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VIDEO GAMES AS INTERACTIVE NOVELS: A DIGITIZED ART AND MULTIFORM  
INFORMATIONAL TOOL BASED IN NARRATIVE THEORY

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## ABSTRACT

Since the 1970's, video game production has globally changed the way the most impressionable consumers of media think, speak, live, and write. This project will closely analyze how narrative is utilized in video games as a creative medium, and what differentiates said medium's narrative components from the traditional novel or film genre. Basic narrative theory and selected games will be used as case studies to explain the uniqueness of the video game genre in comparison to other media, and what the particular form of interactive storytelling and digitization provides to the world through one pedagogical lens of literacy and rhetoric. This project will illustrate the very real potentiality of games in their many forms considered artifacts representative of our culture, in making transcendental impressions through the ability of computer systems to generate appropriate plot coherence and character development. On the eve of virtual reality and augmented reality technology's arrival, blurring the line between fiction and reality, this new coming will again transform the way the world sees, reads, and interprets narrative for centuries to come.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
NEW GAME START .....	1
LEVEL 1: <i>To The Moon</i> .....	14
“I always thought they were lighthouses...Billions of lighthouses stuck at the far end of the sky. ...They all look the same from here, but that doesn’t make them any less pretty.” – River Wyles, <i>To The Moon</i> .....	14
LEVEL 2: <i>Life Is Strange</i> .....	24
“Max, you are not crazy. You are not dreaming. It’s time to be an everyday hero!” – Max Caulfield, <i>Life Is Strange</i> .....	24
LEVEL 3: <i>The Last Of Us</i> .....	43
“I struggled for a long time with survivin’, and you, no matter what, you keep findin’ something to fight for.” – Joel Miller, <i>The Last Of Us</i> .....	43
CONTINUE GAME?.....	60
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	63

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*A hero need not speak. When he is gone, the world will speak for him. – Halo 3*

*A good writer need not speak. When she is gone, her writing will speak for her.*

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## NEW GAME START

It was the year 1983 when the game *Mario Bros.* by Shigeru Miyamoto and Takashi Tezuka of Nintendo emerged from its own green piped underground into Japanese arcades, carrying within the machine's carefully wired and coiled circuitry its own clandestine story. This story of the world's future favorite Italian-American plumber was unlocked by the millions in 1983, years before its sequel, *Super Mario Bros.* in 1986 and before the game's eventual console port to the Family Computer Desk System, or Famicom, and its subsequent port to the Nintendo Entertainment System, the NES. Its timelessly enchanting tale would be smoothly translated for all men, women, and children to enjoy. Kicking the red shells of turtles and stomping on the brown mushroom-shaped heads of Goombas plotting to stop Mario made the general public immune to their calculated daily lives, gifting each and every player who pressed the play button at least three extra ones in addition to the one they were already living. Tensions rose to a peak as shells and flying hammers slowly demolished distance and backed players into corners. Programmed cybertext in bold white lettering popped up on screen, guiding the hero's scrolling adventure and alerting its controlled plumbers on the other side of the screen to rules and scores. This mission as plumber turned rescuer was simple: save Mario's lost love and damsel in distress, Pauline, from the clutches of the evil Koopa King, Bowser, and save the Mushroom Kingdom. While the prehistory of its design remained skeletal, the basic objective, progressing from point A to point B, paved the way for narrative elevation in gaming's history.

The reverberations of this emergence rippled transnationally. American audiences in the West soon found digital interactive media's many other iconic faces beyond the Nintendo Corporation's big-budget arcade-platformer expedition and capitalist market takeover. This would only be the beginning. In 1981, Nintendo would first tease Mario when they released *Donkey Kong* also on the arcade scene, a *King Kong*-like analogy wherein our red-capped hero must climb ladders and avoid barrels in order to save the princess who has been here captured atop scaffolding by a coffee-colored ape sporting a red necktie. The NES port version of *Super Mario Bros.* was launched in 1986 alongside other trademark titles such as *The Legend of Zelda* (1986), a boy-becomes-legend tale where the green-tunic wearing hero must rescue the captured Princess Zelda and save the Kingdom of Hyrule from certain ruin, for the Famicom and NES (*The Strong National Museum of Play*). The global monopoly of results from the dominating rise of Nintendo's revolution cross-culturally alone stands as equal parts sobering and equal parts inevitable; the question from AI researchers soon leveled up from a question of the logistics of utilizing neoteric computer systems in the home that had been slower and rarer just a few years earlier, to a question of how these new systems might serve to revolutionize entertainment and media consumption through video games to its audiences far and wide. Digital interactive entertainment and video game big business reestablished the desire for deep universes that were once found exclusively in oral history, art, novels, or cinema, harkening back to days of old while simultaneously charting their own course.

Anthropologically speaking, humans have always told stories that they have expressed in an abundant range of methods. This aesthetic culture was reproduced in multiform variants through the vehicles of songs, oral narratives, cave drawings, and cave paintings as others would gather to watch the actor in profound amazement at new revelations as he performed his artistic

duty. Jonathan Gottschall in his book *The Storytelling Animal* says the imagination plays an integral role in the formulation of art, as “our minds supply most of the information in a scene—most of the color, shading, and texture” (28). This imagination outlet for the creation of art represents a penchant in the human race towards creativity even when other biological drives should take priority. Even though cavemen and cavewomen needed to ward off enemies and forage for food to survive, these prehistoric people would also take time to gather around in social groups and expound on wondrous stories. Gottschall says the function of this may include, through a biologically advantageous lens: sexual selection, cognitive play, the retelling of information, and social glue (27-28), but it may very well be an evolutionary byproduct of our genetics and have no certifiable purpose, in some ways an evolutionary mistake. Regardless of its origins, the drive for humankind to narrate stories is one of the cornerstones of our existence that we strive to exercise whether we consciously choose to or not.

More contemporarily, the imaginative thrills of imagining different worlds and people became more physical and more idiosyncratic in the winding worlds of books. Artistic expression has had a long and colored history, molded by societal and timely proclivities. The advent of computer literacy in games was predicated on the emergence and resurgence of the literature tradition of male escapist fiction in the forms of westerns, mysteries, space adventures, and other similar boy meets world tales after oral narration (Calleja). These coveted genres of reading all stand as remediations, a term coined by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin in the text, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (MIT Press, 2000), describing how newer media borrows concepts and structures from older media. On this occasion, it is how the written follows the prehistorical oral. (Donovan). Young men became cowboys on the dusty range, trench-coated detectives always looking through magnifying glasses at bloody crime scenes, astronauts

stepping foot on the home planets of friendly or not so friendly extraterrestrial life through book-reading and writing, a feedback loop powered by imagination. By immersing himself in an exotic tale, the reader would enter a psychologically distant state in which his own identity would become malleable, if only for a short period of time, and thereby foster the growth of his own creativity and imagination, allowing the written protagonist to fade away and be replaced by none but the esteemed reader himself (Calleja). These riveting, out-of-body tales whisked away young boys and thereafter young girls by the millions with their multitudes of fascinating characters, points of view, lines of dialogue, text, and plot, all set within the scattered inkblots on anywhere between a few dozen, to hundreds and thousands, of leather bound pages.

Narrative theory does not lend itself to a single delineation of what constitutes true narrative (Jessul). In spite of the uncertainty, main and side characters of the customary storyline are commonly agreed on by literary critics to be integral parts of the yet undefined whole, or at the very least they cannot be avoided in analysis (Richardson). Basic narrative theory suggests character emergence and character development within a frame in the traditional sense by designating figures as human or as anthropomorphic human-like beings, centralizing a flexible chronicle around them, wherein other literary critics like the great Aristotle denounce or deny the existence of characterization entirely as historically fabricated myth (Talib). Characters, according to him, could also be additionally constructed only within the context of their plotlines or settings, either dealing in existential mimesis, or are representative of purely a simulacrum of life working in essentialist theory, but above all following stereotypical schematics with little to no true assimilation (Talib).

Where characters are accepted as their central roles, there exists flat or round characters, static or dynamic characters, or follow archetypes. Flat or round characters, ones with either two-



dimensional or three-dimensional traits, respectfully, are often accompanied by static or dynamic implications, which means they may stay the same or change according to the rules of the written space (Forster) they are bound by. Vladimir Propp's *Dramatis Personae* gave credence to the schematic archetypes of: The Hero, The Helper, The Villain, The False Hero, The Donor, The Dispatcher, The Princess, and The Princess' Father. The Hero, the physical embodiment of positive traits and the likes of which who may or may not be the main character, couples with the Helper who swears to assist The Hero on his mission-drive journey bestowed upon him by The Dispatcher. Amidst trial and tribulations on the road ahead, the wandering pair discovers the antithetical character foil of the The Hero, the Villain, and may unknowingly befriend the deceptive False Hero who may lead the pair astray until the The Hero defeats The Villain and is victorious (Propp).

The characters and universe of the traditional narrative are directed by an internally driven monologue that calls attention to detail. This running monologue of sorts enables narrative schemas denoting a first person speaker, a third person narration, or a rarer second party voice to guide and direct its readers (Genette). These voices are also the agents of authorial intent, if intent is to be considered within the account at all, furthermore establishing the direct and indirect presentation of the characters as either agents of showing or agents of telling as parts of the discourse (Talib). This understanding of narration opens the floor for inquisition into the ultimate reliability of a narrator and how a character's biased funneling of information distorts, shapes, and colors story-told events.

When characters speak to one another, a set of open and closed quotations conveys a spoken conversation to the audience. Lest the overall message or identity of the speaker be gravely misunderstood, the rules of this visual-oral communication are standardized as follows:

each speaker generally receives his own paragraph and inserted indent, mimicking pauses in real-time verbal conversation, each conversant takes attributions to clarify who is speaking and to whom, and each speaker with an attribution has it pointedly marked with a comma. Divergence from this conventionality is undertaken by writers as creative liberty for emphatic or elaborative purposes. These lines harken back to the olden days of orators and histories while simultaneously transcending the written boundaries of simple, descriptive text through enabling rhetorical devices such as irony, sarcasm, satire and parody that more closely mimic human speech (Talib).

Beyond dialogue there is the non-quoted material of the book, covering a unique assembly of textual depictions of descriptions, settings, and events particular to the characters and assigned plotline. Setting in the customary genre spans across three basic notions from beginning to end: the background material of events and characters, the immediate surroundings accessible in a scene, and the spatial location in which the narrative has been historically or socioculturally grounded (Talib). Place is presented in either a linguistic or non-linguistic manner in the event of aural cues, and some genres capstone on particular settings such as the rolling green meadow and the gentle river setup commonplace in romantic fiction (Bal). The written universe may contain an abundance of micro and macro-scale backgrounds which may fluctuate at simply the will of the narrative director or of even the narrator himself (Talib). It is to these visual details in the immediate or general world of the characters that extra care and attention is directed when using language as a tool to paint an internal picture.

Plot, as an interrelated series of action points known to many academics as the narrative structure (Talib), most popularly follows a triangle-like model in which an exposition opens the discourse which a resolution will eventually end. This triangular module proposed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Gustav Freytag, laid the foundation of traditional narrative evolution on twin axis of

intensity of events as a function of time passed in the novel (Crane). Therefore, most novels feature a reversal of various movements such that a lack transitions to that lack being resolved (Jessul). These particular movements explicitly are, following the exposition, comprised of: the inciting incident, rising action, climax, and the falling action, punctuating the dyadic diagonals of the triangle before flatlining to a certain resolution before flowing to an authorial dénouement. The narrative director in the exposition provides necessary background, setting, and characters to drive the rhetorical vehicle through the numerous stages of dramatic events, complications, and centralized conflict. Events postluding the main altercation deliver the plot gradually to its anticipated completion, perhaps accompanied by an authorial epilogue (Freytag).

However realistic to the reader, this effect of assimilation and flexibility of self-image in prose narrative was moreso imagined, molding images that authorial words conjured up in the brain. He would indulge vicariously in an alternate reality all his own but with no one else to share the experience with, one that at its core was conceived by the interpretation of someone else's dictations and narratological choices. The daydreaming young boy was no more buccaneer, private eye, or cosmonaut than those read who read the titles before him or the person who wrote the title. This abstractness allowed for creativity discretion to remain with the individual on a personal level, but inherently discredited any limitations to the text other than the directly stated (Calleja). A reader could not ever alter the events of the text, change the character's minds, or modify the setting, for instance. Reading soon after became digitized, on the Internet, on Tablets and Smartphones, and this prestigious mantle of what started as casual escapism and all of its narratological components were soon picked up by electronic goods such as film and then the subject of analysis: video games. Not so coincidentally from the history, a multitude of narrative and sequential features overlap between these mediums of analysis.

