

NATHAN HARDISTY - VOL.5



THE END

Written and Edited by Nathan Hardisty

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

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NOTE: Anything I mentioned will probably be spoiled.
You have been warned.

INTRODUCTION

Over five years ago I began a stupid crusade to start writing on the internet about things that people might or might not care about. After countless long nights of tweaking, editing and tears, books and articles aplenty and, with a heart of mild sorrow, I must bid farewell. I must bid adieu to the world of video-games journalism and open my arms to the future ahead of me. I always intended for *Up, Down, Left, Right* to be my teenage stain upon gaming criticism, but it's been even more of a persona affair than I might've ever imagined. Ending this series I'm filled with a strange nostalgia, some kind of emotional touchstone, that reminds me of how young I am and how 'rough' my writing still is. I may never be a Hemingway or Ebert or Fitzgerald, but I believe that one day, and I really do hope for this, that I may carve my own niche out of my own hard work. It may take years, tens of them, it will involve more all-nighters of editing and the toughest of slogs, but I will do it. With that I could end the entire series of *Up, Down, Left Right*, but there was only ever going to be one way that this series would end. It will end as autobiographical as possible, for this volume is strictly about my own personal history with video-games. The issues, the history and the dark depths of emotional connection, how my morality and sense of the 'world' was forged in part due to classics of interactive monument from *Shadow of the Colossus* to *Fallout New Vegas*. *Up, Down, Left, Right* was always about my thoughts on video-game design, culture and criticism and so I end it with those thoughts themselves. My own history. My favourite games, my favourite gaming concepts and, finally, the greatest interactive experience of my entire life. I wanted to show just how 'different' of a medium video-games are and I hope I can be the lab rat with a pen to sort out just how 'changing' of an experience that video-games can be.

Looking ahead in my life I imagine I will return to these plains of video-game criticism. There are still essays I want to write, topics to cover and some titles I want to talk about. For now, however, with this effort, I am complete. My film journalism is gaining a grander chunk of my attention and I am off to go to university to study a subject I deeply love.

Up, Down, Left, Right is not my success story. I have not earned one single penny from my years of writing, but I have earned recognition for my other efforts. I've had pieces on Destructoid, Critical Distance and Gamasutra, I've had my fanwork luvvie work *Tears In Rain* featured on a vast number of websites, and it's that work which I'm most proud of. With this series, however, I see more of a personal artefact. I have catalogued my own intellectual evolution and its orbit around video-games. Reading the older volumes I see technical mistakes, that 'roughness' is still in here, but I also see something which I am truly proud of; heart. With this final volume I have finished documenting the blossoming of my inner critic and so I can put that all to rest.

Writing these volumes has never been easy. Altogether I imagine they haven't had close to the recognition of my other works, but it's always been nice to return to

something to which I am most familiar. As I type sentences about gameplay or community, I feel the controller or mouse still in hand. I still feel connected to characters and the lore, histories and fiction is all a brainwave away. I can tell you about the civilizations in *Civilization 5* and my brave stories of building a Polynesian Empire from one city to engulf an entire globe, I can tell you about my near-tearful experience with euthanasia in *Fallout New Vegas* and, the story I know best, one of the greatest 'maturities' of my life in experiencing *Shadow of the Colossus*. This is what Volume Five is about, it's a celebration of the past. I hope you've all enjoyed your time with my rough antics and thoughts, feelings and whatnots about video-games. This isn't just an ode to my own history, but to yours too. We all believe in a grander future for video-games, and perhaps some of it resides in the past.

SECTION ONE: ONCE MORE UNTO THE BREACH

It's tough. After five years of writing about video-games, I'm not sure where to begin or end this weird time. I'm pretty sure the entire philosophy of this entire volume is about endings, nostalgia and a search for the truth and joy found in video-games. I'm writing this now with only plans in place for the ending, and I know they'll probably change even as I end this sentence. I have a deep love for biographies and histories, and yet I realize that a tale or two out of my own life would be incredibly boring. Maybe this is why I'm writing about my relationship with video-games, it at least makes the anecdotes slightly more interesting. I'm not sure.

See, video-games and I have been around since I was four years old. I played *Grand Theft Auto* before I knew how to pronounce all of my vowels. It's a fact I'm not readily proud of, but it is a fact. I am writing this celebration of video-games, by diving through my own history, in an effort of closure. My life is going to get incredibly hectic and, well, I'm not sure that writing about video-games will be a part of that experience. For now, however, we go once more into the lands of pixelated confusion.

Up, Down, Left, Right was always a teenage legacy. Full of spelling errors and disjointed lexicon, yet in all of its rough glory I do believe there's a definite truth to it all. Something of an ode to nostalgia, that perhaps this is more about me sifting through my life to try and obtain some kind of meaning and value with all my hours spent with video-games. I don't think I'll ever stop playing them, but writing about them? I'm not sure.

1-1 CRASH BANDICOOT – Developed by a few Naughty Dog kids, the studio that would go on to create the smash hit *Uncharted* series and the recently acclaimed *The Last of Us*, *Crash Bandicoot* was the first game to 'define' the PlayStation One. It gave Sony its first legitimate mascot and gave a genuinely sweet platforming experience. I still remember my grandfather coming home from work, clutching a plastic bag with a PlayStation and the *Crash Bandicoot* jewel case inside.

1-2 VIDEO-GAMES – It's hard to say 'when' I truly 'appreciated' my hobby of video-gaming. Taking something as silly as video-gaming, a medium here you count kills and headshots, in a 'serious' vein was, for a long time, utterly foreign. As I played hundreds of titles and slowly found my tastes I began to think about games beyond the pixelated surface. This chapter goes from *Bandicoot* to *Colossus* to the present day and covers my changing attitudes towards video-game design and the medium as a whole.

1-3 UP, DOWN, LEFT, RIGHT – Over five years ago I began writing about video-games. Now, in the fifth and final volume, I decide to look back throughout these years of writing a book series about video-games to see if it has actually meant anything.

[1-1] CRASH BANDICOOT

I still remember the absolute foreign feeling of hearing the whirs of the PlayStation come to life and the first polygon beats of my first video-game experience. It was an unfamiliar experience to say the least. My grandfather carted this big grey box home from work; I don't know the exact origins. One of his friend's children was going to university and the console couldn't be 'passed down', so it was given to me. Or perhaps he had picked it up pre-owned for a few quid down the electronics store. This was 1998, and the PlayStation was now in full swing. I remember the carrier bag though. It had the logo of a supermarket, it was crinkled raw and inside were all of these weird cables and things that a four year old just couldn't possibly understand.

Memory is often a familiar, odd and wrong thing. For all the psychology I've read, for all the literature I've studied and for all the history I've... historied I've found no truth to memories themselves. They fold in scrutiny, and yet there is an honesty and pure joy that can be extracted from them. When that 'PS' logo flashed to life on that small black screen, on a television that would probably be an artefact by now, I wasn't sure what I was expecting. Those noises too, like some alien craft landing in forty places all at once. I remember that feeling, right in my head. Here I was, some bored four year old who was just beginning to learn how to read and forget about nappies, and this giant brick of grey was put in front of a screen. I remember the controller being put in my hands for the first time. I look at the DualShock 3 now and it seems like a second home for my fingers and palm, yet my little self just didn't know what to do. The PlayStation has mostly been small enough for my tiny manhands, but the first PlayStation controller, to my four year old hands, was a few angles and ergonomics lesson too far. I think I thought of it as an oversized television remote.

Then *Crash Bandicoot* flared up. The logos and the crackle of the pixelated mixture. What sort of feeling is it. It's kind of hard to explain. I can honestly describe that the closest emotion is similar to when you discover or see a place of pure serenity. A waterfall or a French chateau glistening in the sun, canyons and riverbeds filled with golden reflections of the sun above. That's the closest abstraction I can put towards my first experience with video-gamedom. All of my treasured plays from LEGO to my imagination to the dinosaur playsets. I still recall my four year old self being caught in a rapture of confusion as he began to unravel the very potential of the grey brick before him. Even as the, now primitive, polygon beats played out, my mind was blown. I'd discovered what would become the absolute past time for my life.

Crash Bandicoot is a hard game, don't let anyone tell you differently. Nowadays it simply doesn't hold up. You can't use the sticks to move, only the static D-pad, which makes jumping all the more difficult. There are crates you can jump on to grab apples and if you hit 100 then you get an extra life, if you hit 99 and die then you ragequit (usually). The game is ridiculously hard and unforgiving, yet it probably has the easiest boss 'fights' of all time. The first can be defeated in thirty seconds flat, a feat unmatched by my four year old self. It took him three days.

I remember my first play of *Crash Bandicoot*. I didn't have to just get used to the controls, but the very idea of 'controls'. This was something that people who drive cars and fly planes do, they use buttons and sticks to control things. Here I was with a grey *thing* between my hands controlling some cartoon thing on-screen.

I pressed up on the D-pad, pressed X to jump, and then fell down to the same space. I tried jumping over the crates before realizing you had to hold up and press X *at the same time*. Which I did.

Then I was wiped off the face of the Earth by a crab.

My second attempt was more fruitful. I jumped over the crab and then fell straight down into a pit.

This continued for about fifteen minutes or so, before I got bored out of frustration.

I think back to that ragequit as one of the most important moments of my childhood. If I had continued to sulk, shied away from this expensive toy and instead resigned myself to the outdoors world, my life might've been a lot different. I could've played football, I could've been sporty, I could've learned to talk to the opposite sex much quicker and maybe have none of the anxiety or awkwardness I have now. I might not have been an introvert. While this may sound regretful, it's not. My decision, at four years of age, to continue to carry on playing was probably one of the most important decisions of my entire life. With help from my nearby family, I was able to play my way through the first few sections of the first level. I still got frustrated, but I was still trying to understand my bewilderment at this technology. I still didn't have a firm grasp on the oversized remote that you used to control the thing, but I was getting some hang of the logic of it. The very fact that you could control this on-screen wombat cartoon thing by pressing and pulling buttons and things.

It didn't get any easier. I played for an hour or so, went to bed, and then was playing it the next morning. I didn't stop. Out of blatant stubbornness or genuine joy, I was continuing to play *Crash Bandicoot* and I was enjoying it. Whatever memories I have of almost smashing my controller, breaking down into a toddler tantrum and generally being a horrible gamer, they're all masked by the very feeling of connection. I don't believe video-games are an escapist medium, they have escapist qualities though, but I do believe they are feats of projection. I am not able to fully escape reality, but I am able to adapt to another. *Crash Bandicoot* was hardly a hero of my childhood, less of an idol and more of a symbol. Today I look around and see that the fabled wombat has been reduced to copyright shelf-life. Naughty Dog, as they did with their PS2 franchise *Jak & Daxter*, released three games of *Crash* before making *Crash Team Racing* and going off to the next console, leading the rights to be sold off to Activision. Four year old me had no idea about game development, console manufacturing, system architecture, graphical fidelity, copyright law or sales or any aspect about video-games other than they were *fun*. Sometimes I look at how I view video-games and see that it's a perception that perhaps isn't pure anymore, that there's a quality to my childhood affliction with video-games I'll never experience again.

