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A Wordless World: The Circulation of Affects in *Journey*

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ABSTRACT:
This article explores the communicative possibilities in the third-person walker *Journey* by Sony Computer Entertainment, which eschews verbal communication between player and game, and does not offer a channel for metagame interactions between players, despite the creators' claim to provide entertainment that inspires human connection worldwide. The game has been praised for its innovative use of the online multiplayer option that only allows for chance meetings and a very limited repertoire of oral communication, leaving room for experimentation in a world lacking human language but rich in ambient sound beds. Although minimalist regarding player-initiated communication, *Journey* provides an exceptional atmospheric experience due to its Grammy-nominated and BAFTA Games Awards winning musical score, which foregrounds the affective potential of digital games. The soundscape encourages players from all over the world to travel together and share an adventure not only modelled on Campbell's 'the hero's journey' but also on Everyman's. The decade-long continued interest in the game allows the article to focus on the circulation of affects involving the creators, the non-diegetic interpersonal communication between players, and the formation of a uniquely positive and supportive online fandom, which remains, in turn, an inspiration for the creators.

KEY WORDS:
affect theory, digital games, game studies, immersion, *Journey*, third-person walker, Zen games.

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Introduction

> Experience the wonder in this anonymous adventure where you travel on a life's passage, with the chance to connect with companions along the way. (Journey, n.d.-b)

Upon release, *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012), from the independent developer thatgamecompany, was hailed as an innovative art game, scoring over one hundred industry and media awards over the years, of which the five awards at the BAFTA Games Awards[1] and the first Grammy nomination for a digital game in the category Best Score Soundtrack for Visual Media ("Austin Wintory", n.d.) drew attention to it beyond the gaming community. The Original Score and Audio Achievement BAFTAs, coupled with the award for Best Game Design, stand witness to the impact that the lack of language and the prominent role of music had on players, justifying a closer look at a more than a decade-old game. Although removing language, the most versatile channel of human communication, may seem counterintuitive for a game that aims to foster human connection worldwide, several interviews with game designer Jenova Chen attested to the fact that this

1 Remark by the author: *Journey* won in five categories at the BAFTA Games Awards 2013, namely Artistic Achievement, Online – Multiplayer, Audio Achievement, Original Music, Game Design, and earned nominations in Game Innovation and Best Game categories ("British Academy Games Awards", 2013).

goal acts as the organizing principle of the whole game. Talking with Ohanessian (2012), Chen clarified that he intentionally tried to avoid the usual feelings evoked by competition and winning, on which many games and sports are based:

> there is actually a whole spectrum of feeling that games are capable of creating, but not a lot of them are on the market. And we wanted to ... extend the depth and the width of the emotional spectrum that games can communicate ... I started to realize there is an emotion missing in the modern society, and of course missing in the online console games. *It is the feeling of not knowing, a sense of wonder, a sense of awe, at the fact that you don't understand, at the fact that you are so small and you are not empowered* [emphasis added]. And so our focus for *Journey* was to make the player feel small and to feel wonder, so when they run into each other in an online environment, rather than thinking about how am I supposed to use my gun on the other player, we wanted them *to feel a connection to another player* [emphasis added]. (Ohanessian, 2012, paras. 2, 4)

In contrast with the ever-popular online first-person shooters (FPS), which, according to Chen, focus on freedom and empowerment (Ohanessian, 2012), *Journey* achieves a sense of awe and lack of empowerment partly by not providing instructions or a map of the world for the player to orient themselves, there is no scoreboard, no loot to pick up, and no options at all to personalize one's avatar. The quote above also emphasises that the game's main aim is to evoke feelings, including some that are specific to the interactive medium of digital games.

The past decade has brought far more variety to both the affects that digital games set out to convey[2] and research linking *affect theory* and game studies, which continues to shed light on the complexity of the medium. Yet, the perception of the matter is very slow to change: Hayot (2021) still declares that digital games in general are hampered by the structural constraint of the need to win, making it "difficult for games to fully represent, as can novels and films, the full emotional and social range of human life" (p. 184). These views are contested by in-depth research, such as Anable's (2018), which constitutes the framework for the analysis of digital games as affective systems on which this paper relies. The broadest definition of affect "as the capacity of bodies to affect and be affected by one another" allows for the joining together of "bodies human and nonhuman, organic and machine, material and conceptual" (Paasonen, 2018, p. 283) and led to the theorization of *networked affect* in new media studies. This notion encompasses the medium-specific interconnections that Paasonen (2018) sums up as "the circulation and oscillation of intensity in the framework of online communication that involves a plethora of actors, ... users, more-or-less emergent collective bodies, human and non-human and thus also devices, platforms, applications, interfaces, companies, files and threads" (p. 283). Anable (2018), who posits digital games as affective systems, details in the following concise list the various actors and 'forms of relation' that typically affect each other in digital games. When opening a digital game program, the circulation of affect starts via the player's relations

