

NATHAN HARDISTY - VOL.2



**AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY
DIFFERENT.**

Written and Edited By: Nathan Hardisty

Protected under the Creative Common license

For all commercial inquiries, email the author at nathan.hardisty@gmail.com

Published: August 3rd 2011

NOTE: If I mention any video-game, film or other work I will likely spoil it to get a point across.
You have been warned.

INTRODUCTION

“Like the protected books, plays and movies that preceded them, video games communicate ideas — and even social messages — through many familiar literary devices (such as characters, dialogue, plot, and music) and through features distinctive to the medium (such as the player’s interaction with the virtual world),”

Justice Antonin Scalia, the Supreme Court Ruling on *Brown vs EMA*.

Three years.

I’ve been writing about video-games for three years.

I’ve blogged for three years, I wrote for Platform Nation for a year and a half and I’m now on two healthy media sites writing editorials and columns that fill my everyday life with delight. This is the best volunteer job in the world and, yet, at the same time it’s worked out not all in my favor. I’ve had the displeasure of finding out that video-games aren’t as cracked up as my little childhood brain thought them out to be. As I detailed in my last volume, for the most part, video-games can be amazing.

I think it’s time to change that.

And now for something completely different.

Interactive storytelling is new on the stage of the arts and not everyone is sure on what that means. Not everyone is sure when interactivity can be used and when cut-scenes can do their job. There’s been a lot of editorials over the past few years arguing that games, as a valid form of art, need to be a unique one and the power of interactivity might just be what we need.

Very recently the Supreme Court of the USA ruled against a California Law that would make it illegal to sell violent video-games to children. Here in the UK we have such laws but they aren’t carried out with the same rigor as the law would. It would mean that video-games would become government regulated in the US and, above everything, lose their first amendment protection. Parents are the perfect blockade against violent video-games and I think that was all put to rest in the last volume.

What I’m going to argue over this volume is that interactive storytelling is the greatest chestnut of the arts. Audience interaction, progression and human expression all captured within one method of storytelling. I’ll detail the methods, the stories that touched me and go deep into what it exactly means to be a video-game. This is something completely different and you’re going to hear me argue, above anything else, for the problems. The massive gaping holes in our medium.

What flaws? The cinematic gameplay, the worshipping of design flaws, the shunning of outright superior works of interactivity all because of something called ‘gameplay’ and one of the biggest problems that may well shape the industry for years to come; the middle-man narrative. I will hope to prove to you that video-games have a duty, that whatever the cost we should explore what this interactive age could yield in our world of war and societal division.

Are you sitting comfortably?

SECTION ONE: POWER

"Whoever fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become a monster in the process. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you."

Frederich Nietzsche (*Beyond Good & Evil*)

The power of video-games is impossible to measure, you could write a million books and you still wouldn't know just what 'interactivity' means. This medium is full of stories, full of powers and they all flesh out into one place - the player - and they are the means of power. Emergent storytelling, a story that comes about itself from random design elements and told to the player *by the player*. *Minecraft*, *Far Cry 2*, *New Vegas*, *Fallout 3*, *Grand Theft Auto* and many, many more all exploit the emergent story capabilities we have today.

Defined storytelling, a story that the designer has already laid out with cut-scenes and dialogue and perhaps a player character with a 'revenge story'. In my opinion these are the weakest of all power plays because they ask the player to care about something he has had little to no interaction on. *Fallout 3's* story is a prime example as is the entirety of *Red Dead Redemption's* narrative. These stories ask the player to care and while they may well be powerful, they are nowhere near as powerful as a story that is told to yourself.

These aren't the only two power methods of storytelling, there are grey areas such as *Bioshock* and *Half-Life 2* with the player characters holding no voice but the player still going through a defined sequence of cut-scenes and set-pieces.

These are the powers that be, along with many others and I hope in this section to detail my personal stories and through this express the absolute power that video-games have.

- **1.1 BLANK SLATES** - An exploration of the Freeman Complex, in which a player character exhibits no personality or voice or meaning to the world other than to serve as an avatar for the player to interact with the world. A lot of people have argued against this, that it's impossible to shape yourself into another world and we require something to latch on to. They're right... a bit.
- **1.2 CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE** - Linear choices and non-linear choices, adventure books and video-games are compared here and I use the example of *Portal* to try and express what a linear video-game actually is.
- **1.3 CAN A COMPUTER MAKE YOU CRY?** - The forefather of interactive storytelling, Chris Crawford, has argued this case for many decades. You might not even know his name yet he's responsible for every single explosive experience that you and I have ever had in a video-game. So, can a computer really make you cry? The answer is: it did.
- **1.4 SAVE THE WORLD** - Jane McGonigal's quote sets off an exploration into a long asked question of the duty of video-games and their service to the world. Whose life are they meant to enrich?
- **1.5 AN EMERGENT EXPERIENCE** - The power of emergent storytelling, detailing my own story with a certain character from *Fallout New Vegas*.

1.1 BLANK SLATES

“Game designers think that players can project themselves onto empty shell characters. I think this is a huge mistake.”— David Cage (Director of *Heavy Rain*, *Fahrenheit/Indigo Prophecy*)

Video-games are the only interactive medium to ever grace the world. They just so happen to be filled with designers who think that interactivity itself is a problem and that we should all aspire to be more ‘cinematic’. David Cage created a video-game that felt like lightning in a bottle but in retrospect turned out to be one of the biggest game design mistakes of the 21st century. Unfortunately, the game press went wild and it seemed the whole community agreed that it was a ‘great game’.

The problem I have with *Heavy Rain* is that it doesn’t empathize with the player or allow him to care in the slightest. It asks you to care then force feeds you character relationships which should serve as your narrative motivation. More importantly, it doesn’t respect your interactivity. The choices you take and the characters you grow into don’t matter in the end because David Cage wanted to tell you a story whether you liked it or not. For example, one of the characters you play is Scott Shelby and he just so happens to be the Origami Killer (the antagonist of the game and general child killer). For the whole of the game you’re given moral choices on how to approach situations and you’re allowed to read your character’s thoughts for guidance.

Except Scott never ever thinks about the murdering he’s done or the vile crimes he’s committed. This feels way too lazy and it’s hammered home by some selfish design later on when you investigate a typewriter repair shop and the camera cuts away for a second before coming back to show a murdered bloke. The game takes away your control so it can, forgive the language, bullshit you into believing that you actually have control over Scott’s character.

Heavy Rain is a flawed, flawed game right from its plot-hole ridden story, poor character development and absolutely reckless disregard for the player. It comes to the point where the player pretty much has nothing to do but push buttons and listen to terrible voice acting enact the terrible script. This is not a video-game but rather something aspiring to be a video-game. David Cage himself said he takes pride in reaching a “cinematic level of narrative” as if we weren’t capable of that already or perhaps we’re below the cinematic level by default. He sets us back years of storytelling development all to tell a terrible story.

All of these problems come inherent when you shove the player into a pre-determined character who already has relationships and motives and things he cares about. It’s hard to identify with this in a game such as *Red Dead Redemption* when the game asks you to care about your cowboy’s family and he’s doing it for the “Love of his wife” when you don’t even find out ‘your wife’s name until half-way through the game.

Blank slates are player characters that are usually voiceless and have no tied elements that restrict the player’s identity. They allow the player to project his mindset and self upon the player protagonist and act in this world as if it were his own. A lot, and I do mean a lot, of people don’t like this they think it’s lazy writing or it’s just lazy design. What happens instead is that people fail to understand why games such as *Half-Life 2* and *BioShock* are so immensely

powerful - because they're personal - and this lack of understanding leads to the direction the industry is headed in.

Far Cry 2 was a game about you. It was about finding your own way in the world, planning emergently and taking the time to actually think about complex morality. Playing it on a permanent death runthrough (in which when you die then you restart the whole game) allows you to question the rules of the game further. It makes you double-take with your thoughts and the lack of a voice and personality allows players to immerse themselves into this world and the characters around it. *Far Cry 3* is about being stuck on an island and trying to rescue 'your girlfriend'. The problem here is that we're asked to care about characters that we don't *know* or even get the time to know.

Blank slates found in *Half-Life 2*, *New Vegas*, *BioShock* and many others allow players to ease into the world and act out on their own interests rather than (for example) David Cage's. A lot of people think *New Vegas* isn't a blank slate example given it calls you a Courier and throws amnesia in your face never telling who exactly you are playing. That's a good thing, it means the player himself is the character and he creates the legacy and not the designer who lays it all out and points at the player and says "This is who you are!" because self-definition is more powerful than being labeled, introspection is more powerful than retrospection with pre-determined characteristics.

Another problem people have with the game is that because we never find out who we are then the story itself suffers for it. This is completely wrong as there's no need to find out who the player character is, he is a vessel to carry us. The same people argue he isn't a blank slate given it already gives you a life; you were already a Courier, you had a day job and the guy already has a history. That somehow we should care about all this stuff when the game's story revolves around the player finding his place in the world.

Who else had a defined back-story and a day job?

Gordon Freeman.

He's been voted the best protagonist of all time by many gaming communities and yet he carries no personality. He has a PhD and once had a day job. We know next to nothing about his personal life other than the place he worked in was alright. With *New Vegas* we actually get to talk to the Courier's Office folk and learn little tidbits to cure those questions we had earlier but they're never the focus. Blank slates need a reason to exist, you just can't drop a character out of the sky, he needs small effects to bring him or her to life so that we may take the reins.

People often argue that taking away a player's voice is going against their interactivity or is just lazy writing. I disagree. Games such as *Mass Effect* and *New Vegas* let the player decide what he wants to see while *Half-Life 2* and *BioShock* employ the lack of voice to tell a story. *Half-Life 2* removes the voice so the player can feel totally immersed in this world and, as we'll discuss further in this book, helps Valve re-enforce the themes of slavery through ironic non-interactivity. *BioShock* actually does something completely different..

BioShock's blank slate is used in a way of weaving the player into the world before re-enforcing his place in the world with the narrative. Namely, turning him from a nobody into a somebody through the game's plot twist. This is completely welcomed give we become a part of Rapture through our hours of play, the world of *BioShock*, so it is easy to identify ourselves with being a part of this place and the narrative shock is so shocking because it neatly inserts our

place into the weaved tree of narrative. *BioShock 2* made the mistake of giving the player a pre-determined relationship, with a Little Sister called Eleanor, and forcing him to sit through the narrative with her serving as a 'main motivation'. We were already a part of Rapture from the beginning and I was less comfortable with that thought. I didn't get the chance to find my place in the world, rather I was forced with a goal. *BioShock 2: Minerva's Den* (the DLC six hour story for the game) is an entirely separate adventure that resonates with the original *BioShock* in that it allows you to ease yourself into the game and coming out as a part of Rapture and the way it shies away from some of the problems of the first game (the third act becoming a mockery of game mechanics re-enforcing thematics, the final boss not being a final boss and the ending) makes it superior in some aspects. If you have *BioShock 2* or have no interest in the main story of that game then do download *Minerva's Den*, it is right up there with some of the finest video-game stories of all time and is in many respects superior to *BioShock*.

I don't hate characters with voices, I hate characters that are designed to have more of a voice in the narrative or just the general game than me. Cole Phelps is a prime example because in *LA Noire* the interrogation room (which should be a massive compelling mechanic) is boiled down to three vague dialogue choices. When it works, which isn't often, it's chilling and shows what we're capable of but when it gets ugly it's because you don't *know* exactly what Cole will say. There's no line of preview or anything to help you when, literally, you end up falsely calling out a grieving widow by accusing her of murdering her husband.

BioShock does something different, it eases you into a character with a voice. As you assimilate powers and take in the lore of Rapture and the hell of it all, you become Rapture. The narrative reflects this in its mind-blowing set-piece of a plot twist and, like *Half-Life 2*, it allows Irrational Games to re-enforce ideas of non-interactivity. You ease yourself into a pre-determined characters life and it feels so right. The whole 'voice' thing doesn't become literal, it does in *Minerva's Den*.

The problem is that the community and game developers think that blank slates are poisonous or that players can't be trusted or that they're just poor excuses for lazy design. This is completely irrational thinking and it goes against our progression into an industry full of design quirks from talking guys to non-talking guys. I don't prefer either but I do have respect for both and saying that blank slates do not offer players the chance to express themselves without a player character's story and relationships getting in the way is completely dumbfounded.

Speaking characters who talks for us rather than for themselves are rare but they work wonderfully. *Uncharted's* Nathan Drake, *Assassin Creed's* Ezio and even *LA Noire's* Cole Phelps from time to time are all good examples of great pre-determined characters that do not abuse interactivity. This doesn't suggest that the opposite is wrong, this is a medium after all and all means of storytelling are welcome.

I say to David Cage that if you think it's a mistake that we can't project ourselves on to empty shell characters, then you've already been proven wrong by hundreds of stories. *Half-Life 2*, *New Vegas*, *Fallout 3*, *Metro 2033*, *BioShock*, *BioShock 2: Minerva's Den*, *Dead Space*, *Far Cry 2*, *Mass Effect 1 & 2*, *Shadow of the Colossus* and the *Call of Duty* series use blank slates to their full potential. They immerse us in the world, carry our choices with higher regard than our player character's and allow us the explore the world and characters on our own terms rather than on someone elses.

Simply put, when done right, blank slate characters can allow for the ultimate in interactivity. So can player characters with already set goals and history, but only when they employ empathy with the player's place in the world and allow him to lock arms with the player character rather than stand on the sidelines and watch as the guy/gal goes through the narrative with little effect carrying into the player. Games are not an escapist medium like films or literature, they are an expression between player and designer; blank slates can help ease the pain of that relationship.

1.2 CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

“George Lucas should have distributed the "source code" to *Star Wars*. Millions of fans would create their own movies and stories. Most of them would be terrible, but a few would be genius.”

– Gabe Newell (co-founder of Valve Software)

What separates an adventure book and a video-game?

Nothing?

Everything.

Choose your own adventure books have been around since people remembered there was such a thing as page numbers. There have been countless, countless numbers of them and they have not suddenly evaporated into a niche genre. It's a shame because I think these type of books are my favourite given it's the same reason I love video-games. The interaction creates expressionism within these confined spaces.

Yet I love video-games a lot more, because they aren't choose your own adventure, they're something else entirely. Diverse and massively emergent, they do not rely on page numbers or linear choices already set for the reader. However, choose your own adventure books are in some ways superior as a form of storytelling. For starters, there's not a budget attached and you could have your reader in 18th Century France or the Titanic floating around the Moon at the first choice. For video-games there's an expectation to render and polish and high-definition up everything. The more I think of it the more I think we've never had a proper time travel video-game, it's always been confined so as to be balanced and controlled.

For example, *TimeShift* is a game that includes shooting things and manipulating time. By 'manipulating time' in video-games that usually means a 5 second pause or rewind with a set amount of juice. In a choose your own adventure book these choices are more fleshed out and can go on for hundreds of pages all developing choice. These are linear choices they can never change, yet they hold more worth than a typically non-linear applicant of a linear choice, the time manipulation, which can be used anywhere in the game if you so please.

What is linear? Is it bad?

Far from it in fact.

See it's odd given the linear game has both been done massive justice and has led to, what I consider, a monumental downfall of interactive storytelling. For example, *Half-Life 2* and *BioShock* use linearity as a means to funnel the player from set-piece to set-piece all the while filling him in on the story during the action. There are no cut-scenes, the player is free to jump around the air while he is talked at about objectivism or aliens, there's no forceful linearity on how you should act but whether where you act. In a game such as *Homefront*, however that is far from the case, you are given a weapon and a set objective on the ball. You have to wait for NPCs to open the doors for you and then wait for them to tell you when you can shoot that guy, if you shoot that guy before they tell you to then you fail *everything*.

Choose your own adventure books are different from video-games in that they cannot be interacted with beyond a basic page flip. Does this mean they don't contain mechanics? I'm not sure. You make your decision and turn a page, how is that any different from a button press?

Mechanics are used to interact with the world in a video-game, in a choose your own adventure book, there's only one sole mechanic of interaction.

Portal is described as a linear puzzle game and it definitely shows. There's a lack of any replay value to the game aside from the jokes and jibes done by the main antagonist, GLaDOS, but having a puzzle game means there's only one solution and thus we're left with a choose your own adventure solution. There is only one way out of every room and each choice is defined, printed and bound. The problem here is that a book can offer many other linear choices but a puzzle can only be solved, or is designed to be solved, one way. There's room for experimentation in the video-game but not in the book.

With this comes something weird in that the story of *Portal* is set around a sequence of entrapping test chambers as you're watched by a psychotic robot who may or may not have some cake for you. Eventually you escape the trap and find yourself loose in the bowels of the facility and on the hunt for GLaDOS. What is weird here that the general sense of gameplay does not change. The game does not become sprawlingly non-linear in its level design nor its approach to progression, there are still puzzles here to be solved.

