Common Features of the Illusion of a Companion in Single-player Video Games: The Last Guardian and Uncharted 4: A Thief's End

Bakalářská práce

Studijní program: B7507 Specializace v pedagogice
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                        Španělský jazyk se zaměřením na vzdělávání

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TECHNICKÁ UNIVERZITA V LIBERCI
Fakulta přírodovědně-humanitní a pedagogická

Zadání bakalářské práce

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Zásady pro vypracování:

Práce analyzuje jak postavy v roli společníka ve videohrách The Last Guardian a Uncharted 4: A Thief's End vytváří iluzi společníka ve hráči, ačkoli jsou ve skutečnosti kontrolovány umělou inteligencí. Práce si klade za cíl zjistit, jestli tyto postavy mají určité společné rysy ve hrách, které jsou příklady odlišných žánrů.

Metody:
1. Studium odborné literatury.
2. Analýza her z pohledu interakcí mezi hráčem a postavou společníka.
3. Porovnání hry z pohledu iluze osobního společníka.

Rozsah grafických prací:	dle potřeby
Rozsah pracovní zprávy:	40
Forma zpracování práce:	tištěná/elektronická
Jazyk práce:	Angličtina

Seznam odborné literatury:

Eichenbaum, Adam, Daphne Bavelier and Shawn C Green. 2014. „Video Games: Play That Can Do Serious Good" American Journal of Play 7 (1): 50-72.

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Datum zadání práce:	30. dubna 2018
Předpokládaný termín odevzdání:	30. dubna 2019

L.S.

prof. RNDr. Jan Picek, CSc.　　　　　　　　PhDr. Marcela Malá, M.A., Ph.D.
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5. července 2020   Adéla Fulková

Poděkování

Děkuji mému vedoucímu práce panu Mgr. Zénó Vernyikovi, Ph.D. za cenné rady při tvorbě této práce a zejména také za umožnění tohoto tématu, které mi je blízké a o kterém se mi dobře psalo. Dále chci poděkovat mým rodičům a přátelům z TUL, a to Kristýně Fišerové, Lucii Kočové a Zuzaně Valešové, za jejich podporu a slova povzbuzení, které mi proces tvorby této bakalářské práce nejednou zpříjemnily.

Anotace

Tato práce se zabývá společnými rysy iluze osobního společníka ve videohrách pro jednoho hráče a porovnává hry The Last Guardian a Uncharted 4: A Thief's End, které takového digitálního společníka obsahují. Mou hypotézou je, že ačkoliv jsou obě hry velmi odlišné, co se společníků týče, budou jejich umělou inteligencí ovládané postavy mít určité rysy společné.

Klíčová slova

Osobní společník, interaktivita, nezávislost, postava, spolupráce, umělá inteligence, videohry, vztah.

Annotation

This thesis deals with the common features of the illusion of companionship in single-player video games and compares the games The Last Guardian and Uncharted 4: A Thief's End, which contain such digital companions. My hypothesis is that although both games are very different in terms of companions, their artificial intelligence-controlled characters will have certain features in common.

Keywords

Artificial intelligence, character, companion, cooperation, independence, interactivity, relationship, video games.

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1. Introduction

Video games have played an important part in my life from a very young age. Whether I set on a journey with my Pokémon on GameBoy Color or collecting gems and saving the magical realms as a purple dragon on PlayStation 1, those digital worlds and adventures have always brought me joy, inspiration, and characters and stories to love. To a certain degree, they affect who I am as a person, as I believe they are some of the many aspects that shape my beliefs, values and my personality.

I grew up playing mostly single-player video games on PlayStation consoles. While multiplayer games focus mostly on the interactions between real people who are either working towards a common goal or fighting against each other to see who comes out on top, single-player games often put story, characters and gameplay first. Having said that, one hardly ever feels truly alone even in single-player games. The reason for this are scripted or AI-controlled characters.

In this thesis, I focus on one specific type of such characters, namely the player's companions. While they may not be controlled by a real person, they make the player feel like they are not alone on their journey. They can be right there with the player helping them access areas they would not be able to reach without them (like Trico in *The Last Guardian*), or they can be only providing hints, tips and filling the silence with jokes and stories at times even being "physically" elsewhere, communicating through a walkie-talkie that the player carries while walking around the environment (like Delilah in *Firewatch*).

