

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves - Becoming a Hero - Drew Davidson & Richard Lemarchand

With this essay, we're going to unpack how the design of a game (Uncharted 2: Among Thieves) can offer players the chance to explore and learn all the possibilities within the playing experience. In other words, a good game can teach you how to play it through the very act of playing it. And players can develop a literacy of games as they learn through the playing of a variety of games.

With that in mind, Richard Lemarchand (Lead Game Designer at Naughty Dog and Co-Lead Game Designer of Uncharted 2: Among Thieves) and I are going to explore the making and playing of the game. We're going to analyze sequences in the game in detail in order to illustrate and interpret how the various components of a game can come together to create a fulfilling playing experience unique to this medium. With this paper, I wrote a complete first pass unpacking my gameplaying experience (which included some discussions with Richard). Richard then added in his thoughts and responses to my analysis, to which I, in turn, replied. So, the bulk of the paper is from my perspective, but we've called out specific comments from Richard and my replies. Throughout, we've tried to capture the range of dialogue we've had around and about the game.

From a gameplay experience perspective, we're going to walk through how the game design and narrative development unfold. To help track this process, we'll refer to two diagrams. The first diagram used is a classic literary plot diagram.

Using this diagram, we can follow the story of Uncharted 2 as it develops across key moments in the game. Next, we'll use a diagram illustrating the stages of interactivity.

This interactive diagram was developed in a previous paper (Davidson 2005) and outlines the interactive experience of playing a game. Briefly, the experience is posited to have 3 stages: involvement – being initially introduced into the game; immersion – becoming engaged with the gameplay and the gameworld; and investment – feeling compelled to successfully complete the game. The interactive diagram illustrates these three stages. The x-axis shows the relationship of the time spent playing the game, from start to completion. The y-axis shows both the level of interactive engagement, down from shallow to deep, and the percentage of game experienced, up from none to all.

Comparing the results from both of the above diagrams helps to illustrate the relationship between a game's story and its gameplay and how they can fit together to create a satisfying and engaging interactive experience. Of course, this approach wouldn't necessarily be the most apt for analyzing all the different genres and types of games, but we think it works well for *Uncharted 2*.

One method that isn't directly explored is the procedural, computational nature of how this experience is created. Michael Mateas (2005) and Ian Bogost (2007) have written on the importance of procedural literacy, but for the purposes of this interpretation, the focus is kept more on a gaming literacy (GameLab Institute of Play 2007) and an exploration of the gameplay and narrative. Also, James Paul Gee (2007) has written on thirty-six learning principles associated with games, which illustrate how a game teaches us to play. And in performing this interpretation, Bogost's (2007) ideas on "unit operations," as an analytical methodology in which the parts of an experience are viewed as various units that procedurally inter-relate together to create the experience as a whole, are not explicated in detail, but combined with Gee's ideas of learning principles, inspire an exploration of how the gameplay and story can be seen as learning units of meaning that inter-relate in a variety of ways and lead us to a literacy and mastery through the playing experience (Davidson, *Well Played*, 2008).

Needless to say, this article is full of spoilers on *Uncharted 2* (and some for the first *Uncharted*) so consider this your fair warning. While it's not necessary, we encourage you to play the game(s) before you read on. A goal of this article is to help develop and define a literacy of games as well as a sense of their value as an experience. Video games are a complex medium that merits careful interpretation and insightful analysis. By looking closely at a specific video game and the experience of playing it, we hope to clearly show how a game can be well played.

Introduction

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves is the sequel to the hit game, *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*. Released in the Fall of 2009 for the Sony Playstation 3 (PS3), it garnered critical acclaim (with a 96 MetaCritic score) and many game of the year awards (plus it often came close to sweeping many award shows across all categories). Within the world of the game, it develops on the experiences of the first *Uncharted* as we join the new adventures of Nathan Drake, the player character from both games. For the scope of this paper, we won't delve too deeply into details about the first

game, just enough to help explain any events and characters that span both games.

Before we dive into the game in detail, let's start with a more high-level overview. Naughty Dog was known initially for their Crash Bandicoot and Jak & Daxter series of games, and is a subsidiary development studio of Sony Computer Entertainment. As a Sony subsidiary, all their titles are exclusive releases on Sony platforms (currently the PS3). In 2007, they branched out with a new title, *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*. The game was a 3rd person action-adventure game that drew favorable comparisons to the Tomb Raider video game franchise in terms of gameplay and gameworld, and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* in terms of story and cinematic presentation, and it was the sleeper hit of 2007. It should be noted that Richard was the lead game designer on both of the *Uncharted* games (sharing lead design with Neil Druckmann on the second).

In *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*, players play as Nathan (Nate) Drake, a contemporary fortune hunter, and they join in an adventure to find the lost treasure of Sir Francis Drake. This adventure leads to a forgotten island in the Pacific, and Nate and his companions discover clues, secrets, maps and more, that help them unravel the mystery and find the treasure. Gameplay consisted of plenty of combat (hand-to-hand and gunplay) as well as a lot of exploratory platforming as they work their way through the exotic environments.

Uncharted 2: Among Thieves picks up after the events of the first game. Drake is tempted back into this next adventure with a new group of mercenary companions. Characters from the previous game come to play a role in this adventure as well. Unlike the first game, which takes place primarily on one island, this adventure takes Drake to exotic locales all over the world on the search for the legendary Himalayan valley of Shambhala.

Richard Lemarchand: When Drew invited me to add some remarks to a paper he was writing about *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*, I was immediately interested in having the opportunity to look at the game through a different lens – that of an analytical review. Of course, since *Uncharted 2* was released, my friends at work and I have been studying the reviews that both critics and fans have written, looking for insight into where we had been successful with the game, and where there was room for improvement.

I have become increasingly interested in game criticism in past years, as my understanding of how film and literary criticism works has expanded, and I now see that a robust professional and academic critical

context is an important adjunct to the creative culture that produces games, and that advancement in a form is rarely possible without it. I thought that *Well Played 1.0*, the book that Drew edited and partly authored, offered fresh and interesting takes on the games that it looked at, and I was curious as to what we would uncover if we looked at our game in a new way.

My personal experience of *Uncharted 2* had been intense and rewarding. The game took 22 months to conceive and create, and I was involved in the process from before the beginning, as we began to discuss ideas for a sequel during the closing stages of the first game in the *Uncharted* series, *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune*.

We had always imagined *Uncharted* as a series of games, and our contemporary reinvention of pulp adventure tropes gave us lots of potentially rich subject matter. Our decision to push both cinematic gameplay and character-driven storytelling beyond anything seen in videogames before provided many challenges, but also the singularly most rewarding and satisfying game development experience of my career. I'm excited to have an opportunity to share a glimpse behind the scenes of the process in the course of Drew's narrative.

Full Disclosure from Drew Davidson

In case it's not apparent, I should share that Richard and I are friends, and that helped spur the idea for writing this paper together. In the past, I've approached the analysis of a game mostly from my perspective as a player. Although, I recently did an analysis of *World of Goo*, and knowing Kyle Gabler (game designer) enabled me to participate in the beta testing of the game as well as to ask a lot of questions. And last year at Games + Learning + Society 5.0, I did a live play and analysis of 2008's *Prince of Persia* with James Paul Gee and Francois Emery, the lead level designer on the game. Francois and I were introduced by a mutual colleague, and we prepared through email, but we first met the morning of the presentation. The session went very well, with a lot of shared details coming out during the playthrough in front of the crowd. In fact, it led to an invitation to do a similar presentation for the Games + Learning + Society 6.0 Keynote. I thought of asking Richard about doing the keynote together, because I was excited about playing *Uncharted 2*, which in turn has led to our writing this essay.