> to the game's aesthetic and narrative properties, the computational operations of the software, the mechanical and material properties of the hardware on which we play the game, ideas of leisure and play, ideas of labor, our bodies, other players, and the whole host of fraught cultural meanings and implications that circulate around video games. (Anable, 2018, p. xii)

2 Remark by the author: See some examples covering a variety of digital game genres: *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (Starbreeze Studios, 2013), *Depression Quest* (The Quinnspiracy & Lindsey, 2013), *Orwell: Ignorance is Strength* (Osmotic Studios, 2018), *Where the Water Tastes Like Wine* (Dim Bulb Games & Serenity Forge, 2018), *Neo Cab* (Chance Agency, 2019), *The Longing* (Studio Seufz, 2020), *The Life and Suffering of Sir Brante* (Sever, 2021), *Twelve Minutes* (António, 2021), *Venba* (Visai Games, 2023).

In order to make sense of the emotions and feelings a game aims to evoke, the place occupied by digital games in the cultural imaginary must be borne in mind, as they engage and entangle players "in a circuit of feeling between their computational systems and the broader systems with which they interface: ideology, narrative, aesthetics, and flesh" (Anable, 2018, p. xii). Due to the human-technology assemblage created at such times, Anable (2018) argues that digital games can be regarded as expressions of the new affects called to life by the technosocial conditions of the 21st century, which Chen also approached from the perspective of affects circulating while playing: "We really wanted to have a real social experience. We talk about social games today, but most people think social games are just games on Facebook. But really, social means emotional exchange between people" (Ohanessian, 2012, para. 5), in this case made possible via an online multiplayer game. The initially formed fan groups, forums, and the more recently established communities on Discord and Steam attest to the game's enduring social appeal even twelve years after its release, and provide ample material for a case study that also investigates less immediately observable affects of digital games: the types that may play out over several years. The circulation of affects will be approached by means of shedding light on the genre-specific emotional impact of *Journey*, the components of the in-game affects of presence and connection experienced by the players and then will extend to discussing how in-game affects transfer to the real world of both players and creators.

Genre, Atmosphere and Affect

The fact that feelings evoked by and associated with digital games depend on the genre to a considerable extent is hardly surprising, given that audiences partly extrapolate based on the familiar generic conventions of film and television, and many developers rely on the very same conventions to reach audiences. The difference in affective impact between old and interactive new media has been one of the most widely discussed issues of the new millennium, usually fuelled by fears of addiction and social isolation, as well as the ever-present allegation that digital games are responsible for aggressive behaviour. In contrast, Chen set out to create a game

> where people felt they are connected with each other, to show the positive side of humanity in them. A lot of games today have a list of quests, places to go, items to collect and rewards to receive... We just ignore each other. So in order to make players care about each other, we have to remove their power, and remove their tasks. (Smith, 2012, para. 7)

The appearance of new digital game genres has definitely helped counter the one-dimensional, more often than not negative public perception: as pointed out by Penabella (2015), in the first half of the 2010s, *walking simulators*, for instance, were a direct response to FPS games, mostly held guilty of the charges above. He recommends *first-person walker* to avoid the condescension he feels is inherent in the term walking simulator, because it "misattributes the act of walking as a perfunctory, emotionless action to be simulated rather than identify these games' treatment of it as a complex and meaningful form of expression" (para. 5). While *Journey* shares some characteristics with the category of platform games, if played as one, it is neither challenging, nor very satisfying, as attested by reviewers who rushed through in one and a half hours and subsequently complained about the game being insubstantial. The avatar's limited capabilities and the crossing of

vast expanses definitely remind one of Penabella's (2015) description of the first-person walker: "stripped down of complex gameplay mechanics in favor of decelerated movement and the basic act of seeing" (para. 2), consequently "encouraging a contemplative, participatory mindset over guided directness" (para. 5).

