Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Uncharted 4: A Thief's End
Platform: PlayStation 4
Genre: Action/Adventure
Release Date: May 10, 2016
Developer: Naughty Dog
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Game Writers: Neil Druckman, Josh Scherr

Overview

Uncharted 4: A Thief's End is a third-person action-adventure game that combines elements of platforming, puzzle-solving and cover-shooter combat into a single, story-driven experience. It's heavily influenced by Spielberg-style motion pictures like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Jurassic Park* that interlace large-scale spectacle with intimate character drama. Just as *Jurassic Park* is both about dinosaurs and about a man learning to care for children, *Uncharted 4* is about a treasure hunt and also about a man overcoming his fear of abandonment.

The series did not always grapple with such deep themes. In many ways, *Uncharted 4* is more mature than its predecessors. This is largely due to an elegant retcon that gives Nathan Drake a brother, Sam, and provides a more character-centered explanation for why Drake behaves the way he does. In all of the prior games, we watched Drake risk his life, his friendships and his marriage, but players might have assumed his self-destructive behavior was just a trope, a necessary tool to justify the gameplay. *Uncharted 4* asks us to see these behaviors as choices. In that light, Nathan Drake ceases to be just another video game action hero and instead becomes a three-dimensional character, a man grappling with his own inner demons.

Thus, *Uncharted 4* is a rare game that uses action-adventure gameplay as a vehicle for deep exploration of human relationships. It demonstrates that video games have the capacity to tell sophisticated stories on par with the most iconic movie masterpieces.

Characters

- **NATHAN DRAKE (NATE)** — The player's primary avatar, hero of the *Uncharted* series. He is a self-educated scholar with a love of artifacts, history and ancient languages, but is a pull-the-lever-first-and-translate-later kind of guy. He runs on luck, and is the last to notice when his luck is running out.

- **YOUNG NATHAN DRAKE (NATE)** — The child version of our hero. Young Nathan is already deeply troubled by the loss of his parents. He idolizes his brother, Sam, and is plagued by fear that Sam will abandon him. More open and vulnerable than Sam.

- **SAMUEL DRAKE (SAM)** — Nathan's older brother. A lot like Nate, but less adept at dodging consequences. Kind of shifty. Spent more than a decade locked away in a Panamanian prison while Nathan was finding lost cities. Desperate for a second chance at adventure and glory with his brother by his side.

- **YOUNG SAMEUL DRAKE (SAM)** — The teenage version of Sam. A petty thief with big ambitions. Loves being the hero in his little brother's eyes.

- **ELENA DRAKE** — Nathan's wife. A brilliant and capable journalist who's arguably better at adventuring than Nathan. She loves Nate, but has paid for it in the past and is constantly weighing when to save him and when to walk away.

- **VICTOR "SULLY" SULLIVAN** — Nate's best friend and father figure. A high class criminal. Loves cigars, scotch, and profit. Sully is protective of Nate and keen enough to know something's up when Sam re-enters the picture.

- **RAFE ADLER** — Nate and Sam's ex-partner in the hunt for Avery's treasure. A real sleaze. A trust-fund kid who can't stand the thought that his status was unearned. Wants the kind of glory money can't buy, and is willing to spend whatever it takes to get it.

- **NADINE ROSS** — Rafe's partner. Leader of a South African mercenary firm called Shoreline. A real badass. Has her own parent baggage. Sees Avery's treasure as a means to rebuild her firm's reputation after a string of failed ventures.

Breakdown

 Uncharted 4: A Thief's End is a classic hero's journey told across 22 chapters, a prologue and an epilogue. It takes place several years after *Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception*. Nate is now in his late thirties, and retired from treasure hunting. He and Elena have made a promise to one another to no longer take such risks with their lives, although it's implied that they both struggle with this decision.

 Nate's retirement is disrupted when his past resurfaces. It turns out that Nathan Drake has a brother, Sam. Fifteen years ago, Nate watched Sam get shot to death while trying to find the lost pirate treasure of Henry Avery. Except, it turns out that Sam didn't die, and instead has been confined to the Panamanian prison where Nate unknowingly abandoned him. Sam has escaped, but in the process accrued a debt to the drug lord Hector Alcazar. Repaying the debt will require the Drake brothers to return to the treasure hunt and finally discover Henry Avery's lost riches together.

 The story is thus about redemption. Nathan Drake has a second chance to save his brother, but in the process he risks the normal life he has built with Elena. The question is whether he'll find a way to have both. In the course of the adventure, Naughty Dog delivers an unexpectedly poignant story. We get to see a version of Nathan Drake who can climb to great heights and take out waves of bad guys, but who struggles to trust and take care of the people he loves most.

 Much of the plot and character development is delivered through dialogue and well-placed cinematics. The writing for these scenes makes use of screenwriting best-practices. No scene exists without a purpose that forwards the story. Many scenes multitask to deliver layers of exposition more efficiently. For instance, when Nate's boss, Jameson, implores him to help recover a shipwreck off the coast of Malaysia, Nate's refusal shows players that he has become wary of risky endeavors. But this same scene serves other purposes. It provides Nate a cover to use in his lie to Elena, and also sets up the ending. By the time Elena purchases Jameson Marine, the player has full understanding of what that gesture represents.