Does this negate *Portal* as a way of non-linear narrative? Perhaps. As a video-game it is a set sequence yet as a story it's about breaking free from the grips of an Orwellian overlord. The themes at play do not match up with what's been explored with the gameplay. The main mechanic of portal is shooting two portals that link to one another allowing you to throw yourself through one and out the other to solve puzzles and stuff. There's no giant themes of setting yourself free, although one could probably be argued, and still the level design and overall pacing keeps you caged in puzzling throughout.

A choose your own adventure book has the same rhythm to it. It is all through one mechanic and even if the story is about breaking free, there's still a page turn to be had. There's no change to the gameplay, there's no change to the adventure and it isn't as much of a choice as much as it is just a problem to be solved. Problems direct the player or reader towards a goal, choices let the player choose their goal. In the case of *Portal* there is no choice of goal, only problems (puzzles) to be solved. This might be the same exact case with choose your own adventure books, except perhaps they allow the reader (given the medium) to choose which adventure to take and see what goal they have to achieve.

A problem is a straightforward decision that gives you the best out-come and this is exactly what players want. Whenever a game asks them to choose between a small sword and a small sword with a special attack, then they'll go straight for the upgraded weapon. There is no need to *not* choose the other variant unless it's entirely cosmetic. A choice is something that offers items or outcomes of equal value and this is why when it comes to designing moral choices, video-games (usually) *suck*.

Whenever you take the good choice you're rewarded with some goodies, same goes for the bad choice, this can be put on to a moral metric in games such as *Mass Effect* and a loose one such as *BioShock*. These are games that encourage you to take one path and stick to it, otherwise you may well be punished. The same goes for *Infamous 2* which, if you decide against the 'Good' choice and are already deep in the 'Good' karma meter, then you are punished in the form of being stripped of some of your powers. These do not encourage choices, this is not choosing your own adventure, this is just choosing which problem to face.

That doesn't make them any less interesting than choices, the actual questions posed, but when you're asked to choose between an Infinity Gauntlet or a pair of brass knuckles, and the two are linked via a moral choice, you tend to go towards the one that will reward you in the long run. The question posed is no longer about the actual question of morality but about the level of reward based on what the game's goal is.

Choose your own adventure books tend to have no real reward to them other than the actual outcome of your decision. There's no super weapons or Infinity Gauntlets or experience points, there's just cold hard outcomes and is that how it should be for video-games? Should an evil choice perhaps be the easiest yet riskiest approach, but yield the most reward, whereas the good choice requires more sacrifice and yield less reward? Is this the type of morality we should be teaching anyway? Surely we should be asking ourselves more morally ambiguous questions related to the current climate of debate.

I'm not sure on this one, this is entirely for you to decide, but the question I pose is this: are choose your own adventure books superior to video-games? Are they more interesting and naturally well designed rather than video-games which require persistence and choices linked to rewards making them basic problems? Without a giant fleshed out world of game mechanics, choose your own adventure books are simply books with problems in them for the reader to solve. They may even contain more choice than video-games given they don't have to assign outcomes to other mechanics such as levelling up and power weapons.

A video-game can ask you to choose between an apple and an orange, so can a choose your own adventure book, the only weird thing is that video-games would be the only one to attach a reward or something else towards the 'choice' meaning it denotes it to simple problem solving. Do books have this problem? What is the reward from problem solving in a book anyway? Choices decide which goal to take and perhaps choosing between exploring 18th Century France and just going home is itself a choice. Perhaps it's problem solving though, given you know that only one of those will let you read the entire book, or perhaps the author would be sneaky and have the home choice be the one actually having the adventure. What appears to be problem solving becomes a choice.

So do we need more choices in video-games? Choose your own adventure books are more choice driven than problem solving, does that make them superior in any way? Of course not. Video-games, fundamentally, are about problem solving. They are about achieving the goal rather than deciding it. First-person shooters, puzzle games and real-time strategy games all involve problem solving inherent of the genre choice. RTS games may offer a choice of which goal to achieve (such as going for either a peaceful or conflict victory) but they are still filled with how you can maximise your gold or experience points to get to that goal, they're still basic math problems which is the entire foundation of our medium.

Choices which do not associate themselves with other game mechanics can feel somewhat loose or just attached to the core game. A first-person shooter that decides your moral choice with a simple button press is a world away from shooting people in the face. The only genre I can think of which has choice absolutely integral to its game mechanics is the RPG genre and the best example I can think of is the *Mass Effect* series.

Mass Effect 2's dialogue mechanic is built around both problem solving and choice making. You need to both choose your goal with this system and achieve it. For example, you need to choose who leads a team or who hacks the terminals in the final mission. It's kind of

clear what the choice is, which could be a problem, but there are still multiple team members who could do this. This means that you could perhaps decide who would be best to stay behind and fight with you or perhaps this depends on your relationship with them throughout the game.

You also need to defuse situations and perhaps avoid firefights altogether with the dialogue system. At one point in the first game, in order to save one of your team members from shooting you in the face or being shot himself, you have to talk him out of it. There's a goal already here and there's even an element of choice right at the start of the dialogue sequence given you can just order one of your guys to shoot him in the face if you don't like him that much.

So, what separates a video-game and a choose your own adventure book?

One is fundamentally built on the fabric of choice making whereas the other is primarily problem based. This is an entirely rational thing and it doesn't make either medium of expression inferior or superior. Video-games are capable of choice themselves unlike choose your own adventure books and this, in perhaps some way, makes them a superior form of expression. They are more fleshed out in the methods that they can use to get across the interaction and the level of interaction play is less subtle than a choose your own adventure book.

Why does this matter?

Because we aren't just a problem solving medium, we are capable of choice that can affect a player's mindset and teach him stuff about the way he would act in situations. We are not a strict choice medium and that is a good thing, because problem solving adds a layer of depth and attachment to the choice interaction that isn't found in choose your own adventure books or any medium for that matter.

1.3 CAN A COMPUTER MAKE YOU CRY?

“It is a communications medium: an interactive tool that can bring people's thoughts and feelings closer together, perhaps closer than ever before. And while fifty years from now, its creation may seem no more important than the advent of motion pictures or television, there is a chance it will mean something more.” – Chris Hecker (Designer of *Spy Party*)

Artists, directors, writers and, yes, game designers have long fought over how to make people cry. They have long, long debated over whether connection is needed to the world or whether a more escapist format in which the audience participates as little is most effective. Video-games are weird in that they require active audience participation and thus the audience can never view a perfect version of themselves or somebody else.

I detailed my story of *Shadow of the Colossus* in the last volume, go Google it up, but that was just one experience that made me personally tear up. I will say that a wide percentage of gamers are waking up to this idea and being okay to the fact that video-games aren't this trivial little throwaway hobby. I opened up a long time ago and was quite happy to see what video-games have done to me.

So how do you make some-one cry? Does it require sympathy, empathy or a personal connection? People cry at *(500) Days of Summer* because it aptly reflects their experience in relationships, people cry at *2001: A Space Odyssey* because of its visual majesty and people cry at *Toy Story 3* because a few dumb plastic toys explore that dumb foolish thing called love. All of the above require a connection and perhaps a strong sense of empathy or at least an ability to identify with the characters' situations.

Video-games are different in that you can't exactly empathise with someone you're already playing meaning it's quite difficult to get across a video-game story strictly through a middle-man narrative (more on that later). Video-games require characters around the player character to be the best to be identified with and, given this is an interactive medium, an ability to interact with these characters and build relationships.

This is where the difficulty stems from. Given games are more of a medium of expressionism than escapism (a chance to interact with another world) they have their work cut out for them. They fundamentally require the ability to build relationships and interact with another world so as to connect the player and heighten his emotions and reactions. You can say what you want about the whole games are art thing but when you realise this then you can see why so many video-games are just about shooting things.

I'm one of the few people in the world to dislike *Red Dead Redemption* because it abuses the player's sense of empathy and his place in the world. *Red Dead Redemption* is a video-game about a guy called John Marston going on a hunt to bring down his old crime bosses in order to be re-united with his family. The problem with this narrative is that the game automatically assumes that the player will care about the family or be driven to re-unite John except we're already John Marston and our role in the world is restricted. There isn't even a chance at connection here.

That's not to say the game eventually connects, when the game shifts into the later stages and slows down its pacing then you kind of warm around John's family. It still makes me queasy when the story is told through cut-scenes and Marston is a completely different person to who I actually play him as. For example, in the cut-scenes he loves his family and knows all their names yet outside of the game I don't know the name of his wife (supposedly 'my wife', there's a lot of linguistic confusion between who does what in the game) and I shoot people in the face for the fun of it *because I can*.

A player character blocking my connection to a game world, namely Marston's already founded relationships and his place already in this world, it blocks my chance to perhaps cry. *Red Dead Redemption* ends on one powerful note and the story itself is brave and bold in exploiting the Western genre, but to me the way it's told is flimsy and relies on cinematic tropes to get the job done where interaction would best serve the player's interest. Marston is a player character after all and if he has more control than me in this world over what happens then something is clearly wrong.

A thought of mine is that video-games require us to step into another person's shoes but not assume that person's history, rather just their place in the world. With *Half-Life* we take on Gordon's PhD and his job in Black Mesa and in *BioShock* we take on some nameless guy who ends up being one of the most important names in the grand scheme of the plot. If we took on Gordon's past relationships, which are actually kind of hinted at such as the friendship with Barney, then we wouldn't exactly identify ourselves best with those relationships. We would certainly care but a player character who cares a lot more about you is obviously going to want to drive the narrative in a different direction.

I am not being an advocate of blank slate characters, I believe that many games can cleverly do the crying business without the need for a voiceless and nameless guy. *Red Dead Redemption* did put people to tears as did *Heavy Rain* (ugh) and many, many others. It doesn't have to be crying either, just a raw powerful connection such as in the *Assassin's Creed* series. The second game starts with Ezio's family being murdered and cleverly knows the player doesn't really care about people he's never met so we have Ezio pursuing a giant conspiracy instead.

What I am saying however is that building relationships through interaction rather than assumption is all the more powerful given the uniqueness that comes about of that. *Mass Effect 2* is built around a giant exploration of a whole team of characters with tens of hours of dialogue interaction each all built to engineer relationships and create history between the player and the characters. *Mass Effect 2* actually has less of a blank slate design to its player character too with Commander Shepard (the player character) starting the first game already with some relationships, knowledge and military history which brought him to the point.

A lot of people argue that *Mass Effect 2* doesn't have a story or that it's a horrible one. I for one think that's a stupid thing given that the whole 'plot arc' doesn't really need to go anywhere and the game is left to a more character-driven epic as it is the second act of the trilogy. This is when relationships are built in preparation to lose everything and win something in *Mass Effect 3*. I think of it more in the *Empire Strikes Back* sense that it's a character-driven story compared to a more plot-driven story with the precursor game/film - *Mass Effect/A New Hope* - and it's obvious which one I prefer. That's not to say that character-driven epics should be the only way to make people cry, yes they are required in some sense in order to acquit the

player with the game world and provide an anchor, but they can never be that powerful without something.

Mass Effect 2 was more striking and emotionally powerful for those who played the first game given they watched all of the plot bloat up and start a giant chain of events. The plot was built on intrigue and mystery, *Mass Effect 2*'s story is built around exploring characters with a history. There are character explorations in the first and when you complete the game you can then import your save data into the second game and third, meaning that it is probably the most personal game ever created. There's a real chill when one of the characters mentions that one little favour you did for them two years ago.

I cried at *Shadow of the Colossus* because I felt a connection to a video-game that I never thought possible, but that connection required serious sympathy for another character. Through my interaction I gained a relationship that wasn't done through dialogue but through touch and that might have might it have a lot more bite to it than *Mass Effect 2*. That isn't to say that game doesn't come close, it comes so close but to me *Shadow of the Colossus* is just the superior game given how it plays with both interactivity and non-interactive elements.

Can a computer make you cry?

It already did.

1.4 SAVE THE WORLD

“My goal for the next decade is to try to make it as easy to save the world in real life as it is to save the world in online games.” – Jane McGonigal (Author of *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make us Better and How they Can Change the World*)

It's been often said that video-games have a duty to the world and to themselves. It is to enrich the lives of people and to bring about an unparalleled artistic integrity. So far they've struggled to come to terms with their identity and relied heavily on other mediums techniques to get across their themes and ideas, such as film or comic books, and thus far they're not exactly an interactive medium yet. They're not even respected as one yet, the BAFTA 2011 video-game awards included Dominic Cooper (some actor guy in the UK) coming out and reading from the autocue that “I think we can all agree that video-games are a visual medium.” to which I promptly got a tiny bit too angry.

A question has been raised more recently however is to who that duty is exactly to in the world. Whose life are they meant to enrich? Mine or yours? The poor or the rich? Who needs a better sense of community and worth to the world and who needs to be a better person? Video-games through interactivity have the capacity to push players into new worlds they otherwise would not wish to venture within such as the Orwellian *Portal* or the giant Michael Bayathon war epic *Modern Warfare 2*. These aren't situations people exactly would want to be in yet they enjoy them regardless and it seems odd no-one has taken a step back and realized something.

This is tremendously weird.

We are enjoying ourselves within a war environment, we are chuckling to black humour as a robotic overlord shouts at us and forces us to complete puzzles and yet it feels weird to me. I argued before that a player's place in the world is the most important thing a designer should consider at all times but yet we still don't exactly fear or feel a part of these worlds completely because they're not physical and only passively interactive. We could turn the game off if wanted.

This then brings me to a questioning of my own beliefs whether or not video-games are about bringing yourself into a world, doing things you otherwise normally wouldn't and then coming out knowing stuff about yourself. With a film or book you have to identify yourself with a character rather than carry out actual actions within that context, whereas in a video-game there is no 'character' (or there shouldn't be) there is only you and the plot and, if you so please, a voice you have no control over but gives reason for you to exist.

Then why is it we are enjoying ourselves?

Surely a massive war epic like *Modern Warfare 2* with all of its horrific violence and stuff should shock and make us think about war yet millions still play its multi-player mode and mouth off about which gun is the best. The same goes for *Portal* in which, myself included, we all go off about its level design and how the writing is pitch-perfect. These are video-games, they are not toys remember, they are a medium of expression yet *Portal* (which carries a lot of thematic and self-exploration weight) can still be a part of that weird thing called 'fun'.

Are all great works of art still contained in that bubble of 'fun'? What is 'fun' anyway? Is it the intrigue and the exploration, is it the laughs and awe or is it something else. Fun can mean an explosion of positive mental emotion or finding something about yourself that puts a smile on your face and a good feeling in your gut. It's so weird to talk about something so abstract which holds such massive relevance to culture.

The duty of video-games is, fundamentally, to entertain and entertainment can mean many things to different people. It can be exploiting an interest in criminology by playing *LA Noire* and enjoying getting the root to people (although that is only slightly possible given the vague dialogue choices), it can be blowing stuff up and watching stuff being picked apart like a sandcastle in the heavy wind such as *Red Faction: Guerrilla* or it can be something else. Fun isn't enough, it's important, but it needs a bite to it; a meaning if you will.

Far Cry 2 has been panned from side to side because of its core gameplay consisting of giant walkabouts, annoying AI and many other technical problems which lead to a dull and demanding pace. I love it. It has this bite to it that makes all the firefights seem so worthwhile given that a typical twenty minute mission of "Kill this guy, he's in the mountains" turns into a five hour epic of planning, traversing and executing or just half an hour of storming through the front gates and littering everyone with bloodied bullet holes.

Far Cry 2 is powerful to me not because it considers a more cerebral approach to firefights, which reminds me of the bygone era of Lucasarts adventure games such as *Monkey Island* for some odd reason, but also because of this daft interest of mine called politics. I love the world of old men lying to a camera, spending tax payer's money and happily ruining people's lives to just say "The other party did it first". See, I like to think that modern politics has devolved into political spin-word contests and party politics create a disparity between the general public and said politicians. This means they are more likely to turn towards someone they identify with or can explain things on a level they understand, not necessarily coming down to their level but providing a scapegoat or an enemy which humans quickly identify with. In the case of modern politics we now have the working class of the Western world turning towards what some would identify as extremist groups such as the Tea Party in America or the British National Party here in the United Kingdom.

This disparity shows a sheer link between the class divide and the political divide as politics becomes old news in a world of new news and spin-words. Adapt to survive and all of the above is completely relevant to the world of *Far Cry 2* and I absolutely love the world it pictures. Not only does it manage to replicate a political structure built on militarism (from both sides) but it also manages to avoid all the boringness and replace political debates with giant showers of power from either side who constantly bicker and engage in conflict in order to somehow win the support of the people. It reminds me of both current North African politics itself, but more closely, of the American political system in which (currently) the Republicans and Democrats are bickering over ideas connected to Christianity and traditional beliefs such as the need to help the poor but also the pro-life stance that many Republicans take. They are waging war, not literally as *Far Cry 2* demonstrates, and wanting to win the support of the people and whenever I think of that I think of the sad solemn faces of the poverty stricken peoples of *Far Cry 2*'s world.

