# Uncharted 2 and the Customized Video Game Experience

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## INTRODUCTION

It may be called a toy at times, but video games have clearly become a media force to be reckoned with. With every passing year, games become a bigger part of the worldwide media culture. While the industry hits its high points in the cultural landscape during the holiday shopping frenzy, followed by the Electronic Entertainment Expo trade show in June, video games are a year-round money-generating phenomenon. Games may have similarities in their business structure to the film industry, yet the game industry has amassed nearly $25 billion of revenue in 2011, which is no small feat ("The entertainment software," 2012). This type of expansion is likely due to the different approaches that game consoles and mobile phones now use when it comes to redefining and expanding what it means to be a video game player. Games can now be anything from an epic adventure that takes one hundred hours to complete or a small concept that kills time with its rewarding, repetitive nature. Regardless of the game type, players are taking in a wide variety of media-driven experiences every day, which translates into an industry that is making billions of dollars and continues to strive for greater cultural relevance.

This type of unprecedented success helps communication scholars, particularly those in the media studies discipline, legitimize the study of games through research. Video games, when compared to other traditional media forms, are still in the early, formative years of their media existence. One of the earliest examples of a video game that reached mass awareness was *Pong*, which blipped its way back and forth across home television screens in the early 1970s. Since then, games have added narrative structures, the latest computer-rendered graphics, and more, all for the sake of a game's core concept of play. The progressions appear similar to the first films of the Lumiere Brothers and the changes in the medium by the time film began to feature sound.

In the video game industry, higher production values compared to years past allow for a wider range of titles and experiences. Because the gaming medium is one that relies heavily on player agency and interactivity, studying how a player experiences a video game has great potential. After defining the current state of video games and their markets, this literature review will consider multiple aspects regarding how players experience games differently. First, audiences will be defined, to look at who plays video games. Second, the characteristics that make the video gaming medium unique must be noted. Third and finally, game qualities such as world design, controls, and film-like cut-scenes will be highlighted from a production perspective. After considering all of these, a research question will be posed regarding how to look at video game audiences and how they customize their own experience in the medium.

## DEFINITIONS

### *Video Games and their Markets*

The phrase “video game” may mean different things to different age demographics, so it is important to define the term for this literature review. A game is defined as “a universal form of recreation generally including any activity engaged in for diversion or amusement and often establishing a situation that involves a contest or rivalry” (Game, 2012). The term “game” may be preceded by different synonyms, whether it is video or computer, so it is important to distinguish that they operate based off of electronic software. Video games currently exist for consumers on multiple different media formats and markets. The first of these markets is dubbed as “console gaming,” which represent games that are played on devices typically connected to home televisions and other similar entertainment systems. Currently, the most popular home console in terms of sales is the Nintendo Wii, with nearly 98 million units sold as of December

2012 ("Platform totals," 2012). The Wii's allure comes from its family-focused marketing, which expands the potential gaming audience. In addition, Wii's motion controls attempt to better immerse the player with the game, with Nintendo characters that have been established for years. As far as current game production goes, Wii has been forgotten because its technology is outdated. However, Nintendo has attempted to correct this with the recent release of its new Wii U system, as a more powerful system allows a tablet-as-controller to provide a second-screen experience while gaming.

Next in sales figures is the Microsoft Xbox 360, with nearly 72 million units sold ("Platform totals," 2012). Microsoft has great experience selling personal computers, so the Xbox 360 was created with the intent of becoming an all-encompassing media machine. While it can play all of the latest video games, Xbox 360 prides itself on being able to use applications to stream content from video providers such as Netflix, Hulu Plus, and ESPN, in addition to streaming content from a user's Windows-based computer. This is a similar approach to the marketing concept of the Sony PlayStation 3 (often abbreviated as PS3), which has sold about 70 million units ("Platform totals," 2012). The PS3 streams similar video content, but was designed during its launch in 2006 as an extremely advanced machine. This helped the PS3 usher in the Blu-Ray disc as the next form of physical media, succeeding the frequently-used DVD. While both consoles excel at games, each attempts to be a media center that dominates the entertainment space at home. Both Microsoft and Sony are looking to advance to the next generation of devices within the next couple of years, even though the majority of recent video games intended for home consoles are released for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, due to the Wii's dated technical specifications. Most of the "hardcore" audience has spent several years on Xbox or PlayStation, yet they are in a current state of uncertainty. These game players are

content with continuing their current console experiences, yet future technological growth in video games is an issue that is looming on the horizon.

