

Game Narrative Review

Your name: Yingying Chen

Your school: Worcester Polytechnic Institute

Your email: ychen4@wpi.edu

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Game Title: *The Last of Us*

Platform: Playstation 3, Playstation 4

Genre: Action-Adventure, Survival Horror Game

Release Date: June 14, 2013

Developer: Naughty Dog

Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Neil Druckmann

Overview

Video games never come closer to movies since the gap between them is wider than any other two mediums. You can stomach a lot more sentimentalism while playing video games. The characters grow on you in a way that movie characters never will.

The Last of Us is a third-person perspective action adventure game. The game story is mainly about a single father, Joel, who lost his daughter after an outbreak of mutant Cordyceps fungus in 2013 in Texas. 20 years later, Joel accepts a deal to smuggle a little girl, Ellie, who is almost the same age as his daughter. Much of civilization is destroyed by the infection. Every person's current task is to be alive. The world has degenerated to nearly primitive society. Joel and Ellie must learn to trust each other to survive the realities of this new world.

"At it's core, The Last of Us is about the bond that forms between Joel and Ellie - it is the story of love, loyalty, and redemption." –Naughty Dog.

"We're not telling a survival story—although the story is those things—we're telling a story about a relationship between two characters who, over the course of the game, come to love each other as if

they were father and daughter.” - Druckmann

The Last of Us is different from normal survival horror game because it provides not only astonishing visual elements like the game scenes, horrible creatures, but also emotional narrative. It creates a strong immersive emotional interaction to the player through amazing character design, wonderful pacing control of the plot and appropriate game mechanism. Unlike some AAA games with lots of cinematic cutscenes, this insular story is told by more in-game dialogue, found notes, pictures, and records which all help the player explore and experience not only this believable and depressingly real world, but also every single character's story in the game. What's more, the open ending of the game may make the player surprised and confused at first, but afterwards it provokes the player's thoughtful insight about the relationship between Ellie, Joel, brutal survivals, infected hordes, and nature.

Characters

- **Joel** – The player avatar; In the post-apocalyptic world, he is a hardened survivalist, a brutal killer and a torturer with few moral lines left to cross in order to survive. By smuggling valuable stuff, he stained his hands with innocent blood and gained survival skills. Moreover, Joel's other side is portrayed perfectly in the whole game. He used to work hard to single-handedly raise his daughter Sarah before the outbreak of the epidemic. Joel lost his daughter, friends, and almost everything he valued in life during and after the epidemic chaos, which all changed him into an apathetic man.

"What he wouldn't do in the past is almost a daily occurrence at this point," Bruce Straley, the game's director, notes^[1]

The appearance of Ellie just reminds him of his dead daughter, touching the softest area of Joel's inner world. With the progress of the game, Joel shows a contradictory attitude between the initial rocky relationship and the increasing growth of reliable relationship with Ellie. As time goes by, Ellie's loyalty touches Joel, and he establishes a father-daughter bond with Ellie thus using any possible means to save her and keep her alive. As Joel himself revealed to Ellie, he is on both sides.

Trait: late 40s, hardened survivalist

Gameplay: the player can control Joel in most parts of the game.

- **Ellie** – Another player avatar; Ellie is a 14-year-old girl who grew up in a military-run orphanage rather than a warm family in quarantine zone. She is capable of taking care of herself both physically and psychologically more than normal teenagers with her age. Ellie keeps alive without turning to a clicker after she was bitten by the infected creature three weeks ago. So Ellie is treated as the hope the human being. Though she speaks rudely and unfriendly to all strangers, Ellie keeps a pure heart and loyalty to people around her. Moreover, Ellie’s vivid personality should attribute to more details in dialogues and character design. For example, Ellie has no idea what the real world is since she was born years after devastation began. Therefore, she is curious about everything outside of the quarantine zone, especially media like comic books and music.

Trait: adorable 14-year-old girl, red hair

Game play: Ellie can be controlled for about half of the chapter

Ellie is the protagonist in DLC: *The Last of Us: Left behind*

- **Tess** – Tess is Joel’s smuggling partner in Boston quarantine zone. Both of them share the same survival philosophy and the same ruthlessness. The beginning dialogue between them implied that they were once in a romantic relationship at one point. This is so much that Joel agree to accept her final request to deliver Ellie to Tommy after she was bit, thus buying Joel and Ellie some time to escape.
- **Marlene** – Marlene is the leader of Fireflies who was told that she can rely on Joel if she was ever in a jam. When Joel finally deliver Ellie to the Fireflies, Marlene and he all have to make the hard decision on whether sacrifice Ellie to the vaccine. However, Marlene reluctantly made the decision to kill Ellie that make Joel shot her directly.
- **Tommy** – Tommy is Joel’s little brother and a former Firefly, who covered Joel and his daughter at the beginning of the game. After they made their way to Boston, their different view of the world make the brother lost contact with each other. Despite this, when they meet up again 20 years later, both of them are glad to see each other. Joel still holds him in high regard, and state to Ellie that he trusts Tommy more than he trusts himself.