As years have passed, technology has evolved to have companions who have arguably gotten smarter, more independent, interactive and life-like. Better artificial intelligence allows them to behave in their own different ways and make them stand out from the others, each one being special. Many of them have become very elaborate characters with their own backstories whose popularity sometimes surpasses those of the played characters and finishing the game leaves one with a feeling of losing a real friend.

This thesis thus focuses on the interactions between the player and the in-game companions in single-player video games who create the illusion of a real partner despite being controlled by the computer, and finding out whether there are any

common features by comparing two games (*The Last Guardian* and *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*) that each provide completely different kinds of companions. My theory is that by comparing the two games, despite being very different, we will find out that both games' companions share certain similar traits such as high level of interactivity with the player's character, the ability to act independently, providing active support in and out of combat and that they are a necessary component of the game the player needs in order to successfully reach the end of it.

2. Video Games and Their Popularity

Video games have changed significantly since the time of the first computer capable of running one in 1940 (Kondrat 2015, 171). Besides becoming more complex, they are also more accessible than ever as even mobile phones offer a large variety of different styles of both free and paid games and applications developed by well-known companies and smaller indie developers. Playing video games has thus become a very popular leisure activity primarily for adolescents and young adults (Finke et al. 2018, 672).

Over time, they have become a heated subject of many discussions and debates. Video games allow the players to get immersed in a different world and do things otherwise impossible. Their virtually endless possibilities and genres might also contribute to shaping one's personality or teaching one something new in both a positive and a negative sense (Kondrat 2015, 172) depending on the game and the person's state of mind, hence the still widespread claim that "video games cause violence".

In recent years, however, researchers have been investigating not only the negative, but also the positive and educational effects of video games (Finke et al. 2018, 673). Some of the examples of their positive impact are the use of video games in rehabilitation processes, more specifically the Nintendo Wii, to improve the patients' physical fitness (Kho et al. 2012, 219.e2) and improvements in perception and cognition that come from playing action video games with a lot of fast motion requiring an intensified usage of multiple skills at once, such as keeping track of many items simultaneously and actively using peripheral vision (Eichenbaum et al. 2014, 54).

While movies or books tell stories one can only passively witness, video games need the player's participation, making them a medium with a new twist on the traditional way of narrating a tale (Homan and Homan 2014, 169-170). As one is a participant of the story, the video game experience is very immersive and personal.

Modern video games offer increasingly complex worlds to explore filled with constantly improving computer-controlled characters. Those may serve either as enemies, support characters or travel buddies who accompany, help, interact with

and lead the player on their adventures. "Human-level AI can also recreate the experience of playing with and against humans without a network connection" (Laird et al. 2001, 16). The importance of the role of the AI-controlled partners has been increasing and it has become one of the marketing factors of new video games (Laird et al. 2001, 17) who often pride themselves on them.

Most AAA single-player video games (games developed by mid-sized or major publishers with higher budgets) that put story above gameplay take generally longer to finish than it would take to watch an average movie, allowing the player to get to know the world, the protagonist, the characters and the story better and explore it much deeper than it would ever be possible within a movie's three hours or less, in other words, allowing for deeper immersion. Connected with that, many video games today feature multiple endings with several branching story paths that lead to them depending on the player's decisions, linking their actions with consequences that they have to face (VerBruggen 2012, 558).

As a result, video games have become so influential as a phenomenon that they directly influence other, more traditional media. Some video games have made their way onto the cinema screens, introducing their stories and characters to movie audiences. While not every game's story can be adapted well to the movie format and pacing, games like *Silent Hill (2006)*, *Resident Evil (2002), Pokémon (*2D animated films or *Detective Pikachu, 2019)* or *Tomb Raider (2001)* seem to have tackled that task with vigour. When the film successfully captures the spirit of the video game, it is likely to appeal to both the average movie-goers and the game's long-term fans.

3. Video Games as an Interactive Form of Art

When one looks at modern video games, the answer to the question whether they can be considered art seems clear to some. Roger Ebert, for example, argues against it. The film critic wrote a blog entry in 2010 stating that "video games can never be art" and used the definitions of "art" and "video games" to support his opinion. By contrast, in 2012 the Smithsonian American Art Museum debuted an exhibition called "The Art of Video Games", exploring their history and celebrating them as an artistic medium (VerBruggen 2012, 553).