Interactive Fiction, commonly referred to as IF Literature in the nomenclature, also made an appearance around the 1980's with the introduction of the first cybertext-based narrative, Michael Joyce's *An Afternoon* (Donovan). When *Mario Bros.* launched, a more complete intermingling of the dynamics of textuality, visuals, and story interactivity was bringing with it the digital medium's capabilities of storytelling into the spotlight for the first time. Players navigate a software-simulated environment, engaging with the aesthetic elements of the world and of the narrative plotline by way of inputting text commands such as "pick up the lantern" and "read the sign" (Ostenson). One such popular game to subscribe to this genre is widely known as *Zork*. Within the computer generated interface of *Zork* (1978), this early text adventure also features a more skeletal model dynamic: a nameless stranger has ventured to the ruins of an abandoned civilization in search of hidden wealth and prosperity, similar to the adventurers of a bygone era, but this interactive narrative (and others that have walked in its footsteps) make use of text, programming, and puzzles much more so than its television or arcade ancestors (Ostenson). *Zork* is entirely text-driven and requires full-word and phrase commands, and as a result brings together narrative elements of plot, conflict, and character (Ostenson) without relying on modern day graphic visuals or physical console controllers.

In this way, the hi-tech avant-garde of the video game world through the decades was constructed in relation to other older modes and models of narrative and technical discourse. Video games in their modern day application utilize various various theories from narratology, cinematography, and ancient human practices in an auspicious blend of new capacities for self-expression and representation of 21<sup>st</sup> century culture. A utopian, as it were, culture bred the demand for the type of advanced storytelling that could be found in the ubiquitous presence of a virtual media, unlike the pen and paper and movie projectors of years past. The technical

revolution of interactive storytelling, a digital Neo-Fordism at its core, encourages the marriage and intellectual compromise between the once distanced worlds of the humanities and those of artificial intelligence (Koenitz). What once began as supercomputers programming digital act forces against distant militaristic enemies and arcade coin-eaters became a more developed place where mysticism and industry collide, bringing forth genre, gameplay mechanics, player choice and decision making, graphics and atmosphere, and sound effects. Brand new worlds all found not within books now but within the motherboard of a single book-shaped computer.

It is not enough to say that video games inherited books or any studio's cinematic practices, but rather that gaming transformed them. Oral and written narrative combine to create the modern day video game (Talib). It is less a question of whether gaming fits the subsections of traditional narrative or cinematic narrative and more a question of the degree of interplay between mediums in the creation of new narrative. The accessibility of home computers and consoles in association with middle class affordability skyrocketed the turn to digitalism. Readers-turned-players reprise their reinvented roles as gamified supernatural assassins, high-stakes treasure hunters, or shoot-em-up Texs from the books of days past to a more interactive and immersive platform. These readers-turned-players become the game version of a novel's characters, static and dynamic, or customizable avatars, and advancing throughout the virtual plane of the lush game world with Non-Player Characters (NPCs) as the action exists under the realm of the temporal present (Apperley). Game Studies scholars suggest role-playing and the shaping of personal identity originally from within the printed world found its successor in games like *Dungeons and Dragons*, online metacultural communities or specialized forums for expressive or instrumental purposes (Simon Egenfeldt-Nielson) and Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGS), to name a select few (Murray). Other genres besides the

MMO include but are not limited to: platformers, shooters, fighting games, stealth games, survival horror, metroidvania, text adventures, graphic adventures, visual novels, interactive movies, Tactical RPGS, Real-time strategy games (RTS), Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) games, and sports games, unlike the less differentiated cinematic or written counterparts. While seriously diverging from the traditional prose narrative's framework upon first glance, these digital titles have in actuality incorporated subtextual elements and borrowed components of traditional narrative into each of these experimental genres while still remaining unique.

This electronic media stands tall as a kind of blending of the classic style of story-telling in conjunction with responsiveness and control in the form of interactive gameplay. Frames and scripts in artificial intelligence research are prototypical versions of schemas that create user gameplay mechanics, with frames representing spatial models contrasting scripts' process modeling (Minsky & Schank). Clicking, swiping, or pushing buttons to move through digitally constructed menus shape audio-visual distinctual cues, the likes of which manifest as character development and narrative specificity do in real time (Koenitz). Sequences of events are actualized by the player by button or key presses, voice commands, and the mastering of simulations. Outcomes occur in the form of cut-scenes or as simulations with multiple outcomes (Juul). Erroneous assumptions that the digital situation only exists on only one side of the screen are problematic, as this real time interactivity establishes a specific paradigm in which the main character of the story, the player, remains forever constant. It can be thought of as on the two axis of story time and discourse time (Juul). Temporality in books in this way counters temporality in games as time passes relatively in the former and constantly in the latter, establishing games as a separate yet similar medium of analysis from books, whereas traditional

cinema vouches for story time, the telling of the events, and for discourse time, when exactly these events are told (Juul).

Meeting head-on the creation of this new ergodic literacy (Aarseth), or cybertext as the new kind of text, were scripted textual elements in games that mirrored the pen and paper of years past. The text authorized the visual and the visual concurrently authorized the text. Much like books, the textual elements depicted not only background scenarios and sceneries but occasional written dialogue either in a subtitled format for those hearing impaired or as a compensation for a lack of sound tracks, sound effects, sound bites, or a voice actor's spoken word. Cybertext demarcates the subtitles and various paratexts that the creator uses to announce the title of the game, the game box text, the in-game menu options, and the signposting of the interactive clues scattered throughout levels.

On their endless quests, both diegetic (main narrative) and extradiegetic (side narratives complementing the main), players may choose what missions to undertake, how to accomplish those missions, how quickly, and for what moral reasons. Such interactions afford us the luxury of self-direction and independence. Dialogue and decision trees permeate open world games especially, but none are strangers to the contemporary trend as an inventive change from the once linear, fixed playthrough. Video games as procedural rhetoric, a label crafted by Ian Bogost, describes the way in which video games use interactivity and input signals from players to shape events, much in the same way *Zork* does, which gives the medium a different nuance as compared to other structured aesthetic forms. When players move through the world making macro or micro-scaled decisions with the choices they are given, they are changing the world they are participating in, while also having the world alter them in return (Bogost). Ethically speaking, computer gaming have traditionally created one-dimensionally good or evil characters,

classifications of which one would likely not discover in the pages of a manuscript as they on average contain more morally ambiguous characters (Juul). The ability of players to choose also plays an important role in the construction of character morality, a relatively new concept in games spearheaded by Peter Molyneux and god-game *Populus*, and environmental micro and macro consequentialism (Molyneux).

The ambiance of a gaming universe is enhanced by its graphics style and graphics engine. While a novel relies on its language, non-linguistic cues mold the atmosphere of a vast visual world, like in that of cinematography, in a myriad of similar and different ways. Computer graphic techniques display video game content on the basis of text-based, 2D (including side-scrollers and top-down perspective), 3D (fixed, first person, third person), augmented reality or mixed reality, and virtual reality, significantly altering the experience in relation to the consigned typography (Wolf). Ideologically and structurally the theme and personality of a game at its artistic base can be expressed nonverbally through dispersed light patterns, cell shading, and art style of a more realistic or fantastical nature.

These formulaic foundations of video game construction, both borrowed from other aesthetic forms of expression and made anew, shape games as the intersection of many different cultural and practical mediums. The war has been waged between ludologists and narratologists for decades (Marie-Laurie Ryan), arguing for what makes a game a game, or what elements, gameplay or story, make games so special. We see now that these are largely irrelevant arguments, for an expansive analysis of games at the practical and sociological level should reference the conjunction of all media efforts, as video games did not evolve from a single place or a single medium. Games, by their visual, sound, and ludological and representational design, are not stories to begin with but only computer simulations birthed by streams of code. But it is



these elaborate simulations that create a simple or complex story, and each of these developed stories are representationally dissimilar to others with similar themes but dissimilar gameplay style and mechanics. Each person, at different parts of their lives will interpret these events and the narrative that the game is utilizing to make its point in varying ways, depending on the structure of the game, the social context, and the individual context. Through all of these considerations, video games become the oral narratives of our time, beyond focusing on only elements of gameplay or content, and instead leading us and the generations to come with an intersection of the two foundations into the future of electronic media and of narrativity.

### **LEVEL 1: *To The Moon***

**“I always thought they were lighthouses...Billions of lighthouses stuck at the far end of the sky. ...They all look the same from here, but that doesn’t make them any less pretty.” – River Wyles, *To The Moon***

How far would a man go to be with the one he loves? From the creators of *A Bird Story*, *The Mirror Lied*, *Quintessence: The Blighted Venom*, and *Do You Remember My Lullaby*, comes a synodic game to transcend them all. *To the Moon* (2011) is an indie (independent) adventure roleplaying game (RPG) presenting two dedicated doctors time-travelling through the forgotten memories of a dying, elderly man in order to fulfill his last wish. A company by the name of the Sigmund Agency of Life Corp. is world-renowned for its revolutionarily advanced medical technology, machinery that can implant artificial memories in terminally ill patients—a procedure that the corporation reserves solely for the dying now resting on the last phases of their lives, when it is then legal in this futuristic universe to tamper with a person’s reminiscences without legal or moral repercussions. Corporate employees Dr. Eva Rosalene and Dr. Neil Watts are tasked with carrying out this special wish—service treatment of rapidly waning Johnathan Wyles, a man whose life’s dream is to go to the moon but for a reason he can no longer recollect. In order to successfully honor this request, they must first traverse across the many pitfalls and craters, the lights and shadows, of Johnny’s fragmented memories to discover the origins of this dream and to absolve of him of his own regret, even after he no longer remembers them himself. The computer game is passionate narrative retelling through the

perspectives of Dr. Rosalene, Dr. Watts, and the player of Johnny's poignant life: his life, his loss, and his love.

After much playtime, it is discovered that Johnny met his late-wife, River, at a carnival when they were only children, looking up at the constellations and constructing one together in the shape of a rabbit with its belly as the moon. Promising to find one another again next year, the pair agree to meet back up on the same hill, but should he forget their childhood arrangement he should regroup with her on the moon as adults: this forms the unconsciously burning desire to go to the moon which the researchers hear firsthand upon finding an elderly Johnny standing alone in the first time leap, his sleight of hand on River's worn grave protecting the onlooking lighthouse. Johnny gives River his stuffed toy platypus to remember him by in childhood, and she cherishes it for the rest of her life, even after Johnny suffers a bout of amnesia and forgets, among other things, his pivotal meeting with her. After his twin brother, Joey, is tragically run over by a car and killed before his eyes, young Johnny is given beta blockers by his mother in order to induce memory loss of the death that haunts him, but the far-reaching consequences also force him to forget River. He does not meet her the subsequent year.

As if written in the stars, a second chance at a first love is given. Johnny meets River for the second time when it is revealed that they attended the same high school, he professing his love for her there on the grounds, ironically, that she was inexplicably "different" (*To The Moon*) than the others. She, at first over the moon with elation, accepts him as her boyfriend and later her husband, but later realizes, disheartened and brokenhearted, that their second meeting at school is to him only their first. Until the day of her death, River battles the raging tides of Johnny's amnesia unsuccessfully, cutting her hair short again and folding colored paper bunnies resembling the shape of the constellation but his memories remain locked away despite her best

efforts. She passes away in her bed in their mansion beside the dimming lighthouse they treasured, clutching the stuffed platypus to her chest as he looks on, succumbing to a staggering sense of dread and guilt he cannot begin to place. By fate's design, this regret follows him in the same way his brother's death did: a dark and lingering specter for not medicine this time, but Rosalene and Watts to exorcise in 48 hours before Johnny can be set free into the cosmos.