When video game players are looking to take game experiences with them, portable gaming devices are the answer. This section of the market is frequently dubbed as "handheld/mobile gaming" and predominantly features Nintendo and Sony as primary competitors. Nintendo's DS line of systems saw great popularity with its use of two screens and has since been updated with the Nintendo 3DS. The 3DS is notable because it features stereoscopic 3D graphics without the need for glasses. Sony, meanwhile, has had success with the PlayStation Portable (PSP) and recently followed it up with the high-definition PlayStation Vita. These kinds of traditional portable game systems vary in features and owe their success to the Nintendo Game Boy, but over the past couple years, Apple has become a major player in the mobile gaming industry. With the success of the iPhone, iPod Touch, and iPad, small games are able to be played on the go on these devices and other mobile phones. This kind of advancement is leading to an industry-wide change that few scholars are studying.

Finally, the personal computer is carving out its own niche in the video game industry with the "PC gaming" market, which implements elements from both the console and mobile markets. Most games intended for Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 often get released on PC as well, with retail stores selling DVDs with the install and game data on them. However, digital distribution has made strong progress over the past few years, with Valve's Steamworks service as the primary choice for most game players. This type of distribution generally sells the same games as the retail releases, but involve similar or lower prices and a completely downloaded game copy. Shorter, more portable games are also given life on PC with social, web browser-based games. These titles borrow similar mechanics from games found on mobile phones and

apply them to a variety of websites, the most popular being Facebook. Overall, the devices used today to play video games are rather widespread, depending on a player's overall interests. While the industry continues to grow, this expansion may not be easily perceived by those with little interest in the medium.

*Audience and Gender Statistics*

The perception of video games as a child's toy is quickly becoming an outdated way of thinking. Current statistics indicate the average game player is 30 years old, which shifts the perceptions of who plays games ("The entertainment software," 2012). Granted, teenagers may have more time to play video games than adults, but with the expansion of gaming to mobile platforms, adults are finding value in the gaming medium. Another impression that is widely assumed involves the percentage of game players that are women. Statistics claim that 47 percent of all game players are women, plus more women over the age of 18 play games than boys under 18 do ("The entertainment software," 2012). Researchers then wonder why games are perceived as a kind of activity for boys only, but the answer may lie in how games are advertised.

Video games, especially those with violent themes attached to them, are often targeted to the teenaged male demographic. However, instead of creating and promoting games intended for girls that are fun, these kinds of titles are often branded with cute, pink, and other kinds of stereotypical themes. In fact, there may not be much difference between male and female game players, as female players have likewise shown to be rather social while playing games, while also "[challenging] assumptions that girls are 'naturally' uninterested in and even averse to competitive play" (Jenson & de Castell, 2011, p. 175). Noting demographic data of players in

video game studies is certainly important, but the latest data suggests it may not be as vital as researchers once thought.

*The Unique Medium of Video Games*

In a way, video games can be perceived as a blend between films and books, with an addition of personal input. Games borrow from the visual element that films have established, but a player's interpretation of what is occurring on-screen is required to internalize and appreciate the medium. This is similar to how text in books must be interpreted and understood. Additionally, editing in film helps viewers interpret time and space in that medium, even though it breaks the rules of reality. However, the video gaming medium sets itself apart because of its interactivity and player agency. It is fundamental for a video game that a player must provide some sort of input, in order to engage himself with the experience. Play is what makes the video game medium special, as opposed to the passive viewing that television and film rely on. Just as *Tetris* (1984) requires players to move shapes into an ideal stacked orientation, so too does *Halo: Combat Evolved* (2001) require players to control the in-game character to accomplish specific tasks by firing weaponry. When a player becomes involved in this kind of game input, a sense of immersion takes place. This immersion is further enhanced because of the interactivity, when compared to the suspension of disbelief while watching a film. Moreover, an idealized sense of this game immersion is dubbed as "flow" by researchers. While players in a flow state may have a strong aptitude for understanding the virtual space they are in, "compared to physical presence and spatial presence, self-presence is more relevant to users' emotional, affective response to virtual self-representation in digital media" (Jin, 2011, p. 133). Players have the ability to

become integrated into a game space, but this is not the only special aspect about the video game medium.

Narrative structures are particularly unique in the video game medium because of how complicated and dynamic they can become. Some games, like the aforementioned *Tetris*, do not have an inherent story to them, but are instead driven by a purpose. Stacking falling blocks optimally to achieve a high score is an engaging purpose, but there are no characters or plot in this setup. Yet, as technology has improved over time, so too has the storage capacity on the format the game is printed on, whether it is a cartridge, a compact disc, or a Blu-ray disc. A greater storage capacity allows for more complicated game data to be printed, which can allow for better graphics, improved artificial intelligence, and more. Thus, current game consoles are able to provide a richer variety of experiences because of how far technology has advanced. In many stories in modern games today, "the player plays a character who has been handed cards, explicated by the game's story and virtual world, that are not the cards the player as a "real" person has been handed (Gee, 2011, p. 355). To put it more simply, players can take an active role in shaping a game's narrative by taking control the role of the in-game character. The narrative's structure is determined based on how it is written and programmed by the games creators, so the story can either be very linear, very open, or anywhere in between.