They have thus become more than just a distraction from everyday life; they are a form of expression through which the players can experience complex stories, make decisions that have consequences and explore fantastic worlds. Most video games also accompany their visuals with their own original soundtrack that is often comparable to those created for movies (VerBruggen 2012, 560).

Many game developers today use also motion-capture technology as means of animation. It is a process of recording objects or people (actors) and using those recordings to animate 2D or 3D character models. It is also referred to as "performance capture" when used to record facial expressions or finger movements. Thanks to this technology, the characters on screen can portray human expressions accurately and their body movements look much more natural (VerBruggen 2012, 554), making the characters a lot more believable and life-like. They are brought to life by professional actors whose movements are replicated and who often lend their likeness to the 3D models as well (to some degree, or completely) and act out the characters' movements the same way they would act in a scene in a movie or on the theatre stage with everything being transferred directly into the digital medium for the future players to witness and control, unlike in a movie where the viewer can only passively watch.

Daniel and Sidney Homan compare video games to interactive theatre and give the example of the video game called *Heavy Rain* (2010) which is an interactive drama and action-adventure game written by David Cage. It is a "choose your own adventure" type of game that contains multiple endings and four main characters whose fates intertwine when they get involved with the latest case of the "Origami

Killer". The player takes control of each of the four characters and the game starts off by getting them do simple everyday tasks like brushing teeth, dressing up or working on a project. They also have access to the characters' "thoughts" that they can check at any time as they change during the progression through each level. Later on when the situation worsens and the stakes are high, there are action-packed sequences like a car chase, a break-in or an escape from a burning house. Homan states that Cage's emphasis on those mundane tasks at the start of the game is there so that the players can identify themselves with the characters.

The game puts the player in front of many difficult decisions. Will they do immoral actions to save the main protagonist's son, or will they refuse and try to succeed the harder way with fewer leads to follow? After all, *Heavy Rain*'s main and the most prominent question is: "How far will you go to save someone you love?" By being able to make those choices and shape the story's course, the player becomes both an actor of the story, as well as the playwright (Homan and Homan 2014, 176-181).

Daniel and Sidney Homan explain how video games differ from the more traditional story-narrating mediums:

"But whereas novels—at least until the interactive e-book is born—and movies are limited by constraints of time and technology, a video game like Heavy Rain offers interactive spaces uniting the best of all narrative arts into a complex emotional experience. Here, adventure and split timing, or the dexterity of the controller, give way to a heightened role for the player with psychological dimensions and to a world onscreen that, in many ways, becomes a mirror for that player's own reality," (Homan and Homan 2014, 176).

Video games thus offer a very unique kind of experience with artistic features both behind their development process and directly in the game for the player to enjoy. Be it through the actors' performances that bring the playable (and non-playable) characters to life or through the ability to shape the story's course like only the playwright normally could, video games stand out among other forms of art thanks to their significant interactivity.

4. Video Game Companions in Single-player Games

a) About Artificial Intelligence in Video Games

Artificial intelligence, when it comes to video games, is a broad conception. Video games have played a significant part in the advancement of AI. The first game to use artificial intelligence was tic-tac-toe in the 1950s, which was followed by chess and checkers (Scharre et al. 2018, 7). Since those times, AI has gotten considerably smarter and able to fulfil more complex tasks (8), and video games can now offer virtual worlds with characters for players to dynamically interact with (Laird et al. 2001, 16).

It is possible to divide a video game into two aspects: the game and the context. By "game" we can understand the problems the player has to solve and the challenges they need to overcome (rules and objectives), while by "context" we talk about the plot and the characters – the setting in which the player solves those problems (Safadi et al. 2015, 1). These characters with a human-level AI "can expand the types of experiences people have playing computer games by introducing synthetic intelligent characters with their own goals, knowledge, and capabilities" (Laird et al. 2001, 16).

Modern video games with large and rich worlds require characters with complex skills and abilities, but creating such an autonomous agent is a challenge (Safadi et al. 2015, 1). They differ across game genres (that are often hybrids of several ones), but the basic differentiation of their roles remains the same: enemies, support, partners, strategic opponents and commentators (Laird et al. 2001, 18).

b) AI-controlled Companions in General

Computer-controlled partners who accompany the player appear in a considerable number of video games. Many games contain a human companion who is able to directly interact with the player and respond to their actions (such as the companions

in the *Uncharted* franchise), other games' AI-controlled sidekicks may only serve as a means of transport (for example horses in *Red Dead Redemption*) or an indicator of health (like Sparx the dragonfly in *Spyro the Dragon*).