*To The Moon* leads its players on a complex journey through the stars that in real time only lasts a cumulative total of 3.5 to 4 hours, greatly contingent on player-driven progression and chosen amount of scenic exploration, but its emotional impact lasts for long beyond after the span of those few hours. In GameSpot's 2011 Game of the Year award, *To The Moon* received Best Story Award, outshining other noteworthy titles such as *Catherine*, *Xenoblade Chronicles*, and even The Valve Corporation's venerated *Portal 2*, the latter title typically denoted a masterpiece of wit and surprise in modern computer gaming due in part to the quirky and passive-aggressive yet equally as endearing character of GLaDOS, the artificial intelligence computer system that rules the mazelike Aperture Science Lab with an iron circuit board. *Steam* sales from *To The Moon* boasted huge numbers and overwhelmingly positive reviews across the board-; "...*To The Moon* is a game you must play"; from GameSpot, giving it a 8/10 rating; "It's simple, poignant, and full of heart" from PC World (otherwise known as GamePro) giving it a 10/10; and "How do I explain why it's brilliant without spoiling what makes it so?" from Eurogamer, giving it a hardy 9/10. These next few pages will analyze just what makes this game so brilliant, this story that transports all those who hear it to Johnny and River's world as Neil and Eva were, just beyond the moon and stars.

First captured by the serenity of the calm before the storm, we are soon ushered into a universe wrought from the very beginning with great laughs and great tears because of the

humanity of the characters. Instead of empathizing with written words and formulating an image of the characters, we are given a definitive digital form of a character and are continually exposed to it in different ways, allowing our feelings access to a very physical form we can see. After clicking with our computer mouse through the illuminated menu screen, we are dropped from the sky into an unknown world where before anything else, we hear the abounding laughter of two brunette-haired children playing an enchanting melody on a baby grand piano, juxtaposed with the jarring sound of a car crash from outside: an echoing omen of what is to come. In this particularly audible way the players are introduced to not only the game but to the eccentrically lovable character pair, Eva and Neil, and to the boisterous Sarah and Tommy, the caretaker Lilly's children before meeting Lily herself and then the comatose John, the subject. The tone of the game and of the bickering relationship between Eva and Neil is set simultaneously with the humorous opening lines after the crash into the tree, "Where were you looking, Neil?" followed by a stubborn, "Excuse me for *heroically* saving that squirrel in the middle of the road." The two bicker throughout, a light comic relief for the harsh reality of the situations in which Johnny, River, and Isabella especially must unfairly live, three of the most important characters that, paradoxically, players can only know through a series of flashbacks and a collection of priceless mementos, never in the universe's present time.

These realistic characters, born of a digital invention, are born within genres that both have and also have no literary ties. Old and young gamers alike are welcomed into this digital space by way of familiarly recognized literary genres that this game shares with other works—science fiction, tragicomedy, and the psychological—that have now taken on a form unbeknownst to the men and women of the pen-and-paper late and recent past (the remediation concept referenced by scholar Egenfeldt-Nielsen). Bridled with a slew of conflicting emotions

and naivety, veteran readers who once indulged voraciously in space adventures in supernatural *Star Wars*, Shakespeare's hilariously sad *Merchant of Venice*, or brain buster *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, can now experience the vast breadth and limitations of these respective genres firsthand and in a reinvented vein, conjoined with other genres exclusive to the speedily expanding world of gaming such as the role-playing game, or the RPG. The significance of this genre-mixing extends beyond the characters or the plot itself of any work, wedding two or more genres with possibly different rules and skillsets together to form a more unified, individual product, which is seen often and well in video games.

Freebird Games crafts the heartwarming tale of *To The Moon* using the traditional RPG style engendered by the classic RPG Maker XP engine, requiring little to no programming experience to animate the pixelated sprites and to carry their character's goals and dreams to fruition. Diverging slightly from other RPGS of its kind, like those of *Final Fantasy* (Square Enix's thrilling turn-based fantasy adventure game) or *Pokémon*, (a Japanese consortium between Nintendo, Game Freak, and Creatures Inc., Pocket Monster battle game) this 2D 16-bit game asserts no battle system, interactive inventory, or party system but instead merits itself primarily on its bittersweet story and through its captivating storytelling. This claim stands with the exception of the fake battle sequence in the beginning of the game, wherein Dr. Eva Rosalene mimics, in a kind of parodying gest, a heroine of the traditional RPG model who would valiantly defend the children she is leading from the threat of a viciously attacking squirrel, to which the children she is with remonstrate her for on the grounds of "animal abuse" (*To The Moon*). The graphics and dialogue-timed animations, in spite of slight movements and reactions such as Neil pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose on occasion or Eva closing her eyes in frustration being small gifts that contribute to realistic character development—they are not the forefront

elements here, with production artists sacrificing potential technical creative prowess for the sake of showcasing a beautifully timeless narrative and enriching environment instead.

Because these characters and this environment maintain a very physical form, they can be interacted with accordingly. Players freely move around the sites of interest with the mouse, left-clicking to interact with an object or person, and right-clicking to toggle through menus or to cancel. This simple, active movement of the player through interaction with the game environment pushes the story forward; without this activity, unlike books or movies, the events of the story would never unfold. Through the process of exploration, players discover hidden areas of the greenery around the lighthouse and backstories of the Johnny and the rest of the characters, enriching the lore of the world and permitting the players to collect mementos, sentimental possessions of Johnny's life, in order to solve point-and-click puzzles and progress to the next stage of the narrative. Each level is formulaic: the researchers arrive within a flashback that the player cannot engage with or skip, demarcating a significant event in Johnny's life, and then a member of the pair, controlled by the player, must search the area for five clues and mementos to activate a memory string, at which point they may leap to the next memory and continue the journey. As the doctors progress through the lenses of Johnny's life, we do as well, picking up memento after prized memento in the backwards compilation of Johnny's memories, a process which oftentimes evoke emotional responses in not only the observing doctors, but also in the players behind them. Lab-coated characters Neil and Eva act as in-game placeholders for the outside audience, quipping at or expressing sympathy, grief, and satisfaction at particularly noteworthy moments in the story's development. It is indeed literary's tried-and-true character models at work, but in digitized aural-visual form (Propp).

When Johnny, Izzy (Isabella), and Nicolas, Johnny's middle school friend, are as adults discussing the trials of dealing with River's obsessive routine of folding origami rabbits and her autism spectrum disorder, heavily implied throughout the narrative to be Asperger's, Izzy gives her own self-testimony of the hardships that she and River must face as "non-neurotypicals," and Neil remarks from an adjacent table, invisible to the members of the other group, about how he has never once encountered a person with "that condition" and dwells on the point of reference. Eva retorts that he still doesn't know one because what they are seeing are memories in the mind of another human person and are no longer a part of reality before again placing the control back in the hands of the players pulling the strings. With its poignant story comes a grappling with difficult topics such as death and disorders that players firsthand experience through the interactivity with the electronic text.

Player choice remains an integral component of video games and *To The Moon* is no such exception. Immediately following the clearing of the first objective—(that is grabbing the equipment from the smoking car) the dawdling doctors are tasked with finding their way to the Cliffside abode that houses their elderly client. From here on out, unless restricted by a cutscene, the player may travel anywhere on the map he pleases, either clearing objectives swiftly by following the dark red arrows marking up the paths, or by taking a more meandering, winding route. Choice games or game levels have time limits to objective completion, testing its players to clear obstacles and find resolutions within a certain time frame, one such game being Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (2000) for the Nintendo 64 which limits a 48-hour in-game cycle before world domination, but this does not hold true for all by any means, as in the case of a more relaxed *To The Moon*. Players can take their time investigating and understanding wholly the world around them before proceeding to the next stage; this is also



supplemented in *To The Moon* by an inclusion of decision choices at a variety of important and inconsequential points, such as in the context of the beach ball disguised as boulder, to “push it by hand,” to “find a branch” or to “abort mission and go home” all the way to deciding whether or not to see the “secret room in the basement” filled with colored origami bunnies, or to remain in Johnny’s bedroom with your partner and his medical doctor (*To The Moon*), much in the way *Zork* was. Even though the story is linear and the overall outcomes of the game are not seriously influenced by the decisions one makes, this level of player choice is still revolutionary.

Along those same lines, the timeline of the story is laid out in a reverse chronological fashion, beginning with Johnny’s fall to a comatose state and regressing through his adulthood, adolescence, and then into the innocent pleasantries of his childhood, as it was before Joey’s death. This is more unlike Freytag’s triangular model. It is in childhood that Neil and Eva sow the seeds of becoming a NASA astronaut in Johnny’s brain in order to spur him to action that which would finally relieve him of his crushingly inconsolable guilt. Neil and Eva watch his life rewind as we do, seeing the memories reverse in fluctuating shades of sepia and gray during the time travelling, showing their age but also their steadfast resilience to the cruel hand of time. When Johnny and River first decide on the name Anya, the couple’s beloved lighthouse, Neil remarks on the ridiculousness of the whole affair but Eva, standing as the voice of reason, is quick to justify it as “the end isn’t more important than the parts leading up to it” (*To The Moon*). It is important she says, in how viewing the story as more than just the sum of its parts is, a perspective we as players and narratologists should reciprocate to understand the story in full.

This is wrapped up nicely taking into account the original soundtrack and consequent sound effects. The soundtrack, composed together with the musical talents of Ken Gao and Laura Shigihara beautifully complements the atmosphere and tone of the game, switching fluidly from

scores of distress and sadness when River refuses to sign the treatment papers to save her life, to light-hearted jubilation when River and Johnny get married, to the uneasy notes that play when Neil or Eva questions the memories they see, to the ways in which lack of sound completely punctuates an important conversation or phrase that demands attention. Even the heart monitor that is given to the pair before they begin to time jump through Johnny's memories beeps and lets us hear a distant, thumping heartbeat. There is no voice-acting in the game, but what it loses in verbal dialogue exchange, it makes up for in rich textual exchange and the fitting sounds of birds chirping and the ocean waves receding in the background, again reinforcing that realistic, modern day touch in a futuristic world.

This PC exclusive, operating on Mac, OS X, Linux, and Windows is one of the many independent story-driven novels to find its claim to fame in the open realm of computer digital distribution and not on a home console unlike many of its controller forerunners. Through a few clicks from a computer mouse, this process was facilitated through multiple veins: that of the creator, Canadian Ken R. Gao's website and various download portals, with such a type of distribution permitting the content to spread more ubiquitously without the necessity of a consumer affording or supporting dedicated hardware. Multiple language options are also available in English, French, German, Italian, Russian, Korean, Spanish, Polish, Portuguese, Turkish, Simplified Chinese, and Czech, making the content accessible to a wider audience. A release was made available for *Steam* software client users on Microsoft Windows in November 2011 coinciding with a January 2014 release on OS X and Linux. A sequel, *Finding Paradise*, is set for distribution in the same nearing the end of 2017.

*To The Moon* shines its own light through game and real life space, illuminating all those it captures in its pristine focus. Through its humanistic yet pixelated characters, and through its

wanderlust-inspired, diegetic narrative, the game makes an aesthetic and culturally relevant representation of our own culture: what we value, what we hold to be self-evident, what we fight for. *To The Moon*'s claim to fame are definitely its three-dimensional characters in a two-dimensional game space and the story the game practically utilizes to make grander points, however, this plotline could not be utilized at all, to one reaching a climax, without its grounding in its simple, yet effective gameplay. At the junction of it all, mouse underhand, players cannot help but look heavenward from their bedroom windows, hoping to see the silhouettes of Johnny and River finally holding hands on the moon.

## **LEVEL 2: *Life Is Strange***

**“Max, you are not crazy. You are not dreaming. It’s time to be an everyday hero!” – Max Caulfield, *Life Is Strange***

What does it mean to be a hero? What do true heroes do with the powers they are gifted? Does one need superpowers to be called a hero? Dontnod Entertainment and Publisher Square Enix’s brainchild, *Life Is Strange*, travels back and forth through time alongside its whiplashed protagonist, Max Caulfield. Shy Max is anything but camera shy, as she enrolls at one of the most illustrious art schools in the country, Blackwell Academy, for her senior year of high school. She walks through the academy doors with high aspirations of becoming a famous photographer, a dream she refuses to accept as merely pipe. One seemingly normal Monday, when she has a dream-induced vision of a swirling tornado during her photography class taught by the infamous Mark Jefferson, she leaves for the restroom and witnesses a girl she doesn’t recognize being shot, not by a camera but by a gun. In a frantic effort to save the girl’s life, Max discovers her latent powers as a time-travelling wizard, rewinding time to push the girl out of harm’s way, creating a rippling, butterfly effect. In spite of her newly acquired superhuman abilities, she would soon realize that just because one can, does not mean one should, and even superheroes should not always tamper with the natural film reel of life, lest they find themselves wrapped up in the remnants pulled from the projector.