At the time of this writing, I've only played through *Uncharted* about 1/4 to 1/3 of way through twice now. I started playing it during the winter holidays of 2007, and was enjoying it, but ran into the start of spring semester classes, and had to put it aside, and just didn't get a

chance to pick it back up at the time. When Uncharted 2 came out in 2009, I had the idea that I should go back and revisit the first game before I jumped into the second, but on discussing this with Richard, he encouraged me to play Uncharted 2 first to enjoy all the new content and gameplay improvements they were able to put into the second game.

Taking Richard's advice, I played through Uncharted 2 and completed it two times, while also playing some specific sections several times (I have yet to take advantage of the multiplayer gameplay). I then thought about starting the first game over again for the sake of being thorough, but only got a little further along in the game before getting too frustrated with the gameplay controls of the first game as compared to the improved controls of the second game (more on this below). During my playthroughs, I visited GameFAQs from time to time to double check to make sure I didn't miss anything major (although both games are fairly linear in their experience, so this wasn't too much of an issue). Finally, I should note that Uncharted 2 is one of the rare games that my wife enjoyed watching me play from start to finish, as long as I was playing on the "Easy" setting (and more on this below as well).

Narrative & Gameplay Analysis

Now let's do a close analysis of the game. It's such a large experience, that I'm not going to cover everything that happens in great detail, but I do want to highlight key points and sequences in the game that contributed to the overall experience of playing.

Uncharted 2 starts with a bang that sets the tone for the pacing of the story and gameplay, and how the two are blended in the game through the use of what Naughty Dog calls IGCs (standing for In-Game Cut-scenes). IGCs are intricate moments that combine real-time interactivity (or briefly non-interactive but real-time rendered moments) with techniques from the language of cinema. In a lot of games there are Quick Time Events (QTEs) that are extended interactive cut-scenes in which a player has to press a button at key moments in order to advance through the cut-scene event successfully. Naughty Dog came up with IGCs as a term in order to help emphasize how the in-game cut-scenes in Uncharted 2 are more seamlessly interactive and integrated into the gameplay than a normal QTE.

In the first moments of Uncharted 2, we find ourselves as Drake, coming to consciousness, wounded and bleeding, alone in a train car hanging precariously from a mountain in a roaring blizzard. You then gain control over Drake as you try to climb out of the train to safety.

Throughout this initial sequence are several IGCs that help introduce players to a highly polished cinematic perspective meshed with integrated interactive gameplay moments. So you have very short periods where you actually don't have control of Drake, but you watch sudden events happen and then immediately gain control again. In this instance, the action comes to a climax with the train jerking and sliding off the cliff, while you race to get out before it does. You start getting a good sense of how the platforming gameplay works as you jump, swing and climb. Climbing out of the train gives you a good introduction to all the platforming mechanics. You work your way up and out, climbing the interior and exterior as stuff falls on you, handholds break, and you finally make a leaping run onto solid ground as the train goes crashing away below you.

Drake then loses consciousness, and this leads to a more traditional and extended flashback cut-scene that you get to watch. In this scene, Drake is at a beach bar and is met by an old acquaintance, Harry Flynn, along with a femme fatale, Chloe Frazer. They have a job (presumably the reason Drake is currently unconscious on a snowy mountainside) and they want to rope Drake into joining them. This job has something to do with some lost treasure related to Marco Polo and his travels, and Drake is uniquely qualified as he is the only person to have pulled off this particular heist. Drake resists at first, but slowly gets tempted into helping out, the scene ends with them toasting to the adventure, and Drake saying, "What could possibly go wrong?"

Richard Lemarchand: I was glad to see your remark, that the job that Chloe and Flynn are offering in Drake is presumably the reason that he's now passed out in the snow in the Himalayas, because that was exactly the kind of thing we wanted the player to think during the cutscene.

By showing Drake in a dangerous situation and an inhospitable environment at the very start of the game, our normally empathetic, curious audience starts to ask how Drake came to be in such a situation – even if they've never seen him before. By making our flashback cutscene start to tell the story of a chain of events that might lead to Drake's disastrous circumstances, we naturally grab and hold our audience's attention, right from the very beginning of the game.

This definitely worked on me as a player, as I was instantly drawn into the action (and what the heck has happened?). What could go wrong indeed. You wake up in control of Drake again, back on the icy cliffs in the middle of a blizzard. And now you get your first sense of the combat gameplay. Like the climb out of the train, this section of gameplay briefly

introduces you to the combat mechanics as you get a sense of how to use various weapons that are strewn all around in the wreckage of the rest of the train along with some soldiers who appear to be after Drake. As you work your way through the wreckage from carriage to carriage, there are also explosions that rock you around, and Drake loses consciousness again.

Which cues up another cutscene that you get to watch. This one shows Drake and Chloe together. There are hints that Flynn is actually onto something real, and there seems to be a love triangle brewing, and some trust issues amongst the three of them. The scene ends with Drake regaining consciousness on the icy mountainside.

RL: In fact, as Drake regains consciousness we seized the opportunity to add an interactive moment. When control returns to the player after the cutscene, Drake appears to still be unconscious. He is lying prone in a smashed train car, with one arm slightly swinging, and his eyes closed. Only when the player touches the analog stick will he start to stir and then stand up.

It's one of those chances for us to give the player one of those "oh cool, I'm back in control" moments. It might be a little fourth-wall-breaking, but players generally remark positively on that moment of revelation as at least novel, and I think that we can probably leverage that type of experience towards both gameplay and storytelling ends in the future.

Interestingly, I didn't pick up on this initially, but did notice it after the fact. For me, I was eager to get Drake back up and on his feet and start actively playing the game. As you stumble back out into the blizzard, you come upon a unique looking dagger. One that shows up spinning every time a scene loads in the game. So, this dagger must be important (and in some way the reason behind all the catastrophe on this mountainside). As Drake cradles the dagger, the scene fades out, and then a new scene fades in, as you're told that it is four months earlier in Istanbul.

RL: One more comment about your not noticing that interactive moment when Drake regains consciousness: we've found that it's often the case with this kind of interactive finesse: many players will never notice it. Some game developers will use "hardly anyone will notice that" as a reason not to put something in a game, and of course, you have to draw the line somewhere. But when an opportunity, like this one, takes relatively little effort to put into the game and doesn't require the creation of new assets, I always jump at the chance to make our game even a little richer. Players also love the feeling that they've discovered a secret.

I'd also like to grab this opportunity to mention that *Uncharted 2*, like all of Naughty Dog's games since *Crash Bandicoot*, streams data from the disc so that players only have to experience load times at the start of a play session, and never during the flow of the game's action and story. This is very important for us, in maintaining the pacing we've carefully constructed, which is so critical to our creation of a cinematic experience that players get caught up in.

And this definitely helps to create a more seamless experience of the gameworld and story. So, you leave Drake on the mountainside, and back in time, you find him in Istanbul with Harry and Chloe ready to run the heist they were discussing in the first extended cutscene. Before I get into the details of this first heist, I want to take the time to comment on the cinematic storytelling that has been used to introduce you to this gameworld. On a high level, in terms of the plot diagram, we're still getting some great introductory exposition, but also with hints of things having all gone awry (that's a huge mess on the mountainside). And I'd like to note that the game story is broken up into 26 titled chapters (so far, everything discussed has been in Chapter 1: "A Rock and a Hard Place.") To help with orientation, I'll refer to these chapters as we move through the analysis of the game. Considering the interactive diagram, we're still firmly in the involvement stage, we've had some initial practice with the platforming and combat, and have also been introduced to how the IGCs work.