 Another strength of the writing is that conflict is usually kept on screen, and often optimized for visual storytelling. For example, in the level *Infernal Place*, the prison guard Vargas refuses to let Nate explore the ruins of the Spanish prison. To emphasize this point, the scene is blocked with Nate's hands tied behind his back. This way, the script doesn't rely on the actors' performances to make their point—players can plainly see that Vargas has Nate at a disadvantage. When Vargas cuts Nate's bounds, the player understands that an agreement has been reached. In another example, the level *Once a Thief…* introduces Rafe Adler. We're expected to understand that Rafe is a toxically competitive individual. This is manifested in a bidding war with Sully, which gives us a chance to see Rafe's competitive nature and the

pleasure Sully takes in causing Rafe distress. By finding ways to show internal conflict through external behavior, the game doesn't have to rely as much on dialogue.

This frees up the dialogue to provide dramatic irony. There is friction between what the characters say and what their actions suggest. In *A Normal Life*, Nate insists he doesn't want to take the Malaysia job, but the player knows this isn't true. We instead notice that he spends his time in his attic, pouring over mementos of his past and play-acting that he's in a gunfight. Keeping character's desires in the subtext makes moments between them more unique. For instance, Nate and Elena don't say "I love you." Instead, they say things like "You have a funny idea of romantic." This adds texture to the characters that makes them seem more authentic.

While the writing is strong, it's not the only quality that makes the game's narrative so successful. The gameplay itself is reflective of the characters and content of each scene. Take, for example, the climbing system. The game makes liberal use of traversal puzzles that force the player to climb Nate to perilous heights. If the player causes Nate to fall, he will die instantly, so climbing has stakes (but not too high of stakes, since dying will simply respawn Nate a few paces back). The quickest routes often involve jumping or dropping to handholds, which feels extra risky. To make matters worse, some handholds are deceptively unstable and will break, forcing the player to act quickly if they're going to save Nate's life. This system is designed to encourage risk-taking, which in turn makes Nathan Drake seem recklessly confident, even before his clever one-liners are layered in.

The combat mechanics work similarly. Because the game is a cover-shooter, it incentivizes the player to quickly read and react to their environment. Finding and leveraging cover is essential, but cover can often be destroyed or negated by grenades, so the best strategies involve constant movement. Guns are abundant, but mostly come from fallen enemies, so the player will have trouble predicting when and where a certain weapon will be found. There are a lot of weapon types, each with their own advantages, and ammunition is limited. This encourages the player to improvise, grabbing whatever gun happens to be nearby and adapting their playstyle accordingly. In short, it encourages the player to behave like Nathan Drake.

The gameplay is also reflective of different story beats. *Once a Thief…* is a heist, revolving around stealth and careful planning. Narratively, it is placed at a point when Nate is still feeling cautious about his involvement in the hunt for Avery's treasure. *The Twelve Towers* is positioned later in the story, once Nate has gained confidence and embraced the adventure. Fittingly, this level is a sandbox-like exploration space with combat sequences that let the player string the game's climbing, swinging and shooting mechanics into thrilling combinations. A later level, *Marooned* occurs after that confidence has been lost. In it, Nate's ability to jump between handholds is temporarily suspended, making the player feel less capable.

Level design also supports the narrative by constructing meaningful goals, paths and spaces. In an early level, *The Lure of Adventure*, we get a glimpse into Nate's and Sam's childhood. The player's goal in this level is to follow Sam. The player is thus trained to empathize with young Nate, who eagerly followed his brother into any situation. Goals are also

used symbolically. *Infernal Place*, the level in which Sam dies, asks the player to steal Henry Avery's cross from the Spanish prison. The player is given the same goal again in *Once a Thief...*, this time stealing the cross from the Rossi estate. The revisiting of the goal is symbolic of the fact that Nate has a second chance to save his brother's life.

This same underscoring is extended to paths and the player's processes of navigation. Levels like *Infernal Place* and *Lights Out* are intentionally disorienting, using techniques like repetition and occlusion to keep the player from easily spotting their goals. This is appropriate for parts of the story when Nate feels desperate or overwhelmed. By contrast, levels like *The Twelve Towers* use weenies and marked trails to help the player get their bearings in moments when Nate would be more capable. The Level *At Sea* comes after Nate's fight with Sully and Elena, at a moment when his tension with Sam is growing. Its map sends the player down a few dead ends, forcing them to backtrack and reevaluate their decisions, just as Nate is questioning his own choices.

As a final device, the environments the player navigates are often demonstrative of Nathan Drake's emotional journey. The house you wander in *A Normal Life* is cozy, but uncomfortably constraining (especially the low-ceilinged attic space where Nate hoards relics of his past). The plains of Madagascar are vast and open to exploration. Liberalia, where Nate discovers he has been deceived by his brother, is unstable and literally crumbles out from beneath his feet. All of these spaces are manifestations of Nathan Drake's journey, and become another window through which we can understand his character development without it being spelled out explicitly.