During the week of October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013, Maxine Caulfield (voiced by Hannah Telle) moves back to her hometown of fictional Arcadia Bay, Oregon, and after having a prophetic vision of a

swirling tornado destroying the town's local lighthouse, she successfully rescues Chloe Price (voiced by Ashly Burch), from certain death at the hands of Blackwell's rich, yet psychologically troubled bully, Nathan Prescott (voiced by Nik Shriner). Only familiar with her hometown best friend's long brown hair and closet rebellious nature, Max discovers, with no help from her brain's face recognition, that the punk blue-haired girl she saves from looking down the barrel of a gun is actually her old partner in crime, and the dynamic duo rekindle their childhood friendship after some charming teenage squabbles about failing to remain in contact through phone calls or texts. The pair wanders to the lighthouse from Max's nightmare, still the symbol of light and coming home that it was in *To The Moon*, where she finally confides in Chloe about her vision foretelling a storm destroying their town, bringing her innermost doubts into full focus and opening light onto her most darkest of shadows. It is to this stark emotion that Chloe reveals some baggage of her own: that her current best friend and implied lover, the popular and talented Rachel Amber, has recently gone missing and Chloe has vowed to find her, convinced that Blackwell Academy houses clues to her whereabouts. This is the story of two, once similar but now very different girls: of their timeless friendship against all odds and of uncovering answers to life's most tantalizing mysteries, from the normal (like high-school peer-pressure with drugs and alcohol to fashioning self-identity) and some abnormal (like interdimensional travel, ecological ruin, and homicide).

*Life Is Strange's* slice of life drama lays its foundation in a graphic, episodic format featuring semi-regular monthly installments instead of the single, full-length release traditionally more often found in game design. Developers implemented this strategy for both narratological and fiscal reasons by the copyright studio, to be able to tell the story at a more deliberate, realistic pace while accordingly saving the studio unnecessary production expenses. There are

five episodes released to date, *Episode 1: Chrysalis*, *Episode 2: Out of Time*, *Episode 3: Chaos Theory*, *Episode 4: Dark Room*, and *Episode 5: Polarized*, with each detailing approximately a two and a half hour exposure to the story, liable to players leisure at clearing fetch quests and extra world exploration, again much like *To The Moon*. The game at its core is best captured by the events of the second episode, which will be the epicenter of subsequent analysis.

That fateful day after the girls bond and embark on their trek to the ominous lighthouse, the boarding school's dorm is abuzz with promiscuous rumors circulating about the Academy's most religious student—Kate Marsh (voiced by Dayeane Hutton). While Max showers in the Girls Dormitory restroom, she overhears Kate at the sink being bullied by Victoria Chase (voiced by Dani Knights) and Taylor Christensen (voiced by Ashly Burch), two well-known Vortex Club members, a motley crew of pretentious kids who rule the school and dominate its social scene. The adolescent hierarchy is not kind to Kate, as a viral video gets leaked depicting her drunkenly kissing several other students at the recent Club party she reluctantly attended. Upon taking their criticisms seriatim, Kate storms out of the restroom in a flurry of angry tears, swearing they will “be sorry one day” (*Life Is Strange*) as her two tormentors giggle at her expense. Max slowly exits her stall to find the showers abandoned and a link to Kate's viral video drawn on the mirror in clear, red matte lipstick, a witness to the calm before another storm.

On a mission to return Kate's copy of *The October Country* by Ray Bradbury (to which numerous allusions are made throughout the friends' chats), Max, unsettled, enters Katie's dormitory. A pitch-black room rises up in horror to meet Max's senses and ours, too, as we navigate around the obscured panorama, taking caution to avoid tossed Bibles, misplaced letters on the floor from disappointed family members, and children's book illustrations of death lining Kate's dorm. Max's depth of field on the situation is widened upon hearing from Kate that she

believed she was drugged at the party and that Nathan is the possible perpetrator. It is at this critical junction that Max, motivated by the player, either advises Kate to report to the police with her information, or to remain silent for lack of law enforcement-identified proof as to her assault. Player interactivity and freedom allows for a greater sense of narrative completeness; the player can interact with as much or as little in the room as they choose, and will also choose what Max recommends to Kate.

With a heavy heart, Max hops a bus to visit Chloe's mother, a waitress at the local Two Whales Diner, a woman she hasn't seen since she and Chloe were only children. Max's memory chip responds well, remarking quietly that the seaside diner had not changed a bit since she had last seen it and neither had Joyce Price (voiced by Cissy Jones). After the mother and daughter's friend exchange witty banter and gossip about their new life in the bay, the death of Chloe's beloved dad, William, and how Chloe has troublingly changed since Joyce remarried. The blue devil herself then bursts onto the scene, engaging Max in a silly game involving guessing the content of her pockets by which Max's psychic powers are put to the test, a test the player must clear to continue. This not only further cements the controls the player must master in order to progress through the game, but solidifies Max and Chloe's best friend dynamic narratologically.

Only slightly convinced, Chloe pulls Max from the diner and they make a beeline for Chloe's secret scrapyard hideaway. It is in this junkyard Chloe yet again tests Max's electronic viewfinder in finding bottles scattered throughout the wreckage that they can shoot with the gun she stole from her stepdad and Blackwell's Head of Security, David Madsen. Provided that the challenge is cleared and Chloe leaves satisfied, the player and their digital punk-rock best friend exit the grounds to a nearby train yard where the two reminisce, sprawled out on the tracks without a care in the world, until of course Chloe's foot gets lodged in the tracks and Max must

save her life again, fighting the egregious limitations of her supernatural powers in order to divert the oncoming train from squashing all they have rebuilt. Time brakes and rewinds at Max's beck-and-call, altering Max's vision with a grained, particle noise one often sees before blacking out. Our weary protagonist is led back to the Academy in time for afternoon classes, arms hooked around her wily companion, the likes of whom reminds Max that she is her "hero" (*Life Is Strange*).

A Jefferson lecture on Chiaroscuro is eclipsed by a boy from the classroom doorway screaming that "crazy shit" (*Life Is Strange*) is happening atop the roof of the Girls Dormitory. In a flash, the students sprint outside in the pouring rain only to bear witness to the image of Kate jumping to her death, time stopping in this moment for everyone, not just the protagonist. Max struggles to use her rewind abilities and in the end can only temporarily freeze time long enough to reach the rooftop and to reach Kate. Emotionally reaching Kate would prove for Max even harder as the time winds down to the final second, leaving the conversation that determines Kate's life in Max's, and the player's, shaky hands.

From the same studio that brought us their debut action-adventure thriller *Remember Me* (2013) and the character Nilin's 2084 Neo-Paris, now brings us a modern masterpiece similarly showcasing a strong female lead with surreally supernatural prowess. *Life Is Strange* (2015), entitled *What If* in pre-development was well-named on both accounts for focusing on the hypotheticals and subtle ironies of daily life, with attention to fate and the unintended consequences of choice. Raoul Barbet and Michel Koch, the French Co-Game Directors, were tasked with a difficult, but interesting challenge of not only balancing out each other, but also of working directly with all members across the audio-visual, sound design, the 3D and concept art teams, the voice talent team, technical gameplay team, and the perhaps most importantly the



narrative team, all equally inspired to find a more “interactive way to tell stories” (Director’s Commentary, *Life Is Strange*). *Life Is Strange* as a game was a success because the narrative directors synthesized manifold, from time to time conflicting elements, into a coherent, single production made better as a result of this convergence of talents. They successfully utilized narrative as a tool to make engaging, realistic points about the world around them and about the characters’ world they shaped. These mysteries in the mundane of the game, as it were, are carried out with the conscious employment of memorable and heartfelt characters within main and side stories unlike the more constant attention to overly realistic and over produced graphics with elaborate gameplay mechanics of many big-budget games produced by large game studios of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

One important preliminary point to be made in the way of character analysis before continuing is Max’s similarity to a camera. Max as a passive protagonist quietly listens and observes, a main character befitting a peaceful, slow-paced game like this, preferring to maintain her distance to capture for herself and the player the full picture of any given situation or person to the best of her ability, while also cropping out unnecessary frames. Max’s room is her own universe and it describes her well, a quaint residence decorated with shelved art books, hanging photos of her family members smiling, some cookies, an old computer, a growing plant, a brown teddy bear, square cushions, and a soft pink hue of her duvet that all speak to her innocence and gentleness. Perhaps because she blends into the background, of her school’s crowded hallway, of her sprawling small-town campus, of her best friend’s life, she acquires a different kind of silent strength—to be invisible and to work in the shadows, understanding the importance of listening when others would only speak. The directors wanted the players to always know what Max knew, as omniscient first-person observers and to just “be with her” (Director’s Commentary

*Life Is Strange*) on her intimate journey. Each player hears all of her thoughts and witnesses the game's universe only through her and her own perspective lens.

In the same way that a camera's aperture regulates how much light shows through—Max is the aperture by which the story, light, is filtered through. Players see the world through the lenses of her eyes, through her observations and through her bias, and for this she may not be reliable, in spite of the player's intervallic control of her. Sometimes neither Max nor the players know where they are or what clues mean, but this uncertainty and process of discovery allows the gamified pair, Max and the player, to grow together. This extra constituent of control, a motivating factor so necessary in game production, sets her apart from other unreliable narrators in film and the traditional book.

Max's life is colored by the filters of her surreal powers, and much like her affinity for photography and for her old Polaroid pictures, she is able to use these artifacts and moments to remain stuck in time physically where she usually is mentally consumed by her memories and insecurities. Photographic memory, a direct reference to her favorite hobby, ranks as perhaps Max's strongest asset only second to her rewind ability, but that clear memory is also her biggest liability. At the junkyard, while scavenging for Chloe's five lost bottles, Max finds herself reminiscing on not only her own past, but the past of all of the objects she sees, if a smashed-up red car reminds Chloe of her father's accident and his death, or if an abandoned boat is missed by its previous owners and where the owners are now (*Life Is Strange*). It is incredible to see a protagonist in any medium either on paper or on screen that is so self-aware. When Max rewinds time to explore other decision options, she is quick to ask herself if she is doing the right thing. Her magnetic pull to nostalgia and to self-reflection is why Max is given the power of time manipulation. Because she is so insecure, Max has trouble moving forward and making

decisions; in the past she has only gone backwards, to her old best friend, to her old town, to her old habits. However, no matter what choices she may make, or the player makes in the game space, in every episode and specifically at the end of Episode 5, when she must choose to either give up her best friend or her town, Max will instead finally move forward, being forced to make a decision and not stay neutral, zooming into the future waiting of her. This is a decision with no rewind.

Chloe is the deuteragonist and one of the most important characters, as the final choice of the series can be considered entirely dependent on the level of the player's grown attachment to her. She stands in as the opposite to Max in almost every way, icy and recalcitrant, she acts out as a means to receive the attention and recognition she was never given. Her blue hair matches the blue butterfly that gives Max her powers, and Chloe also has a butterfly tattoo on her right arm. Chloe's room and her junkyard hideaway holds her and the game's many tantalizing secrets. A tattered American flag, a punkish checkered red plaid comforter, weed, and a folded over picture of Rachel Amber wafting in smoke rings defines what her junkyard car piles and rummage boxes filled with rusty parts and old letters do not, and vice versa. Chloe is locked in time, predestined in more ways than one towards entropy, as she recollects herself amidst a pile of rubble and other things at the junkyard like herself that have been long since forgotten. As Max has been allowed to live and remain in the past by her disposition and by her free rewind, Chloe has been shoved forward physically time and time again, forcing her to push down her deepest of feelings, using cognitive suppression as a means to cope with the loss of others and the loss of herself to the past. A lot of what Max, with her powers, captures pictorially is instigated by Chloe, with her drive and bullheadedness. Fortunately for her, regardless of the

outcome she receives by Max's hand (and the player), she will never be forgotten by someone she loves ever again.