Crash Bandicoot defined me, probably for the rest of my life. My time and frustration with that game, I don't think four or five or six year old me ever finished it, was all in an effort to start me off the long path. Soon I was playing *Rayman*, *Destruction Derby*, *Final Fantasy* and too many classics to mention. *Duke Nukem* and *Doom* appear as vague memories, with the PlayStation 2 appearing as a big arrival in my life. My long relationship with video-games began with *Crash Bandicoot* and playing it today reminds me that for all the charm, wonder and fantasy that our 'hobby' may bring us, it can also take us back. Like photographs or video-footage of our childhoods, we too can, by playing these titles once more, remember what it was like to have smaller hands and a smoother view of the world.

Crash Bandicoot is my time capsule, what's yours?

[1-2] VIDEO-GAMES

Writing about video-games is a weird profession. It's hard to exactly express the absolute motive behind my mad crusade. Ever since I was little I've wanted to be a writer. I used to write short stories and 'novels' (12 pages long) but I never fancied myself a video-game 'journalist'. Even while reading all of the fancy magazines, some of which I took to school to read in my lunch break, I saw that my love wasn't for the words or writers but for the screenshots and the hype sentences. I still have a box full of the stuff. There's one particular feature, one big six page extravaganza that probably is the 'origin' of my gaming writerhood. It's seven or eight years old now and, I won't name the magazine, it pretty much changed me. It was a hype feature on *Grand Theft Auto IV*. It talked about how the road would change with every drive, how some pop anthems would blare out of your phone during shootouts, how the online play was a free-roam extravagance and how the entire game sounded like the greatest achievement in the interactive arts.

As said, I was four years old when I first encountered *Grand Theft Auto*, starting out with the 2nd iteration. The very idea of freedom and freeroaming, the very idea I could drive around this city and generate tiny stories of my own, stories I told some of my bemused friends in that child-like vernacular, it was all one big luscious mix. I had no idea of the actual context of *GTA*, I didn't know you could murder hookers and that I was slaughtering innocents, it just seemed fun to me. Even renting it time and time again, the folks at the counter didn't tell me how truly demented that my smile was after everytime they handed me that jewel case.

Grand Theft Auto IV was the changing point for me. After *III* pretty much consumed a full two months of my life, *Vice City* a few weeks and *San Andreas* practically a whole year, *GTA IV* was primed to become the greatest game ever made. *Shadow of the Colossus* had took an emotional thump into me, something I didn't quite understand until I began reading a lot of video-game journalism, and I still didn't quite 'understand' video-games. It was this isolated hobby that followed me everywhere, consumed my mind. I can honestly say that living in all those worlds, interacting with thousands of characters and murdering bastards was probably the most 'formative' avenue of my life. I learned compassion, I learned Lovecraft, I learned psychology and I learned how to write. *BioShock* instilled me with a sense of rhythm, pacing and intelligence that was really unmatched. *Shadow of the Colossus* is still one of the emotional peaks of my entire life, we'll discuss that later, but *Grand Theft Auto IV*... this was *the game*.

I have written tens of thousands of words about *GTA IV*. For years it has haunted me as a game I will never properly understand. I've watched hour long machinimas, big discussion videos, read critiques and patterns of commentary. It's one of the few games to which I, and I haven't written this before, *still* collect reviews for. It was a game that consumed me, that caused me to re-evaluate my experiences with video-games. How and why did I feel, what was the value of my experiences and what on Earth was the

entire 'point' of playing these things?

It was some April morning in 2007 and I still remember hearing the slither of the box through the door. I still remember my own thoughts, I was terribly sick (something I counted as a blessing, so I didn't have to go to school and could play *GTA IV* all week), and all I could think of was how much hype and want and desire with which I wanted to experience this game. I had only just taken my first steps into the 'next-gen' of consoles. I'd been taken aback by *BioShock* and I had spent six months in *Oblivion*. So many other games were on my 'map', ready to be scouted out, but *GTA IV*, to me at least, was going to devour me whole.

Those seven minutes sat at the install screen with the title music still blaring will stick with me. I thought I was in for a masterpiece. Five years onwards and I still don't know what I saw.

Trust me, I was sucked into it. The invitation into high-def Liberty City was taken. I became absorbed into this thousand-long page symphony of AI and world building. I remember taking virtual friends out to dinners, feeling myself being pulled along the greater strings of the narrative and, after tens of hours passed, going to bed and doing it all over the next morning. I felt nothing, numbness perhaps, as I was enveloped whole by the Rockstar North beast. There were virtual strip clubs, hours of in-game television and so much more *stuff*, I devoured it all, and I felt nothing.

After over thirty-five hours had passed in-game and the credits rolled, I was faced with a harsher truth. I still believe that I 'grew up' through playing that thing. I didn't know what to feel. There was a taste in my mouth, some kind of need to both clap and boo. I had mixed feelings with *GTA IV*, I still do, but sat there, confused, I just couldn't process it all. I didn't understand it. I remembered my first days with the PlayStation 2 having my mind blown over and over, playing the original *Halo* on the Xbox and seeing the grand draw-distance of the great vistas that stretched into literal space. I remember finding myself in another sleepless night on top of a mountain in Cyrodiil, another memory of jetpacking through Las Vegas in *San Andreas* and so many countless hours. So many hours. I was taken back to the final colossus in *Shadow* and all of those new feelings as I dug that final swordstoke in. Sat in front of this high-definition television, watching the final beats of Rockstar's 'magnum opus' play out, seeing all of the magazines piled up to the right of the screen with all the '10s' and '9s' for the game, it did something to me. It taught me, in a matter of minutes simply recalling a few choice memories, that video-games were worth more than my little brain could ever have guessed.

See, I knew of the controversies surrounding video-games. I saw on YouTube all the *Mass Effect* scandals, I still caught E3 every so often and I caught on to the buzz around next-gen. I had talked about video-games for so long and had never evaluated their impact on me. They had caused my affliction for science-fiction and comic books and history and *Doctor Who* and all avenues of 'nerddom'. My experience with outer space worlds, demons in dungeons and characters from all walks of existence, they had all formed *me*. It would take me a few years to fully process this thought, but *Grand Theft*

Auto IV was the origin of it. The bitter taste it left in my mouth led me to pick up the online pen that August, it led me to begin writing about video-games.

Over the months and years I digested the works of Anthony Burch, Jim Sterling, Ken Levine, Ben Croshaw, Charlie Brooker, Tom Bissell... the list goes on. Even today I have an Adam Sessler video still to enjoy, I have a few articles to read and I am hoping to start writing some other video-game projects. I was always a writer, but *GTA IV* made me into the writer that I am today. I will never properly form a cohesive opinion on the game, but I do understand that it's where I began. Where 'The Purple View', my first blog, began. It's where my time on Platform Nation was made. So many, many countless articles and blogs and reviews and news and every single syllable of my modern writerhood is probably owed to *Grand Theft Auto IV*. It's when I started taking my video-games that much more seriously.

Tomorrow I will have to finish a column piece for Flixist, and I realize that I've fallen out of the loop. Currently, I have not written about 'any' video-game for a few months. I've played this year's fancy delights from *Papers, Please* to *BioShock Infinite* to *The Last of Us* and so on. With *Grand Theft Auto V* on the horizon I have to try and wonder if such a grand self-tectonic shift could take place again.

That's, I guess, what video-games are to me. They're the physics and forces that have helped to manipulate the geography of my mind. It's hard to really pinpoint, and I do believe any other medium has this capacity, exactly what changes have been done to me. I know that I wouldn't be writing without video-games, I know that if it weren't for that first play of *Crash Bandicoot* I simply wouldn't be the person I am. I know, and remember more clearly, how the experiences with *Grand Theft Auto IV* began my first steps as an outward writer. I wanted to write about video-games.

[1-3] UP, DOWN, LEFT, RIGHT

In writing *Up, Down, Left, Right* I've slowly become more comfortable with the fact that my once simple hobby is a much more complex and multi-faceted 'thing'. It's hard to say exactly what my relationship to video-games is given all of the means that it exists. It exists in game design, it exists in games journalism, in the intricacies of publisher management and distribution and it exists within communities. To comment on video-games means to comment on things surrounding it, and there's a lot of stuff. Being such a technological medium means that certain artistic critiques so commonly associated with other mediums cannot so handily applied. It makes sense to try and adapt literary criticism to the language of games, yet games don't have their own language yet. Maybe they never will. For every 'ludonarrative dissonance' we have design tenets that we boil down to a simple word of 'linear' that's slowly become more tainted over the years.

I never intended this series to be academic exercise, even in its most basic form it's been simply about my thoughts on something gaming related. Beginning *Volume One* was an odd, odd experience. I've written book-length things before, but to actually make one of those 'things' publicly available was a scary prospect to me. Re-reading the Volume I see a lot of my horrible writing and Nathanisms, most of which have survived to this day, and I do see it as this adorable experiment. *Volume One* mostly sums up my beliefs in video-games as an artistic expression and, increasingly, it's becoming an empty work. The very knowledge that video-games are an art form seems ubiquitous across the internet, only sprinkles of factions seem to deny the interpretation. When I wrote that Volume I was still trying to find an identity for myself, still trying to find a rhythm and pacing to my writing. Writers are often a sum of people, the writers that they've read themselves. The literary amalgamation I've undergone, to me at least, is quite weird. I've read articles from Anthony Burch and pulp drama from Bukowski, I've read the poetry of Thomas Hardy and skimmed the columns of Kotaku. My textual diet, during *Volume One*, was only beginning to find its dislikes, likes and tastes. I still pride myself in trying to read as widely as possible, it can inform and change you in ways you'd never expect.

I don't agree with everything that the slightly-younger Hardisty said. His thoughts on *Red Dead Redemption* aren't as refined as mine, he seems to see it as an almost Second Coming. It's weird how you can misunderstand your own opinion, but it's something that gaming journalists have done for quite a while. It's not an easy job, I mean, yes, it is cushy, but the pay is horrible and the hours are cheap and, well, how do you exactly *read* video-games. Do you have to play them on the hardest difficulties, are there certain playstyles etc. The most unique feature of our medium is probably its most direct hindrance; the nature of freeform play. The player, in the words of *BioShock Infinite* "complicate[s] the narrative". The 'narrative' is the cohesive 'game', the story and the world and in video-games you can jump around a room while everyone is having a sad tragic scene. The player is a problem, and I don't think *Volume One*

accurately covered my flourishing gaming philosophy in that regard. Time and time again I've changed my mind from strictly ludological to narratological, and I've yet to fully decide as to what a 'game' is, and that's a problem that, if solved, might actually be detrimental to the very experiential qualities that video-games possess.

