

Video Game Review: Moving ‘Journey’ Redefines Gaming Expectations

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on March 7, 2012 - 11:23am

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CHICAGO – At their very foundation, all games are journeys. Whether it’s a massive one like the “Mass Effect” trilogy or as simple as Mario climbing to save a girl in “Donkey Kong,” games are built on getting from point A to point B. What is commonly placed on that foundation is action-based but ThatGameCompany has dared to suggest that our expectations of what we get when we press Start are limiting. After the success of “fIOw” and “Flower,” they have released their highly-anticipated “Journey” and, once again, challenged the commonalities of what we receive when we hold a controller. Stunningly beautiful and even emotionally engaging, “Journey” is like nothing else you’ll play this year. It is rewarding and remarkable.



“Journey” has a few recognizable markers (it auto-saves your game for you and even has a rarely-used trophy system), but it truly does defy so many of the basic rules of video games — you don’t die, you shouldn’t save (the experience is TRULY one that should be had in one 90 to 120-minute sitting), you won’t shoot, and there’s not a word of dialogue. With all of that stripped away, what is left? Only one of the most emotional, engaging, and beautiful experiences that you’ll ever have with a controller in your hands.



Journey
Photo credit: Sony

A shrouded figure with a flowing scarf appears in a barren desert. There is a mountain in the distance with a light emanating from it. As we know to do from a very early age, we move toward the object on the horizon. That is all for the set-up of “Journey.” Like a child learning to walk (and the entire game really starts to take on a metaphor for the progression of human life), we head off and start to explore the world. Objects appear that allow for jumping, which can be strung together into something approaching flying. Other banners/flags appear which can be “spoken to” in order to alter the world. We build a bridge to leave the desert and find a shrine, where we sit and pause for a moment, reflecting on what has passed and thinking about what’s to come.



Journey

Photo credit: Sony

Then we shoot a zombie. I’m kidding. But if you’re worried that “Journey” is a bit TOO symbolic or poetic, don’t be. The game has those basic tenets of gaming in that there’s some puzzle-solving elements and areas to explore. On my playthrough, I went with the flow of the title, always trying to move forward as much as possible and reach my next destination, however there is not a ticking clock. I look forward to another playthrough where I can explore the world more completely. To give you some example of how little exploration I did, I didn’t earn a single trophy until the end of the game. I LOVE that the developers only give trophies for out-of-the-way discoveries, allowing for a pristine playthrough the first time, removing yet another element that would remind you that this is just a game.

Of course, you probably think I’m silly to suggest that you would ever think that this is more than a game. Play for yourself and decide. “Journey” is as close to poetry as we’ve ever seen in a video game. Ever. As the game was wrapping up — after I had crossed deserts, oceans, climbed towers, and trudged through blinding snow — I actually found myself getting a little misty-eyed. And I did so without a concrete explanation as to why, like classical music or poetry that touches something subconscious. I have my theories now as to what “Journey” is “about” but it will mean something different to you. Like great poetry.

It helps that “Journey” looks and sounds amazing. At first, the graphics may seem rather pedestrian. It’s not as instantly visually striking as “Flower.” But give it time. They’re simple for a reason. “Journey” is an experience that demands you bring something to it more than you typically do with a video game. More than just hand-eye coordination. And so the relatively simple graphics — although it should be noted that the interplay of light and shadow is remarkable — are purposeful in that the developers want you to engage with the experience instead of telling you what to feel. And the score by Austin Wintory is simply one of the best in the history of gaming. It’s beautiful.

That’s the word I kept thinking of when I finished “Journey.” God, that was beautiful. When’s the last time you said that about a video game?

“Journey” was developed by ThatGameCompany and released by Sony exclusively to PlayStation Plus members on March 6, 2012 and will be available for everyone else on March 13, 2012.



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