Breakdown

The perfect factors of *The Last of Us* would be the great game design and the control of the emotional

output in the game. It consists of six parts that go by four different seasons: prologue - summer - autumn - winter - spring - epilogue. I would like to break the whole game down into four parts based on the emotion output.

Part one: Prologue – Outbreak and tragedy

At the beginning of the game, a little girl gets up from the bed, hearing the chaos from the TV news. Joel shows up as a single father who works hard to raise up his daughter, Sarah. His effort to be the best father every year is forced to be interrupted just hours after his birthday because of the infection outbreak. He joined his brother, Tommy's evacuation journey. Unfortunately, Sarah gets shot when they encountered soldiers.

This part is the strongest emotional climax before the ending in the whole game. Meanwhile, the background of the game is told by switching characters and not completely freedom scene narrative. Though the plots seem to be conventional, which break out a biochemical disaster, the intense atmosphere is foiled perfectly with the third person over shoulder perspective. The game play after the cutscenes is the appropriate combination of driving-car, escaping from the infected people and QTE.

Part two: Summer – Fateful smuggle

Joel meets Ellie for the first time.

20 years after the initial outbreak, Joel promises the leader of Fireflies Marlene to smuggle this 14-year-old girl, Ellie and escape from the quarantine zone in Boston. Joel and his partner, Tess, gradually reveal the secret of Ellie, who has been bitten by the infected creature without turning to be infected for several weeks. In order to buy Joel and Ellie some time to escape, Tess died in the following crossfire with military instead of turning to a clicker after being bitten.

Afterwards, they meet their temporary allies. Joel plans to find Bill who owes him a car. However, it turns out that Bill's partner, Frank stole the battery of the car for himself that broke Bill's heart, though Frank has already suicided after he was bitten.

With the car repaired, Joel and Ellie head down to Pittsburgh. They encounter groups of hunters and infected, and battle through the city. They two slowly warm up each other and later team up with brothers Henry and Sam. But this bond between these two pairs ended when Sam became infected and Henry committed suicide out of grief for killing his little brother.

In this long part (more than half of the game), the whole atmosphere is depressing. Besides several supporting characters appearance, all the things that the player needs to be done seem like to stealth or sneak away from the hunters and infected hordes. However, with these characters appear on the way, the slightly change of relationship between Joel and Ellie from rocky to harmonious seems to be more

real. For example, when Sam and Henry leave Joel to the military, Ellie decides to go back and fight together with Joel, which not only shapes the role more real but also makes the change of their relationship more believable and warmer.

What's more, the atmosphere is foiled well with the lack of ammo and goods. Though the player may complain about the slow pace and some kind of monotonous game mechanic, Joel is not designed to be a super hero. The real situation is that these survivals are much weaker than infected hordes, military and organized hunters. On the other hand, the item crafting system is abundant that players can make their own survival goods by collecting components around to recovery health or attack enemies. This also conforms to survival theme of the whole game.

Part three: Autumn and winter - Injury, recovery and rescue

Joel and Ellie arrive at Tommy's dam in Wyoming. Tommy, a former member of the Fireflies, can show Joel their location. However, Ellie runs away since she is unsatisfied of being left by Joel to a stranger. After Joel chase back Ellie, they head out for a university of Colorado where they meet with only large groups of infected and hostile survivors instead of Fireflies. Joel is impaled in the abdomen and leaves the fighting to Ellie, who gets both of them to the Lakeside Resort.

Joel is in Ellie's care since he is unconscious for a few weeks due to wound sepsis. Ellie gets caught while trading a stag for antibiotics with David for Joel. Weak Joel hurries to find and save her after the medicine bring him back to his feet. He tortures and dispatches the rest of the cannibals before finding Ellie brutally hacking at David, and pulls her away from lifeless David, noticeably calling her "baby girl", a name he used for his daughter.

