

# Game Narrative Review

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**Your name (one name, please):** Glenn Winters  
**Your school:** Drexel University  
**Your email:** [glenn.j.winters@gmail.com](mailto:glenn.j.winters@gmail.com)  
**Month/Year you submitted this review:** January 2013

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**Game Title:** Journey  
**Platform:** Playstation 3  
**Genre:** Adventure  
**Release Date:** March 13 2012  
**Developer:** ThatGameCompany  
**Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment  
**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Director - Jenova Chen, Robin Hunicke - Producer, Nicholas Clark - Designer, Bryan Singh - Designer, Chris Bell - Designer

## Overview

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Janet Murray states, “journey stories emphasize navigation -- the transitions between different places, the arrivals and departures -- and the how to’s of the hero’s repeated escapes from danger [4].” At its core, the game *Journey* encompasses this sense of transitioning and the player character’s rite of passage. It is essentially a “hero’s journey” described in Joseph Cambell’s “*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.” In *Journey* you play as a red robed character whom is often referred to as “the traveler.” The game’s narrative revolves around the player’s exploration of the eight different levels as you unravel the history of a once thriving civilization. You collect energy by freeing several “scarf like creatures” that are trapped throughout the world. In this process, the player is challenged by environment driven puzzles and guardians of the past who actively try to capture her energy source before reaching her destination.

Different from many other computer games, *Journey* provides no textual description of the story or dialogues. Thus to convey the story, it relies heavily on visuals and interactions with the environment. In other words, the environment and the resulting visual narrative are crucial narrative elements in addition to the more common storytelling components in the game.

## Character's

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In *Understanding Comics* [7], Scott McCloud argued that when images of cartoon characters become more abstract, it is easier for the readers to identify themselves with the characters. In other words, the language of abstraction leads to greater universality. The characters in *Journey*, like its overarching narrative, are purposefully designed to be abstract for similar effect. As the player progresses through each stage of the hero's journey, she can draw on her own background and complete her own version of the story through the faceless characters and the open-ended pictograms.

- **Red Robed "Traveler" (Player character)** – The main character's backstory and goal are unspecified. In fact, his (or her) identity is purposefully left unspecified through the long red robe and concealed facial features. Throughout the story, he discovers clues through constant interactions with what seems to be his ancestors and unravels the history of the once thriving civilization. His main source of communication is through the use of sound that some consider singing, which acts as a way for the player to speak to fellow companions. After the main character departs on his journey and goes through challenges, transformations and revelations, he eventually completes his cycle and returns home.
- **Partner Red Robed "Traveler"** – There is opportunity for the main character to be accompanied by a companion traveler through multiplayer options. This traveler holds the same traits as the main character with the exception of the pattern on the robe and the visual pattern of the "singing." It acts as a buddy or partner in his quest. The partner traveler can change from one level to another. Interestingly, these partner travelers are sometimes mistaken as non-player characters (NPCs) initially.
- **Energy Creatures** – These characters serve as the energy source and are constructed in many forms. They can be viewed as single pieces of cloth or several pieces that form a "jellyfish style" looking creature. In certain instances these characters are trapped in the fallen civilization and need to be freed by the traveler. Once freed, these characters may join the traveler throughout certain segments of the environment in order to provide energy for the player to glide throughout the space. Therefore, they serve as support characters and can be considered as the "helpers" of the journey story.
- **Guardian Creatures** – These are the main villains of the game. Originally, these creatures served as weapons in the great war between the red robed travelers. After the civilization fell, they became guardians of the past and the only element in the game that "attacks" and hurt the player. These characters live within the tunnels and act as the challenging force in the player's journey. They are daunting creatures whose main motivation is to seek out energy sources and capture them within their rock like bodies.
- **White Robed Ancestors**– This is the mentor character in our hero's journey. Although not much is known about the character him/herself, she reveals the rise and fall of the old civilization to the main character through the pictogram messages. They also guide and help the main character to succeed in a later challenge. They appear during the meditation state that occurs at the end of each

level and help the main character to fully understand where he is from and where he must go.