But that doesn't quite do justice to the highly polished craft in which all of this is seamlessly blended together into an amazingly engaging and gripping experience. The IGCs are used to great effect, and you're able to watch and play your way into this gameworld. Naughty Dog has crafted the videogame equivalent of a thrilling action adventure movie. Pushing this comparison deeper, they've used the narrative conventions of these types of movies to help shape the story beats as they play out across the game (which I believe helps make it such a watchable experience). Story beats are the smallest units of a story, like an exchange between characters in a scene, that advance the narrative, and this initial sequence really does drop you right into the action. You then have some flashbacks to help break up the tense action, but also to start filling in some backstory on how it all started and how wrong things went awry. Simultaneously, you're gaining a sense of how the gameplay mechanics work as you play through the scenes, establishing how you, as Drake, are able to survive the straits laid out before you. The game pulls you into the story by requiring you to play through it successfully (as the hero in a movie would

do
as well).

And now you're back in Istanbul four months prior, at the start of it all. From here, the high-rolling, globe-trotting adventure kicks into gear. You're here to steal an artifact from a museum that should provide you with a clue to the ultimate treasure you're seeking. Chloe is the driver for the escape post-heist, and Harry and Drake go through the sewers to enter the museum from below. This is the beginning of Chapter 2: "Breaking and Entering," as you make your way through the museum to the artifact. There are some interesting dynamics to this chapter that again blend gameplay and storytelling well. For instance, Drake makes it clear that he doesn't want guns involved so as not to risk accidentally killing the innocent museum guards. This gives you some sense of Drake's character and motivations, while also setting up a level that is more about sneaking around than shooting it out. Harry has brought two tranquilizer guns though, so you can shoot some, but your focus is more about traversing through the museum while remaining undetected.

That said, there is a contradictory moment in this level where it appears that Drake actually kills a guard. He is hanging from a ledge high up on the roof of the museum, and a guard walks by, and the game prompts you to hit a certain button, which causes Drake to grab the guard and toss him off the roof to his apparent death. I've seen online that this moment disturbed players in terms of their sense of who Drake is and what he would, and wouldn't, do (Wardrip-Fruin, 2010).

RL: We were, of course, very focused on preserving the idea that Drake didn't want to take any innocent life during his time in the Museum. When the level's layout offered us the opportunity to showcase our "pull an enemy off a roof" stealth mechanic (one of a number of new "action-stealth" moves that we'd added to *Uncharted 2*) we couldn't resist seizing it, but we still didn't want Drake to appear inconsistent.

So we made sure that there was water below the roof for the guard to fall into, and even went so far as to create an animation that showed the guard swimming to safety, having survived the fall, and clambering onto a nearby rock to recover.

However, we now realize, based on what we've read on the Internet, that many players don't notice that the guard survives the fall, and they think that Drake has suddenly stopped caring about whether the guards get hurt. It's just one of those times where we have to realize that what we added doesn't "sell" or "read" – it's not completely, transparently

obvious to nearly every player – and we just have to chalk this one up to experience and try not to make the same mistake next time!

To be honest, this moment didn't register strongly with me at the time I played through it, but I can see how players may not have "read" Drake's intentions. Moving on, Drake and Harry continue through the museum. Before we get to the treasure, I want to unpack how this buddy system works on two levels. In terms of story, you get to listen to the two characters banter back and forth while they're together, so it helps to establish their relationship for the player. In terms of Drake and Harry, you get the sense that while they don't fully trust one another, they do have a camaraderie in which they joke with each other. The dialogue pulls you into the characters in terms of content, but also in terms of delivery. The voice acting behind the characters is excellent and it's obvious Naughty Dog took great care in making sure the characters come across in the voices. Granted, often their dialogue is reminiscent of Hollywood blockbuster action movies, but that is the genre they're emulating, so it fits fairly well to the adventure in which you find yourself as Drake. And on a gameplay level, the buddy system is used to help keep you on the right track. Throughout the game, you're almost always with a companion (here it's Harry) and this buddy often is able to serve informally as a guide to lead the way so that you don't spend too much time getting lost, and also to give hints when you're trying to solve environmental puzzles that always seem to require two people (like boosting Harry up to grab a ladder that he can then drop down to you). Once again, Naughty Dog is working with a high level of integration throughout the experience.

Drake and Flynn get to the treasure (and ancient oil lamp) that has a resin the burns blue and enables them to read a scrap of paper from the lamp, that tells of a tsunami that left Marco Polo shipwrecked in Borneo and the first hints that Polo may have found Shambhala (Shangri-La) with the help of a cursed Cintamani Stone (that may actually still be on a prominent mountain in Borneo).

So now they know roughly where in the world they need to go next on this adventure. But here the subtitle of the game (Among Thieves) really comes to the fore as Harry double-crosses Drake, leaving him stuck in the museum while also setting off all the alarms. So now you have to try to find some other way to escape, and you can manage to get out of the museum through the sewers, but when you exit you find yourself surrounded by armed guards.

RL: The characters that accompany Drake through the game are crucially important for creating an emotional reality for the player, and we

think that it's this emotional reality that makes our game engaging. We use the characters that Drake interacts with to show different sides of his (often conflicted) character, and we work hard at every stage of the process – from their character designs, to our scriptwriting and performance capture processes, to the implementation of the characters in gameplay – to make sure that the people in our game are believable and nuanced in their characterization. We try to use techniques that are both narrative and interactive to set up and pay off situations that deepen and enrich the world of the game.

And I found the character interactions definitely helped flesh out the world and where you thought Drake stood within it. Three months later, you find that Drake is (still) in jail. Victor Sullivan (Sully) shows up to spring Drake. Sully is Drake's friend from the first game. Their friendship was called into question throughout that earlier adventure, but it all turned out to be a misunderstanding, and Sully is one of the few people Drake trusts.

RL: We think that Nate probably mostly trusts Sullivan, but I don't think he trusts him completely. The world that Drake and Sully exist in rarely allows for certainty about anything, and we try and use that to our advantage whenever possible, to heighten the mystery, wonder and romance of our game's world.

This is definitely taken advantage of as the reunion is complicated by the fact that Chloe is with Sully. As they dance around regaining some trust, it is revealed that Harry and his client (Lazarevic) have found Marco Polo's lost boats in Borneo, but have yet to find the Cintamani Stone. So, Sully, Chloe and Drake team up to try to go to Borneo to sneak the Stone right out from under Flynn and Lazarevic.

Off to the jungles of "Borneo" (Chapter 3), and in this part of the adventure you partner up with Sully. As you work your way into the jungle toward the camp, the stakes are raised as you now get into more deadly firefights with Lazarevic's men. This is where you really get familiar with the combat gameplay mechanics with multiple encounters and a variety of weapons from which to use. At the same time, you're also becoming more adept at traversing through the territory in which you find yourself. Chloe is acting as a double agent getting in close to help create a diversion and give Drake and Sully an opportunity to get access to all of Lazarevic's notes, journals and plans (in Chapter 4, "The Dig"). This helps them realize that Lazarevic is off track in looking for the treasure.

So, they have a chance to find it, as soon as they shoot their way out of the camp.

Stepping back for a second, this is where the story really aligns with action adventure movie blockbusters from the past, particularly *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. You can definitely see the similarities quite clearly, but it also helps you fall into the role of Drake. The familiar story beats give you a direction of how you should act if Drake is indeed the hero of this adventure. This in turn, aligns with your game goals as you play your way through the experience.

Back in the game, Drake, Sully and Chloe manage to find the resting place of the ancient survivors deeper in the jungle. They don't find the Cintamani Stone though, instead they find the unique dagger (a Phurba) from the earlier scene on the mountain, which appears to be some sort of key to Shambhala which they now figure out is in Nepal. And then Chloe fulfills her double agent role twice. First it appears she turns Drake and Sully over to Flynn, but then it becomes clear that it was to help save them and gives them a chance to escape. And as they flee, we get a scene straight from *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* as Drake and Sully leap from a cliff into a raging river below and float away free and clear.