First scenes for characters in games must, by circumstances of the medium, always reveal a lot about them—their appearance, their disposition, their personality, their style,—and *Life Is Strange* as a whole production masterfully responds to this urgency. This is accomplished in a way that is wholly unique to the techniques by which film and books introduce their characters. Blackwell students each have a smaller or larger segment solely dedicated to showcasing their likeness. A player's first impression of a video game character is based substantially on these and other coinciding aspects of directed camera angle, environmental background, lighting, character's word choice or posture and more, in order to create a more complete picture in the player's mind of who the character is, who they think they are, and what they are about. When the player meets Max, she is cautiously trudging up the side of a hill, silhouetted by a raging storm that returns with a fury in *Episode 5*; when the player meets Chloe, she is pointedly pushy and cold, towering over and accusing Nathan of drugging innocents before he pulls his gun; when the player first meets Victoria in class, she is adorned in expensive clothes, sporting a catty smirk when she eagerly answers Jefferson's question and when she sees someone throw a paper ball at the back of Kate's head. These subtle, or not so subtle, debuts for these characters personify their essences to those who watch them, their hopes, dreams, values, and wishes, as art imitates life in a way that is both artificial and authentic.

Each student at Blackwell is constructed as seemingly playing the role of a particular character archetype, much like those of Propp. Ingeniously, the true magic of the game is in the deconstruction and subversion of those archetypes, a technique that speaks volumes about the three-dimensionality of the human spirit, and how that spirit can be transferable and given life in

even computerized megapixels. *Life Is Strange* prides itself on entrapping its players in the ruse of convincing the players early on of a straightforward character and narrative base. In actuality, not one of the students at Blackwell Academy are the archetypes they appear to be upon first glance: Victoria stages herself by all accounts as a mean-hearted, careless person but behind the scenes is very gifted and craves recognition so much so that the fear of failure causes her to push others away, failing her like she failed Kate while she sobs into her hands the night of Kate's suicide; Nathan, while undoubtedly highly problematic, is so due in part to his manipulative father's childhood abuse of him and the unnecessary medication he is unfairly sedated with and who dearly loves Victoria as a close friend for seeing beyond the mental illness that terrorizes him; even Samuel who is relegated unfairly to the position of creepiest and weirdest character, is the gentlest, and always willing to speak to any of the students with love and to care for the squirrels and plants dotting around the campus. Warren is gifted and intelligent beyond measure, but constantly feels isolated and lonely by all but Max, Dana is emphatic and cares for despite their social status, but she was mistreated by her previous boyfriend and fell pregnant, ending in an undetermined abortion or a miscarriage. Something more to these realistic characters exists beneath the surface, much like that of the town and its locals; all appear happy and stereotypically on the outside, but not one is without their internal struggles or without their conscience. Kate is similarly an archetype: religious, abstinent, pro-life, maybe at first glance boring to some, but the game principally proves to the nonbelieving that one can find good or interesting things in every person if they should look hard enough and Kate is certainly no exception. Caution will lead players away from the egregious faults of making assumptions as to the true natures of the characters preemptively. Max must be The Hero here against The Villains Nathan and Victoria, in order to assist The Helper, Kate.

The story is one intimate, a relatable tale accurately portraying the joys and pains of living in a small community, built on the back of love and friendship. The game at its base is about the lives of two young women caught in the tying and untying of destiny, not about sci-fi; the sci-fi element is utilized only as a tool to make the relationship between the girls stronger and to build intrigue. By inviting chaos and interesting variations of a dynamic plot, multiple opportunities and possibilities arise from outside the standard daily life model, separating this context again from that of a paranormal movie, television series, or traditional book.

But of course the game cannot escape its base in a pop culture reality and what this grounding means for the reality in which the game is set. Other difficult social issues plaguing a postmodern society—bullying, peer pressure, family issues, domestic issues, abortion and teen pregnancy, drugs, depression, and suicide in Episode 2 alone—are all carefully mentioned and addressed here in order to make important points as to the imperativeness of discussion. A private high-school setting, disregarding the supernatural influence, invites with it its own point of contention and while it is a place comfortable and familiar for most, and it is this similarity that causes players to be shocked more at Jefferson's cliffhanger plot twist in *Episode 4*. As players witness in the second episode, Max's time-travelling fails her in attempting to save Kate—the only time in the entire game where this happens—in order to emphasize instead Max's words and connection with her lost friend, the gravity and the anxiety of talking a friend down from suicide when every second counts, or gradually healing the wounds of modern cyberbullying in the aftermath with love and acceptance (*Life Is Strange*). In the new Age of Technology, cyberbullying and the rise of social media's influence in the lives of millennial children and teens is an equally important issue, referenced in the game by way of Kate's story and by way of directly illustrating the impacts of having an evolving social media presence

centered around “selfies” and statuses. Be that as it may, despite the weight of the subjects, each is introduced in a way that doesn’t necessarily appear pastiche, cliché, or forced on the player, with the directors subjecting the player to the directors’ established moral codes, but instead invites the possibility for open, future conversation, obviously this point excluding the game’s decision-making moments. In that of cinematic or written discourse, this openness of subjects, a freedom in a sense, is not commonly found because those mediums by way of their construction do not invite audience participation and therefore must have a creator, director, or writer giving a set direction and moral code that is fixed and unchangeable regardless of the audience. A reader or viewer’s perception of the narrative or the discourse can certainly change moment to moment depending upon who they are and what the neurological and cultural circumstances are in which they partake in the reading or watching, but the same story, discourse, and ideas will always exist, across time and space, without fail (Neilsen). This freedom lends itself to more objective-based discussion on serious issues previously marred by biases and subjectivity.

Taboo or sensitive subjects such as unemployment, euthanasia, homosexuality, and the aforementioned few are all integral parts of reality that cannot be avoided, and games such as *Life Is Strange* are in an unusual position in involving players with these hard decisions and choices. This is one of the cornerstones of the uniqueness of the video game genre as it relates to diegetic and extradiegetic content. At the culmination of everything, Max is faced with the verdict not only to sacrifice Chloe or Arcadia Bay, but also to confess romantic feelings for Chloe or to remain platonic best friends (*Life Is Strange*). This adds to the mix a principle of LGBTQ+ representation and of empowering young women to establish their identities, in whatever way that might look. Again, the morality here is only suggestive. Interacting within bounds of the rules of the game world, players are analogous to actors to the digital experiences, living them

simulated before their eyes as one would a real world scenario. This interactivity grants the game much of its emotional power, as players identify not only with functional or cast characters they like but also with the characters they play, a vicarious experience through which the player feels the emotions of those game characters they have identified with in either the first or second degree.

If it follows that the overarching plotline centers Max and her history with Chloe, each character, like Kate, also has an appealing story segment, a story within a story either as large as a portrait or as small as a snapshot for the player to live through. This extradiegetic content does not stop with characters, as even objects scattered throughout wordlessly tell their own stories to players who bend their ears to listen. *Life Is Strange* encapsulates the beauty of environmental storytelling, the act of using objects and setting to teach the audience more about the world. This is a method clearly implemented from scenes with Chloe's scrapyard, notably when Max discovers Chloe and Rachel's secret refuge. Here discourse time is slowed to less than narratological time without prompting slow-motion frames, following the theory of Juul. This slowing down of plot time in favor of further exploring the narrative is a staple of this game and allows players greater immersion into the world of Arcadia Bay. The traditional storyline becomes less blurry to the player/audience just as mixtapes, rock posters, drawings on the wall, and Rachel's balled up love letter to Chloe at the bottom of a trash can challenge the player's previous knowledge and contribute to world-building. Immersed in the game's small facts and figures through artifact collection, players will learn more about Arcadia Bay, its history, its people, and its surprises than they once thought possible.

Within the world of the diegetic and extradiegetic narratives are paratexts. One important paratext is the user interface and how it is designed to tell something about the game the paratext



opens for. Without such structure, there would be no game to play or story to follow. For the user game design interface team, the beginning scene of a game is regarded as the hardest sequence to choose. It is the first thing the players will see in the world beyond the menu screen (which, in this subject, pleasingly illustrates the interconnectedness of the town and those living within it), as in the opening cinematic of a movie or the first line in a novel. *Life Is Strange* is no exception and perhaps it is accounted for here even more so than in other games. For effective gameplay mechanics in a game relying heavily on its storytelling, the players must always be alerted as to where to go and to have objectives clearly marked at every turn, by way of highlighted paths signpostings such as hints or written reminders, and other small paratextual hints. Without clear directions as to where she must travel or what quests she must complete, Max cannot get from one point to the next, allowing the story to drag and the player to exit early, unimpressed.

As Max wanders around Arcadia Bay, living out every day of the one week in October the game's events happen in, chalked out outlines of objects in her way means that they are interactable, and upon performing the commands on screen after hovering over the item in question, the player can then interact with it accordingly. These objects are the keys to progress. While the player takes control of Max in the third-person perspective, items can be observed, read, picked up, turned on, played with, and much more, granting the player an ample of accessibility and space for creativity. There is player freedom and world building here, but within limits—in conditions of true player freedom, players can do everything and anything they want, in any order. Max, when in her room at the beginning of *Episode 2* can do many things like get dressed, play her guitar, lay back on her bed and ponder, or skip all of that and move quickly to the next checkpoint, albeit the game permitting and even delicately encouraging lingering from area to area as much as possible. More than books or movies, maintaining player attention

for game developers is crucial by offering rewards and incentives like power-ups for the high-achieving player or extra weapons and armor for the daring player. *Life Is Strange*, following its strongsuit, motivates their players and motivates their control over the game space by supplying large amounts of character background and world lore for the particularly curious character should they choose to snoop and to snoop wisely. Occasionally the game will provide challenges to the player in the form of puzzle-solving or clue-finding through fetch quests; for example, in *Episode 2* at the diner, Chloe persuades Max to use her rewind skills in order to tell future events that happen in the diner to past Chloe, i.e.: Joyce dropping a porcelain tea cup, a trucker complaining on his cell phone, and two boys from Blackwell bickering amongst themselves. In the classic adventure game, most players can only move forward and not backwards as Max can, undoing any and all of their actions if they so choose, so this offers a unique and refreshing new element for older gaming fans to enjoy. This also creates an unusual break in the diegetic time, as this is one of few distinguished games like *Superhot* and *Braid* that utilize playing with game time as a crucial element of the mechanics (Juul). Disregarding the sporadic glitch or bug in the mainframe, the gameplay is smooth, simple, and straightforward, remaining so in an effort to best utilize the game's potential as a storytelling device and less as a fast-paced, high action-adventure game.

In the gameplay space of *Episode 2*, most events of the take place in or around Blackwell Academy, but other noteworthy locations of reference include but are not limited to: Kate's room, where we first learn of Kate's depression, the junkyard where we again see the doe that symbolizes the then late Rachel Amber, and the train tracks where Max gains a bit more self-confidence. The local community, at least upon cursory first glance, seems warm and inviting and altogether stereotypical of a town where "everyone knows everyone about everyone else,"

with an easily walkable and carefree campus teeming with teenage social interaction to hallways and streets appropriately decorated for the Halloween season. Each nook and cranny of each area map is hand-painted in an acrylic art style following the design of the characters it complements. The concept and the animated concept artists, the artists involved in providing the flat, baseline art which are changed by the 3D environment artists, provide lush and captivating details to an already beautiful world. Directors Barbet and Koch, like cinema directors, take great care in reproducing their backgrounds, the Pacific Northwest in this case, in a way that both fits the mood of the game and their own artistic interpretations of the area while staying true to what is usually seen in the states, particularly Oregon. In design terms, light and dark contrasts within the game are symbolic and blend well to a pastel style, foreshadowing or implying the positive or negative atmosphere of a particular scene or locale. Artistic direction gives life to the characters and the world in a creative way that especially binds the player to these fictional worlds and to the fictional rules of these distinct spaces.

From *Episode 1* the importance of choice is set in stone: although most decisions can be rewound at will directly after making them, after exiting the scene or changing frames they cannot be altered. Taking up the mantle of other decision-based games, each decision made, even smaller ones like the decision whether to water Max's indoor plant, Lisa, will have future consequences and has the potential to chart the course of the rest of the narrative. With few exceptions, there is also no save-game option that would allow backtracking. AI-controlled characters will remember the actions and words of the player, which will mean responding with their own opinions and choices—the butterfly effect. With that being said, there are a wide variety of branches and variations in outcomes and dialogue options within *Life Is Strange* and each personalized combination of those judgements draws a poignant sketch of the person

playing behind the screen. This reflection of oneself in Max follows her penchant for transparency and allows us as players to more directly insert ourselves into the tides of the narrative, molding the heroine as kindhearted or as mean-hearted as we would like her to be. Morality in video games is innovative operating at both the macro and micro levels of gameplay through multiple routes to complete the game and through sandbox structure at the micro level. This again places the main character in a distinct position exclusive to video games.

