International Journal of Education and Humanities
ISSN: 2770-6702 | Vol. 21, No. 1, 2025

Echoes of Nature: Exploring Environmental Themes through Structure in *Journey* and *ABZÛ*

Yirui Xiong

Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH8 9YL, UK

Abstract: This paper critically examines how *Journey* (2012) and *ABZÛ* (2016) articulate environmental themes through their formal structures, including visual design, mechanics, and narrative strategies. Situating the analysis within theories of environmental communication and game studies, it argues that Journey employs metaphorical symbolism and cooperative play to evoke human fragility and interdependence, while *ABZÛ* foregrounds ecological restoration and marine biodiversity through direct interaction. By juxtaposing these distinct approaches, the paper demonstrates the capacity of video games to function as cultural texts that foster ecological awareness and reframe human–nature relations.

Keywords: Video Games, Environmental Communication, Interactive Narrative, Ecological Representation, Game Mechanics.

1. Introduction

In contemporary art and media, video games have gradually become an important way to explore complex social and environmental issues. Through unique storytelling, visual designs, and interactive mechanics, many video games have transcended the scope of traditional entertainment and become cultural tools that encourage players to think deeply [1]. In this essay, I will compare and analyse how *Journey* [2] and ABZÛ [3] express environmental themes through visual design, game mechanics, and narrative structure. *Journey* (2012) and *ABZÛ* (2016) are representative works in the independent game industry, celebrated for their artistic innovation and environmental focus. Both games offer unique insights into how environmental themes can be communicated through narrative and interaction, providing valuable case studies for exploring the role of games in environmental communication. They explore the relationship between humans and nature and raise people's ecological awareness in symbolic and direct ways. *Journey* uses a desert journey to represent the smallness and loneliness of humans in nature symbolically. On the other hand, *ABZÛ* invites players to explore a vibrant underwater world and directly reflects the complexity of marine ecosystems and how human activities affect them. Even though these two games differ in their expression, they both use their game forms and structures to guide players to think about the harmony between humans and nature.

2. Video Games as Environmental Communication

Literature and films often reflect the relationship between humans and nature through narrative storytelling. However, video games, as an interactive medium, allow players to engage directly with environmental topics from a first-person perspective [4]. By interacting with virtual environments, players move from being passive observers to active participants in ecological narratives. This highly immersive experience gives video games a unique advantage in environmental communication. For example, in *The Last of Us* (2013), players experience a world affected by ecological disasters and human survival struggles. This immersive experience enables players to feel the emotional weight of the characters and the urgency of the environment, thereby reflecting on the impact of human actions toward nature [5]. Similarly, *Journey* and *ABZÛ* use visual and mechanical design to guide players to think about their relationship with nature.

In Bogost's "unit operation" theory provides an essential framework for analysing the mechanics and meaning of video games. He believes that games express complex ideas and narratives through their structural units (unit operations), which sets them apart from traditional media [6]. For instance, the character of the "traveller" in *Journey* is not only the protagonist of the game but also a symbol of the relationship between human exploration and nature. The player's interaction with the environment during the exploration process directly affects the narrative direction of the game. Furthermore, Calleja's "Player Involvement Model" emphasises the multidimensional nature of immersion, including kinesthetic, emotional, and spatial involvement [1]. In *ABZÛ*, players can freely swim and explore various underwater areas while interacting with marine life. This mechanic not only enhances immersion but also allows players to appreciate the fragility and beauty of marine ecosystems. These theories help understand how *Journey* and *ABZÛ* use design, narrative, and interaction to express environmental themes.

Environmental communication theory also provides important background support for ecological narratives in video games. In *Playing Nature*, Alenda Chang explains how games enable players to simulate and explore ecosystems, fostering environmental awareness and encouraging players to rethink their relationship with nature [7]. This approach complements *Journey*'s metaphorical exploration of natural forces and *ABZÛ*'s strategy of directly representing marine ecosystems. For instance, *ABZÛ* prompts players to focus on marine conservation by allowing them to experience the beauty and complexity of the ocean environment. This exploration is not just an understanding of environmental issues; it is also an emotional experience that encourages players to reflect on their roles and responsibilities within the ecosystem.