In this part, player can control Ellie for half of the chapter. This kind of plot-driven switch between two characters strengthen the player's understand and experience of both Ellie's growth and Joel's behavior. The relationship between them switches with the change of the character control. Ellie turns out to be a protector. She grew up a lot without Joel's protection. All these designs pave the way for the climax of the whole game in the ending.

Part Four: Spring and epilogue

Spring arrives as Joel has recovered from wound sepsis, and reach the intended final destination with Ellie. They encounter the Fireflies, who was led by Marlene, and lost most of the members on the way from Boston to Salt Lake City. Ellie decide to take Marlene's research order to create a vaccine for the infection. However, Joel faces the dilemma: Sacrifice Ellie for the human being, or battle a way to save Ellie and struggle on this tough survival road. For the sake of Joel's selfish love, he becomes completely rage and brutal. Finally he saves Ellie and lies to her that Fireflies has given up the vaccine plan at the same time. They return back to Tommy's organized group. At this time, Ellie confronts Joel

and question him whether he tells her the truth. Joel replies, "I swear", leaving a doubting Ellie to her own belief. End

This part is definitely the best part of the game, which the player would experience maximum emotion output of the whole game. There are more elements appear in this chapter. The player may feel the heartbeat, drop tears, confused and astonished in almost 15 minutes gameplay.

First of all, the general story develops exactly as the player anticipates except for the ending. Joel and Ellie will find the fireflies and do the research. However, the ending is different from normal ending of works with similar subject. Joel does not choose to sacrifice Ellie to save the world. On the contrary, Joel is designed to be more real, and selfish.

Secondly, the narrative rhythm and the use of cinematic shots and clips strengthen the suspension atmosphere a lot. For example, after Joel is cornered by Marlene, who would like to let Joel to decide Ellie's fate. At this point, the timeline jumps into the time that Joel is driving a car outside of Salt Lake City. The player will be more curious about whether Joel takes Ellie away because of these narrative flashbacks.

Thirdly, the character's facial animation is so amazing that it leaves the player a big space to conjecture the character's real thoughts. For example, at the end of the game, while Ellie questions Joel about whether he tell her the truth, the player will see Ellie's expression changed slightly, thus indicating her doubts. However, she still decides to trust Joel temporarily. And then the whole screen fade in black at the climax point of the whole game.

Fourthly, the player can also experience these characters' inner activities through records and found notes. For example, the player can collect two Marlene's records on the way to save Ellie, which shows the relationship between Marlene and Ellie. Marlene treats Ellie as her own daughter. However, as the leader of Fireflies, she has to kill Ellie for the future of human being. She suffers pain of sacrificing Ellie days and nights. The player can feel the struggle from Marlene's inner world through those records.

Fifthly, the game design make the player think more about the relationship between human and nature. In the beginning, Joel and Ellie get over from that extremely cruel winter, gangs of cannibals, and arrive the intended final destination. Joel tries to fill the silence in order to brighten an estranged and traumatized Ellie, who warms up after seeing a huge adorable giraffe eating the leaves on the wall. Several giraffes are wandering around the playground. Everything just gets back to life. It's so amazing to see such a peaceful natural view with bright sunshine after fighting and stealth with infected hordes and cannibals for so long. You can even smell the Earthy from the game. And then looking backward of human being, with infected hordes, military and even cannibals, the whole society has been degenerated to a primitive level. Ironically, everything on the earth except human

beings enjoys a happy and relaxing life without people's disturbance. It looks like some kind of alert to awake people in the reality before it is too late.

Strongest Element

Strong immersive emotional interaction:

The strongest element of the game narrative is the deliberate design of the open ending, which may make most of the player feel confused for a moment. Then collecting every single jigsaw and detail from the whole game, the player will come to understand Joel's behavior that he is just a single father, a middle aged ordinary rather than a super hero who would sacrifice everything to save the world. Joel's relationships are painful and selfish but real. After surviving in this post-doomsday for 20 years, he doesn't ever believe human beings. In other words, he would rather be selfish to save Ellie from Fireflies than letting she die for the future of human beings.

That's maybe the reason why *The Last of Us* is such a masterpiece if you put yourself enough in the game, it will just linger long enough after the game is over. I think all of these strong immersive feelings should attribute to an important principle: The cinematic storytelling part should be consistent with the narrative of gameplay no matter how many cinematic cuts are used in the game.