The politics of the world of *Far Cry 2* has turned into a world of disaster and a class divide beyond consideration. Does it show what our world could become? I think it shows what it

already is given the poverty stricken are already turning to a killer and (in many ways) an absolute mad man for help in escaping this political wasteland. Which killer? The Jackal character perhaps, the one that sets off *Far Cry 2*'s main narrative of wanting to go after and kill him? No. It's the player character. The Jackal is a ghost, for the majority of the game, and when he shows up he wants to help the populace and as do you but no-one in the game is morally right or wrong. The poverty stricken turn to you to help, giving you medicine and stuff in return, you then go off and shoot people in the face. The two main factions shoot each other in the face all the while and the Jackal sits in his phantom throne throwing guns and bullets at you all to kill each other with.

This is the world of politics, this is a world of grey moral and not of party bickering. It is not of the firefights showing strength but of the truth face of what the monster of modern politics is. Could this save the world?

Possibly.

When a game can subtly make you realise about the current situation of the world in a more abstract sense, but still conquer the land of entertainment, that to me is saving the world. It is enriching my view of the political struggle and transforming some of my views on things such as my definition of democracy and of my view of current political structures and their associations with religion. I have books to teach me all of that but video-games with the powers of interactivity can put me right inside of these struggles and real-life situations so as to transform my view.

I am, by comparison to half of the world's populace, a young rich man with an internet connection. *Far Cry 2* made me a more politically active person, more so than I was before, and by that effect I now regularly comment and Tweet and spread the wrath of my political opinion. I am a better person for this and perhaps the world is better for it. I am safe from the sinkhole of party politics or from blaming a scapegoat such as immigration for my country's problems, that's not to say I wasn't safe before but *Far Cry 2* strengthened my refusal into an opposition. Now I can convince and shift people's mindset into my own and perhaps make people, who hold a vote in the Western world, lead a chain of events to benefit the world as a whole.

But... perhaps that's not all.

See, video-games have this raw power exclusive to them to not only transform a political mindset but perhaps encourage something more charitable or perhaps change people's perception or drive towards certain issues. It's kind of hard to accomplish this given the millions that are needed to make a video-game and ninety percent of them consisting of absolute juvenile shoot people in the face stuff.

What if you could play as a poverty stricken child?

What if you could play as a child soldier?

What if you could play as a slave on the run?

Doesn't that sound powerful and right? Doesn't that sound just so *interesting*? What if we could put ourselves in these roles and feel around problems and choices as they came, what if our lives could be enriched by these powerful interactive sequences and what if they were profitable? Because, currently, video-games have this problem in that fun isn't enough but it's all we've got. I want to change that, not through writing, hopefully grow up some day and make my dream game.

All of those game concepts are about extreme dis-empowerment which is the direct opposite in what the mainstream publishers are wanting at the moment. Money makes the world go round, I don't think I even need to write that. Do video-games have a duty or do the publishers have a duty? I'm not saying developers considering the vast majority of my complaints or the problems I'll be talking about in the next section will be due to publisher pressure and not necessarily developer intention to make those mistakes.

I think that I myself cannot stand alone as proof that video-games can save the world given that I am one person and maybe the world is better as a whole, but without us all being changed then the vast majority of my thinking can be summed up under the word 'Idealism' and I'm not even an idealist myself.

1.5 AN EMERGENT EXPERIENCE

“What have games given me? Experiences. Not surrogate experiences, but actual experiences, many of which are as important to me as any real memories.” – Tom Bissell (Author of *Extra Lives: Why Games Matter*)

Video-games are a medium of transformative works. They are constructed spaces in which interaction with worlds can take place and thus no game playthrough is the same. The cut-scenes are the same, definitely, but the way a player uses the mechanics to morph the game space is entirely unique to that playthrough. In considering this we can perfectly imagine the fact that, by default, all games function on an emergent gameplay structure. The unique experiences came about of unique interaction and are thus procedurally generated and not bound to happen like the cut-scenes are.

A common complaint of video-games is that they are often not properly digestible, as in, they are not consumed in the way you read a book or watch a film. It is the only medium in which audience participation is the only way the content actually progresses and thus many gamers out there will never, ever see the end boss or even the second level. This content blockade fused with the unique playthrough that the player creates means that video-games are about a separation; story and gameplay.

I'm not entirely sure that is a good thing.

Considering the role of the player in the world, as an interactor, half-author of the game world. The game world the designer creates is more often than not simply bound and printed and linear, it is the space in which interaction takes place and not the space itself that is manipulated. Many games beat off this bound rule such as *Minecraft* or *Dwarf Fortress* or any space manipulation game. This 'space' also includes cut-scenes and dialogue trees and many other strictly linear traits of common non-interactivity.

Non-interactivity as a basis of getting across a message within a medium of interactivity rather goes against the progression of methods and means of passing on ideas through actual interactive means. Designers aren't lazy but they see the cinematic methods as just a way that works to get across a message and convey a narrative, so they simply apply the non-interaction to separate the interactive places and actually alienate the player's actions. It's the perfect separation of gameplay and story.

The problem here is that the procedurally generated experience, done via the player using the mechanics to interact within the world, creates two narratives. There's the narrative of the player and there's the narrative of the player character, which I'll discuss deeper in my middle-man chapter later on, but to put it bluntly there is the narrative that you are telling and the narrative the game is telling.

I think the perfect example of this is *Grand Theft Auto IV* in which Rockstar tried to 'grow up' from its glory days of vulgarity and violence without meaning, they wanted to move into satire and emotional connection with characters, they failed. Rockstar did not push the emotional connection and all of the themes they wanted to push through interactivity, instead trying the same techniques they had done previously, via a cut-scene. When you have a

narrative in a game that tells you that the player character is a good guy and is full of regret about a war, that is powerful and all that, but that does not apply to any player who creates a separate narrative.

Many players will simply go about the game recklessly driving and shooting innocent people in the face, because that's fun to them, it isn't disgusting in the slightest, (do we have to have this again?) but what is interesting is that there's two narratives telling the player two entirely separate threads of themes and ideas and (more importantly) *motives*. Here we have freedom to create chaos and another which says sit down and listen to emotional outpourings; it's as if it's asking you whether you want to play or watch, interact or stay quiet; except we're inside a video-game *already*.

Rockstar did it with *Red Dead Redemption* too, and I've been banging on about 'pre-determined relationships' for too long but they do carry weight here, they just keep repeating the same mistakes. Do not get me wrong, I found the ending to both games to be insanely powerful and both were well written and high-budget games, except I found the emergent narrative I created all the more interesting and personal. There are stories on the internet of people being trapped in the middle of the desert while the cops come to get them or of a thunderstorm serving the background to a chaotic stand-off in a town or of something *unique* and that is what makes video-games themselves unique. They are interactive, they all contain an emergent experience and the extent of which a game gets across its messages and themes through interactive means depends on the extent of which the designer respects that the player's narrative exists.

Complimenting the player's place in the world and allowing him freedom within your world means that your messages will be the same and thus be ultimately powerful. I'm not saying re-enforce interactive methods with non-interactive ones, but support the player's exploration of those ideas you want him to endure. *Red Dead Redemption* is powerful but it is limited by its methods of non-interactivity and its abuse of the player's role in the world, if it had been engineered to be a more emergent experience then perhaps it would be even more powerful. These are video-games, they are not films, and using your mechanics to tell a story can be a lot more powerful than a simple cut-scene.

Here's an example of telling a story through a mechanic and not through non-interactive means: *New Vegas*. *New Vegas* features a character that the player may or may not come across, around ¼ of the way through the game, and he's called Boone. Boone has a little quest concerning his past and (more importantly) him dealing with that past. He was a Sniper and part of the New California Republic, one of the dominating factions of New Vegas, he's haunted by his days as a soldier.

His first quest contains him trying to find someone who hurt him in a different way, another haunting memory, not too long ago his wife was taken from him. Not just taken from him but sold to some Legion soldiers, Caesar's Legion being another key faction of the land and one of the factions vying for control over the game-changing Hoover Dam, Boone's wife was sold to the slavers by someone in the town.

The player takes on the quest and rustles about the town, Novac, to try to dig up clues by talking and interrogating. I myself found the killer in a matter of minutes due to my evil curiosity, there was a locked safe with my name on it, and some detective work on my part. I

threw a hat on, that Boone had given me, as a way of letting him know who to shoot in the face as I led them in front of his watch-tower.

Boom.

The culprit died and I returned to Boone's spot to collect my reward and talk about the outcome. He still seemed cagey, hiding something, even his deadpan facial expressions gave something away. Before handing over the evidence I found in the safe, I give it a read over, it's the bill of sale. A line sticks out at me "the exclusive rights to ownership and sale of the slave **Carla Boone for the sum of one thousand bottle caps, and those of her unborn child**" *Unborn child*. He isn't telling me everything.

Boone says that he has nothing to do and I ask him if maybe he wants to come on my quest to save the world. He is hesitant at first before he joins me on my quest.

We journeyed together for weeks, avoiding the main quest for the most part, simply going off and doing quests and coming across Legion Camps and letting Boone off of his leash. He went mental with his sniper rifle, I bought a new one which gave massive damage, I thought he was achieving catharsis in some way. That sweet revenge was his, yet something managed to stick out about the way he moved and talked.

The mechanic that I think can express the themes and ideas that *New Vegas* may or may not be implying is the dialogue system. A character says something, you choose what to say back, it's simple and people in a game like *Mass Effect* and *Fallout 3* will happily relish in their life story at the drop of a hat. *New Vegas* is guilty of this too but the Boone character is unique in that he holds off on that until you've been with him for a good amount of time. It reminds me of Agro in *Shadow of the Colossus* and the giant world that was used to connect the Colossi, you had to use Agro to travel throughout the land and you naturally grew into liking him and eventually caring for him. In my case, you eventually *cried* for him.

That nearly happened twice.

Boone's story finally starts to unravel as we head for the Legion's headquarters, Caesar's palace, it's just a tent really. I beat Legion soldiers with my melee weapons while Boone whails on all of them with his sniper rifle. We reach Caesar's tent and, before entering, I quiz him on his history once more. I want to enjoy this moment and see him open up about the ultimate catharsis.

Boone opens up with a quest *I Forgot to Remember to Forget*.

Odd.

We go to Bitter Springs, an old spot where Boone was ordered to murder the residents. His higher powers thought it would be military resistance in the area, not women and children. The 1st Recon squad had to carry out these orders and Boone was *forced* to murder innocent civilians all in the name of some silly dispute with the Khans tribe or something.

I could see the hell of it all in his eyes.

He suggested we spend the night nearby, a ridge where he was stationed. I watch him as he shuffles about his words in the request, tries to not make eye contact. We sleep. The day comes and he tells me there's a group of Legion recruits coming towards us.

We pop their heads off one by one and for a moment he seems less... violent.

Except there's something else in his eyes. The thought of having to murder women and children, not by your own choice, that would *kill* anyone. What else was inside that mind, I wondered. There was something else, something I missed.

What happened to his wife?

We travel for a while, I don't want to talk to him. He looks happy and contempt, even gaining some special armour (which is useless compared to power armour), I don't want to nudge him though. We go about solving quests and gaining items ready for the Hoover Dam battle. I decide to sell off everything I don't need and start stocking up, taking inventory and talking with the factions I've slowly developed relations with. All the while I see into his eyes, behind those glasses, he's hiding something in that gravelly voice and I can feel it.

We head to Goodsprings, my point of beginning the game. The sky is out, the sun is beaming and he's ready to tell me something. Something he has never told anyone.

After Boone's wife was taken, he tracked her down for a long while. He chased after whispers, hunted rumours and went through torture of thought. His world was taken from him, he wanted her back. He tracked her down to a slaver camp, not a small encampment, but hundreds of Legion slavers.

I looked at him, I wondered about all that rage at the slavers. Where did it come from... no one man is that... driven to kill others out of 'mindless revenge'.

His pregnant Carla was being auctioned off in a massive crowd of Legion. There was no way he could rescue her, the moment he wandered into camp they would murder her. I asked him about what he had; distance and a rifle between them. I asked him what he did.

Rather than subject his wife and child to the horrors of Legion slavery, he took her life. In that instance he wasn't Craig Boone, he wasn't human. With one shot of euthanasia, he obtained a suicidal drive through life. He forgot to remember... to forget. The world he once had was finally gone, he had no catharsis to find, he was dead to himself. All that rage, all that anger and the hellish look in his eyes was all at that guilt. All guilt out of that stupid, stupid act of that stupid, stupid thing we all call love. Love, devotion and emotion. These are not the badges that soldiers earn.

Boone wasn't a soldier, he was once, but he died a long time ago. He was a husk of what he once was. He starts relaying all this to me and it's hard to take in.

It's at this point I'm taken back to *Fallout 3* and how odd a lot of games try and push their stories. Pre-determined stories make me angry, but in this case, I almost feel *insulted* by all of them. Here I am being all sad over a video-game character I've learned to care for, learned who he was and what he wanted in life. What he had lost. *Fallout 3* has you spend twenty minutes with the Dad character and then he supposedly serves as the main motivation for the rest of the game. Here I am in some virtual world caring for a character I've spend tens of hours with... like a friend.

We wander up to Goodsprings cemetery, and I look amongst the sunset. There's a new day brewing behind me, behind the horizon, another day for Boone. Tomorrow's another day, the words are like acid to his ears. Another day of nightmare and torture, of being a husk. He's searching for a solace he knows he won't find, I can see it on his face. I've dealt with some of the trauma, but this is something that can't be cured... I look Boone in the eyes and I swear for one moment there's a connection like no other. For once, *New Vegas* leaps straight into one of the greatest work of interactivity.

The mechanic of dialogue interaction has allowed me to so far prod and poke and unravel a psychologically damaged soldier. Through the other mechanics at my disposal, *New Vegas* allows me to explore something that's controversial and ultimately some of the most

powerful stuff on the planet. All that anguish and misery in Boone's countenance is still there and there's nothing I can do to stop that, a lot of players will just get on, but having spent close to sixty hours of gameplay with the chap I feel I need to be a friend.

The controversial subject I am talking about is euthanasia.

I decided to grant Boone peace.

There's a common mechanic we use to interact within game spaces: shooting things in the face. Usually it's done directed at cannon fodder or basically without any meaning or real bite or drive behind each shot. It's emotionless and cold, which is a shame considering we've never really had a 'proper' war game. *Call of Duty 4* managed a scene involving an atomic bomb explosion but the shooting mechanic has never been done justice, at least not intentionally, and that's still unchanged.

New Vegas allowed me to euthanize my best friend.

That emergent experience conquered my mind more than any linear story ever has, including *BioShock*, it's up there with *Shadow of the Colossus* in its supportive nature of an emergent narrative rather than a linear one. That's not to say a powerful game narrative is still there, it's supported, but so is the chance for something to arise emergently. *BioShock* kinda does this with how the player deals with certain characters but not full on letting to you come out of a linear story and deal with it in such massive possible ways.

I agree with a certain quote in this book by a certain designer, that any pre-written or emergent narrative is powerful in its own right, but when the two compliment each other or are both held with the same regard then interactivity becomes something else entirely. It becomes artistic.

SECTION TWO: PROBLEMS

“To summarize the summary of the summary: people are a problem.” - Douglas Adams
(*Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, sci-fi writer)

The main problems that face our interactive mediums are the same that faced film in its early days: applying techniques from other mediums to tackle the issue of delivering a message. It's that simple, we use non-interactivity where interactivity could easily be used to convey the same message and cover up the holes of our little medium with cut-scenes and convoluted 'cinematic' set-pieces.

That's not to say the above techniques are bad when applied in the right context, *Metal Gear Solid 4* and *Call of Duty 4* are both great examples of interactive and non-interactive techniques fused together (cut-scenes with interactive elements and cinematic sequence with interactive space respectively), but these techniques are overly used in a medium founded around interactivity.

In this section I will explore these problems in depth and seek to reach a few key issues which could be easily addressed, outlining my solutions in the next section, some of this section you may dislike heavily. I've already said that *Red Dead Redemption* and *Fallout 3* are player-role insulting and horribly told video-games, *Fallout 3* less so, so that's pretty much alienated half of my audience given the love for both games.

Nevertheless, I will crack on and try to unravel many problems with perspective, narrative discourse, actual care and over-writing in video-games. I will try to reference the examples I employed to demonstrate the powers, we already have, seen in Section One but for the most part this will be quite heavy exploration of key problems.

- **2.1 TAKING A NEW PERSPECTIVE** - The problem with perspective of video-game protagonists or designer's approach to the player's role in the world. How *Mass Effect* is more a first-person shooter than *Call of Duty Black Ops*.
- **2.2 GOD DOESN'T CARE** - Not entirely true, but this problem lies in the lexical confusion of the words 'story' and 'storytelling' and how that's engineered a medium that doesn't know what it's doing. Also this deals with re-enforcing to the gaming media and public that it's okay to confuse the two and it's okay to separate gameplay and story.
- **2.3 A PATHETIC EXCUSE FOR AN INTERACTIVE MEDIUM** - Video-games suck. Pure and simple, we are a medium that prides itself in spinwords such as 'story', 'cinematic' and 'innovative' and yet our lexicon palette tells so much about ourselves.
- **2.4 YOU PLAY AS...** - In media res stories and the lack of player empathy in video-games, *Infamous vs Infamous 2* and the player character's role in a medium strictly around audience participation.
- **2.5 OVERWRITING** - A common complaint of video-games is a lack of good writing. I try and investigate this criticism by applying some basic game development logic along with trying to figure out how this problem came about the first place. Is it the writer's fault that game writing sucks or is someone else's fault?

