Journey: Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Journey*
Platform: PS3 (eventual PS4)
Genre: Adventure/Art Game
Release Date: March 13, 2012 (PSN-NA); August 28, 2012 (Retail-NA)
Developer: thatgamecompany; Tricky Pixels (eventual PS4 port)
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Game Director: Jenova Chan

Overview

Journey is a multiplayer game that tells the story of two anonymously paired online players struggling to survive a harsh and beautiful world. Each player begins as a small, red-cloaked figure with only the ability to run. After receiving their first scarf piece, players learn to fly and shout a musical sound. Unlike traditional adventure games, *Journey* has no leveling up, no in-game dialogue, and no skills system. Players rely on their ability to communicate through sound and flight to overcome puzzles in each level. The story of *Journey* is the story of player's interactions.

Journey's anonymously pair system provides players a unique cooperative, storytelling experience. The designers of *Journey* intended players to play with another person. Still, both single-player and multi-player *Journey* exemplify how games can tell stories through players' interactions with the world around them. Combining a limited controls scheme with the human need to communicate, *Journey* is the strongest example of a game where playing the game is the story. Every element in *Journey* supports the idea that narrative in a game is there to service the player's experience of that game, not supplant it. *Journey* does not tell the story of the characters in their world. *Journey* tells the story of the player.

Characters

Character descriptions include both player and non-player characters. Since *Journey* is a multiplayer game, interactions players have with other player characters changes their story. *Journey* distinguishes player characters by how many times they have played through the game, and if they have earned a specific achievement. Players paired with a certain cloak type have different experiences than those playing with another cloak style.

The player's experience is intrinsically tied to the story of *Journey*; thus, the player has a different story each time they play the game. Player character descriptions reflect the majority play style typical of players with that cloak type.

- **Player: Red Cloak with Bottom Stripe Only**–This character is the player who has never played *Journey* before. Players cannot go back to a clean red cloak once they complete the game one time. Thus, this character is most likely a first time player. The novice either follows another player character without question or ignores the other player entirely. This player wanders around the world, but sticks to the main path and rarely explores too far away.

Figure 1. Red Cloak with bottom stripe [1]

- **Player: Red Cloak with Multiple Stripes**– This character is the player who has replayed *Journey*. This player's cloak shows how many times they have replayed the game through embroidered stripes starting at the hem. Each play through of the game grants another embroidered design atop the old one. This player is experienced, and usually knows the locations of obstacles and collectables before they appear. This player is generally helpful to novice players and to other Red Cloaks.

  Depending on the number of embroidered stripes, this player potentially has just as much experience as a white cloak, but either chooses not to wear theirs or cannot find one collectable.

Figure 2. Red Cloak, has replayed Journey twice [2]

  This player goes after secrets because they want to show the other player, or because they want to earn all the achievements. Whether for selfish reasons or altruistic ones, this player is more or less helpful to novice players. The more embroidered their cloak, the more helpful they tend to be.

- **Player: White Cloak with/without Multiple Gold Stripes—** This character is the player who has collected all the scarf pieces. Even if the player collected all scarf pieces as novice, seeing a White Cloak in game signifies that they are replaying *Journey* for the time indicated by the gold stitching on their cloak.

  The purpose of the White Cloak is to have unlimited flight capabilities. This character may not have all the achievements, but has played the game enough times to collect all the scarf pieces hidden throughout the game. This player has the most likely chance of knowing the most about *Journey* than any other player. Of all player cloak characters, this character is the most helpful for finding scarf pieces, avoiding hazards, and getting through the level with the longest scarf possible.

Figure 3. This player's White Cloak indicates he replayed to achieve the cloak [3]

This player shares a strong visual resemblance to the white cloaked deity figure, who serves as a ritual guide through the game. This gives the character an inherited status in the world of *Journey,* reinforced by players having to play more than once to get this cloak.

This White Cloaks are the most attentive to other players, rarely ignoring them. Most of these players wait for other players to finish exploring before moving on. With the visual parallel between the NPC Guide character and this player character's cloak, the player becomes a new, constant spiritual guide for the more novice players within the context of this game.