RL: We hope that we don't draw on any preexisting narrative too much, and we are always walking a fine line between appealing to adventure stories from the past, whether it's the more recent past of 80s action movies or the distant past of Robert Louis Stephenson, and approaching everything with a fresh eye that invigorates the characters and prevents them from feeling like clichés or types. It's always a compliment to be compared to films as beloved as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or *Butch and Sundance*, though!

From my perspective as a player, the familiarity of the story conventions helped draw me into my (or Drake's) role within the adventure. Speaking of which, now it's off to Nepal to try and find Chloe and the Cintamani Stone. At this point, we're solidly into some rising action on the plot diagram with the major conflict coming into better focus (although I'm still not sure who I can trust or not). And we're getting solidly immersed in the interactive experience. The last escapade gave you a lot practice in gameplay (both combat and platforming) and at this point I've noticed I'm much better at both. I'm more accurate with my gunplay, and more strategic about taking cover. And I've learned to adjust the camera view to search around my environment to help find my way when I need to jump around and climb.

The experiences in Nepal last for several game chapters as we start with Chapter 5, “Urban Warfare,” and it lives up to its title right away. As Drake is driving through the war-torn streets, it’s apparent that the city is overrun with fighting. And we get to see a classic Naughty Dog gameplay sequence in which the perspective shifts and you have to run toward the screen. This is something they’ve done across many of the different games they created. It adds a unique control moment as everything is reversed, which adds an intensity to the gameplay as you have to adjust to the backward perspective and controls on the fly. In this case, Drake ends up running down an alley with a large military truck barreling after him. You have to run forward while shooting backward in order to cause the truck to crash as you flee from the wreckage in the alley. The switch of perspective makes it a challenging gameplay experience that adds to the cinematic action of watching as a truck comes bearing down on you. It’s another great sequence that makes you feel like a hero when you survive (although truth be told it took me several tries before I did).

There are some other interesting gameplay twists that happen in Nepal. Right after the alley sequence, you’re on your own for a bit before you find Chloe. So for almost the first time in the game, you’re not buddied up with someone. This increases your immersion as you have to find your way on your own. Once you meet up with Chloe, the two of you work your way through the war torn city, traversing alleys and up and down buildings. There is a nice mix of platforming and combat as many of the buildings have been bombed or damaged, and there are soldiers and guerillas all around.

There’s also an interesting story moment on the roof of a hotel that happens to have a pool. You’re up there to scout for the right temple in this city full of temples, but you can have Drake jump into the pool, where he goofs around and jokes about playing the Marco Polo game. This shows a great level of attention to detail by the developers. Unlike many of the more sandbox, emergent games (like the Grand Theft Auto franchise) where players have an open world to wander around in, Uncharted 2 is linear in progression, so you’re always moving forward through the experience. But little moments like the pool scene open up the gameworld and make it feel fully fleshed out, and you’re just moving through it on your adventure.

RL: It’s always very satisfying when players call out this moment as enjoyable, because it was a particular labor of love for a number of us, including the actors who partly improvised the dialog and the game

designer who carefully added the dialog to the game and made this implementation interactive – there are different dialogue flows dependent on whether the player keeps Drake in the pool for a while or makes him climb out quickly. We even went so far as to re-jig our Trophy scheme at the eleventh hour, adding two Bronze Trophies: one for when Drake first jumps in the pool and yells “Marco”, and another one for the player who keeps Drake in the pool long enough for him to get Chloe to say “Polo”!

I’ve enjoyed how trophy schemes have developed to help track a variety of player achievements across a game, this provides players with another level of motivation to fully explore a game. And I really like how there are trophies for little narrative moments like these. It encourages me, as a player, to explore the world some more, which resonates well with the theme of game overall. And so, shortly after the pool, Lazarevic finds out that Drake is in the city, and sends out attack helicopters to deal with Drake. This leads to an amazingly cinematic gameplay sequence. You and Chloe are trapped high up in a building with soldiers chasing you from floor to floor, when a helicopter joins in the fight and starts shooting missiles at the building. As a player it was a confusing experience. I was in an office room using a desk as cover as soldiers entered the room, when the perspective started shifting and all the furniture and people started tumbling across the room as the building tilted. I wasn’t sure what was going on, but noticed I was sliding toward a window and could see that we were crashing toward the building next door. It all felt crazy, but I made a run for it with Chloe and we jumped through the window, landing in the adjacent building. And then it jumps to a quick IGC as Nate and Chloe turn back and watch the other building collapse completely. This is definitely an intense moment that made me feel like a hero. I was psyched to have survived (and actually managed to do it on my first try) and was impressed by how the designers created the gameplay sequence to line up with the story beats and enable me to perform like an action adventure hero.

RL: This sequence was very important for us – it was among the first of our major cinematic set pieces that we polished, and it showed off a system that represented an important technical leap forward for us: our Dynamic Object Traversal System. This system let Drake, and all his enemies and allies, use all of their moves on any arbitrary moving object in the world, and without it we couldn’t have realized either this collapsing hotel, or other emblematic sequences like the Train level. A system like this is pretty much the Holy Grail for character-action game designers, since it lets us do things we’d only previously been able to dream about,

and it was incredibly difficult to implement, causing our programmers to change or touch almost every core system in the game. We felt that the sequence was very successful, and it inspired us to push ourselves ever further with our set pieces. It certainly seems to make an impact on players, and it was planned to punctuate the peak of action that this part of the game reaches.

What's important to consider is how seamless the playing experience was. It makes me realize that the technical challenges going into the Dynamic Object Traversal System paid off as I didn't even notice them (which meant I felt like I was able to play the set piece (and feel like a hero) even in the chaos of a collapsing building. Staying with this concept of being a hero, shortly after escaping the collapsing building, Drake and Chloe run into Elena Fisher and a cameraman (Jeff). Elena is a gutsy reporter from the first *Uncharted*, and through those earlier adventures Elena and Drake developed complicated feelings for one another. Chloe argues to leave them on their own, and Elena and Jeff seem a bit wary of joining Drake and Chloe. Based on previous experience, Elena assumes that Drake is up to something (and most likely it's no good). Drake insists that they could use their help, so he talks everyone into sticking together. What I liked about having this short story experience shortly after feeling like such a hero jumping from a collapsing building, is that it underlined for me that being a hero isn't just about those feats of derring-do, it's also about doing the right thing. And you see Drake stepping more into the role as a hero in this moment.

So, you now have a party of four, deep in a city surrounded by enemies out to get you. As you make your way through the violence around you, Elena reveals that Lazarevic is a psychopathic war criminal, and she's here to expose his war crimes to the world (so now you know who you're up against). The group works its way to the right temple, and then there is some amazing environment puzzle solving within in the temple that requires a lot of platforming by Drake as he uses his trusty notebook and works to unlock the clues found within and beneath the temple (Chapters 8 and 9). Once you successfully negotiate the puzzle platforming, and use the Phurba as a key, you're shown the location of Shambhala deep in the Himalayas.

Of course, Lazarevic's men find you, and you have to fight your way out. In the ensuing firefight, Jeff's get wounded pretty bad, and Drake has to help carry him away. This adds a gameplay wrinkle as well since Jeff really slows you down, so you have to work at a much slower pace.

Again, this is combined with a story element as Chloe argues to leave Jeff, but Drake insists on carrying him. And once again, it looks like Chloe turns on you, as Flynn shows up, and we finally get to meet Lazarevic. Although it looks like Lazarevic suspects Chloe and has her taken away to the train. He then kills Jeff and threatens Elena in order to get Drake to share what he's discovered. Once he has the information, Lazarevic leaves and asks Flynn to kill them. Elena and Drake manage to get away and head to the trainyard to rescue Chloe from Lazarevic.

