

BLOOM 2020 – SHOWCASE FOR CCI103
PERSPECTIVES ON THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

WORLD-BUILDING NARRATIVES FOR VIDEO GAME
DESIGN: *THE LAST OF US* AND *SKYRIM*

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Video games have evolved to embrace many new forms of storytelling. The video game industry is able to give the audience the control of how to perform and explore certain narratives. With this freedom, developers have created unique and personal narratives in two distinct fashions. One relates to the linear progression and execution of a story, with a focus on characters and 'set-pieces', such as the 2013 Naughty Dog survival shooter game *The Last of Us*. Another form of narrative includes more open ended and explorative games, in which the actions that take place, the decisions within the story, and the time in which what is completed is ultimately up to the player. An example of this would be Bethesda Studio's adventure role-playing game *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. These games use narrative in separate ways, yet both achieve a deep connection with their audience.

The Last of Us was directed by Neil Druckmann, and released in 2013. The linear style of storytelling and gameplay lends itself well to portraying the story in the exact way the developers intended. With this method of narrative expression, players of the game are able to form very strong connections with the pre-established characters, through the fleshed out interactions and realistic dialogue. The downside towards this direct style is that unless the audience is not interested or compelled by the characters or setting, there is little to no room for people to personalise their experience. *The Last of Us* is a story first and a videogame second, something that could not be achieved effectively in the earlier stages of video games. Neil Druckmann said in an interview that "You feel out the narrative elements through gameplay" (Takahashi, 2018). He refers to a chapter within the game where the main character who you control, Joel, gets injured, and the player must take

control of Ellie, the side character. Without the prolonged exposure to playing as Joel, this crucial moment of Ellie's need to "take charge" would fall weak (Takahashi, 2018).

An example of narrative through gameplay this game uses is a reoccurring action within the game where you 'boost' Ellie up onto a high surface to reach something. A single button press will have Ellie walk over and perform the boost. However, during one of the last chapters of the game, after Ellie has seen and suffered many traumatic things, Ellie does not initially come to help Joel, instead she is sitting down daydreaming. This one simple break of consistency within gameplay very effectively illustrates the cost and turmoil of their journey. The freedom found within this game is primarily through gameplay elements, such as weapon upgrades, crafting and how to approach enemies. To not have any bearing over the story allows the characters within the games to be complex individuals that we are sidelined to controlling, rather than vehicles for us insert ourselves into.

The story driven style of gameplay *The Last of Us* implements is successful at telling a compelling story, however there is a slight disconnect between the gameplay and story element because of this. The gameplay has the side character invincible to attacks and invisible to enemies within stealth, however the story rides on protecting her and not letting anything happen to her (Hughes, 2015). This disconnect ultimately falls down to the developers not wanting to risk the danger of having to micromanage another character throughout the entire game, which would hurt gameplay and overall enjoyment of the game.

On the opposite side of narrative expression within game design is *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, directed by Todd Howard. This is a game that gives you free reign to complete tasks at any pace, master any type of weapon or spells, and gives you a plethora of options to customise your own character. This style of storytelling favours players who enjoy creating a personalised experience, without having to be forced to accomplish certain goals to progress, hence the nature of role-playing games.

The open world nature of *Skyrim* allows players to go at their own pace, including the overarching main story of the game. Many players abandon the main story to focus on other stories within the vast land, the game encourages this explorative nature. Miguel Carvalhais and Pedro Cardoso's article on narrative within video games proposes types of ergodic traversal; one relating to *Skyrim* being "Bending" traversal, where the player is engaged through exploration of non-mutual paths (Cardoso & Carvalhais, 2013). This method of narrative is more free form and relies on the actions and intentions of the player, such that no two players are likely to experience exactly the same game. This abundance of choices highlight that as the work is spread so far out, much of its side content is nothing comparable in quality in regards to a linear focused story game.

One could say that the quality of the tasks themselves within this broad spectrum do not matter; rather, it's the enjoyment of the player knowing that there are likely hundreds of hours of immersive content to participate in, before or after the 'end' of the game. We are at a stage of gaming where we no longer need to be constrained to a single storyline, and we can be let free into an imaginative and expansive world. Our enjoyment, objective and narratives are created through the exploration of said world, and not just the assigned tasks within them (Cardoso & Carvalhais, 2013).*

*[**Editor's note** – this can be likened to the Wiradjuri concept of *Yindyamarra Winhanga-nga*, which is the "experience of wisdom for a world worth living in"]

These two video games take different approaches towards narrative, both with their positives and with their negatives. *The Last of Us* uses pre-rendered cutscenes to tell major plot points of the story, whilst also have character development through gameplay. *Skyrim* has no cutscenes and relies only telling the story through character dialogue basic interactions.

Video games must find attempt to find a balance between the narrative and the gameplay, to make the player feel as if there is realistic progression and growth throughout the narrative (Kuo, Hiler, & Lutz, 2016). For a game such as *The Last of Us*, it is vastly more difficult to create powerful progression within a realistic setting, comparative to the fantasy land of magic and myths found within *Skyrim*. *The Last of Us* treats progression through

character upgrades know as 'supplements', as well as an expanding arsenal of weapons throughout the game (Figure 1), whereas *Skyrim* uses an expansive skill tree accessible by mastering a skill within the game (Figure 2).