An example of a complicated, critically-acclaimed story in the gaming medium is *Heavy Rain* (2010). In this psychological thriller that plays like an interactive movie, Ethan Mars is a man tortured by personal tragedy. Things only get worse when his son is kidnapped by the "Origami Killer," a mysterious serial killer of young boys. In order to discover the criminal's identity, players make difficult choices while changing perspectives between Ethan, a private detective, a journalist, and an FBI detective - each with their own personal conflicts. Through the

course of the game, the player is tasked with saving Ethan's son, while also striving to discover the identity of the Origami Killer. *Heavy Rain* is cited as special example because the story makes the player feel many emotions, including sadness, anxiety, horror, confusion, and more from its gameplay. Not only is every choice made in the game important for how the plot develops, but the accumulation of choices can lead to multiple endings for each character, which fuse together into many ways the game can end. The development of these kinds of stories have led to an interesting debate regarding the purpose video games, in which "ludologists generally believe that the pleasure of playing games lies in the gameplay, whereas narratologists treat narratives as the fundamental enjoyment players are experiencing during the play session" (Ang, 2006, p. 306). Perhaps pleasure can be found in each, but ultimately, how the game is created plays an important role in shaping the immersion and experience of the game player.

### *World Design, Controls, and Cut-Scenes*

Since video games are still a relatively new media form, they have not congealed to a standard, cookie-cutter method of production. Games are incredibly varied in how they are constructed, which would take many pages to fully discuss. In an attempt to keep things simple, video games construct their in-game world in one of three ways: two-dimensional, three-dimensional first-person, and three-dimensional third-person. Older games rely on two-dimensional worlds because it is the simplest to program. For example, *Tetris* is played in a flat environment as the blocks fall vertically, with players able to rotate the blocks and shift them horizontally. Games also use two-dimensional environments in a side-scrolling environment, as the camera pans left and right with the player's movement to provide the necessary view of the world.

Three-dimensional games started to become a staple in the gaming industry in the late 1990s, with the significant difference in design being the player's perspective. Both perspectives take place in a three-dimensional world, which allows for greater detail and realism than a space constructed in two dimensions. In a first-person perspective, "events seem to happen in the perceptual field of our direct, first-hand or lived experience, even when mediated through a screen or some other means of transmission" (Dubbelman, 2011, p. 165). When a gamer plays as Master Chief in *Halo: Combat Evolved* (2001), the player sees the world through the in-game character's eyes. Because of this, the player's immersion and flow is increased, which causes the player to typically shift their own self-perceptions based on the character or object they are controlling in the game (Klimmt, et al., 2010). The third-person perspective places the camera behind the controlled characters head, so the player can see the character they are controlling. While characters with a first-person view are typically more of a blank slate to help with player immersion, the move to the third-person allows for in-game characters to have more specifically defined character traits. By controlling Ethan Mars in a third-person perspective in *Heavy Rain*, the developers are able to define Ethan's looks, personality, and more, since the player is now able to notice these traits.

The way a game world is designed heavily influences how the player controls the game and its character, which the designer must consider from the player's perspective. An in-game character is typically moved through a directional pad or left analog stick, depending on if the environment is two-dimensional or three-dimensional. Buttons or keys trigger character actions. However, in a three dimensional space, the player needs to be able to look around the in-game world, in addition to moving the character. This is where the right analog stick, remote motion control, or mouse comes into play, depending on the control scheme. With this sense of camera

control, the player is able to customize how they take in the visual experience. This allows for the player to decide if the camera should be moved in an efficient manner to accomplish in-game objectives, or if the in-game character should stop and enjoy the scenery for a while. The player's decisions, with controller in hand, make all the difference in the game world.

Yet, an additional tool has recently become critical for most recent games, which emphasizes the blurring of game and film mediums. An in-game "cut-scene" provides the player with additional story information, as if they were watching a movie. Most of these scenes are meant to be viewed and interpreted by using traditional means of film understanding, such as montage theory. Certain video games, however, add the element of on-screen prompts for a button press on the player's part, which can influence how the scene changes. The themes portrayed by these cut-scenes are similar to those shown in the cinema, which is not too surprising, as games today "employ the conventions, genres and iconography of traditional media, belong to the same horizontally-integrated culture industry as contemporary film [… and] draw upon common ideological formations and constructions of social identity" (Kirkland, 2005, p. 176). Even in its convergence with film, games are unique enough on their own to stand on their own as a powerful form of media.

