal of argument about which is in the "right," and the conflict forms a core struggle in the sequel game *Dragon Age: Inquisition*.

implements rules that the player then understands and follows, using the tools at their disposal to solve challenges. In cutscenes and social encounters, the player remains cogent of the problem-solution aspect of the narrative, but the rules are more arbitrary, and limitations are more noticeable, largely because conversation is not a game-specific action the way gameplay is. Anyone can talk to someone else; not everyone can shoot a bow and arrow from the treetops. Even more generally, social decisions are rarely so cut and dry, while physical actions can be. A player has fewer means of solving social encounters than they do skill challenges and combat encounters, especially as developers broaden worlds and allow for players to beat mechanical puzzles and problem spaces in their own way. While a player might move from point A to point B in a number of different ways while playing (stealthily, by fighting their way through, taking a higher path, staying low to the ground, climbing something, going around something else, using a cheat the developer didn't realize was possible, etc.), narrative encounters are generally limited in their options and outcomes, meaning players can be stymied by the roleplay element of choice-based narrative games. In *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare 2014) a player can complete quests through numerous different means. Enemies can be dealt with numerous ways, there are multiple paths to take through the incredibly large and open maps of the game, and within gameplay choice feels varied and possible. In choice-based cutscenes, a player usually has only two or three options, each of which is a trade off in terms of power, experience, rewards, approval, and other social and point-based capital a player seeks to accrue. Additionally, some discussions have influence on the end of the game that a player may not realize, as is the case with choosing a leader for

the fantasy church at the end of the game.<sup>44</sup> The either/or choices from the final act of *Dragon Age 2* is another prime example; no matter what the player does, everything boils down to picking A or B.

Another instance of limitation comes from lacking the social capital (however that manifests in the game, be it reputation, karma, charm or intimidate skills, or something like the paragon/renegade options *Mass Effect* is known for) to choose the dialogue they want. A fairly well-known example of this appears in *Mass Effect 3* (Bioware 2012), where players without enough points in either renegade or paragon—points gained from playing *Mass Effect 2* with the same imported player character—cannot broker a peace between two warring species and therefore must choose one to win and one to be wiped out. This results in lost resources, which comes into play in the final battle, and the death of a squad member—which one depends on the side taken. These sorts of limitations pepper the *Mass Effect* games, but by this point the player has ostensibly spent a full two and a half games with the same companions. Sacrificing one member of the crew is designed to be an emotional beat, but it gets warped because built-in game mechanics force failure rather than lack of skill. The game turns character traits into skill points, forcing an outcome that has no relation to how good or bad the player is at the game.

In problematizing narrative encounters, players can slip out of the narrative involvement, instead attempting to predict social and story outcomes based upon the choices made in cutscenes, at times replaying entire cutscenes for optimal

---

<sup>44</sup> Three characters vie to become Divine (equitable to the Pope, though a position only a woman can hold). Choices made throughout the game either give or take points from each of the three characters, which the player has no way to track. Decisions made in Act I can influence the endgame without the player ever realizing what they have done.

progression. Cutscenes in choice-based character-driven narrative games therefore function twofold: as story markers, just as in linear narrative games, and also as their own brand of skill challenge, a line they often struggle to walk. Offering choice in a digital environment requires limiting options, especially in traditional, authored narratives like those of *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect*. For this reason, though cutscenes continue to be narrative moments, they are a more unwieldy tool in choice-based narrative games, requiring finesse from the designers to keep players engaged with the story and not merely focused on the mechanics and rewards of social encounters. To combat this shortcoming, designers look to open world games, which can overcome the limitations of the cutscenes by offering different options. In the early *Fallout* games, for example, players without enough points in the right skill could not choose to use persuasion or charm to work out narrative encounters the ways they wanted, choices limited by choice-based game structure. Players then complained about this shortcoming so vocally that the designers altered the dialogue and roleplay system to allow for broader player choice in the next game, *Fallout: New Vegas*.<sup>45</sup> Alternately, designers simply limit or avoid cutscene-driven narrative altogether, leaning into fully emergent narrative and gameplay, so that players can reach upper levels without seeking out narrative, as is the case with *Shadows of Mordor* and, to a lesser extent, *Skyrim*. Players can pick and choose side quests, progressing along the game's level system without actually interacting with a core narrative; or they can play for gameplay pleasure, and failing to engage with narrative at all.

---

<sup>45</sup> Josh Sawyer. Choice Architecture, Player Expression, and Narrative Design in *Fallout: New Vegas*.

Each of these tools of game storytelling—space, cutscenes, and choice—offers a different narrative experience, and the systems game developers implement largely depend on the final product they seek to produce. *A Thief's End*, like the rest of the *Uncharted* games, places its primary emphasis on story and would lose some of its emotional core in utilizing an open world. *Fallout: New Vegas*, with its open world and loosely-emergent story, would be a far narrower game if it forced players through the main narrative. *Rise of the Tomb Raider* utilizes simulation to invite the player into the game, and so narrative can serve as a framework rather than the game's core. Different systems fill different storytelling needs, and by manipulating how players interact with forms of game storytelling, game developers create different narrative experiences. As the gaming industry grows, the way in which players interact with game and game stories will likewise grow and develop. And as game stories develop, so too will the relationship between players and characters. Games can tell stories, but to do so they must invite the player into the world—and the shoes, and the mind, and the heart of their characters. If stories are about understanding another's viewpoint, then it is with empathy, and with character, that the heart of game storytelling lies.

## 2.

# Living the Story: Engagement, Empathy, and the Avatar State

Play begins with the player, the participant who makes gameplay possible. In character-driven narrative games, that participation takes place via the avatar, the player's stand-in within the game world. This interaction between player and player-object is one of two player/game relationships, the second being the broader—and previously discussed—interplay between player and game space. While space creates the world of the game, avatars are an anchor point for the player, multifaceted objects whose purpose is to allow the player access to game space and game story. More often than not, they are the protagonist of the narrative whom the player becomes. The player partakes in a transformation upon crossing the magic circle in order to play through the player character's unique story. The player grows and learns along with their avatar as the game progresses and, in the end, emerges equally victorious. The player fights the avatar's battles, learns their strengths and weaknesses, and ideally experiences their arc firsthand. This direct connection gives the avatar a great deal of power—and, as the adage goes, a great deal of responsibility—in character-driven narrative games, power that can either help or hinder game storytelling. As a vital feature of gameplay and game narrative, examining the variety of avatars found in games and the ways by which these avatars interact with the game world showcases the pleasures of character-driven narrative games and highlights places where gameplay and game story come into conflict. This chapter examines the types of avatars traditionally found in character-driven games, how players relate to and

align with them, and how that relationship fits into the wider game world and broader game story. A strong and accessible avatar can be the primary source of narrative pleasure in a character-driven narrative game, all due to the intermedial power of imagination and empathy.

### **What's in A Name**

An avatar, in the broadest sense, is a player's representation within a game world, the collection of pixels and code that form an object that the player guides. Veteran game designer Chris Crawford defines "avatar" as a "virtual construct that [is] controlled by human players and function[s] as a means of interacting with other characters."<sup>46</sup> By this definition avatars—also called player characters—are the primary means of player access to game story. They are the controllable focal point of the gameplay experience. If game storytelling is often spatial, the avatar guides the discovery of space and instigates progressive narrative. Avatars are objects of balance: between player and object, between designer and player, between empathy and utility. They are unified by their position within the game, player objects that guide how players interact with game space and story. From the little grey blips in *Pong* to the intricately detailed design of protagonists like Nathan Drake and Lara Croft, avatars are the primary point of player participation and interaction. Pass through the magic circle and they await, vessels and reflections ready to guide and be guided as the game progresses.

---

<sup>46</sup> Waggoner Zach. *My Avatar, My Self: Identity in Video Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 8

But as with game style and genre, there are different kinds of avatars, which offer different means of participation in games and a game stories. Avatars can be broken down into four subgroups: voiced avatars, unvoiced avatars, cipher avatars, and authored avatars. Voiced avatars are those which either have spoken lines—avatars like Nathan Drake and Lara Croft, as well as *Mass Effect's* Commander Shepard and the Sole Survivor from *Fallout 4* (Bethesda 2015). Unvoiced avatars do not speak, as is the case with Link from the *Legend of Zelda* or the protagonist of *Portal* and *Portal 2* (Valve Corporation 2007 & 2011). Some avatars exist in a middle ground, their dialogue unspoken, instead popping up through speech bubbles or on-screen text, as is the case with the Warden from *Dragon Age: Origins* and Frisk from *Undertale* (Toby Fox 2015). Distinct from their level of voiced content, avatars can also be ciphers or authored. A cipher is an avatar whose background, personality, and overall character is left to the player to decide, either through in-game character choices or by stint of never being acknowledged in-game, allowing the player to imagine how their avatar thinks, feels, and has lived up until this point. The Courier from *New Vegas* is an example of this. An authored avatar is one whose story has been designed by a game developer, as is the case with Lara Croft or Nathan Drake. These subcategories form two loose spectra, which can be turned into a graph by which to organize most any player character. For example, if the voiced-unvoiced spectrum forms an x-axis and the authored-cipher spectrum the y-axis, one might discover something like this:

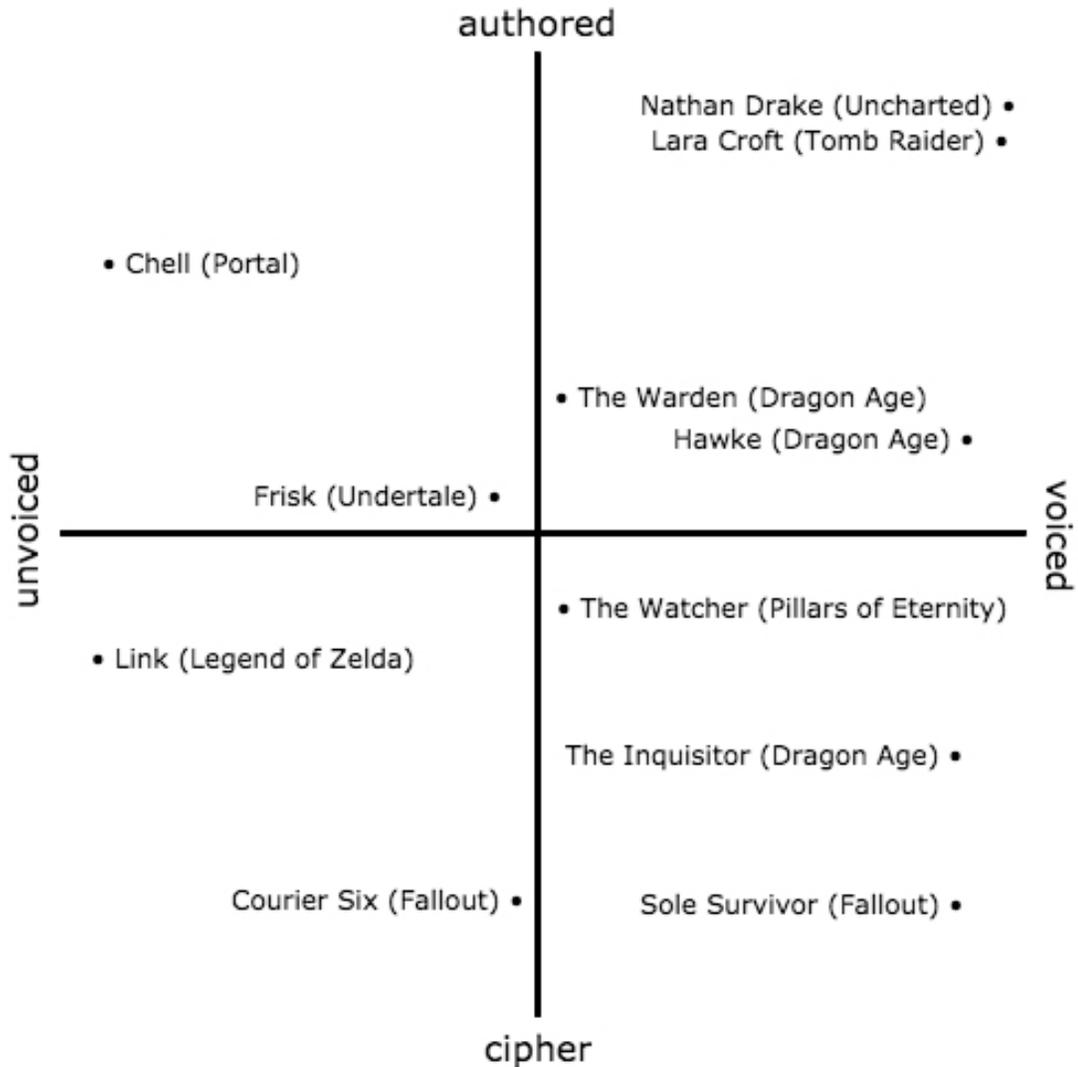


Image 2.1

The impact of avatar design can be seen in the way that players interact with and talk about a game. Character voice offers concrete inflections and vocal patterns that can suggest personality and offer the player something concrete to latch onto, and even characters with unspoken dialogue offer a modicum of personality through text. Likewise, avatars that fall towards the authored end of the spectrum often have more substantial stories, backgrounds, and personalities to ground themselves in, as is

the case with Nathan Drake, whereas more cipher-like avatars require more work on the player's side to build or understand a character, which can be a freedom or a burden depending on the player's preferences and the amount of effort they are willing to put in.<sup>47</sup>

The uses of character backstory, personality, and authorship can roughly be understood by examining the four quadrants of game avatars: voiced ciphers, unvoiced ciphers, voiced authored avatars, and unvoiced authored avatars. Voice weighs slightly less heavily into this, as avatars both voiced and unvoiced can have compelling, empathy-inducing stories. Link from *Legend of Zelda* is unvoiced but is among one of the most popular video game characters of all time despite his lack of dialogue. Chell from *Portal* likewise has something of a cult following despite never speaking nor being seen through both of the *Portal* games. Both the Warden from *Dragon Age: Origins* and the Watcher from *Pillars of Eternity* (Obsidian Entertainment 2015) are semi-voiced, but despite the lack of spoken lines, they manage to invite players into their stories, considered favorites among the character-driven narrative gaming community. While the Warden can be considered semi-authored and the Watcher a semi-cipher, they both fall in the middle of the graph and so split the work between player and game. The choice architecture of *Dragon Age: Origins* allows for the authorship of the Warden to be shared between the developers and the player, while the cipher-ness of the Watcher is mitigated by the impactful and unique choice architecture developed by Obsidian Entertainment. Voice, on the far

---

<sup>47</sup> The *Dragon Age* games are a particularly strong example of this. The protagonist of the first and second games have playable backstories that tie into the game's overall story, something which the third game in the series lacks. It has become a point of contention, and fans often point it out as one reason why *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is considered a weaker game than its predecessors.

end of the spectrum, offers a familiar and instant point of connection. Much can be gleaned from a character by how they speak. It emphasizes difference between the professional protagonist of the original *Mass Effect* series, Commander Shepard, and Pathfinder Ryder, the wet-behind-the-ears lead of its sequel. Shepard's no-nonsense dedication unfolds over time to showcase their humor and softer side, whereas Ryder's constant joking and wryness shows them from the get-go to be young, untried, and enthusiastic. Both fall more toward the cipher end of the spectrum, as do most Bioware protagonists<sup>48</sup>, but their distinctive voices nevertheless root them in a solid characterization that gives the player something concrete to understand and jump off of when taking the plunge into their specific stories. Though such aesthetics are surface level and almost textural, they fall into the same category as graphic detail in the cutscene, richness helping to craft an environment in which the players can feel present.