There is regrettably some awkward character dialogue with its fair share of quirky argot, perhaps as a drawback of the original French to English translation of the game, but there is nothing regrettable in the way written text and allusions to text are employed in the game. One of the best examples of this, other than the descriptions found on miscellaneous objects, are the overflowing descriptions of daily events and detailed illustrations in Max's daily journal that exhibit true attention to orderliness. The diary uses text to again shape how we see the world and how we see Max, much like the other objects do in environmental storytelling but in a more direct way. Not only do the events and drawings themselves of her diary help to shape our perception of the world Max lives in, but also how she describes each of them. This also says a great deal about Max as a character and again offers us access to her thoughts, despite this feature being optional. At no point is a player required to open the diary, but if they do, they are handsomely rewarded with world lore and narrative building blocks of information. In the way of real books, allusions to other works are littered within the game space, Kate's copy of *The October Country*, a set of macabre short stories; Max's shared last name with cynical Holden from *Catcher in The Rye*, and other easter eggs in reference to modern media and pop culture like anime, *Doctor Who*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Twin Peaks*, and *The Shining*.

Seldom do video game companies commission their own licensed tracks or licensed music, but that was the case here for *Life Is Strange*. Audio production holds a special place in the heart of *Life Is Strange*, as the melodies highlight important moments and scenes. The choice of music is important in describing character's identities, current decisions, and the atmosphere of the game as it shifts from lighthearted and stereotypically jovial to sneaky and sinister. For example, Max may choose the music on Chloe's stereo while she is smoking a blunt on her bed (*Life Is Strange*). Both the music and the original soundtrack (composed by the talented Jonathan Morali) are subtle ways to move the player and to clue them into hints around them lurking in lyrics and in tone quality of the music at various points. Of course, this is a contributing factor to the medium's success. The choice of music is important also because music is to the characters here as music is to teenagers in the real world, and not every two adolescents will listen to the same genre of music and artist. When Max plays guitar, she strums along clumsily to a José Gonzalez song while alone in her room while Chloe jams to *Piano Fire* by Sparklehorse and dances along crazily on her bed. In *Episode Two*, Max puts her earbuds in while she is riding the bus and effectively tunes out the rest of the world with *To All Of You*, sucking us back with her into her own world and into her own head even without her own thoughts leading us. When she pulls out at her earbuds and arrives at her destination, so do we.

Unlike *To The Moon*, voice-acting for the characters exists in *Life Is Strange* and gives soul to what is written as well as a kind of permanence to their designs. The voice actresses who play Max and Chloe essentially become parts of these characters beyond what's written on paper for them or scripted in their character background. This holds true for all of the voice actors in the game; there is a unique meshing of the fictional and the real in the actors that play the

characters and also the players that then play those same characters on their gaming consoles or on their computers.

*Life Is Strange* demonstrates a similarly powerful pull to character development and storytelling in the visual-practical medium of video games, but does so with increased attention to graphical output, textual complexity, and excerpts of dialogue. This is not to say that *To The Moon* does not work as emotionally or as efficiently as *Life Is Strange* in the way of representational development—this is of course untrue—but it is to say that both of these games move towards the same goal in their own ways through varying ludological procedures and implications. *Life Is Strange* relies on interactivity and player motivation to a greater degree than *To The Moon*, which capstones on a linearly set diegetic track. This emphasis complicates the controls more than its predecessor does and permits the player sandbox control at the micro and macro levels. If these gameplay tactics work and the player is sucked emotionally into the game world, they will not only play Max but transform Max Caulfield, creating a feedback loop which will shape the character and the player forever. Every player, despite their lack of superhuman abilities or lives outside of the game space, has the potential in this irreplaceable space to become a true hero.

### **LEVEL 3: *The Last Of Us***

**“I struggled for a long time with survivin’, and you, no matter what, you keep findin’ something to fight for.” – Joel Miller, *The Last Of Us***

A blinding lights cut through the darkened stillness of the night. Still, but far from silent, the echoing screeches of those made into zombies resound in the distance, a harkening call from the Devil himself. Joel Miller cradles his injured 13-year old daughter, Sarah, to his chest as he sprints from those dead set on his trail, holding her the way another man would hold a gun. A nearby patrol officer shoots the approaching infected with ease, unlike the chilling yet very human panic with which he then uses to shoot a child. Sarah falls to the ground from the shot, bloodied and lifeless, as Joel’s tears mix with her blood spreading on his arms. In this world, one cannot afford naivety and to take their chances even on children. As she breathes her last breath, in the last second Sarah spends in a floating purgatory, Joel realizes that Heaven and Hell aren’t places one goes after death, but places one lives in on Earth. Right now, he could only be in Hell.

In the year 2033, 20 years after Joel (and the game players) watch his daughter die, The United States is now in a state of panic and degradation at the rapid spreading of a fungi-based, brain-altering virus known as the Cordyceps infection. Survivors of the first outbreak now reside in sanctioned quarantine zones scattered across the country where residents live in fear of the same military ruled, police-state government that has sworn to protect them. Martial law fosters the growth of anti-government factions such as the guerrilla group, the Fireflies, in order to restore civilian government to the United States and overthrow the oppressive regime. It is in this setting that we find the game’s lead character, Joel (voiced and motion-captured by Troy Baker),

living physically despite dying emotionally, his now cold and distant mentality defining him as a character. The now rugged 40 year old takes refuge in the rundown squalor of the Boston Quarantine Zone, making ends meet through a series of morally ambiguous odd jobs: smuggling through the illegal black market, dealing in contraband, and taking up numerous other dehumanizing and inhumane duties with his post-pandemic partner in crime, Tess (voiced and motion-captured by Annie Wersching). This dog-eat-dog world is where the jaded pair unexpectedly takes up a job from the Firefly leader, Marlene (voiced and motion-captured by Merle Dandridge) to smuggle a young girl across the continent, Ellie Williams (voiced and motion-captured by Ashley Johnson), a headstrong 14-year old girl who is harboring a deadly secret: she is the only person alive immune to the Cordyceps virus (CBI). This is the story of Joel and Ellie: their westward journey across the now-wasteland United States and their struggles to find what they have once lost hidden in each other.

On a planet almost completely decimated by a nefarious, genetically altering disease and overtaken by the zombie-like “Clickers,” the game reminds the players at every turn that moral boundaries never before pushed may now be crossed for the sake of survival. From the same company that brought the world the spunky *Crash Bandicoot* and the Indiana-Jonesque *Uncharted* series, Naughty Dog and publisher Sony Entertainment System present an action-adventure and survival-horror hybrid, *The Last Of Us*. At headquarters, with half of the team engaged in continuing development on *Uncharted 3: Drake’s Deception*, costs were split in order to materialize the new intellectual property under the creative direction of Naughty Dog employees, Bruce Straley and Neil Druckmann. As no genre in literature, film, or game studies exists in a pure form or in a vacuum, the game can be classified as a third-person shooter with an artistic blend of minimalistic role-playing elements (RPG). With over 1.3 million copies sold



within the first week and over eight million copies sold within fourteen months, the title singlehandedly swept over 250 accolades, thus elevating it to its rightful place as one of the most awarded and beloved games of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In the years following its original debut on the Sony PlayStation 3 (PS3) in June 2013, the game has changed the course of video game history by releasing comic books (*The Last Of Us: American Dreams*), a live action-skit (*One Night Live*), follow-up DLC (*The Last Of Us: Left Behind*) featuring new backstory focusing on the fraught relationship between Ellie and her best friend, Riley Abel, and by remastering the original game in June 2014 for the PlayStation 4 (PS4). These digital and metacultural remediations of the original game has effectively spread its influence to as many contemporary gamers as possible across many platforms as possible while being distributed on a transnational scale, despite its status as a PlayStation AAA exclusive.

Excluding bonus content or the multiplayer mode (otherwise known as Factions), the game in its entirety spans the course of about 13-16 hours of player-directed activity and cinematic cut scenes. Much like aforementioned titles *To The Moon* and *Life Is Strange*, active versus passive interactivity exists in the way of scavenging and exploring the surrounding environment, which influences the pacing of the narrative and thus stands as a historically commonplace staple of the video game medium. Progressing by utilizing firearms, improvised weapons, and advanced stealth tactics to combat hostile human AI and the cannibalistically diseased, the players traverse the towns, cities, old homes, and sewers of the post-pandemic world that nature has since begun to take back. Narrative progression is simultaneously mediated by player skill in conjunction with various difficulty settings that the player can adjust at any time to their liking: Easy, Normal, Hard, Survivor, and Grounded. Because of the longer length

of the title, this analysis will focus centrally on the Ranch Cinematic Scene towards the last quarter of the game as a pristine example of the game's capabilities and of its general themes.

The excerpted sequence opens in the fall season (the game follows the course of a year by changing seasons), one season after the game's initial start with a frustrated Joel searching an abandoned farmhouse for a runaway Ellie in Jackson County, Wyoming. Immediately prior to these events, Ellie, albeit young but not stupid, catches onto Joel's plan to pawn her off onto his younger brother, Tommy (voiced and motion-captured by Jeffrey Pierce), who used to be a distinguished member of the Fireflies and therefore is perhaps better suited for the job of escorting her cross-country. Disheartened and defiant, Ellie abandons Tommy's camp where she and Joel are staying at and rides out alone, determined to find her own way. After sneaking around and/or murdering bandits unfortunate enough to stand in his way (the player decides), Joel finally arrives at the place he believes Ellie has escaped to on horseback. A dilapidated old white house shows its age, perhaps shielding within its walls many families and many generations of life, as evidenced by its many picture frames and worn out couches, now only sheltering a single person in its midst, Ellie, but soon to have two.

Joel, controlled by the player, reconnoiters the house's perimeter, scouting for concealed enemies before moving onto the upper floor where he finds Ellie curled up in the corner of a window seat, leafing casually through an old book from quite possibly now the player's own time. He walks inquisitively into the child's bedroom where she sits, overlooked by a large brown bear atop a white dresser. The stuffed toy resembles a spectator seemingly watching their every move. "Is this really all they had to worry about...?" Her voice cuts through the pregnant silence. "...books, movies, what skirt goes with which shirt? It's bizarre." Gently yet forcefully with the tone of a concerned father, Joel encourages Ellie to get up so that they can move on. To

his gentle persuasion she coyly asks what would happen if she were to decline his request, swinging her legs off the window seat and planting them firmly on the ground, other stuffed animals piled up around her, protecting her from harm. “Do you even realize what your life means?” He briefly pauses, brows creased in irritation. “Huh? Runnin’ off like that...puttin’ yourself at risk...it’s pretty god damn stupid.” She calmly replies in response, “Well, I guess we’re both disappointed in each other, then” (*The Last Of Us*).

The two characters then proceed to fight over Joel’s true motive, the likes of which Ellie knows and Joel is hesitant to disclose. “Stop with the bullshit! What’re you so afraid of?” she throws at him, brave enough now and hardened by modern life’s daily struggles to accept the hard truth he is avoiding. “I’m not her, ya know,” she says quietly. “What?” He sharply interjects, wide-eyed, “Ellie, you’re treadin’ on some mighty thin ice here.” Understanding the emotional gravity of the situation she has created, Ellie apologizes for the loss of his daughter, but that she has lost people, too, and has learned to cope with it. With teeth clenched and voice shaking, he fires back, “You have *no idea* what loss is.” After a few seconds of disbelief and with searing pain in her chest, she approaches him. “Everyone I have cared for has either died or left me. Everyone *fuckin*g except for you,” pushing him back with the sheer force of her rage. “So don’t tell me that I would be safer with someone else because the truth is I would just be more scared.” He scans her shaking frame up and down, her green eyes welling with tears and memories as he taciturnly withdraws into his shell yet again, “You’re right. You’re not my daughter. And I sure as hell ain’t your dad. And we are goin’ our separate ways” (*The Last Of Us*). This is one of a handful of cut-scenes in *The Last Of Us*, acting as a cinematic layover, and each cut-scene in some ways are more impactful than the parts in which the player is actually moving through the game world and performing actions. In a game that capitalizes on the

necessary actions of survival at all costs, there is little limit to the degree and type of violence Joel can inflict on his enemies, or how far a player may wander in a given area at any given time. However, during moments such as these cut-scenes, that freedom and agency of the player to initiate actions are suddenly taken away and replaced with that which the player may not agree with in word or decision from their characters that have minds over their own, motivated internally by their own digital lives. The players must then learn to accept the decisions and outcomes of these static moments in the broader diegesis that they cannot change or alter like they can in *Life Is Strange*. Game time emulates real time like it does in cinema in these boxed off interactions, pulling the players out of the real world and dropping them in a new other, but for much of the rest of the game the narrative time is always slightly faster than the discourse time when the seasons erratically jump but not enough to become a montage sequence (Juul). It is at this pivotal moment, hanging in emotionally charged suspense that Tommy bursts onto the scene, alerting the quarreling pair that they've got thief company. As the brothers gear up to take on their silent assailants lurking in the shadows of the house that used to be a home, Ellie saunters behind, looking down, silhouetted by the stuffed bear from the beginning looming over her.