2.1 TAKING A NEW PERSPECTIVE

“First-person shooter (FPS) is a video game genre which centres the gameplay around gun- and projectile weapon-based combat through the first person perspective; i.e., the player experiences the action through the eyes of a protagonist.”- Wikipedia

Video-games are an interactive medium. Duh. There is a problem however with how we handle perspective in this medium and the way that we've done it so far is quite embarrassing. I know no-one can trust Wikipedia, but that above quote has been trusted for a long time. It's a definition of the first-person shooter, and yet, there's something weird about it. We're apparently taking place within a first-person perspective, but through the eyes of a protagonist?

So what does the word 'I' mean to first-person shooters? Who is shooting the dudes, is it me or my avatar?

This confusion has led the rise of middle-man narrative and abuses of player roles given that fact it is so easy to just centre entirely on the protagonist and not the player's perception. For example, the 'I' in a *Half-Life* game is the player through the whole experience, but the 'I' in *Call of Duty Black Ops* is the player character when it comes to actual narrative drive. There's a confusion of responsibility and it's been popularized heavily with *BioShock Infinite* and *Dead Space 2* two of the recent changes of voiceless to voiced protagonists.

Giving a protagonist flavour I am not against because it firmly places the player in a role he can then use to explore the world. What I am against is giving a player character more control over the experience and thus limiting the player's perspective on the world. *BioShock Infinite* has me worried because a trope of *BioShock* is exploring a mysterious world on your own terms and now with a player character, who talks every five seconds, and a lack of dialogue interaction with characters has me worried.

Who is more important to a game world, the player or the player character?

Duh.

The problem with having a player character having more control than a player is the fact that all that juicy emotional and narrative stuff doesn't go straight to the player. The whole experience is only experienced by the player character and the player's interaction is simply limited. This means that all of those non-interactive techniques typically result in a powerful experience for the player but not on the same page of the player character. *Red Dead Redemption* being the prime example here.

It's a contradiction to say both "first-person perspective" and "through the eyes of the protagonist" because a first-person perspective involves a reference to the self and when you don't know where your control or where the 'self' ends then things get rather complicated. The power of interactivity is often negated too, meaning any meaning or expression you wish the player to experience is minimized given the vast majority of that is put through a non-interactive filter aka the middle-man aka the player character.

Once video-game designers start to understand perspective then perhaps we can have a more personal experience with video-games; a prime example being *Mass Effect* and the fact you can import your save game into the second game along with all of your choices and

relationships with characters. It is so thrilling to see such tiny details and tiny missions mentioned when talking to old friends.

Mass Effect 2 and *Call of Duty Black Ops* have one thing in common; they both explore the power of first-person storytelling and one of them ends up acting within a third-person perspective. *Mass Effect* is told, visually, from a third-person perspective but weirdly feels like a more self-referential one and thus feels more personal. *Black Ops* completely blocks off any player interaction with quick-time events, cinematic set-pieces, a player character with a voice we have no control over and one GIANT alienating middle-man narrative. Visually, *Black Ops* is a first-person affair from the eyes of some Marine fella yet it feels so weak when it tries to impart any flair or shock on to the player. The main plot twist falls short given the lack of any connection to anything affiliated with the plot twist, all because of a confusion of perspective, this is a game that does not allow the player's actions to be the player's actions, it is not one that employs self-reference but rather player character reference.

Mass Effect 2 is more of a first-person shooter than *Call of Duty Black Ops*.

The powers I described in Section One are completely meaningless without proper discourse, they carry no weight or at least do not realise their full potential without a proper perspective. This lack of good first-person weight and perhaps confidence from players, who are quite happy to chow down tonnes of games which abuse their role as the interactor, this has all led to one definite conclusion: there has never been a good video-game revenge story.

Revenge is such a delicious literary trope and it's never been something expressed within the space of video-games, at least not cleverly. The internal battle of Skywalker at the end of *Return of the Jedi*, the entire career of 24's Jack Bauer and countless, countless novels and stories have all transformed revenge from this blood-thirsty ideal into a search of catharsis. Actually, *New Vegas* does this but not intentionally, which may be an exception. A game with a pre-written narrative has never fully expressed what it means to feel revenge over someone and I feel we're about to get one.

Mass Effect 3 comes out in 2012 and it once again allows you to carry over your save file from the last game, still with some of the weight from the first game, meaning relationships founded in the first will reach a conclusion. I would not be surprised if BioWare do something spectacular with this power, although I was a little surprised they didn't with *Mass Effect 2* in which everybody can just survive. I want my friends to die in my arms and for me to swear vengeance against the Reaper horde. It's just a terrific image in my head and a great way to end the series with myself sacrificing myself to save the world and trapped in a bitter search for catharsis.

There's never been something that interesting to do with suicide or euthanasia (until, unintentionally, *New Vegas*) or revenge and all of these are powerful ideas expressed so fluently by other mediums that there's no reason we can't. We have to find our common ground and a common perspective and approach to creating interactive spaces in which a player can explore both on their own terms and a world that can explore *them* on different terms. A designer can create a powerful relationship that a player explores and then a designer can explore how far a player cares about that character by killing them off or throwing choices at their feet.

These powerful and striking images cannot be reached with a medium that dis-regards a true first-person approach to the audience and it is so weird that gamers chew this up like it's

nothing. Maybe it's because we've been so used to observational and third-person perspective modes of media that we don't want to swear it off.

I have seen the other side and it is beautiful. Video-games could become an unparalleled work of an artistic medium and all it takes is for us to consider on taking a new perspective to the way we design video-games. Engineering experiences around the player and not abusing his role in the world. *Far Cry 3*'s story is now about you finding 'your girlfriend', or rather, some-one else's girlfriend making it a third-person perspective (the player character's narrative) fused with a first-person one (the player's actions). This is weak and none of the narrative effects can reach their potential without proper care for the player. *Far Cry 2* was already powerful with the fact you were tasked to hunt down, on your own terms, and kill The Jackal and the dis-regard for the player is becoming an ever increasingly problematic trend in video-games.

I fear the worst and yet it would be so easy to put my mind at rest. Listen up, gamers, I don't care if you cried at the end of *Red Dead Redemption* or felt the sorrow of *LA Noire*'s Cole Phelps. I have seen the promised land and it is something quite worthy, emergent experiences tied to a true, confident first-person perspective (not visually) all filling my role as a player. This a medium about interactivity and if we keep limiting interactivity to a simple shooting gallery and a yes/no button press then we're in for a lot of trouble in the not too distant future.

2.2 GOD DOESN'T CARE

“The Darkness II continues the 2K Games tradition of delivering quality, innovative games that are filled to the brim with atmosphere and deep storytelling.” – Christoph Hartmann, President of 2K Games

Our medium has a specific attribute that kicks it above the level of any other type of theme or idea delivery. It is an attribute solely built around the very foundation of our industry and, yet, it's gone ignored for a long, long time. I'm not talking about my incessant rambling my philosophy on player characters, this is something deeper, this is about respect and about knowing exactly what you're creating.

That attribute is the audience participation thing.

It is both our downfall and our ultimate power.

And no-one seems to understand what exactly that means.

Every single medium currently has doctorates and degrees and students and studies tied to developing ideas based around the design and thematics and delivery so on and so forth. They all have deep, rich academic followings and since we're still in our late-teens as an industry we're still feeling things out. I want this industry to mature in the right sense and I keep rambling on about “all games should do X”, I'm wrong of course (depends) but there's one deep problem we need to address.

Or rather, two sides to this problem.

The problem begins with the word ‘recognizing’ or rather ‘understanding’. There are two parts to this; the first being the problem with video-game journalism and the second lies with the game makers and publishers and developers and PR companies. I'm saving video-game journalism for the next volume of this series, so for now, let me rant on about what exactly the problem is.

Whenever you see a game developer or games publisher being interviewed or showing off their games, there's a certain annoyance to it all. Partially it's the interviewer being pushy and wanting them to explain the whole game for the two-billionth time that day and it's partially because there's a confusion about certain elements affiliated with audience-participation.

All mediums hold a narrative, no matter how little or how big, they all contain narratives filled with ideas and themes and general stuff. There is a problem however in that our medium contains creators who constantly refer to narrative and video-game's main attribute as two separate things; story and gameplay. When, if anything, that is fundamentally damaging to us as a force of art.

Gameplay explores the story, apparently, it is not used as a means to deliver a story and a story cannot be a strict progression of gameplay. This is completely wrong. I explained in section one how there's two narratives to every game ever released ever, that's what makes your playthroughs unique, it matters how far the two narratives compliment each other. *Grand Theft Auto IV's* main cut-scene story tells you that your a nice guy whereas the gameplay lets you slaughter millions of innocent people, it's that simple.

Separating gameplay and story has led to this alienation and it is silly to think that they are separate at all. A story should be told through all means possible, including gameplay, it should not be separate or behind a glass wall for the player to simply gawp at unless absolutely technically necessary. *Portal 2*'s ending sequence was impossible to produce under the gameplay engine so they made it a cut-scene instead, and the game is still one of the best games ever made in the history of forever. Not because it used only one cut-scene, but because it didn't interject it and slice up gameplay and because it was used in a more conservative manner.

It's not just the flow of gameplay (and general player enjoyment) that is sacrificed when you separate gameplay and story, it's everything. The player's role in the world is diminished because he's not allowed to touch your story (a la *Modern Warfare 2*'s No Russian level and the entirety of *Black Ops*), he's just there to move it along. When games peoples talk about 'the story' or 'the writing' or 'the gameplay' I feel a little disheartened. Surely it would be best if all the elements were neatly together rather than just a shooting gallery tied to a vague sense of attachment to what seems like a completely alien story?

The quote that started this chapter off carries words such as "storytelling", "atmosphere" and "innovative", all of which are just gaming spin-words designed to get you excited. They're pretense loosely used like 'the story'. What makes me more angry is seeing the whole of the gaming community just spin words like 'innovative' off into their criticism like it's actually bad to be a game that repeats good things. *God of War*, *BioShock*, *Portal* and so many, many, many great games are just refined genre-busters that are littered with the tiniest of new spins on old ideas. Innovation is when new technology or entirely new genres are invented, it cannot be so aptly applied to criticism of video-games given the fact that our industry is one heavily console orientated and thus having to rely heavily on pushing boundaries that already exist. We cannot invent new ones so freely.

What we've managed to do as a culture is see a few spin-words and then just write them into forum posts or blog reviews at the drop of a hat, like we can't find anything to really say bad about the game so we just cover it up with something we heard in a review. What makes me even more frustrated is how video-game journalism re-enforces the ideas that developers so freely talk about, by separating story and gameplay when it comes to talking about the overall score that a game gets.

That's a stupid thing because it encourages separating them and improving them separately, rather than merging them and doing something interesting like with *New Vegas* or *Shadow of the Colossus* where gameplay and story are practically the same thing.

What probably bugs me a lot more, as a fiction writer myself, is how developers, journalists and people generally supersede the word 'story' with 'storytelling'. The quote way above does this with the adverb of 'deep' which is very odd considering *The Darkness II* will likely carry on what its predecessor did with having pre-determined character relationships I have no control over, quick-time events, cut-scenes and many other 'deep' storytelling tropes, clearly the pinnacle of interactive 'storytelling'. If you want to tell me your game has an 'atmosphere' then I guess that's a given for any game ever, and I will give the game credit for being atmospheric in a Stephen King sort of visionary way.

How loose our gaming masters interject these words and how freely they use them to talk vaguely about their creations has all led to this current trend in both gaming journalism and

community in which we are just stagnantly waiting for a change to come along. We're sitting here, and it's started very recently, and we happily eat up the fact that storytelling means ways of delivering narrative and not narrative itself. We deserve better, games deserve better and when God doesn't care then we must be the ones to do his will.

My problem is that gamers suddenly started caring for 'great stories' around after *Bioshock* and totally missed the point of what made *Bioshock* such a great story. Not its character development, political commentary or any gameplay staple but the actual way it was told.

The game was told through its environment and through interactive means. Through the art deco style of the city contrasted against the graffiti to the hulking Big Daddies and the haunting dead innocence of the Little Sisters. It was told through dialogue, the main villain of Andrew Ryan being so effective because he is prominent throughout the entire game. It is also told through, more importantly, an interactive means. The player character does not speak, encouraging some of the game's messages and themes along with acting as a way for the player to be truly immersed in this world. This is used in an ironic sense when the player confronts Andrew Ryan and finds out that he is being controlled with mind conditioning techniques. The player character launches into a cut-scene, without control but for a logical reason that strikes home the message that Ryan and conversely (what I think) Ken Levine (the creative director) was trying to say.

"A man chooses, a slave obeys".

Bioshock also works in providing literal game design commentary in commenting on linear game design; games which don't allow for the breadth of player freedom or empathize with the player's situation. Andrew Ryan functions as Ken Levine here, driving a home run in terms of showing the player just how much of a slave he is. It honestly makes you think about all those times when you were following your own orders, and acting out of someone else's intent. In video-games the latter far outweighs the former.

Storytelling is not simply cut-scenes and pretty pictures, it is the way of interaction. It is gameplay and, to an extent, the story that is associated with the story. Gameplay is both an expression of the story and the exploration of that story and if our game makers want to keep making *BioShocks* then they need to stop confusing their vocabulary and start understanding exactly what makes 'good stories' such well remembered experiences to gamers.

The same goes for video-game journalists and gamers alike. Do not demand good stories, demand good storytelling, the human race has been telling fantastic stories for decades. What challenges us is finding new ways to tell them.

2.3 A PATHETIC EXCUSE FOR AN INTERACTIVE MEDIUM

"Let me ask you, 'Do you love your freedom?'" – Sarah Palin (2008 Presidential Election Republican Vice Presidential Candidate, Former Governor of Alaska)

Video-games are not a visual medium.

They are interactive, a whole new space to express ourselves within and a whole new artistic medium to conquer. We're going to find new ways to express ideas and more powerful ways to express ideas to the point of which we might just change the entire human race into believing something.

Yet, we're a pathetic excuse for an interactive medium.

If you take one hard look at the industry today; the vast majority of the profits stem from shooters, beat-em ups and trivial and juvenile explosions of macho-power fantasy. What's even more interesting is not just how our interactivity is belittled to shooting galleries but also how it is belittled to one set idea, that we are not meant to interact with 'the story' and it serves only to remain in 'the gameplay'. Games like *New Vegas* and *Minecraft* show that 'the story' isn't cut-scenes or pre-determined, that 'the story' can be anything and the restriction of 'the story' poisons the player agency that can be experienced.

What is more frightening is looking at who is being sad as the 'Kings' of interactive storytelling. Bethesda, Rockstar, Quantic Dream and Infinity Ward: *Fallout 3*, *Grand Theft Auto IV/Red Dead Redemption*, *Heavy Rain* and *Modern Warfare 2* respectively. *Fallout 3* has a 20 minute section where you talk to your pre-determined father and then he serves at your narrative purpose, along with the game's ending being completely pointless. I don't want to rant on about Rockstar anymore. *Heavy Rain* is an abuse of player empathy to the point of which they become a simple button presser in a mindless cavalcade of bad writing while being taken your control away to tell a non-interactive story.

Modern Warfare 2 I'm less inclined to pick on because it had its player character speak when the player wasn't in control, which turned out to be extremely interesting given it was nice to share the guy with the game's story. However, its 'No Russian' level is built around forcing the player to take part in a cut-scene and punish any exploration of the story or try and act against forced 'horrific scenes'.

All I can say is, if these people are leading in interactive storytelling, then we seriously boned.

All of these developers exercise, above all, non-interactive techniques to get across a message and Rockstar in particular push the player's interaction with the story into short gameplay sequences. A lot of people say they create non-linear games, I disagree given they only create free-roam games with a story linked together with linear corridor shooters. *Far Cry 2*, *New Vegas* and *Minecraft* are all non-linear games, some with more linear tropes than others, and yet these games haven't been as celebrated as Rockstar. Not because they're independently developed, far from it, but because they're not 'cinematic'.

'Cinematic gameplay' is the vocabulary disease of the gaming industry along with 'innovative' and 'awesome'. 'Cinematic gameplay' does not exist, gameplay which takes on traits of cinematography perhaps does. What game developers and journalists mean when they say 'cinematic gameplay', they mean quick-time events or as little interaction as possible. This makes it so the player doesn't have to feel they're watching a cut-scene, but they might as well will be and this is killing off interactive storytelling. *Black Ops* tells its story exclusively through these non-interactive techniques and it has been applauded for telling a good story regardless. It'd be also quite easy for me to find a quote that, once again, confuses narrative with narrative delivery ("storytelling") when referencing *Black Ops*' "amazing storytelling".