3. *Journey*: Symbolism and Cooperative Play

Journey is an adventure game developed by Thatgamecompany and released in 2012. The player takes on the role of a mysterious traveller, crossing a vast desert with the goal of reaching a shining mountain in the distance. The game is known for its minimalist geometric art style, soft colours, and atmospheric music. This design makes the desert environment seem empty but full of metaphors, symbolising humanity's smallness and loneliness when facing nature. During the journey, players may meet other travellers, but there is no language in the game. Players can only communicate through simple musical notes to form a symbolic partnership. This non-verbal interaction design adds emotional depth to the game, and highlights the connection between humanity and nature.

4. *ABZÛ*: Direct Ecological Engagement

ABZÛ was developed by Giant Squid Studios and released in 2016. The player takes on the role of a diver in a vibrant underwater world, exploring marine ecosystems and restoring the ecological balance of the ocean. *ABZÛ*'s visual design features rich colours and delicate marine creatures, showing the diversity and complexity of ocean ecology. In the game, players can interact with various fish species, experiencing the behaviours of marine life. This interaction is a part of the game mechanics, and it can immerse players in the importance of ocean conservation. In addition, the game employs silent storytelling and visual symbols, such as damaged underwater structures and scenes of cleaning ecological pollution, to reflect the impact of human activities on marine environments [8].

Since its release, *Journey* has been widely acclaimed for its emotional storytelling and cooperative mechanics. According to Metacritic, the game holds a score of 92 on the PS4 platform, showing its success in fostering emotional resonance and artistic immersion. Furthermore, its producer, Jenova Chen, stated that *Journey* was designed to explore emotional connections between humans through cooperative mechanics, which aligns closely with the "unity and coexistence" in the environmental theme. Similarly, *ABZÛ* has demonstrated significant educational value and ecological messaging impact. On the Steam platform, over 90% of player reviews praise the game's ecological storytelling and visual design, highlighting its effectiveness in raising awareness about marine conservation. These data illustrate the actual impact of *ABZÛ* in environmental education and emotional transmission.

5. Comparative Analysis

5.1. Narrative Mechanisms

In terms of narrative mechanisms. Narrative mechanisms refer to the structural means used to tell stories in media works, including the arrangement of events, the interaction of characters, and the design of plot development [9]. In video games, narrative mechanisms can be implemented through level design, environmental clues, and player choices to enhance immersion and convey meaning. *Journey* uses a nonlinear and metaphorical narrative mechanism, revealing the story through the player's exploration of the environment. The desert, mountains, and storms are not merely backdrops but symbolic elements. Also, the game does not have clear text narration or dialogue, and players need to understand the story through clues in the environment, such as ruins, murals (Fig.1), and changes in terrain. In *Journey*, there are many relics of prosperous civilisations, but they have been eroded by wind and sand for a long time. Each tombstone is dotted with tombstones where pioneer travellers rest. Every time a tombstone is lit, a tall white-robed man will be awakened, and a mural recording this ruined civilisation will be displayed. Murals are an important part of the journey. They depict the history of the world, the rise and fall of civilisations, and the meaning of the player's journey through metaphors and symbols. The murals show that this world was once a prosperous civilisation, with the development of resources and the advancement of technology. However, as civilisation developed, a war was imminent, the natural environment seemed to be destroyed, civilisation gradually declined, and the desert covered the once prosperous world. Although Journey does not directly talk about ecological protection like *ABZÛ*, the murals in the game show the industrialisation of the world and the loss of harmony with nature, which has a potential connection with the environmental theme.