Joel, although loosely described as the 'protagonist' of the game, is in many ways a complex antihero, running suspiciously counter to the traditional archetypal hero of Propp's design. In modern book and filmography narrative, it is hardly uncommon to see a post-apocalyptic narrative featuring survivors doing all that they can to ensure their own safety and prosperity, even at the expense of innocent others. Like them, a man with many years under his belt and very few moral lines left to cross, Joel ruggedly insists on practical, logical and sometimes questionable solutions over indulging pragmatic ones, but whereas this is an element

treated as an unfortunate consequence in other mediums and kept in the foreground, it is a centralized theme in this game and is constantly referenced. And Joel is not the only one affected: the Hunters, the roving band of petty thieves in the game, also shoot first and ask questions later for the sake of looting and killing for the same means. Joel snaps at Ellie at the ranch, not because he doesn't see the validity of her points, that she feels upset with him, but because he understands that in the world they live, there is no time and no resources to pursue any alternative or train of thought other than the one that is absolute base; the one that will grant them the most likely chance of continued existence, even if what he they are continuing to live for remains unclear and fluid (*The Last Of Us*). Because of his complications, Joel becomes a more realistic character despite the unrealistic nature of the world's setting.

However, because of these actions, sometimes Joel remains an unlikeable character, and this constant questioning of self-preservation versus ethics takes on an entirely new dimension when considering that players are the ones controlling the same man committing the heinous crimes. When Joel and Ellie are travelling by car into a seemingly abandoned city in Texas, buildings lush with overgrowth, Joel, unlike Ellie and her innocent surprise, remains unfazed when a limping man walks in front of the car begging for assistance. He floors the gas pedal and kills him without remorse which uncovers the ruse of a surprise attack, actions chosen in haste which he would later, in private travel talks with Ellie, attribute to "once being on both sides" (*The Last Of Us*). Other than his status as the lead playable character, there are few distinguishing features between these nameless scavengers, their motivations, their crimes, and their struggles in comparison to Joel's or anyone else's. The hunters from the same group of the man that was run over are brutally massacred by Joel, one's neck stabbed with fragmented glass shards from a broken shop window, while others can either be shot or punched to death as per

the player's wishes. Although the player may choose the way in which these men die, they must all be killed to continue. This is only of the many decisions that the game forces the player to make, regardless of their own moral predispositions or thought processes. As Joel's hands stain themselves with blood, equal amounts from the innocent and equal amounts from the damned, players then too begin to question the legitimacy of their actions against the limitations of the nightmarish situation they have been thrust into.

Very much a product of his circumstances and of his past, Joel stands embittered, scarred, and oftentimes heartless in the face of morally questionable situations in order to survive in the new world the fungus plague and people's frantic reactions to it has created for him. The question remains whether or not this justifies his behavior or merely compromises them: the weight of that decision rests with the player. An old travel buddy of Joel's by the name of Bill (voiced and motion-captured by W. Earl Brown) remarks at an earlier checkpoint in the game that it is not the flesh-eating zombies born of the CBI virus that scare him the most, but the people the new world has shaped, verbalizing for the audience that Joel more than others would understand what he meant as a result of the game's framing of Sarah as a plot device (*The Last Of Us*). The players will again see this distinction come full circle nearing the end of the game in the winter chapter when David (voiced and motion-captured by Nolan North) kidnaps Ellie and attempts to make her into his sex slave, kill her when he's done, and then cannibalize what remains. People are sometimes more monstrous than the actual monsters; after all, it is a nameless patrol officer that kills Sarah in cold blood before he then is shot in the head and killed instantly by Tommy, and Joel in the primary narrative is no exception. Joel retorts to Ellie in the ranch cinematic that she can't possibly at her young age know what it's like to love someone so much that their death alters the other person's life irreparably, which is later revealed as a rushed

judgment on his part. As a defense mechanism after witnessing his teenage daughter's death, having once been a passive victim who then turned into a brutally violent activist as a means to make up for past hesitations with deadly costs, Joel closes himself off and looks to a series of ambiguous goals of his own design, never clarified for the players until his heart again opens to let in Ellie and allows him to feel the same loving emotions he has long since suppressed.

Joel's paternalistic relationship to Ellie undergoes a massive transformation underscoring and directing the rest of the diegetic framework. Upon their first meeting, Joel finds her an insufferable brat, as is typical of his type of character in media, and finds himself going along with what he views as a death sentence of a mission only because of Tess' striking belief in Ellie's potential to save mankind. Unlike Tess who proves to have retained some semblance of hope for humanity despite the sentiment being buried deep, Joel holds onto none and expects no redemption for the human race (*The Last Of Us*). This changes only once he begins to see, by some degrees selfishly, Ellie's likeness to his lost daughter, Sarah, throughout the narrative and ludological trajectory of the game. Astutely, Ellie picks up on Joel's perhaps subconscious comparison of herself to Sarah when she counters Joel's claim at the ranch of merely passing Ellie onto Tommy as a means to protect her (*The Last Of Us*). In the way of environmental storytelling, the child's bedroom where the pair quarrels in in the cut scene is s also clearly that of a young girl, a pink hued room with a closet filled with dresses and with stuffed toys adorning the shelves. This subtly beckons to the reinforcements in Joel's mind of Ellie's resemblance to Sarah and to the life that he has lost that he could reclaim. It is through his growing relationship with Ellie that Joel and the players shift from an indifferently jaded older man with nothing left to a very human father with everything to lose.

Ellie the dual protagonist and final playable character, sitting within the ranch house bedroom with its flowery bedspread and girlish features, wants Joel to see her as her own individual being with her own goals, past, and scars, not as a surrogate of Sarah. The miscommunication of interpretations is what fuels the father-daughter argument. Although the band posters embellishing the peeling paint of the room harkens back to Sarah's old room before the collapse, the cracked mirror in the corner of the shot wordlessly speaks volumes about Ellie's differing appearance from Sarah. Growing up in a disease-ridden world with no parents and with a deceased best friend, Ellie, like Joel, is hardened by the circumstances of her upbringing and of her past, but does not allow it to completely strip her of her humanness as he does. When she argues with Joel at the ranch, very indicative of her age in spite of the times, she is using highly emotional jurisdictions to form the basis of her suspicions that Joel wants to, as she says, "get rid of her the whole time" (*The Last Of Us*). Even if she proves herself time and time again to be a strong, capable, and courageous young woman in the face of grave peril, she is still a girl coming-of-age controlled by her emotions in a world rampant with violence and corruption.

In some fundamental ways, she can be seen as a stronger character or more of a protagonist than Joel, as evidenced by her humanistic make-up for his moral shortcomings and of the player's brief ability to control her during the winter season nearing the end of the game when she must save Joel's life. Sporting an array of feminist implications, despite being much smaller in stature and less experienced with fighting as Joel is even with her military background, she is quicker and thinks better on her feet. As a figure primarily controlled by the sharply programmed artificial intelligence (AI), Ellie will assist the player by collecting medical kits and other supplies, jumping on the backs of men that are attacking the player when they are in a pinch, and shooting others when Joel eventually gives her unrestricted access to a gun.



During more peaceful travels, Ellie will often engage Joel in surface-level banter: telling him jokes from her joke book, retelling fond anecdotal memories, or remarking on the pristine beauty of the world around them in spite of the wreckage and turmoil. For example, when looting the Massachusetts town before meeting Bill, the player may stumble into an area with forgotten gnomes to which Ellie may call “cute” and insist that they are better than fairies which are “creepy” to her (*The Last Of Us*). These outwardly small and superficial gestures serve to bring Joel and the players closer to Ellie, as players have now had ample time to identify with Joel, perhaps becoming closer here even more so than the game’s larger-scale reveals, culminating with her ranch scene declaration of having lost everyone in her life other than the man before her (*The Last Of Us*). In a world that is hell-bent on stripping her of her childlike innocence with ruthless violence and sexual transgressions, Ellie retains some semblance of who she is and utilizes this identity as an act of defiance against the only system that she has ever known. This can be seen especially in the winter season when Joel falls injured and the player temporarily takes control of Ellie, navigating around an enemy camp to find medical supplies and avoiding clickers at every turn. Her eventual retrieval of these items signifies her strength as a character and as one capable of standing alone on her own two feet as a hero in her own right, perhaps the only hero in the story. Just as players take on the first playable role of Sarah in the beginning thirty minutes of the game and then perish, which in of itself is unusual for a video game because of games’ proclivity to restart the player character at checkpoints once respawning, they then take control of Ellie, the third and final playable character near the last quarter of the game.

Ellie and Joel’s symbiotic relationship is not one-sided, stimulating and perpetuating the growth of not only Joel but Ellie as well, although perhaps molding the latter more positively than the former. While Ellie comes to love and value Joel as her protector and as her pseudo-

father figure as the game continues, the only person she is close to after the death of her best friend, Riley, she never completely loses herself to him and has the strength of mind to differentiate herself and her desires from those of his. Unlike Joel, for most of the game she hasn't killed a cognizant human being, but after she does, she kills only out of necessity to protect her allies and only with a handgun, a relatively speaking more impersonal firearm than that of the knife she uses before and the machete she uses after to murder David. Ellie is young but wise (and crass) beyond her years, stubbornly refusing to back down from a challenge or to allow anyone to push her again into a physical or mental corner; like Joel, she had been living within a box of passivity for far too long. When Joel threatens her sense of self, her character model in the cut scene physically pushes him back, obstinately refusing to crack under pressure of his anger or of his convictions that she knows are falsehoods designed to fool her into submission (*The Last Of Us*). Never bowing, this differentiation between Joel's selfish desires and Ellie's mature sacrifices lays the groundwork for the final discussion on the personal connection versus the good of mankind debate, much like that of *Life Is Strange*, when it is revealed that Ellie will willingly sacrifice herself for a vaccine to be reverse engineered to cure the CBI virus while Joel refuses to give her up, ultimately in the end stripping her of her right to choose what happens to her own life. Joel's love for Ellie and his psychological inability to lose another daughter forces him, much like how the players are forced in the game, to murder all of the Fireflies and the last remaining doctors and bring the world as they know it to ruin in order to take back Ellie for himself from a surgery she willingly consented to.

This digital game, like any other, can be juxtaposed on the axes of content and form, with formal elements denoting some degree of player interactivity within the realm of micro or macroscale effects. What *The Last Of Us* provides content-wise is a scathingly raw commentary

on the sociopolitical issues between the intersection of morality and the culpabilities of basic human nature. Almost no one, if asked, believes that they would play the villain in real life, risking the lives and wellbeing of innocent people or hesitating to act in a dire predicament; we would all, in similar situations, be heroes, we say. But this holds untrue, as research indicates with the bystander effect and in other notable events in human history, namely the Holocaust in Nazi Germany, where the survival of the individual in question was placed above basic regard for other human life. *The Last Of Us* offers a possible panacea for the world's medical ills but not for the moral pandemic fostered by the inherent nature of humankind. This opens the floor for further critical discourse on the true identity of the infected, and if they are truly still people with souls, albeit with diseased bodies, as spurred by a five minute night-time conversation between Ellie and the other young survivor, Sam. If these infected beings can still be called people, what are the ethical and moral restrictions for their murder?