RL: I'm not sure that I agree with your characterization of Drake at the meeting with Elena and Jeff as heroic, at least not at the start, but this scene is certainly a pivotal one for him. We use this moment to reset the rhythm of the action, and we do it somewhat at Drake's expense (and perhaps partly to his credit).

For a start, Elena openly challenges Drake about the nature of his quest, saying, "So let me get this straight: you're competing with a psychopathic war criminal for a mythological gemstone?" In a single sentence we say everything we need to about the breakdown of any romantic relationship that may have formed between Nate and Elena at the end of the first *Uncharted* game, and we characterize Nate, rather negatively, as both a criminal and a dreamer. We've grounded our story in the context of the real world (or at least, a real world) and we've moved both Drake and Elena's characters forward a step in their relationship.

Secondly, this is the first time that Elena, a woman for whom Nate may have had deep feelings, meets Chloe, Nate's sexy sort-of current lover. Amy Hennig, our Creative Director and head writer, says that this scene was one of the most difficult to write in the whole game, and commentators have paid us the compliment of remarking that many games – indeed, many films – would have played this scene badly, perhaps showing Drake as swaggering or cocky as his conquests past and present cross paths, and leaving all the characters stuck playing out banal stereotypes that do nothing to honor them.

But instead Drake seems awkward and embarrassed – it betrays a kind of vulnerability that I think is appealing, and also indicates that he's not just a regular Joe in terms of his sloppy fighting style and frequent clumsiness: he can be conflicted and self-conscious, just like the rest of us. The women are confident and funny in counterpoint to Drake, and even seem to rather like each other, even in the midst of a difficult situation.

So I think that the scene works tremendously well, not just to tamp down the pace of the game after such an intense crescendo of action (and before a relatively sedate sequence of exploration and puzzle solving in

the Temple complex), but also to shed some new light on the characters and the relationships between them, and to bond the player to Nathan Drake as a likable guy with some serious flaws.

I would agree, that within this scene Drake isn't necessarily heroic. But for me, having him being awkward also read as a moment where he was having to assess what he's doing and why he's doing it, and that got me thinking that in order for Drake to become a hero, he has to figure out how to do the right thing. We're now at Chapter 12, and looking at the plot diagram, we're well into the conflict of rising action, so this mirrors the conflict Drake is displaying in this scene as well. I'm feeling empathy with the characters and want Drake to help thwart Lazarevic and save the day. In terms of interactivity, I'm solidly immersed in the gameplay. I'm at the point where I don't even have to think about what buttons to push. For the most part, I'm able to maneuver Drake as I need to, and now the designers do a nice job throwing another wrinkle into the mix.

With Elena's help, and a lot of improvising with many different vehicles, you're able to get onto the train for a thrilling extended action sequence in Chapter 13. Plus if you recall, the game began on a wrecked train on a snowy mountainside, so even though you're down in the valley, this very well might be that train since Lazarevic knows Shambhala is up in the mountains. Now Drake has to work his way through, under, over and around the train as he makes his way forward toward Lazarevic, Flynn and Chloe. The train is a limited spatial environment so you have to be careful (plus you can fall or get knocked off). And this train is loaded for war; there are soldiers, weapons, tanks and helicopters. This is one of the longest combat sequences, although because your goal is to get to the front of the train, there is a lot of platforming as well. And the combat is mixed up as well, as you have to take on soldiers in train carriages, on top of the train, on the sides of the train as well as helicopters flying beside the train. Plus the environment the train is moving through comes into play. You have to watch out for, and avoid, signs near the side of the train and also for signals above the train. And then the next thing you know you're in a long tunnel and you come out in the mountains (uh-oh).

Drake finally finds Chloe, who asks him to leave. As they argue, Drake gets shot by Flynn. Then Chloe starts arguing with Flynn and Drake is able to run to another carriage followed by some soldiers. Wounded and trapped, Drake takes aim and shoots some propane tanks, setting off some huge explosions, and causing a massive train wreck.

We're now back at the same sequence that started the game. Recall, the game up to this point has essentially been an extended flashback from the start of the game. And once again, we have to climb Drake back out of the train again. And then fight your way through the exploding wreckage and surviving soldiers out to get you. You manage to get out and away, but now you're basically wounded and lost in a blizzard on a mountain. Drake collapses in the snow and someone walks up to him as he loses consciousness (again).

RL: It's good to read your remarks, here. It was easy for even us on the team to forget that nearly the first half of our game takes place in flashback (when viewed in a certain context, at least).

Non-linear temporal flow is a hallmark of some of my favorite films, from *Rashomon* to *Lola rennt* to *Memento*. Indeed, discontinuity of space and time, bridged by the edit, is a character of nearly all film.

I think that, partly because of pragmatic issues to do with camera control in third-person character-action video games, and partly because we perceive a relationship between digital games and digital simulations, both developers and players are somewhat over-focused on maintaining temporal and spatial continuity in narrative video games.

Few games have taken advantage of the opportunities offered by thinking about time and space as the plastic, collapsible continua that they are in cinema. When we remember that games are different from simulations, new creative possibilities open up, and I'm happy that the talented team members that came up with the temporal sequencing of our game did so.

As a player, the non-linear way the story is revealed created a more complex set of expectations in terms of how I was experiencing the set pieces across time and places. In the back of mind, I always had this feeling that I was heading for a catastrophe on the side of the mountain, so I was paying attention to the choices and consequences of Drake's actions. Moving forward, Drake comes to in a small hut with a small girl looking at him, and the man who rescued him. The man speaks to Drake in Tibetan, which Drake doesn't understand, but he notices that his wounds have healed. We're now in Chapter 16, it feels like we're both literally and metaphorically getting close to reaching the climatic moment in the story. And I'm starting to feel invested in the gameplay experience. I want to find Shambhala and keep Lazarevic from ruining it.

The Tibetan man beckons Drake to follow him out of the hut. Which starts a short sequence that has a similar effect to the earlier game of *Marco Polo* in the pool. As Drake exits the hut he finds himself in a

Tibetan village, he can follow after the Tibetan rescuer, or walk around and play soccer with some kids and pet a yak. Again, what's nice about these little moments is that you don't have to do any of them, but if you do, you can feel more of the world in which you find yourself. Also, in talking with Richard, he related how they designed these particular moments so that players couldn't go around and punch the villagers. Instead, those familiar button presses lead to Drake offering handshakes or waves of hello since Drake doesn't speak Tibetan.

RL: Indeed, the idea for those hand-shaking interactions emerged directly from playtesting. I was in charge of the "Peaceful Village" level, and I noticed that about half of our playtesters ran straight up to the villagers and threw a punch at them when they arrived in the Village for the first time. By talking to them afterwards I worked out that they weren't really trying to hurt the villagers – they wanted to test the bounds of our system, by attempting an interaction with the world.

Experimentation of this kind is a fundamental aspect of the way that players relate to video games – they make hypotheses about the game and then test them out, and by doing so they learn the rules of the game and how to succeed. Video game players are a lot like scientists investigating a world in this regard.

We'd initially set up the villagers so that if Drake threw a punch at them, nothing happened. Games that reward experimentation on the part of the player with reactions that are interesting or entertaining are generally considered better than those that don't, and so we decided to make the extra effort to add a set of animations to show Drake and the villagers shaking hands or waving to each other, should the player try to throw a punch at a villager. I'm still very grateful to the animators and programmers who expended elbow grease on this.

It's a moving experience whenever I hear that a player was delighted when they found themselves shaking an old man's hand or patting a yak on the nose. It feels like the realization of a playful dialog between the player and me, the designer.