If you want to treat video-games as a visual medium above any other attribute they carry, go right ahead. If you think an art style and non-interactive techniques are the most important things in a medium capable of interaction into whole new artistic territory, then go right ahead. No-one is stopping you from keeping those 'leaders in interactive storytelling' at the top of the food chain. No-one is stopping you from killing off interactive storytelling and, to an extent, what it means to be a video-game.

Times must change.

I've had the pleasure of video-games to change and define me in ways I still don't yet understand or comprehend. Subtle ways, subconscious ways and even stuff that would probably scare me if I knew about it. It goes for anyone who has ever played a video-game, the slightest interaction with a game world can make your brain twitch and feel and move inside another world. The extent of the power and how you recognize that power depends on how limited or how free that interaction is and, more importantly, how the interactive storytelling techniques are able to lure your brain in and put it on show for you to enjoy or cry over.

See that isn't the case given the current epidemic of 'cinematic gameplay' and the fact is we as a community need to wise up and demand better. Yes, all of the games above are tremendously enjoyable but they're not as powerful as interactivity could be. We all have stories, we all have dreams and we need to wise up and accept the fact that video-games suck. They are, for the most part, juvenile crass that has no merit or indeed value to the human race. Fun isn't enough, it's important don't get me wrong, but we have a duty to make it so that video-games are remembered for not just trying to cannibalize what works in a different medium and try and apply it. We are not a visual medium, we are a new kind, an interactive one; a pathetic effort but a potential rests inside this mockery of an art form.

2.4 YOU PLAY AS...

“The association of player to character is central to the experience. Thus, out-of-character actions and meta-game thinking should be minimized.” – John Kim (RPG theorist)

How is it I can be against the idea of middle-man narrative when, in fact, many game stories revolve around player characters and I celebrate them. *Half-Life 2*, *BioShock* and many other examples which I applaud are completely set around the player character and not the player. That's the definition of a middle-man narrative, in which there's a middle-man to pass the narrative through and most of the impact is kept in the player character. What separates a game like *Half-Life 2* and *Grand Theft Auto IV* however is how associated I am with Gordon Freeman, my actions are his actions, there are no non-interactive places. I always hold some degree of control and thus he and I are exactly the same, he is a blank slate character.

Middle-man narrative I apply whenever video-game journalist banter on about the words “You play as...” which I feel is passively disturbing. First off it denotes any notion of the fact that when we enter a game space we express ourselves and not simply assume different traits. Secondly, the idea of ‘playing as’ another character is kind of weird considering we're the ones who are shooting people and progressing the story. Finally, it just doesn't seem to fit to describe a game like *Half-Life 2* because there is no connection to Freeman, there is simply the player and the world to explore.

I describe a good player character as one without character, or undiscovered character that is later developed, who essentially becomes a role to fill in that world. Gordon Freeman is a Black Mesa scientist who is about to take part in destroying an alien horde so we take his role, his job if you will, and play the game on our own terms. The problem comes when it's a game such as *LA Noire* when you're trying to fit yourself into an already determined character, Cole Phelps, and trying to fit your way into his role is difficult when he solves most of the mysteries himself, takes part in cut-scenes, has a family I don't care about (and am asked to care about later on) and generally is used as a vessel of my experience.

That sounds like a good thing, but it blocks out any hard impact I myself could have on the narrative with the dialogue choices being denoted to vague answers of “Truth” “Doubt” “Lie” and generally being a cavalcade of non-interactivity mixed with interactivity. Don't get me wrong, it's probably my most ‘liked’ Rockstar published effort given it's at least experimental in the facial recognition stuff and, when it works, it *really* works.

Cole acts like a good guy, banter on about serving the law and doing all this good stuff and, as James Portnow has pointed out, stays silent when his friends commit racist acts. There's a good potential here for exploring a character, but it feels weird to me when it's supposed to be ‘me’ and he is meant to be just some shoes for me to fill and hustle. It's like I'm constantly fighting with the game over control of Cole Phelps and the game is designed so that I have the absolute minimum of control necessary to still be a ‘video-game’.

Trying to explore a character or trying to empathise with a character such as Phelps, when he says nothing during acts of racism or when his family situation goes tits up, it's kind of difficult to do when you are actually playing that character. I don't know if the game is asking to

explore myself or explore this guy that I 'play as'. To me he's just some shoes to fill and be able to interact with the experimental stuff. When the game asks me to care about a family I've never met and a wife I never know the name of, it's kinda weird, they are not my family. This disregard of the player's role in the world has led this sort of weird popularized 'in media res' storytelling in which the player is dropped into a pre-determined character and is asked to explore that character and limit their expression.

Far Cry 3 is going to do it with the narrative kicker being 'save your girlfriend', *BioShock Infinite* has banter between the two main characters which the player has no control over (this has been laughably been called 'more immersive' by some members of the gaming community) and *Dead Space 2* already threw a whole lot of character at the main protagonist. The weird, weird thing is that this represents a shift in game design mentality, as all of those games are sequels and their predecessors all exercised the blank slate approach to player characters. Roles to fill, boots to slip myself into; simply a vessel for expression.

I argued against David Cage in the very first chapter of this book, the quote of that chapter actually comes from a speech that was heavily applauded which is very worrying, and I still mean everything I said. Blank slates do allow for the ultimate in interactivity, a space in which there is no middle-man, no need for connection, simply the player and the narrative. There are narrative elements which make it so that the role exists such as Freeman's PhD or *New Vegas'* Courier being shot in the face. What bothers me is when designers go the whole hog and remove any ounce of recognising my interaction such as *Grand Theft Auto IV* where it doesn't really matter that I spent hours in a thunderstorm fending off cops, it just matters that Niko gets to the cut-scene and nods along to some guy.

Can middle-man narrative be done without being intrusive upon the player's experience? I think it's already happened. *Infamous* is a game in which the player takes upon the role of Cole McGrath and goes on a long, long story full of superhero stuff and power stuff and comic book stuff. What is interesting is that the game forces you to care about 'your best friend' and 'your girlfriend' and constantly fixes the narrative motivations and story choices around these two characters. The fact is, I could not give an ounce of care about these characters because I've been dropped into these relationships and ask to care about years of history between each of them. I can sort of attempt to, but I can never fathom the same connection that Cole himself has and thus begins a disconnect.

And then comes *Infamous 2*.

Holy shit.

Infamous 2 has one line referencing Cole's girlfriend which is just sort of thrown away and never cared about again it has characters who start off as hardcore stereotypes and then flesh out into these arcs of true friendship (yes!) because you and Cole meet them at the same time. You actually develop a relationship *with interaction* (choosing which mission to pick) and thus grow a sturdy relationship. What is actually quite frightening is that the best friend character, Zeke, comes back and becomes the true heart of the story. No, seriously, it is so weird to see a pre-determined character and I actually start to identify with one another and towards the end you genuinely feel for the character.

Cole McGrath himself carries no personality, which I welcome because I can insert some of myself into that, but whenever I interact through Cole he sort of keeps his head down along

with his growly voice turned up to 11 but, still, there's actual middle-man narrative that *works* because Cole and I are on the same exact emotional page all the time.

What is probably the most interesting aspect of *Infamous 2* is its ending, which I kinda won't spoil because it's so good, but if you pick the Evil side then it forces you to do something which is really, really ballsy. Like, it rips the idea of the *Mass Effect 2*'s final mission having this giant amount of death and explosion of relationships (which never actually happens) and makes it happen. It doesn't force you to care about the characters, that's the important thing that *Mass Effect 2* also does, but it forces you to do something with them and the ending is so brave and bold in the way it explores your relationships to the point of which it (in one specific aspect) goes beyond *Mass Effect 2*.

Infamous 2 has its problems with its morality being put on a metric and having the evil choices being downright silly (when they should be the easiest yet riskiest) along with punishing any neutrality when it comes to moral choices. What it does do, however, is show a true change of heart from the developers. That they recognized what was wrong with the first game's story and changed it so that the middle-man narrative they created *worked*. *Infamous 2* proves you can have a middle-man narrative with a defined player character and still get the same amount of impact from the narrative as much as he or she does. Cole and I were on the same emotional page, there was no bullshitting or assumption that I would care about any 'girlfriend' or 'wife' and instead focuses on bringing the Zeke character from the first game and building him up into something I care about. When I have to choose to do a certain something with him in the ending then it all comes crashing down and I realise just how much I care.

Middle-man narratives and blank slates can both be done to exploit the full potential of interactive storytelling in very different ways. What I want to talk about now is the bad side of blank slates, David Cage isn't right don't worry, but when they are abused as an excuse for lazy design. One example, which has been unfortunately copied quite heavily, is *Homefront* in which the player character has no voice (which should be a good thing as it encourages immersion and player to narrative direct connection) but ends up being turned into something used to force bad design down our throats. The game is heavily linear in that you are not allowed to shoot people until asked to do so, even if they kill your buddy in a scripted event, and if you do then you fail the mission. The game is not designed around your interaction, it is designed around 'cinematic gameplay' and encourages non-interactivity to be king of the hill.

Many members of the gaming community write off Gordon Freeman as being silly and that voiceless characters are also silly because there's no interaction between characters. In the example of *Half-Life 2* I completely disagree because the game manages to make you care about characters through its core combat mechanics and by just having you stroll around spaces and be talked at. In the example of *Homefront* then I would kinda agree but one point I would bring up is that when game designers give a player character a voice they usually make one so that the player has no control over it. It means that a middle-man narrative takes place, the player's interaction is denoted to shooting galleries and he has no chance to interact with the story and characters.

Here's an idea, how about a voice I control?

It would save money in the case of *New Vegas* when there isn't even any voice acting on the player character's part and I've already proved just how powerful the game can be. In

fact, a voice I have control over might actually bridge the gap between middle-man narrative and blank slate characters.

Mass Effect 2.

Commander Shepard has pre-determined traits that define his character such as a history and a personality that stems from the first game's moral choices. These actually come up in the dialogue choices of the game, but so does the player's interaction. They are completely the same. Commander Shepard is both a defined character and a blank slate who exercises player expression to the highest of degrees. You are not forced to talk to any of the characters, you explore the relationships on your own terms, but Commander Shepard will always have defined traits. It's this weird mix between middle-man narrative, a player character with a degree of control over the player (there are cut-scenes and you don't always have control over the voice) but also a blank slate narrative. The player moulds him using the moral choices and explores the relationships of other characters using him, he is simply boots to fill, a role to do. He is Commander Hardisty as much as he is Commander Shepard and I wholeheartedly welcome more mixing.

One particular mixing is when blank slates shift into middle-man narratives, which is what *Dead Space 2* practices. I sort of welcome it given I've identified myself with the player character already and I can sort of accept this, but I think a better way of doing it is keeping the same game design intact. *BioShock* does this in shifting the player from a nameless bum into an important, defined, character. It's natural because we've just spent the whole game absorbing the environment and becoming progressively empowered. *Minerva's Den* also does this in its ending and manages to be ultimately more powerful than *BioShock 2* especially but also *BioShock* in some aspects.

I'd like to mention player character death. *Red Dead Redemption* does this, *LA Noire* does this and one of those actually does it to a more powerful degree. *LA Noire* actually has you switch back and forth between another player character, easing the transition when it comes, and doesn't make the mistake of shoving you into another pre-determined character. The one you take the role over is actually someone with less of a defined history and when the death does come, it becomes more powerful given you feel comfortable in the new role and not simply being forced to throw away a role you've filled. *Fallout 3* is the exact wrong way to do it, given the game ends with death and it's a RPG so you could quite easily have no need to play. It would be more interesting if you were asked to sacrifice yourself at multiple points (as Anthony Burch as suggested) and the stakes get higher as you refuse.

To end with, I think the words "You play as" are completely rudimentary to interactive storytelling. I think I prefer the words in the context of describing the player characters role (Commander) or perhaps changed to "You play with" and used to describe some traits of the character (*Infamous 2*). Unfortunately, for now, it's simply used as a way to oddly disregard any degree of expression I could possibly have in a game space. Extreme middle-man narratives such as *LA Noire* (which was heavily praised for its - ahem - 'story') limit player interaction and are simply exercises in authoritarian game design practice. Extreme blank slates such as *Homefront* can make it so that the player's interaction is actually limited and often abused. The middle-ground between the two is conquered by blank slates with traits that make it so they exist and middle-man characters who are designed to feel the same way a player does. I like this middle-ground. Don't you?

2.5 OVERWRITING

“Writers are often brought in late in the development cycle, so they usually have to work on whatever developments come before them.” – James Portnow (CEO of Rainmaker Games)

I'm a writer of all trades and as such I firmly believe that no medium can survive without good writing tailored to that medium. The same goes for comic books, movies and video-games. There are many problems however associated with 'the writing' and it's kinda weird to see it take on a whole new act of problems compared to the typical problems that linear media faces. We're an interactive medium and, as such, all the writing must be created to make sure the player knows exactly what to do, when to do it, what not to do and what is going on. That last one has been left in the shadow, but I think it's for good reason, video-games are interactive and each of them must carry some form of instruction.

It's not bad writing that plagues video-games, that's a lie, it is a problem but it's not one of the main ones. Video-game writers are, unfortunately, still being carried over from old mediums and from an old mindset when it comes to video-games. It's why so many games have middle-man narratives and stuff, because it's just easier to go with what you know, it's not the writers fault that they just don't know how to apply themselves correctly to the medium. No-one really knows how we're going to do it anyway.

Rhianna Pratchett, daughter of Terry Pratchett, is a video-games writer and has written for EA with *Mirror's Edge* and with Codemasters with *Overlord*. *Mirror's Edge* is set around the player trying to save - ahem - 'the sister' of the player character and is generally just a poor story anyway. *Overlord* is actually kind of charming and funny at times but it's still kind of trapped in the cut-scene mentality. There is nothing with the writing here, it's all technically sound and good, but it's the same for *Red Dead Redemption's* story. It's good, damn good and can be powerful, but it's not applied correctly and it's not for the sake of interactivity.

See, I don't even know how to solve this problem. Valve currently released *Portal 2* which has absolutely stellar writing all built around the blank slate character and turns out to be probably the funniest game ever created. It's not the writing that's good; it's the way it's applied to make it so interaction is emphasised or is celebrated by the writing. It's a recognition of the player's role and not simply throwing them away into the bottomless pit of 'cinematic gameplay'.

The other core problem that video-games face is in the very title of this chapter. Many, many RTSs have these big speeches whenever you move about units, but then a game like *Starcraft 2* has them say just one battlecry and it's just as effective. It's probably a lot more effective anyway because you just need some recognition that those guys have got your orders and not some giant speech about freedom and liberty. *Duke Nukem Forever* faces this problem too, stretching out cut-scenes so they can make sure you know everything and that the action can be as dramatic as possible. In reality, however, it just seems like they're compensating for a basic lack of anything interesting or fun in the game.

A further complication arrives in multi-player when the player doesn't really need any information other than recognizing team efforts and stuff that is going on. A little "Airstrike

inbound.” is all that is necessary yet Valve’s *Team Fortress 2* has some of its classes actually *sing* and cry out victory.

It works too.

Since it’s a multi-player setting, the addition of a voice isn’t for your sake but mostly for the sake of others and you and your character are generally on the same page when they do speak. There are lines that come about you ‘Dominating’ (killing someone three times flawlessly) some-one, there are lines to show that you’ve caught the flag and there are also directory lines for other team members. This is to both inform the other play on what to do audibly and textually (as it shows in the chat box too) meaning there’s re-enforced orders that keep you all on the same page, as a team.

Portal 2 actually uses the interaction with writing in order to evolve certain themes and play on some ideas. The player can, for example, just happen upon a small turret that they can pick up (or not) which spouts an entire story about the Greek legend of Prometheus. It then goes on to pretty much spoil the revelatory sequences on the game without the player knowing, since this takes place early in the game, and so when those revelations do come they also tie into the Greek legend. This interaction with the writing makes the player feel special, like they could have easily missed it but they chose to explore that little character. It’s an element of interactive storytelling that *needs* good writing and not flimsy dis-regard of player place.

Mass Effect 2 has writing absolutely integral to one of its core mechanics, the dialogue system, there are thousands of lines of dialogue all tailored towards exploring characters. Some of them reference Shepard’s history and others reference the player’s history of the past game, all tying it up seamlessly to make sure the player knows he is in full control.

Writing for video-games is hard given the above. You have to make sure your player knows everything but there’s a fine line between hammering them with themes and letting them explore the themes themselves with support. That’s the challenge that video-game writers face and, as the medium evolves, I do hope that times will change and we’ll have a medium with good writing structured around interactive storytelling rather than copying traditional media. Those stories are effective but after seeing what actual interaction with writing can do, these are video-games remember, there’s an even better place to be right now.

SECTION THREE: SOLUTIONS

“The best solution to a problem is usually the easiest one.” – GLaDOS (*Portal* series)

Video-games suck.

Hopefully you understand that by now.