Both Drake and Croft are voiced and, more importantly, authored. They are easy to understand and align with, being fleshed-out characters with clearly defined goals. Drake in particular is rendered sympathetic by his story, which invites the player's engagement courtesy of its linear nature and dedication to detail. Croft too offers a clear character to understand, even if her narrative is less closely aligned with gameplay. This separation allows the player distance from the character and, by extension, the story. Predominantly authored characters appear in games of multiple styles and genres: Aloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn* showcases an authored avatar at

---

<sup>48</sup> Bioware as a studio produces predominantly choice-based games and is known for its branching dialogue and intermittent either/or decisions that allow the player to craft their own stories as well as unique player characters.

work in an open world, and Corvo from *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios 2012) exists as a primarily authored player character even with the karmic either/or choices *Dishonored* presents its player.

But the more choice is injected into a game's story, the less exclusively authored and avatar becomes. For example, Hawke from *Dragon Age 2* exists roughly in the middle of the authored-cipher spectrum. Hawke has a concrete backstory—some of which gets played, akin to the Warden from *Origins*—and a voice for the player to latch onto. All the same, the player can, as the game progresses, make a series of choices to craft the character's personality (as benevolent/peaceful, charming/mischievous, or violent/blunt) and make a lasting impact on the game world.<sup>49</sup> The Inquisitor from *Dragon Age: Inquisition* tends even more towards the cipher end of the spectrum.<sup>50</sup> The game offers little by way of concrete character backstory, and while the choice architecture of the game allows for some specification, most of the Inquisitor's personality and characterization comes from player imagination. The Sole Survivor from *Fallout 4* similarly presents as a cipher; though the game has a playable prologue, there is little by way of concrete, authored details about the character, as is in line with the *Fallout* series' tendency towards wide open worlds for the players to explore they see fit. This is not necessarily a

---

<sup>49</sup> *Dragon Age 2* does this particularly well courtesy of its space—unlike open world games of the same caliber, *Dragon Age 2* takes place entirely in one location, the city-state of Kirkwall, and so the game progresses through a series of acts that take place years apart, allowing the player to experience how their actions impact the growth (or destruction) of the city.

<sup>50</sup> Bioware is interesting because no two games tackle space and character the same way. The studio has produced three games set in the same world with some of the same characters that present fundamentally different avatars and game spaces, making the series an intriguing study of what works and what, frankly, doesn't.

shortcoming in game design as a whole; it merely places a different sort of pressure on both game designers and players to create a character that can be empathetic.<sup>51</sup>

Empathy matters because it is, more than anything, the cornerstone of engaging storytelling. Empathy is defined as “the ability to understand and appreciate another person's feelings, experience, etc.”<sup>52</sup> or “the ability to put one’s self in the place of another,” and, no matter the medium, is vital to guest absorption and—in the case of video games—immersion.<sup>53</sup> It is a question of psychological proximity. Events that more closely affect you, or those you are close to, garner more personal interest than events happening to a complete stranger. But most stories, especially those built for popular consumption (i.e., films, books, podcasts, games, etc.) happen to strangers, so storytellers use empathy to encourage audience engagement. It bridges the gap between stranger and self, allowing the guest to connect with a protagonist over the course of a story. The strange becomes relatable, and the guest experiences the absorption the storyteller desires. While empathy can be found in any narrative medium, games must negotiate the complication of their participatory nature.

Because games are participatory, the empathetic connection between player and protagonist involves gameplay as well as narrative alignment. The player inhabits the character’s space, both riding along with and making decisions for the player

---

<sup>51</sup> Fans and fandoms, for example, tend to be more transformative in their enjoyment of choice-based and cipher avatars. Fans fill in the blanks with original fan content, theory-crafting, and general imagination. On the other hand, fans more interested in the curatorial aspects of fandom tend to find these protagonists—and games by extension—thin and hard to connect with. Such is the case with the difference in the Warden (a more authored avatar) versus the Inquisitor (a cipher with little by way of concrete backstory or, more importantly, a solid background upon which both player and game can build) and continues to be a reason for the rose-tinted nostalgia surrounding *Dragon Age: Origins*.

<sup>52</sup> Oxford English Dictionary. s.v. "empathy." Online: Oxford University Press.

<sup>53</sup> Schell, "Understanding Entertainment," 3.

character, so skill challenges and problem solving complicates how players relate to their avatars. Controlling the avatar gives players control within the game world, and the specific actions an avatar can take reflect upon a player's relationship with the game. Moving Croft around a space to collect ingredients for better weaponry grants players autonomy, both improving inventory and allowing story progression through spatial exploration. A player's solution for a traversal puzzle in *A Thief's End* offers agency through the unique way the player moves from point A to B. Games offer a second tier of engagement, moving from traditional narrative investment to a ludic absorption. Empathy takes on an added dimension, because the player is not merely watching and engaging with a distanced story but submerging themselves in the experience via gameplay. The player experiences narrative both first- and third-hand, participating as the protagonist while stepping away from narrative to solve puzzles and win skill-based challenges. To craft the pleasurable and interactive narrative experience that character-driven games advertise, the player must have a strong connection with the protagonist, whether cheering for them in third-person cutscenes or moving as them through gameplay scenarios. They must be able to switch between the two without slipping out of their engagement with the game as a whole.

This movement between story and gameplay leads to a code-switching in character-driven narrative games. As a game progresses, the player relates to the avatar in different ways. Previous studies suggest two primary modes of address. The first describes the avatar as a vessel, or object, that the player controls.<sup>54</sup> By that school of thought, avatars are proxies, or transports, things to be guided and that offer

---

<sup>54</sup> Gee, James Paul. *Good Video Games + Good Learning: Collected Essays on Video Games, Learning, and Literacy*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2007)

players the chance to be distinctly separate from themselves. This mode of address suggests a distance between player and avatar that fully separates the two. The other popular understanding of avatars is that players view them reflectively, as though seeing oneself through a third-person perspective, similar to the way a moviegoer views a film protagonist.<sup>55</sup> There is an aspect of projection involved in this school of thought; the player does not participate in experiences separate from the self (as is suggested by the avatars-as-proxies perspective) but actually participates as that avatar.<sup>56</sup> Each of these perspectives offers something important, but the reality is not so black and white. Rather, players tend to cycle between different modes of address depending on the in-game situation.<sup>57</sup> The avatar is often seen as something more akin to an object or proxy during gameplay challenge situations, where the player guides them through goal-oriented play and problem spaces. In *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, Croft's personal story becomes less important when the player must instead give their attention to navigating a certain area or succeeding at a challenge. There is little emotional projection needed to jump from cliff face to cliff face; engagement is instead encouraged via real-time reactions and the sense of acting for Croft to solve these puzzles. However, during cutscene story moments when Croft experience emotional turmoil—say, discovering her father's old flame is actually working for Trinity—the player's relation to the character tends more towards the second of the

---

<sup>55</sup> Rehak, B. "Playing at being: Psychoanalysis and the avatar." In M.J.P. Wolf and B. Perron(eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader*. (London: Routledge, 2003), 103—128.

<sup>56</sup> This is a concept that has led to a number of studies about identity, self-concept, and gender studies, and seems to be especially prevalent in multiplayer games, where avatars stand in for players in interpersonal social situations (Taylor et al 2015).

<sup>57</sup> Taylor, Nicholas. "Me and Lee: Identification and the Play of Attraction in the Walking Dead." *Game Studies: the international journal of computer game research* 15, no. 1 (January 2015). 2015.

two perspectives. The player projects onto Croft in a different way and can understand what she feels in the situation. The cues shift from physical and challenge-oriented—the simulation of game engagement—to emotionally resonant. Betrayal is a near-universal experience, or at least familiar enough in media that a player can understand it; *Rise of the Tomb Raider* uses that understanding to encourage emotional and empathetic connection with Croft. As with more traditional storytelling mediums, the player is invited to experience the story through the protagonist. This switch is smoothed over by empathy. Connection to the character allows the player to step forward or back as the situation warrants, playing either as an objective puzzle-solver or an extension of the character.

Croft tends to alternate between these two states, and for that reason *Rise of the Tomb Raider's* gameplay is generally more pleasurable and engaging than its story. The full shift between goal-oriented gameplay and character empathy takes a great deal of work on the player's part, so the aspects of the game easier to connect to—the more prevalent and less emotionally strenuous gameplay challenges—garner more of the player's time, effort, and attention. Croft's ability to forage, craft, explore, and participate in other non-linear quests and challenges means the player spends more time interacting with her as an object in the game rather than as a reflected version of the self. Gameplay is more consistent and engaging than narrative, so story becomes secondary. While gameplay relates to plot, it is often without direct emotional engagement in the story, because mechanics encourage players to act separately from Croft's personal wants and needs. For example, the gameplay pleasure of sneaking into the Soviet instillation relies on skill-oriented

engagement; the reasoning behind Croft's infiltration, or what she seeks within, are secondary, used more to instigate skill challenge than as meaningful story beats. Gameplay is more important and pleasurable than story, so player empathy is lessened, so gameplay becomes even more important and enjoyable, and so on. It's a cycle that does not sidestep empathy or story entirely—in fact, at times the two align quite well, as is the case with a side quest where Croft hallucinates and relives her father's suicide<sup>58</sup>—but in general, the separation between the two requires switching from one mode of address to the other, which takes work, and is therefore less conducive to creating an empathetic player/avatar relationship.

This contrasts with Nathan Drake, who walks a finer line between distanced gameplay and narrative presence. Certainly, there are moments where narrative is secondary to gameplay—most combat encounters are logic-based skill challenges first and narrative moments second—but Drake himself tends to remain a sympathetic character even during gameplay. Ambient dialogue, commentary, and actions keep the player rooted in the story. This is fundamentally a design choice—*A Thief's End* is, after all, a “playable blockbuster” and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* is not—but it helps that his character is continuously fleshed out. Not only he is a familiar archetype—the cocky, skilled, rootable action-adventure hero, like so many treasure-seeking protagonists before him—but he also has relationships with those around him that give the player greater access to his personality and ways of thinking. While Croft is

---

<sup>58</sup> Though, as I later learned, that particular quest is a DLC and so its place in the overall story can be argued.

often alone<sup>59</sup>, Drake travels with a number of companions: his wonderfully three-dimensional wife Elena, his old friend and partner Sully, and most notably his long-lost and thought-dead brother Sam. Each of these characters has a relationship with Drake that magnifies different facets of his personality and gives him dimensionality, presenting opportunities for player connection. Through these relationships, the player gets to know Drake during gameplay as well as cutscenes. There is a smoother transition between Drake-as-proxy and Drake-as-projection because he is often both at once. The narrative does not disappear during gameplay. Instead, empathy continues to be encouraged and built up by Drake's actions, dialogue, and relationships, creating a more pleasurable narrative experience that parallels gameplay.<sup>60</sup> Emotionally resonant moments, such as the boys' first job together after Sam re-enters Drake's life, are paired with gameplay set pieces, such as their wild escape from the villa they rob together, so that emotional beats and play challenges align. Banter about the job and their relationships fills moments of down time as Drake, and by extension the player, works with Sam to break in, harkening back to the old days in speech and action, connecting play and narrative. In this way, empathy plays into narrative pleasure, and while *Rise of the Tomb Raider's* gameplay challenges are more engaging than those of *A Thief's End*, Drake's more robust and empathetic story encourages a level of player absorption that *Rise of the Tomb Raider* lacks.

---

<sup>59</sup> While she has companions, who might count as party members in the traditional sense, she often leaves/loses/is separated from them; there is always a certain independence to Croft that suggests a loner quality and offers fewer opportunities to get to know her.

<sup>60</sup> It may be said that *Uncharted's* gameplay is less interesting than *Tomb Raider*, which is understandable, but the narrative propels the player through the game with a sort of energy that encourages continuation, whereas if one cannot succeed at *Tomb Raider's* challenges there is less by way of narrative momentum to encourage progress.

Beyond modes of address, games encourage empathy and deepen the player/character relationship through the use of shared goals. Game story is at its most absorptive when the wants of the player match those of the character. If the avatar stands for the player within the game world, it follows that the wants and needs of the player character should be felt by the player as well. Feeling for and reacting as the player character is one of the core participatory aspects that narrative games attempt to encourage. This ludonarrative consonance can be seen in how cutscene narrative in *A Thief's End* mirrors active gameplay. In other games, gameplay does not always align with game narrative, either due to the structure of play—games in which side quests hold no relation to the main story, such as the innumerable fetch quests of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*—or because the game story itself is not well-connected to the gameplay challenges, resulting in ludonarrative dissonance. While a good portion of this misalignment comes from the particulars of quest and game structure, it begins with an understanding of what the player character, and by extension the player, is trying to do. *A Thief's End* works as well as it does because the character's goals mimic those of the player and vice versa; narrative themes are reflected by gameplay and story.

