

# Game Narrative Review

=====

**Dean Goodson**

**University of Silicon Valley**

**dgoodson@usv.edu**

**December 2023**

=====

**Game Title:** *Journey*

**Platform:** Windows, IOS, PS3, and PS4

**Genre:** Adventure Platformer

**Release Date:** March 13, 2012

**Developer:** ThatGameCompany, Tricky Pixels, Santa Monica Studio

**Publisher:** Annapurna Interactive, Sony Interactive Entertainment

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Jenova Chen

## Overview

*Journey* is a game without any dialogue, with its impressive and stunning visual storytelling it guides the player on a story of discovery and self reflection. The player starts in a desert full of tombstones that guide the player up a small hill. Once over the small hill a bright light shines over a large mountain in the distance, the title “Journey” hovers above the mountain. At that moment the goal is clear, reach the mountain. *Journey* is one of the finest examples of “Show Don’t Tell”, with the only story being your own personal journey reaching that mountain.

Something Matt Nava (*Journey* art director) said really stuck out to me, “Thinking about it as moments was the real trick. That’s what people remember the game for.”[1] *Journey*’s beautiful art style and colors envelop players, immersing them in the ruins of a fallen civilization. As your own journey continues you may come across other players with seamless multiplayer. This idea of creating “moments” for the player was very purposeful and gives players time to

reflect on their own lives, their own journeys. Creating moments of self reflection was what made this game so impactful for not only myself but a whole community of players.

## Characters

- **The Traveler (Player)** - The character that is on the “journey”. They enter the world through a bright orb of light that descends from the main mountain, destined to reach the top once more. As The Traveler gets closer and closer they discover the remains of a civilization, one that they believe was from their ancestors. On their adventure to the mountain they may see more lights come flying down, representing other Travelers (Players) finishing their journey and starting anew.

They might also come across other Travelers who are also attempting to reach the mountain. Both Travelers may be confused at first, but slowly they both will become attached to each other. They may even miss each other at the end. Once The Traveler reaches the top of the mountain they get sent back down to the beginning of the “journey”. This time they will have a different looking robe, to represent their achievement. These new robes will allow the once novice Traveler to stand out to others, being a guardian angel of sorts, guiding other players to secrets and through the levels.

- **Other Travelers (Other Players)** - While only being able to communicate through the singing mechanic and jumping, the relationship players build together transcends all barriers. No matter what background players have they are all connected through their common goal, amazement at the scenery, and curiosity. Sometimes other players will have white robes, or golden colored accents on their robes. These players know what lies ahead and enjoy assisting others. The other travelers can also be beginners, allowing for both players to explore the world for the first time together. The other players make every journey different, even showing the levels you completed with them in the end.
- **White Cloaked Ancestor** - Although who these white cloaked characters are is unknown, they look very similar to the player. At the end of each level the player activates a tablet and meditates, this shows visions of this White Cloaked Ancestor. The Ancestor helps show the player what lies ahead while also contextualizing the history of this once great civilization. I assume it is an Ancestor because they never take physical form in the world, even when they save the player. They represent the people who lived in the world The Traveler is going through. Their slow, almost sad movements give the player a glimpse of the pain and loss they have experienced.
- **Cloth Creatures** - Although cute they are a crucial part in gameplay and making the scenery feel alive. The cloth takes form in bridges, dragons, little dragons, seaweed, jellyfish, and fish. *Journey* does a good job of giving each version its own little personality. The little dragons follow the player around making cute chirping noises. The fish fly around in little packs and all jump towards the player when interacted with. These little additions to the cloth’s personality give a fun mechanic a very intimate feeling.

- **Guardian** - The Guardians are the only creature that can hurt the player. They are stone snake creatures who patrol certain areas. They are one of the main reasons the original civilization crumbled. The same fear the ancestors felt the player felt trying to avoid them. These Guardians serve as the one of the final trials for The Traveler and their companions, helping build deeper connections for them.

## Breakdown

With the story being very centered around the 3D art and gameplay mechanics, *Journey* builds up the narrative through the players own personal experiences. Let's first go over what enables the player to see the progression of the narrative. The player can jump, fly and sing as they interact with the world around them and the creatures that inhabit it. Every single object in the game the player can traverse is a destroyed piece of an old civilization. The player only sees their progression through the moments they remember and their robe growing.