## Breakdown

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The overarching narrative structure of *Journey* follows classic Monomyth Pattern of a hero's journey. The hero begins with a call for an adventure that will include challenges, rebirth, transformation, and atonement. Helpers and mentors assist him along his quest and ultimately lead him back to the start of the adventure. In this full cycle of the hero's journey, the *Journey* player learns about the story of the rise and fall of a civilization. As mentioned above, thanks to the game's open-ended structure and characterization, the player is able to interpret the finer details of the hero's tale on her own.

Unlike many other instances of a hero's journey story where text or spoken words are used to communicate the end goal, *Journey* communicates its story and the emotional tale by intertwining the abstract visual narrative of the player's experience with the implied story arcs. By visual narrative, I mean how visual composition within level design communicates the goals that are intertwined with the game's narrative arc structure.

For example, *Journey's* ancestral narrative is implied through pictograms, a form of writing that uses representational, pictorial drawings and is the basis for hieroglyphic writings. These pictograms depict the beginning of time and the birth of a civilization. A natural energy source comes from the sky in the form of a shooting star and creates life, also referencing the beginning of the player experience. This is the birth of animals and vegetation and ultimately leads to the birth of the first red robe travelers. They are given the gift of another energy source in the form of cloth that is used to start building their architectural structures. While this occurs the travelers' ancestors focus less on natural energy and focus more on urbanization. Natural energy sources such as plants and wildlife slowly disappear as buildings overshadow nature.

Because of this, energy becomes sparse and panic ensues until no other energy sources remain. Rock like creatures are used to gather the remaining energy sources in a war between the travelers. Ultimately, this leads to the demise of the traveler species and the civilization begins to fall. The important architecture structures begin to crumble and sand covers this once thriving civilization. The natural energy source once again starts to emit from the earth and drifts over the tombs of the travelers. Ultimately, it gives birth in the form of a shooting star, the player.

This story is fully unveiled before the player's final climb towards the top of the mountain. This is the moment when the player also comes to the realization that she has traveled through all these different scenarios displayed in the pictograms but in their fallen environmental state. These visuals serve as the backbone of the player's story and describe what she must learn before she reaches the "atonement" arc of the Monomyth pattern. Therefore, it's important to discuss how the player views her story through each sequence.

The player is introduced to the tombs of the past in an open desert and begins her call to adventure. The sequence is followed by architectural structures that contain remaining scarf like energy creatures trapped within the fallen structures that once were the main focus of her ancestors. These creatures provide support to the player and give a sense of comfort throughout the rest of her journey. She continues her quest and discovers the beauty of the once thriving civilization by observing and interacting with protruding architectural structures. The player begins the descent into the tunnels during the “threshold” arc of the Monomyth pattern and meets the rock like creatures. These were once considered war machines but now act as guardians of the past and are the only element throughout the game that can hurt the player. Eventually the player slowly rises back to the surface and encounters her ancestors one last time.

As mentioned earlier, ancestors display the hero’s history at the end of the sequences and act as a “mentor” for the player. However the ancestor reveals to the player that her story is a continuation of the ancestor’s history and foreshadows what is to come. This is the moment of “revelation” and notifies the player of her death in order to achieve atonement. The player makes one last struggle towards the top of mountain as she witnesses the death of her red robed traveler. The ancestors meet the player one last time and rocket her towards “atonement” by giving her their ultimate energy source. It also serves as a moment of peace and rest before her ultimate return to where she began. This results in the player returning to the beginning of her journey in the spirit of a shooting star.

In terms of *visual* narrative, *Journey* uses the platform of video games as a visual storytelling device. It shows how the medium can enhance the goals, the attention and the emotional arcs of the story. Bruce Block, a visual consultant for film, TV, and digital media states, “Every picture is comprised of a story, visuals, and sometimes sound. Used together, these three elements communicate the meaning of the picture to the viewer [2].” In essence, *Journey*’s visual narrative structure of story, visuals, and soundtrack work in conjunction with the traveler’s history and speak to the player. Key elements are important in working in conjunction with player’s story in order to provide a sense of emotion and exploration. They are color, light, structural composition, and visual pacing.