While the term walking simulator persists and has a secure place in common parlance – though it continued to be contested for several reasons (see Juul, 2018; Muscat, 2018) –Penabella's (2015) claim that these games act as an "entrance towards sensations and experiences often overlooked" (para. 10) is echoed by Juul (2018), who draws attention to the fact that they not only limit interaction with the game world but also reduce the player's feeling of responsibility for the outcome. A few years later, van Dam (2022) already takes the genre's existence for granted and focuses instead on the affective potential of first-person walkers, underscoring the "particular kinds of pleasure that differ from the addictive thrill that is often associated with videogames" (para. 9) and contends that they foster player reflexivity both towards the game and the real-life world, hinting at the transfer of in-game affects beyond the gameworld. This aspect is well documented by Flanagan (2021), who demonstrates that digital games with specific narrative mechanics have the potential to shift beliefs and biases.

Based on the continued academic interest in the player experience provided by walking simulators, Andiloro's (2023) approach to the genre is a particularly appropriate lens to scrutinize the affective experience of players of *Journey*. Andiloro proposes an experiential perspective, "attentive to the embodied and affective lived-experience of players," which he captures with the term *atmosphere*, defined as "a wholistic [*sic*] affective and embodied experience arising in-between player and videogame" (p. 560). The idea of genres as meaning-making frameworks is not new, however, bringing their emotional impact to the forefront is a result of the affective turn and "marks a shift in thought in critical theory through an exploration of the complex interrelations of discursive practices, the human body, social and cultural forces, and individually experienced but historically situated affects and emotions" (Zembylas, 2021, para. 1). Andiloro (2023) convincingly argues that "genre texts are, to an extent, designed to achieve a certain embodied emotion … they afford specific types of embodied experiences" (p. 561), and points out that current conceptualizations of atmosphere bring together effect and spatiality to denote the assemblage of people and things present in a space.

The above are the exact same components that Chen lists in layman's terms in the previously quoted interview, but his choice to make a multi-player walking simulator expands the affective possibilities offered by the genre. It is also important to note that *Journey* diverges from first-person walkers that "privilege the habitation of a singular consciousness in a cerebral space, often filtering our experience of the world through solipsistic voiceover narration" (Penabella, 2015, para. 9). By eschewing verbal input, the game removes the limitations that narration would pose on the player's perception of their surroundings, and the same stands for abandoning the POV perspective: in third-person walkers the game world is experienced less passively, as detailed by Swain (2013), who uses *Journey* and *Bientôt l'été* (Tale of Tales, 2012) to tease out the characteristics of the then-new subgenre. The third-person perspective, in his view, shifts the focus from passively observing the world to the dynamics of traversing space and the significance of "the avatar's place in relation to the objects around them" (Swain, 2013, para. 5),[3] which also explains the platformer-like elements in *Journey* and is hardly surprising given the game's title.

3 Remark by the author: For an in-depth discussion of the affective potential of a narrative-adventure game that is also a third-person walker, see Bülgözdi (2023).

The other category *Journey* is often placed in is known as *Zen games*. As Navarro-Remesal (2016) summarized, the genre is typified by "the pleasurable, individualistic and relaxing experience, built around an almost complete absence of stress factors and effort demand" (p. 1), pointing out that this conception does not have much to do with the theory and practice of Zen but can be roughly equated to the Western trend of non-religious mindfulness and focus on one's well-being. Regardless of the misnomer, these games are very much based on the experience of flow, the theory of which Chen's (2007) design has embodied since the very beginning, and virtually all of his games fit this label. Navarro-Remesal (2018) cites *Flower* (thatgamecompany, 2009) as one of the first widely advertised games that transformed Zen from the alternative, stress-free gameplay mode available in some earlier games, where scores, time limits, and other obstacles were removed, to become the centre of player experience. Characterized by "a combination of mental flow states and pleasing sensorial inputs" (Navarro-Remesal, 2018, para. 23), the Zen genre's main aim is to affect the player's state of mind by providing immersion without the competitive element, but *Journey* also avoids the level of detachment inherent in the minimalist gameplay of first-person walkers, altogether being more aligned to Zen as a practice of "sensing the present and its constant change" (Navarro-Remesal, 2016, p. 5). Thus Chen's design unites components from two genres that enhance an atmosphere geared towards novel affects leading to immersion, as well as the possibility for more than one individual to be involved in this experience.