With this literature review completed, what summaries and conclusions can be made? Video games are changing the media landscape. The population and demographics of players are more balanced than what may be expected. Games are unique because of their immersion and narrative structures. Familiarity of cinematic aspects such as editing can prove to be beneficial for those playing modern games, which borrow these elements frequently. Finally, because of how the game is designed, there are a number of tools for the player to craft their own customized experience. With that said, research questions must be posed.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

*RQ1: How does the design of a section from a modern video game convey meaning to a player?*

*RQ2: How does the level of a player's video game expertise change how he constructs his own visual experience?*

## METHOD

In order to study how game design and player expertise affects the game experience for a player, a specific section from a specific game must be analyzed. For the purposes of this study, the opening sequence of *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* (2009) is ideal. *Uncharted 2* is an award-winning title for PlayStation 3 that puts players in control of Nathan Drake, the wise-cracking and adventure-loving treasure hunter. This time around, Nathan sets off on another adventure after his exploits in the first game in the franchise, *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* (2007). From a gameplay perspective, the *Uncharted* franchise does not offer anything original in terms of what the player actually does. The ancient ruin exploration, treasure hunting, and puzzle solving is borrowed from the *Tomb Raider* games, whereas the third-person shooting element is very reminiscent of the *Gears of War* franchise. Instead, what makes *Uncharted 2* so special is its precise blending of video game and cinematic experience. Sony even made a point to advertise how much the game was like a blockbuster movie in its advertisement campaigns for PlayStation 3 at the time (NoodleReport, 2009). The game's fine-tuned gameplay, careful narrative pacing, and fantastic visuals also cause game critics and players alike to rave. As it currently stands, the Metacritic score for *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* is 96, which is exceptionally high, making it of one of the best-rated games of the past decade ("Highest and lowest," 2012).

Not only is it preferable if the game is top-notch, but the examined section of the game should be very specific in what it accomplishes as well. Players remember the train sequence from the opening sequence of *Uncharted 2* because it presents high stakes very early, while teaching the player the basics of exploration in a limited, scripted setting. This is important because of how *Uncharted 2* tells its story and what this means for playing and studying the game. Because of its cinematic nature, the game's story is very linear. The player has some flexibility in how he explores the current area, how he defeats enemies, and more. However, at all times, a specific goal must be accomplished by the player in order to progress to the next part of the story. This could include a variety of tasks, from entering the next room, to clearing the area of mercenaries, to solving the puzzle standing in Nathan Drake's way. If Drake dies in-game for whatever reason, the player will restart at a nearby check-point, to make sure the story continues as the developers have scripted it. This linearity is emphasized in the opening sequence that will be studied, as Drake will escape a train that is hanging off of a mountain cliff, the player will learn expository backstory through a cut-scene, and then Drake will continue to progress through the bitter cold with the help of a weapon. Yet, even in this heavily-scripted opening, the goal of the analysis will be to study the game design at work and the variety of player experience this causes.

The employed method was relatively straight-forward for gathering and experiencing the necessary media. First, I re-familiarized myself with the text by playing through the game's first chapter. I had last played *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* about 18 months ago and I needed to decide on how much of the game was necessary to have my focus group subjects play-test. I ultimately made the decision to have this testing segment be from the beginning of the game, up to and through when Drake has to shoot off a door lock with a gun to advance. Then, I recruited

friends I knew, both offline and online, to contribute their play-through of this game section, without divulging the intended, studied purpose. The video footage of these gameplay sessions was captured and reviewed to make sure that it was seamless, without edit cuts. These sessions were identified with letters – A, B, C, D, and E – to maintain privacy and anonymity, as there were no identifying features such as name or voice input in-game. However, in this focus group of five players, I happened to be familiar with their experiences with video games and *Uncharted 2* specifically through conversations with the players. This knowledge would be important when it came to comparing the footage, but it did not make the players personally identifiable to the outside public. As my study progressed, it began with close textual analysis through game development and player perspectives, followed by a focus group testing the determined section of *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves*. For those unfamiliar with the following sequence and wish to see it in video form, I have uploaded a play-through of it on YouTube (Spezia, 2012).

*Analysis – First Train Scene*

After a loading screen, featuring a spinning dagger in the lower right corner, a quote appears on the black screen in white text. It reads “I did not tell half of what I saw for I knew I would not be believed…” crediting Marco Polo on his deathbed in 1324. This creates a sense of mystery in the player’s imagination. Why use this quote? Is it representative of what is to come? The screen fades to a first-person perspective, as the camera looks at a flickering light inside a decayed, ravaged train. This is followed by showing a man sitting inside the train, implying that it was his perspective we had just observed, based on shot-reverse-shot continuity editing. A player experiencing the *Uncharted* franchise for the first time does not know who this is, but series veterans understand this to be the protagonist Nathan Drake. Drake is looking rather beat

up, as his face and shirt is stained with blood, although the stakes are about to be raised. After a grimace on Drake's face, the camera cuts to a wider angle, which reveals a wound in his abdomen, and that his hands holding it are covered in blood. This is emphasized with an over-the-shoulder view of the hands, as Drake quips "That's my blood, that's a lot of my blood."