When I meant ‘*And now for something completely different*’ I meant it. I spent Volume One of this series prancing on about games as an interactive force and while I did mention some dark days ahead and what could happen to us if we went tits up, the fact is, we’re tits up now. Interactive storytelling, or how people define interactive storytelling, does not exist in mainstream titles. In fact, it isn’t that prominent in the indie community either (we’ll save that for another day) and there’s certainly a lack of good and proper support of interactive storytelling anyway given how everyone loves spin-words like ‘innovation’ and ‘cinematic’.

So how do we make sure this medium becomes artistic for not copying past media? How do we ensure that video-games don’t become a visual medium, as it is already celebrate as. It’s simple, we kill the Batman.

By Batman I mean you.

By Batman I mean probably 90% of video-game journalists.

By kill I mean convince otherwise.

People often ask me on why I do this, on why I cry over video-games and prant on and act all elitist when it comes to talking about ‘all games should do X’ and, quite frankly, I agree with you. I can be an elitist and it’s wrong to say ‘all games should do X’ but it’s worry when that ideal already takes place. The good examples I’ve mentioned are *minuscule* compared to the bad ones, right now, pretty much every ‘game of the year’ contender in the gaming public’s eye is more than likely going to be something that repeats non-interactivity as an ‘effective’ way of storytelling within a medium that revolves around player interaction.

Quite frankly, I am tired of arguing that games are an art form. I shouldn’t have to do it because video-games *are* an art form with such rich potential and as a community and as developers and designers and writers and especially journalists we are throwing this away. One of my solutions includes eradicating video-game journalism, I’m kidding of course, but it does need to change. I think I’ll touch on it in this section but video-game journalism *needs* its own *Up, Down, Left, Right* Volume.

As do **you**.

- **3.1 LINEAR VERSUS NON-LINEAR NARRATIVE** - Pretty much *BioShock* versus *New Vegas*.
- **3.2 STOP WORSHPPING A DESIGN FLAW** - In which I call 90% of video-game journalists ‘assholes’ for re-enforcing language that caused our industry to be what it is.
- **3.3 THE TOUGHEST JOB IN THE WORLD** - How to make a modern-day classic.
- **3.4 METHODS OF STORYTELLING** - In which I try and debunk storytelling methods associated with video-games.
- **3.5 MINECRAFT** - Place a block, break a block, fight monsters.

3.1 LINEAR VERSUS NON-LINEAR NARRATIVE

"I strongly believe that all good stories have a conflict and that all good games tell a good story regardless of if it's pre-written or emergent."- Markus 'Notch' Persson (Creator of *Minecraft*)

A linear video-game is one that contains limited freedom, you are free to do as we allow, whereas a non-linear video-game has the philosophy of you are free to do as you want. Now, obviously, one clearly looks to far excel the other. Except they're not *that* different. I mean, yes, they're very different in how they tell their stories with one relying heavily upon interaction with the other only relying on progression through interaction.

In any linear game there is still space for a non-linear narrative, which as I've already explained, is the player actually playing the game. The people he chooses to shoot in the head and when he drops the grenade, that sort of thing, it's all emergent gameplay and this streaming thread of narrative. Linear narrative comes about of cut-scenes, dialogue and environmental storytelling; there's a lack of interaction that serves them but it is necessary to get to the next bit of narrative.

One thing that I explained being one of our problems as an industry is our tendency to simply write all the above as 'the story' and boil it down to characters, plot, setting and writing without considering the fact a story should only be good as the way it is told. It's still odd to me how Rockstar Games' library still manages to score very highly in the video-game press yet they use traditional, obstructive methods of storytelling. It's even more odd when people hold *Fallout 3*'s story with higher regard than *New Vegas*, failing to understand what exactly was *New Vegas*' story.

These two worlds, linear and non-linear narrative, are at constant war with one another. At least, most video-game developers push it as some kind of war. We're beginning to slide more heavily towards linear, middle-man narratives which is quite worrying considering how that's probably the most dangerous combination for an interactive medium. Is linear narrative a bad thing? Of course not, when used properly, *Half-Life 2* is proof that you can make a player feel involved rather than just a camera to move around while pressing buttons.

Half-Life 2 isn't extreme linear narrative, nor is it extremely non-linear narrative, it's that sweet spot that I've only experienced from a handful of titles. A more imposed linear narrative is usually made so that the designers have full control over your experience, so you only get weapon X when you reach a certain point. *Half-Life 2* is different in that you collect all the weapons and can use them whenever you want in the game.

An extreme linear narrative such as *Call of Duty Black Ops*, which is full of cut-scenes, a middle-man narrative and quicktime events, can be very damaging to the industry. It's damaging because most video-game journalists do not understand exactly *why* video-game stories are so powerful (hint: video-GAMES) and so they'll just throw around 'good story' like 'innovation' or some other buzz word. *Black Ops* has been lauded for its 'good story' and, as such, designers

will probably look towards it for inspiration. They'll pick apart what makes it such a good story and realise that all of that 'interactive storytelling' is worthless and time-consuming to support.

It's actually really, really weird how much developers would save if they eased off of the linear juices. If they gave me some dialogue interaction in some games, they wouldn't really need to pay for a voice actor for the player character. If they designed something like *Left 4 Dead's* AI director, placed a few spawns and balanced it out then they wouldn't need to plan out giant expensive set pieces. Expensive is the word here, video-games have often felt they've needed to just sit and explode in Hollywood's shadow instead of venturing out to make their own stamp on things. If it looks expensive, people will buy it, because it's more accessible to understand than *Minecraft*.

Minecraft is an example of an extreme non-linear narrative, in which there is zero story substance or any clues to guess why exactly this world exists and who you are. There is simply the world and the mechanics, the world itself being completely procedurally generated. *Minecraft* is probably the biggest game design step of the 21st Century, more on that later, for one simple reason: it is a game that does not have a 'story'.

The story you create in *Minecraft* is your own and you don't have to look very far to see just how gripping of a story it can be. There are message boards, YouTube series with millions of views and so many more places in which you can find that *Minecraft* is possibly the most emergent video-game of all time. However, if it were ever reviewed, I would not be surprised in the slightest if one review said 'there's no story' as a negative.

I would write that too, but as a positive.

Minecraft is a space in which to create your own story, your own Freeman, your own journey and a place to be scared and victorious and shell-shocked. There are deep caverns that are randomly generated and can hold absolutely anything, the game goes beyond surprise into the world of *no idea*. There are monsters at night, wolves to tame, food to eat, houses to build, blocks to form and it's pretty much a modern day LEGO infused with the essence of an adventure game.

The lack of a common objective other than 'get the best gear' has made it so that *Minecraft* is an open experience in which anything can take place. It is non-linear narrative in its purest form and it seems a lot more rewarding than an extreme linear narrative, saying that, do I want *just* non-linear narratives? I don't want to give up my *Half-Life 2* or my *BioShock* and especially my *Shadow of the Colossus*. Linear games which accept the fact that there will always be a non-linear story alongside it, and incorporate it into the story (*BioShock's* main plot twist having effect because of gameplay progression, *Half-Life 2's* pacing driven by the player, *Shadow of the Colossus's* final message only powerful because of interaction) those are great game narratives. *Minecraft* is a more extreme form, separated entirely from linear tropes, and yet it's much more powerful.

Yes, *Red Dead Redemption* is a powerful story but it's not rewarding or fulfilling to my interaction. All I've done for 26 hours is shoot dudes and ride horses through a free roam world dotted with linear corridor missions. *Homefront* has a pretty cool and brave premise, yet it forces me to wait while some NPC bashes down a door.

Are linear video-games bad? Of course not. Are strictly non-linear video-games bad? That's an odd question. Non-linearity can be abused just as much linearity can with games filled with a space and mechanics but ultimately feeling empty and unrewarding. They often have a

lack of objective too: meaning most players - certainly used to common linear ideals - will just not understand or feel motivated to explore at their own terms. Both carry their own problems, but I think *Minecraft* is proof that an extreme method of this type of narrative can thrive given the proper support.

Saying that, does an extreme linear narrative carry the same weight? *Infamous 2* has quick-time events, a middle-man narrative and all manner of tropes and yet feels all the more satisfying with my interaction being paramount to the experience. I feel a lot more part of this world than *Red Dead Redemption*. I think this is probably perhaps of the choices that are at play and the way that the game demands that you are in control for around 80% of the time, cut-scenes do take place, but it's in the same flavour of *Metal Gear Solid 4*.

In fact, *Metal Gear Solid 4* and *Infamous 2* have the same thing in that there's cut-scenes, quick-time events and middle-man narratives. It is so weird that I complain heavily about player character voices and yet I was driven to the precipice of emotion by *Metal Gear Solid 4*. The game's cutscenes take up around 40% of the game too, meaning your gameplay experience is... cherished in a weird way. You end up exploring the game's worlds and experimenting with the mechanics before moving the story along. I think that when linear games acknowledge the player's existence, even how extreme that linear narrative may be, then they become just as possibly powerful as extreme non-linear narratives done correctly.

Metal Gear Solid 4 contains one sequence in which you're an old, dying, burning man crawling through an oven as the world ends. It's one giant quick-time event and yet it's so brutally dis-empowering to the point of which there's a strike of connection. The series itself has been set across the vast majority of my lifetime and, as such, I have more of a connection to the character as most people. It feels to me that this one pinpoint was designed to emotionally reward me for my faithfulness to the character and the series, the game has constant themes of sacrifice and growing old along the lines of *Toy Story 3*. I think both of those exercise similar things too: that I had to accept the fact that I had to let go.

An extreme linear narrative can either be abused or turned into an illusion engineered to deliver pinpoint accuracy of emotional moments and connection. A non-linear narrative can either be abused to simply become an empty space or used by the player in order to cause a world in which he interacts with *him/herself* and his/her own actions, chaos theory being the backbone, and as such the emotional moments and connective tissue with the world is sporadic but more organic. No method is superior, but both can be abused heavily and cause disconnect and other issues that intrude on the player's experience. All methods, anywhere on the spectrum, can tell a powerful story but the effect of that story is limited or heightened by how extreme or conservative that the method is employed.

There exists a sweet spot in which very few games exist but all of them have thrived to become some of the greatest games ever created. Perhaps this sweet spot needs some investing, or perhaps it needs more investigating. Whatever the case, this sweet spot is set within both non-interactive and interactive storytelling. It is so odd that an interactive medium still inherently needs non-interactive components in order to reach powerful heights. Perhaps it's unsurprising, actually, we need a world to conquer and dialogue to hear. *Minecraft* needs textures, *Half-Life 2* needs voice actors and *Infamous 2* needs cut-scenes.

3.2 STOP WORSHIPPING A DESIGN FLAW

“Thinking back [on *Call of Duty Black Ops*], I can easily forget whether the last absorbing moments of the game were played by me or for me. This is what video games should be, a confusion of interaction and story-telling, of graphics and camera movement, of **play and parable.**” – Brian Crecente (Editor-in-Chief for Kotaku.com)

Play and parable.

How insulting is that?

No, seriously, how insulting is it that gameplay and story *should* remain separate? That they shouldn't even touch each other, that storytelling and interaction are not the same thing and video-game journalism sucks. Kotaku is the most popular video-game site on the world and constantly publishes 'hot scoopz' such as articles of Japanese sexual fetishes such as giant breasts and also loves to write editorials on how eSports isn't a proper sport and how music isn't needed in a video-game.

And these are the guys who will identify and thus elevate our medium.

I will save the majority of the video-game journalism bashing until the next volume of this series, but for now I might as well incorporate you lot; the community. Video-game messaging boards are full of 'my console is better than yours' and posts full of words like 'innovative' and 'cinematic'. We're not discussing high brow questions like the film community or the art community do on IMDB or any other popular site that incorporates the medium's value into discussion. A film review challenges how themes are expressed, a game review tells you how 'awesome' it is to pull off a quick-time event.

Something is clearly wrong here.

The design flaw I'm highlighting above can pretty much be any design flaw, I would have used the plural - 'flaws' - but I wanted to perhaps bite into a few I've already talked about. There's already one lurching out at me, one I've already mentioned, the ever-lasting fight of gameplay versus story. The one that is actually promoted by Kotaku and video-game journalists and, more importantly, the video-game community.

Go on any video-game site that has some sort of discussion or comment section and you will find more than a handful of comments that go along the lines of "The gameplay was great, the story not so much.", now I will admit, even I fell into this trap. When I was young and foolish, which I still am, I considered these two completely separate things. Yet, whenever they are separate, the impact of either is lessened. I feel less of a part of the game when my actions don't match up with the cut-scenes, which is why I questioned why *Half-Life 2* is one of the best video-games ever made. It's because the two work in tandem, they are close friends and not pen pals.

Should gameplay and story be judged separately? Perhaps linear elements such as voice acting, writing quality and visuals should be but it should always be mentioned why they feel so satisfying to the player. Is it the interaction or is the 'do as you're told' attitude that is promoted heavily? Is it the *Metal Gear Solid 4* promotion of character connection or the *Minecraft* promotion of world connection. The way that story and gameplay play off of each

other is one of the many ways that our medium exploits and uncovers the ideas that we have conquered long ago. What does it mean to be human? Are people born evil? What is evil? Who are we and where have we come from? Is it right to brainwash, euthanize and do the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few?

Questions like these have haunted literature, cinema, art and so on and so forth. Why can't we do the same thing? Why can't we do it in our way instead of relying on old ways of telling? Video-games are fundamentally a place of fun, engineered by interaction, that interaction is absolutely the most integral part of any video-game and without it any non-interactive element will not feel satisfying or relevant. *Grand Theft Auto IV*'s 'story' tells you you're an anti-hero and yet you can just walk outside and murder old people to death.

It's not that separating these elements itself is insulting to interactive storytelling, it is, it's that way that we go about as a community and nod along like it's completely fine that this happens. That it's completely okay for a developer to take away my interaction and that it's a *good* thing that I didn't interact with a game and that Valve need to get out of tradition and start giving their player characters a voice.

Know what else is a video-game tradition? Cut-scenes, and the same people who yell at Valve to bow down to the middle-man will also applaud *Red Dead Redemption* for its 'storytelling' when in fact they applaud their lack of understanding. I have no problem with people who like the game, I detest it myself, it's just this weird double standard of appreciating certain video-game traditions. In fact, that's kind of an odd word to associate with stuff that's non-interactive. A voiceless protagonist can't have a voice that can be used to interact with the space, unless given one, and a cut-scene is basically just a very short film that gives a burst of exposition or character. 'Tradition' feels bizarre as a word to describe non-interactive bits as always part of an interactive medium's history.

I think players need to start understanding why video-games are powerful, not holding their knees and pouring over the metaphors in *Braid*, but at least understand those things exist. They need to stop whining and celebrating design flaws, otherwise we won't get anywhere, and they need to understand that while *Red Dead Redempti-* (last time I mention this game, I swear!) is a powerful game, it was only as powerful as Rockstar allowed it to be.

Another design flaw comes to mind actually, one that's been nagging me for a long time. It's another word confusion that we need to sort out, not necessarily a 'demand better' that the above is, but something that really annoys me. *Grand Theft Auto IV* is not a 'non-linear' game and 'linearity' is not a bad thing anyway. It can be practiced incorrectly, it can be abused and it can also be used correctly and made into something beautiful. *Grand Theft Auto IV* is a large, free-roam world where you can wander about and do stuff in-between missions but the game itself does not really endorse your gameplay. The story tells you that you're an anti-hero fighting for your cousin, who I couldn't give the tiniest amount of care in the world given I'm forced to like him.

As a community we seem to take a lot of this for granted and just chew our food. A lot of us seem to get on very well with middle-man narratives and that's slightly worrying considering how damaging they can be. *Infamous 2* is the only example that I can think of when a middle-man narrative holds its hands with the player and carries that same weight as a blank slate connection.

I like all methods of storytelling, unless they're abused, and the closer we are to making sure we all accept the fact that 'play and parable' is dangerous when separate then the closer we are to a more artful medium.

Linearity can be a perfect way of delivering pinpoint emotion and character development, it can give the designers control over your experience (which can then be heavily abused) and then they can make sure that the pacing is built around your play (*Half-Life 2*) and not around 'the story'. Non-linearity itself is very, very rare and while certain bits of it do exist in every game ever, the only middle non-linear narrative based game I can think of is *New Vegas* which carries both an excellent player-accepting linear narrative and a support of a non-linear one (such as my story with the Boone character in Section One).

Extreme linearity is more of a problem, *Homefront* and *Black Ops* being prime examples of this. Extreme non-linearity is rare and as such can't be really called a 'problem' though we do need to make sure that non-linearity isn't abused. Non-linearity does not mean free roam worlds, it means a way of interacting with a world with mechanics that create an entirely unique gameplay.

Confusing non-linearity with free-roam has led to the rise of *Grand Theft Auto* clones and its led Rockstar to forget its roots and concentrate on writing excellent stories and making the worst games possible. *Saint's Row 2* is probably just one giant wrecking ball of non-linearity encouragement given there are so many mechanics that can be used to destroy this world and it also carries a weight of non-linear approach to the linear missions, not as much as procedurally planning based *Far Cry 2*, but still a good amount.