While each video game is different and unique, they have certain concepts in common based on their genres. Despite that, the AI that each game uses is individually developed and therefore different, which makes it "difficult to create thoroughly robust AI because its development is constrained to the scope of an individual game project" (Safadi et al. 2015, 1).

Important aspects of these characters are cooperation and coordination between the player and the companion. Their interactions are more restricted than those between two human players due to the limitation to only being able to use certain commands such as "follow me" or "attack". Human-level AI partners must also adapt to the environment, respond in a human-like way and adapt to the player and other support characters (Laird et al. 2001, 23).

5. About The Last Guardian

a) General Information

The Last Guardian is a PlayStation 4 exclusive action-adventure video game developed and published by Sony Interactive Entertainment. The game tells the story of a player-controlled "Boy" and his very unusual companion – a giant mythical creature called Trico. Trico is described as the "Great Man-Eating Eagle" (Suttner and Murray 2017, 20) and is an animal feared by the people of that fictional world which makes their friendship even more extraordinary. The boy and Trico soon find out that they need each other to get out of the "Nest", a place that can only be escaped by flying out of it. Together they need to overcome the hardships and enemies of that world and destroy the mysterious source of power at the core of the place's tallest tower so the boy can be brought back home to his village.

The game begins with the boy waking up in a cave area. He is covered in peculiar markings and does not remember how he got there. In front of him lies a great beast chained to the ground, half of its mask is missing, one of its horns is broken off and it has spears stuck in its body. The animal is visibly hurt and weak but it still lashes out at the boy when he comes too close. The boy (the player) needs to explore the area and find barrels to feed Trico and remove the spears from its back which proves to be a difficult task resulting in the boy falling unconscious as Trico kicks him off its back. Trico wakes the boy up the next morning and it is no longer angry or afraid of him. That is when their friendship and their journey begin.

Their bond is a fundamental factor of the game and it evolves as the player progresses through the story. As the bond strengthens, Trico is more likely to obey the boy's commands and even learns new ones later in the game. However, Trico's unique AI was developed to make it act like a real animal which means that it will not always listen to the boy's wishes, making them rather suggestions than actual orders, contributing to making Trico its own living character in the game. Both characters have their own ways to get around and interact with the environment but in most cases they need each other's help to progress further and face the odds.

Throughout the game, the boy's attitude towards the mythical beast changes and the player gets to witness it forging in real time. Be it through the few lines of dialogue coming from the boy or through the more obvious action, the game's main core, the bond between the boy and Trico, grows with every scene they spend together and thus makes the game a very special experience.

b) The Companion

Trico is the player's only companion in the game. With its unique behaviour and an unusual design, Trico was made in a way so that it "should be an animal with a mystique, while at the same time be real enough that you could think it's an animal that actually exists" (Suttner and Murray 2017, 21).

The huge beast looks like a combination of several different animals; it unites features of a dog, a cat and a bird. Trico's muzzle looks like a soft beak that despite having no teeth can crush wooden barrels quite easily. Its eyes can change colour and show the animal's mood, they are a useful indicator of its temper. On top of its head there is a pair of big ears and horns that curve forwards. Trico's body is covered in 20 420 grey feathers (Suttner and Murray 2017, 21) that get darker towards the tail. Feathers also cover the wings that start off broken but regenerate throughout the story. Both the front and back legs show bare skin and are similar to those of a bird and have three fingers with claws.

Trico's movement animations were based on cats which also suits its lean, long body. It is able to leap to great heights and jump from one edge to another effortlessly, just like cats can do. Over 2500 animations contribute to making Trico a very vivid and lifelike character (Suttner and Murray 2017, 22) who is able to react and respond to many things that the player may do.

One of Trico's abilities the player gets to use in the game is lightning that it shoots out of its tail tip. It reacts to a light shining from a green "mirror" the boy finds early in the game and it can be used to open new areas or to fight the possessed armour suits. However, Trico's body language suggests that it is terrified of this power despite being the source of it which might make some players refrain from using it unless necessary.

