

# LUDONARRATIVE DISSONANCE: INTERLACING THE NARRATIVE AND LUDIC STRUCTURE TOGETHER IN THE LAST OF US.

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This paper sets out to investigate what can be learnt from the previous generation of narrative driven games. Specifically in The Last of Us and to what degree it steers away from the typical cut scene-action-cut scene dilemma many cinematic gaming experiences suffer from and to what means it attempts to interlace and balance its narrative/ludic structure together. It shall be looking at other theorist's analysis on how cut-scenes impact the gaming experience to highlight the main problems occurring and see how The Last of Us attempts to solve them. I would recommend playing The Last of Us first to fully understand the relationship between Ellie and Joel as their companionship and interaction with each other plays an important role in tying the narrative and gameplay together.

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## LUDONARRATIVE DISSONANCE: INTERLACING THE NARRATIVE AND LUDIC STRUCTURE TOGETHER IN *THE LAST OF US*.

### ❖ Section 1 - Introduction

Story telling often requires subtly in guiding the viewer through the narrative, but game play operates on a need to know basis. It requires players needing to know immediately what is happening so they may act and make their choices accordingly. Leveraging both a narrative structure and ludic structure against each other in what has come to be known as cinematic games, often leaves players unable to feel connected to the story or able to enjoy the game play. (Hocking, C. 2009). Gameplay can make the player feel disjoined from the character as it interrupts the narrative flow as well as cut-scenes interrupting the flow of play and forcing a personality on to the player character, it becomes hard to enjoy both at the same time. The term coined by Clint Hocking to explain the conflict between a video games narrative and its game play is Ludonarrative dissonance, first being used in response to Bioshock's conflict between game play promoting self-interest yet selflessness through its narrative, pulling players out of the immersive experience.

*The Last Of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013.) was at the end of a gaming generation with many critics giving praise to its ability to deliver a "*..spectacle of Hollywood cinema without completely hijacking interactivity*"(Edge staff, 2013). With the next generation games beginning to make an appearance, backed up by better hardware and pumped up graphical quality, I will investigate what can be learnt from the previous generation of narrative driven games. Specifically in *The Last Of US* and to what degree it steers away from the typical cut scene-action-cut scene dilemma many cinematic gaming experiences suffer from (Nutt, C. 2013.) and to what means it attempts to interlace and balance its narrative/ludic structure. I shall also be looking at other theorist's analysis on how cut-scenes impact the gaming experience to highlight the main problems occurring and see how *The Last of Us* deals with them.

## ❖ Section 2 - Cinematic(Cut-scene) and Game Play Agency

Murray describes agency as "... the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (Murray, J. 1997). But videogame agency differs from that of a film, in film the author has complete control and power over the action whereas in a game it is the audience who control how the events unfold. The result may be as the original author intended, but the path and choices taken to get there are in the player's hands. As a cut-scene breaches through game play it shifts back to an authored passive experience, taking back all the control the player had become accustomed to and replacing it with a forced interpretation of the character they had just been. Rigby and Ryan discuss the notion of his/her verses yours, in that as a viewer it is *his/her* actions affecting the events while as a player it is *your* actions and choices. (Rigby, S & Ryan, R.M. 2001.)

One of the most common complains of cinematic games, or in extreme cases such as *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010) interactive movies, is that the freedom of the player is restricted (Lessard. J. 2009). Maybe not in the freedom of choice but the freedom of movement in the case of *Heavy Rain* as it still offers the player many choices that changes how the story plays out resulting in multiple endings. Cut-scenes compound this problem as they take away both freedom of movement and choice. The experience of games is tied accordingly to the players involvement and how much they invest into the game (Veale, K. 2012.), what the player does and how they choose to do it is a big part of that investment. If the player character says or acts in a way that do not align to the players play style and the choices they have made up to this point in a cut-scene, it may pull them out of total immersion. It is automating the players responses and how they would act to the events that have just occurred (Conway, S. 2012.) and can cause confusion when juxtaposing a high action play sequence against a calm cut-scene. Gameplay occurs in real-time and in general is almost always chronological whereas story (fictional time) is predetermined. (Juul, J. 2011) In order for the passage of time to flow coherently play time and fictional time must work together. If a slight time skips occur in the cut-scenes fictional time, such as a flash forward or flash back, the player feels their

actions have had little to no impact on the narrative or that the narrative is so out of line to the player characters personality, making it neither fun to play or watch. Even smaller time skips such as a high action sequence leading immediately into a calm cut-scene giving the appearance the player is rested and time has passed, disconnects the narratives passage of time from the play time. The player is still reeling from the massive fight only to have the character act as if hours have passed and they are fully recovered during the cut-scene.