The player travels through a destroyed world full of creatures that are made up of the same cloth as you. These creatures chirp and fly around like children, invoking the feeling of playfulness. These simple connections *Journey* do wonders to make players curious. The silhouettes in the cutscenes and art that resemble the player. This connection that *Journey* creates is very purposeful. It makes the player think, "What is my connection to this world? Why am I here?" This question always has an answer, the mountain. The mountain is always in view, always shining brightly in the distance. Every time the player looks for an answer it is answered simply, reach the mountain. Yet it never seems to get closer, even when you are seemingly at its foot. This is a very human thing to experience. This grand goal gleaming in the distance, always glowing brightly, always just as far away. It is the insatiable hunger that drives us humans.

You aren't the only one who wants to reach the mountain. The players you meet along the way, are also filled with the same curiosity you are. You journey onward with your companions. Then realize you aren't the only one that wants you to reach the goal, your new friend wants you to make it too. Both of you are always looking back to make sure you didn't lose each other, and showing each other secrets you find. Then once you complete the level a White Robed figure also believes in your journey, giving you a preface on the challenges to come. Everything adds up to you being in a world worth exploring, so deeply connected to you that it almost feels nostalgic.

*Journey* may seem like it follows Campbell's *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*[2], but I think it follows it in a very untraditional way. The player traverses the world they slowly become an integral part of it. It is very similar to *The Never Ending Story* by Michael Ende[3]. It is the idea that the world is there and exists because you are breathing life into it. The hero's own journey of discovery is flowing with the world's journey of recovery. Take for example the frozen cloth creatures in the snowy area in *Journey*. They are completely frozen over, they don't move.

Almost as though time was frozen for them too. When the player interacts with these frozen cloths they take form once again, flowing just as brightly as they did before. *Journey* turned a simple mechanic into something that directly mirrors the player's effect on this world. *Journey* was waiting for you to play it.

*Journey* does an amazing job at creating moments, these moments are what makes *Journey* so impactful. The first moment is when the player slowly walks up the first sand dune right when gameplay starts. As the player reaches the top of the dune they are shown the mountain with the title above it. Time seems to stop as you stare at the beautiful light in the distance. Another key moment is when you free the first flock of cloth creatures, seeing them fly around excitedly because of your actions. Whether you're walking across a cloth bridge you created or roaming the dunes with your new cloth friends flying in the wind next to you, these moments you create seem to be of your own flourishion. It is these meaningful interactions with the world around you that fill you with excitement.

*Journey* gives the player opportunities to see their own actions become alive through the cloth creatures. You fly through a lake of golden liquid, bounce on a giant jellyfish, fly on the back of a dragon, slide through golden sand with vibrant scenery. All these moments *Journey* creates you can even experience with other players adding another layer of depth. Each of these moments are hand crafted, with the camera angle moving to show the key elements of the world around you. *Journey* doesn't do this by mistake, it purposefully plays certain soundtracks during each moment. With expert sound design, lighting, and creature ai, *Journey* allows for players to have their own experience.

Video games enable players to be the hero in the hero's journey. Is the player in *Journey* the hero of a story? Or are they just a gear turning the tides of time? The feeling each player has at the end of their own journey is different for everyone. How is that possible? It is the introspective nature of the moments *Journey* creates? All the feelings *Journey* is able to elicit allow players to experience whichever one emerges. They do this by not forcing one emotion over the others with dialogue and a clear overarching goal with stakes. What players remember from *Journey* is how it made them feel. It does this by creating moments, ones that you don't want to end. Every moment will always come to an end, and so will every thought. *Journey* forces players to move on from a beautiful moment quickly. Once players move on from these moments they are then immediately shown another one. It is a very good philosophical message of personal growth. You can't sit in a good moment forever, but if you continue to push forward more will come.

The ending segment of *Journey* rips everything you knew away from you. It sends you into a dark cave with Guardians, the first enemy that can hurt you. My mom even said "Is this death?" as she fell into the hole with her companion that she was with the whole time. The moments that the player experienced before this were in complete contrast to the world they just entered. *Journey* took away the beautiful moments that the player was so used to consistently feeling. This is a representation of our lives and the large gaps that sometimes form between our own beautiful moments. The player escapes the hole and expects another moment, but they

don't get it. The world they once knew is gone, it is snowy and slow. As the player's robe slowly loses all the length it gained, the player begins to question why they are here once again.