This is something which *Volume Two* tried to address, and it's one of the Volumes and works to which I still hold in good regard. A lot of the stances I take are fuelled by nihilistic and vitriolic spite, and I often come across as a proud prude in some of the language, but some of the opinions and points about the types of storytelling and gaming tropes, narrative props, that sort of thing, I still believe in most of it. The hardline 'mechanics' interpretation perhaps doesn't hold up to my modern day take on the likes of *The Last of Us* and, in particular, *Spec Ops: The Line*, but some of the exploration of Rockstar Games and other works still, to me at least, proves at the very least a tiny bit convincing and well-intentioned.

I could talk about how the series was always a teenage legacy and how it wasn't academic in the slightest, but some of the qualities of *Volume Two* do propose that inside this little head there might be some salvageable commentary about video-games. *Up, Down, Left, Right* was about an attempt to make this writer's evolution, as I tried to learn this new craft, and make it public. I want to be able to look back in a few years' time, and for employers and whatnot can join in too, just so I can see the progress I've made.

Storytelling in video-games is something that is still being discussed, still being refined, within the larger communities. I don't think my writings, any of them, ever properly 'contributed' to the grander discussion but that didn't exactly matter. A lot of it was rhetorical to begin with. I wonder sometimes if anything I ever write will be remembered, and then I remember that's the worst way to go about being a writer. Even if you're famous, it's only momentary. Even if you're successful, it's momentary. In the grander scope of the universe, everything eventually dissolves. The most important part is finding your place in this infinite, and my place is a little writer with a few hopes and loves.

I think this is why storytelling will always be important to me, because it defines who I am. We're all stories in the end, and stories usually don't last. Maybe one day I would like to write a video-game or join some kind of writer's room, and trying to unravel the myth of interactive storytelling is more of a very personal venture. It could also be said that all of this, every single one of these Volumes, is out of sheer gratitude to countless names, faces I've never seen and the smallest of changes that can all be seen within video-games. Video-games, quite frankly, are a very weird and messed up medium. Only very recently are we seeing specific definitions, only very recently are we seeing confident efforts to take it further and, well, perhaps I'm trying to find my place in the longer continuity. All of this, every word, is an effort to try and help video-games and myself find a way through the modern existence.

Volume Three is a mixed bag for myself. In writing it I found a crossroads appearing. I was being put under increasing academic pressure and the deadlines I'd

set for myself, for the books, were not being kind to my studies. My social life was, don't laugh, actually beginning to blossom too. *Volume Three* was actually planned as a community effort. Planned. Plans don't always work out.

Both a lack of interest, lack of knowing writers with free time and general 'effort' those plans fell through. I spent most of December rushing through researching, waxing some notes and then hurrying through getting the Volume finished. It was rough on arrival and the first thoughts I got were equally rough. I had inserted jokes and attempted some humour. It was at a time when I wasn't sure exactly what 'being funny' actually entailed, my novel *Trimalchio* is apparently a 'funny' book, and inserting humour alongside some serious thoughts on video-games, and some genuinely rude words about some game designers, meant none of it paid off.

Volume Three was a self-critique of course. It was an attempt to place myself in the grander context of video-game journalism and, in that regard, it largely failed. Because I'm not a games journalist. In *Volume Three* I identified some of the problems with language, passion and relationships, alongside covering issues of credibility and 'reading' video-games, that the problem is not necessarily with journalists nor journalism but the very idea that there exists some golden way to critique and evaluate video-games. Video-games are not books or films and attempting to replicate that model leads to inconclusive reviews. Really, a video-game is not a sum of its parts. Game design has largely been misinformed about game reviews and their tendency to dilute them into separate compartments of 'story' and 'gameplay' rather than properly blending the two.

I still do believe that a medium is defined by its writers, they are who literally define it. Roger Ebert, Siskel and so many others were able to pioneer film criticism and gain proper academic recognition for their beloved medium. Video-games, for the most part, are still 'in development' in that area, something which *Volume Three* attempted to address. There's some commentary I still believe in, and it is still quite well-researched, moreso than a lot of my efforts, but it pales in comparison to some of my other writings on video-games. I think the main problem I have is its sense of loose identity. It really isn't until *Volume Four* that the *Up, Down, Left, Right* series finds some kind of identity. There are sparks of opinion and individuality in *Volume Two*, but they're marred by both the quality of expression and the roughness of some of the opinions.

And thus we reached *Volume Four*. Trust me, after *Tears In Rain* I wasn't quite sure if I was ever to write a book about video-games again. *Tears In Rain* was another effort, another 'fanwork', a 130 page essay eBook all about the film *Blade Runner*. It's pretty much, I believe, the reason why I am writing for Flixist. It's still the work that attracts the most attention and, in all of my 'criticism', it's still my most 'accomplished' piece. Post-*Tears in Rain* was very weird. Everything felt slightly inadequate. With this work I'd found my own niche, a little slice of Hardisty. Out of that I was able to find my calling. It wasn't writing about video-games, perhaps that writerhood is too saturated, but it was instead writing about film.

For about a year there existed this loose identity crisis. I wasn't tearing my hair

out over the issues, nor was I losing sleep but I was pushing a lot of thought to the idea that my little hobby, the very origin of my modern philosophies, thoughtstreams and a good chunk of my worldview, is nothing. That it won't reward me with a writerhood. After *Tears In Rain* I began experimenting with a host of new avenues, particularly fiction writing, and found myself delaying and delaying *Volume Four*.

Halloween passed, Christmas passed and with me caught up in some academic rigor, I could not dedicate the time to writing it. I could, however, find time to write another film criticism book. *Volume Four* released on March 23rd of this very year, after numerous delays, and it is a weird one. *Volume Four* has that cohesive style; it has some flow of opinions. It's not disjointed in the same 'youthful' way that most of my previous works were. It has a line of opinion and it follows it to the end. *Volume Four* covered the ideas of 'community', and my proposed 'Islands Theory', something which I still strongly believe in. *Volume Four* finally ended my take on video-games as a medium. I'd covered their artistic qualities, their storytelling quirks, journalism and coverage and finally their communities.

Volume Four is still the most 'cohesive' video-game work I've done. It's on the short side, but there's less padding. It really is quite heavy in the theory side, something which I've always enjoyed. All of this Volume is more of an effort of utter self-indulgence if anything. It's nice to think that *Volume Four* was, well, 'good'. I think I am a pretty harsh critic, but a lot of the writing in that Volume still passes.

So. We reach today. After my first novel *Trimalchio* and my second film book *Killer Looks* (on *American Psycho*) have been released, I now return to *Up, Down, Left, Right* for the last time. I'm not sure if there's an air of nostalgia or frustration or some kind of emotion at all. This is me saying a goodbye to video-game criticism, because I simply won't have the time to regularly write about it. My fiction and film avenues seem to be that much more fruitful, but it isn't the full reason why I'm letting it go. As you've seen across these Volumes, I've become more and more discontent with the 'modern' video-game industry. *Volume Five* might be the final celebration of the hobby that defined me, but I'm not sure that it'll *continue* to define me.

SECTION TWO: CONCEPTS

This section is about the specific traits and concepts in video-games that I adore the most. It's difficult to exactly articulate why I love video-games and what about them is so specifically magical, because, really, that's attempting to boil down your grand hobby down to a fine print which is, quite honestly, a little bit too impossible.

As much as a lot of this series was about complaints about specific concepts, from chest high-walls to pre-determined relationships, this section is a celebration of specific concepts, with examples, and an attempt to articulate what a *good* video-game might actually be. This is a largely 'mess' and 'theory' section before we get to the homestretch of full frontal favourites, but it's an important section nonetheless. It's essentially a look into where parts of my future, where my actual academic career, for example, actually originates.

You could say this is the calm before the storm, before we start drilling into the absolute specifics, my favourite video-games of all time. This section looks at concepts and the power that they still hold.

2-1 HISTORY – Where do we start? Caesar rolling his die at the river Rubicon, the siege of Baghdad, the final death marks of the black plague, King Charles II's head being sliced to death, a single piece of paper transforming a nation, a steel fire raining down under Moscow, the minute that two nations held their breath underneath a Cuban sun or the moment that one man said 'yes we can'? History is one grand love of mine, one that rivals that of video-games. This chapter explores its relationship to my love of video-games too.

2-2 FREEDOM – You could call this the 'American' chapter, but you'd be slightly wrong. That's not a political comment but, well, a lot of the most 'free' games seem to come out of Europe too. Freedom is a concept most associate with free-roam, with procedurally generated affairs. This chapter takes a look at one of the most fabled of video-game concepts and unravels why we all love it so.

2-3 DISCOVERY – Running from somethings in *Amnesia*, cracking open a diamond block to reveal a chasm in *Minecraft* and finding out that you could have a flashlight just by holding down the big red button in *Fallout New Vegas*. Life is about discovery and video-games' approach is something to talk about. The way that they cover discover and make it seem exciting, thrilling and a part of the game world means we will have to spend an entire chapter dedicated to discovering what makes discovery so delicious.

[2-1] HISTORY

I stab a man in cold daylight. Blood already jerks from my hidden blade handle as he spasms in pain. He clutches his wound and falls to death, it takes the other peasants a few seconds to notice. Within a second or two there are sparks of panic and the guards begin to flood in. I have just killed a man for nothing. I am Ezio Auditore and I am a Renaissance murderer in Venice.

Assassin's Creed, as a series of games, get a lot of things wrong. To say they're historically inaccurate would be a gross disservice to the likes of *Independence Day*. Yet when you're scaling the Doge's palace or finding yourself in the cold of the American frontier, you can't help but be at least a little bit engaged with history. The man I murdered in Venice never existed, but neither did a lot of the things in *Assassin's Creed II*. Few of these people have actual names, let alone real ones, and so I am killing men but empty people; I am a murderer of ghosts. Even as Ezio, a fictional assassin who scales buildings and topples Templars, I feel I too am a ghost. The architecture, bridges and buildings from Rome to Constantinople are mostly ripped from Renaissance paintings, with the mechanics allowing you to jump and hop and climb them to your heart's wishes.

Engaging with history, properly engaging with it, is something that video-games don't *do* that often. For a good while in the early 2000s, World War II shooters were pretty much the business. Recreating America's grand Hitler-smacking orgy of patriotism and slaughter of the Japanese was pretty much the only bullet points on the back of any world war shoot 'em up. The reduction of World War II down to a series of corridor shooters is slightly annoying, but there are a few games and strategy titles that manage to inject some originality and genuinely moving pieces. Seeing the stormage of Omaha beach done correctly in a computer game, there are many examples, is one of those few experiences that only video-games can deliver.