The protagonist looks outside the train, showing a destroyed window and a wintery, mountainous view. As if the bloody wound was not enough, a sound from the left speaker channel is followed by a box of emergency supplies flying and crashing next to Drake. As the camera starts to rotate to show the back of the train, the environment is becoming very unstable, with more objects flying through the train. All Drake can do is hold on for his life, but this becomes futile, as he falls through the train's exit as well. As he lands on and grabs some gold, metal railing, all Drake can do is nervously laugh and say "Oh crap," as the camera pulls out to reveal the train is hanging off of the mountain cliff. Nathan Drake is hanging on for dear life in a treacherous environment, with fires starting on other parts of the mountain. With that small, cinematic cut-scene over, the game has offered its challenge to the player as the music builds to a crescendo, in a way that taunts "let's see you work your way out of this one."

With this, the player is finally in control of Nathan Drake. Interestingly, the game makes a point to distinguish this moment by presenting "1 – A Rock and a Hard Place" in title form. This is intended for the player to recognize it as a chapter title, so while the player is unsure how many chapters there will be in total, it becomes a method to segment the game at different story beats. As Drake hangs off of the gold, horizontal pipe, the player can be prompted to use the left analog stick on the controller to move the on-screen character. After discovering that up and down achieve no result, the player can deduce that Drake must be moved left or right to continue the story. If the player moves Drake right, a new angle of the train is presented, only to discover

that pipe disconnects from the train, resulting in a dead end. Therefore, by process of elimination, the developers have essentially funneled the player into moving Drake left on the original, horizontal pipe. Continuing to do so successfully leads the player to the train's undercarriage, where things become more complicated.

At this point, the low camera angle and the length of the train imply that Drake must make vertical climbing progress. Again, the game designers enforce a set path for the player and Drake, when vertical progress on the left side of the train is completely blocked off by the carriage's rear wheels. However, the set of horizontal pipes as climbing apparatuses continue on the right side, which triggers a brief cinematic event when the player move close enough towards a specific ledge. The train suddenly buckles and the camera dips even lower to show a boulder falling and knocking Drake back down to the bottom of the train. Once the player makes that climb again, he discovers a new ledge has been revealed, except it is too far away for Drake to simply climb to. "Press X to jump" appears on the screen, displaying a prompt from the developers meant to teach players an essential control mechanic in the game. Not only can Nathan Drake climb with this button press, he can make leaps to ledges within his grasp. However, to maintain the game's linearity and minimization of glitches, the developers made a helpful choice for players. While hanging off of a ledge, the player can move the left analog stick in the direction he intends to jump. If Drake extends one of his hands off the ledge, as a kind of self-preparation for the jump, this is an indicator that the jump to the next intended platform can be made safely. This is not elaborated clearly in the game's tutorial, but with enough practice in this limited gameplay space, it is a feature that experienced players can easily deduce.

Another clue becomes apparent to keen observers after Drake learns how to jump. The player must move up and around the gold pipe from this point in order to progress further. Gold

is actually an important indicator in identifying important structural clues to players, which the developers consciously chose to do. After all, this was enforced with the gold pipe that Drake originally landed on. In addition, gold stands out easily as a bright color, especially on a red and brownish-grey train. This is intended to draw the player's eyes to an important physical structure, while laying the foundation for similar kinds of climbing throughout the game. Another boulder-falling sequence occurs as Drake moves left across the horizontal pipe, but it has little effect in terms of damaging the train. Instead, it only serves as reminder for the danger of being on a suspended train. As the player moves Drake around the next corner, the gold pipe reinforces the sense of direction, as another low camera angle implies the need for a vertical climb. This pipe proves to be unstable though, as it disconnects from the train, sending Drake around the mechanical pillar as he hangs on helplessly. The game once again prompts the player with a tutorial instruction – this time to move the left analog stick to have Drake start to swing, followed by pressing the X button to have Drake jump. Doing so successfully allows the in-game character to grab the train on carved-out ledges, which wrap around the train towards a window.

After climbing the window ledge, the inside of the train poses as its own structure that needs to be climbed. Red chairs with gold armrests are scattered throughout the now-vertical cabin and as the player moves Drake from one chair to the next, the camera moves dynamically to show the next logical progression point. The automated camera movement is not a helpful decision the developers made, it also makes the player feel more engaged in the accomplishment of scaling such insurmountable odds with simple controls. When the player tries to climb on the highest chair, Drake is once again thrust to the outside of the train. Once again, because it was strategically planned this way, carved ledges and gold pipes are indicators for further progression

along the train. The train buckles once more and reveals a distinct platform that Drake can jump to, with the gold pipe falling away into the chasm after the jump is completed successfully.