As they trek through snow they are always waiting, waiting for that moment. *Journey* creates expectations that the human condition also creates. People come in and out of your life, they may be there at the end and they may not. These moments we hold so dearly leave us too soon, and we eventually find new ones to fill that hole. Us humans have goals and dreams that we don't know exactly why we want them, but we push forward. We journey through a world that has history connected to us, yet we struggle to find our place. *Journey* found the connection between desire, curiosity, amazement, friendship, and wonder, through the moments it creates. Whether you're sliding down golden sandy ruins or gliding through the air on a cloth dragon, you can't help but look back at all the times you have felt this childlike wonder.

## Strongest Element

The strongest element is environmental storytelling, but not in a traditional way. The way it creates moments for the player through elegant art, lighting, and friendships. With the help of the stunning graphics and masterful game design the world envelopes the player, creating a world worth exploring. A game without any words can tell a story no words can explain. The ability to allow the player to tell their own story is something that *Journey* not only mastered but revolutionized. It is the freedom of exploration and self reflection, the quietness and simpleness of the journey.

## Unsuccessful Element

Many reviewers and players rave on about the deep and emotional effect this game had on them. I have also seen reviews of players who don't understand what everyone is talking about. I believe this disconnect between the game's vision and the perspective of some players, can make the experience for those players very boring. Not everyone enjoys this slow paced no stakes gameplay. I believe if there were a few sections, hidden puzzles, or maybe even a secondary journey with more gameplay it would invite a broader player base. Even though articles and players seem to only talk about how beautifully crafted this game is, the truth is not many players have played it compared to most titles today. This game is low stakes and self reflective, which only invites a certain type of player. This might seem like it isn't narrative, in a game like this the narrative follows the player. Wherever the player goes the narrative follows with them. This game could have a larger player base if it was a little more difficult, which I think it could do while still retaining everything it has built so far. Players look for gameplay and when the time to beat a game is one hour it scares players away from spending money on the game.

# Highlight

The highlight for the game is different for everyone, everyone's journey is different! I know what mine was, but watching my mom play it she had a different one. While watching other players you realize that it isn't the moment that defines its gravity but rather the person who is experiencing it.

For me the highlight was near the end when I was slowly getting slower and slower, colder and colder. My movement slowed down, as I saw my robe shrunk all the way down. I was alone, all the people I had done my adventure with had disappeared. It was just me and my goal, the mountain. Then I realized the mountain was gone. I kept pushing forwards even though my goal had disappeared. The mountain in the distance that I had clung so dearly to had disappeared. I looked back on my own life, my own experiences, the mountains in my life. What would I do if they all disappeared? Would I keep moving forward? Determined to prove that to myself I continued to push, slowly freezing to death and falling over. For me, my journey had ended there.

The moments *Journey* created gave players ample opportunity to reflect on themselves and to find their "Highlight". My highlight was my own, everyone else had their own separate highlight because the story isn't about a journey. It is about your journey.

## Critical Reception

Ryan Clements[4], a writer for IGN rated *Journey* 9 out of 10. He stated, "The hours spent completing Journey will create memories that last for years." This remark by Clements is something any narrative designer dreams of hearing. In his article he also touched on the captivating nature of *Journey* and how emotionally attached players get to it. He even goes as far as to call it "the most beautiful game of its time". It is safe to say Clements enjoyed *Journey*, he had no negative feedback.

The Guardian's writer Keza MacDonald[5] gave *Journey* 5 stars. MacDonald is in love with the visual and sound design, he stated many times that it was a piece of art. His love for the game was very clear, "Journey has moved me as much as any other piece of art or entertainment has." MacDonald didn't complain about the length of the game, nor did he complain about gameplay. He even believes "subtle direction and storytelling to create a lasting emotional effect that elevates this to one of the very best games of our time." *Journey* envelopes players and leaves lasting impressions on them, and MacDonald believes that too.