So, the important thing that we should all do is stop worshipping design flaws. Why? Because games deserve better, as do you and I, as does the history of art itself. If we consider for a moment our input in this still fledging medium we could impact it in a way unparalleled before. Games are not complete without our interaction, the same goes for the medium, we could do so much. We could change the world.

All we need to do is stop thinking straight-forward, stop saying story and gameplay and start saying story is gameplay. All we need is stop confusing designers with what we want. Story is not story, it is so much more than that, it is everything. I firmly believe video-games to be at the forefront of entertainment and artistic potential and when we stop considering video-games in the same way we've considered movies, though we should still discuss themes and ideas, and stop separating every element then we will send a clear message.

Video-games are awesome.

3.3 THE TOUGHEST JOB IN THE WORLD

“Because today we live in a society in which spurious realities are manufactured by the media, by governments, by big corporations, by religious groups, political groups... So I ask, in my writing, what is real?” - Philip K. Dick (Author of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*)

Literary classics and cinematic classics exist, video-game classics don't have that same history. Making a literary classic in this day and age is the hardest job in the world given the masses of information, historical context and ideas that are debated and moulded every single day in politics. With such a busy time, we need a busy medium, and while film has certainly delivered in exploring many ideas (*The Dark Knight* probably being the bravest in exploring post-9/11 themes) video-games have yet to reach that level of merit.

I don't think it's an understatement to say that the very vast majority of video-games today are about killing people or hurting people and by that we already limit ourselves as a medium of interaction. Of course, this is just something we need to get out of our system and I've already talked about it in depth, but it is quite worrying. Given we're so limited in our way of interacting with the world, dialogue choice mechanics only recently becoming popular and other stuff, we're going to need to somehow explore the same territory that literary classics do.

Assassin's Creed Brotherhood came about quite recently and something interesting came with it, one of the lead writers said he tried to reflect current day politics within the game. There's all sorts of stuff about in the game connecting legislation from both the Bush and Obama administration, with one particular puzzle exploring the corporate connections of Bush. This is a puzzle which is interactive and the revelations it carries both connected to the game's plot and commentary on modern politics.

The puzzles themselves aren't that important to the core gameplay, most of it revolving around running around and stabbing people or sneaking around and then stabbing people. I don't know if we could ever have a game that details commentary on modern politics while also being a game about shooting or killing things. I envision a public debate sort of game in which dialogue is played like chess or an RTS with both sides reacting, bonuses carried for audience favor and each debate lasting many hours and covering many problems. It would certainly raise the bar when it comes to speech interaction as the mechanics are already built and they already suit what's coming about (a thoughtful discussion).

Far Cry 2, as I've already talked about, discusses extensively many political issues which have relevance across the spectrum of the world. Actually, I'm sounding like a complete hypocrite aren't I? I just said you can't make a game which details commentary while also being about shooting people and yet *Far Cry 2* is just that. It's a game that revolves around you being caught up in this vicious civil war and vicious African region that reflects the whole world in similar ways.

Making a literary classic in this day and age is quite a challenge. The term 'literary classic' shouldn't really apply JUST to literature, as the ideas it reflects has been carried on through cinema and through the arts.

We are currently living in the 21st century, bombarded with technology and instant news thanks to the miracle of social networking. We're going to live on the internet, it's inevitable, when real life conversation turns into reflecting on instant-messaging conversation. That's fine, it doesn't scare me all that much, what does scare me is how easily all those messages and transfers of private information can be stored and sold off to corporations or just *looked* at. That's scary itself that someone out there knows more about me than many of my friends.

This is the 21st Century and while films and literature can capture some of that emotion, technology affecting us is only truly brought to light by our interaction with technology, it would be some beautiful irony if video-games stepped their game up and reflected some of those ideas. Not necessarily Orwellian but with a hint of Orwell built around the effects of social media and societal pressures carrying through a digital space.

Inception prompted many intellectual talks online about the nature of dreaming, all from the ambiguity that it left at its ending, it was clearly desired to happen. The same has happened from *Blade Runner* and insert intelligent and historical book here. Video-games have actually prompted discussion themselves through *BioShock* and *Mass Effect 2*, both of which respectively discuss Objectivism and the true meaning of what it means to be human. The specific mode of story transport that *BioShock* uses will be discussed more intimately later on, but for now, lets come back to creating a literary classic.

It needs to embody the time, the flavour of society, deal with themes on multiple levels, ambiguity isn't necessary but opens up audience discussion more easily through the use of a plot event being a catalyst for spurring on questions and serving the audience in an open rather than an obtuse manner.

Why can't video-games do this?

I think it's already happened but perhaps ourselves as a community, including video-game journalism, just hasn't recognized it yet. We're not recognizing it because we're not exactly looking for it. A classic video-game to us is one we remember rather than one we actually think about in the same way a literary or cinematic classic would. They have all of that good stuff, we do too, we're already capable so why haven't we got there yet?

I'm more sure that the community we have carries intelligent and thoughtful people within it, this is a medium that revolves around technology after all, and as such it feels weird we aren't thinking about video-games in the same way we think of everything else. I know many people who would laugh at the fact I cried at a video-game, I know many people who just want to shoot people and see them as toys and yet as a community we're more than capable of discussing Objectivism and stuff so why can't we come out of the closet and admit we're a medium full of literary classics?

Video-games could define the 21st Century, I wouldn't be surprised if they're already going to leave their mark, except right now we're going to leave it all for the wrong reasons. We're going to end up being a shallow, humble medium in the shadow of cinema if we don't pull our act together and realize how brilliant we already are. We're a medium that could change everything if we put our mind to it, it's a shame we haven't done already.

So here's my solution: whenever you start discussing ideas and stuff that has come about of playing a video-game then refer to the game with the words 'interactive classic'. It sounds silly at first, yes, but then it sort of sticks.

Once we start holding video-games with the same regard as any other medium, and start talking about and opening up about our experiences then things can only get better. We're a medium with a lack of real ambition and thus lack of confidence or swagger. We're still talking about the fact it's time to sit down with film and literature at the table of art forms, but we still pride ourselves in *Homefronts* and *Black Opses*. We are not toymakers, we are not filmmakers; we're something new entirely.

The awards developers already get from BAFTA and the VGAs can already be seen hugged close to their chest and shown to their families. They're proud, I'm proud of them yet there's no real 'Oscars' or any real award shows that truly celebrates the medium. The VGAs are peppered with advertisements on next year's releases, celebrity cameos who throw a few lines down to get quickly paid and the separation of Indie Games from the mainstream awards like they're not capable of 'Best Story'. Recognition is what will drive our solutions, as will understanding, because doing that will mean developers will consider and think before they make their billionth quick-time event.

Our play, our voice and our interaction is the most important thing in creating a 'literary classic'. We are the force that drives this industry and once we understand and hold video-games up in our arms then we will define the 21st Century for generations to come.

3.4 METHODS OF STORYTELLING

“Where most other media require the audience to *induce* their meaning, games afford the audience at least the possibility of *deducing* their meaning.” – Clint Hocking (Creative Director on *Far Cry 2*)

Is interactivity the lifeblood that drives our medium or is it something else entirely? Is it our anguish and desire, our fears and hopes dying before our very eyes so much so we hang on to that slither of interactive existence. Video-games have long sat in the shadow of cinema and they forever will unless they realise the most important thing that any medium can ask itself. How do we tell stories?

Cinema has cinematography, art has the spectrum of colours and strokes and visual noise, books have deep and thoughtful ties to the nature of language and video-games are an expression of all of the above. Except they're not just that, or I hope I've proved that, they are something so much more. We have reached our limits, or so I feel, of impersonating other mediums. We have gone beyond the call of duty and delivered works of visual art and cinematic art that could rival the foundations of those mediums, except we haven't accomplished the same for interactivity.

There is a need, a drive, to constantly re-evaluate our position in the world and how far we're come. It's so we can prepare ourselves for changes, I think the time has come to change, the next five to ten years are the absolute most important to this medium. We have the rise of middle-man narratives to deal with, we have to get over our fear we are incapable of 'Hollywood' level narrative, we have to get past the idea that people can't project themselves into blank slates and we need to refuse to take the seat at the table of the arts.

That's a broad statement, brass even, am I saying video-games aren't a valid form of art?

Of course not and that needs to stop being the question. We are an art form, end of, however you define it or however you perceive it, whether you don't believe in or not, you are wrong. Games are art, the end, games won, the end. But we should refuse the invitation to join cinema or books and all the others.

Not because we aren't an art form but because those mediums have long poisoned us for so long. We have mimicked their language and movement for so long that we've forgot what we are. Video-games are not a visual medium, they are not ones that fundamentally live within non-interactive constraints, they are something else entirely. We do not have the same problems that they have, we can touch and feel the face of our audience, conquer their hearts and make them cry at their own actions.

That is why we should never, ever associate ourselves with lower art forms. Yes, I say lower, because those mediums are only capable of non-interactivity. We are capable of that and then some. We are the masters of art, we're not exactly qualified to say that yet, but we are more than capable. Video-games are going to define the 21st Century, whether we like it or not, and I do not want the words 'cinematic' or 'visuals' to conquer our obituary. I want this to be the odd time when video-games tried so desperately to fight within Hollywood's shadow and then

ventured out to own the world. I want this to be a disgraceful time of bad writing, a disregard of our identity and a time when we didn't know what a video-game was. Soon, we will, and then it's only a matter of time before we go beyond the table of non-interactive arts and own the world in the palm of our hands.

Will you join us?

Then there's something that I'd like you to know. It's a theory of game design narrative I've kept to myself for a while, it's the methods of storytelling. Maybe it's right, maybe it's wrong and maybe it might just be the secret sauce that we need.

There are three main methods of storytelling in our medium; interactive, ironically non-interactive and non-interactive. I should probably start with interactive because, well, video-games!

Interactive is when interaction itself functions as a means of storytelling, with the player driving the narrative and pre-written elements being background noise or a support to the player's story. How prominent this method is identified depends on how much emphasis a designer will put on it, *New Vegas* will support this method whereas *Black Ops* has almost no trace of it. Open-world games kinda encourage this, unless they have a 'story' that likely tells different things to what the player is doing. In the right hands, interactivity as a method of storytelling can produce stories which make people cry by their own actions. What is hard to do, however, is support this in happening because if you begin to support then you begin to control. Sometimes some control is necessary to get the player understand your message or themes however.

Shadow of the Colossus' final message of David becoming Goliath is only powerful because of that action of killing each Colossi and losing Agro to your need to fulfil your quest. Your drive to kill these beasts, who slowly become passively-aggressive and then outright passive, that is what highlights the message. The very core objective of 'killing' turns into the most wretched feeling of guilt during the game's final sequence as you realize all of those beautiful creatures have been killed in the name of some crush or faint notion of love, that you lost your true friend and have become the monster under the bed.

New Vegas has less control over this method, but still acts on the same level of power. It allows you to do as you please after experiencing a pre-written narrative that you can interact with. The freedom it gives you, with the core mechanic of shooting things, makes it so that the themes and ideas that you come across aren't always even mentioned or referenced by the rest of the pre-written narrative. It doesn't do the complete opposite and go against your stance either, my exploration of euthanasia was done by myself and never did the game stop and say I couldn't do it. One of *New Vegas'* themes is life being the driving force of actual power, the narrative being constructed around Hoover Dam and the lead up to one giant battle between various factions over that power. That power is water and electricity, which drives life, and the stuff that I've just explored is the idea that life is harsh and we should be allowed to choose to die or help others to die.

Interactivity itself can't really exist in video-games as a means to drive a message, it does need to be driven home by visual elements such as the beautiful Colossi or the writing of *New Vegas*. In its purest form I would say it's *Minecraft* but I doubt any game includes *just* interactivity as the sole method of storytelling. It is the exclusive power we have and I can only

name too few of a games which use it as their prime method of storytelling, which is probably about to change.

Ironic non-interactivity is when non-interactive techniques such as a voiceless protagonist or linear level design are employed to re-enforce ideas that the game wants you to explore. This is probably the trickiest method to boil down to, but there are quite a lot of healthy examples. I've mentioned *BioShock* all too much but it is true that it explores its messages through ironic non-interactivity reflected against the interactivity.

The common video-game trait of 'objective' comes back to *BioShock* (all throughout the game, unfortunately) and it is used to funnel the player through the game narrative. This is to both keep the story and gameplay together but to also reference the plot revelation that comes about at the end of Act 2 when the player finds out he has been mind-conditioned to obey commands followed by "Would You Kindly". The mechanic of the objective coupled with the non-interactive nature of it all re-enforces what is being played out. If anything it's commentary on linear, strictly non-interactive games, in which we don't actually ask the question of whose orders we are following all of the time. *BioShock* also has a protagonist without a voice and a lack of interaction with the world beyond shooting it, all used to bring about the same commentary and the same ideas of limited freedom and Orwellian tones. It's a shame then that after the mind conditioning is removed, the non-interactive game 'objective' still exists and the core gameplay remains unchanged. It would've been even more of a re-enforcement to see the game shift up into more interactive territory.

Half-Life 2 also plays with the same sort of non-interactivity, more deliberately in fact. Throughout the games, the player is haunted by a character known as G-Man, who constantly lines up events and sequences for the player protagonist to solve. The game is strictly linear, though never removes the player's control over his vision and shooting things, though he has no choice or interaction on the level of *New Vegas*. This is a good thing as it is used to both be ironically non-interactive and re-enforce the ironic naming of the main character - Gordon Freeman - which is not only ironic given the word 'free' but also opens up the fact that many blacks in times of slavery (who had been free) would be given the surname of 'Freeman'. This loose leash of still-imposed slavery lives with *Half-Life 2* throughout its story along with the Orwellian tones and other good stuff explored by *BioShock* without needing to make one of its mechanics meaningless.

I think probably the best example of deliberate and ironic non-interactivity is, another Valve Software title, *Portal 2*. *Portal 2* takes place in a dilapidated research facility controlled by a maniacal robot, haunted by a dead CEO and all along holding hands with a comical personality sphere. They all have one thing in common: humanity without flesh. *Portal 2*'s protagonist does not speak, she has no personality, and the level design and progression are functioned within the linear flavour. The lack of a personality is reflected against the personality filled AI constructs and recordings of the dead CEO, Cave Johnson, and liveliness of the voice acting makes for a sure-fire questioning over what exactly *is* separating the player and the robots around him/her. What is human?

Portal 2 actually has non-interactive sequences, fancy words for cut-scene, in which stuff beyond the player's control happens. I read up on this afterward and it was apparently done because in-game engine stuff would've made it technically impossible. I think this should

probably be where my control is removed completely, when I have no function or the game cannot support my function properly within the game.

The final method of storytelling in video-games is blatant non-interactive. Cut-scenes, quick-time events and set-pieces beyond interaction; *Black Ops*, *Grand Theft Auto IV* and *Infamous 2*. *Black Ops* actually carries a good, weighty narrative but is held back by a lack of player empathy, given it's another middle-man narrative gone bad, the same goes for *Grand Theft Auto IV* which has a great main character but it all falls flat. There's a lack of connection not seen in the likes of *Portal 2* or *Infamous 2*. The former being an exercise in having the prime technique being ironic non-interactivity, but *Infamous 2* is different.

Infamous 2 is non-interactive in the sense that *Metal Gear Solid 4* is non-interactive, it makes sure that you still matter in this world. It makes sure your interaction carries weight and you're not some camera shooting things and waiting for the next cut-scene to happen. There are choices, open-world little side-diversions and boss fights to keep the pace up in *Infamous 2*. With *Metal Gear Solid 4* it is taking the idea of a quick-time event and spanning it out into something that becomes more observational than interactive.

BioShock and *BioShock 2: Minerva's Den* both carry a plot twist which call the player into existence. He becomes a character in that world, it feels natural too given the gameplay progression, so all of the ideas and themes (*Minerva's Den* deals with segregation too) they all come flooding out naturally. *Metal Gear Solid 4* does it in reverse, it makes the player hold hands with Snake throughout the entire series and then it is time to let go. The final 30 minutes of *Metal Gear Solid 4* do not replicate the same core gameplay as the rest of the game, especially the quicktime event sequence with the microwave corridor. It seems like the camera is pulling back from a defined character and giving us room to say goodbye, accept that he has to die, somewhat in the *Toy Story 3* sense when it gives us room to breath.

That is when blatant non-interactivity is used to be as powerful as any other technique. Non-interactivity can really, really show us what a horrible 'in the shadow of cinema' little medium we are and it can also give weight to our interactions. It can make our connections with characters seem all the more remarkable, it can make middle-man narratives feel on the same emotional page as the player and it is also capable of giving us room to breathe and let go. It's that subtlety that's missing from *Grand Theft Auto IV* or *Black Ops*, it's all cut-scenes and set-pieces and explosions without any real heart or connection.