The player's next objective at this point is clear, yet the game's designers challenge the player with putting everything they have learned so far together. Drake must reach a higher ledge in front of him, but it cannot be climbed and reached, much less grabbed by a standstill jump. By moving towards the wall and then pressing the X button to jump, the player makes Drake run up the wall and grab the higher ledge. This process is put into practice once more as the developers put an even higher ledge above Drake, yet this time safety in the form of the cliff's edge is easily in sight. The context clue of gold structures is reinforced once more, as Drake must make the running wall jump at the point where a short, gold ladder is in place. With that achieved, an intense action sequence occurs, as the player has Drake run down the corridor of the now-falling train. With a leap of faith, the character is safe, as the screen fades to white for a flashback.

*Analysis – Exposition Cut-Scene*

As explained earlier, in an in-game "cut-scene," the gameplay aspect of a video game typically takes a back seat, as story elements are conveyed through a style very similar to cinema. The scene after Drake passes out on the cliff acts as a flashback and the contrast between the two environments could not be any more different. After experiencing our protagonist as a ragged, bloody mess in a harsh, arctic region, it is significant to see him relaxing at a bar and having a beer in a tropical paradise. Clearly, Nathan Drake was living the good life before the events aboard the train. At this point, the player – who has now become the viewer – is introduced to Harry Flynn, who spots Drake at the bar. The two clearly know each other, as they greet each other warmly and hug each other. Despite the scene being entirely animated, the

performances are believable because of the degree to which computer graphics can now emulate reality. When the viewer sees a smile on a digital character's face, it easily translates to the tangible emotion of happiness that is relatable because of the viewer's real-world experience. In addition, cinematic editing constructs the space in which these characters are interacting in, which further contributes to the viewer's suspension of disbelief.

This type of non-verbal communication continues when the character of Chloe Frazer joins Nathan and Harry's conversation. Harry believes he is introducing Chloe to Drake for the first time, yet Drake's reaction to seeing the woman suggests different. From muttered disbelief to the awkward nature of introducing himself, it is clearly implied that Drake and Chloe have met before, that it is unknown to what extent at this time. However, this gets even more complicated when Chloe runs her hand seductively on the back of Harry's neck when greeting Flynn. This suggests a type of intimacy between Harry and Chloe, especially when the two sit next to each other, on the opposite side of the table from Drake. Each of these details is perceived by an observant viewer because the format the scene is shown in is so similar to film. Ultimately, through clever writing and engaging character interaction, with the help of traditional cinematic and editing techniques, the exposition is established. Drake is going to help Harry and Chloe betray their client, by joining them on an expedition to find Marco Polo's lost treasure. It just so happens that Drake's last words in the scene are "I mean, what could possibly go wrong?"

*Analysis – Initial Exploration*

With the cut-scene over, the viewer becomes the player once again, as the irony becomes clear and a whole lot has gone wrong for Nathan Drake. The camera shows the unconscious Drake, then zooms out to show more mangled train wreckage, this time safely on the ground. As

Drake wakes up and gets to his feet, the camera slowly zooms in, showing the player a clearly made path in the snow for Drake to walk through. A twinkling light flashes off the beaten path and, should the player choose to go investigate it, he finds a treasure. This treasure-hunting aspect of gameplay adds an optional motivation for those who want to complete every aspect of the game, but it is not required to fully experience the story. While insider the train, Drake must be led through opening passages. Yet, while there are no gold structural markers in this section of the game, the designers use light to help guide players. In this case, fire from nearby wreckage shines through the nearby passageways, which acts as another way to use bright objects to catch players' attentions.

Along the way, the player finds a shining object next to a dead body on the ground. Walking over the object brings up an on-screen prompt that the player can press the green triangle button on the controller to pick up the 92FS 9mm pistol. This gives Drake a weapon to use as a form of self-defense as the game progresses. The action of picking up a pistol, combined with a green triangle prompt to open a train cart door, emphasizes the fact this button is meant for players to perform context-specific actions. As Drake progresses through the cart door, he encounters another door with a chained lock. Once again, the game instructs the player to use the pistol, by aiming with the L1 button and firing with the R1 button. Overall, this on-foot exploring section shows the player how to play the game, aside from the actions of climbing and jumping. Instead, the player is free to guide Nathan Drake through a three-dimensional world, while learning gameplay aspects such as context-specific actions and weapon use. By shooting the lock off of the door, thus concludes the section of *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* meant to be played by the study's focus group.

**RESULTS**

Tester A has several years of experience playing video games. He claimed it had been at least a year since he had played *Uncharted 2*. When Drake had to initially move on the horizontal, gold bar, Tester A moved left first. Interestingly, he used the right analog stick at certain points during the linear train climbing section, which created a bit of a camera wobble effect. When Drake was at the point of swinging on the detached bar, Tester A moved Drake left in an attempt to line up the jump better. This actually caused Drake to miss the jump to the left, resulting in the in-game character's death, but this was corrected on the second attempt. More camera control was used while making the last chair jump inside the train. Additionally, Tester A moved along the second carved ledges section as designed, instead of jumping as a shortcut. The player appeared to pick up on Drake's "lean before jumping" mechanic, although when Drake had to run up the wall to grab the gold ladder, Tester A misjudged the first two attempts. After the cut-scene, he moved directly along the carved path and used the camera once again to explore his surroundings inside the train wreckage. Tester A was the only player to miss the dead body and gun on the ground, yet he picked up a gun in its second, unmistakable position. Shooting the lock was no problem for Tester A, as he stood in place to proficiently do so.