Beyond the cliff climb discussed in Chapter One, one can find examples of this in the game's DLC, where the player character Chloe must backtrack physically (revisiting a space already covered) and emotionally (rebuilding her relationship with fellow adventurer-slash-NPC-companion Nadine Ross) at the same time, further highlighting Naughty Dog's awareness of this correlation between gameplay and narrative. The main game provides other nuanced instances of such balance and

reflection between gameplay and narrative. Nathan Drake's scuba diving excursion early in the game is an easy skill challenge that reflects the slow pace of his post-adventuring life. The scene is structured so that the player—especially one familiar with the *Uncharted* series—thinks they are seeking some sort of treasure, when in reality Drake works for a retrieval company, an overall dull if legitimate lifestyle. Another example comes later in the game, when Drake, Sam and Sully are driving across an expansive and beautifully detailed region of rural Madagascar. Though primarily a traversal situation, the ease of gameplay—driving the jeep across the landscape—stands at odds with the complexity both of the space and the facets of the relationships between the three that come up in conversation. Though a lull in adrenaline-pumping skill challenge or combat, gameplay continues at the same time as character information comes to light, the trio covering literal ground in continuation of their treasure hunt as well as figurative ground in re-solidifying their relationships.

Another perspective on ludonarrative consonance comes from Obsidian Entertainment developer Josh Sawyer, who addressed the connection between player choice and character choice in a 2017 Game Development Conference presentation. Sawyer speaks about the particulars of choice architecture in game design, specifically the branching decisions found in choice-based narrative games like those of Bioware and Bethesda. Choice introduces a possibility of gameplay/narrative conflict, in the sense that choices problematize narrative, thereby forcing narrative decisions that can negatively impact gameplay, which separates the player's goal (to achieve the best outcome) from that of the player character (to succeed while existing

as a multidimensional character). Essentially, game progression comes into conflict with how players have been taught to play games. Choice draws players out of the ideal immersion state of gameplay, and more importantly mitigates empathy, because players focus on the technical aspects of the game rather than those of emotion and narrative.

But this holds true on a scale beyond narrative encounters; even games without choice architecture can suffer from the separation between gameplay goals and story goals. *Rise of the Tomb Raider* is one such example of this: Croft's gameplay, while related to the overall plot, does not necessarily fulfill her narrative goals. Materials gathered during exploration can be used to craft or upgrade weapons and other items, but that does not directly impact the game's story. Similarly, side quests—collecting things, destroying other things, fighting bad guys, discovering challenge spaces, uncovering caches of coins or goods or treasure items—tie into the overall story goal (to beat the nefarious Trinity) without directly impacting Croft's characterization or story arc. Drake's gameplay, on the other hand, ties into the overall plot, play progression connected to story progression. At the same time, detailed and layered level design allows for player choice in how they solve certain skill challenges (such as succeeding in an encounter by sneaking through an area undetected, or killing all enemies in a frontal charge, or utilizing another unique solution the player discovers). *A Thief's End* aligns victory with character development, so that succeeding in any skill challenge offers plot continuation. *Rise of the Tomb Raider* does this as well—cut scenes upon challenge completion are an example of this, presenting additional situational information—but unlike in *A Thief's*

*End*, Croft's victories do not necessarily lead to deeper understanding, merely more information. This division between skill challenge and story changes how a player interacts with the avatar, and by extension the game. Each can be enjoyable in its own way, but they are still fundamentally different, pointing towards different means of engaging with game stories, highlighting the importance of the avatar in crafting a variety of engaging and immersive experiences.

### **Be A Part of the Narrative**

Avatars do all this and more, but they cannot do it in a vacuum. Instead, they function within a wider game world, the eyes and ears of the player in game space and story. Game storytelling is largely spatial, as discussed in Chapter One, and the position and actions of an avatar within the game space affect the way in which the player relates not only to the characters but to the game world itself, adding another dimension to narrative experiences in video games.

Stepping away from empathy for a moment, interaction with game story can occur in two directions: top-down and bottom-up, story-focused or simulation-focused.<sup>61</sup> All digital games are, in part, simulated experiences, the avatar providing a simulated mode of address through which the player participates in game challenges, stories, and worlds. This often leads to bottom-up game design that begins with these simulated actions, starting with the rules and building towards a story that is laid on top. Often these games offer episodic plot, the minutia of the rules superseding the cohesion of an overarching narrative. Game pleasure is derived primarily from the

---

<sup>61</sup> Aarseth, "Genre Trouble," 52.

rules system, and any narrative is secondary—that is, “the rule system not level design” forms the core of the game.<sup>62</sup>

But not all games lean so far into simulation; some place greater emphasis on story, building simulations to fit to storylines rather than vice versa. This is a shift in the perspective through which games are viewed. Stories are processed in a top-down manner, beginning with a broad view of the game story—the overall arc—and then narrowing down to focus on specific details of how the player interacts with the world. In terms of game authorship, the more authored a game is the more top-down it tends to present, because story so clearly stands out in game design. This sort of design often—though, not always—leads to conflict between game system and game story, the story leading one way but the system allowing (or disallowing) actions that contrast with the game’s story or themes.<sup>63</sup> In these cases, system generally wins out, mechanics overshadowing story. This is another reason why player choice and story design tend to come into conflict: the system does not wholly support the story, and the player is ejected from the narrative.

*Rise of the Tomb Raider* and *A Thief’s End* are near-perfect examples of this differentiation, *Rise of the Tomb Raider* being a simulation-focused bottom-up experience and *A Thief’s End* being a story-focused top-down game. *Rise of the Tomb Raider* places its emphasis on the mechanics of gameplay; the detailed crafting and exploration systems—a series of mechanics used to discover new spaces, collect items, and build relevant weaponry and gear—highlight simulation. Other parts of the

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, games that put system far before story end up with limited, or even unengaging, narratives.

game do this as well, such as the mechanic of shooting traps as they spring in order to avoid being skewered, jumping away from crumbling ground underfoot, or breaking open dams and walls to raise water levels. Minor aspects of puzzle solving contribute to an overall sense of performing actions; the actions of the avatar are so specific that the player experiences them in real time. That detailed level participation is further helped along by the game's nudge controls<sup>64</sup>, which place greater importance upon player skill in performing simple actions and lend a sense of realism to gameplay.

*A Thief's End*, on the other hand, streamlines gameplay in favor of story. The development team took great pains to offer engaging and detailed gameplay mechanics, but story was crafted specifically to be a cohesive whole.<sup>65</sup> The development team's dedication to keeping story and gameplay moving in the same direction mitigates the separation between story and system. Even so, players have their problems: many have commented on the paradox of Drake being a sympathetic protagonist who can nevertheless gun down countless enemies on the way to his objective. According to this argument, Drake's status as a good guy is undermined by the realities of the game. Skill challenges and combat encounters—which require him to fight through innumerable enemies—lead to the deaths of hundreds at his hands, breaking the illusion of Drake's moral righteousness.<sup>66</sup> Other examples of this divide

---

<sup>64</sup> A term coined by video game blogger Nathan Randall in his 2017 blogpost "Nudge Controls: Part I." Essentially, this is the tendency for game controls to be less forgiving of minor player mistakes than one might hope.

<sup>65</sup> Naughty Dog, "Pushing Technical Boundaries."

<sup>66</sup> What this argument fails to address are the conventions of the action game, which are generally fighting-based to some degree, and so this sort of fighting—and NPC death—forms a core aspect of the game genre. In fact, Naughty Dog creative director Neil Druckmann included a trophy in *Uncharted 4* called "Ludonarrative Dissonance" specifically for killing over 1,000 enemies and claims he "doesn't buy into" the arguments about Drake being paradoxical. (Druckmann, Neil. "'Uncharted 4' Director Neil Druckmann on Nathan Drake, Sexism in Games.")

can be found in the innumerable side quests of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* that offer nothing by way of story progression and at times even contradict knowledge given to the player character. An elvish Inquisitor, for example, can lose their hometown during a series of off-screen quests called War Table Missions, but the emotional impact of that is never addressed. Additionally, minor quests done for characters in certain areas—collecting items, gifting people with supplies they need, fighting off local enemies, allying with one local faction over another—have no noticeable change on either the region or sentiment toward the Inquisition.<sup>67</sup> Improvements made and losses suffered can fail to affect how the game progresses, beyond receiving minor rewards—money, items, experience points, etc.—for completing the objective.

Empathy then informs, and is informed by, the different methods of simulation and story interaction. Players engage in simulation through participation, which requires little by way of empathy to encourage absorption, as is the case with *Rise of the Tomb Raider's* gameplay. Game stories, on the other hand, are carried by empathy but can sometimes fail to utilize enjoyable gameplay mechanics. The skill challenges in *A Thief's End*, for example, vary little throughout the game, whereas Croft has a multitude of actions she can take and things she can do both in and out of combat, as well as skills and abilities she can learn as she progresses. Player expertise plays a large part in continued participation in and enjoyment of *Rise of the Tomb Raider*. In *A Thief's End*, while Drake's gameplay is fun, it is fairly static, the

---

<sup>67</sup> At one point an Inquisitor can completely break off a potential alliance with an entire nation in order to save a group of NPCs, and while this affects companion approval it does nothing to alter the relation between the Inquisition and the foreigners.

narrative driving continued player absorption. Play can be pleasurable without empathy. Solving a puzzle requires no interpersonal connection for victory to be enjoyable; there is a level of skill challenge and success that requires no emotional attachment. Achieving a goal in goal-oriented gameplay feels good even without personal connection to the player character's wants and needs. Narrative play, however, requires a sympathetic relationship. Player absorption and immersion hinge on the ability to connect with the player character—and with the overall game story—on an emotional level.

This is the difference between *Rise of the Tomb Raider* and *A Thief's End*; Drake's character is easier to connect with on a sympathetic, interpersonal level and therefore his story is more engaging than Croft's. His conversations with others help highlight the facets of his character; Croft's conversations serve primarily as a means to share information. *Rise of the Tomb Raider* does system well, but its narrative beats feel weaker because it puts simulation above narrative, whereas *A Thief's End* utilizes a system that, while engaging, offers little variation, and so gameplay is not as appealing as it is in *Tomb Raider*. Neither is wrong in emphasizing its unique strengths. This is the sort of differentiation that feeds into consumer choice when it comes to deciding which games to buy and to play, in much the same way that a moviegoer might enjoy police procedurals and avoid romantic comedies. It is, at the end of the day, a question of taste.

Beyond empathy with the avatar, players access games by imagining the game world. Where empathy connects player and character, imagination connects player and space. The player/world relationship is essentially an extension of the

player/avatar connection (or vice versa—the player and avatar can be considered to be a microcosm of the relationship between player and world). Much like aligning narrative and gameplay or character goals and player goals, there are ways to encourage belief and placement in the game world, such as the graphics discussed in Chapter One. But there is still an aspect of personal projection involved. Stepping into the magic circle, as in any other media, requires a willingness to accept the rules of the world as true and normal within the confines of the medium. The difference with character-driven narrative games is that those rules are literal, and the game space is not merely an imagined world but also a space that can be explored, where story is organized by spatial relations and connection to an avatar.

This is not dissimilar from other media. Meaningful emotional moments and beats allow for absorptive, engaging storytelling, much the same as they do in film, or television, or a radio drama, or novels. Games are unique not because they cannot tell stories, but because they balance in player agency and gameplay mechanics with their narratives. System and story exist in the same space, and the juggling act that ensues both complicates traditional narratives and opens the door to a whole new genre of storytelling. As with *A Thief's End* and *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, developers must prioritize what sort of narrative and/or gameplay experience a specific game aims to offer. *A Thief's End* stands as an example of a primarily playable story; *Rise of the Tomb Raider* shows the outcome of a game where play is aligned with but distanced from story. It makes an effort to be engaging with regard to its simulation rather than its narrative arc. These possibilities, like genre conventions, provide a framework to be used and subverted in game design, a series of rules that guide game story. Games

present a form of storytelling with its own rules, conventions, and history. Unique in its possibilities, game narrative brims with potential, ready to be used as developers see fit to craft the experiences they want to share.

Games are not inherently narrative; that much has been argued to death and beyond. But they are not inherently anti-narrative either. Rather, they exist in a space between, full of potential with a slowly-solidifying body of formal tools that can be used to tell not one but a number of stories: emergent, simulated, system-based, authored, and more. But within all of these, it is empathy—the act of feeling for and as the characters that inhabit the video game world—that drives narrative absorption and, from there, primes the player for immersion.

### 3.

## Wandering the Wastelands: Player Agency and the Open World Game

Choice introduces a complicated new dimension to game narrative. Players exert agency by making choices that affect the game world, a facet of participation not found in linear authored games where story events are immutable. Similarly, open worlds introduce new possibilities for gameplay and player participation by giving players opportunities to engage in spacial narratives without being beholden to designer authorship. To that end, it is worthwhile to examine the varieties of narrative enjoyment found in open world games, and what garners interest in a game style that, by outward appearances, limits narrative in favor of other gameplay pleasures.

*Fallout: New Vegas* is a popular game that provides an early example of a fully interactive game space and has a broad choice architecture. This makes it a prime game to study in order to break down the way game narrative works in open world and choice-based games, and what pleasures can be found in such designs, which have become increasingly popular in recent years.

*Fallout: New Vegas* presents a complex choice architecture that, in tandem with its open world and use of narrative suspense to engage players, makes it a novel and intriguing take on gameplay pleasure and narrative involvement. With primary emphasis on player option and freedom, this game shifts away from the authored, linear focus of games discussed so far, offering an opportunity to examine how choice and player power, real or imagined, feed into gameplay and narrative pleasure, as

well as how such facets of game interaction craft a unique play experience. An open world and choice-based game built on expansion, *New Vegas*' narrative shifts from a primarily authored whodunit to a complicated system of influence built of various allegiances, friendships, and regional conflicts. With a focus on reputation as social currency and a nuanced skill system that balances combat and social encounters, *New Vegas* is a far cry from strictly authored, linear games such as *Uncharted* and *Tomb Raider*. *Fallout: New Vegas* frontlines structure and skill challenge, using narrative as a secondary framework to encouraging player participation long enough for the game's more complicated and rewarding system of power and influence to come to fruition and provide the game's core pleasures.

*New Vegas* is the fourth game in the *Fallout* series. It was developed not by its distributor Bethesda Softworks but by Obsidian Entertainment, a company founded by several members of *Fallout*'s original development team after they left Black Isle Studios.<sup>68</sup> Bethesda, busy with development for *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, outsourced production of its new *Fallout* game to the old team, and Obsidian, known for its work on the sequels of *Knights of the Old Republic* and *Neverwinter Nights*,<sup>69</sup> pitched an idea for a game set between *Fallout 2* and *Fallout 3* and taking place in Las Vegas. The game's timeline was rejected, but the concept was approved, and so *Fallout: New Vegas* was born. Released in 2010, *New Vegas* was extremely popular and critically well-received, and in 2011 it won a Golden Joystick for RPG Game of the Year. With a sprawling world, impressive quest design, and new implementation

---

<sup>68</sup> Black Isle, in tandem with Interplay Entertainment, developed *Fallout 1* and *2*; Bethesda bought the IP and began publishing games starting with *Fallout 3*.