History, I feel, is a loose and ever escaping concept. It is the pursuit of the objective truth and yet every historian and comment attaches subjective view; truth does not exist in the very mechanics of the academic study. Yet there's a nobleness to it, a more human truth to it. I feel that video-games have managed to capture some of this in some of their works. *Assassin's Creed* genuinely does capture the life of Rome and Constantinople in its games, even though it stalls and pauses for bloody hours of Revolutionary War to salute to how fantastic and *right* of a revolution it is.

My interesting in history stems largely from my reading as a tot. I was thrown some *Horrible Histories*, big books with digestible factoids and paragraphs from pieces of history from Egypt to the Black Death to Imperialism. After hearing the 9/11 attacks I also found some books on the Middle-East at my Primary school, I think one of my teachers did Middle-Eastern Studies (I don't entirely remember), and though some of the words were too big for my breakfast, and there weren't many pictures, I was still able to get some gists. I began to become entranced by specific tales and stories. Caesar's heroism and Mark Antony's beheading of Brutus in the 'The' Roman Civil

War, Stalin's staunch refusal of defeatism in Moscow as the Germans seized to cut off the capital, Ronald Reagan's stories and smooth-talking landing him the White House job and the transformation of the world under the wake of a mass terrorist assault. The beheadings of Kings and Queens, sweeping religious changes, fires and diseases and all sorts of little pieces of history are what hold my interest. It's hard to dilute it down to one long narrative and to say that history is simply a story, given that is a direct betrayal of its truthful and objective qualities. Yet I can say, without a shadow of a doubt, that history is the greatest story never told.

There are some fantastic titles which capture the air and majesty of history, and some of them managed to push me in entirely foreign directions. Ken Levine's two *BioShock* titles equally moved me to search for new passages and periods that I had never even heard of, let alone dared to explore. The original *BioShock* dealt with Ayn Rand's objectivism and a right-wing ideological renaissance, infused with post-war feelings of American maturity and absolute rationalism. The 20th Century has always been my 'thing' and so finding some literary land that had inspired Reagan and Ron Paul made me feel that I had found a history untouched, that of the modern American right-wing. Andrew Ryan's pipe dream of underwater Rapture also rekindled a look into utopian history and visions of an idyllic past.

BioShock Infinite recently introduced me to my (current) absolute favourite piece of history of American exceptionalism. I am usually not fond of social histories, but the infusion of late 19th century political invincibility and social golden age all speaks massively to me. The wounds of the Native American genocide that *Infinite* also covers, giving some weight to specific events such as Wounded Knee, also casts how deftly black that this time of America was. The exceptionalism interests me because it has that almost Ozymandias-like quality of 'King of Kings' in that America, like so many nations before it, felt invulnerable and fantastical and yet expressed it all in the modern ways. *Infinite* doesn't let you play with the pages so much as dive into the decibels of grand American change, relating early 20th century social exceptionalism to a modern day commentary on the true crooked truth behind American values, traditions and religious powers.

We should probably talk, however, about the few portrayals of history that annoy me. I'm one that quite adores Middle-Eastern history, especially that of 20th Century Iran and Iraq, and yet the modern coverage has never been entirely, well, let's say 'fair'. The balancing of diametrically opposing neoclassical epic-scale architecture of Washington with, say, the absolute barren deserts of the Middle-East, in video-game locations, has always really bothered me. Civilization and writing and science and so much more were all birthed in the Islamic nations, and to kick them away with a flick of wrist seems genuinely insulting. *Call of Duty* does it, *Medal of Honor* does it; countless shooters relegate the Middle-East, a place of grandiose and genuine beauty, down to a bunch of huts and hills. I could write a book on the specific treatments, about how all the villains are 'not American' in most modern military shooters, but the portrayal of modern history is what scares me. Modern, young Westerners are being fed a view of 'America good,

they bed' as if to fashion some kind of neo-crusaderism out of the entire genre. It is a really difficult thing to cover, and thankfully the likes of *Spec Ops: The Line* and some short sections of other games manage to keep some intelligence and grounded thought to modern conflicts and problems in the Middle-East.

There are a few other histories that I've taken quite a fancy to, most notably Korean history. Video-games haven't really 'investigated' that area, but there's been some attempts, some tries. *Homefront*, a game where you shoot people in the face, at least attempted to try something new. It's speculative history, stuff resigned to the outskirts of academic rigor. Niall Ferguson would probably be into *Homefront* for all of its speculative qualities. The game fundamentally fails on a multitude of levels, but it's interesting to see that there are some genuine attempts at trying to get outside the overdone modern military shooter genre.

Soon I'll be discussing *Shadow of the Colossus* which is a game, at first glance, doesn't hold that much history. If you look deeper, and I realized this very recently, you seen an amalgamation of quite a few histories. The geography of the landscape is a blendage of Asian idyllic landscapes and sand dune pictures. The colossi themselves are hulking magnitudes made out of foliage, hard rock and classical engineering. *Colossus'* entire narrative fabric seems to be weaved from myths, legends, Asian morals and Greek mythology (particularly David and the Goliath). Some of the environmentalist commentary could also be called contemporary. *Shadow of the Colossus* is quite a sum of histories.

Homefront doesn't disgust me in its presentation of history and while *Shadow* may awe-inspire me they both represent different speculative soups of histories. One particular video-game which, on paper, should shock and insult me is *JFK Reloaded* in which you're given a sniping rifle on that Dallas day. It's a shocking and frankly gross video-game with its base, shameless mechanics being the central point of insult. I'm not sure if the game is engineered to take one of history's shocks and turn it into a joke or to simply push the audience's buttons. I have some not too kind opinions about the matter and how it pushes in some conspiracy logic and generally plays around with trivia, but I have to admit it's at the very least *interesting* to realize that there exists a game in which you can play through the eyes of Lee Harvey Oswald in his most infamous moments.

A much more odd choice that revolves around history as a concept is the *Civilization* series. I only jumped on board with the series with its 'fourth' iteration, but the newest addition *Civilization 5*, and all of its expansion packs, builds a set of systems which allow the user to build their own histories. Within the game there's an ability to take civilizations, both dead and kicking, and battle it out on a randomly generated world through four-thousand years of diplomacy, warfare, manoeuvring and bliss. The very idea that I can take a Brazilian Empire from a simple settler all the way to devouring American hordes whilst slapping Napoleon is a fantasy that, quite frankly, us amateur historians can only dream of. It really does make you quake a bit when you see Genghis Khan and Attila the Hun have made a 'Declaration of Friendship'. Nothing

good can come of this. *Civilization* isn't exactly 'about' history but has mixtures of it. Iconography, languages, archaeology and all sorts of orbiting pieces, alongside what may be seen as some basic historiography. Great Artists, Scientists etc. all shape the civilization, but so does trade, and so does politics, and so too religion and so does the workforce itself. *Civilization* perhaps takes an ultimately 'agnostic' view on to what exactly shapes history but that is one of its greatest qualities. I can shape and mould my history however I choose.

I could discuss the next series of games in quite a lot of depth, but I shan't dive too deep into Paradox Interactive games. From *Crusader Kings 2* to *Victoria 2*, Paradox games are essentially gifts written for my heart. I can follow a lowly Irish count all the way from a few soldiers short of nothing all the way up to a grand kingdom full of duchies and political instruments. The very idea of crafting our own stories of histories is perhaps what attracts us most to these games, and *Crusader Kings 2* sucks you into a world filled with connections, relationships and a grand abundance of unlimited characters. *Victoria 2* allows you take a 19th century nation and see how it evolves and faces the challenges of the uncertain 20th century. The very fact that dynasty management, Viking pillage, papal manipulation, forced marriage, Medieval spy-games, assassinations, sieging and looting are all game mechanics in Paradox games fills me with awe. I am practically entranced by whatever Paradox produce and their attention to absolute detail, from duchies to de jures to goddamn religious authority, makes them a great favourite of mine.

You can find history in art. In the window panels of Van Gogh's paintings you can see reflections of the world outside. Within *Northanger Abbey* there can be seen echoes of the French revolution. In Chaucer's writings there's pieces of the Black Death and corruption and in Shakespeare's plays there's sharp political wit. So too in video-games can there be seen reflections of the past and video-games' constant use, and sometimes abuse, of history is at the very least further affirming of it being an art form. History carries with it the moral conscience of a nation; it reminds us of whom we are. Just as film is able to document an entire psychology of a nation, such as *The Eternal Jew* (1940), so too are video-games able to show us both the dark depths and the bright heights of the mad, human history.

[2-2] FREEDOM

Perhaps the one word that you can cut from political history more than any other is the above. Freedom is a loose, weird concept that stretches back to the times when we were single-celled organisms. The very idea of biological and environmental determinism versus the ideas of a belief in free will. Psychological debate is not one of my fortes, but historically freedom has had mixed reception. The slave workers who built the pyramids were not considered or treated completely as 'slaves', but our modern ideas of free peoples do not apply to them. In medieval England the concept of 'freedom' was only for the upper middle and upper class that could ascend, and descend, given enough power and drive – though they could never be King – and the grand slave trade, that great stain on Western history, is the one of the most uncomfortable histories in the world. I believe history to be the moral conscience of every nation, but what of freedom? Freedom is loose. In video-games, however, it seems to mean a whole lot more.

In fact, it's actually difficult to put into perspective the absolute inherent freedoms at play with video-games. The very idea of agency is embedded into every interactive experience. 'Linear' corridor shooters still have long stretches of interaction, yes driven down a singular lane of action but interaction nonetheless. For all we talk about binary choice systems and linearity and 'cinematic' experiences, video-games are all inherently interactive. They all operate on some spectrum of 'freedom'. The question is: what is the line between a video-game and everything else. You can interact with a door; you have freedom to push and pull it and do as you please. Some may argue that wooden doors often have much more in the way of freedom than the annual *Call of Duty*.

Freedom, to me, means something simple. It means opportunity and options. Both of these are placed by the designers and directors for the player to utilize. In *Far Cry 2*, for example, there is a huge array of opportunities from arms dealing to assassinations to political intrigue and the options come in the form of which way to pursue those measures. One grander option that many people take with the game is 'permadeath' which is exactly what it sounds like. Allowing the freedom to choose exactly how we play, sometimes we construct our own meta-play, is important to me in particular given it allows me to experiment and to craft stories of my own. *Civilization* is usually a game about building cities and empire but there emerged some creativity from the playerbase early on. Now the 'one city challenge' is not only an option but linked to achievements and all sorts. Freedom isn't just the way we play but the limitations, or freedoms, put upon that play.

My absolute favourite video-game *Shadow of the Colossus* is practically an exercise in mystery interlinked with freedom. *Colossus'* free-roaming world is largely empty, sparse of any landmarks and yet it evokes this mysterious and mythological quality that really soaks you in. The freedom I have to explore this land and leisure in its majesty, to find little beautiful alcoves and explore the deserts and beautifully rendered

world, well, it's something the high-definition world has actually yet to offer. It isn't just how pretty your world is but how much of a *world* it feels like. *Colossus* feels like a Garden of Eden gone wrong, and you're a traveller in the aftermath.