- **NPC Guide: White Cloak Deity**– At the end of every level, the player activates stones and meditates in the center circle to call upon the White Cloak Deity. This character acts as the storyteller and spiritual guide for the player, telling a piece of the story at the end of level. This character bends down to look at the player, implying grandiose size and strength. Although the character's face is masked, the movement of the shoulders and tilting of the head imply sadness and regret as they expand on the story to the player. With each story segment revealed, the character also warns of the upcoming challenges the character must face to complete the level.

- **NPC Level Guide**: **Scarf Creature**– This character acts as a landmark and transportation option for the player. Placed along the main path, these creatures fly towards the meditation circle at the end of the level. Placed in other areas of the level, these creatures allow the player to recharge their scarf (in order to fly) or use them as transportation to the level's end.

- **NPC Enemy: Snake Machine**–This character attacks the player who enters their line of sight indicated by a red circle on the ground. The Internet community surrounding *Journey* has given them numerous names including "Guardian" as they patrol certain areas of the world covered in ruins [4]. Both underwater and over ground, these creatures eat off a portion of a scarf and knock back all players.

Breakdown

Journey tells the story of the player through in-game cut scenes and the player's interactions with the other players in the game. The beginning of *Journey* establishes the first empathetic connection with the player. The player starts as a small, hooded figure standing alone in the middle of a desert. The animation emphasizes each careful step trudging up the first sand dune, wind forcing the player towards the top. The player sees a huge mountain in the distance that shines a light into the sky. The word "*Journey*" appears on the screen as both the game's title and an implicit objective: go forth and discover.

Journey's use of visuals connect the player to this world. Every character in the world shares similarities to the player character. The embroidery on the player's cloak matches that of the NPC scarf creatures. Character silhouettes of the deity figure, other players, and in pictures found throughout the world exactly match the player character's silhouette. Everything in the world visually derives from the player character. Because of that, the player character inherits the visual feelings of the state of the world of the world around him. This visual design intrinsically connects the player to their character and the world around them.

Journey has a simple story that allows the player's imagination to expand it. The over-arching story is told through cut scenes without dialogue to tell the player what happened. The White Cloak Deity specific animations convey a specific emotion the game's designers want the player to feel. This figure moves their head down towards the player in sadness, and up with eyes curved downward to indicate regret. They allude to in-game hazards, such as the Snake Machines, as war-machines before the player encounters them in the game. An animated visual shows various scenes with other cloaked figures tending crops, building cities, and fighting each other in the sky. The player character (regardless of cloak color) tilts their head with eyes wide in confusion and chin tilted forward and up. The detail of animation conveys the player's out of game expression of wonder: what happened here and why?

Journey provides a feeling of motivated curiosity that determines how players interact with other players and NPCs. As players fly though through a ruins, they superimpose their own interpretations on the world. The player's own motivation and imagination for the game becomes the motivation of their character. Each level includes extra areas that allows players to discover a story they can connect to they own motivation. Players fill in the gaps of the story without it being explicitly told to them. In order to continue the story, they must continue playing the game. The player's game state mirrors their emotional and mental state. Exploratory players weave through to understand what happened. Achievers rush towards the goal, even if they suffer repercussions to their flight abilities. *Journey* makes players feel the need to understand their place in this world, encouraging them to interact with everything in it.

The interactions determine how the player experiences the game. *Journey* randomly pairs players together who cannot attack each other. Players can ignore, can run away from, and can blatantly disassociate from other players; and yet, the average *Journey* player does not. Instead, players use the same mechanics as communication devices. When paired with another player, pressing "o" becomes the voice of the individual player. Players circle each other to guide movement. Players elicit chimes as signs of greetings, signs of warning, and to help regenerate each other's scarves. Players who fly together have the ability to fly longer and higher, regenerating each other's scarf by proximity. Simultaneously flying with another player leads to dancing around each player's character trying to go as high and far as possible. Multiplayer players see the actions others take in-game and mimic them. Single players only have NPCs to interact with and rely on the world to guide them through, giving them a different experience entirely.