The use of color serves as a huge factor in the way images relate to the narrative and immediately conveys an emotional tone. The narrative quality of color sequences and the emotions they evoke work in parallel with the story’s key dramatic moments. Lighting methods enhancing the color value, which add to the player’s sense of awe and astonishment. For example, during the narrative’s threshold crossing the player begins her descent into the tunnels, which results in one of the most beautiful parts of the game due to the way light interacts with the structural composition and creates a warm color palette. This palette slowly declines into a shade of dark blue as the player gets closer towards the end of the sequence. This conveys the time shift from daytime to the night, but also causes the player’s emotions to change from a sense of comfort to a sense of cautiousness. This correlation of story and emotion corresponds with the “challenge” arc of the Monomyth pattern in order to reach revelation.

As the player learns more about the red robed traveler's heritage she becomes more challenged by the environment and its structural composition. Structural composition relates to how buildings are constructed, laid out and serve as the incentive for the player's goals. For instance, throughout the desert, buildings are sparsely laid out in order to show the desertedness of the fallen city. Hidden in the corners are structures that showcase bonus pictograms that deepen *Journey's* narrative. The environment becomes dense as the player moves through each sequence. This creates several different emotions due to its interaction with color values. It's important to note how structural composition (i.e., level design) is used as a goal driven device due to the lack of spoken word. For example, the player starts in an open desert and makes an initial climb up a sand dune. As the player reaches the crest of the dune she is able to see the summit in the distance. Due to its prominent placement just above the horizon line, the player can sense its narrative importance, even though she may not realize immediately it is the final destination of the story.

In *Journey* visual pacing is created by combining several visual narrative elements. It functions by affecting not only the player's attention within a level, but also how it causes a player to slow down or speed up. A perfect example comes after the player's revelation when she approaches the mountain during her final transformation. Wind pushes the player down the mountain if she does not stand behind strategically placed goals shaped similar to the tombs at the beginning of the game. This enforces the story's final struggle and the challenges that the player needs to take before the "revelation" arc of her story. The player is able to feel this due to the way she interacts with the environment. Contrasting this, is the visual pacing as the player begins her return to where the journey started after the state of atonement. At this point the player returns to a comfort level familiar to that at the beginning of the game. Players are free roaming and engulfed in a bright atmosphere that cause no visual restrictions on how fast or slow they can proceed throughout the environment. Ultimately, the player is able to take one last walk into the summit and once again become a shooting star to restart the story's cycle.

Finally, along with these two styles of storytelling, *Journey* allows the player to create stories written by her game play experience. This is the result of what Chris Bell, designer of *Journey* discusses in his 2012 GDC talk *Designing for Friendship*. By engaging in the experience with other players and sharing a wide range of emotions, a narrative is created [3]. This can be attributed to the combination of story structure, visual narrative elements, and how the players communicate.

Players are able to develop these bonds by having a simple language mentioned above. During a recent play through, I was exploring the environment to locate certain collectibles in order to achieve "white robe status" achievement. My fellow traveller had already achieved this status and realized my intentions based on the actions I was making within the environment, drawing attention to certain areas through the use of singing. From that point my companion was able to lead me to specific areas of the map and I was able to collect the final pieces. If I fell behind, the player would wait for me and vice versa. It's a unique way for the player to create a friendship story alongside your hero's quest and cross the finish line together.

ThatGameCompany created a structure that would allow players to enter open minded and build her own narrative alongside the underlying story. They challenged themselves to do this visually and it was accomplished by taking into account how the visual narrative is constructed and supports the overall classic Monomyth narrative pattern. It is important to mention the powerful score done by Austin Wintory and it's impact on the gameplay's elements. It is minimally mentioned in this breakdown but should be noted how it enhances all aspects of the narrative elements mentioned above.

## **Strongest Element**

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The strongest element in *Journey* is how the visual narrative is intelligently constructed to work with the Monmouth story pattern. It's very rare that a game can tap the emotional chord of a player similar to my experience with fellow red robed travelers and seeing the beautiful sun setting in the background as you float smoothly by during the Descent sequence. The experience pushes forward the discussion of the importance of visuals and how they can be constructed to guide the player's attention, but also tap the emotional connection the player has with her narrative. It was imperative for the story to have a strong visual statement that works with the story because of its lack of spoken word. Therefore, the visual narrative directs the player towards her goals and speaks to the player through its visuals.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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An area that has been a point of contention is the pacing towards the end of the game's story. There is a sequence where the player must partake in a long struggle up the mountain towards the summit. This acts as part of the players challenge in order to head towards atonement and ultimately return home. Due to the drastic change in visual pacing the story can draw itself out beyond the point of interest to some players. The player can end up forgetting the images she saw at the beginning of the climb and lose the traveler's sense of purpose. The narrative ultimately ends with the death of the main character and players may not realize the purpose of the long struggle.