And building on the earlier scene with the pool, players have been encouraged to explore, so it's likely that they'll encounter these unique interactions, which again enhances and expands the feeling of the world in the game. Back in the village, the Tibetan rescuer leads you into a house, and lo and behold, there's Elena (who speaks Tibetan to boot!). She followed the tracks from the train wreck and found Drake. Elena introduces Drake to Karl Schafer, and older man who went on an earlier expedition to find Shambhala. Schafer introduces Tenzin (the man who rescued

Drake) and shares some advice and warnings learned from his experiences, and lets Drake know that the phurba is the key to Shambhala, so Lazarevic is going to be coming for it. He also relates how the Cintamani Stone will give Lazarevic great power to rule the world. During this conversation, Drake wavers about doing anything more, he feels like it's all been a big mess and actually says that he's through playing the hero. Elena argues that they should try and stop Lazarevic, and Schafer offers to show Drake proof by having Tenzin take Drake into the mountains to the remains of Schafer's earlier expedition.

RL: In terms of Joseph Campbell's monomyth as reconfigured by Chris Vogler in his screenwriting book, *The Writer's Journey*, this is a moment where Drake makes his final and most emphatic refusal of the call to adventure. It's a low point for Drake's character, and an important point for us, as it helps us show that Drake isn't a straightforwardly crusading altruist. He doesn't want to get killed in the service of some abstract, even ridiculous-seeming, quest. His world is a serious, dangerous place – just like ours – and he's a sensible guy – someone just like us. Having Drake pass through this moment – where he simply can't accept that he's a hero – grounds his character in reality and helps us to relate to him.

This underscored how Drake really struggled with doing the right thing (which is more important than “playing the hero”). So, Drake now buddies up with Tenzin and heads off into the mountains for Chapters 17 and 18. You make your way into a mountain cave system, where you start finding some of the dead men from Schafer's expedition. There is a lot of platforming gameplay here with Tenzin as you make your way through the icy cave system. You also start getting hints that there is some sort of monster in the caves with you, and then you're attacked by a ferocious yeti. Together with Tenzin, you are able to fend off the beast, and continue deeper into the caves. Soon you come upon a huge underground area with large statues. This leads to another intense sequence of puzzle platforming as you work your way through the environment with Tenzin. They then discover more dead men, and find out they were Nazis after the Tree of Life and immortality. And it's apparent that Schafer killed the Nazis to prevent them from succeeding in their quest.

This discovery significantly raises the stakes of our current adventure, and it is followed with an attack by a bunch of the yetis. So Tenzin and Drake have to fight them off and escape by activating an ancient elevator that gets them above ground away from the monsters. From their perch in the mountains, they can see that Tenzin's village is being attacked.

So they rush down into the village and into Chapters 19 and 20. They find Elena, who confirms that Lazarevic has found them. Tenzin is worried about his daughter and Elena tells them that she is hiding with Schafer, before telling Drake that this terrible destruction that has been brought down on the Village is all their fault – people are dying because of Drake and Elena. Drake and Tenzin head out to find Schafer and Tenzin's daughter, only to run into a tank, which then pursues them through the village. This leads to an out-of-control action sequence as you and Tenzin play cat and mouse with the tank. One moment stands out in particular for me, it reminds me of the scene in the Bourne Ultimatum in which Bourne is chasing an assassin through the medina in Tangiers. Except in this game scene, I'm running with Tenzin, trying to keep some houses between us and the tank. And there's this intense moment, when the tank actually crashes through the walls of the house that we're running through.

In this moment, a quick (all of a couple of seconds) IGC shows Drake getting bowled over by crashing tank, but the camera angle during the IGC is such that I'm instinctively trying to guide Drake out of the room, so when I do regain play control, I'm already heading in the right direction. This is some very clever design as it makes me feel as if I'm playing through the short IGC, while also using the IGC to up the intensity of the moment. I've talked to some friends who wondered if they were actually in control at all or not, but for me, it all lined up. Yet another moment where I felt heroic in performing some crazy feat of action.

Drake is able to take care of the tank finally, and Tenzin finds his daughter, but Lazarevic's men have taken Schafer away with them in a convoy of trucks. Drake and Elena manage to hijack the last truck and take off in pursuit and into Chapter 21. This leads to a gameplay sequence somewhat like the train, but ramped up a level, as you now have combat while also jumping from truck to truck across crazy terrain.

RL: This long sequence, leading from the peaceful village to the ice caves to the frozen temple and then back to the now-besieged village is a pivotal section of the game. As you've identified, there's a lot going on there, in terms of cinematic gameplay – sequences where complex set pieces play out almost entirely in gameplay, with the player directly in control of Drake nearly all the time.

We switch things up a few times, using moments of constrained gameplay in a narrative way – like the climax of the first encounter with the 'yeti' – and we pull out every single trick in our bag to guide and

sometimes push the player from A to B to C, using ‘characters’ like the tank or the transformed village to effect moment-to-moment emotional change in the player. We even sucker-punch the player a second time, having already brought Drake low by his near-refusal to continue with the quest, by having Elena blame him for the awful transformation of the formerly idyllic community.

But Tenzin occupies the heart of this sequence, of course. Drake and Tenzin do not share a common language, and that gives us an opportunity not only for a few gags, but also for the player to become bonded to this unusual, dynamic character almost entirely through their collaborative gameplay actions. As Tenzin sets up ropes for Drake to swing on, boosts him up to otherwise inaccessible ledges, and catches him as he is about to fall to his death, we hope that a connection is slowly growing between Tenzin and the player (or Drake, by proxy) in a way that the player barely notices.

When Tenzin’s village comes under attack – and his small daughter’s safety is in doubt – we hope that the groundwork we’ve carefully laid gets activated, and that the experience of fighting through the war-torn village is charged beyond what might expect from even the most epic, awesome battle scene in another video game.

Interestingly, I really wasn’t thinking about Tenzin specifically during this (he was just another buddy as I was playing) but I really felt the responsibility of causing the attack on the village and putting everyone’s lives, especially Tenzin’s daughter, at risk.

RL: I should be clear in saying that the effect we were trying to have wasn’t one that the player would, or should notice, and it is interesting that you weren’t really thinking about Tenzin during this sequence. Either we did our job really well, or what we did with Tenzin didn’t make much difference! I do think this sequence would have had far less – or perhaps just different – emotional impact if you’d played through the Ice Cave with Chloe or Elena.

I would agree that playing through with Tenzin gave it a better context in which to have that emotional impact. Again, I felt like I needed to step up and do the right thing. Back in the game, Drake and Elena end up getting forced off the pass and over a cliff. The soldiers assume they’ve died, but Drake and Elena (of course) survive and climb up and follow the convoy on foot to a monastery. Spying from afar, they see the Lazarevic has Schafer. So now in Chapter 22, they sneak into the monastery to rescue Schafer and stop Lazarevic. This requires a lot of combat

and platforming, as Drake and Elena work their way through the monastery, fighting off soldiers as they go. They get to Schafer in Chapter 23, but they're too late. Schafer has been shot and left for dead, and Lazarevic has the phurba and is off to find Shambhala. Schafer tells them that the monastery hides the entrance to Shambhala, and as he dies, he implores Drake and Elena to stop Lazarevic.

This further underscores how high the stakes are in this adventure. So Drake and Elena decide they've got to find a way to save the day. As they try to pull together some sort of plan, they notice that there are yetis loose in the monastery as well, adding to the challenges ahead of them. They split up so Drake can get the Phurba and Elena can find the secret entrance. Drake manages to find Chloe with the Phurba (with Lazarevic and Flynn nearby). Using the Phurba and his notes, Drake is able to solve a tricky environmental puzzle to find the secret entrance which is cleverly hidden in plain sight.