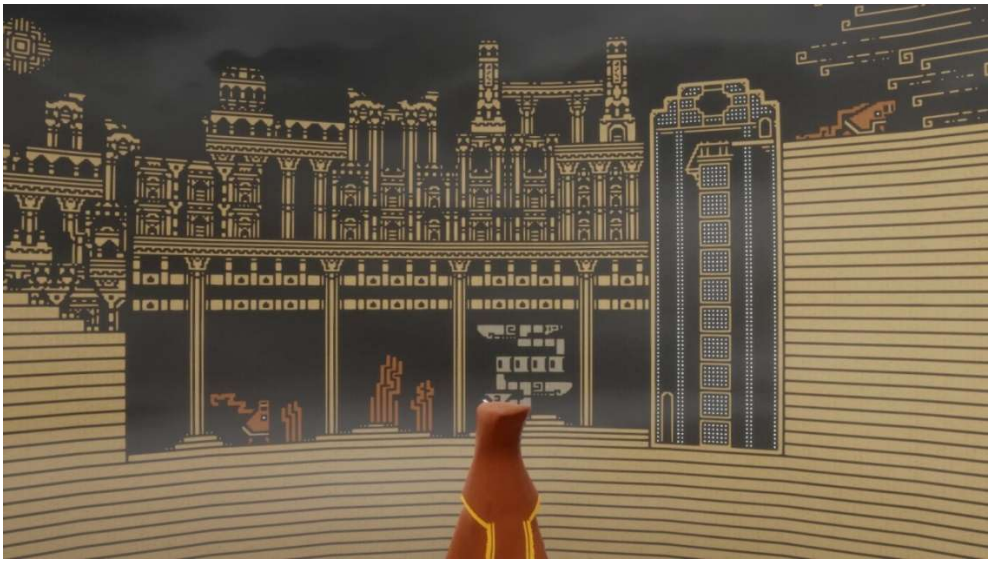


Fig.1 *Journey*'s murals

5.2. Ecological Restoration and Narrative

Unlike *Journey*'s more metaphorical narrative, *ABZÛ* emphasises human destruction and restoration of the ecology through specific plots. Visual cues and environmental changes depict the destructive impact of human activities and the potential for ecological restoration. For example, in the middle of the game, players explore a water area occupied by technological ruins, and the surrounding environment gradually changes from vibrant coral reefs to desolate deep sea. The existence of technological ruins implies damage to human activities to ecology, and the player's task is to gradually restore the health of ecology through actions such as unlocking mechanisms and cleaning up pollution. And the impressive ending of the game, the player releases the vitality of the ocean by destroying the mechanical facilities that represent human destruction. The moment he jumps out of the sea on the back of a blue whale, it seems that the entire ocean is alive. *ABZÛ*'s narrative mechanism allows players to directly participate in the process of environmental restoration in the game through clear visual cues, which not only provides players with a sense of satisfaction but also encourages them to consider how to take actions in the real world to maintain harmony between humans and nature.

When I compared these two narrative methods, Journey offered a more philosophical exploration of humanity's connection with nature, while *ABZÛ* was more educational, emphasising the importance of addressing ecological issues. These complementary narratives illustrate the diverse ways storytelling can convey environmental themes.

5.3. Hero's Journey Framework

Both Journey and *ABZÛ* incorporate elements of the "Hero's Journey," a narrative framework popularised by Joseph Campbell, which consists of leaving the ordinary world, facing challenges, undergoing transformation, and returning with newfound wisdom [10]. In *Journey*, the player plays the role of a traveller departing from a starting point, traversing deserts, ruins, and storms, and ultimately reaching the mountain with strong symbolic meaning. This narrative clearly follows the structure of the "Hero's Journey", especially through changes in the environment and gradually escalating challenges. It reflects the player's transformation from an ordinary person to a completer. Similarly, *ABZÛ* uses a comparable framework. Players begin in a vibrant marine ecosystem, discover the truth that the ecosystem is destroyed by technological waste, and achieve ecological reconstruction by solving puzzles and destroying mechanical facilities. This mirrors the "challenge–solution–return" sequence characteristic of the Hero's Journey.

Although the "Hero's Journey" has advantages in constructing engaging narratives, it also introduces several limitations. When playing *Journey* and *ABZÛ*, I appreciated the narrative compactness provided by the Hero's Journey framework, but I also noticed how it tended to simplify the portrayal of nature. This framework, though effective in engaging players, might reduce the complexity of human–nature relationships to a linear arc, limiting its ability to explore the nuances of ecological themes. In the "Hero's Journey" framework, nature often serves as a challenge or backdrop rather than as an independent subject. This perspective may weaken the role of nature as the core of the narrative. For example, in *Journey*, elements like deserts and storms are portrayed as obstacles for the player to overcome rather than autonomous forces with intrinsic value. Such depictions may encourage players to view nature as a problem rather than a partner or independent existence. In addition, the "Hero's Journey" typically follows a clear beginning, middle, and end. This linear narrative may not be entirely suitable for the complexity of environmental themes. In *ABZÛ*, while players successfully repair ecosystems, the game does not fully demonstrate that the long-term balance of the ecosystem requires continuous efforts. This simplification may underestimate the multifaceted and dynamic nature of real-world environmental challenges.