However cut-scenes may well be a necessary evil in order to further the narrative, or allow dialogue to occur between NPCs and the player character along with controlling the pacing of the narrative. They provide a release from action and allow the player time to think, helping to provide a rhythm. (Klevjer, Rune. 2002). One solution to this is one that *The Last Of Us* utilizes, and is reminiscent of RPG quest storytelling, is to have game dialogue between NPCs and the player character occur during play instead. *The Last Of Us* still uses cut-scenes to control pace, but opts to have a lot of the main dialogue between Joel and Ellie (the main characters) spoken in game with the player still in control, allowing for the character and narrative progression to still happen whilst keeping player agency and involvement intact.

### ❖ Section 3 - Player Self Interest

The main concern keeping the player in control is that they themselves will interrupt the narrative. The benefits of keeping agency with the player must be taken advantage of appropriately or it can become the games undoing. (Scott, S. 2013.) As the player character engages in conversation with a NPC that may further the narrative, the player has the option to just walk away and not listen. *The Last Of Us* revolves around the idea of survival and the players main concern and a core game mechanic will be that of loot finding in order to survive. If they do not stand to gain or are not forced to listen to conversation the player can just simply walk away and search for loot instead. Players only seek to play to their benefit and a games ludic structure and rules only help to enhance this mentality, "*The rules of the game say 'it is best if I do what is best for me without consideration for*

*others'.*" (Hocking, C. 2009) *The Last Of Us* attempts to remedy this situation but not using text based dialogue that can be skipped, but by audio and proximity instead.

In each case of *The Last of Us* the player has the choice to explore every inch of an area. In order to keep the players from walking away during narrative or character building conversations but carry on maintaining player agency, Ellie is kept close by. The player is free to continue playing to their benefit gathering loot and crafting in preparation for the next fight, although this does break down a little during the early sections of the game as Tess acts as a guide through the level. As the player follows her through the broken down world, they have the freedom to walk out of ear shot of her to grab loot as she talks about important points which disrupts the narrative flow. This may be due to the fact the player is feeling safe at this point as Clickers (one of the main antagonists) introduced in the games early stages are not around. The player has no real reason and nothing to gain by sticking close to Tess other than to avoid getting lost.

Most games become impeded by the need to satisfy player agency, especially if they are given the option to skip. Cut-scenes and text based dialogue further narrative, but they are "*...not part of the temporal framework of the player playing the game: they can be skipped because they exist in a temporal context disconnected from the player.*" (Veale, K. 2012) *The Last Of Us* is also guilty of this on occasion as it offers the ability to skip cut-scenes. A few games have attempted to mix it up by introducing quick time events (QTE) in place of cut-scenes or alongside them, most notably is *Heavy Rain*, but this is still removing control from the player as succeeding in pressing the button in time will always have the same result. Failing in the majority of QTE events means the player cannot proceed with this being the only choice to be able to continue. Although in *Heavy Rain* this is not the case, if you fail the story continues on.

#### ❖ Section 4 - Player Embodiment and Identification

Player choice is integral to feeling they are part of the world at that moment, without it the player might as well be watching TV or Film as the story passively plays out before them (Scott, S. 2013).

The controller acts as a gate way for the choices to be made, allowing for the player to become part of the world and embody the character they play as. "*Embodiment then takes the form of extended cognition, in which human agency and thought are enmeshed within larger networks that extend beyond the desktop computer into the environment.*" (Hayles, K. 2012). In games the players extended body can take many forms such as characters, a car or even just a camera, (Klevjer, R. 2006) for *The Last Of Us* the player becomes Joel and Ellie, entering their world through the extension of the controller they hold.

As video game experiences rely on player investment and involvement (Veale, K. 2012) embodiment and extension become a key factor in keeping the player invested not just in the game as a whole but also in the characters themselves. *The Last Of Us* camera is in 3rd person which, while may not be as immersive as a first person set up, allows the player characters full range of body movement and emotion to be seen. It functions as any traditional 3rd person camera would with the player using the analog sticks to look and move around, although no matter which way the camera direction looks the player character will also turn their body in that direction. In order to see behind, the player must turn their entire body around with Joel also turning around to take a look behind him, just as the player is doing. Because of the simple connection between the direction the player is looking and the direction Joel is looking, the player's thoughts and actions are instantly translated into the movements Joel makes.