The Circulation of Affect in *Journey*

Andiloro's novel definition of genre is based on Cremin's (2016) premise that players actively "compose and liberate affects contained within the game design, actualizing a previously virtual assemblage" (Andiloro, 2023, p. 564). The brief comparison in the previous section demonstrates that the game mechanics and affordances of even third-person walkers are not identical with those of first-person ones, which results in a different foundation for the construction of the atmosphere and the circulation of affect in *Journey*. This is all the more apparent when the multiplayer option is available, though it must be noted that it is not compulsory; Chen emphasizes that the environment does not force cooperation on the players, but if they "choose to cooperate, then that is the real essence of connecting two players" (Smith, 2012, para. 10). Besides the flow experience of Zen games, which Owen (2017) posits as an integral part of immersion in general, he identifies two major medium-specific aspects of how digital games affect players: on the one hand, through the presence of *compelling narratives* to be discovered by the player through their actions, choices, and exploration, and on the other hand, via an *immersive environment* that provides visual, aural, and tactile feedback for the player's actions to unfold. Immersion depends significantly on experiencing the affect of *presence*, that is the feeling of being *live* in a space during the gameplay, heightened by the co-presence of other players (Owen, 2017). Even though it is the immersive environment that is mainly regarded as being responsible for a game's atmosphere, due to the lack of language and the emphasis on the rest of the sonic experience, the player's narrative and sonic engagement take place via a similar process in *Journey*: players are active participants, co-constituting both the narrative and the acoustic ecology, comprised of the game's soundscape, its acoustic environment, and player-generated sound (Grimshaw-Aagaard, 2012), all the more reinforcing the affect of presence.

The circulation of affect, however, is not restricted to presence, happening in the period of active play. Collins (2013) clarifies that cognitive/psychological interactions are constantly present "alongside all other types of interactions in games. These interactions include the conscious or unconscious emotional and cognitive activities that take place before, during, and after gameplay" (p. 9), which draws attention to the fact that digital games affect players in a variety of ways when not actively playing. Collins (2013), in fact posits psychological interactions as the prime mover for all others, which encompass a variety of interactions between the player and the game, and the interpersonal and sociocultural metagame interactions that actually extend beyond the game, thus justifying the inclusion of gamer fan cultures into the charting of the circulation of affect. As the most widely researched aspect of digital games, the narrative elements will be the starting point for the analysis, since the title itself raises the first salient questions: what sort of journey does the player embark on and where does it lead?

Journey contains both embedded and emergent narratives; while traversing the gamespace, first of all, the fall of an ancient civilization takes shape, signalled by mysterious ancient ruins and also conveyed by murals and by white-caped ancestors in cutscenes that are not easy to interpret at first sight, given that they lack any form of verbal information. The completion of the game reveals another layer: the player enacts the archetypal journey of birth, life, and death, followed by rebirth, an aspect that Chen (n.d.) considered important enough to include in the very brief description of *Journey* on his own website. With the cycle automatically restarting after the credits, the player is invited to enter the gameworld again, but this simple narrative pattern is continually personalized by the player's in-game trajectory, exploration, and the chance meetings with other wayfarers, making for a different experience every playthrough.

Michelmore (2021) underscores that the composer's task, beyond composing musical responses to highlight aspects of the gameplay, like the avatar's success or failure, the environment, or the plot, is to "predict and imagine how the player will engage with the game, and create music to reinforce and amplify the emotional journeys they undertake" (p. 69). The affective power of music is implicitly assumed here, but the musical score of the game adds yet another layer: the composer, Austin Wintory consciously aimed at using music as an active story-telling device. More specifically, he named as one of his main inspirations the archetypal narrative widely referred to as the hero's journey (Wintory, 2012a, 2012b, 2018), originally espoused by Campbell (1949).[4] Several song titles on the soundtrack are identical to the stages specified by Campbell, while others closely correspond in meaning as indicated by the titles (Table 1), but at the same time, the score also outlines Everyman's journey,[5] which include birth, death, and rebirth beyond the elements related to the hero's adventures. The double nature of the narrative coded into the song titles is also supported by the fact that the avatars are not outstanding heroes, but are all nameless and identical in appearance, except for the small pixel-art style glowing symbol on their chest. The plain red cloak receives a line of new pattern after completing the first three runs, then, when the player collects all the glowing symbols in the game, they receive the option to wear a white cape. These visuals only reveal how much experience a player has, there is no other differentiation between the wayfarers.