The bottom line is that *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* treats game design, level design and writing as equally important components in the narrative experience. This approach makes it possible to use entertainment-oriented gameplay to tell deep and meaningful stories, and is part of the reason the game has been so celebrated.

Strongest Element

The strongest element in *Uncharted 4* is the reconciliation arc between Nate and Elena. One of the smartest decisions the writers made was to split this scene up into a series of brief dialogues. This effectively makes the process of earning Elena's trust something that the player, not just Nate, has to work for. The goal of this level is to find Sam by working your way upstream (a metaphor that deserves recognition). Along the way, Nate and Elena must complete small puzzles such as repairing broken elevators (another metaphor). After each puzzle, Nate and Elena share a small scene in which they make incremental repairs to their relationship. This effectively turns the puzzles into a test, and reconciliation into a reward the player gets for passing it.

What's more, the player is given incentive to truly desire Elena's presence as a companion. She's extremely helpful, often pointing out the way forward or completing more chore-like steps (like moving the jeep onto the elevator) that the player would have found tedious. In short, gameplay with Elena is much easier than gameplay without her, and earning her company feels like growth for both Nathan Drake and the player.

Unsuccessful Element

The climactic sword fight with Rafe Adler is disappointing. Fans often blame the mechanics of the fight itself, complaining that the quick-time events or the use of swords rather than guns make the fight feel forced and unfulfilling. This is a misdiagnosis. The actual issue is structural.

By the time the sword fight occurs, the player hasn't seen or heard from Rafe in six levels. Meanwhile, Nathan Drake completed his character arc. This was confirmed in the port town during *No Escape*, when Sam tries to convince Nate to go after the treasure and Nate pushes back, saying "We're not those kids anymore... and we got nothing to prove." When Sam bolts for the mountain on his own, the player wants to go after him, but not for the treasure, and not to defeat Rafe. The player wants to save Sam from Sam.

But when we do find Sam, he's unconscious. There's no opportunity to confront him or convince him of anything. Instead, the player is left fighting Rafe when what we really want to do is talk to Sam. There is no clever fight mechanic that could have solved this structural problem.

But imagine if Rafe Adler was present for the exchange in the port town. Imagine if he turned up, weak and out of mercenaries, and he convinced Sam to go back to the mountain. Now Rafe is an obstacle, and now defeating him feels necessary to freeing Sam from obsession. This restores relevance to the fight itself. If Sam helps Nate win the fight (just as he does in the current scene), that choice takes on new meaning as proof of Sam's own change of heart.

Highlight

The signature moment of *Uncharted 4* is the chase sequence in King's Bay. This monumental set piece shows off everything the game has to offer, from fast-paced action to witty dialogue to substantive character moments. What makes it especially effective is that it prioritizes storytelling over strategy. From moment to moment, we're able to track the goals of the

characters, what's standing in their way, and what choices they're making as a result. The sequence is carefully broken into beats that skillfully manage the player's tension. Encounters with the armored truck are offset by Nate and Sully's banter. The joy of catching up to Sam transitions into the terror of being stuck in the overturned jeep, and then a deep sense of relief when Sam comes back to save you. The ending of this sequence is especially endearing because it celebrates the relationship between Nathan Drake and his brother. Meaningfully, the chase ends with Nate on the back of Sam's motorcycle, giving closure to the scene when they rode Sam's vintage bike together as young boys.

Critical Reception

Reviews for *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* were mostly positive. Metacritic gives the game an aggregate score of 93/100, based on 113 reviews. Polygon and IGN each gave the game a 9/10, with Griffin McElroy calling it "a pitch perfect conclusion to the Uncharted series." While many reviews focus on the game's technical achievements, several praised the story highly. Game Informer commented "A Thief's End's the best Uncharted yet, delivering a story I didn't want to end…" The Escapist, who gave the game a perfect score, stated "A Thief's End doesn't settle for telling the final story of Nathan Drake, it also tells the human story of Nathan Drake, serving as a fitting, elegant farewell."

Lessons

It's worth taking the time to earn dramatic moments. — Real-life relationships develop over time, and there's no reason for game relationships to be different. *Uncharted 4* demonstrates this in both the relationship with Sam and the relationship with Elena. Fights begin as friction that is given time to build. Apologies are broken down into small, progressive actions. This makes the characters more real and gives the player time to acclimate to emotional shifts.

Make the player perform the story. — The goals and problem-solving are often used to help the player align their own mental state with Nate's. Following Sam in *The Lure of Adventure*, getting lost in *At Sea* and cooperating with Elena in *For Better or Worse* are all parallel experiences to what Nathan is feeling on the screen. When this is used wisely, the player doesn't have to imagine the character's emotional state, they embody it.

The environment is a metaphor. — Often, an environment can express something a character cannot. The instability of Libertalia, flooding of New Devon and dangerous confinement of Avery's tunnels each serve both a literal and a metaphorical function to support the scene.

Summation

Uncharted 4: A Thief's End shows how the action-adventure genre can be harnessed to deliver mature character drama. Despite the game's heavy use of cinematics, the gameplay and level design are as much a part of this story as dialogue and performance. This holistic approach makes for a more dynamic and authentic player experience.