All of the above three techniques can either be abused or celebrated, they can be mixed with others to create a game that tells a story in various ways rather than one way. *BioShock* kind of slipped up by having the same method repeated throughout but losing effect after the main plot twist. *Grand Theft Auto IV* has cut-scenes which make sure there's a blockade of connection and even *New Vegas* is guilty of ultimate interactivity leading to a loss of direction and drive. What I felt will never, ever be felt by anyone else. That's the beauty and downfall of interactivity, it's unique and it cannot be preserved or replicated, only supported.

Minecraft however.

That's something else entirely.

3.5 MINECRAFT

“This is one game where there's officially no shame in looking up the FAQ. A tutorial wouldn't go amiss. "See those trees?" it would begin by saying. "Chop them down with the flat of your hand. Now make a workbench. Now make a pickaxe. Mine some stone and make a better pickaxe. Now find some coal. If Lady Luck consents to smile, you'll find some in a wall somewhere - no, I don't know how you were supposed to figure all this out.” – Ben ‘Yahtzee’ Crowshaw (video-game reviewer, creator of *Zero Punctuation*, *Escapist* columnist)

Minecraft is a game in which the player can pick up blocks from the environment and put them down again like virtual legos. He can use the blocks in his inventory to craft stuff and gain items which can help to craft more stuff and eventually dig into the ground to find minerals to craft better stuff and build his house. It is a game in which there is no direction, no objective, the minimum of developer hand-holding, an ever-changing game state (still in ‘Beta’ stage) and possibly the next step in the evolution of video-game design.

Minecraft is pure interactivity, the messages that the player discovers were placed there by the player. If he's afraid of the dark and chooses to conquer that fear, the only things in place of making sure that happens is darkness and a movement system. Everything else is completely independent of the game, it is a player-driven experience so much so it becomes a player-experience.

All of *Minecraft*'s worlds are procedurally generated, meaning each new world is random and unique, allowing players to tackle fresh new landscapes and carve their own stake in this land. The world itself is virtually endless too, meaning that (in theory) the player could dig all he want but never have power over everything. There will always be a chance at death, even with the best of items.

It's not exactly an exercise in dis-empowerment or empowerment, it's not an exercise in progression on any fronts and that's what makes it infinitely powerful. Progression is probably the most important aspect of holding player's interest and it is usually used to throw new, powerful abilities and weapons in the player's face. In *Minecraft* all of these have to be discovered by the player, they can eventually break through use and the player isn't safe from drowning, lava flows, monsters and gravel cave-ins. They can die just as easily as before, there's barely an advantage here, yet it's all necessary to strive to survive and thrive in this world.

People often through the term ‘sandbox’ at *Minecraft* given there's no clear objective or drive that the player is forced upon but I think the term survival-horror has been resurrected here. Survival-horror used to mean having the smallest of advantage over masses of opponents who were out to eat you. With the old *Silent Hill* games it meant a sloppy movement system, sloppy combat and all of this felt more human. You could survive, but it took real patience and often real courage to venture out to find goodies. Survival-horror today has been thrown at games like *Dead Space 2* which are pretty much third-person shooters with scary things in them, don't get me wrong, I think *Dead Space 2* is a thrilling and compelling title, but it's not survival-horror. I've said of *Dead Space 2* that it is the *Uncharted 2* of action-horror, and that is

not belittling at all, because the game excels at its genre and it should be proud of its action roots and horror aura.

Survival-horror, I feel, is a term given to games which have systems which permit empowerment but limit the player's power so as to make sure his or her opponents (whether they be enemies or the environment) can always kill the player regardless of skill level. In a game like *BioShock*, it is near impossible to be killed by the same enemies so the game tries to scale them up to your level. It powers everything else up around you, but *Minecraft* is consistent in the power of its enemies and environment. It can kill you, it probably will end up killing you.

The survival aspect of *Minecraft* is still being fleshed out with the game still in 'Beta' stages but the game's developers have wanted to include food, hydration and sleep necessities to the player's gaming diet. This means that a higher level of realism will be introduced to *Minecraft* and usually I'm against the idea of realism unless it really heightens the experience, and true survival systems might just make it a more dynamic and even more thrilling experience. Not because of empowerment or dis-empowerment but because of a consistent set of rules and game logic that permits the player to gather up resources to solve the problem of those necessities, but never *end* those problems. There will always be hunger, there will always be thirst and a need to sleep everyday.

Minecraft turns into a horror title at night when the monsters come out to player and spawn randomly. They could be anywhere, any number of them depending on the difficulty, and when you're exploring the dark caves below then anything can come out and kill you. There is no fear like being trapped miles underground after taking a mis-step and without torches. There are also giant spiders, skeletons, exploding green things and all manner of stuff that will ruin your day. The randomness of the experience, along with the procedurally generated world, makes *Minecraft* possibly the scariest game ever created. Not because it is the scariest but because of the possibility behind the randomness of player based experiences.

Minecraft is then the solution to all our problems as a medium then. It is a game engineered in emergent narrative, player driven experience and isn't capable of any the problems we face. It is true non-linearity and not abused, there are mechanics in place and light touches of progression (better minerals/materials) that keep a light sense of focus in the player driven experience. It isn't capable of a middle-man narrative nor overwriting nor any real issue that faces 'expensive' games. It is independently developed, but that doesn't mean it can't be replicated or learned from.

The problem we have from this great solution is that fact that it both isn't complete and it isn't being celebrated or analyzed. The fault isn't of interactive storytelling, it is our fault in recognizing and understanding it. I'm not asking you to understand game design pragmatics, I barely know anything of the sort, but that doesn't mean you can't understand what makes you feel better: watching a cut-scene about some guy talking about 'his wife' who you then use to shoot people at or stumbling across a randomly generated cave filled with wonder? Experiences are more powerful when they come within, you don't have to look far to figure that out.

I have begun to recognize video-games true power and *Minecraft's* power as being contained in one simple scene from a much celebrated 2010 film. I'm talking about Christopher Nolan's 'film of his career... again' *Inception* in which people go into dreams and go about being amazing. There's a scene in which Cillian Murphy's character ends up discovering that his father's last words to him, "disappointed... disappointed", meant he was disappointed in him

trying to emulate him and always loved him no matter his mental capacity. The sad, sad thing is that this takes place all within a dreamscape and is probably not true in the real world, but that doesn't matter, because Murphy's character cries anyway and believes this. It leads him to breaking up his empire and having the film's ensemble cast all completing their objective.

Murphy's character tells himself this. It is his own mind that has populated this scene with what takes place, but there is something oh so subtle in the way it all works. All of this experience that populates the scene and leads to victory is all done with suggestions *by* the team that wants him to break up his father's empire. If you think of it in the way of game developers leaving little hints or systems, such as a pre-written narrative and a weapon in *New Vegas* or a few mechanics and a world generator for *Minecraft*, then I think *Inception* becomes the perfect metaphor for perfect game design. If the team wanted to achieve their objective in a more obtuse manner with a giant, middle-man narrative that makes Cillian Murphy's character take on the reins of another character and restrict his emotional connection then they would probably still succeed. They would probably get the job done, but they wouldn't make him cry or at least not in the way of *personal* touches.

That is pure interactivity, in which a player's own experiences all condense to form one solid narrative built from the architects of his or her own mind and affect the player like a rebounding basketball.

That is *Minecraft*.

There is never a *right* way to tell a story in a video-game, there will always be explorations of thrown away or 'inferior' ideals. I am more than happy to say that middle-man narratives are not all as bad as each other, *Infamous 2* is proof of what is to come, but I am not happy to say that they may well define the next few years. *BioShock Infinite* has already been debated on about its main character's exclusive relationship with the other characters, and the lack of interaction available to the player, I think this is a dangerous thing. If video-games become this shallow, waddling medium of interactive storytelling with the most random of waves and little tides that never touch the soil then we have a problem on our hands. There will always be *Minecrafts* and *New Vegases*, but they aren't held or analyzed or even given the chance to be explored as much as the pre-written and defined narratives of our culture. I believe in what *Minecraft's* developer, Notch, said in one of the quotes in this book.

"I strongly believe that all good stories have a conflict and that all good games tell a good story regardless of if it's pre-written or emergent."

What I also believe in is recognition and not throwing something away because it's difficult. The former type of narrative, pre-written, has conquered our interactive medium for too long so much so its started to alienate *our* piece of the puzzle. All games carry two narratives, as I've already said, how powerful they ultimately are depends on at how they are at peace with one another. *Minecraft* throws pre-written out of the window, *Black Ops* throws its opposite out of the window too and yet one of them doesn't make the effort to even *try* and build an experience around the player.

If video-games are to become the most powerful form of art, which I more than believe they are capable of, then we need to stop it with the spin-words and politics that we've built ourselves around. Console wars, 'exclusive games', graphics wars and all sorts of 'I'm insecure about my investment in video-games' nonsense. Video-games are video-games, they are an

interactive medium, they are not a visual one. It is time to stop treating ourselves in the shadow of cinema and take our true throne atop the promised land reigning over art.

That will be a task that will take decades.

Minecraft is the first step.

It shows that pure, non-linearity can be exciting and thrilling and shows video-games cannot be approached or be taken apart like a book or film. They are unique, their themes are unique and the true analysis comes from the *Inception* metaphor I argued earlier. Ask yourself this of any powerful video-game that draws you to tears.

How **did** it make me cry?

CONCLUSION

“I dreamed of the day when computer games would be a viable medium of artistic expression — an art form. I dreamed of computer games expressing the full breadth of human experience and emotion. I dreamed of computer games that were tragedies, games about duty and honour, self-sacrifice and patriotism. I dreamed of satirical games and political games; games about the passionate love between a boy and girl, and the serene and mature love of a husband and wife of decades; games about a boy becoming a man, and a man realizing that he is no longer young. I dreamed of games about a man facing truth on a dusty main street at high noon, and a boy and his dog, and a prostitute with a heart of gold.” – Chris Crawford (the forefather of interactive storytelling, designer of *Balance of Power*)

Video-games have touched me more than any medium, they have held my hand and they will continue to hold my hand for the rest of my life. I imagine myself tens of years from now with old hands with wrinkles clasped around hot plastic looking at graphics that come out of the screen to try and bite me. I imagine being with a family, of my children running about and of being filled with a strange sense of youth. I haven't touched a controller in a while, the gaps becoming longer, but still filled with this alien nostalgia. I can feel those emotions, those old games which made me who I am.

Then I look at the screen. I look at what is playing out, what exactly I'm playing.

For one medium to be boiled down to one idea repeated over and over and over is sickening... but it's normal for us. I've felt trapped in the bubble of video-games for too long, I've ventured out and tried to look at the whole medium as a vessel for storytelling. Hopefully I've convinced you that we have a long, long mountain to climb but perhaps go back into Section One. We've come so far, I am surprised so much good has happened.

Our progress does not depend on academic analysis, it does not depend on big blogger writer guys writing bloated, self-indulgent pieces about how a specific video-game touched their heart and made them think of euthanasia; it depends on you. More importantly it depends on what you ask from video-games: do you want a good story or do you want the same good stories as cinema or literature or any non-interactive based media? Even more importantly, you need to ask better of a specific group of people.

It has been argued for a long time that the reason film, literature etc. are all well-established mediums with bedrocks of artistically relevant works is because those works have been identified. They've been sifted over, celebrated, analyzed and held with high regard. People are often proud and joyed to say they cried at a film or felt more touched than ever before, that the character's situation could relate so well to their own real life situation that they felt an emotional outburst was necessary. Films have changed people, literature has changed people and all in good ways. People write blogs, they write essays and people write... reviews.

The biggest problem we have to face as a medium is our way of treating video-games and who exactly will elevate us to those promised land heights.

And that is a story for another time. That is something... completely different.

SOURCES AND REFERENCES

INTRODUCTION: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/58814913/Brown-vs-EMA-decision>

SECTION ONE:

INTRO – Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*

BLANK SLATES - <http://kotaku.com/#!5775640/a-plea-for-games-to-grow-up>

AN EMERGENT EXPERIENCE -

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/theobserver/2010/mar/21/tom-bissell-video-game-cocaine-addiction>

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE- http://www.forbes.com/business/forbes/2005/1212/064_2.html

SAVE THE WORLD -

http://www.ted.com/talks/jane_mcgonigal_gaming_can_make_a_better_world.html

CAN A COMPUTER MAKE YOU CRY?- http://chrishecker.com/Can_a_Computer_Make_You_Cry

SECTION TWO:

INTRO – *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

TAKING A NEW PERSPECTIVE - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First-person_shooter

GOD DOESN'T CARE - <http://www.comingsoon.net/news/gamenews.php?id=73910>

A PATHETIC EXCUSE FOR AN INTERACTIVE MEDIUM - <http://www.motivationtruth.com/2010/10/gov-palins-heroic-media-appearance-in.html>

YOU PLAY AS - <http://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/narrative/paradigms.html>

OVER-WRITING - <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/videos/view/extra-credits/1887-Video-Games-Bad-Writing>

SECTION THREE:

INTRO– Portal 2

LINEAR VERSUS NON-LINEAR NARRATIVE- <http://www.minecraft.net/about.jsp>

STOP WORSHIPPING A DESIGN FLAW - <http://uk.ps3.ign.com/articles/109/1090380p1.html>

<http://kotaku.com/#!5684775/review-call-of-duty-black-ops-modern-warfare-redefined>

THE TOUGHEST JOB IN THE WORLD - http://deoxy.org/pkd_how2build.htm

METHODS OF STORYTELLING- http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/08/on-authorship-i.html

MINECRAFT- <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/videos/view/zero-punctuation/2680-Minecraft>

CONCLUSION: *Chris Crawford on Game Design*

MINI-GLOSSARY

- Mechanic - The elements of a game that allow for a fun and engaging user experience including, but not limited to, goals, points, collecting badges, awards, trophies, rankings/leaderboards, levels, exchange of virtual goods and currencies, and feedback loops e.g 'Objectives' in *BioShock*.
- Quick-time events - A scene in which the player presses on-screen prompts to further the action, also known as a 'glorified cut-scene' e.g 99% of the *God of War* series.

A SPECIAL THANKS TO:

My Mummy, James Portnow, Anthony Burch, Clint Hocking, Jordan Thomas, Ken Levine, Roger Ebert, David Jaffe, Jim Sterling, Chris Livingston, Tom Francis, Adam Stephen Kelly, Ridley Scott, Joseph Patrick Byrne, Stanley Kubrick, Mark Speight, Patrice Desilets, Chris Dahlen, Gabe Newell, Erik Wolpaw, Chet Faliszek, Philip K. Dick, Christopher Avellone, Valve Software, Bethesda Softworks, Jane McGonigal, Team Ico, Fumito Ueda, Steve Gaynor, Markus Persson, Madison Bird, Stuart O' Connor, Orson Welles, Q-Games, Monty Pthon Crew, Stephen Fry, The Yogscast Scott DiMonda, Steven Artlip, Johnathon Holmes, Chris Beswick, Andrew Ellard, Christopher Nolan, Danny Baranowsky, Quentin Tarantino, Ben 'Yahtzee' Croshaw, Graham Linehan, Duncan Jones, Joss Whedon, Warren Spector, David Cage (cough), Charlie Brooker, Luke Murphy, Rocksteady Studios, Irrational Games, Obsidian Entertainment, THQ, Ubisoft Montreal, Johnathon Blow, Media Molecule, Matt Thorson, Terry Cavanagh, 4A Games, Geoff Keighley, Carl Sagan, Tommy Refenes, Edmund McMillen, Playdead Studios, Mojang Studios, Kanye West, David Bowie, Nyan Cat, Alan Moore, Dave Gibbons, Bioware Studios, Derek Yu, John Bain, Garry Newman, Infinity Ward, Everyone who ever put up with me, Destructoid chaps and gals, 2 Player Productions, Adam Hustwit, Sucker Punch Studios, Insomniac Games, Chris Crawford, Tom Bissell, Chris Hecker, Daniel Floyd, The Gamer Studio, Platform Nation, Jason Rohrer, Tim Schafer, Sidhe Interactive, Stan Lee, Everyone who ever affiliated themselves with the words 'Doctor Who' and 'Firefly', Reddit.com, The Screenjabber Team, Ellen McLain, Stephen Merchant, The Electric Hydra crew, Conan O' Brien, The Escapist Magazine, Marvel Comics, DC Comics, Team Bondi, Christina Hendricks.

Special thanks for the US Supreme Court and the Smithsoneon museum for recognizing video-games as an art form.

A special thanks to you: the reader.

Thank you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Nathan Hardisty is a late-teen-something-or-other living in Leeds, England and trying to make a living as a writer-guy. He's written for Platform Nation, The Gamer Studio, Screenjabber and all the while pissed thousands of people off by telling them that their opinion is wrong and his is right. He has problems with time tenses because he's an idiot and also can't shift from third-person perspective because he's a double-idiot. He currently has four self-published works under his belt with *Tears in Rain*, an analysis on Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, still to come along with the next installment of the *Up, Down, Left, Right* series.

 @Nathsies

 Nathan Hardisty

 +Nathan Hardisty

 nathan.hardisty@gmail.com

 blogossus.wordpress.com