4 Remark by the author: It is a highly influential work of comparative mythology, whose inherent Eurocentric bias was since recognized. A variety of shortened versions of Campbell's (1949) elaborate, seventeen-stage trajectory are in circulation and are often mentioned in analyses of well-known pop culture protagonists, like Luke Skywalker from the *Star Wars* saga.

5 Remark by the author: The term Everyman, coming to denote all humans, derives from the eponymous 15th-century English morality play on death and the fate of the human soul, in which the protagonist attempts to justify his time on earth (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2019).

Table 1: Journey original soundtrack song list

No.	Song titles	Campbell's (1949) stages	Everyman's journey
1	Nascence		Birth
2	The call	The call to adventure, Refusal of the call	
3	First confluence		
4	Second confluence		
5	Threshold	The crossing of the first threshold	
6	Third confluence		
7	The road of trials	The road of trials	
8	Fourth confluence		
9	Temptation	Woman as the temptress	
10	Descent	The belly of the whale	
11	Fifth confluence		
12	Atonement	Atonement with the father	
13	Final confluence		
14	The crossing	The crossing of the return threshold	
15	Reclamation		
16	Nadir		Death
17	Apotheosis	Apotheosis	
18	I was born for this		Rebirth

Source: own processing based on Campbell (1949) and Wintory (2012a)

These seemingly contradictory aspects, the heroic and the everyday are also present in the only song that has lyrics, titled "I was born for this" (No. 18), though virtually no one would be able to understand it without doing some research, as illustrated by Table 2. The song is performed in five languages, the first three of which are dead, with the quotes harkening back to the heroes of old: Aeneas, the legendary forefather of the Roman people, Beowulf, the monster-slayer, and the greatest Greek hero of the Trojan War, Achilles. The French sentences are attributed to Joan of Arc, a peasant girl turned military leader and uttered during her trial preceding her execution for heresy, whose fate demonstrates that ordinary people are capable of heroic deeds. The Japanese haiku,[6] however, stands apart, since it describes the individual's life journey, as explained by Asano (2017): it "reflects many key Buddhist elements with one of the most prominent being the feeling of loneliness. We are all alone on this path through life which eventually leads to death (autumn eve)" (para. 7). Even though Wintory's (2019) text commentary accompanying the soundtrack identifies the quotes as inspired by the hero's journey, a closer look reveals that they do not elevate feats of heroism above the drudgery of everyday life. In my view, the quotes ensure the two perspectives intertwine in the score, implying the heroic aspects of accomplishing a life's journey, as well as presenting heroes not as distant figures

6 Remark by the author: Several English translations are available. The rough translation in the Table 2 is a close approximation of the one by R. H. Blyth: "Along this road / Goes no one, / This autumn eve" (Asano, 2017, para. 7).

of perfection, but as individuals who need to cope with life's ordinary aspects and are exposed to similar affects as all humans. This is also supported by Wintory's (2012b) choice to subtly alter the pitch of the two musical notes the avatar can emit as the game progresses. His decision to change them from an animal-like chirp to a lower, more human-like sound[7] brings to mind the universal learning process that forms the basis of every individual's socialization through interaction and communication.

Table 2: Lyrics of the final song of Journey, "I was born for this", playing during the credits and parallel rebirth

Original text	Phonetic transcription	Translation	Language	Source
Stat Sua cuique dies Stat Sua cuique dies		To each his day is given To each his day is given	Latin	*The Aeneid* (Book X, verse 467)
Maél is mé tó féran		'Tis time that I fare from you	Old English	*Beowulf* (verse 316)
Ὤλετο μέν μοι νόστος Ὤλετο μέν μοι νόστος	Oleto men mi nostos Oleto men mi nostos	Lost is my homecoming Lost is my homecoming	Homeric Greek	*The Iliad* (Scroll IX, verse 415)
C'est pour cela que je suis née		I was born for this	French	Attributed to Joan of Arc
此道や 行く人なしに 此道や 秋の暮	Kono michi ya Yuku hito nashi ni Kono michi ya Aki no kure	On this road Goes no one On this road Autumn sunset	Japanese	Matsuo Bashō
C'est pour cela que je suis née Ne me plaignez pas C'est pour cela que je suis née		I was born for this Do not pity me I was born for this	French	Attributed to Joan of Arc