They manage to sneak into the entrance and into Chapter 24. Of course, Lazarevic manages to trap them in the entryway. Lazarevic threatens to kill Chloe and Elena if Drake doesn't help him. Under this coercion, Drake solves the puzzle that opens the entrance and leads to some puzzle platforming with Flynn and some combat with some yetis as well. Lazarevic enters and kills the yetis just as they're about to kill Drake and Flynn, and in looking at the corpses they discover that they're actually men, guardians of Shambhala (granted really strong men who are extremely hard to kill). They now finally enter Shambhala, which is a large ancient city overrun with greenery, and they're immediately attacked by more guardians.

RL: Chapter 24 gave us an opportunity to do something we hadn't ever done before: a sequence of play where Drake is accompanied by someone with whom he is in an antagonistic relationship. Drake and Flynn still need to cooperate to complete the sequence, but we had a lot of fun with the banter between them as they travel through the area, and we hope it is another technique that helps raise the emotional stakes as we race towards the game's climax. We also took the opportunity to add in another bit of finesse interactivity, as anyone who decides to take a swing to Flynn's irritating grin will discover.

It does add a tension having to work with Flynn in this scenario (although I didn't take a swing until you mentioned it and I played through the sequence again). In the following confusion of entering Shambhala, Drake, Elena and Chloe escape into Chapter 25. Here you have combat with both soldiers and guardians as they try to beat

Lazarevic to the Cintamani Stone. Drake is now adamant about setting things right (and saving the world). He's become a hero, and it's up to you to succeed and save the day. As they make their way through the ruins of the city, they notice more of the blue resin on trees, and when it's shot it explodes. This becomes a way to clear a path as well as a weapon to use against others. They work their way to a temple, and solve some puzzle platforming which leads them to the Cintamani Stone which is embedded in the Tree of Life. Drake starts worrying that something is not right. He then figures out that the Stone isn't a gem, but is made of resin, that can be eaten to gain immortality (or at least you're pretty near invincible).

They then spot Lazarevic by the tree, but before they can go, Flynn shows up, mortally wounded and holding a grenade with the pin pulled. He sets off the grenade, killing himself, leaving Drake and Chloe woozy, but severely wounding Elena. Chloe ends up carrying Elena, while Drake goes to stop Lazarevic, and into the final Chapter of the game.

At this point in the plot diagram, we are firmly in the climax of the story, we're out to stop the villain or die trying. Which gives you a clear sense of where we are in the interactive diagram, deeply invested and committed to successfully finishing this experience.

Drake moves toward the Tree of Life and see Lazarevic drinking from the pool of sap. Drake shoots at Lazarevic, but the bullets don't seem to have any effect, and he now comes after Drake. In gameplay terms, we're in the final boss battle, the climax of the story. You then have to figure out how to kill Lazarevic (hint, use the exploding blue tree sap) and once you've managed to catch him in enough explosions, he weakens and falls.

Drake approaches Lazarevic, and Lazarevic calls him out on how similar they are (look at how many people Drake has killed, just today even). But in the end, Drake doesn't kill Lazarevic in cold blood: he leaves him for the guardians. In this moment, Drake makes the right choice and acts as a hero. And now, of course, the whole city starts collapsing. So, Drake goes and finds Chloe and Elena, and they manage to narrowly escape. You have a great scene where the perspective shifts again, and you're running toward the screen on a bridge while everything collapses around you. This is another effective use of the perspective as you really get to see the chaos all around you as you try to stay just ahead of it at all and escape (to be honest it took me a couple of tries) as we fade to black with Drake holding Elena, hoping she'll survive.

And now we're in the denouement, the active gameplay is over (we won!) as we return to the village and see Drake standing over a grave, at first it's not clear if this is Elena's grave, but it turns out she did survive. Chloe says her goodbye (they joke about playing the hero) and she encourages Drake to tell Elena about his feelings for her, and Sully shows up to help with the recovery. The scene, and the game, comes to an end with Drake and Elena joking about how much he cares about her, as the boy (might actually) get the girl.

Meaning and Mastery

With that, we've completed the narrative experience of Uncharted 2. There is the multiplayer gameplay (which I have yet to experience) but I want to discuss how the gameplay controls improved in this game as compared to the first Uncharted. As I mentioned at the start of this essay, I actually played a bit of the first game initially, then played through all of the second, and then I tried to go back to finish the first. But Naughty Dog didn't rest on their laurels between the two games. The gameplay controls have been refined and improved (in terms of responsiveness and accuracy in both combat and platforming). So after playing all the way through the second game, it was hard to go back to the first game with the older controls. Interestingly, in talking with Richard about this, he noted that the development of the multiplayer portion of the second game played a big part in how they improved the controls.

RL: When we first announced that Uncharted 2 would have a multiplayer component, some internet-posting fans of the first Uncharted were concerned that the single-player game of Uncharted 2 would suffer as a result of the fact that our attention would be divided between two different parts of the game. As Drew says, it turned out that multiplayer actually helped our single-player game.

In order to make the online multiplayer game as on-the-button responsive as a great multiplayer game needs to be, we had to tighten up our player mechanics and make them even snappier than they'd been in Uncharted: Drake's Fortune, and this fed back directly into a better feel for single-player, which used the same executable (i.e. the same game code).

And this made for a more playable game from my perspective, as I felt that I had better control of Drake's actions throughout the game. At this point, I want to take a step back to discuss how the meaning of the game came through a mastering of the gameplay mechanics across the experience of the story. In a well-designed game, the experience is kept pleasantly frustrating; it's not too easy, nor is it too hard. Ideally you get

increasing challenges followed by a reward, and possibly increased abilities that make it a little less challenging for a bit, but then soon ramps up again.

Crawford (1984) refers to this as a smooth learning curve in which a player is enabled to successfully advance through the game. Costikyan (2001) notes that “play is how we learn” and move from one stage to the next in a game. Csikszentmihalyi’s (1991) notion of flow, in which a person achieves an optimal experience with a high degree of focus and enjoyment, is an apt method for discussing this process as well. And Gee (2004) notes that well designed games teach us how to play them through rhythmic, repeating structures that enable a player to master how to play the game. In terms of unit operations, the units are being juxtaposed well so that the meaning and mastery builds as you play. I believe this creates an aesthetic performative experience unique to games.

In *Uncharted 2*, the developers do a nice job of striking this balance, on three levels. First of all, the game has a fairly even mix of the two major types of gameplay (combat and platforming) so that you are continually doing one or the other (and often both) throughout the game. Second, there is a good flow to the increasing level of difficulty across the game. It builds on your successes, offering more daunting challenges. And finally, it blends the narrative and gameplay quite seamlessly. The clever use of IGCs throughout the game helps create the feeling of being an integral part of an amazing action adventure. Combined together, the overall effect is one in which you start out as a bit of a bumbling ne’er-do-well and as you play through this experience you become a hero who saves the day.

RL: Thanks very much for the kind words, Drew, and for the favorable comparisons to the academic work around this subject. We worked hard to create a structure for our game where the peaks and valleys of its respective narrative and gameplay rhythms would be well-aligned, creating synergistic effects for our audience of players.

We tried to create patterns of rhythms that would be irregular enough to avoid the repetitive feelings that some games suffer from. We feel like we did pretty well in this regard, with the exception of a sequence of gameplay in the Monastery that doesn’t have quite enough story beats to support the ongoing gunplay action, and where the pace of the game starts to flag a little.

We also worked hard to introduce the game's mechanics in a way that would allow the player to learn about them without ever feeling like they were being taught something. Our usual technique was to couch the 'tutorial' in terms of an action sequence, the opening train wreck 'climbing lesson' being a good example. This fed into a ramp of action where we offered successively more complex challenges, building on the player's previous experiences and the skills they'd acquired from them.