The player's experience becomes their personal journey, and their personal story of journey. Both offline and online players create the narrative they experience. Whether or not the player has an online connection determines the level of interaction within that player's individual story. Without other players to guide and protect them, single players experience *Journey* as a much more traditional adventure game. Yet, both offline and online players feel joy and regret in *Journey's* world. Based in a universal human premise of success in the face of struggle, players who play multiplayer experience overcoming dangerous enemies and freezing to death with someone they have never even met. At the end of the game, players view a list of all of their companions. Some players have multiple PlayStation Network names on their list, where others could have just one. This end of game list shows the player that their journey affected one to several other players along the way. Even if only for the duration of the game, this creates a link between players where their stories collide.

*Inter*acting comes from that struggle to communicate inside a game. The player can only ever control so much. Opening the world to multiple players and recycling game controls allows *Journey's* narrative to branch from an overarching wordless world to a deeper, empathetic experienced based on the players' interactions with each other. Story usually is a feature of the game; but in *Journey,* story becomes an active experience that requires players to participate in order to create a unique narrative.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of *Journey* is its multiplayer, anonymous random-pair system. The impactful narrative of *Journey* comes from the human interactions within the game towards other players. Other games rely on multiplayer for competition; *Journey* relies on multiplayer for compassion. The game mechanics centralize around the player character's ability to communicate with the world around it. Players control their character through flight, and improve their flight by finding all the scarf pieces that power up their abilities and using tactical movement to avoid creatures. Without prior knowledge, it is near impossible to find every power up and avoid every enemy attack. *Journey* forces players together and uses that relationship to strengthen the player's connection to the world and story of *Journey*. The combined struggle of two individuals to succeed defines *Journey*.

Unsuccessful Element

Journey's focus on a cooperative, online experience also proved to work against them in single player. Relying on a network connection to deliver an impactful, shared experience means playing *Journey* offline inherently distances the player from that intended experience. There are many similarities in single player *Journey*, but the player experiences those similarities alone. The narrative of *Journey* is about overcoming challenges together. Without another player to participate with, the single player never establishes the empathetic relationship the developers intended. This counteracts the

central narrative theme of *Journey;* even if the player's single player story does generate an empathetic connection

Journey's* developers created the game for an online connection. The other player is necessary to the make game world feel alive. There is another human being controlling that character on the player's screen. This directly influences how the players view themselves within that world. Since the game relies heavily on delivering story through those player-to-player interactions, the offline player does not have the same level of empathy placed on interactions between the player and the helpful NPCs. The highlight of the game cannot be experienced without an internet connection; thus, the element that makes *Journey* the most successful narrative experience also can potentially be an unsuccessful one.

Highlight

The most impactful moments of *Journey* for the player come from realizing another person is also playing the same instance with them and learning to rely on them for success.

When the player realizes the other character in the game is not an AI, this changes their experience dramatically. This can happen at any point in the game, and is entirely dependent upon the player's interactions with the other player, and the preconceptions they make. If players have played video games before, they are aware of traditional, tutorial guide characters. These traditional characters tell the player what to do through dialogue or on-screen text, and then wait for the player to catch up. However, the other players in *Journey* are not scripted. There are human beings controlling them; therefore, compared to the NPCs, who are scripted, these at first glance "AI" characters do not behave the same way. They are sporadic, and may wait for the player, may move on, or drop connection and be replaced by another one that looks completely different. This forces player to rethink how they treat these characters, knowing there is a human being on the other side.

Learning to rely on that player, especially for players who know about the anonymous pairing system before hand, creates a sense of trust and bond between both players. Although players can complete *Journey* alone, the game purposefully forces players to watch the other player's experiences. It is difficult to watch a companion player get snatched by an enemy and mercilessly tossed to the ground without feeling some pang of remorse for not guiding them the right way. Another level forces players into an icy, mountainside that chills the players scarf pieces one by one making the player's scarf and flight duration shorter. Players who stay together prevent their scarf pieces from falling off, keeping each other warm in the narrative of the game.

