**Storytelling**

Storytelling is almost as old as humanity itself. Folklore, myths, legends, fables and cave paintings are some of the oldest forms of storytelling, each having their own devices to distinguish them from other stories; fables have a moral to them, cave paintings show the accomplishments of man against beasts and folklore deals with cultural traditions concerning religion or mythical creatures.

Over the centuries more forms of storytelling emerged. Dance, theatre, photography, film, TV, radio, books, music and comics have all appeared in recent centuries and one that has appeared in the last 40 years is videogames. What makes videogames different from other mediums is that they are interactive. The audience or player must physically participate in the unfolding story.

Some of the first videogames like *Pong*, *Tetris* and *Pac-Man* didn’t feature a storyline as such but more of an objective that had to be completed. There was no act structure or character driven narrative that immersed players in an alternate reality. One of the early games to feature a linear narrative was *Super Mario,* which had the player play as Mario, an Italian plumber, who must save Princess Peaches from her kidnapper. The ‘Damsel in Distress’ plot device is one of the oldest plots and used across many storytelling mediums so in some ways it is fitting that one of the first narrative games would use this device.

Shortly the release of *Super Mario* we were introduced to another Nintendo giant, *The Legend of Zelda.* This fantasy action game had you control Link, an everyday teenage boy who is drafted into an epic quest across Hyrule to collect the eight pieces of the Triforce of Wisdom in order to save the princess, Zelda. Again using the damsel in distress plot device in some ways, this was one of the first games to use the hero's journey plot device. This plot device sees a normal everyday person who, by the powers that be, becomes the hero of the land. Travelling through periless lands, fighting monsters, supernatural foes, the unknown and ultimately saving someone special and going through a self discovery by the end of the game. A very common plot device used in almost every game, although altered to fit a fantasy, horror and action or adventure game.

By adding characters and storylines in videogames, the medium has become the modern era's most diverse and interactive form of storytelling. Multiple genres offer up different plot lines and character types that add new dimension to the stories being told. As technology for videogames grew so did the size of the stories being told. Genres merged together to form original and exciting worlds and gameplay, while others took inspiration from previous texts like books - *Sherlock Holmes Vs. Jack the Ripper,* film *- The Amazing Spiderman 2*, TV shows - *Greys Anatomy*' and comic books - *Batman Arkham series*.

The way in which the story unfolds has also moved from simple linear narrative to fully interactive sandbox style. Linear story featured in most video games during the early days because the technology to create a bigger world wasn't available at the time, meaning that adding choice influence to the game was unachievable at the time. Once videogames moved onto the next-generation, more memory and space was available. This introduced non-linear narrative which gave the player the ability to choose how the story unfolds and in what order. Other forms of story structure includes sandbox style - *Grand Theft Auto* and episodic - *Alan Wake.* Sandbox games are open world free roam games, which allow players to walk around in an entire world freely. Storylines and character interaction are included however it is up to the player how long it takes for them to complete the story. They can literally walk around the entire map, rank up to the highest level; unlock multiple weapons and costumes without even touching a single level within the story. Episodic videogames are quite unique in gaming because they play out like TV shows. The entire game is divided up into several episodes in which the character plays through in a mostly linear narrative.

The combination and hybrid in genre and storytelling formats has allowed for essentially the same stories to be told over and over but in different ways, always adding something new to the previous version. What keeps the games fresh and different from one and other however -besides the change of genre, characters and settings - is the modern inclusion of role-playing. An RPG (role-playing game) puts the player in control of the hero. Their look, style, race, gender, age, background, fighting style, clothing, powers and class (different rpg's will have other categories too or different ones from the ones listed) are all in the players control, making the game truly unique to another player across the world.