I found dozens of reviews for reputable reviews for *Journey*, in fact I am even more impressed by this game after reading over ten reviews all saying the same things. They all talk about how beautifully the game tells such a simple story. Reviewers are amazed at what a one and a half hour experience *Journey* gave them, going so far to not have a single bit of negative feedback.

really want to mention that with all these reputable sources speaking so highly of *Journey* but in my research I have also found negative responses. They mostly talk about how boring they found the game, it is easy to brush these reviews off as just negative. This has such a polarizing set of reviews. The majority of people call it a masterpiece. The people who rated it low always say things along the lines of, "I don't get all the hype" All the people rating it negatively are not reputable sources. I believe that this game may be more niche than I first thought, and the majority of players who wouldn't like the game are just not drawn to it. That is the beauty of *Journey*, it attracts a certain type of player and the players it attracts enjoy the game.

## Lessons

- The most important and impactful thing that I learned is the idea of moments. I don't think I have ever played a game with such open-ended moments where I am free to think whatever I want to think. The lesson is that you don't need dialogue or a large overarching storyline to create moments. I am inspired to make my next game have no dialogue to challenge myself and make something open ended. This game is by no means a blueprint, but it gives a very insightful look on how art and a fluid player controller can take a story. You don't need a deep message but rather you need a deep understanding of what players are looking for entering your game.
- I learned a lot about seamless multiplayer while playing and watching people play this game. Everyone who played this game has a story of where they met someone and where they lost them. The multiplayer is similar to *Destiny's* multiplayer when on planets, players can see each other and shoot enemies together but other than that they can't really interact. It was the tools that *Journey* gave its players that allowed for bonds to be created. The only thing players can do to interact is also the only way for them to help each other. There is no voice chat, you can only sing to each other. So moving forward I will think about the tools I give players that they can interact with. The point is to make the interactions with players fit with the overall mood of the game.
- The connection between the cloth on the player character is very apparent. The feeling of being connected to the world around you was very important to the cohesiveness of *Journey*. When playing *Journey* you realize that these pieces of cloth are very docile and sweet creatures. This makes you feel docile and sweet, it envelopes you. I believe that this was key in creating that childish feeling that carries you through *Journey*. So when creating a player character I need to think about the way they see their own connection to the world. For example at the beginning of cyberpunk you get to choose what your backstory is, this choice directly impacts your own vision on the world. Who you believe is a good and bad character. So I need to make sure that there isn't any ludonarrative dissonance between the players' perceived mood and the world around them.
- I am a Narrative Designer more than a writer, I love communicating to my team to portray emotions through game design. The lighting in *Journey* is one of the crucial parts to the story it tells. The key color gold is vibrantly portrayed through the lighting. While sliding the sand under the player changes based on the feeling *Journey* is trying to emote. The artistic feel of the ruins never switches; it's the colors that shine on them that

changes. I found it super interesting how they didn't change the assets they made to fit the vibe, they just changed the color shining on them. When you think about telling a story through the medium of video games you think about all the assets you will need, which is dangerous for the scope of your projects. I need to remember that lighting can make the difference in a cheap yet effective way.

## Summation

*Journey* sent waves through the game narrative world in 2012 and they are still crashing against the beaches of every narrative. It pushed the boundaries of "Show Don't Tell" in a way that impacted not only players but developers. Making a game this impressive is the same as reaching that mountain shining in the sky. I believe that out of all the games I have played and studied, *Journey* is the most imposing one of them all.

## References

Gordon, Lewis. "Ten Years Ago, 'Journey' Made a Convincing Case That Video Games Could Be Art." *The Ringer*, 11 Mar. 2022, [www.theringer.com/2022/3/11/22966978/journey-jenova-chen-thatgamecompany-video-games-art](http://www.theringer.com/2022/3/11/22966978/journey-jenova-chen-thatgamecompany-video-games-art).

Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Pantheon Books, 1968.

Ende, Michael. *Never Ending Story*. The Diocese, 1991.

Clements, Ryan. "Journey Review." *IGN*, IGN, 1 Sept. 2016, [www.ign.com/articles/2012/03/01/journey-review](http://www.ign.com/articles/2012/03/01/journey-review).

"Journey – Review." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 13 Mar. 2012, [www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2012/mar/13/journey-ps3-review](http://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2012/mar/13/journey-ps3-review).