Tester B had a very similar video game history and experience with *Uncharted 2*, compared with Tester A. Tester B also went left first on the horizontal gold pipe, but he only used the right analog camera control in the first section at the chair climbing inside the train. Similarly to Tester A, Tester B also picked up on the Drake leaning mechanic to make safe jumps when necessarily. He also moved along the second carved ledge section as designed, without taking any shortcuts. Overall, the first section of Tester B's play-through was surprisingly flawless. After the cut-scene, when Drake was on solid ground to explore the train

wreckage, Tester B took the opportunity to explore more than any of the other players. Even though there was a path carved in the snow, instructing players where to go, Tester B explored the right and left sides of the environment, using the right analog camera control while he moved Drake around the area. This resulted in the discovery of a few hidden areas in the game world's design, in addition to revelation that the game designers put careful attention into crafting the realistic portrayal of snow tracks. The player's exploration with camera control seemed to continue inside the wreckage, as he investigated the dead body and looked down with the camera as he picked things up off of the ground. Finally, Tester B was the only player to back away from the lock before shooting it proficiently. Although, it was entirely unnecessary, this was a choice that the player decisively made.

Tester C had a reasonable amount of video game expertise, but had not played *Uncharted 2* in at least a couple years. He first moved Drake right along the horizontal gold pole and reached the dead end. When he moved left, however, he did not realize at the first that Drake was supposed to continue around that corner. This resulted in Tester C going back to the right, almost as if he were reaffirming the dead end, before he successfully continued right. There was also a strange transition as Drake was meant to climb the vertical gold pole, as Tester C did not adjust smoothly to the cut from one screen to the next. This created a jarring effect, as the new screen was on the television for about a second before it reverted back to the previous screen. In the second carved ledge sequence, Tester C made a safe jump as a kind of shortcut, where Testers A and B moved along the designated path. Tester C accidentally caused Drake to die a couple of times in-game in some unusual circumstances. He waited too long to jump off of the pipe which was falling away, taking Drake with it. Additionally, Tester C made Drake jump to the left of the first red chair, which caused another fall of the protagonist to his in-game demise. After the cut-

scene, Tester C was very direct in his on-foot exploring. He took the carved path and used the right analog camera to find the dead body and exactly where he needed to go. After he stood in place to proficiently shoot the lock off of the door, Tester C's play-through ended.

Tester D had the most video game expertise out of those in the focus group, yet he had never played *Uncharted 2* before. His experience at the beginning with the horizontal gold pole had a distinct trial-and-error feel to it, as a long pause implied he was trying to move up into the hanging train. This continued into Tester D moving Drake right into the dead-end, as he realized the only way to progress was left. Tester D experience the same peculiar screen adjustment transition that Tester C did. Similarly, while Tester D also moved left before swinging on the detached pole like Tester A did, Tester D's jump had a safe result that was further along the intended grab point on the train. There was also one failed attempt to make the jump onto the last chair inside the train, but the game designers put a kind of safety net in place, as the falling Drake landed on a previous chair instead of careening into the abyss. The shortcut with the second carved ledge passage was also taken by Tester D, like Tester C did. Additionally, the running wall jump to the gold ladder was misjudged once, but easily corrected on the second attempt. Since it was Tester D's first play-through of the game on his PlayStation 3, he noticed a twinkle on the right side of the screen after the cut-scene. This led him to finding some treasure and gaining an in-game trophy reward, showing that the designers meant for players to discover these kinds of hidden secrets. Interestingly, Tester D hardly used the right analog camera, yet still found the necessary progression points and the dead body. He also stood still to shoot off the lock with little trouble.

Tester E had by far the most intriguing sample of gameplay, as her video game expertise was extremely minimal. She tried having Drake move up on the horizontal gold bar for quite a

while, before ultimately moving him right into the dead-end. After moving Drake left and encountering the first boulder, Tester E did not initially retrace her steps up the right side of the train, but tried moving towards the wheels blocking the left side first. There was also some difficulty in figuring out the second horizontal bar, as Tester E first crossed it to reveal the vertical gold pipe, and then for some reason retreated back across the horizontal pipe before continuing forward. Tester E's biggest struggle was swinging on the detached pipe, as she appeared to release the left analog direction before she pressed the X button, thus stopping the jump before it even started. Like Tester D, Tester E encountered some difficulty jumping to the last chair inside the train, but the safety net proved useful on several occasions. Additionally, the concept of pressing the X button while moving did not register so easily for Tester E while she was trying to make the running wall jumps. This resulted in some very strange deaths, as Drake at one point just leapt off the platform he was standing on. The final climax of running out of the collapsing train did not smoothly the first time around as well, as Drake got stuck behind a chair and fell with the vehicle to his in-game death.