## **Highlight**

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There are moments in games where certain sequences stand out from the rest. In most other games this happens in the narratives cut scenes, but *Journey* achieves this in a different way. Players are presented with what I referred to as "a painting in motion" s such as when the player turns a corner during the Descent sequence. This is when the player passes the sunset mixed with the architectural buildings of the past and the summit in the background. This moment serves two purposes: 1. A turning point in the narrative and emotions of the story and 2. A moment of personal reflection of what has occurred thus far. It acts as a literal descent in the narrative's plot and a gradual decline from the bright open comforting level towards a dark tunnel in which the rock creatures dwell. By doing this, it drastically changes the emotion of the player and causes them to not feel as

safe as she previously was. Its inspiring that a game can give us a sense of awe, emotion, and self reflection with no spoken narrative or a scenario that deals with guns, blood, or gore.

## Critical Reception

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*Journey* received overall positive reviews and received a 92-metacritic review [8].

Giant Bomb's Alex Navarro [1] awarded *Journey* 5 out of 5 stars. He applauds *Journey* for its painstakingly crafted world and how mixed with the mechanics can invoke a strong emotional response from the player. He continues to say that the visual art in *Journey* is enough to captivate those that play it. Its character and architectural art is of that gorgeous pseudo-religious styles that's informed everything from the modern day Legend of Zelda to the words of Team Ico and yet it remains distinctive and singular.

IGN Ryan Clements [5] gave *Journey* an overall score of 9 out of 10. He states that *Journey* tells a special story and it does with grace and subtlety rarely employed in video games. It is the magic and cloth shimmer at the heart of *Journey* and represents the life in the world. He does slightly critique *Journey* may not be appreciated by all. He states that "*Journey's* deliberate, melancholic pace might tire those of you accustomed to fast and frantic challenges"

Finally polygon.com's Russ Frushtick [6] gave *Journey* the sites perfect 10. He states that the world is awe-inspiring. He continues by saying *Journey* is about the quest you take on and the memories you gain along the way. It's only a mere three-hour game but that three hours is more emotionally rich than 30 hours of the latest Zelda game. Without words, it promises to touch anyone that experiences it.

## Lessons

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- Impact of connecting Visual Narrative with the Story's structure
  - Visual narrative is something that affects not only the story but also the attention of the player. Having a dense scene vs. having open scenes are different from one another in portraying different levels of comfort. At the beginning of the game we have a sense of openness and freedom due to the way the space was visually constructed. As the stories tension increases, so do the visuals.
- Pacing of the Narrative
  - It's imperative to make sure the pacing of the narrative works with the gameplay. Anything that throws the pacing off can cause the interest of the player to be taken away and no longer interested in the story. If the climb to the mountain was any longer, players may not be invested in the game and immediately shut it off.

- Let player's create her own story
  - Start your narrative by trying to get your player on a neutral ground. This allows the player to come into a game intrigued as to what lies ahead. This can work in different ways. First, it encourages the player to become interested in what direction the story may take. Also, it allows the player to start an inner monologue and reflection. We enter this game with no idea of who this robed character is or where it has been. It allows us to explore and become connected to the red robed traveler's history.
- Emotional Gameplay
  - *Journey* is about starting in a place and slowly climbing towards the top where the player is given the reward of "emotion." There are several instances in which a player becomes frightened by the sheer contrast in visual narrative. It is also important to gradually build upon these elements. Sometimes this can become more beneficial than a typical narrative trope. Let the player become attached to the avatar on the screen and relate to her story in some way. The player is then given a sense of joy when her own journey is completed.

## Summation

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*Journey* continues the goals of ThatGameCompany's mission of designing games that push the boundaries of interactive entertainment. They challenged themselves by creating a story that is mainly driven by both traditional storytelling and visual narrative. By combining the two, the designers crafted an experience that is emotional, open-ended, and universal. The game succeeds in many aspects and pushes the boundaries of how visual narrative can support and enhance the story's overarching structure.

## References

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