This is why Rapture strikes me but not with the same weight of the empty world of *Colossus*, it's the freedom to explore which really hits me. Rapture still has this ability to look around things but the constant onslaught of enemies and obstacles is perhaps too much. Some of the areas I can see through the underwater vistas are also later enclosed and while the city feels 'alive' it doesn't feel like an urban sprawl. *BioShock 2* might've been made to address some of the issues regarding this. Rapture is still very much one of gaming's most striking and awe-filled places but the lack of freedom, mainly because it would take a lot of time to build an entire underwater city, might impede the feeling of a constantly invading environment, though *BioShock's* narrative fancies *more* than make up for this.

Freedom isn't just the ability to explore game worlds at your own pace, it's also the ability to explore the game's mechanics too. *Portal 2*, and practically all of Valve's titles, allow for experimentation. Particularly in the *Portal* series you're allowed a certain amount of agency to bounce around entire levels and play around with levels. The co-operative experience adds two more portals to play with, resulting in utter hilarity. Video-games can be incredibly funny and the bonkers play with mechanics or some gross bug or glitch sometimes does the work for us, *Portal* has the ability to make you chortle in its dialogue while you're playing around with flying robots.

Freedom is a concept that is regularly tossed around with quite a lot of liberty in games media. Free-roaming games and 'open-world' games usually chalk themselves up as having a grand amount of player freedom. Whilst there's a lot of great sandbox titles out there, including some of the better titles of the *GTA* series and *Saints Row*, 'open-world' is hardly the right lexicon. *LA Noire* talks of its open-world qualities, but its restrictions on player's freedom and empty world largely mean it's a series of corridor, linear missions spread throughout this large, vacant landscape. Turning Los Angeles from a symbol of noir into a literal void is something that only *LA Noire* has delivered. I actually quite like a lot of what *LA Noire* does narrative-wise, but its boasts of an open-world are hampered by, well, its actual open world.

Freedom is something that video-games have been used to for a long, long time. To call it 'choice' would be slightly reductive, but it is what freedom is in its simplest forms. The very idea that 'choice' is now a bullet-point on the back of the box is slightly discomfiting. If our Hollywooded extravaganzas are only now realizing that they're video-games. Game design has come a long, long way and freedom is inherent in every piece. Every single game boasts it in some day. When it is used to add to the narrative or thematic purpose of the video-game then it shows just how complex and wonderful of a medium that interactivity can be. Video-games are here to stay, and I'd like to end with a small little piece on *Mass Effect*.

Mass Effect, as a trilogy, has constantly surprised me. Obviously the last twenty minutes are the epitome of 'anticlimactic' and the whole of the third act hinges on a

random deus ex machina, but their ability to create character and scenarios and build relationships across tens of hours just has to be applauded. What I'd like to talk about is the first one.

I'll talk about this later but, to me at least, *Mass Effect 2* is the *Empire Strikes Back* of the trilogy. It's more about smashing characters together and building the stakes. The first title builds the universe and in the original *Mass Effect* there was something that was largely removed from the successive games. The Mako sequences. These were tours around one square patch of a chosen planet with large vast emptiness between any of the landmarks. Yet there was always something mysterious and haunting about the very idea of driving on the surface of a completely foreign planet. *LA Noire* is this supposed urban sprawl but it simply has no characteristics or livelihoods of a big city. Much like *Colossus*, *Mass Effect* built its themes through exploring. The very notion of being free to explore planets is the absolute human dream. At one point I parked my Mako to just get a look at the red sun looking down at me. This red hot mess of something I'd never heard of. I would never, ever touch this planet and I would never, ever feel the rays of this sun shine upon me. It would take thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, until man would step here too. I suppose my fascination with the long continuity of history is reaffirmed by this exploration of the future. *Mass Effect* provided me with an existential experience unlike any other and, well, its fusion of freedom with its themes of space travel, discovery and humanity all creates one grand mantra. Video-games will always be about choice and humanity, they will always be about freedom.

[2-3] DISCOVERY

There's a surrealist quality to be found with the early arcade video-games. The bleeps, bloops and foreign sounds, like the very noise of neon, all encapsulated in the most rudimentary of pixelated forms. Starships, asteroids and aliens and enemies and the vast black canvas of nothingness. All were encapsulated with video-games. Sometimes the smallest of bloops meant the biggest of explosions. Video-game aesthetics seem almost lifted out of a Dali exhibit with all of their melting of reality. Discovery isn't just finding something in-game, it can also mean discovering what a video-game actually is.

Discovery and freedom are very different. Freedom includes opportunities, and the pay-off of these opportunities is discovery. It's hard not to glee when you come across something obscure or new or completely uncanny in a video-game. You feel like a great adventurer, some archaeologist sifting through the digital sands of ones and zeroes. Discovery is the pay-off of exploration. It makes all those easter egg hunts and video-game conspiracies seem that much more worthwhile.

One such easter egg, the one to which I devoted the most of my time to, was the Bigfoot myth of *San Andreas*. Purportedly, goddamn Bigfoot could be seen roaming the forests. Ghost cars, dinosaur footprints, mystery noises and wolf howls were all common place in the game before this myth even existed. Nothing could seem that out of place. This was before I really took the internet seriously so when I first saw a message board posting about its existence I began sieving through the whole of the simulated foliage that *San Andreas* had to offer.

I spent so very long hunting the myth. I discovered ghost cars, scary whispers and weirdly occurring storms. I would dedicate whole hours to running around the same square 'mile', I drew on a *San Andreas* map a grid and told myself to scout out each block individually. Days like this passed and the very map screen, the small 'ding' too as you select for it, may still be burned into my brain. I remember it being so very fuzzy and I remember moving that red waypoint absolutely everywhere. *San Andreas* might have soaked more game than any other I had ever played and the myth of Bigfoot hooked me in more.

There never was a Bigfoot. There never was any 'real' discovery. The real discoveries of *San Andreas*, from the jetpack to the secret co-op missions, they were the stuff of legend and, well, order. Only within the limits of the game could you actually discover anything. The feeling of being on the cusp, though, of feeling the fog through the screen and thinking that creepy sight might just turn out to be Bigfoot. It might be the discovery to make you internet famous.

Few feelings and words can encapsulate this feeling. Like Howard Carter peeling back the last licks of sands upon Tut's tomb, we too perhaps feel we are unearthing history. Discovery is a concept that attracts me more than chest high walls and violence and punching because it is perhaps the most innocent of video-game pleasures. Simply looking and touching and talking and wandering around once foreign

places. Some folks like to treat video-games like long holidays. Given the nature of immersion and the vast expansiveness alongside the nature of discovery, that comparison may be quite fair.

Two specific games might be the absolute high points of discovery to me. *Oblivion* and *Fallout New Vegas*. *New Vegas* offers a grand and expansive world filled with nooks, crannies and references and stories and quests to look around. When I discovered a darker secret in some basement or found a Wild Wasteland easter egg or when I found the *Blade Runner* gun, discovery was all the way through. After eighty hours on one of my playthroughs with *New Vegas*, it is one of my favourite games, I realized that this very act of discovery had become a slight addiction. My character in-game had become addicted to some sci-fi substances and so too had I. *Oblivion*, another Bethesda published title, drained practically six months of my life. My tale with *New Vegas*, which I will tell later, puts it a leg up *Oblivion* but the Elder Scrolls title is nonetheless absorbing in all of its majesty. It was my first true Bethesda experience and it took me over twelve hours in to realize I could fast travel. Heck, I even gave up on it after two hours after thinking 'you are over encumbered', after murdering a guard and taking his stuff, meant you had a mental freeze. Over forty hours later I was roof-diving and ascending through the Dark Brotherhood, had fifty quests done to my name and was considering travelling up one of the nearby mountains to look for loot.

Oblivion took me in given the absolute weight of stuff to do in the world. I could craft and develop my character hour after hour and slowly search and discover throughout his world so many little details. I was punching goblins in the face and making up these little tales of me travelling from city to city, planning my own assassinations and saving my way up to a house. The soft music, the foreboding melodies of the menu screens and the general atmosphere all sucked me in. *Oblivion* is still a game, like *New Vegas*, in which I constantly find myself discovering new and fresh things in the gameworld. Such games swallow us all and lead us into the raw potential of video-games as an artistic medium. They allow us to experience heartbreak, loss, discovery, torment and valour. So many emotional responses and unique pieces of blended mythology, history and literature can only be found in these types of games. *Oblivion* is the game which ate me up, it was *New Vegas* that spat me out.

I do have to give an honourable mention towards *Fallout 3*. While I really enjoyed my time with that game, some of the narrative hiccups (here is your father, care about your father, oh look your father is gone) and general 'pre-determined relationship' stuff got in the way of that. I also experienced far more technical bugs and nonsense with *Fallout 3* too, although the game world offered a great experience ripe with places to explore and things to discover. It too was my first *Fallout* game, but *New Vegas*' writing, world building and narrative pacing, alongside all of its other more dangerous quirks, makes it much more of an effort of building discovery for me.

One could easily say that *Minecraft* might be the grand chief of discovery. The game's procedural worlds, its very algorithm, generates discoveries ready to be found.

Excavating out diamonds and stone only to be faced with a grand cavern or chasm is an experience that I had wished for so long for video-games to deliver. *Minecraft* is a genuinely moving and, once more, absorbing world. I have a lot to comment on how the Ender Dragon might actually be detrimental to the 'point' of *Minecraft*, a game in which you find your own purpose, but the full mechanical facts of the game are still intact after all these years. It is difficult to find any other game that treats discovery in the same way that *Minecraft* does and I doubt any other title ever will again.

The feeling of discovery is about unearthing something new; in *Minecraft* it's about unearthing something completely unique to your game world. That chasm or canyon will always be a part of your narrative before anyone else's. Much like *Oblivion/New Vegas* can swallow you whole, or myths of video-games (like *San Andreas*) can pull you along, so too can the discoveries in *Minecraft* envelop you and make your interaction seem so much more worthwhile.

SECTION THREE: THE END

The end. What else is there left to say? After five years of writing about video-games and after five Volumes of *Up, Down, Left, Right* it's perhaps time to say goodbye. This is the end. Over my entire life I've seen video-games grow from some humble plink-plonk nonsense into the dominant art form of the 21st Century. Video-games still have a lot to suss out and, well, I don't want to be around for the tail end of our maturity. That's when things will get awfully messy. I am proud of a lot of my gaming works and I hope a lot of great writers will get into this business. My video-game journalism career is largely over for now and so for just one last time let's take a look at the greatest video-games ever made.

This section is about my favourite video-games of all time. This is a list largely in no particular order, other than the final *Shadow of the Colossus*. *Colossus* is the most important video-game of my life and one of the many reasons as to who I am today. This section is a full on celebration of video-games and the joy, change and sadness that they ultimately bring to our lives and our hearts.