*Mass Effect* is a TPS (3rd person shooter) Science Fiction Role-Playing Action Game released in 2007 by BioWare. Already we can see a huge hybrid of different genres, letting audiences know what sort of story they are in for. The character you play is Commander Shepard or his female counter-part of the same name; choosing a male or female gender does not affect the story or gameplay itself but only the romance sub-plot. After deciding to play either the male or female character, you can then decide on the physiology of the character. The only feature that you can't change is that you are a human because the entire story is based around being human. Then you decide on the characters backstory. The backstory selection gives player’s unique abilities and bonus missions depending on what they choose. The 'Pre-Service' selection concerns what the character did before they joined the Alliance. Players either choose:

***Spacer*** *- Born in space to military parents, you were moved around ships and space stations frequently and when you turned 18 you enlisted as an Alliance Officer.*

***Colonist*** *- Born on a small colony called Mindoir on the edge of the Attican Traverse. At the age of 16 your family and friends were slaughtered by raiders but you were saved by a passing Alliance patrol unit. This led you to sign up on when you turned 18.*

***Earthborn*** *- As an orphan, you were raised on the streets of earths metropolises and signed onto the Alliance to escape a life of petty-crime and gangs.*

Depending on which you choose, either Paragon or Renegade (peaceful/political - violent/aggressive respectively) points you collect throughout the game are boosted. After determining the pre-service you then choose a psychological profile which again effects the paragon/renegade point system and offers different dialogue options at certain points.

***Sole Survivor*** *- After a mission went wrong, resulting in the death of your squad, you overcame psychological traumas that would have broken most.*

***War Hero*** *- On a mission with your unit described as impossible, you pushed and faught on resulting in an unsuspecting win against a deadly enemy. Your bravery and heroism was rewarded and you are now recognized as hero of the Alliance.*

***Ruthless*** *- Throughout your career you have been described as callious and brutal but non-the less driven to get the job done no matter what.*

These character traits will affect the way in which your character responds and speaks to others. Both of these elements add more depth and meaning to your character and offer up a reason as to why you might respond in the ways you can throughout the trilogy. Possibly the most unique aspect of this trilogy however is that it is the first ever game to give you the ability to carry over your current hero and decisions into the next game, having them being resolved and effect different points throughout the sequels. This storyline is an epic and thought-provoking adventure because it forces you to make decisions that could have horrible effects in a later game, which could help you win or lose the war.

Mass Effect is just one example of an expansive storyline. Many game series will follow one or several heroes as they journey towards whatever goal it is they set out to complete, interacting and conversing with others along the way but the genre it goes with often dictates what elements might be involved. For example, a deeply emotional storyline won't be featured in a puzzle game like *Candy Crush* but might be involved in fantasy games like *Final Fantasy VII* or survival horror games like *Silent Hill 2*.

Several top critics including the prolific Roger Ebert have shunned the gaming medium as an art form. However videogames like *The Last of Us, Portal, Heavy Rain, Ico,* *Spec Ops: The Line* and *Bioshock Infinite* have all be praised for having purely immersive, emotional and complex stories that involve players in a way that forces them to become embroiled in the world the are playing. It would seem that, by the list of video games that are cited as art forms, the game must involve emotional story elements that challenge morals and ethics. Flawed characters that exhibited human qualities like guilt, remorse and empathy, allow for complex writing and a character driven story, as seen in *Silent Hill 2* and *The Last of Us*. In someway games are more immersive than films and TV because you are physically controlling the characters, giving you a connection that is different to one you can get with film. Some games have been described as a pure cinematic experience like *Gears of War* and *Uncharted*. If videogames were not a form of art because the story isn't as moving as film, then how could they be described as a cinematic experience? You cannot change the ending of a film at the end or change the book while reading it but it is possible with gaming because of the ability of choice throughout. This separates and proves that videogames are the most unique way of offering a story.

Still not seen as a legitimate art form by some, video games though have proven over again that they can be as emotional, thrilling and exciting as the most popular films, TV shows and books around. Videogames have a prestigious award system that honors the best games that show how videogames have excellent stories. Games can now be nominated for BAFTA awards, games like *The Last of Us* winning 5 out of the 10 it was nominated for. Videogame haven't only contributed advancements in graphic technology but also cultural icons like *Lara Croft* who has added to the progression on female representation in the media.

Combining all these elements- the genres, characters, interactive medium - what videogames gives players, in its basic form is a story. Just like a book or film that takes a group of characters and sets them up on a quest that is ultimately solved. However unlike these, videogames allows you to physically play out the way in which you choose. The player’s journey through a vast and fantastical world is as rewarding as the ending of the journey itself. The power to replay the game afterwards but with a different path gives the player different rewarding experience; something that differs in other mediums because it has already been determined. Although the ending of a videogame has been scripted, there are often multiple endings with different paths getting their, adding to the replay factor of that game and giving the players a new experience each time it is played.