5.4. Orientalism and Cultural Representation

The desert landscapes, ruined buildings, and silent storytelling of Journey remind many players of the desert culture of the Middle East or North Africa. This "exotic" visual style may have Orientalist overtones, which is the romanticisation and mystification of Eastern culture from a Western perspective [11]. The desert, depicted as a mysterious and desolate environment, serves as a symbolic challenge for players to overcome without involving its real ecological or cultural significance. This representation may reinforce Western culture's stereotypes of the desert, while ignoring its value as a complex ecosystem. Ruins and mysterious murals further enhance the ancient and mysterious atmosphere, suggesting a lost glorious civilisation, but without exploring its specific cultural connotations.

In contrast, *ABZÛ* mainly focuses on marine ecosystems, adopting a more globalised and universal narrative style. While underwater ruins in the game might draw inspiration from ancient civilisations (e.g., Mayan or Greek), they do not deliberately highlight the over-romanticization of a particular culture, but serve more as background elements to reflect the environmental theme. *ABZÛ*'s narrative also tends to be more global and universal. Although its visual design references multiple cultures, the game mainly revolves around ecological protection and does not focus on a specific culture as the core narrative. This approach reduces possible Orientalist tendencies.

5.5. Game Mechanics Comparison

Speaking of game mechanics, game mechanics are the core of video games. They define the player's behaviour patterns and can convey profound themes through interaction. The core mechanics of *Journey* are exploration. Players explore the desert by jumping and gliding and gradually approach the distant mountain. This simple operation complements the game's minimalist visual style, emphasising the importance of the environment and the player's sense of concentration [12]. It is worth noting that the game does not have clear mission prompts, and players need to rely on visual cues to determine the direction, such as the bright light shining on the distant mountain peaks, attracting players to move forward. This design guides players to pay attention to the environment rather than completing the "mission" in traditional games. For example, in one scene, the player must cross a storm area in the desert, and the strong wind will constantly push the player back, forcing them to find shelter. At this time, the player can observe the terrain, find shelter, and avoid the force of the wind. This mechanism simulates the constraints of natural forces on human actions, reminding players that nature should not be conquered but needs to be respected.

5.6. Cooperative Mechanics

Another key mechanic in *Journey* is cooperation through non-verbal communication (Fig.2), which I think is a unique experience in this game. Players may encounter other players during their journey. The two parties cannot communicate through text or voice but can only attract each other's attention by making simple notes or movements. You don't know who the other party is (but after completing the game, you will have the ID of the people you met along the way), when they will leave, and whether you can go to the end together. These encounters are unpredictable. The cooperation mechanics guide players to reflect on the collective responsibility of human beings in nature by simulating the interaction between people. In *Journey*, the vast desert and endless mountains symbolise the grandeur and irresistibility of nature, and the player appears small and lonely in it. However, when another player appears, this sense of loneliness is broken and replaced by a sense of collective power. This design implies that humans need to find a way to survive in the face of natural forces through cooperation. The cooperation mechanics make players realise that environmental protection is not a one-person job. In the game, we completed seemingly difficult tasks through simple actions, but human unity and action may be the key to responding to the global environmental crisis. However, on the other hand, while non-verbal cooperation is unique, its interactive depth is limited. Interactions between players are limited to simple "calling" and following, and more complex collaboration or decision-making is not possible. This design may lack long-term appeal or practical significance for some players.



Fig.2 *Journey*'s non-verbal communication

The core mechanics of *ABZÛ* focus on the free exploration and restoring polluted sea areas. Players can swim through underwater environments, interact with marine life, and complete tasks like cleaning polluted areas or freeing trapped animals. These actions immerse players in the role of an active participant in environmental conservation. Near the end of the game, the protagonist evolves and smashes the technological waste in the ocean, releasing the damaged ecosystem. This design allows players to realise the impact of human activities on the marine ecology in reality, and experience the sense of accomplishment of protecting nature by completing tasks. *ABZÛ*'s unique "meditation mode (Fig.3)" also deeply reflects the environmental theme. There are many stone statues in the game that activate meditation points. In meditation mode, players can switch to a close-up observation of particular creature around them and observe the underwater world as they swim. This mechanism allows players to break away from the game's objective mission temporarily and simply appreciate the natural behaviour of marine life. Players can watch fish forming intricate networks around the coral, showcasing the interdependence of marine species. This mechanic encourages players to appreciate the beauty and complexity of nature. In meditation mode, I found myself willing to stay for a long time to observe the behaviour of each creature and the scenery on the seabed. This static interaction highlights how modern life often limits opportunities to observe nature, and this observation itself can also inspire a sense of responsibility for environmental protection to a certain extent.