In the way of form, *The Last Of Us* constructs its story through a widely open-ended discourse. The story is linearly designed, crafted so that players can impact the world of the story on a micro, but not a macro-scale level: regardless of player action or behavior, the unsettlingly selfish end result remains the same. A recurring theme from the game is the relationship between interactivity and the striking lack of choice. For example, the game ingeniously coerces the player into utilizing the same skillset that has allowed them to win through the game to lose in the end, when the only option presented to the player at the falling action is to either kill the entire medical unit and their leader, the last doctors in the world, or simply stop playing the game altogether. This also shows a striking junction between morality and game mechanics.

The player navigates through the neglected, yet colorfully vibrant world mostly by foot (with the exception of a car in a single cut scene), using the controller's analog sticks to temper

Joel's movements and pacing. Most behavior is action-based and overly violent, but some levels require the completion of puzzles to continue, such as those concentrating on Ellie's vexing inability to swim. Ellie and the other allies throughout the story often trail behind Joel unless alerting him with an audible ping to interactive elements of the environment or weapons. These allies, most notably Ellie, can often be triggered for further dialogue options which, while not necessary to understanding the story, enrich the extradiegetic qualities of the game for those decidedly curious. Using the symbolled buttons on the PlayStation gamepad, the player explores various terrains, collects artifacts and old notes, and engages in fierce combat with fists or with short-range or long-range equipped weapons. These weapons are customizable, the game providing workbenches scattered throughout the world alongside checkpoints in order to improve chosen weapons or not, all at the player's discretion.

Graphically, the world is stunning to traverse, giving the feeling that there is always more under the surface. Unlike the visual aesthetics of *To The Moon* and *Life Is Strange*, *The Last Of Us* promises to provide the most realistic lens for a quite unrealistic scenario. From lush settings of nature's reclaim, to towering skyscrapers long outliving their builders, to character models twitching and pouting eyes and mouths all drawn and brought to life by hand, the development team has settled for nothing less than pure human-likeness. Environmental elements specifically reinforce the foreboding darkness and pessimism that has ensnared their world. Artistically, Joel and Ellie physically and mentally resemble humans of today so closely that they could easily be mistaken for one of them rather than realized figments of Naughty Dog's collective imagination. It is this descriptive imagination transposed to a big-budget graphics engine that is clearly also the byproduct of more employees and more brainpower expended, in comparison to the smaller graphical rendering and artist teams of lesser known or smaller companies. This stark realism in

the faces of the characters and in their environment was an intentional choice; it provides a bonding chilling ulterior dimension of empathy in players when some characters die tragically in battle like Tess, become the infected like young Sam, or experience great joy in spite of their difficult lives like Ellie at seeing the herd of giraffes migrate just before the climax of the game (*The Last Of Us*).

This title, like its traditional AAA predecessors, aim to show not tell, cutting its use of words and providing more action scenes. What it lacks in diction beyond subtitles the player can casually switch on and off, it makes up for in intense gameplay and purely graphical scenes. Hidden across the world are other collectable items, but again, these are namely rewards for the curious player that deliver additional extradiegetic content such as a letter from Ellie's mom wishing her daughter good luck, and smaller tragic accounts of people killed before players can meet them (*The Last Of Us*).

Instead, the game delivers wholeheartedly on the audible and score front, but in a slightly different way than *Life Is Strange*. Many elements of audible narrative are incorporated as a means of enriching play experience and further blurring the lines between engaging book narrative and appealing film narrative. When the pair zoom by in their newly acquired car, making their way westward again after having said goodbye to Bill, the music playing from the car radio is at first extradiegetic, as we hear it first coming from nowhere as the car zooms past the screen in the pouring rain. However, in the next frame the players are in the car with Joel and Ellie and have front-row seats to hear their amusing chatter and to hear the same country song playing diegetically on the car radio, now in a diegetic space, that Joel claims light-heartedly that it is "before his time" (*The Last Of Us*). All good things must come to an end, and when the two

run into bandit trouble shortly afterwards, the music still plays in the background as Joel runs over their leader.

In many game worlds, the player character is inhuman, taking many more bullets than the average person, being able to come back to life after getting too injured (respawning), and overall stronger or smarter than the average person. In some ways, *The Last Of Us* is no exception to this trend, having Joel seamlessly murder hundreds of men in his wake, but it also has some of the most human elements in video game history, when Joel and Ellie are playfully chatting in the car for instance and Ellie falls asleep while Joel drives carefully through the city of Pittsburgh being careful to not wake her. These small instances of humanity are what players hunger for in this game world where hope is almost gone, and Naughty Dog does not fail to give tastes of this faith throughout the gameplay experience.

In addition to the outlandishly beautiful and haunting melodies of Gustavo Santaolalla, scores that swell and culminate on integral parts of the narrative and coat the game's atmosphere in a negative hue, for instance, when Ellie shoves Joel in the ranch cut, voice actors in motion capture suits provide not only their vocal talents to give life and dimension to the characters they are cast as in each *mise-en-scène*, but also contribute to the characters' final body language and idiosyncratic gestures when translated into the game product. In the ranch scene, the vocal talents of Troy Baker and Ashley Johnson move the lines of dialogue from a base emotional one level a chilling, masterful performance with each rise and swell of the character's punctuated anger. The actors, as one would have actors in a creation of cinema, mold the characters they play in a similar way that the characters indisputably mold them.

*The Last Of Us* has been regarded by many players, game journals, and game critics as one of the best video games of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and of quite possibly all 60 years of current

video game history. This credit is due in part not only to its intense character or scenic design development, its voice acting or motion capturing, or even the characters or plot themselves. It is because of the ways that the game subverts the brought-in aesthetic repertoire of many players, and gives them, through the use of a highly complex ethical and emotional story, events and elements that surprise veteran gamers who know the common video game or shooter genre tropes out of their comfort zones. Representationally speaking, video games are relatively new to the emotional scene, so for an emotionally in-depth game of this magnitude to launch, featuring a strong female protagonist in a third person shooter no less, speaks volumes as to the progressive direction society is shifting towards in time and the way games are evolving to fit and change that mold. It is highly unusual for a game unlike books or cinema to permanently kill player characters, and this happens almost immediately in *The Last Of Us* with Sarah. Ludologically speaking, the game balances stealth and combat mechanics, heightening the emotions of the content and working in harmony to ensure a realistic, human experience in a surreal and unknown place. Fear's origin arises in players upon realizing, through the combined force of all of these elements and themes that a world like Ellie and Joel live in, however distant it may appear now, could very well be real and on the horizon.

## CONTINUE GAME?

Game theory is an amalgamation which lies at the intersection of ludology and narratology. It is also crafted by way of the unique blending of basic narrative theory, poetic theory, cinematographic theory, and the like. This foundation, found nowhere else, in the way that Gottschall suggests oral narration may have been an evolutionary byproduct, casts this intersection as one formed by a humanistic consequence of curiosity, self-expression, and representation across various times, cultures, customs, and people. The human drive for aestheticism cannot be contained within insular regions or space, but the medium or the ideas themselves remain evident in the forms of culture that are produced, preserved, and partaken in, knitting the interwoven threads of history. Video games, much like the dialogue spoken in caves, the pen to paper journeys, the cinematic expeditions, are among the current generation's primary means of individual and sociocultural expression across many other possible frames of reference.

Games are unique in the way they utilize narration, as opposed to the traditional novel or film. The utilization of a designated diegetic and extradiegetic narratives is mediated by the channel of gameplay mechanics through which they are limited. In *To The Moon*, the point and click, simple gameplay style is juxtaposed with the representational context of a man coping with old age, memory loss, lost ambitions, and love. Simplicity allows the narrative to remain front and center alongside the licensed music tracks, so other areas of mechanic complexity, voice-acting, and combat take a back seat. This construction creates a very different set-up than would



a game narrative with focused emphasis on gameplay mechanics or graphics, versus moving audio quality, for instance, or a narrative such as this one produced in a novel or movie format.

In *Life Is Strange*, the varying pacing complementing the directional movements of the player's controller while exploring the environment are substantial elements of the game's centralized narrative. This shapes and is consequently shaped by the game's representational content of Max, or any other teenage girl's stressful navigation through high school, friends, drugs, fitting in, and what it means to be yourself in the face of adversity. Aversion from others strengthens Max and allows her, and the player that identifies with her through time, to become a more capable and mature person, regardless of her time-travelling abilities. The specific gameplay ability to rewind and temporarily freeze time in most game world instances and at will is so crucial to the narrative focus that the game would likely be quite dissimilar without this feature, and would also have operate differently in a book or film, possibly jeopardizing the crux of the work itself because Max's powers were meant to be used by the audience, not simply observed by them.

In *The Last Of Us*, the fast-paced third person-shooter genre blasts through all slower reservations and when contrasted with the slower-paced but higher-anxiety stealth, it provides a fluid base and robust foundation for which the award-winning narrative may sit upon. Rife with anxiety and pessimism, the characters, atmosphere, and gameplay mechanics of the game space cause the player to feel a sense of constant uneasiness and apprehension, and this is complicated further when taking into account the morally questionable acts that oftentimes have no alternative option and a player must act according to the game's rule limitations and its lack of completeness. In this vein, the linear account of the utilized narrative instills within its players a sense of dread, and because of the linearity of the progression of time within the game space,

even between montage and cut-scenes, it is even more surprising when the player's logical expectations derived from their aesthetic repertoires and from their own predictions are turned on their heads. It is clear that this is a tragic story, and one that is tragic for all: Joel, Ellie, and the players themselves, but without the combination of all of these factors formulating a unified product, a game of this particular design would not have existed to make millions and win over the hearts of many.

With the worldwide video game industry now reaching a peak total of about \$99.6 billion in revenue in 2016 (Dean Takahashi), clearly video games are lucrative for discussion fiscally, socially, and academically speaking. This subject, often neglected in academic spaces, is admittedly due in part to game studies as only being a decade old recognized field of study. However, this new field has taken so long to become recognized as a result of its nuanced audience and to stereotyped assumptions by some of its impracticality or lack of value, whereas this could not be further from the truth. The worth of video game and video game studies extends far beyond automated game theory or narrative theory, but has real-world applications and implications for the way 21<sup>st</sup> century stories of lives are growing and adapting. The process of gamification, or attributing gamelike properties to non-gaming scenarios has become a popular way to get children to learn or to advertise for a consumer audience, for instance (Donovan). With the rise of mobile games production and sales, and of VR-technology on the distant horizon, undoubtedly the future will be one where video games have the potential to become as popular as books or movies are to the general public, until, of course, the next medium comes, as they always do, to take its rightful place in our long, comparative history

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# NICOLE M. ANTKIEWICZ

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## **EDUCATION:**

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**The Pennsylvania State University**, Schreyer Honors College *Expected Graduation May 2017*

- Bachelor of Arts in English and Psychology
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## **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:**

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**Narrative Designer**, Laboratory of Developmental Neuroscience January 2017 – Present

- Directed the narrative trajectory of a video game teaching children on the autistic spectrum

**Teaching Assistant**, Pennsylvania State University December 2016 – Present

- Supervised PSYCH 412 and synthesized lecture material to students

**Enhanced ENG 015/Hybrid Studio Tutor**, Penn State Learning September 2016 - Present

- One of four tutors to visit remedial English classes and lead guided study groups with the students
- Stimulated and facilitated essay reviewing with the ESL students

**Communications and Marketing Intern**, New Leaf Initiative August 2016 - Present

- Visualized and reinvented the outreach strategies of a digital media-based, nonprofit project on reducing or eliminating local food waste and improving food literacy
- Spearheaded *TheCatalyst* Magazine, a local periodical that amplifies ongoing nonprofit work in the community

**Research Assistant**, Pennsylvania State University June 2016 - Present

- Independently researched two hundred real world examples in six weeks on the theory of the minimind
- Constructed and updated one of two coding keys utilized for project data analysis
- Collaborated on the creation of a professor's book illustrating the intersection between business and psychology

**Writing Tutor**, Penn State Learning August 2015 - Present

- Tutored struggling Penn State students in grammar, organization, clarity and writing style
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**Editor for *The Dangling Modifier***, Pennsylvania State University September 2015 - May 2016

- Streamlined and ran *The Dangling Modifier* website
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