<sup>69</sup> Both are originally Bioware titles—*Neverwinter* was published in 2002 and *KotOR* in 2003—but Obsidian has worked with both IPs since 2004.

of choice infrastructure, *New Vegas* remains popular, raising the question: what makes the game so memorable and well-loved years after its initial release?

The plot of *New Vegas* is relatively straightforward: the player plays as Courier Six, a post-apocalyptic postman who runs messages and packages through the remains of Nevada and Arizona—now known as the Mojave Wasteland. The game follows Courier Six as they seek out a man in a checkered jacket, a man who attempted to kill them immediately prior to the start of the game. Following his trail, the Courier wanders the wasteland, taking odd jobs and learning about the conflict between the New California Republic (NCR), which is the nominal democracy that has risen out of the ruins of California and seeks to expand eastward, and Caesar's Legion, an imperialist slaver society based on the ancient Roman Empire looking to move west. Between them lies the Wasteland, unclaimed and ripe for the picking. The player learns that these two sides are fighting over Hoover Dam, whose energy will give the victor control of the region. While traveling, Courier Six also discovers a third player in this conflict: Mr. House, the mysterious owner of the Strip<sup>70</sup> who wants to keep New Vegas independent. The player can build influence and power by taking jobs (a.k.a. quests) that aid various groups around the region. Helping or hindering different factions nets the player reputation, a social currency that affects what the player is able to do within the game. At the end of the game, the player has the opportunity to, depending on the reputation they have gained, decide which of the three major factions to support or—should they desire—betray everyone and claim New Vegas for themselves. While the nexus points of the game are strictly authored—a

---

<sup>70</sup> The name given to the remains of the Vegas Strip, and the biggest, fanciest settlement in the region.

player must start and end at the same place as anyone else, going from a nobody to the person who decides the fate of New Vegas and the Wasteland—the open world of *New Vegas* offers elements of emergent story. It does not quite have the omnidirectional exploration and discovery that one finds in its sequel game *Fallout 4*, mostly due to the relative lack of content outside of the settlements of the Mojave Wasteland,<sup>71</sup> but the world is broad and made for exploration, traversal, and player choice. *New Vegas* walks a careful line. It allows for player direction and agency while still keeping a clear plot progression: begin in Goodsprings, then travel to Primm and continue from there, following the clues to discover what intrigue the Courier has become embroiled in that lead someone to attempt to kill them. This progression is not the only way to play the game—players who have more familiarity with the game and its systems can wander in other directions and may indeed prefer it—but for a player occupied with story, there is an obvious, informed sequence of quests and events they must follow—up to a point.

### **Puzzling Through Space**

The novel conceit of *New Vegas* is its shift from a narratively-focused, railroaded storyline to an expansive, discovery-oriented space where the system encourages player agency and engagement. Narrative intrigue plays a secondary role within the game. While it drives the plot to a point, the shift from mystery to the more mechanized focus on building influence and connections fosters a different kind of

---

<sup>71</sup> While settlements appear throughout the Wasteland, the region has a certain sparseness that makes early-level emergent story difficult to stumble upon by stint of quest-givers existing only in populated settlements, which are introduced linearly.

game participation, allowing for a different type of gameplay pleasure. The story is a means to an end rather than a priority, and it becomes even less organizational as the game progresses. Engagement stems from solving problems via the game's mechanics rather than from a cohesive narrative arc. Narrative is a frame for skill challenges, a way of structuring progression via space, and narrative-driven curiosity need only hold out until the player finds something more engaging to keep them invested in the game.

The search for the man in the checkered jacket is the vehicle the game uses to lead the player from one point to another, always with the suggestion that the next person or location will have the answers the player seeks. This creates a “just down the line” effect, a sensation that an important narrative beat waits just beyond the player's current position, and they need only continue a little farther to find it. Answers, satisfaction, and fulfilling narrative progression are only one more quest away. This “stringing along” is what keeps the game moving forward, especially in the early levels when the player does not have enough understanding of the game world to see how they fit into it or the power they are coming to wield. The anticipation of an outcome pushes the player to continue, so to grant an outcome would undermine the pressure to progress. Curiosity, rather than emotionally compelling narrative, keeps the plot moving forward. To avoid player frustration, the game makes a point to parcel out hints and rewards, but most of the knowledge a player accrues offers only enough to prod them to the next stop on their trip. After all—the next location will surely have the answers one seeks.

Game authorship appears in the way the game guides the player from one location to another in search of information. But despite the authored progression of the main plot, there is a distinct sense of agency and influence within *New Vegas* that encourages the player to connect with the game experience and keep coming back for more. After all, there are five titles in the *Fallout* series. If not from narrative connection, there must be some other aspect of the game that encourages this puzzling enjoyment. And indeed, there is: it comes from the growing effect of a player's choices on the Mojave Wasteland. While the constant narrative push to continue just a little longer can grow stale, the game uses the player's search for information both to keep them playing and to educate them about the world of the game, so that by the time a player's influence becomes tangible they understand enough of the game world to know what their reputation can do for them. In a sense, it teaches the player the value of their social currency even as the player accrues it, building up a system of rewards as the player begins to realize such a system exists. As the game progresses, connections made with and support gained from various settlements and factions slowly come to have a visible effect on quests, rewards, relationships and other minutiae of gameplay. Being on good terms with the NCR opens up additional dialogue options and social solutions; being on bad terms with a faction requires additional steps or puzzle solving to achieve a goal. Mechanically, the game gives the player more options, and these options do not solely exist within the confines of singular quests. The disguise mechanic, for example, wherein a player can equip faction-specific armor and thereby walk around a faction's camp or base without being attacked, both complicates and broadens the possibilities available to a

player. These options, and reputation-forming moments, have eventual repercussions on the player character's relation to the game world.

This agency props up the game's simplistic narrative. Rather than experiencing absorption through a balanced presentation between gameplay and socially-oriented scenes, a player's power stems from interaction with the game world. System begets connection, and by extension story. Narrative becomes more than a climb toward the game's climax; it is the consolidation of the player's power within the game world. By putting such importance on the social aspects of the world, and the player character's place within it, *New Vegas* connects gameplay and social encounters in a way that suggests an entirely new sort of narrative integration and involvement, one where the point is not to feel empathetically for the character but to act as the character. It is an emergent influence on an authored system; choices made in non-combat situations and challenges of skill offer the depth and participation missing in the game's limited narrative engagement. *New Vegas* is a revenge tale and a power-building game, and the shift that occurs as the revenge story moves aside to bring forward the politics transforms the game experience. The "just down the line" sentiment prompts continuation along the main storyline, that pressure to continue becoming a framework to structure plot progression. The game invites pleasure by giving a player noticeable and expanding influence over the world of the game, creating a sense of immersion.

*New Vegas* opens conventionally enough with its first, last and only cutscene, a sequence designed to introduce you, Courier Six, to the Wasteland. The job you were working, the opening informs you, has led to your unfortunate and untimely

almost-death at the hands of a man in a checkered jacket, who is after the mysterious poker chip you were transporting. The cutscene ends with you being left in an unmarked grave—and gameplay begins with your waking up in the house of a man named Doc Mitchell, who helpfully informs you that you're not dead, but he knows nothing about the man who shot you. He suggests you ask someone else about it, and so you set off, following a trail of he-said-she-said as you hunt down the mysterious man in the checkered jacket. The game spiderwebs out from there, giving you opportunities to uncover clues and gather information about the game world as you travel, level up, and, most importantly, gain fame (and infamy) among the various settlements and factions of the Wasteland.

The opening cutscene addresses the player directly, informing *you* of what *you* were doing and what happened to *you*. The use of second person primes the player to place themselves in the protagonist's position from the very beginning. The game's automatic first-person point of view also helps settle the player in the place of the avatar, spatially aligning player and character, though a player can switch to a third-person camera to suit their playstyle. Because the story offers little by way of empathetic narrative engagement, the emphasis on player-as-character must be enforced via other means—chiefly game system and mechanics. In addition to the opening cutscene and general gameplay, the game uses a head-on, first-person camera during conversations—which are not cutscenes, lacking the transitions, shots, and editing typical of a cutscene. This roots the player in the place of the avatar, a spatial placement that encourages a sense of immersion. Non-player characters, or NPCs, speak directly to the camera, further reinforcing the player-avatar connection through

technical rather than empathetic means. In fact, the player never fully sees the face of their avatar in gameplay once they exit the character creator. Even in over-the-shoulder play, moving the camera also moves the avatar, so the player is always looking over the avatar's shoulder.<sup>72</sup>

*New Vegas* plays with presence and alignment. Nothing—or very little—within the game story allows for emotional player connection. Even the story's hooks primarily serve to encourage curiosity; they do not pay off emotionally or empathetically. It is up to game systems to create and foster player connection, to create an experience where a player feels like an active participant, visibly effecting the game world. Through this power and change a player participates in narrative. This is a lynchpin for *New Vegas* as a choice-based, open world game; for choices to have meaning, they must have impact. In *New Vegas* they do, and so the game can move away from narrative. Emotional distance does not impede gameplay enjoyment, because mechanics and design elements root players in the game world. The heads-up display also emphasizes the presence of the game system. Everything from quest (charmingly named for old quotes, songs, and sayings) to objectives to loadout can be seen on the screen, which distances player from character empathy while reinforcing system and presence. The game primes the player's physical placement within the game world and lessens the work narrative must do to connect player and game by blending player and avatar perspectives right out of the gate.

---

<sup>72</sup> The sole exception comes when the game idles; the camera circles the avatar but jumps back to the first- or third-person position as soon as the player interacts with the controller again.

The game offers multiple means of navigating social encounters, and the choice system becomes more complex and open as the game progresses. The problematizing of social situations smooths over the dissonance between social challenges and combat challenges found in many choice-based games by rendering everything more game-like. It balances the states of play, keeping mechanics at the forefront, which benefits the system-heavy gameplay of *New Vegas*. Having multiple avenues for success in social encounters mirrors the spatial freedom afforded to players in combat and traversal. Challenges can be solved based on a character's skill proficiency, equipped gear, standing with various factions, and even specific perks.<sup>73</sup> There are, in short, multiple solutions to a single problem. Choice and breadth promote agency and power in quest completion, so the player can enjoy gameplay even if the limited story might undermine narrative satisfaction. The outcome of a successful quest is the same no matter what, but the path taken to get there affects the player character's position within the game world little by little until one sees the influence one has and can feel as though the choices they make have repercussions, introducing a different type of satisfaction more in line with emergent and open world games.

Throughout *New Vegas* there is a puzzle logic in conversations and narrative beats related to quests and also in idle dialogue. In essence, in order to make states of play flow more smoothly into each other, the game leans into mechanics, offering problems that mix aspects of traditional combat with social encounters. Rather than trying to mask social challenges the way choice-based games like *Mass Effect* or

---

<sup>73</sup> Certain perks available early in the game allow for novel dialogue options with characters based on the gender of the player character and the NPC.

*Pillars of Eternity* might, *New Vegas* brings them forward, offering skills such as Barter and Speech, which are specifically designed to help with social encounters. Much in the same way that head-on animations reside somewhere between a cutscene and standard gameplay, quests offer progression that is both skill-based and narrative. One of the earliest instances of such a quest comes just after Courier Six leaves the initial game space of Goodsprings. The townspeople encourage the Courier to head south to Primm, a town in need of a sheriff—a problem the player is encouraged to solve. The quest to get Primm a sheriff, *My Kind Of Town*, may be undertaken a number of ways:

1. By programming a local robot either by passing a Science (30) check or having the right parts in one's inventory;
2. By traveling to the NCR outpost and convincing the commanding officer there to send troops to oversee the town, which requires either a bribe, a Barter (20) check, or completion of a series of local quests given by the NCR to gain faction influence; or
3. By gaining entry to a nearby correction facility that has been taken over by escaped prisoners—either by fighting the whole gang, bribing the guard, pickpocketing the guard, sneaking in a back entrance, or disguising oneself—and convincing an ex-sheriff within to come to Primm, after which a pardon must be obtained from the NCR outpost by either convincing the officer there with a Speech (30) check, a bribe, or standing faction influence.

The intricacies of this early and low-level quest exemplify how the game uses problem and solution in non-combat encounters. Offering more options allow a player to specialize in different areas and evolve their play style in a way that best fits them, building the player's sense of agency and allowing for trends in play that suggest characterization. The end result is the same—Primm gets its sheriff and the player gains 350 XP—but the means by which the player achieves this solution creates choice and directionality within the story. By presenting non-combat encounters with multiple solutions that use the game's nuanced skills system, *New Vegas* better aligns social and skill challenges, weighting them towards the skill end of the spectrum rather than the social.

Through the completion of quests for various people and communities around the Wasteland, the player builds up influence. Early in the game there are few opportunities to branch away from the clearly organized mainline narrative, but as the game expands and the player discovers more space, more quests trigger, so there are more opportunities to gain influence, which has a nearly tangible effect on the game world.<sup>74</sup> People in the Wasteland begin to treat the player differently based on the player's growing reputation, and sway with one faction or another can change the way in which a player progresses. Game systems and structure begin to foster absorption and spatial presence. Through rules and mechanics, a player enacts change in the game world, achieving pleasurable play through system rather than character

---

<sup>74</sup> This makes an interesting comparison to traditional tabletop games, where players can gain power and prestige as they level up; a low-level adventurer may do little good on the world stage, but as they reach higher levels and their challenges increase in scale, they are more likely to gain social clout, which can then affect the game world. So it is with *New Vegas*.

empathy. The authored narrative is relegated to second place, while player power derived through system rises to the fore, and through that power the game grants the player access to a different type of participation.