Tester E's gameplay struggles continued after the cut-scene, even though she followed the carved path in the snow. Some hesitancy was shown upon entering the wreckage when the tree above the entrance started to buckle, but did not collapse. The vaulting over the yellow gate inside the wreckage also proved to be more of an obstacle than it should have been, but this was another gameplay test of moving forward with the left analog stick while pressing the X button. Additionally, Tester E's uses of in-game prompts of the green triangle button were wildly mishandled. At times they were completely ignored, as the player was focusing more on the environment. Meanwhile, at other times, the triangle prompts were used too often, such as when Drake was checking the lock on the door, as the camera zoomed in to show that something had

to be done with the lock. Up until the use of the gun to shoot the lock, Tester E had never used the right analog stick to move the camera. Considering this control was necessary to aim the weapon, the player was at a loss on how to aim the pistol, though this task was ultimately accomplished. The play session ended up being two to three times as long as the other subjects in the focus group, which proved to be rather enlightening.

## DISCUSSION

Ultimately, after the textual analysis and breakdown of the focus group play samples, what can be derived from this study? Simply put, modern video games are complicated, particularly ones that attempt to be cinematic, yet so too are those who play these games. In these kinds of cinematic games, the camera is critical. Regarding *RQ1*, the camera in most modern, cinematic games is necessary for the concept of conveyance – that is, when the game's designers are trying to communicate to the player what needs to done by using the medium's mechanics. When the camera dips to a low angle, focusing on the length of a vertical pipe, it is implied that the pipe needs to be climbed to advance. In *Uncharted 2*, other examples of conveyance include color, light, physical markings in the environment's design, and on-screen control prompts. Yet, conveyance techniques are going to be different in each game because each and every game is inherently different. Going back to the *Tetris* example, the developers are trying to help the player make the most strategic move by displaying the shape of the next falling block before it actually does. While *Uncharted 2: Among Thieves* may be a basic example of a modern, cinematic game, it is a strong indicator of how vastly different it is from titles with simpler concepts.

Similarly to how games are different compared to one another, players are vastly unique because of different levels of game expertise and experience with a particular title. In an attempt to answer *RQ2,* there is no direct correlation between a player's gaming expertise and the precise decisions they make while constructing their visual experience. That is because a game like Uncharted 2 is comprised of so many small choices, that there are simply too many variables and factors to consider. For example, Testers A and B had similar levels of expertise and experience, yet in the section after the cut-scene, Tester A went directly for the train wreckage, while Tester B took the opportunity to do much more exploration. Another choice that makes a difference in the overall visual experience is if the player runs into the dead-end on the right, while traversing across the first horizontal gold pole. To put it simply, modern games have become so complex that combining this interactive medium with the unique natures of game players all over the world, the possible visual experiences based on miniscule choices are endless.

At the same time, visual experience can either indirectly or directly affect the overall game experience. Many players may not notice the subtleties of the choices they make, such as how long they decide to wait before they make that perilous jump, or if they have to shoot another bullet out of a gun because they missed the first time. However, when a player accidentally causes an in-game death, this breaks the game's flow. The particular section of the game has to be played again and if a player struggles enough with a certain section because of the visual experience they are creating, this can lead to frustration. This was shown most clearly with Tester E's intriguing gameplay sample. Now, even though Tester E was the only female participant, gender played no role in her gameplay struggles. This was clearly due her minimal experience with modern video games. For example, Tester E struggled with using and understanding the controller because of her lack of video game expertise, even though this

seemed to be simple for those with that experience. In addition, players who had experienced other kinds of games before, such as third-person shooters, had no problem shooting a weapon in-game because of previously learned mechanics – something Tester E had no experience in.

*Future Research*

In hindsight, the researcher must always retroactively ask what can be done differently in future research. More focus group testers would have been ideal. Not only would more players have created more gameplay samples, but it would have been helpful to have had a wider variety of expertise levels in the participants. A smaller section of the game would have also been more beneficial to the study, as there was simply too much to study, with all the decisions that were made in the ten-minute sample. While the chosen section provided a good range of gameplay types, it was definitely a “bite off more than you can chew” scenario. Surveys would been an interesting aspect to add in future research, particularly to gauge the levels of game expertise and title experience. At the same time, this would have added a quantitative statistical element to the game that would have changed the way in which conclusions were drawn. For this study, participant gameplay samples were gathered with both local, in-person recordings and recordings transferred online from a distant location. This should be streamlined for consistency in future studies. Overall, several chances were taken with the open-endedness of this study. However, it certainly may open up possibilities for future research. After all, the games that can be played, as well as the players who experience them, are ever so complex.

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