Unsuccessful Element

In my opinion, the unsuccessful element would be the relationship between the time line and the places where they went. The transition between different places seems to be too fast in such a horrible world. With the lack of survival goods, how can these two people transfer from Pittsburgh to Wyoming immediately. Will they encounter any other horrible creatures? How do they find enough fuel to support a car to complete such a long journey. I just feel a little confused about the reason why the route need to be designed so long even to travel through the whole America.

Highlight

The highlight of the game would be the narrative of the interactive stuffs. The player can explore every survival's different story in this desolation. Players can collect notes on the ground which reflect some dead people's stories. For example, when Joel and Ellie discover Bill's partner Frank hung himself, the player can find a note on the ground that shows he is the one who stole the car battery because he hated his "partner" Bill. What's more interesting is that, on the way from Boston to Pittsburgh, Ellie reads the gay magazine that she stole from Frank's place. This indicates that Frank maybe a gay, and maybe he is Bill's "lover". However, he hated Bill actually. How insular and

desperate it is that a person would live with someone he hates. In order to keep alive, Frank has no choice. With such delicacy narrative design, the player can understand Frank better even after the player met him for a while.

Critical Reception

The Last of Us overall received positive reviews and received several full mark on rating website, such as : 5/5 Metacritic, 10/10 IGN, and also 9/10 from GameSpot.

Kelly Andy awarded *The Last of Us* a 10 out of 10 stars.

“The narrative and characterisation are impressive, and not just for game.” “It never loss sight of the fact that it’s a video game, not a film” “*The Last of Us* is a remarkable achievement, and one of those rare games that you never want to end” [2]

Mahan-K gave *The Last of Us* a 8 out of 10

” *The Last of Us* is an exceptional experience from beginning to end; however, it is hindered by a few gameplay setbacks. Inconsistent AI in the stealth portions of the game, the simplistic stealth mechanics, limited crafting system, and pointless stats upgrades prevent the game from getting a higher score. ” [3]

Lessons

- Emotional gameplay and Character Design

The character design is the most difficult part in both traditional media like movie, novel and new media like game. In order to bring Joel and Ellie to life, Naughty Dog did a good job on details. There is no doubt that the animation of the characters is perfect, especially at the end of the game. Players can even feel Ellie’s acting skill though it is just an avatar. More importantly, they make lots of daily dialogues to present different characters’ personalities. Like Ellie feels disappointed about the interruption of the comic magazines. It’s really adorable.

The main characters don’t have to be playable.

Though the player can only control Joel in most part of the game, it does not affect the role shaping of Ellie through natural funny communication with Joel. And when the control avatar changed to Ellie, the player will feel the physical and psychological growth of Ellie more real, which all work for the emotional narrative and game play, which strengthen the explosion of the ending.

- Pacing of the Narrative

The reason why game is different from movie and novel is that the plots of a game are easily broken by the game play mechanism and level. So it is pretty important to design a amazing beginning and ending since players can put all their attention on the plots in those periods. Moreover, it's also very important to merge the plots with the game play part appropriately. With the third person perspective and semi freedom operation of the characters, Naughty Dog completes the switching operation naturally.

- Theme

The Last of Us create a new experience that make this game a kind of real art. It pick up such a heavy subject which can easily bet the player's to thought, about human nature, human and nature.

- Prologue: tutorial

The beginning of the game can be treated as a textbook of how to present the tutorial more effectively and naturally. As mentioned above in BREAK DOWN part that this tutorial is good not only because it teaches people the basic operation, but also introduce the background and make a good mat in atmosphere and environment for the following plots.

Summation

The Last of Us evokes players' strong emotion resonance. It leaves us the rule of making a impressive emotional video game: a good game is what the player supposed to do should intersect with what the player want to do. So do cinematic storytelling and gameplay narrative. Moreover, the delicate design of a wonderful start and an open ending is also another key element of insight evoking. Although visual and audio elements are pretty important, it does not mean that the fancier the visual are, the greater the game is. "Less is more" seems to be more appropriate to describe NaughtyDog's original intention to develop the game with such a heavy subject about human nature. It tells an emotion story filled with love, loss and brutal of the world, and also the darkest side of human nature. But even living in a world like that, there are still something for human to fight for, hope, love, happiness. Human beings are still capable of doing good deeds, even on verge of insanity.

Reference

[1]<http://www.ign.com/articles/2012/02/08/the-last-of-us-storyline-explained-in-detail>

[2]<http://www.computerandvideogames.com/409703/the-last-of-us-review-survival-horror-masterpiec-e-is-naughty-dogs-finest-moment/>

[3]<http://www.gamespot.com/the-last-of-us/user-reviews/2200-185430/>