Player death can be a disruption of not only the narrative of the game, but also the player's identification as the player-character. Games often use death to educate the player, but the way death is portrayed often pulls the player out of immersion as they begin to no longer identify with the character (Blythe, M. 2014). *The Last of Us* suffers from this interruption to, as the player dies it

switches the camera's focal from the 3rd person to a fixed position in order to stage the scene, the player's thoughts and actions are no longer being translated into those of Joel's movements.

Although often moments before certain deaths the player is presented with a QTE to try and escape their fate, the removal of movement and cutting away to another camera is enough to cause a break in player identification.

Despite the fact death in *The Last of Us* is disruptive; it also works in tandem and supports the narrative of survival. Death acts as a punishment, through loss of ground covered and rewards from time invested lost, thus encouraging the player to survive at all costs. "*This encourages the player to defer death for as long as possible, not merely in order to extend their play experience, but to avoid the temporal, spatial and material losses that add memorial insult to in-game injury.*" (Blythe, M. 2014). The game inherently encourages survival, and tries to steer away from using death to educate you but making you realise early on without dying that survival is important. Scavenging and exploring slows the pace of the game down enough for the player to prepare for fights and survive them whilst the lingering sense of death all around keeps the player alert and on the edge, allowing the player to feel and connect to the same sense of fear and emotions Joel and Ellie are also feeling in this world.

#### ❖ Section 5 - Companion Relationship

For Joel we play out his emotions, his actions are our actions and the connection comes more easily, but for Ellie we must find our connection to her through Joel (although later on you do play as Ellie for a while). She needs to be a believable character in game as well as during cut-scenes as she plays an integral part of tying the two together. "*There is a notion in the Arts of 'believable character.' It does not mean an honest or reliable character, but one that provides the illusion of life, and thus permits the audience's suspension of disbelief.*" (Bates, J.1994)



It is important that characters are not fully formed before the player begins to project their own interpretations onto them (Pearce, C. 2004). If the character is already fully formed, there is nothing compelling the player can add. The Player is made aware of Joel's history in relation to the world you are about to enter and of the loss of his daughter, just enough to allow room for change. For Joel and Ellie they do not know each other when they meet, just the same as the player does not really know either character. This leaves the gates open to build a believable relationship, for as Joel and Ellie get to know each other, the player in turn also gets to know Joel and Ellie. The player is able contribute and grow emotionally attached to the characters at the same time the characters grow attached to each other. If Joel had carried on with his daughter all the emotional attachment and fatherly instincts would have been established a long time before the player has entered the story.

David Cage stated that "*the future of games will be meaning. You will hear a lot of people telling you it's technology, it's more polygons... I have been claiming for years that the future of games is emotion*" (Nutt, C. 2013). In the past a lot of AI companions have suffered from a lack of emotion during game play, one noteworthy case is that of *Resident Evil 5's* (Capcom, 2009) Sheva. She was heavily critiqued as having bad AI, but her lack of emotional response as she gunned down hordes of zombies which were effectively once her own people during play, yet trying to convince Chris (the player) to retreat during a cut-scene sequence caused ludonarrative dissonance to occur. For *The Last Of Us* as well as having conversations between Ellie and Joel occurring during play and cut-scenes aiding in smoothing over the transition, Ellie also displays relevant emotion in her body language and facial expressions during play using a gesture system, she is acting out how she is feeling at that point in the narrative, helping to accentuate the point of the relationship the two characters are currently in. As she first meets Joel she is visibly unsure of him as they have just met and she is nervous. As seen in Figure 1 she is turning her body away from Joel and keeping her head down indicating she is uncomfortable and distrustful of Joel. She also has her arms half crossed indicating she is feeling defensive and closed off but as the game progresses in Figure 2 and the pair

begin to trust each other, Ellie's body language opens up and she is much more relaxed, standing with open arms looking straight at Joel.