Source: own processing based on "I was born for this" (2018)

Although figuring out the embedded narratives based on the visual and musical clues can lead to exciting revelations, neither these, nor the platformer aspect explain why many players return to *Journey* again and again. Based on the countless reviews and thank you posts, it is the music and the personal experiences with randomly paired-up unknown wayfarers that keeps them hooked, consequently broadening the *Encyclopedia of video games*' placement of *Journey*, along with the rest of thatgamecompany's output, under the heading "spirituality" (Hayse, 2021), and demonstrating that Chen's main objective to connect people has been successfully put into practice. These affective aspects, which contribute immensely to the atmosphere, need to be analysed in detail to tease out more about the circulation of affect in the game.

Affect and Communication

As noted earlier, the other major factor impacting players besides the narrative is the immersive environment digital games create, but in *Journey,* player immersion based on attachment to unique avatars is out of the question due to the completely identical and nameless cloaked wayfarers. This aspect, too, is the exact opposite of the affective potential

7 Remark by the author: Timeframe 29:02–30:11.

of another highly popular genre: in MMORPGs, immersion is also facilitated by the appeal of and the strong cognitive-affective bond between players and the highly customizable avatars they may spend hundreds of hours with, as detailed by Wilde (2024). The lack of such an avatar, however, allows wayfarers to focus on engagement with the rest of the game. Even though this game has player interaction at its centre, *Journey* offers very limited means to communicate compared to most online multiplayer games: no text or voice chat is available, and every avatar can only emit the same two musical notes, whose volume and frequency they can slightly modulate. In essence, it feels like trying to communicate with someone whose language is absolutely unknown, and what is more, facial expressions and hand gestures are also unavailable, given the avatars' body structure. With the exception of the first and last levels, two players can connect when sufficiently close to each other, then may use chirps and infinite combinations of the simple actions available, like jumps, flying, sitting down and standing up, or running away and returning to indicate which way they would like to go, to get their companion to follow them. Staying close to one's companion is encouraged by game mechanics until players find all the symbols and can equip the self-charging white cloak, but benefitting more than occasionally from recharging each other's energy in very close proximity is easier said than done. For instance, flying long distances side-by-side could be theoretically accomplished, but it would take a lot of coordination and practice.[8] The connection, however, can be severed if players stray too far from their companions or do not move on to the next level at the same time, underscoring the effort necessary to maintain the relationship, yet again contrasting the game with more typical player versus player scenarios of conflict. Relying on the affect of presence stemming from the experience of *virtual liveness* in multiplayer mode for immersion is not that straightforward, once language, the most versatile means of communication is removed. Getting across to people becomes a much more demanding task, therefore, players have to be really committed to making the connection Chen wished to set the stage for. This may also be the reason why only two players and not more can connect at the same time: the interpretation of a combination of sounds and the whole-body motion of an avatar is far from straightforward, and in a group this would only lead to missed cues and ensuing frustration.

Interactivity in games ensures that music and sound in general have a far more complex role than simply setting the mood or characterisation, both typical of cinema, because, as Kamp (2014) points out, in games "what we hear and how we listen is determined by our goals and intentions, and our relation to our environment" (p. 235). While the whole score was composed with utmost care to convey the mood and emotions Chen envisioned, as emphasized in the composer's commentary (Wintory, 2019), it is also responsible for providing the foundation for immersion, as claimed by Collins (2013). The diegetic sounds emitted by the player are integral to their sense of immersion and telepresence, owing to the fact that this process is analogous to real-life sonic interactions: they extend one's sense of self into the virtual world (Collins, 2013). This is clearly demonstrated by the fact that players contribute to digital game soundscapes by interacting with the game world, for instance, with sounds as simple as an avatar's footsteps. *Journey* surpasses this by rewarding travelling with a companion via altering the soundtrack to make the effort worthwhile: when wayfarers pair up, the score becomes fuller, with new instruments added, the music swells and has more depth, turning the time spent together into an even more outstanding sonic experience. Thus, immersion is reinforced on two levels: players not only co-create their own narrative during their joint travels, but also literally enhance the musical score, changing the whole soundscape.