But the tradeoff is gradual, organized in such a way that the player does not entirely realize the scope of their influence until they have the opportunity to wield it. The ever-present system beings to work, while narrative pressure begins to fade as it is no longer needed to encourage continued participation. Where this tradeoff happens—or becomes noticeable at least (the tradeoff itself is, like most things in this game, slow to come to fruition)—varies slightly from player to player, depending on quest order and choices previously made. For a player following the main storyline, it happens sometime after they have run into both the NCR and the Legion and have had opportunities to gain standing with each of them, around the time they arrive in the town of Novac.<sup>75</sup>

## **Last Stop To Everywhere**

Novac stands out as the place where the player finally gets concrete information about the man they have been seeking. It is also—unless one strays far from the order suggested by the narrative framework or has a particularly high Repair or Science skill in the early levels—is the place one picks up their first potential traveling companion, Craig Boone. Furthermore, it is a point where the story makes particularly strong use of the “just down the line” phenomenon. Home to a handful of

---

<sup>75</sup> Named charmingly after the broken “no vacancy” sign outside the Dino Dee-lite Motel that forms the town center. It is also the first place a player can rent a room and receive the rewards that come from that, a minor but surprisingly important change.

colorful characters and a fairly complex quest, the information gained in Novac pushes story progression forward in a big way. It feels rather like a small-scale denouement, drawing threads of various quests together to paint a larger picture of the game's plot and world and pointing the player toward something almost conclusive—a solid lead on the man in the checkered jacket. Of course, this turns out to be, like most “solid” leads in *New Vegas*, too good to be true—following the intel one gains in Novac does not lead to the end of the line, only another stop along the way. But there is still a gateway aspect to Novac, the feeling that a resolution is just beyond the next quest, which does a number of things for play pleasure and game absorption. First, it pushes the player through one of the most intricate quests so far, exemplifying the integration of social and other challenges. Second, it exemplifies the “just down the line” effect. Third, conversations with Ranger Andy, the injured ex-NCR officer staying at the town's motel, and Craig Boone introduce some of the earliest instances of faction support that affect a player's game experience.

The centerpiece of Novac, besides the three-story-tall dinosaur in the middle of town, is *Come Fly With Me*, a fairly involved quest at the nearby REPCONN test site. Ghouls, one learns, have invaded the site, and Ranger Andy—not to mention the rest of the town—would be much obliged if someone could deal with them. Luckily, the player has come along, a gun-toting wanderer of the wastes whose middle name may well be “mercenary,”<sup>76</sup> to take the job. It is a classic Western scenario that

---

<sup>76</sup> Or “philanthropist,” if a player is going for a character who is a little less free-wheeling moneymaker and a little more good Samaritan. It's a character choice that can eventually be brought up in dialogue and reflected by one's karma, a means of building characterization out of the cipher of Courier Six.

highlights how genre feeds into game story.<sup>77</sup> *Come Fly With Me* is a more self-contained quest than *My Kind Of Town* while also being more complex in its choices, and therefore a clearer example of the branching internal quest options than that of the search for Primm's sheriff. No matter how the ghouls are dealt with, Ranger Andy will thank the player and Courier Six will gain fame in Novac, but the player can complete the quest a number of ways.

At its most basic, one can scour the whole base and kill everyone there, an unmitigated bloodbath that gives players interested in combat the fight(s) they are looking for. At its most complex, the quest is comprised of a series of nested goals, so that dealing with the ghouls requires clearing another group, called the nightkin, out of the basement so that the ghouls can access the old rockets beneath the compound. Clearing out the nightkin can in turn be done more-or-less peaceably by finding the MacGuffin (a shipment of stealth field generators). But to do that the player must deal with a third party, the ghoul mercenary Harland who has become trapped in the basement while looking for his friend. One step forward, two steps back. Laid out in full, the quest looks something like this:

---

<sup>77</sup> Genres, with pre-existing rules and conventions, make for good game foundations; story rules and gameplay rules cross over in ways that are difficult for "high art" stories to achieve.

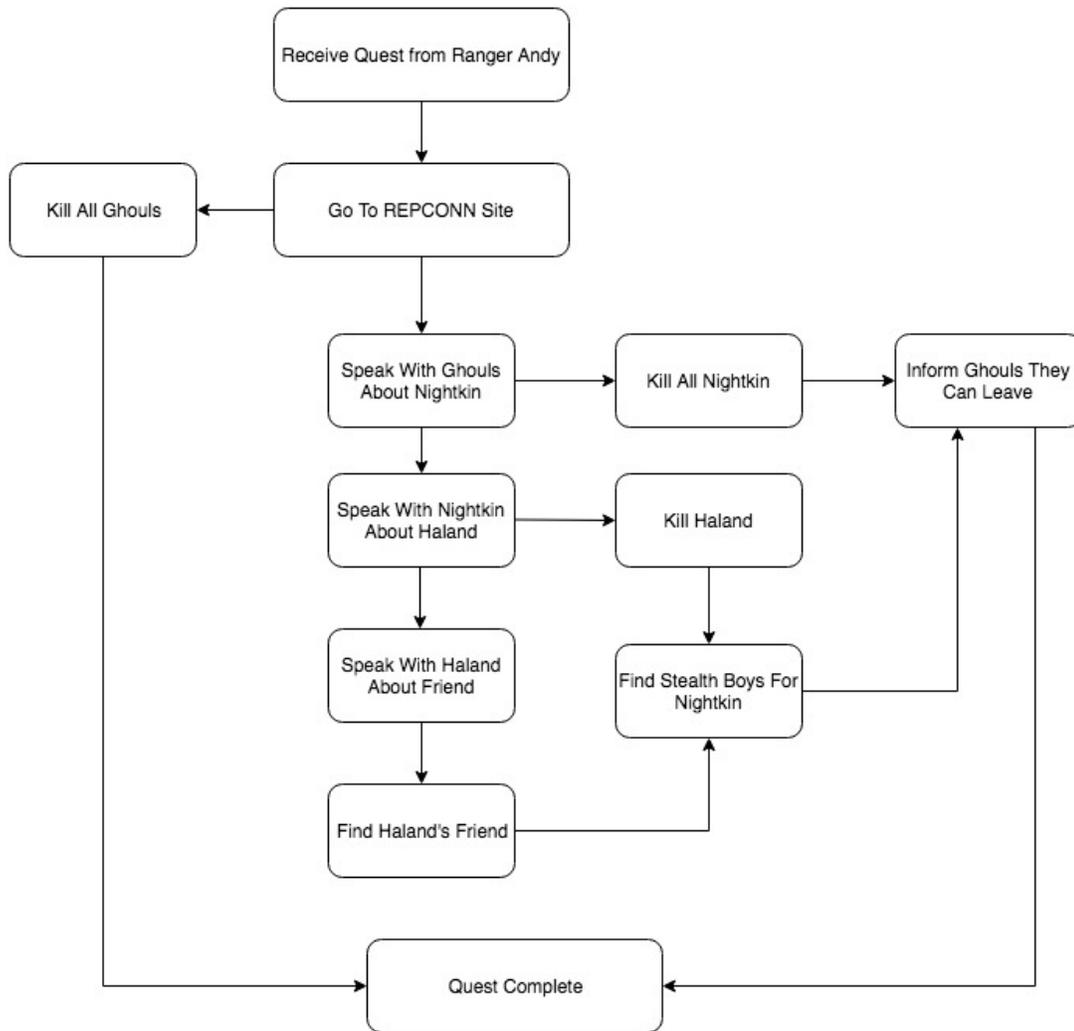


Image 3.1

Completing all these steps instead of killing everybody gives the player a big XP bump—chances are the player levels up at least once during the quest<sup>78</sup>—and a hefty dose of Novac fame. Following the successful completion of *Come Fly With Me*, the player learns the name of man they are seeking (Benny), where to find him (Boulder City), and what he does (he is a member of the Great Khans gang, another

<sup>78</sup> It took me two-to-three hours to complete, with one hour of gameplay being more-or-less analogous to a level, so that I went from level eight to ten while playing it.

faction vying for a modicum of power in the area). Completing this quest in Novac does more than merely offer experience and information: it broadens the scope of the game. Influence gained previously—particularly with the NCR, though also with the Legion—allows for new dialogue options with people around town and the REPCONN site, as though one has traveled enough to learn of the world and have opinions about it, an exciting development for the player interested in becoming involved with the game story. Additionally, NPCs begin to appear whose philosophies intersect with those of the Legion, the NCR, and the locals, whose independent streak the player uncovers as Courier Six moves through the game. These varying philosophies offer a more complicated look at world of the Mojave Wasteland. The effects and repercussions of a player's relationship with one faction or another begin to come across during Craig Boone's recruitment quest, which presents the regional conflict through the microcosm of Novac's community.

Boone's recruitment quest is called *One For My Baby*. Boone, a town guard who is an ex-NCR soldier and a widower after the death of his wife and unborn child at the hands of the Legion, offers the player aid should they be willing to look into who sold his wife to the Legion in the first place, and why. The player must bring the guilty party to the intersection in front of the hulking dinosaur statue at night, when Boone's guard shift is, so that Boone can shoot the traitor and get his revenge. Upon receiving the quest, the player has the chance to wander town and talk to everyone about what happened. In typical *New Vegas* fashion, the player can convince a random townsman to be at the place and time Boone has established, but talking to people around town reveals that Jeannie May Crawford, owner of the Dino Dee-lite

motel, has something to hide. Through either pickpocketing or breaking and entering—that familiar spread of solutions the game offers—a player can find the evidence that she sold Boone’s wife to the Legion for a hefty sum, then set her up for Boone’s revenge. Once Boone is satisfied, the player can invite him along for the trip. A little violent perhaps, but this does seem to be the way most budding friendships begin in the Wasteland.<sup>79</sup>

Boone’s recruitment mission serves a twofold purpose. First, it roots the conflict between the NCR and the Legion in a personal story; in scaling down the fight the player understands how it affects individuals across the region, and how backing one faction over another reflects on the Courier. Though the player has an opportunity earlier to pass through a town that has been raided by the Legion and see their violence firsthand, the story of Jeannie May Crawford presents an example of everyday folk interacting with political powerhouses, something that becomes increasingly relevant as the player gains power and becomes a powerhouse in their own right. Second, the recruitment of a companion is a novelty at this point.<sup>80</sup> Up until now, NPCs may have tagged along for a quest or two, but no one has stuck around. Companions, beyond being useful in combat situations, offer the possibility for empathy building via interpersonal connection, particularly in authored games, so meeting a character who can reflect, interact, and grow with the player character is a big change. Though Boone instigates few conversations outside of certain quests—most of which revolve around fighting the Legion, which he understandably opposes

---

<sup>79</sup> You know what they say: friends who set someone up for assassination together stay together.

<sup>80</sup> Unless the player has been able to collect ED-E, a broken-down robot in Primm who can become a companion; with my dismal repair and science skills, I was still on my own by the time I reached Novac.

both as an ex-NCR soldier and a widower who lost his wife to them—the player has the option to talk to Boone whenever they would like, asking questions about him and his family. The player does this through use of the “Talk” option on his companion wheel, an interface that allows the player to give him a number of orders, everything from swapping gear to giving him combat instructions to dismissing him for periods of time. Boone is initially cagey, but as the player gains his loyalty by making decisions he agrees with and completing his quests<sup>81</sup>, he opens up, giving the player the opportunity to know him—and, by extension, their own character—somewhat better.

The system is not perfect. The cipher nature of Courier Six means conversations serve more to allow for the player to collect information and make broad characterization choices than to flesh out details and better understand an authored character. But increased dialogue focused on Courier Six and their relationship with others does introduce a level of choice and customization that feeds into player agency, which in turn provides gameplay pleasure. A player can, through conversation, exert their will on the game world, building a character that they desire to roleplay, involving themselves in game customization and interacting with the game world in a virtually tangible way. Though this is a narrative pleasure in the sense that it involves characterization and interpersonal relationships, it is one born of system. Choice architecture leads to such agency and enjoyment. Companions in choice-based games such as *New Vegas* are also different from companions in authored games like *Uncharted*, in that conversations are player-implemented, so should a

---

<sup>81</sup> Most of these revolve around his hatred for the Legion.

player fail to talk to him, gain his loyalty, or bring him along on the journey, the opportunity to create an empathetic bond with Boone is lost. And where the possibility of gaining loyalty exists there is also the chance of losing it: accrue too much fame with the Legion, gain too much infamy with the NCR, or set up a random townspeople to be killed during the recruitment quest and admit that to Boone, and Boone will leave. Though this does little to affect the game's final outcome—the developers designed the plot so that a player can reach the end even if they never interact with the game's potential companions—it impacts gameplay, in that Boone becomes a lost resource.

Overall, Novac itself has little by way of strongly narrative-driven gameplay. There is no plot twist, or deeply sympathetic character or relationship, or much by way of narrative balance to align play with story. But it offers chances for player agency, and awareness of a player's impact on the world, and the suggestion that just down the line there will be some real narrative to sink one's teeth into, a confrontation of some sort with the mysterious Benny—that, should the player continue a little longer, something exciting will happen. Whether or not the subsequent narrative is emotionally fulfilling is questionable, but something exciting does lie just beyond Novac, and that excitement is the shift in how the player interacts with the world, not merely spatially but also socially. Novac is a jumping off point; from here the world opens up, the game offering greater possibility and specialization. This town serves as a gateway to the wider world of the Wasteland. Next stop: Anywhere.

As with *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, mechanics supersede narrative, creating a game where the player can feel immersed without the traditional empathetic connection of narrative. Engagement and agency, core aspects of gameplay pleasure, come not from game story but from the structure of gameplay progression. The story itself is not built to be a deeply affecting experience as it is in *A Thief's End*; it is the path of a player's progress through the world that leads to enjoyment. Though the authored narrative remains simplistic, gameplay pleasure is found through the game's mechanics—through a player's sense of placement, power, and participation in the game world, which fosters a type of immersion. The use of game system to tell game story is not a new concept, but it is a concept that *New Vegas* hones and expands. While plot serves to organize gameplay progression, it is rounded out by extraneous content and side quests available to the player before they reach the endgame. There is little by way of empathy between player and avatar; and combat challenges, while making use of skills and equipment that allow players the freedom to play as they wish, are generally rote—the same sort of infiltrate-and-fight scenarios that fill Bethesda games.

And yet, the game remains engaging on a level beyond that of skill challenge or combat encounter—the social level. This intermediate between the technical aspects of gameplay and the game's limited story encourages a heightened engagement and participation beyond skill and combat. The social aspect influences a player's awareness of the game world and their actions within it, expanding the player's sphere of influence across game space and giving the player a sense of agency and power, something games strive to do as a medium. *New Vegas*

encourages absorption and involvement via logic, the puzzle-solving aspect of navigating social encounters, and the unique participation that video games can offer as a storytelling medium. Repercussions reinforce choice architecture: a benevolent player can find themselves backed by the locals whereas a violent loner might discover things to be more challenging when they attempt to interact with settlements. Not all of this is authored narrative; it is part of the choice architecture of the game, the pseudo-emergent trends of character and world that lead to unique story experiences on the player's end.<sup>82</sup> *New Vegas* stands somewhere between emergent and authored, its main plot a railroad that leads from point A to B, but between stations the game offers a variety of options, play styles, and characterizations that open the game to player choice and, by extension, agency.