**Figure 1:** *The Last Of Us* - Ellie is visibly unsure of Joel in her body language



**Figure 2:** *The Last Of Us* - Ellie is much more relaxed in her body language as the pairs relationship grows.

## ❖ Section 6 - Scripted events

Scripted events are one of the current solutions of Ludonarrative dissonance, with the storyline still unfolding whilst the player is still playing. (Kuroiwa, J. 2009.) The gesture systems are scripted to allow Ellie to display certain emotions at certain times, but these are not the only events to be scripted into Ellie during game play. For the player to be able to read Ellie emotionally she needs to be engaging with the world around her so that the player may understand why she is displaying sadness or worry etc. For example during one scene as the player wanders around a garage looking for a way out and for supplies as Ellie is also exploring the environment displaying a relatively relaxed state, she picks up a vase and then accidentally drops and breaks it and begins profusely apologising. As the player goes back over to her to see what all the fuss was about she has switched back to her uncomfortable gesture. Emotion "*facilitates decision making, has significant influence on learning and memory, and provides the motivation for critical action in the face of environmental incentives*" (Davidson and Jackson et al., 2000, p. 890) Giving Ellie's emotion context in play instead of jumping out to a cut-scene and automating a players response to Ellie not only empowers the players sense of agency but also influences their decision making. Body language and signals are perceived and understood by players, emotionally communicating and influencing their decision-making (De Gelder, B. 2006). If Ellie looks scared and unsure, the player may want to stick close to her and protect her, if she is looking calm and confident it signals to the player that they are ok to leave her alone for a bit. The subtlety of the events is the key in maintaining player immersion, if it is to obviously scripted or repeated in the same manner too often it can cause distance between the companion AI and the player. To be enjoyable the larger events need to be staggered at a pace to keep the player interested, especially if an event is used as a visual reward, as there are larger more obvious actions taking place whilst the smaller events such as Ellie's display of emotion which are required and repeated throughout the game calls for subtlety. (Lopez, M. 2006). If Ellie were to begin harassing the player every time they needed to see her emotional state change, or a cut scene was used to show every change, the player would begin to resent her and loose the emotional

connection intended by these events. Instead the player is left to discover and read Ellie's state change on their own and act accordingly.

One such larger repeated event is that of lifting Ellie up to a higher place so she may help the player climb up as well. This is repeated throughout the game but with subtle changes each time such as instead of Ellie kicking down a ladder it's a piece of wood. Another memorable change which utilizes Ellie's emotion and varies repeated events is as the pair enters a bus station, the player needs to lift Ellie up again to knock down a ladder, the player activates the usual event but this time Ellie does not come over and she is instead sitting on her own far away from Joel. Previous events in the narrative have left Ellie visibly distant and hurt. Her lack of response to an event that the player has learned and become accustomed to signals to the player that something is wrong and they need to go over to her and see that she is ok before continuing. This could have been achieved by just simply have a 'Go to Ellie' prompt appear on screen or a cut-scene come in but this would only help to pull the player out of immersion. Using emotion to interrupt a key signifier not only influences the player's actions but also supports the narrative structure, helping to interlace the ludic and narrative structure together.

## ❖ Section 7 - Conclusion

Cut-scenes and game play are both equally important in creating a cinematic gaming experience but getting both the ludic and narrative structure to work together can sometimes be an issue. Trying to maintain the all important player agency whilst keeping the player immersed and avoid interrupting narrative flow becomes a precarious balancing act of which *The Last of Us* has gotten close to. By letting many dialogue and narrative sequences play out in game it allows narrative progression to still happen whilst keeping player agency intact. The choices the players make are translated through the controller and projected into the environment. Extended cognition through the use of the controller allows the players thoughts and movements to then become one with Joel's thoughts and movements which in turn aids the player to also be able to connect to their companion Ellie. Ellie's

display of emotion within context of her surroundings and the current stage of the narrative sets her up to be a believable and readable character. She helps to guide the player's decision making without the need of intrusive cut-scenes or obvious prompts telling the player what to do and where to go. The leveraging of the different emotional states to tie the ludic and narrative structure together is very important as it helps provide reasonable and subtle variation to repeatable events the player has learned to use and are important to a ludic structure as well as supporting the narrative structure set out in cut-scenes, bringing across the emotions portrayed by the characters into play as well.

Although *The Last Of Us* still has ludonarrative issues pertaining to player death and player interruption of narrative flow that require further research into to find a suitable solution, it is a step in the right direction for cinematic games that future next gen titles may well choose to learn from.

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