8 Remark by the author: Beyond the basic actions described above players have discovered that a variety of practice-intensive tricks, like sliding or fancy flying can be performed, as described under the "Expert mode" entry in Journey Wiki at Fandom (see "Expert mode", 2024).

This is only achievable if players do communicate despite the constraints placed on them, but maintaining this connection takes patience and ingenuity. Metagame interactions without a shared language are unable to convey much information, consequently, the affective aspect of communication is foregrounded instead of meaning-making. Under these circumstances players have to get creative: for instance, when reaching the mountain, some used the snow as their canvas to write a few words or draw a heart with their tracks, and a plethora of comments and fan artwork reflect the supportive attitude of companions. To this day, the vast majority of reviewers praises the atmosphere and the connection they felt to their companions,[9] attesting that the game has accomplished its goal and confirming Andiloro's (2023) claim: many players, such as Jess (2024), whose well-articulated review on Steam is reproduced below, describe their journey first and foremost as an affective and embodied experience:

> Somehow, without a single word, Journey provided the most profoundly emotional gaming experience of my life. I went in about as blind as I could for a game that came out over a decade ago, and that's absolutely the way the first play through should be. I found this to be a game where I often forgot I had a controller in my hands, multiple times IRL distractions broke my concentration and made me realize I was just witnessing the game with my jaw dropped, mouth open. As my final companion and I pushed through the last act, I realized I was actually crying. Just weeping as I pushed the joystick forward. There was a shocking level of catharsis for me, and I absolutely never expected that from this experience. (Jess, 2024, para. 1)

Players are also impressed by how well the music is matched to the game world and the narrative, the complexity of which is explained by music scholar Grasso (2020), who investigates how music and narrative can enhance each other in digital games. She coined the concept of *ludomusical narrativity* to denote "the potential for music to shape *ludic* actions of play to fit *narrative* affects of story", creating affective zones, defined as "spaces in which potentials for meaning and perception are shaped by these musical differences" (p. 127). Her analysis of *Journey* also points to how the affects experienced in-game are linked to the real world, because the affective zone, when paired up with a companion, may expand to virtually "crossing continents to create a connection" (p. 96).

The only information about companions can be gleaned during the credits: for a brief period, the PlayStation tag or the Steam profile name of the players one met shows up on the "Companions met along the way" screen. The powerful affective responses elicited by the in-game connection with random strangers are memorialized in thank-you threads identifying the player either by the places visited together and joint activities, or the profile name from the credits, the latter of which can entail real-life communication. It is the emergent narratives blossoming from chance meetings that bring players back again and again, and spark both diegetic and non-diegetic communication. The lack of verbal communication in the game causes players to experiment with combinations of sound and motion to invite companions to follow; more experienced players help newbies and pass down knowledge of secret places and beautiful views, how to find glitches and how to reach the vast out-of-bounds areas that were not supposed to be accessible to players.[10] Another form of very popular metagame interaction is just hanging out with a companion: many players report engaging in playing hide-and-seek and tag, flying together, playing

9 Remark by the author: Based on the summary of the *Journey*'s most helpful reviews in the past 30 days on Steam as of August 24, 2024 ("Journey", n.d.-a).

10 Remark by the author: Out-of-bounds are "bigger than the normal level and contain beautiful scenery, unexpected dangers, weird objects, rendering glitches and other surprises. The game's art style makes [out-of-bound] exploration a dream-like experience which many players enjoy" ("Out of bounds", 2022, para. 1). See video by Tara's Sky Journey (2019) for visuals of *Journey*'s out-of-bounds.

with cloth creatures, and enjoying the views. In fact, the 'wordless' game design goes beyond Western mindfulness and manages to approximate the purpose of Zen:

> Philosopher Ueda Shizuteru warns that "we only consider real what can be understood through words" (2004), whereas he defends an "infinite openness" that cannot be expressed through language, where one lets go of the self without removing it, a way of accessing reality and the others through a deep, non-personal knowledge. And it is this kind of knowledge, and not calmness or relaxation, what makes Zen be Zen. (Navarro-Remesal, 2016, p. 3)

The lack of verbal communication in the game turned the affective experiences related to flow and virtual liveness into the main means for immersion: the limited metagame communication ensures that the emergent narratives of paired wayfarers are experienced, that is they are seen, heard, and felt as they happen. Consequently, by eschewing chat options, Chen managed to remove a major obstacle from connecting with players from any cultural background, and the anonymity and the uniform appearance of the avatars fosters an unbiased attitude. This is also backed by the multiple sources the architectural style drew upon: to achieve a space "that was exotic, yet familiar; an alien space, with ancient civilization" (Leo, 2012, p. 7) the game operates with a new Eastern-Western mixed structure, an amalgam of ancient Egyptian, Greek, Chinese, and Middle-Eastern architecture.