Fig.3 *ABZÛ*'s "meditation mode"

5.7. Aesthetic Expression

In terms of game aesthetics, *Journey*'s visual style (Fig.4) is known for its simplicity and expressiveness. The desert environment is presented through clean geometric shapes and soft colours, creating a world that feels vast and mysterious. This minimalist design emphasises the player's experience of loneliness and exploring the unknown [12]. The wind and sand in the desert, the reflection of sunlight, and the natural curves of the sand dunes all guide players to feel the majesty and vastness of nature. This visual expression increases the immersion of the environment, and it implies the meaning of the journey through the openness of space - the insignificance and hope of human beings in the face of nature. Every time the character climbs a sand dune or faces a storm, I feel this sense of loneliness. This visual language reminds me of how humans are forced to face environmental changes, and it also made me think about the position of individuals in nature. The design of the game does not directly convey the intention of protecting the environment. However, it indirectly guides players to pay attention to ecological issues through the power of nature. At the same time, the colour changes of the game screen also reflect the environmental theme of the game. At first, the golden hue of the desert symbolises the beauty and tranquillity of nature, but as the journey deepens, the colour of the desert gradually becomes brighter and finally reaches pure white at the top of the mountain. This transition symbolises the process of players exploring nature and seeking inner balance.

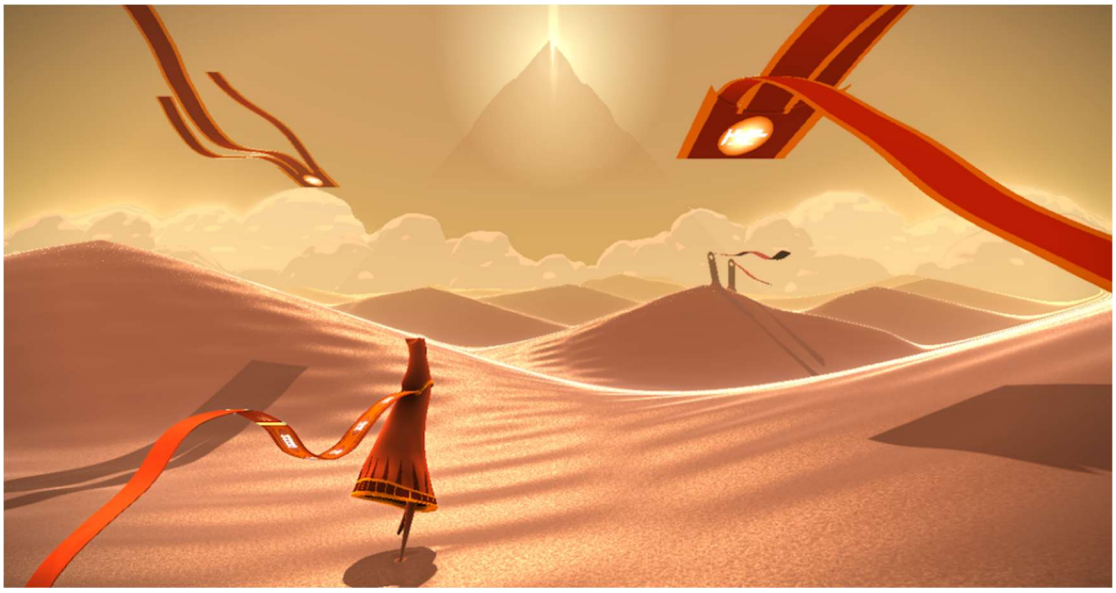


Fig.4 *Journey*

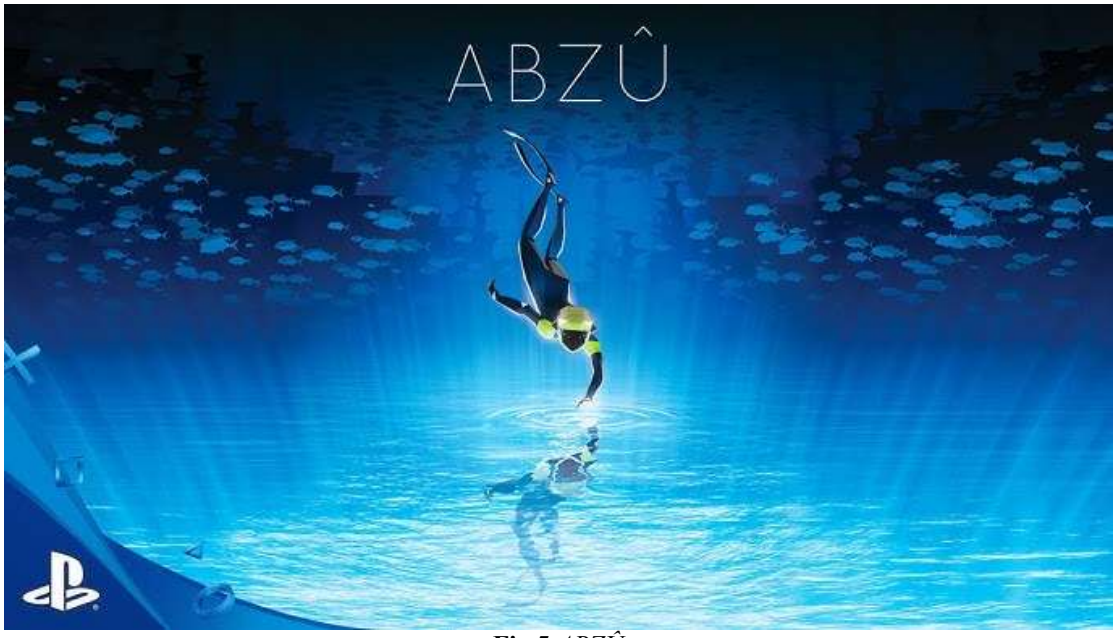


Fig.5 *ABZÛ*

In contrast to Journey's desert environment, *ABZÛ* (Fig.5) shows the richness and complexity of marine ecosystems through a vibrant underwater world. Every scene is filled with intricate details, from the slight changes in the coral reefs to the flow of fish, illustrating a lively and thriving ecosystem. Through this meticulous design, players can be attracted by the richness of colours and the diversity of creatures, and realise that the real ocean also carries so much life. When

discovering polluted waters or broken ecosystems in the game, this contrast allows players to feel the urgency of environmental issues more deeply. *ABZÛ* also uses dynamic lighting and shadows to convey emotional depth. At different depths, the interaction of light and water creates stunning visual effects that make the underwater world feel more authentic. This not only enhances player immersion but also reinforces the theme of ocean conservation. For instance, in deep-sea areas, the dimly lit environment contrasts sharply with the glowing bioluminescent creatures, emphasising