3-1 SPEC OPS THE LINE – A good chunk of *Volume Four* revolved around using *Spec Ops* as an instrument to unearth myths and commentary on video-game communities. In this chapter we take a deeper look at the actual game and its actual value, alongside its specific impact upon me.

3-2 BIOSHOCK – There are huge portions of this game to which I could quote for hours. The subversion of common video-game tropes into narrative points, and metanarrative squiggles, gives me such glee that makes me hope that literary criticism techniques can survive and thrive in video-games. Ken Levine's magnum opus in my opinion.

3-3 MASS EFFECT TRILOGY – There aren't many characters to which I can say I have become attached to, but most of the cast of the *Mass Effect* games most definitely own some of my heart. This chapter is mostly about those relationships.

3-4 FALLOUT NEW VEGAS – Becoming a part of another world is a weird experience that only video-games can offer. *New Vegas'* writing, direction and quality all contribute to an absolutely carnivorous beast. This chapter explores how exactly the *Fallout* chapter was able to absorb me for so very, very long.

3-5 SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS – The greatest interactive experience ever made.

[3-1] SPEC OPS THE LINE

Spec Ops The Line is one of the few titles to leave me utterly speechless in awe. Quite honestly, the game transforms all the popular nonsense of gaming and smashes it in a smooth cultural commentary cream that really fizzles and pops. It is one of the most astounding dramas of the 21st Century and an absolute tour de force on all fronts. This is one for the history books.

On the internet I've read constantly, however, about how the game 'fails in gameplay' but 'has a good story'. I've talked a lot about the constant dilution of video-games into compartments. 'Gameplay' and 'story' is one such divide, and one that is incredibly unhealthy. Story should not be separate from the mechanics and in *Spec Ops* they're the primary way of unearthing the darker truths behind the narrative. It crackles with metacommentary on the shooter genre and yet its own shooting mechanics are incredibly sub-par. The shooting is engineered to be the right amount of engaging whilst also not being confused by 'fun', to which the game keeps constantly asking whether or not you're really enjoying this and lecturing you about cognitive dissonance. Never, however, does it seem pointless or dull to be in the throes of *Spec Ops* and the hellish illusion it psychologically casts upon its main protagonists.

The actual core writing of the game is also exceptional. Generic 'black guy' and 'sniper guy' start off as tropes and caricatures that slowly become more and more, and less and less, human as the game grows on you. These people become people to you as you slowly realize exactly the impact of your actions. The game questions your agency, your very existence and the nature of playing such violent video-games. It asks us to evaluate our choices of acquiring gratification and places itself in a Middle-East setting, namely Dubai. The opulent jewel has been sandstormed to hell and so an American intervention to correct awful circumstances goes haywire. Sound familiar? *Spec Ops* is, however, absolutely subtle in its political and social commentary.

Less subtle is its comments on the mental poison of the shooting genre. The main character, voiced by Nolan North of all people, slowly starts hallucinating and seeing his superior's face on billboards and posters throughout the city, but it takes a smart second glance to actually notice this stuff. The helicopter turret sequence, so tried and dull in shooting games, is repeated again at one point of the game to Walker's comments of *deja vu*. He feels like he has done this before, just as you have done it so many many times to the same bored bemusement.

Spec Ops delivers an absolute tour de force of gaming commentary. It attempts to ask us about why we actually enjoy these neo-crusader endeavours and whether or not we're healthy for it. It asks us to consider that there is always a choice and that sometimes the only way to win is to not play at all. The allusions to *Heart of Darkness*, on top of everything else, add a real literary spike to the game's literary texture. There's a real bite to the thematics of psychological hell, human destruction, neo-imperialism, death, choice, decay, control and death. *Spec Ops* boasts tonnes of sequences from hellish landscapes to manipulation of 'loading screen hints' to tell its very clever yarn.

One specific scene, now known as the 'white phosphorous sequences', channels the AC-130 sequence seen in *Call of Duty*. The same feeling of discomfort, of a birds-eye view, except with missiles and giant machine guns, is matched but this time it doesn't result in dead bad guys. It results in palpable guilt. The same 'heroic' feelings are washed away. There are no coy remarks about how cool you are, only death.

By its end sequence, *Spec Ops The Line* deconstructs every single idea associated with modern video-games. Perpetual player empowerment, levels and choices and, most of all, the hero complex. It literally berates the player character, and thus player, for coming to a carnival of violence in a bid to feel heroic in any way. In some respect it sees such pursuit as absolutely pathetic. It notices there's a discrepancy between real world experiences of war and the video-games that we play, saying that such dissonance cannot be healthy for the human race. Only *New Vegas*, *Spec Ops* and *Colossus* have managed to induce a rotting feeling of guilt right into my gut upon finishing each of them. The raw power of induced responsibility that interactivity can give us is something that, quite frankly, needs to be shown more design love. The potential for new emotional canvases within video-games is limitless with this responsibility in mind.

I have talked about *Spec Ops* at length but the above just shows some of the reasons as to why it is one of my favourite titles. It's an incredibly brave effort that blends mechanics and narrative to deliver a cultural, political and metanarrative message about placing video-games in a broader context. *Spec Ops* achieves what all great art does, it manages to express something profound, interesting whilst also compelling you to recognize the beauty in how it manages to shape these responses. It really is an incredibly unique and genuinely haunting marvel of an experience.

[3-2] BIOSHOCK

I swim towards the lighthouse in the distance with the airplane wreckage trying to sink my feet to a watery grave. There's flashes of fire and moonlight as the sudden reality hits me. I am stranded and with the night draining on I seek refuge in this tower. Clambering inside I am met by darkness and then a burst of light as NO GODS OR KINGS, ONLY MAN adorns a red banner. A bronze head bust of some man's face looks at me too. I start walking around this place of mystery and empty with uncomfortable music playing in the background before coming across a bathysphere. With nowhere else to turn to and, perhaps out of impulse, I turn the handle and feel the weight of the thing suddenly be dragged deeper and deeper. Fathoms and fathoms deeper. I see a flash of ocean life and then the bathysphere is drenched in some advertisement jingle before...

"I am Andrew Ryan and I am here to ask you a question; is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow?"

Keep in mind that I was 12 years old when I first opened the doors of Rapture. This metaphysical, political and psychological drama all wrapped up in a metanarrative cotton candy dreamstate filled with forced bodily harm and eclectic touches. It's hard for me to guess exactly what the impact of *BioShock* was upon first playing, but I remember a lot of open mouthing. I remember the famous 'A man chooses, a slave obeys' plot twist scene, heck I can probably recount the words from memory alone. *BioShock* was, to me, when video-games became 'intellectual' in a sense. It was the game that led me on to read about the bonkers nonsense of Ayn Rand and all sorts of 20th Century stuffings. It's really the game that jettisoned my interest in politics and political philosophy, but it's also the game that launched my interest into greek mythology, psychology, dystopian fiction and further enhanced my love for science-fiction. *BioShock* is one of the greatest video-games ever made.

There's a lot of reasons why. I could write a book about *BioShock*, perhaps someday I will, but for now there's a few core reasons exactly why and they all revolve around the same basic 'thing'. It challenged me. As in, video-games had never made me reevaluate my intelligence in such a sharp way. *BioShock* introduced a lot of concepts and video-game commentary and just expected me to sort it. It genuinely took years for me to exactly rationalize all of it, to find the point and logic behind every abstraction.

I adore *BioShock* for one of its many facts. It flips video-gamedom on its head. One core mechanic, the 'objective', is turned into a direct narrative device. The blinking arrow over the top of your head is given a narrative justification. Your direct inaction in pre-determined events, your very lack of narrative action and interactivity is itself part of the narrative. *BioShock* asks us to question exactly what motivates us in video-games and tells us how much of a slave we've become to the same narrative design. Just pulled along by strings. It's not a perfect metaphor and the third act makes it fall apart, but for a few seconds *BioShock* creates the most compelling video-game commentary

of all time.

When Andrew Ryan is yelling at you to kill him, to realize that true extent of your enslavement then, well, it might as well be Ken Levine spanking you for believing in pre-determined narrative. It is why I am predisposed against pre-determined character relationships. A lot of my video-game philosophy can be traced back to this bonkers masterpiece of art deco and Ayn Randian blend, of exactly what video-game storytelling can be and what it perhaps has the potential to be.

I have my gripes with *BioShock* from the shallow moral choice systems to the sometimes diametrically opposing ludonarrative dissonance. Yet the game is still, puntended, a watershed moment in many glittering eyes of gamers. In all my years of gaming I somehow secretly wanted the very virtues of play, interaction and experimentation, to be inverted and twisted inside-out and *BioShock* did that mechanically and narratively. The game still carries a great sense of pacing nowadays and its writing is ruthlessly antagonistic towards the player's very existence.

Infinite is, in completely honesty, a little less of a heavy hitter than the original *BioShock*. It still manages to create some fantastic metanarrative and cool commentary on interactive design, stuff I've yet to properly mentally digest to be fair. The original *BioShock* will always stay with me for its genuinely shocking factor, for its abilities as a game to still surprise and delight me. Some great video-games are like fine wine, the tastes and design textures grow with the ages. *BioShock*, in retrospect, still has a lot of faults to its name but it's without a doubt one of the few games that still carries a grand air about itself. There's a sense of classicism in the atmosphere that constantly drenches you, a sense of narrative momentum as you, like a nautical archaeologist, slowly peel back the layers of history and truth to Rapture's past. The abilities and freedom in manipulating environments and the very notion that entire levels, sometimes hours long, are spent developing characters are, well, finely tuned to relative perfection. *BioShock* is the rare game that constantly delivers.

The game is also home to my absolute favourite 'level' of all time. Fort Frolic. In Fort Frolic we slowly journey into the mind of mad Sander Cohen and slowly into the very heart of darkness. The psychological destruction, tragedies and artistic displays alongside so much great art direction just makes for a level that sparks with everything *BioShock* has to offer. A smashing of philosophical discussion, existential crises and game mechanics that allow you to bounce security terminals off of splicers. Much like the protagonist slowly builds on his genetic manipulation history and ease himself into the very biological fabric of Rapture, so too do we melt into the narrative and world of Rapture. It is probably the most memorable video-game location of all time and it is most definitely the cityspace that I remember the most to the point where I could describe more Rapture locations and shops than I can recall from my real life hometown.

This is what defines *BioShock*, that sense of underwater urban living. It really does feel like you're feeling your way through the very aftermath of an apocalypse, as if a dead world is suddenly held in a freeze frame. We're reminded way too often of

apocalyptic pictures from Hiroshima to Gettysburg and so many other touchstones of our history. Video-games, like history, remind us of who we are and what we're capable of. *BioShock* is both a testament and warning to the very depths of human complexity.

[3-3] MASS EFFECT TRILOGY

Video-games are weird. It is weird what and who you exactly end up caring about when playing them. They're primarily an interactive medium, no matter what anybody says, and, well, interaction usually entails talking with characters and shooting people yadda yadda. Those shallow descriptions do make up pretty much the entire mechanical basis of the *Mass Effect* trilogy but, truthfully, that's kind of underselling just how much emotional weight that *Mass Effect* manages to deliver.