*New Vegas*' narrative pleasure is not that of a traditional story, of deeply affecting narrative connection or character arc. Player power and player engagement work on levels different from the imagination- and empathy-based involvement that is the focus of Chapter Two. Instead, its pleasure is more closely tied to the enjoyments of playing within, and achieving power within, a system. The game's reputation system serves as another facet of gameplay. Enjoyment comes from victory and progress without paralleled narrative progression or satisfaction. It comes from exercising one's vision over the game world, something more systematic than authored or empathetic. All this creates a game that is fun to play, where exploration is enjoyable because it leads to expansion of power, and the player is encouraged to do more so they will get more—doing rather than showing, much the same way films

---

<sup>82</sup> *Pseudo* emergent because the exploration of space and variation in quest completion do not affect the overall trajectory of the game, so while it has emergent aspects it remains a semi-authored game.

strive to show rather than tell. But that is separated from close personal connection with characters or the game's story arc. It is a game meant for gameplay rather than narrative integration; plot is a means to an end, and that end is player placement within the world of the game, something *New Vegas* achieves without relying too heavily on authored game story.

*New Vegas* serves as an example of a different sort of narrative pleasure in games, one unique to the gameplay experience, where participation drives enjoyment. Challenge arises evenly through the game, both through combat and social conflict. Where other games fall short in the interplay between social encounters and skill challenge, *New Vegas* makes everything—up to and including social problems and relationships—a skill challenge. It allows the player to benefit from both social and traditionally combat-based victories, thereby creating a game system that recognizes player choice and action and responds accordingly. While it takes some time to see the fruits of one's labors, the player who follows the narrative clues long enough to discover the slow building of power and standing can find pleasure without ruing the lack of empathetic narrative.

## 4.

### Narrative in Gameplay: Charting New Horizons with *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*

While *New Vegas* makes clever use of game system and holds a great deal of promise for the future of game design, games can keep players entertained, engaged, and participating with more traditional stories as well. *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* is worth examining because it does what so many games strive to do. Emotionally resonant, the game pairs cinematic game design with a well-crafted narrative without ignoring or diminishing mechanics or gameplay challenges. It remains aware of its status as a game while presenting the satisfaction of a well-written story, providing salient instances of the interplay between its interactive game format and authored narrative. The end result is an engaging example of what integration of narrative and gameplay can achieve. *A Thief's End* shows a way in which games can tell participation-based stories without losing emotional connection, creating player experiences closer to the balanced character-driven narrative games designer strive to produce.

*A Thief's End* is the fourth game in the *Uncharted* series, and with it Naughty Dog returned to their roots. Coming off their award-winning game, *The Last of Us*, *A Thief's End* was the developer's attempt to both deepen and rein in the *Uncharted* story. Previous games had been progressively bigger, built on showpieces that advancements in game technology made possible. *Drake's Deception*, the third game

in the series, showcases this in particular. Despite its good ratings and sales<sup>83</sup>, the ability to make bigger and bolder games led to the game losing some of its emotional core to spectacle.<sup>84</sup> But *A Thief's End*, coming on the heels of *The Last of Us*—a small-scale game with a focus on the relationship between its two protagonists—reels that spectacle in. The game balances the set pieces typical of the *Uncharted* franchise with a deep and honest examination of people and their relationships, something Naughty Dog learned to do while working on *The Last of Us*. *A Thief's End* presents both touching emotional moments and the blockbuster action sequences and skill challenges typical of the *Uncharted* series.

Between and around the big, flashy action moments, *A Thief's End* is a game about family. It is also a game about finding treasure, and traversing interesting game spaces, and solving logic puzzles, and fighting bad guys, but mostly the game, and its story, is about family. Nathan Drake, after years of treasure hunting, has finally settled down with his wife, Elena Fisher, to live a peaceful, quiet life doing legal contract work. His wild, action-filled treasure-hunting days are behind him. Then Drake's older brother Sam, thought dead these past fifteen years after a failed escape attempt from a Panamanian prison, reappears at Drake's workplace with a story of how he escaped prison and the life-threatening debt he owes to Hector Alcázar, the South American drug lord who bust him out. Sam has a plan to pay Alcázar back: he is going to finish the search for the lost treasure of Henry Avery, seventeenth century pirate captain—the search that left him stranded in prison in the first place. But he

---

<sup>83</sup> It was the fourth best-selling game for the PS3 with 6.6 million copies sold. (Tassi, P. (2015) 'Bloodborne' May Be The PS4's Salvation In 2015.)

<sup>84</sup> Naughty Dog. The Evolution of a Franchise.

needs Drake's help to do it. Drake, equal parts elated and worried, promises his aid, lies to his wife about what he is doing, and jumps into one last adventure.

What follows is a wild chase across the globe as the brothers try to beat their one-time partner Rafe Adler and Rafe's new sidekick Nadine Ross to the treasure they have been seeking since they were kids. Complications spring up along the way when, in chapter eleven, Elena discovers that Drake lied to her, and when shortly after, in chapter fifteen, Drake discovers that Sam lied to him about how he got out of prison and why he still seeks the treasure in the first place. The negotiation of falsehoods, forgiveness, and loyalty in these relationships unfolds against the backdrop of a race around the world to find Avery's mythic treasure, a story that seems better suited for a summer blockbuster than a 2016 video game. Yet, *A Thief's End* expertly negotiates the growth and change of the characters and their relationships while offering the player control and connection within the game via explorable spaces and a close emotional alignment with its protagonist. Split into twenty-four chapters which serve as distinct levels<sup>85</sup>, *A Thief's End* unfolds slowly, skill challenges and action sequences padding and structuring moments of emotional depth and growth that help the player understand and empathize with Nathan Drake, feeling both as and for him as the game requires. A cutscene-heavy game, it carefully negotiates the shift between player-as-viewer and player-as-participant. From the first prologue to the epilogue set over a decade after the game's events and played from the perspective of Nate and Elena's pre-teen daughter, *A Thief's End* uses game scenarios and its unique blend of explorable space and linear narrative progression to

---

<sup>85</sup> These twenty-four levels consist of twenty-two numbered chapters as well as a prologue and an epilogue.

inform character and relationships. Gameplay merges with story to craft an experience predicated upon ludonarrative consonance and character empathy.

### **O Brother Where Were Thou**

If *A Thief's End* is a story about family, then the relationship between the Drake brothers forms the emotional core of the story, and the treasure hunt is the means by which the game examines their bond. The game follows them from their earliest days working together to the present day, their changing relationship forming a backbone for the progression of the treasure hunt, and by extension the game's more mechanically-oriented skill challenges, narrative forming a framework for gameplay. It is not the only relationship the game examines—Drake and Elena's marriage is similarly important, as is the long-running relationship between Drake and his partner-cum-father figure Victory "Sully" Sullivan. The web of connections the four offer as an ensemble deepen character relationships, and the relationship between Drake and Rafe introduces characterization as well, but it is Sam's return, and the shift he causes within Drake's life, that instigates the game's events and story. This relationship permeates the whole of the game, but it culminates—and, in a sense, begins—with roughly an hour of gameplay that occurs a little past the midway point. In the final scene of chapter fifteen, *Thieves of Libertalia*, Drake discovers that Sam has been lying to him since they met up again, and the whole of chapter sixteen, *The Brothers Drake*, serves as an opportunity to go back and learn how the brothers see each other and what the core of their relationship is. This section retroactively informs and alters the player's understanding of the brothers' relationship. It is a

reestablishment of facts stretching both backwards and forwards, shifting the player's view of the game story as well as Drake's—and subsequently, the player's—relationship with Sam. With help from game mechanics and narrative structure, this section of the game changes how the player understands and empathizes with the characters, and by extension the game story as a whole.

Chapter sixteen jumps backwards, all the way back to where chapter one leaves off, to Sam and Drake's earliest days. Chapter one, *The Lure of Adventure*, is the second of three prologues (the first being the opening boat sequence and the third being Drake and Sam's prison escape fifteen years ago). In it, the player takes Drake—then known as Nathan Morgan, about thirteen years old and living in a Catholic orphanage—across the orphanage to meet up with Sam, who is already out of the system but has come back to visit him. The level serves as a tutorial, introducing the player to the game's controls and mechanics, as well as a foundation for the game's narrative, setting up the relationship between Drake and Sam, no longer at the orphanage but still around to keep an eye on his baby brother.<sup>86</sup> Narrative and skill are introduced simultaneously, exposition serving as a tutorial, merging mechanics and story from the outset. After sneaking out to see Sam via the roofs—which introduces the player to the climbing, jumping, and sneaking mechanics that form the core of the game's traversal and stealth systems—the chapter ends with the brothers taking Sam's motorcycle to steal back their deceased mother's notebook, which Sam has finally tracked down. As they drive away the game springs forward a decade into

---

<sup>86</sup> Sam at this point is eighteen and has been kicked out of the orphanage following multiple infractions, suggested to involve theft and other illegal actions that introduce his rather questionable morals from the get-go.

chapter two, *Infernal Place*, which is the last of the prologues and covers the boys' time in a Panamanian prison and their escape—the escape that leaves Sam presumed dead. The abrupt end of chapter one leaves the question of their mother's notebook, and the importance of that night, to be answered later, put on the back burner and allowed to simmer as the player continues through chapters two through fifteen. Chapter sixteen, hours later, finally answers those questions.

The level itself is primarily exploration; what skill challenges it contains are based on traversal, climbing and running and solving spacial problems rather than engaging in combat. Stealth remains key, as the level involves breaking into an old mansion, but overall the chapter focuses on discovery. It is not unlike *Gone Home* (Fullbright 2013) or other games of that ilk, where the collection of miscellaneous information within an environment guides game story. These games—known as discovery games, as their narratives are based around discovery of a space and the objects within it—offer a method of storytelling that puts the onus on the player to connect the dots, creating a unique form of engagement. *A Thief's End* utilizes this system earlier to introduce the current (i.e., thirty-nine-year-old, married, retired from the treasure hunting) Drake, and his life with Elena. The early use of exploration-focused gameplay allows the player to ease into the characters at the start of the game, shifting from the more energetic pace of the prologue levels (the boat race, the childhood introduction, and the time in prison) to the normal, everyday life of Drake and Elena. A long-time fan of the series can examine trophies and memorabilia from older games that line Drake's shelves, while a new player can learn about his previous adventures without spending countless hours catching up on previous

installments, connecting the dots to understand story as in any other discovery-based game narrative. The early discovery combines nostalgia with important narrative beats. Among the paraphernalia of Drake's previous adventures are items belonging to Sam, which carry his memory through to the present day, keeping him in the player's mind. While a player does not need to go through all the past memorabilia, only once they interact with Sam's possessions will the next stage of the level trigger. This ensures the player finds this key information, if nothing else.

But poking around the attic offers reward in its own right. Drake's interactions with his belongings provide engaging comments and picking up the nerf gun allows the player to enter fake combat, shooting darts at paper targets hanging from the ceiling and ducking for cover behind shelves. The combat serves multiple purposes: it introduces the character to the game's firearm mechanics, reinforces stealth and combat traversal rules, and gives insight into Drake's nature—he is the sort of guy to play pretend in his attic with a nerf gun. Rewarding exploration with player enjoyment, game clues, and the feel-good reminder of the decade of *Uncharted* games preceding *A Thief's End* helps teach the player that taking the time investigate yields emotionally and narratively satisfying results, which in turn links player empathy with game progression. Learn more about the characters and the world and the player feels closer to both. The connection between exploration and reward comes to fruition in chapter sixteen, reaching its full potential as a narrative and gameplay mechanic to not only present more of the boys' history but also creating a complex understanding of the ailing homeowner the brothers meet upon breaking into her house through nothing but environmental clues.

Taken together, the reward for exploration, the early introduction of the system, and the through-line of Sam and Drake's relationship prepare the player to return to the past and the metaphorical birth of the brothers Drake. The level opens with the brothers arriving at an old manor house, seemingly abandoned. Together they break in, the player scaling the walls and jumping across roofs to find an open window to sneak into. From there, the player can explore the mansion, interacting with objects along the way while searching for their mother's white leather notebook. Along the way, besides intriguing artifacts and paraphernalia, there are a handful of decoys, some of which trigger conversations that slowly reveal the boys' background as they uncover bits and pieces about someone named Evelyn, the person who lived—or perhaps still lives—in the house. The paralleled discovery of the boys' history—they were left at the orphanage by their father, their mother was a historian, and both of them know a great deal about ancient artifacts and their mother's work—reflects the information gleaned about the homeowner—a one-time treasure hunter aged into an old and sickly collector, lonely and left with nothing but her illness and her artifacts. Slowly the player works their way downstairs, a progression that involves a few instances of spatially-based problem solving. Eventually the brothers end up in the study where—now that all other locations have been exhausted—the player discovers the notebook. No sooner does this happen than the ailing Evelyn discovers the intruders and, while holding a gun on them, calls the police. In the ensuing cutscene, Sam tries to talk her down, and it comes out that the brothers are the sons of Cassandra Morgan, Evelyn's one-time colleague. She immediately stands down, informing them that she knew their mother and the notebook rightfully belongs to

them. She promises to explain everything to the police, but as soon as they work things out, her age and illness catch up to her and she dies at the narratively-appropriate moment, forcing the boys to run from the arriving law enforcement. The player must then evade the police as they rush for the exit, fleeing the estate with their mother's notebook in tow on the back of Sam's motorcycle.

The level is not particularly complicated—there are no tough fights, or difficult logic puzzles. The most challenging point of the level is figuring out how to climb up a wall in the manor's living room. Even the race from the police serves mostly to induce stress and adrenaline through visual and musical cues; the traversal itself involves little skill beyond being able to navigate via a controller. But the chaos of the moment helps make the chase feel difficult and stressful, connecting the player to Drake's emotional state. The chase supersedes the previous moment; everything the player (and Drake) just learned is set aside in favor of dealing with the mechanics of the chase, the game using a skill challenge to create a state of heightened emotion and connection with the character which then pays off in the ensuing cutscene and the emotional beat that it carries. By interrupting a story moment with mechanics the same way that the police interrupt the brothers, the game uses system to align player and character. The pressure and tension to perform well in gameplay prime the player for the emotionally impactful conversation that follows the chase.