Furthermore, *Journey* also fulfils another requirement Navarro-Remesal (2016) identifies to be characteristic of games truly inspired by Zen philosophy: they "should affect our relationship with reality, changing the way we see the world and ourselves after we stop playing, illuminating the dependent nature of everything" (p. 11). The powerful affective response to in-game experiences of connection dominates fan art and is transferred to real-life interactions within the fandom, demonstrating the workings of networked affect. The thank-you threads are full of awe, gratefulness, and shared joy, often followed by extra-diegetic communication to set up planned meetings in the game. This process is not that straightforward either, as the cloaked avatars are anonymous, thus, the effort to connect with people is yet again foregrounded, reminding players not to take human connection for granted. The uniquely positive and supportive community that grew around the game is very well showcased by Salenius (2021), whose journey started in 2013. Although disappearing in a world of beautiful visuals and music could be regarded as escapism at first sight, the daily companionship experienced in the game and on the forums, followed by real-life friendships that blossomed after chance meetings, gave Salenius a different perspective on chasing goals largely imposed by society, taught her to focus on life's journey instead of failures, and finally, the impetus to turn her life around while suffering from depression:

> I developed from an inexperienced pupil to a confident and trustworthy teacher. I became a mentor and taught these new journeyers what I had been taught by the ones before me. With that in-game confidence, daily companionship and the positivity of the *Journey* community, I actually started feeling better about myself and about my life outside the game. (Salenius, 2021, paras. 14-15)

In conclusion, the sonic experimentation and unconventional gameplay successfully communicate the positive affective response of the majority of players and their willingness to share the journey, turning the game into a safe haven instead of the often toxic online spaces Chen explicitly had in mind when planning an online multiplayer game (Leo, 2012). It is these affects that spill over into real-world interpersonal and sociocultural interactions, which, in turn are carried over to subsequent journeys, as explained by Salenius (2021). It must be noted though that the circulation of affect in this case is not unidirectional, from developer to game to players, partly owing to the fact that the soundtrack took

on a life of its own beyond the gaming community. Wintory (2015) received invitations to perform the music all over the world with various orchestras and ensembles, which let him experience the game's enthusiastic reception at first hand. He credits his insight into how *Journey* and its score affected individual people with a profound impact on the principle he follows as a composer: since then his main objective is to make something that "people take into their lives" because "it's about them finding meaning through it as a vehicle and enriching their own life in a genuine way" (Wintory, 2015).

Though Wintory seems to be the most vocal among the creators about his experiences regarding the circulation of affects related to *Journey*, he is not the only one: in a recent interview (thatgamecompany, 2024) Chen credits player feedback on his experimental game back in graduate school with encouraging him to focus on instilling positive emotions via games and changing people's lives. He reveals that the over 1,600 emails they received from *Journey* players who wanted to share their stories and insights helped them improve the design of their next game, *Sky: Children of the Light* (thatgamecompany, 2019).[11] Besides fond reminiscences, the volume *The art of Journey* by art director Nava (2012) features more than his own concept art: it also includes a curated section of fan art, which may have served as inspiration for Wintory to use fan art as background visuals for his 2019 commentary on the soundtrack, but his homage to the community has manifested itself on a far more grandiose scale on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the game's release. He rewrote the original score as a symphony for the London Symphony Orchestra, recording and producing the album *Traveler – a Journey symphony* (Wintory, 2022), which he dedicated to the community: "I hope the people who hopefully find the album recognize that it is for them and wouldn't have been possible without them" (Kain, 2022, para. 9).

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11 Remark by the author: Described as a puzzle-adventure game, a peaceful MMO, where one can create enriching memories with other players, this game is another testimony to the long-lasting circulation of affects both in and outside of the game, owning the official Guinness world record for the "Most users in a concert themed metaverse hangout" (10,061) on August 25, 2023 ("Most users in a concert themed", 2023).

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