It's a question I've asked myself since finishing *The Walking Dead* that still allows *Mass Effect* to orbit my greatest games list. In short, if a game is well written and, well, that narrative thrust is what keeps it so sweet, is it lesser of a game? Is a video-game entitled to the sweat of its brow? In short, it was a question of whether or not a 'good game' has to exactly play like a good game. The conclusion I've come to is that writing can often enhance the immersive qualities of video-games and their narratives but interaction is paramount. *The Walking Dead* and *Mass Effect*, while not being mechanically 'complex' (not really), are still involving in their very interaction. They allow the player to feel in tune with the narrative and characters by simply allowing base interaction, at the click of a button you can probe characters' feelings and motivations.

Mass Effect, to me at least, is incredibly different from a lot of games involving character interaction. *The Walking Dead* tells a hefty, emotional tale across the course of five DLC episodes, each containing some of the finest writing to ever grace video-games. The quality that *Mass Effect* has, to me, is its very quantity. There's an absolute glutton of tens of hours of content in each of the games. For the most part I tried to scavenge and unearth as much as I could in each game before moving on to the next, but some things and some story branches will always be left undiscovered by me. Some things I've never get to play, even though they belong to my video-game. It's an incredibly odd feeling that's almost backwards against 'gamer entitlement' because, quite frankly, I am happy that I can pick and choose which characters and places and planets to explore.

Over the course of around 200 hours I took my Commander Shepard and the ensemble of his alien superfriends, and homosapien buddies too, all on an intergalactic superstorm adventure. Yeah there was a lot of boring 'shooting people in the face' stuff and, no, this isn't the type of game in which "I played it for the story". I refuse to believe that makes anything 'a good game'. Yet I do admit that I played *Mass Effect* for the characters. Not that they would bark their well-written histories and psychologies at me but that I could interact with them, use dialogue trees to unearth secrets, opinions and build a relationship with characters. For all the dark shooty nihilistic apocalypse that you have to deal with, the *Mass Effect* universe is often filled with warm, humour and humility. Characters such as Garrus speak of a specific vision of justice, Wrex talks about surviving a practical genocide, Tali discusses her species' biology and Mordin sings Gilbert and Sullivan. You don't get dumped all of these stories in a singular cut-scene, or any cut-scene for that matter, but the very act of being allowed to choose your way

through a dialogue tree makes *Mass Effect* such a sweet adventure in exploring human and emotional themes.

I have my reservations, obviously. To me, a good chunk of *Mass Effect 3* simply doesn't exist to me. I could talk about the deus ex machina that comes out of nowhere, the loose 'dark matter' plot thread, the fact that the main antagonist appears in the game for about ten minutes and, well, I could go on. Ultimately, however, I like to frame the *Mass Effect* trilogy within the *Star Wars* Original Trilogy. I'm one of the first people to snap back at comparing video-games to films, but the thematic lines are a bit too strong. The original *Mass Effect* set the scope, setting, stakes and the facts (just as *A New Hope* did so well). *Mass Effect 2* is a pure character-driven epic that is completely devoted to a small band of folks and the impending suicide mission that they have to train towards. You can mathematically work out your chances and build yourself to a 'foolproof' operation for the final mission and yet that tension is always there, that perhaps one of the cutscenes or special chances might result in one of your buddies dying. You can't help but becoming connected to these individuals who are just piles of pixels. Video-games are very weird in how they are able to forge relationships with us, sometimes maybe things get a bit too Kubrick. *Mass Effect 2*, then, is the *Empire Strikes Back* (the best one, for both trilogies). That leaves *Jedi*.

Return of the Jedi has a lot of great qualities and yet it seems perfectly parallel to *Mass Effect 3*. It's tasked with ending this trilogy, this cultural phenomena that spanned hours of our lives, and the need to cave to certain pressures and rush certain elements means that it might not be the best product. I still see *Mass Effect 3* as more of a swansong of the series than a definitive 'story cap' in itself. It certainly speeds up developed relationships to full throttle and there is genuine emotional payoff. There's a few imagined set-pieces, specifically sacrifices and conversations, that never happen but, truthfully, I'm not bitter for it. The hours I spent with *Mass Effect 3* were pretty fine, I just choose not to remember certain pieces. I like to encapsulate *Mass Effect 3* in its fourth-wall breaking, bonkers and stunningly brilliantly DLC 'Citadel' which allows you to actually bring the crew back together for one last hurrah. It's an ode to the connections that you have forged with these characters. The Ewoks and other mis-steps of *Return of the Jedi*, in a bid to appeal to perhaps a wider audience, have their equals in the more friendlier design of *Mass Effect 3*. I don't think it's the 'lesser game', but it is the least satisfying of the trilogy given it refuses certain narrative payoffs and often feels rushed and inelegant, removed of that 'personal touch' and quality that really felt injected into the games. The sparse character interactions might have something to do with it but, well, *Mass Effect 3* feels too hollow too many times, it almost feels like a joke.

As a whole, however, I can't think of another video-game trilogy that managed to suck so many tears and hours out of me. At one point my hard drive was stolen, containing around eighty hours of playthrough across the first two games. I still pressed on because I believed in these characters. I genuinely felt a connection to the characters of Wrex, Garrus, Mordin and so many more. Video-games have a weird capability in allowing us to project ourselves into other worlds, to test our moral grit and invite us in to

chat with people we could never hope to encounter in our lives. I'm quite the science cheerleader and I often think that *Mass Effect* has given me the rarest of experiences in connecting with possible extraterrestrial life. My children's children's chil... (you get the picture) will be the ones to physically do this, but a simulation is as close as I will get. I feel genuinely grateful for having being able to talk to aliens and 'monsters' as if they were humans, and it's a real salute to the power of video-games.

[3-4] FALLOUT NEW VEGAS

I never got completely enthralled in *Fallout 3*, I must admit. There's something about the world and its texture that never properly grabbed me. Being asked to care about 'my Father' for a whole story, who I had met for just twenty minutes, also wasn't the best of interactive storytelling choices in my opinion. Although, really, I'm setting this up to say that *New Vegas* was above and beyond *Fallout 3*. To tell you the truth, to me at least, it was. *Fallout New Vegas* is one of my favourite games.

There's a sizeable essay online called the 'Story of Boone', you can get it on Blogossus if you Google it right, and it summarizes a particular story I had with the game, the story that made it one of my 'greatest games'. *New Vegas* is ultimately a masterpiece of a video-game for the same reasons of *Mass Effect* and *Spec Ops*, it explores humanity on a deeper level, sometimes diving into nihilism. The wacky post-apocalyptic-oddball humour of the *Falloutverse* only sweetens the deal. *New Vegas* is honestly a triumph of storytelling on too many levels to mention.

Of course these sorts of games pride themselves in exploration. *New Vegas* has those tiny details, those bits of environment storytelling, that just seem much more rounded and more implicit than the skeletons in the sewers of *Fallout 3*. *New Vegas* also boasts some of the best DLC around with *Old World Blues* being an absolute favourite of mine. It's a shame that *Lonesome Road* tried to insert some 'backstory' to your blank slate character that, to me at least, left no scar or tissue or impact. Regardless, *New Vegas* is still a game that you can practically sink yourself into and with over one-hundred hours clocked in it altogether I'm still wondering exactly what draws me to it.

I suppose it reminds me most of *Oblivion*, a game I've spent far too long with. *Fallout 3*'s world felt full of detail and money but that was kind of the reason why it lacked so much rugged charm. *New Vegas* isn't that populated, but its settlements have more richness, stories and discoveries than *Fallout 3*. It is a simple matter of quality over quantity and *New Vegas* wins in the former respect.

This is not to say *Fallout 3* is a bad game. I certainly didn't enjoy my time with it as much as I did with *New Vegas*, but I still explored the Capital Wastes and found myself at some points absorbed by the experience. *Fallout 3* explored some pretty ballsy games for a triple-A RPG too, from slavery to post-apocalyptic existentialism. *New Vegas* involves itself with homosexual characters, political philosophies, black and white morality and a host of other 'deep' topics too. Both games explore some subjects that video-games seem to have actively avoided for their entire life and I can't help but respect that. *New Vegas*, to me, is still the superior game. It's not just the 'Story of Boone' that puts it leagues ahead but it's a sense of atmosphere, direction and pacing that is really unparalleled. *Fallout 3* had you involved with a host of factions but none of them ever felt truly 'real'. *New Vegas*' 2nd and 3rd story acts revolve entirely around the relationships between the various factions and where your allegiance stands. You can't make everyone happy. I adore that.

New Vegas also contains a lot of writing that might be just about the finest in video-gamedom. *Portal 2*, *Grim Fandango*, *Gunpoint*, *BioShock Infinite*, *Borderlands 2* and a host of others are all in the same league of *New Vegas*' writing but *New Vegas* has a bite and edge to it. The main scribe Chris Avellone, who has written video-games since the mid-90s I think, gives a real sense of humanity, weight and personality to literally every aspect of the *New Vegas* universe. At one point I might be laughing at some hilarious dialogue of a robot that can perform sexual favours, at another I might be almost bawling while learning about a Sniper's dead wife and another point might amp me up to want to *do something*. I'm not a complete fan of the whole 'empowerment' fetish that video-games have but *New Vegas* is often able to do it via dialogue sequences that involve the player and that is often just a lot more engaging to me.

The original *Mass Effect* at one point literally posed a question of whether or not I believe in God. I said yes. *Fallout New Vegas* can, if you see it and interpret it, be seen as questioning your beliefs in humanity, morality, sacrifice, philosophy, politics and euthanasia. In some of those subjects you're allowed to directly intervene. The mechanics are rudimentary in some sense, all you really do is shoot and talk to things. The care and attention to the details and dialogue of the inhabitants of this world, however, flesh the entirety of *New Vegas* to become this microcosm of countless subjects from metaphysical properties to the ethics of sexual intercourse with a robot. It's also unflinching in its approach to progressive topics. Characters range from bisexual, homosexual, pansexual, omnisexual and (suggested) transexual. There's topics about rights of men, the truth behind democracy, the real legacy of mythology and how history can be used as a political device. All of these areas are explored fully, with respect and a deft touch. *New Vegas* is possibly the greatest dramatic masterpiece of video-gamedom, *Shadow of the Colossus* is probably its greatest tragedy.