The level is even-paced, slow to unfold and somewhat meandering in its direction. But that is no accident; the slow pace of discovery and dialogue serves as a breather following the stressful events at the end of chapter fifteen. The lull allows the player to reflect on the young boys wandering the house and on the current-day

Sam and Drake and the complexities of their relationship. Coming directly out of chapter fifteen, the player is left reeling by Sam's revelation; chapter sixteen immediately contradicts the player's sense of betrayal by returning to the early days, where Sam fulfills his role of older brother to Drake who, at that point in his life, still needs the protection and guidance. By playing through this level where they are children, the player sheds Drake's action hero persona and becomes a kid again, needing help, support, and direction, which Sam offers as best he can and with a loyalty that shines through even to the present day, despite how complicated their relationship has become. That protectiveness can be seen in a shot toward the end of chapter sixteen that quotes the end of chapter fifteen: Sam puts himself squarely between Evelyn and young Nathan as she raises a gun on the both of them, just as he does half an hour of gameplay earlier and twenty-five years later at the end of chapter sixteen when Rafe pulls a gun on Drake. For all that has changed, Sam's protective streak towards Drake is exactly the same; his brother means as much to him as before, and that helps the player come to terms with his actions in chapter fifteen.

Chapter sixteen is both buffer and expansion. Time allows for distance from the chaos of chapter fifteen and breeds familiarity with the boys. Chapter sixteen shifts perspective, moving away from the current-day understanding of the brothers to a reveal of what their youth was like, a tactic the game uses to help familiarize the player with Sam, a previously unmentioned part of Drake's life. Much in the same way that game pacing, especially in the first half, serves to acclimate the player to Sam's presence and build up the rapport between the brothers, the conversations Drake and Sam have while wandering through chapter sixteen allow the players to

reorient themselves. As with any companion, dialogue between characters introduces dimensionality and encourages player empathy by fleshing out facets of a character. Chapter sixteen forms part of the slow-growing understanding of how these brothers relate to each other, an understanding that begins with the initial prologue of the boat chase and grows as the game follows the boys through multiple periods of their lives. *The Brothers Drake* comes this late in the game so that the player has time to grow accustomed to Sam, to expect his comments during traversal and his help in combat, to acknowledge him both as a mechanical aid in skill challenge scenarios and also as a three-dimensional character within the story. In both gameplay and narrative situations, the player becomes familiar with, and even a fan of, Sam. By this point in game, he has been well-established as Drake's protective older brother, and also a liar who can pull the wool over our eyes. The game then uses space and the chapter system to distance the player from the emotionally-laden end of chapter fifteen, presenting another facet of the boys' relationship. It keeps momentum flowing, but in a different direction, broadening the player's understanding of these characters and consequently strengthening the player/character connection, aligning the player ever more closely with Drake.

The most resonant beat of the chapter comes at the end, the moment when the brothers decide to run away together, armed only with each other's support and their mother's notebook. The scene comes on the heels of the police chase, while the player is still reeling from the interrupted conversation and the chaos of the traversal challenge, a point at which the player feels closely aligned with Drake. The adrenaline from the chase leaves the player on their toes, mechanics priming the

player for an emotional moment which the game then delivers. Standing beneath a bridge, having just evaded the police, the boys consider their future. They decide to honor their mother's theory that famed privateer Sir Francis Drake—who features in *Drake's Fortune* and whose motto *sic parvis magna*<sup>87</sup> Drake has adopted for himself by the time the first game rolls around—had a line of descendants, whom the game unsubtly suggests to be the brothers. The police, Sam assures Drake, will be looking for Sam and Nate Morgan, the delinquent boys; no one will be looking for Sam and Nathan Drake, the treasure hunters. Together, the boys set out, following their mother's legacy, searching for the next great find in her notebook: the treasure of Henry Avery. With this, everything comes back to the beginning. Twenty-five years from this moment, after years in prison (and three other *Uncharted* games), the boys can finally finish their very first treasure hunt, older and wearier and still at heart those two idealistic kids who decided to name themselves Drake after a theory and a hope.

The impact of the moment is difficult to explain without experiencing the buildup from both the game and the series as a whole. That it works is a testament in part to the length of video games as a medium. Much in the same way a player's growing power in *Fallout: New Vegas* is so satisfying due to the time taken to achieve it, the emotional payoff of this chapter tugs at the heartstrings because of the effort taken to reach it, both through narrative and gameplay. This chapter—and the whole of the game—is narratively tight, and the way that gameplay reflects story emphasizes and echoes the care taken. The narrative takes on a nostalgic lull in

---

<sup>87</sup> *Greatness from small beginnings*, the games'—and Drake's—motto.

chapter sixteen, and so too does game progression; the player discovers the space and Sam and Nate's past at the same time. The further one moves, the more one learns, pairing spacial exploration with character growth. It presents both the formation and culmination of the relationship between the brothers, as well as the reasoning behind this one last ill-advised treasure hunt, and in doing so indicates how everything ties together. It is a tangled knot that sits at the heart of the story and allows the player to slowly pick it apart as they progress through the game. Coming so late in the game—and the series—the cutscene at the end of chapter sixteen retroactively informs and alters not merely the relationship between Sam and Drake but also the player's understanding of Nathan Drake's as a whole. At the end of the day this scene, this newfound understanding of the brothers' dedication to each other and their search, must come after the revelations at the end of chapter fifteen; it answers the questions the game encourages the player to consider, all surrounding the *what* and *why* of Sam's lie, his loyalty, and his connection with his brother.

The end of chapter fifteen shares an equal importance with the chapter following it, putting the player in a position where they need the distance chapter sixteen creates to fully appreciate the emotional impact of the Drake brothers' history and upbringing. Beyond that, chapter fifteen pulls perhaps the greatest trick of gameplay storytelling to date, using mechanics and player expectations to blindside the player in a way that strengthens the connection between player and avatar and opens up the possibilities of game narrative. What happens is this: finally caught by Rafe, Nadine, and their lackeys, Drake attempts to work out a deal to keep Sam safe from Alcázar's threat, only to discover that Sam's life has never been in danger from

Alcázar. It was Rafe who got Sam out of prison and back into the race in the first place, and the entire tale Sam fed Drake about owing Alcázar a debt is a lie. This comes as such a shock because earlier in the game the player spends a full chapter playing as Sam during his prison break with Alcázar. This is technically the second of two flashbacks which feature an escape from prison; the first takes place fifteen years prior to the main events of the game and is one of the game's prologues. In that escape, the player plays as Nathan Drake and is forced to leave Sam behind. The second prison flashback takes place a few months prior to the game's events and is framed as Sam telling Drake the story of how he got out of prison, recounted when the brothers are reunited in the modern day. In this second prison flashback, the player plays as Sam, breaking out and fighting through prisoners and guards alike, finally making a break for it only to be confronted by the infamous Hector Alcázar with an ultimatum: find Avery's treasure for Alcázar, or that will be the end of Sam Drake.

With the gameplay to back it up, the player does not stop to consider the verity of such a tale. After all, a player's actions are truth in a game world—the player did it, and so it happened. The participatory nature of the game means that the actions taken are undeniably real; there is never a question of whether or not a narrator in a game might be unreliable because the player, in embodying the player character, is the narrator. The reasoning behind actions may be fuzzy or obfuscated as part of the game's story, but the actions and events themselves are not. The player participates, running and jumping and fighting and finding, experiencing everything that happens through the proxy of the avatar, and therefore they expect these events to

definitively have happened the way they were played. That Naughty Dog takes that tacit understanding and flips it on its head—that Sam Drake can be an unreliable narrator, and the player can be both him concocting his story and Drake taking it in, complicit and unknowing—is a novelty to the video game medium and an aesthetic development, and in its newness is brilliantly effective.

Chapter fifteen uses system and game conventions to not only tell story, but to influence story's impact on a player. Where *Fallout: New Vegas* gives the player control and agency through system but remains emotionally distant, *A Thief's End* takes conventions of the medium and twists them to directly impact the emotional stakes of the game. *A Thief's End* is a linear narrative from the beginning, but this flexibility within the medium is an aspect of game storytelling yet to be explored to its full potential. As a participatory medium, the allocation of narrative information in a video game can be manipulated in new and unusual ways; rather than create a mystery as in *Fallout: New Vegas*, *A Thief's End* presents concrete information only to reveal it to be false later on. It is not quite the “it was all a dream” disappointment that comes from discovering an action was not, in fact, real—to do that would pull a player from the game environment, destroy the connection between player and game and break the so-called suspension of disbelief—but it is a reorientation that induces a deeper emotional response.

The use of this twist also showcases Naughty Dog's self-awareness, how well they understand their characters as well as audience expectations. From his introduction, the player knows Sam is not wholly trustworthy, and without the physical action of playing through the prison break there is no reason for the player to

trust his story. But by becoming a participant, the player accepts the flashback as truth, allowing Naughty Dog to pull the long con they do. Such a twist is planted as plausible, but the developers at Naughty Dog direct attention away from it, so the revelation serves as a confirmation of suspicion rather than to break the sense of participation and presence. Expertise like this points toward a future of game storytelling where the medium itself allows for further specialization of the kinds of stories told, introducing a flexibility one sees in older, more established media. Games have developed to a point where their conventions can be used specifically to deepen narrative experience. Chapter fifteen's impact come from a manipulation of system and expectations the kind of which shows a deft hand on the part of the developers and hits the player full on, requiring the flashback to chapter sixteen as a means to come down from that high, to take the anger and hurt directed at Sam from Drake's perspective and come to understand how exactly it ended up here—and from there, the player and the characters begin the long, slow climb back toward understanding and connection.

### **Mirror Mirror**

Beyond chapters fifteen and sixteen, Naughty Dog uses Sam Drake as a barometer against which to measure Nathan Drake's character growth across the game, often through the use of flashbacks. In an interview, Sam's voice actor and motion capture artist Troy Baker explains that while Drake "became the older

brother... Sam stayed the same.”<sup>88</sup> Baker makes a strong point; Drake has an additional fifteen years of life experience and an emotional maturity that Sam clearly lacks. Drake’s relationship with Elena is only one such example of this. The climax of the game involves Drake going after Sam when, after everything, Sam goes back to chasing after the treasure, unable to let it go the way the more mature Drake manages to. This change has a greater impact for the player who has gone through all four of the *Uncharted* games, but even a new player can see the difference between the brothers over the course of their time together through the flashback sequences. This is especially true when one compares their relationship in the first Panamanian prison flashback to the current day. Over time, Nathan Drake has matured in a way Sam has not, and the player sees that clearly in the progression of the game. The flashbacks cover Drake’s growth from the gung-ho kid he was into the reckless young adult he became and then into the personable and skilled man he is now. The flashback structure allows the player to see Drake’s change and Sam’s stagnation. It is part of the barometer effect of Sam’s role in *A Thief’s End*, as well as a way for players of other games in the franchise to reorient themselves. Through flashbacks, Sam’s presence becomes something lacing Drake’s life rather than a new addition to the franchise. The structure of the flashbacks transforms Sam from a novelty to the man “waiting in the wings”<sup>89</sup> for his chance to return to Nathan Drake’s life.

But Sam is not the only reference point for Drake’s development, and their relationship is not the only one to influence the progression of the game. Drake and

---

<sup>88</sup> North, N. & Baker, T. (2016). *Uncharted 4: A Thief’s End*: ‘The Brothers Drake’ Interview. North, N. & Baker, T. Youtube, PlayStation.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

Elena's relation offers similarities to that of the brothers, not only introducing depth to the characters but also playing into the use of parallels in *A Thief's End*. Some of these parallels are blindingly obvious—the way in which Sam puts himself between Rafe and Drake in chapter fifteen and its direct echo in chapter sixteen, for example—while others are subtler. Elena's reaction when she discovers Drake lied and is not working a legal job in Malaysia like he said he was is a particularly cutting example, serving as a precursor to Drake's reaction to Sam's lie later on in the game. The act of working through—physically and emotionally—her forgiveness as they scale the cliff likewise serves as a sort of rehearsal for coming to terms with Sam's revelation. Sam does not have the emotional maturity for such forgiveness, but Drake and Elena do, and together they overcome not only the cliff but also their fractured relationship. That the couple can come back together heralds Sam and Drake's eventual reunion and peacemaking, one duo reflecting the other. If Sam stands in for the old, dangerous treasure-hunting life, Elena is the new, both exciting and legitimate, the thrill of discovery and exploration paired with care taken and laws followed. She is not the anti-Sam—that falls to Nathan Drake, determined to leave treasure hunting behind for good at the start of the game. Instead she is the third option, between Sam's desire to succeed at any cost and Drake's resignation to his retirement. Another parallel is the discovery of Evelyn's home in chapter sixteen: she is an old woman who has pushed everyone away in her pursuit of history, something the brothers veer dangerously close to. In uncovering her home and her history, the player comes to understand the complexity of the boys' search and what it could mean for the two of them—Sam in particular—to become too caught up in their hunt and lose the people

he is close to in the single-minded pursuit of treasure. *A Thief's End* develops its themes across multiple characters and across its timeline, creating a cohesive whole that is affecting and present even during the skill challenges involved in fighting, climbing, and sneaking toward the game's ending.