the diversity and importance of marine ecosystems [8]. *Journey* and *ABZÛ* take different approaches to visual design. They both have different focuses on expressing the environmental theme, but both succeed in conveying it. *Journey* tends to be abstract in expression, triggering players' indirect thinking about ecological issues through metaphors and emotions, while *ABZÛ* uses a more intuitive approach, clearly conveying the theme of environmental protection by showing the contrast between the fragility of the marine ecology and pollution.

6. Conclusion

The two games have different focuses in their expressions, but both reflect the complexity of ecological issues and show the multi-level connection between humans and nature. By analysing the narrative, visual and mechanical aspects of the two games, we can have a more comprehensive understanding of their role and significance in environmental communication. *Journey* uses metaphorical narrative and emotional design to guide players to reflect on the power of nature and the fragility of human beings. Through loneliness, cooperation mechanisms and environmental metaphors, the game focuses more on the spiritual aspects of the relationship between man and nature, which is suitable for triggering deep emotional resonance and philosophical reflection. *ABZÛ* shows players the dynamic process from marine environmental destruction to restoration through specific ecological restoration tasks and intuitive visual comparisons. This design is intuitive and educational, suitable for enhancing players' awareness and action awareness of real environmental problems.

References

[1] G. Calleja, In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2011.

[2] Thatgamecompany, Journey [Video Game], PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, PC, 2012.

[3] Giant Squid Studios, ABZÛ [Video Game], PlayStation 4, PC, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, 2016.

[4] I. Bogost, Persuasive games: The expressive power of videogames, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2007.

[5] G. Farca, C. Ladevèze, The journey to nature: The Last of Us as critical dystopia, Green Mediography (2016).

[6] I. Bogost, Unit operations: An approach to videogame criticism, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2006.

[7] A. Chang, Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2019.

[8] K. Salen, E. Zimmerman, Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2004.

[9] M.-L. Ryan, Narrative Across Media: The Languages of Storytelling, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE, 2004.

[10] J. Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, New World Library, Novato, CA, 2008.

[11] E. Said, Orientalism, Pantheon Books, New York, 1978.

[12] J. Newman, Videogames, second ed., Routledge, London, 2013.