We do our best to plan these things in advance, but there's also a good deal of iteration and trial-and-error involved. We try to constantly put ourselves in the mindset of someone who has never seen the game, and we do a lot of playtesting with people who haven't played before, to help us find and fix problems.

In truth, we use a lot of gut instinct, too. As well as the conscious approach we try and take to these issues, there's also a little bit of something intangible and unpredictable involved. So for me, when everything comes together – as it did for *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* - it makes the creative process all the more satisfying.

Now that you mention the Monastery, that actually still sticks out in my mind as the longest gunfight (and I recall my wife mentioning it as well). This leads us into some ideas on what good game design can do to create an engaging experience.

Ludic Narrans

A good game can and should teach players what they need to know and do in order to succeed. Ideally, the very act of playing the game should enable players to master the gameplaying units of the gaming situation so they can successfully master the rising challenges and complete the experience. If a game gets too hard, too easy, too confusing, or if it just is too long and seems never-ending, players may not finish. For these reasons and more, players can reach a point where they drop off the curve and lose their sense of engagement, becoming bored, frustrated and tired of playing the game. But if a game enables players to stay on course and continues to hold their attention, players will advance to a point where their immersion develops into an investment in which they truly want to successfully complete the game experience. And when there is a lack in the balance of the interactivity, the story can actually help keep the player engaged in order to move from involvement, through immersion to investment and successfully complete the game (Davidson, 2008).

RL: We've noticed from the online data that we gather that about half our players complete the single-player, narrative part of *Uncharted 2*.

This figure is quite high for a contemporary video game, which famously have poor completion ratios. We'd like to drive this number higher though, in future.

This gets me thinking about the various reasons people play games (since completion rates are normally low) and how some games are designed in such a way to help make this happen. *Uncharted 2* is an example of how a game can combine gameplay and story together in a resonant manner. As I mentioned at the start of this essay, my wife actually enjoyed watching me play through the whole game because she engaged with the story experience, but only if I were playing on the "Easy" difficulty level (the levels are Very Easy, Easy, Normal, Hard and Crushing). I usually play games on normal, but I sometimes switch to easy depending on how a game fits my skill level as well as the amount of time I have to devote to playing games. Similarly, I will sometimes use GameFAQs when I get stuck for a while (again, this depends on the amount of time I have to play the game). What was interesting about *Uncharted 2* was that I started on normal and was doing fine, but the firefights took me long enough (due to the number of enemies or the number of times I would die) that my wife would lose interest in watching as she lost the thread of the narrative, and didn't have fun watching the seemingly endless firefight. But if I set it on "Easy" this enabled me to advance through firefights more readily, which kept the story beats coming at a pace that was enjoyable for her to watch.

In talking with other colleagues and Richard, it seems that a lot of people enjoy watching people play this game. I think this says a lot about how well it does blend the two together, and how games are becoming an even more performative medium, akin to theatre or sports. *Rock Band* and games on the Nintendo Wii are other examples of games that are fun to watch. It seems as if designers are becoming more cognizant about creating games that enable performative experiences that are fun to play and to view.

I think it has been useful to consider this game (and games in general) from a variety of perspectives. In doing so we can, as Marie-Laure Ryan (2001) notes, observe features that remain invisible from other perspectives. Engaging this medium of videogames, we tell our stories of the game as we relate the varied and visceral experience of the games we play. Noah Falstein (2004) discusses the "natural funativity" of games, how they are activities that help us live in the world. And stories are how we stitch together a continuity of our experiences. They are our "mystories," our stories that enable us to understand the world (Ulmer,

1989). Narratives are how we convey the perspective of our experiences (Meadows, 2002). So, we are both *homo ludens* and *homo narrans*, or as Greg Costikyan (2001) states, “Play is how we learn; stories are how we integrate what we’ve learned, and how we teach others the things we’ve learned ourselves through play.”

Now, in following the idea that humans begin life in a pre-linguistic consciousness as babies, it seems that we start solely as *homo ludens*. We literally learn everything through play as we interact with the world. And then we learn language, and a new phase of consciousness begins, one that dominates, shapes, and constrains our worldview for the rest of our lives (Huizinga, 1950). We are now *homo narrans*, we discursively talk about what we play, what we learn, what we feel, believe, think, etc. (Schank, 1995). But being *homo narrans* does not erase our foundational *homo ludens* character; we are always already *homo ludens*, it’s just now we talk about it.

I believe that games are an interesting medium, because there are definite para-linguistic activities involved, meaning is conveyed through gesture, space, color, sound and activity and agency. And these all can combine into engaging aesthetic experiences. I think one of the reasons these experiences are so compelling is that they enable us to tap more directly into our pre-linguistic *homo ludens* consciousness as we play them. Of course, we then step back and talk about it, which engages our discursive *homo narrans* consciousness. Hence, ludic narrans, playful stories (Davidson, *stories in between*, 2008). I bring this up because I believe *Uncharted 2* is good example of a playful story.

Playing Well

On reflection, I think the dual approach of analyzing the narrative plot and interactive levels enabled me to show the moments in this game in which units of both elements were working together to truly engage me in the experience. It was also a useful method for exploring moments throughout the experience that didn’t work as well as they could have. Overall, the story development and the rhythmic gameplay help players understand the gaming situation, the “combination of ends, means, rules, equipment, and manipulative action” required to play through the game (Eskelinen 2001). That said, I kept my analysis with both diagrams at a general, high-level progression of the plot and the stages of interactivity. I think this was useful, but I also believe it could be interesting to get even more granular with both diagrams and really dig into units that show the details of the diversity of peaks and valleys of interest curve in the development of the plot of the story as well as the moments

of engagement, disengagement and reengagement that occur during the progressive stages of interactivity. I think both macro and micro perspectives would be worthwhile to pursue in analyzing and interpreting interactive experiences.

RL: As we create and playtest our games we gather metric data about how long our playtesters take to travel between the game's automatic save points, and the numbers of attempts - how many times each player dies and restarts - in each of these intervals. We look at the maximum, minimum and median values for these data, and doing so helps us to discover potential problems with the game - places where some aspect of the game is making it arbitrarily or needlessly too difficult (or, more rarely, too easy).

These data can also be viewed as a kind of intensity chart for the game, with peaking median attempt counts denoting places where the game reaches a crescendo of challenge. It's a crude method of visualizing the data, but it does help us ensure that the plans we've laid, in terms of the rhythms of play we've attempted to present to the player, are bearing the right kind of fruit.

As new technologies appear that gather biometric data, like pulse rate, galvanic skin response, and even EEG activity, to interrogate the player's biological state and attempt to make inferences about their emotional state from that data, we will have even more opportunities to confirm that the experience we've crafted is having the affect on players that we intended.

However, planning and designing an experience like that of *Uncharted 2* will probably remain a craft that relies partly on our experience as designers and players, partly on our skill as craftspeople and storytellers, and partly on what our gut instinct tells us, for the foreseeable future.

This helps summarize what we've been exploring in this paper, how the meaning of playing a game is designed and experienced, and how a game can be well played in two senses (Davidson, *Well Played*, 2008). Lev Manovich (2001) notes, when engaging new media (or playing a game), we oscillate "between illusionary segments and interactive segments" that force us to "switch between different mental sets" demanding from us a "cognitive multitasking" that requires "intellectual problem solving, systematic experimentation, and the quick learning of new tasks." Together, an aesthetics is formed out of the game design and the experience of playing through it. So, when the units of story are effectively intertwined with the units of gameplay, the rising action of the plot

can parallel the rising challenges of the gameplay, and enable us to have a compellingly engaging experience. Overall, *Uncharted 2* does an elegant job of combining its narrative and gameplay to provide a well played and fulfilling interactive experience.

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