In general, the game's mechanics and the minute detail of the tics and personalities of the characters play into verisimilitude, the richness that helps with spatial placement in the game. Beyond the wonderfully intricate and affecting emotional moments, play itself is pleasurable both on the mechanical level and on a wider narrative scale. Traversal is smooth and intuitive, with light and other visual or auditory cues guiding a player to solve problems in such a way that, by the end of the game, one does not need to puzzle over how to get from point A to point B in gameplay and can simply go. The game trains the player how to travel over time, teaching them what sort of movement is possible within the rules of the world. Even as puzzles get more complicated, the player learns how to solve them. What begins as climbing walls and jumping across rooftops becomes moving through ancient, ruined houses, places where a beam of sunlight or an off-color stone can indicate directionality, allowing for intuitive movement through space despite the added complexity.<sup>90</sup>

Beyond that, Nate's companions benefit from the work done on companion mechanics for *The Last of Us*. Ensuring that companions do not impede gameplay and

---

<sup>90</sup> Playing with other people in the room, I was asked on multiple occasions how I knew to do one thing or find another. What was intuitive to me after a few hours of gameplay and a general familiarity with the system was confusing and unnoticed by spectators, proving that the game had continued to teach mechanics and rules without my noticing.

traversal is a minor but vital aspect of ludonarrative consonance.<sup>91</sup> Naughty Dog put a great deal of effort into creating artificial intelligence systems for companions and NPCs so that their movements and actions do not trigger enemies, get between the player and the enemy they are attacking, or otherwise negatively impact a player's experience.<sup>92</sup> Their aid in and out of combat flows naturally. Traversal in *A Thief's End* utilizes a number of ladder-and-crate type puzzles, where Drake must rely on companions to travel, inducing familiarity and building a rapport between player and companions. In combat, Drake can finish attacks with help from a traveling companion, working together to take someone down. Companions also give clues about enemy movement and positions and puzzle solutions. Minute detail like this play into verisimilitude in the same way that losing the black screen before a cut scene does, smoothing transitions between player-as-spectator and player-as-participant. System aids story, giving the player clues that help gameplay while also being character moments. Helpful companions are not new to video games—party members exist in untold games—but the care taken to be certain that companions in *A Thief's End* work with players rather than impeding their progress indicates not only a detailed attention to mechanics but also an awareness of the relationship between players and characters. This level of detail stems from a game system built to allow its players freedom of mobility while injecting character personality into insignificant gameplay moments—even something as simple as performing a dual takedown with different characters reflects different relationships.

---

<sup>91</sup> Naughty Dog. "Grounded: The Making of The Last Of Us." Youtube, 2014..

<sup>92</sup> This is a surprisingly important detail; despite the aid of companions in *New Vegas*, the number of times a companion went charging into an encounter thereby making it impossible to sneak or talk one's way through a fight became infuriating and, at points, interfered with quest completion.

The pleasure of *A Thief's End* is found in the ease of gameplay and in the alignment between skill challenge set pieces and emotionally resonant character moments. Its story engages the player on its own terms, and it utilizes game system and design in new ways to bridge the gameplay/narrative gap. Unafraid of playing with game style and aware of the power of adrenaline-pumping moments and quieter character beats, *A Thief's End* stands as an exemplar of what authored, linear games can be. Naughty Dog's dedication to narrative experience makes them a forerunner of character-driven narrative games, but the techniques found here can be broadened to inform other narrative game designs, fostering the relationship between the interactive game format and authored story. By using system and empathy to connect player and avatar, designers can deliver emotionally engaging games augmented by mechanics, rules, and system rather than hampered by them.

## Pushing Boundaries: What Comes Next

There are countless other games to examine: indie games, puzzle games, and the entire scope of the multiplayer and communal play that linger tantalizingly on the horizon, just to name a few. Video games are a wonderfully disparate medium, but while their goals are different, the presumption that they cannot tell stories—that game and story are diametrically opposed—must be left in the past. Though games do not always subscribe to the beats of traditional forms of storytelling, they nevertheless show narrative potential and inclinations. Participation and play allow for a range of storytelling tricks and tools that invite players to place themselves in the lives of others through empathy, imagination, exploration, mimicry, choice, agency, mechanics, and other means yet to be understood. Game pleasure comes not in spite of the limits of games, but through use of them, integrating rules and fictions to craft engaging tales of all kinds.

Games have begun to come into their own, and into the public eye, as a more and more legitimate form of culture. As development—and consequently experimentation—continues, conventions become codified. Games are in the process of exploring their potential, finding a balance between the ludic and the narrative, expanding to become greater than the sum of their parts. As debate fades into the annals of history, games point towards possible avenues for player engagement and enjoyment, avenues that tell stories both engaging and meaningful. *A Thief's End* is a story about family; *New Vegas* is a portrayal of the conflicts of power; *Rise of the Tomb Raider* is about conviction. Even the semi-railroaded, choice-based *Mass Effect*

trilogy is a story that highlights the significance of loyalty and coming together despite differences to achieve an impossible goal—which happens to be fighting giant robot aliens. That games rise to tackle these concepts and themes showcases the medium’s development into a form of storytelling ready to use its uniqueness to its advantage. This is a question of potential, of where games can go from here while still being beholden to their technology. Limits form the scaffolding of any medium; games must acknowledge theirs. Video games may never be the perfect holodeck experience dreamt of in days past, but in much the same way limitations of genre lead to the production of stories stronger for their restrictions, the necessity of working within the limits of technology offers opportunities for compelling forms of storytelling yet to be fully explored. People are quick to blame technology for shortcomings in games, lamenting that modern technology simply isn’t good enough to do what it should be doing—whatever “should” means to them—but in truth, limits of technology are generative. Constraints encourage new ways of tackling problems. They encourage new solutions, and through new solutions new experiences are born. Games find middle ground by accepting systems and working within them. Solutions may be found by restructuring narrative, by accepting the rules of the game as structure rather than impediment. It is perhaps true that games will never be interactive films. But then, in trying to mimic films they lose the essence of play that makes them such an intriguing and powerful form of storytelling. System can guide and support story as much as the hand of an author, and in integrating rules with empathy and absorption, games find a balance that both emphasizes their uniqueness and remains engaging and enticing to players—the ideal ludonarrative consonance.

Character-driven narrative games are as cherished as books and film in the eyes of those who play them. They provide an intersection of storytelling and make-believe with concrete rule systems and traditional aspects of games: the puzzles, the skill acquisition, the play. Though play pleasure may not come from a traditionally linear or cinematic narrative, such games nevertheless offer enjoyment and engagement through the interactivity that makes the medium unique. By reorienting the way in which games address story and playing into the strengths of the medium, designers can craft narratives that are just as absorbing as spectator-based media. Connection between guest and character is a necessity in any story, and the participatory aspect of gameplay allows storytellers to strengthen or alter that bond, going above and beyond older forms of storytelling. Such possibility is neither better nor worse than any other; this is not an argument for superiority but for exploring new ways to engage guests with story and character. In video games, it becomes possible to tell new stories, or to tell familiar stories differently, so that their messages, morals, and meanings may be affecting in new ways. Experimenting with how players relate to character allows games to shift and redefine their narrative possibilities and pleasures. Be it by monetizing social influence as in *New Vegas*, altering a player's understanding of a character as with Sam Drake in *A Thief's End*, allowing freedom to explore as in *Breath of the Wild*, building empathy over multiple games as in the *Mass Effect* games, or doing something completely different, the novelties of game design introduce new dimensions to storytelling, opportunities possible only in an interactive and participatory medium.

Games are young still, young enough that their rules are flexible, and as they push toward the mainstream, game studios continue to experiment with how they tell stories, what sort of stories they tell, and why stories are worth telling in the first place. Indie games delve even deeper into the possibilities of game narrative, playing freely with storytelling technique on a smaller scale, without the pressure of major studios looming over them. The popularity and praise of games like *Undertale* and *Gone Home* proves this. If anything, the ability to tell stories through video games furthers the question of why we tell stories, of what they bring to culture and the world, and how important it is to tell them. There are dozens of treasure hunters out there, but Lara Croft's position as a woman among ranks of men has meaning and merit; she is the hero of a generation of young women playing games. Nathan Drake is less of a novelty, but his relationship with his family gives him depth and morality the kind of which is unique to both games and spectator media. Their interactivity may make it difficult to tell stories about small-scale interpersonal conflict, but already games are proving that they can deal with difficult or nuanced plots and remain engaging and immersive.

As they stand right now, games have begun to showcase what they can do when they embrace their status as messes, picking and choosing what they keep and what they use in crafting experiences. Just as there exist ludic elements in more traditional media—especially highly serialized storytelling—there exist narrative aspects in ludic media. The possibilities of game narratives come from altering the understanding of game stories as a non-traditional and increasingly unique form of narrative pleasure. Games can tell stories as much as any other media, but the stories

they tell differ in method and convention, and to attempt to read and respond to such stories on the terms of games' predecessors undermines their potential. Traditional narrative gains new depth and dimensionality in examining the participatory storytelling of video games. Spectatorship is active; studying game narrative broadens our understanding of how people interact with the stories they consume. Older media can learn these lessons from studying narrative pleasure and structure in video games. It is vital to broaden our cultural foundations and understanding of narrative to understand why people connect with stories. The narrative power of this young and growing medium can shed new light on the resonance of traditional storytelling. The intermediality of video games need not be a unidirectional expansion. Just as previous media informs game development, game development reflects and broadens our understanding of older media.

Game designers, players, and scholars stand poised to tackle the challenges of crafting and interacting with games that are absorbing, stimulating, and immersive. Balance between story and gameplay is not a pipe dream; it is a current possibility. However technology advances, it is through narrative flexibility that games will move from mere objects to the storytelling medium players and developers dreamed they would become. Their uniqueness is their strength, and their narrative possibilities and pleasures will come from better understanding and reexamining how we tell stories, rather than forcing old stories on misaligned technologies. We may never have our holodecks, but we have our loyal brothers standing at our sides, our webs of influence connecting us to entire worlds, our larger-than-life threats and our loyal friends at our backs, our power struggles and our daring adventures and our discoveries of whole

new worlds that are both fictions and realities. Thousands of stories wait at our fingertips, ready for us to build and explore and love. All they need is a little time, effort, and balance to become the fully-realized tales of tomorrow.

## Selected Gameography

Arkane Studios. *Dishonored*. Bethesda Softworks, 2012. Computer software.

Bethesda Game Studios. *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. Bethesda Softworks, 2011.

Computer software.

Bethesda Game Studios. *Fallout 4*. Bethesda Softworks, 2015. Xbox.

Bioware. *Dragon Age*. Electronic Arts, 2009-. Computer software.

Bioware. *Mass Effect Trilogy*. Electronic Arts, 2007-2012. Computer software.

Bioware. *Mass Effect: Andromeda*. Electronic Arts, 2017. Playstation.

Crystal Dynamics. *Rise of the Tomb Raider*. Square Enix, 2015. Xbox.

The Fullbright Company. *Gone Home*. The Fullbright Company, 2013. Computer software.

Guerrilla Games. *Horizon Zero Dawn*. Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2017.

Playstation.

Monolith Productions. *Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor*. Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, 2014. Playstation.

Monolith Productions. *Middle-earth: Shadow of War*. Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, 2017. Playstation.

Naughty Dog. *The Last of Us*. Sony Computer Entertainment, 2013. Playstation

Naughty Dog. *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*. Sony Computer Entertainment, 2016. Playstation.

Obsidian Entertainment. *Fallout: New Vegas*. Bethesda Softworks, 2010. Xbox.

Obsidian Entertainment. *Pillars of Eternity*. Paradox Interactive, 2015. Computer software.

Takashi Tezuka. *The Legend of Zelda*. Nintendo, 1986. Famicom.

Telltale Games. *The Wolf Among Us*. Telltale Games, 2013. Computer software.

Toby Fox. *Undertale*. Toby Fox, 2015. Computer Software.

# Bibliography

- Bogost, Ian. *How to Talk About Video Games*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.
- Bogost, Ian. "Video Games Are A Mess" (speech, Digital Games Research Association Conference, 2009), Ian Bogost.
- Brown, Mark. "Telling Stories with Systems." In *Game Maker's Toolkit*, edited by Mark Brown: YouTube, 2015.
- Druckmann, Neil. "'Uncharted 4' Director Neil Druckmann on Nathan Drake, Sexism in Games." By Chris Sullentrop (2016)
- "Fallout: New Vegas." How Long To Beat. <https://howlongtobeat.com/game.php?id=3351>.
- Floyd, Daniel. "The Magic Circle - How Games Transport Us to New Worlds." In *Extra Credits*: YouTube, 2014.
- Fox, J., Bailenson, J.N., and Tricase, L. "The Embodiment of Sexualized Virtual Selves: The Proteus Effect and Experiences of Self-Objectification Via Avatars." *Computers and Human Behavior* 29, no. 3 (2013): 930-38.
- Gee, James Paul. *Good Video Games + Good Learning: Collected Essays on Video Games, Learning, and Literacy*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2007)
- Harper-Collins Dictionary*, web., s.v. "cutscene."
- Hocking, Clint. "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock." Click Nothing, 2007.
- Hope, Robyn. "Ok So Here's What I Figured out About Castlevania." Tumblr, 2018.

- Juul, Jesper. *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fiction Worlds*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2005.
- Madigan, Jamie. "The Psychology of Immersion in Video Games." In *The Psychology of Video Games*, 2010.
- Mittell, Jason. "Playing for Plot in the *Lost* and *Portal* Francises." *eludamos* 6, no. 1 (2012).
- Murray, Janet. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998.
- Naughty Dog. "The Evolution of a Franchise." In *Making of Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*, edited by Naughty Dog LLC: Sony Computer Entertainment America LLC, 2017.
- Naughty Dog. "Grounded: The Making of The Last Of Us." Youtube, 2014.
- Naughty Dog. "Pushing Technical Boundaries." In *Making of Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*, edited by Naughty Dog LLC: Sony Computer Entertainment America LLC, 2017.
- North, Nolan and Baker, Troy. "Uncharted 4: A Thief's End: 'the Brothers Drake' Interview." By Troy Baker Nolan North. 2016.
- Oxford English Dictionary*. s.v. "empathy." Online: Oxford University Press.
- Oxford English Dictionary*. s.v. "narrative." Online: Oxford University Press.
- Randall, Nathan. "Nudgy Controls Part I." In *With a Terrible Fate*, 2017.
- Rehak, B. "Playing at being: Psychoanalysis and the avatar." In M.J.P. Wolf and B. Perron(eds.), *The Video Game Theory Reader*. (London: Routledge, 2003), 103—128.
- Sawyer, Josh. *Choice Architecture, Player Expression, and Narrative Design in Fallout: New Vegas*, GDC. 2012.

- Schell, Jesse. "Understanding Entertainment: Story and Gameplay Are One." *Computers in Entertainment* 3, no. 6 (January 2005 2005).
- Sicart, Miguel. "Defining Game Mechanics". *Game Studies*. 2008.
- Tassi, Paul. "'Bloodborne' May Be the Ps4's Salvation in 2015." (2015). Published electronically Mar 16, 2016.
- Taylor, Nicholas. "Me and Lee: Identification and the Play of Attraction in the Walking Dead." *Game Studies: the international journal of computer game research* 15, no. 1 (January 2015). 2015.
- Waggoner Zach. *My Avatar, My Self: Identity in Video Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 8
- Wardrip-Fruin, Noah & Pat Harrigan. *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance and Game*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004.