One would be ignorant to say that cutscenes simply are outdated and not required within today's video game industry, however it is not as black and white as you see. The use of cutscenes during earlier generations was due to graphical limitations, which could not be implemented within the game engines (Kuo, Hiler, & Lutz, 2016) , however we still see cutscenes that we have no control within. It ultimately comes down to the developers and how they want to present a story, it makes sense that a role playing game will give you dialogue choices and not leave the viewpoint of the character (Bitmob, 2017). Cutscenes still serve a purpose, to better capture the director's intention using traditional film techniques.

There are limitations however to both of these methods of narrative explanation. Whilst cutscenes can be graphically more impressive than the game itself and have more freedom within the animation process, the immersion and connection the player has can be damaged as it takes away the controls and possibly perspective. Staying fully in-game however creates many variables to the situation, such as player position, character lip-syncing, and animations.

There is no denying that the technologies and narrative affordances of video games have changed incredibly fast within a historically brief period. Complex stories are now able to blend more seamlessly with the gameplay, something unachievable before. This concept of narrative within gameplay has changed and evolved into something truly impressive, and it is unique to most games. *The Last of Us* and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, whilst taking different routes to portraying narrative, both are some of the most highly praised games of their generation. With the rapid progression of video game technology, the immersion and storytelling opportunities are only getting higher. Whilst some video games suffer from disconnect between narrative design and gameplay, the medium itself is a marvellous, engaging and expansive product of its time, and a vital forum for contemporary storytelling.

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Figure 1: Screenshot from The Last of Us, showcasing the 'skills upgrade' menu. Supplied by "MAT" on 'Moby Games' Website. Jul 08 2013.

<https://www.mobygames.com/game/ps3/last-of-us/screenshots/gameShotId,628824/>

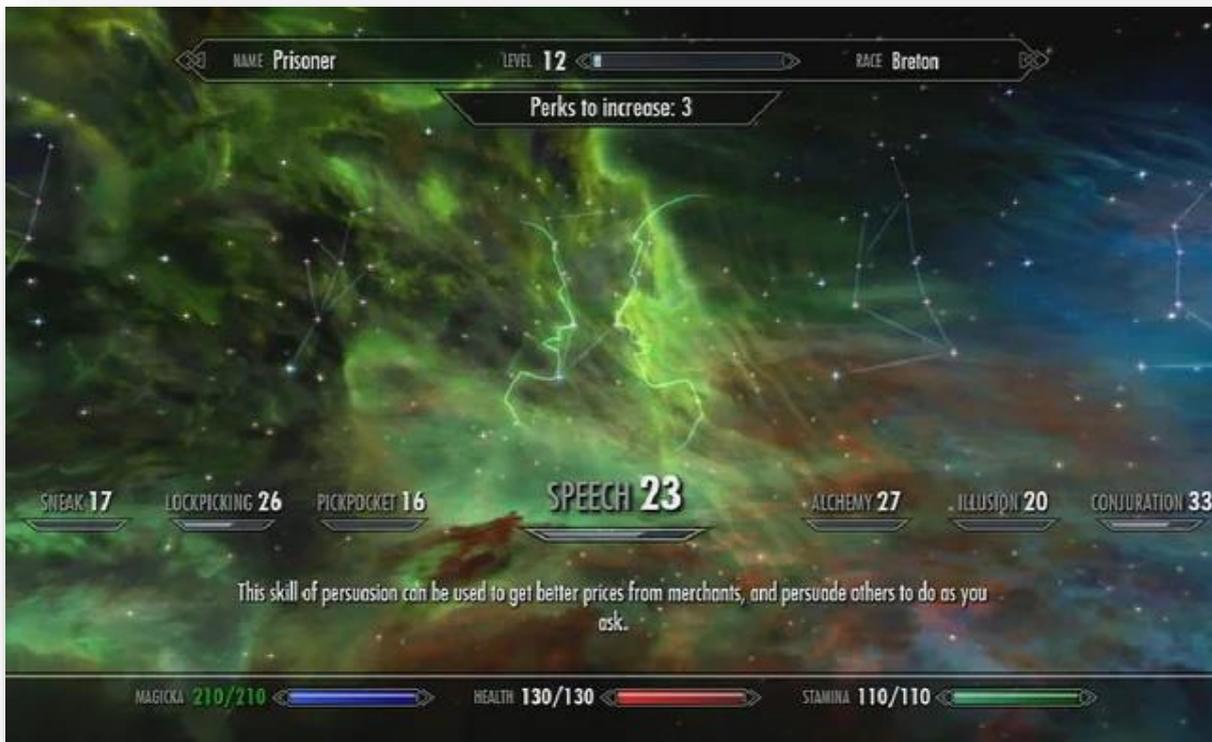


Figure 2: Screenshot from Elder Scroll V: Skyrim, of the Skill tree menu. Supplied by "Stephanie-IGN" on "IGN" Website. Nov 04 2016.

<https://www.ign.com/wikis/the-elder-scrolls-5-skyrim/Speech#Perks>