Relying on another person makes the player's journey easier. There is someone else out there playing *Journey* that care about the player's struggle in the game. This connection between players highlights the game's underlying narrative of success in strife. Players share not only the story of *Journey*, but also the moments that make it worth playing.

Critical Reception

Journey received high critical acclaim for its overall game design. In 2013, the game won awards for Game Design, Artistic Achievement, Online Multiplayer, Original Music, and Audio Achievement from the British Academy of Film and Television (BAFTA) Games Awards. In the United States, *Journey* won Game of the Year for GameSpot, IGN, Entertainment Weely, Kill Screen, and in PlayStation Life Style in 2012 [5].

The 9.0 IGN reviewer Ryan Clements states, "*Journey* tells a special story, and it does so with grace and subtlety rarely employed in video games" [6]. He emphasizes how the audio effects become their own type of language when used to communicate towards other players. These "smart gameplay cues eliminate the need for traditional chat" [6]. Clements felt *Journey* instilled emotion even in single-player, but multiplayer completed his experience in totality.

This critical reception to *Journey's* gameplay elements specifically emphasizes the correlation between gameplay and narrative. Columnist for *Forbes,* Erik Kain, states that *Journey* relies on storytelling through *experiencing* the game, not observing it [7]. *Journey* tells their story through sharing that experience with players— "Walking into the light at the top of the mountain…next to that other player. I was nearly speechless. It was so much more profound than walking alone" [7].

According to Wired reviewer Patrick Shaw, *Journey* has no storyline, but became the most mesmerizing story he had ever experienced in a videogame. Visual and audio elements heightened his emotions—wonder, fear, excitement, sadness—and amazed him when he worked with other players to solve puzzles he could not do on his own without speaking with players directly [8]. Although he struggled to find meaning in the game story, he did not need it explained. He felt fulfilled in the experience and gave *Journey* a 9/10 rating.

Lessons

- Narrative design does not need to be explicit for the player to understand it. *Journey* did not tell a story; it presented the story and let the player find the words to describe it.
- Stories in video games can use narrative to frame a common objective without having to explicitly state that objective. *Journey* used visual landmarks to cue the players to their goals. Pairing online players together at the same part in the story reinforced the story's objective.
- Narrative and gameplay do not need to be mutually exclusive. *Journey*'s experience comes from the game's core controls (X and O button) that initiate communication between players.
- Story does not have to be complex to be emotionally engaging. The simple narrative cut scenes between each level are short and show in-game textures and assets. *Journey* instills the story's emotional impact through careful animations, timed sound effects, and the player's own interpretations.

- Multiplayer does not need to be competitive. *Journey*'s cooperative mode paired online players together that could choose to help or ignore one another. For the offline player, the Internet became the helpful second-player guiding them to secret caves and hidden stories.

Summation

  Journey's over-arching narrative frames the underlying premise of overcoming obstacles in a dangerous world. The anonymous pairing system creates an empathetic link between online players not experience in any other game. *Journey* gives players a world they do not understand and forces them to work inside it. Life is unknown, treacherous, and foreboding. *Journey* presents a grand narrative that pairs people anonymously together while playing the game. Giving players the opportunity to share their stories with their anonymous counterparts. Players create their stories with each other; and knowing there is another human involved, further makes that story visceral and lasting to the player.

  Journey is a game where the game itself and the player of that game is the story. Without the game in its entirety, there would be no journey. Unlike traditional games where story is a major focus, reading about *Journey*'s story on Wikipedia is not enough to understand it. Players must play the game to experience the story, because their experiences create that story. *Journey* embodies the narrative of compassion that the players must exhibit themselves in order to fulfill that narrative. Through interactions with other players and reliance on friendly NPCs, players of *Journey* experience a unique and interactive storytelling experience that without them would truly be impossible.

References

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