That is something that so many video-games fail to bridge; a sense of drama. There are hundreds of personalities in the *New Vegas* universe and you don't believe in the leaders of every faction because they're the 'leaders', you believe they're the leaders through experience. You'll encounter Caesar and his story of taming 'tribes' and you'll understand that his charisma can touch the hearts of nameless soldiers who try and stab you out in the Mojave Wasteland. Mr House's philosophical, Howard Hughes brilliance just seems to roll straight off the tongue and into the brain. His wit, charm and genuine intelligence is convincing, authentic and you start to find yourself seeing his vision of an independent Vegas bleed into the citizens you encounter. The NCR's bittersweet bureaucratic mess can be seen even in the very uniforms you encounter. All of these philosophies, histories, and those are only the three 'main' factions, collide and endlessly bounce off each other. Everyone has got something to say about each other and it sheds light on certain aspects. At one point I found myself believing in the far-right austerity-pledge of Caesar and how fear was a device he was simply using to contain law, that the NCR's good intentions were unmatched by its inefficiencies. This was about two minutes before I beat Caesar to death with my bionic arm for, well, 'other reasons' but the fact that *New Vegas* can make you second-guess your own

philosophies, and make you see the logic behind certain evils, makes its a truly wonderful interactive drama to sink yourself into.

[3-5] SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

Do you remember growing up? It's an odd question that's been jittering around my frontal lobes for a few weeks now and the truth is I think I honestly do know. I do think that you become an adult when you realize how finite you are and, well, that happened a lot earlier than it probably should've with me. I remember sitting and looking at this fuzzy television screen with these events playing out, events directly a consequence of my playtime. The moments played out and I shed tears. I don't know how many but it happened and I had to hide them from my family.

Shadow of the Colossus is the greatest video-game ever made, perhaps the greatest storytelling of all time. I haven't experienced this world long enough to make a definite judgement but, to me at least, *Shadow* is the absolute pinnacle of the medium. What separates *Shadow* is its attention to detail when it comes to consequences. Every single action you took in the world will directly lead up to an inevitable ending.

I've written on the game about three times now in my life and, everytime, I keep returning to the same theme and the same drive. Behind *Shadow of the Colossus* facade of boss battle gimmick there's a core behind it all. Every action you take against the Colossi results in their death and, often, they don't even have the means to fight you anyway. As much as this is a mashing of Christian, Islamic and other religious iconography; the parallel between David and Goliath are probably the most present. At the foreground, however, more prominent is the very reversal of this timeless tale. By Colossi 3 you're having the actively seek out and kill them. In some cases the Colossi try to run away or kill you not out of malice but self-defence. It's a subtle change in their behaviour but, if you notice it, then everything really does change.

This is a game about guilt. Much like *New Vegas* allowed you to feel genuine emotional guilt for your deeds, *Shadow* is entirely built around giving you that feeling in your gut that you've genuinely wronged the world and it's all your fault. While you clamber up a Colossi's beard with wind whirling, physics cascading and the epic (yes, epic) score throwing you about, well, it's all instilling a vibe of heroism. What happens straight afterward, after you've drained the beast of blood, is a sad and sombre few notes of music whilst blue-ish tendrils spit out and drain into you. You fall to your knees, much like the Colossi does, except you'll rise again. The Colossi are, every one of them, beautiful in their own way. Some are these working collections of Earth, nature and clay-like structures. Their eyes are these static blue orbs that nary blink. When they walk they genuinely feel massive, not simply a gaming character scaled up by a few points. Your player character stumbles about against the weight of the Colossi's steps and, often, you're left grabbing on to the nearest anything in order to survive.

It is pretty much a unique video-game experience. Each Colossi is essentially a walking puzzle and whilst you might feel guilt for ridding the world of every one you're still pushed along the path. Either out of the mystery or compulsion to see what is next, silently judging each Colossi along the way. The narrative context tells you that you're doing it for a girl you've never met, and in fact instance you're asked whether all these

monsters are worth one human life.

Philosophically, *Shadow* finds itself in a peculiar place. The world is removed of enemies and creatures, besides stamina-giving lizards and the Colossi themselves. It's empty and barren. One could have lifted the world straight out of the final lines of Shelley's *Ozymandias* - 'the lone and level sands stretch far away' - and there is a quality given to the world unlike any other in video-games. It's empty and yet its geography is astoundingly complex. There's fields, forests, cliffsides and odd beaches. Even the waters feel out of place, and the man-made structures reveal a hidden history underpinning the land. Whatever narrative is left for the player to piece together themselves. Much like in the vein of *BioShock* it's an archeological effort in trying to find out exactly what the purpose was behind this world and who exactly lived here.

An empty world, mechanics driven to make you feel overwrought guilt and enough empty narrative that doesn't feel too teasing or too edgy. What also deserves special attention is *Shadow's* aesthetic. People have already written on how the controls are designed to inform the experience one-to-one, but the aesthetic is often ignored. *Shadow* presents its world via a washed-out semi-realistic filter. The ground is often this dull texture and the sky is often this empty nothing. The beauty of the world is found only in small amounts, an oasis of beauty in a land of nothing. The most strikingly beautiful pieces of this world, however, are the walking Colossi. Alive they are these striking collages of foreign anatomy and incredible artistic effort. They are genuinely a joy to just stalk, to just watch as they make their way through this world. Video-games have done aliens and all kinds of disturbing fantasy creatures, but the thousands of hours poured into each individual Colossus is all revealed in the movement. Guilt also rears its head because by ridding the world of they're life you're also ridding it of beauty. Fumito Ueda, creator and lead on the game, and his position on environmentalism and modern aesthetics is fairly unknown. If I were to hazard a guess as to whether or not *Colossus* has a social-political purpose then I would say that one can be seen very easily. It's quite surface.

True art, true beauty, lies in the beholder. I'm annoyed whenever people assume that over-analysis and pretentiousness comes with any kind of want to look at the depth behind art. Art isn't made by artists, it's made by the observers. Art is the feeling of a grander connection to ideas and a universe outside of the mind. When you feel a genuine connection a human being that might be dead or thousands of miles away. If I were to meet Fumito Ueda I would guess we would have a large linguistic barrier between us. *Shadow of the Colossus*, however, is fairly universal. There's this odd language that's given sub-titles and its empty world communicates via its own geography. The entire experience seems foreign, alien to us and yet it philosophical content and the implications of its interactivity can hit me harder than any great British drama.

Shadow came at an odd time in my life. Even today, on the precipice of transformation, I think back to my experience with the game. I remember the very first sighting of the first Colossus in the demo disc that they handed out. It blew my mind. I

remember buying a lot of magazines to see screenshots and reviews. I wasn't hyped, but I was very interested. When release day came, I got it day one, I wasn't expecting most of what transpired. Tiny Colossi, big Colossi and even these giant sand serpents that stretch in the sky. What I remember too is those long stretches of time I spent just looking at things throughout the world, of being transfixed on the smallest geographical anomalies.

I remember the fall from a Colossus and those cutscene intersections perfectly paced throughout the game. I remember, more than anything else, 'that moment'. *Shadow's* world is so massive that you have to use Agro, the use, in order to get around. From that springs a natural relationship, something you don't know how much you value until Agro 'sacrifices' himself in order to fling you towards the final Colossus. Watching that horse fall down a cliffside for the sake of my own skin, for my woman, for my selfishness, for my ego and, probably, for my lust... it felt weird. I was in this game for the mystery but in that moment I realized what I cared more about was the humanity. Agro's death removed the last bastion of warm quality in the game. From then I charged into the 16th Colossus full of a heavy, bittersweet weight.

I fell from the final Colossus. All the way from its head. I remember the weather grinding and the entire grand scope being revealed to me. I remember the ending. I remember the last moments of trying to dive back towards the mysterious girl and then the rebirth. I remember.

As those credits roll I felt something stir. A love. From that moment I realized this little hobby, pressing buttons to shoot people and drive cars and things, was much more than that. It was a genuine art form.

CONCLUSION

Over five years ago I began this stupid crusade trying to articulate my thoughts about video-games. Today I am going to slide into semi-retirement. I'm not going to be writing about video-games for about year or two or maybe three. Partly it's out of my bitterness for the modern industry and its reluctant to change but it's mostly out of the people. The constant need to dilute games down to 'story' and 'gameplay', to refuse any analysis and to refuse any kind of broader understanding of video-games.

Video-games are still about shooting people, for the most part, and I doubt that will ever change. What has changed is they've grown more cynical. *Far Cry 2*'s experimental morality and non-linearity was replaced by *Far Cry 3*'s constant empowerment and a need to emphasize pre-determined character relationships. *Grand Theft Auto V* is a world removed of heart and soul and only carries cold insults to everything it 'satirizes'. What has me still hopeful, what has me still playing games, is the likes of *Gone Home*, *Spelunky* and *Papers, Please*. The gaming landscape is changing, rapidly, but I don't think I'll be an active participant for long.

I'm going off to university, I'm probably going to be leaving the country in a few years and I've got things I want to write and finish and get into. Soon I'll be worrying about my taxes and what to have for dinner, less about what the political trends of *The Last Guardian* are. But I owe it to video-games, I owe it all. Without them I simply wouldn't have such a good life. I wouldn't be full of philosophy and intellectual curiosity. My writing style wouldn't be as concrete, thanks to *BioShock*. My understanding of mechanics and how they inform meaning wouldn't be as apparent, thanks to *Spec Ops: The Line*. I simply wouldn't 'understand' art. Without *New Vegas* my writing and intellectual scope would probably be narrow. Without *Team Fortress 2* I wouldn't be able to be friends with so many wonderful people. Without *Grand Theft Auto IV*, bizarrely, I wouldn't be heavily writing in the first place. Without *Mass Effect* I wouldn't know how to properly construct a science-fiction universe.

And without *Shadow of the Colossus* I wouldn't be bothering at all.

I owe it to video-games to continue writing them. But for its intellectual and philosophical puberty, I'm not sure I want to 'be around'. I'll still play, I'll still tweet but don't expect a great 'comment' on everything worthwhile. People have written much more eloquent pieces since I began writing and they'll continue to do so. Campster, 8bithero, ThatGamingBrit, RockPaperShotgun and too many places to mention will all still be providing excellent commentary on the world of video-games. The part I've played has been small.

With *Up, Down, Left, Right* I wanted to chronicle my teenagehood. To see exactly how my writing and opinions evolved over five Volumes. With this final, self-aware note I realize that's an impossible task. Like any other text, including video-games, trying to judge an entire person from a few wealths of words is probably

impossible. But there's some indication to be found, some kind of trace humanity. Maybe that's what I want.

To little Nathan Hardisty, who always wanted to be writer, I hope I've done you proud. To people reading this right now, I'm sorry for you having to put up with all this post-modernist, narcissistic, self-referential and poorly worded bullshit. I've got better though haven't I? I'm slowly getting the hang of this 'writing' thing.

But, for now, video-games aren't something I really want to write about. I'll be back, I know I will someday. But for now this is where I get off.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nathan Hardisty is a writer. He's currently studying History at Cambridge. He'll be back soon, honest.

Twitter @Nathardisty

Facebook Nathan Hardisty

Google+ +Nathan Hardisty

Email nathan.hardisty@gmail.com

Website blogossus.com