Its artificial intelligence (AI) is one of the most interesting aspects of the game and the main part of Trico's identity. There are very few scripted scenes or paths for the beast to follow, most of the time it reacts to the player's directions or acts upon its own curiosity. Thanks to that, not a single playthrough is completely the same. The AI combines obedience with free will to mimic a real animal and to ensure that Trico truly feels like its own being that accompanies the player because it wants to.

Whether Trico obeys the player's wishes depends on each situation. Some parts of the game are made to guarantee that Trico does not listen to the player's commands no matter the effort (for example when Trico is fixed on a strange green mist and its scent coming from a large pot), other times the animal might just be too distracted by a flock of birds flying around, or it finds the orders too confusing or inaccurate.

At the beginning of the game, Trico only knows how to respond to the boy calling its name and understands it as a command to come over. As the player progresses through the story and spends more time with Trico, it learns new commands. The game introduces this ability in a moment where the boy's leadership is needed to progress. It is through the narrator who says: "The beast could not find a way forward. But we had come so far together. And in so doing, we had developed a bond. A mutual understanding that offered us a way of escape." Each command, like direction, jump, attack and others, issued by the boy is accompanied by an animation that helps the animal understand what to do (pointing, jumping, stomping, etc.) so the closer Trico is to the boy and the better it can see him, the more likely it is to obey.

Trico wanders around the environment on its own but always keeps an eye on the boy from time to time. The player can call out to Trico or say its name from any distance to get its attention or to make it come closer.

The boy can climb the animal by grabbing onto its feathers and ride it or use its tail as a rope to get to places he otherwise wouldn't be able to reach. While on the beast's body, the player can also pet Trico. Purposeful yet not necessary, it is a significant mechanic in the game as it is mainly used to soothe Trico after a fight against the enemies. At the same time, the animal can be stroked at any moment as the player wishes and stroking it in different places (head, back) evokes different reactions. Trico reacts to the strokes by squinting its eyes in bliss, yawning or even falling asleep when being petted on the head in a sunny spot. Petting can also remove

the blood stains from its feathers left by spears after a fight. An example of the boy petting Trico after a stressful segment where he is saved by the beast from falling down from a collapsing tunnel placed high above the ground is shown in a YouTube video uploaded by one of the players (TheBombayMasterTony 2016). When their bond gets stronger, Trico will also occasionally come over and lower its head to the boy in an affectionate way to ask for pets and the boy will giggle, indicating to the player that it is time for this to happen.

Trico will try its best to protect the boy in dire situations which becomes very clear by the end of the game. It will fight off enemies that try to kidnap him, focusing on those closest to him at the time and sweeping them away with its mighty claws and even almost dying several times when trying to get rid of other tricos who want to attack the boy, making it a capable adventure partner the player can rely on. Luckily, Trico can take massive damage and is very durable. It also seems to heal even more serious injuries quite fast as its broken horns and wings from the start of the journey regenerate by the game's final sections.

It watches the boy carefully while the two of them are crossing areas very high up, making sure he is fine and even catches him by the robe like a kitten if the boy jumps towards Trico. If Trico doesn't manage to catch him in time, it swings its tail in the boy's direction, giving the player one more chance to grab on before falling down to the ground. Since all the actions and Trico's reactions happen in real time, its efforts to save the boy may not always work as intended and the player will have to retry from the last checkpoint if they die.

In return, the boy has to take action when they come across certain hexagonal stained glass panels in the shape of an eye. Once Trico sees them, it begins growling and backing away from them in fear and will not come near them until they are destroyed. There is no explanation why it is afraid of them but they are scattered and hung around the structures to drive the trico away and it is the unique weakness of the beast, meaning that the player needs to clear the path for their companion first when they come across them.

The player can witness character development in Trico near the end of the game. There is a moment when the boy is paralyzed by magic and captured by the Yoroi (suits of armour possessed by spirits) who are slowly taking him away and

immobilizing Trico with the glass eye panels, keeping him away. Willing to save the boy no matter what, Trico defies its biggest fear and jumps into the group of possessed armour suits and stained glass eye hexagons it could not stand seeing before. He snatches the boy and runs away as the structure under them collapses and Trico has to take flight for the first time in the game. This can be seen in a user-uploaded video on YouTube (Amnesiacps 2016, 0:00-2:00).

Both characters grow very fond of each other as the story progresses and their bond gets stronger. When they are separated and the boy is left alone, Trico can be heard whining off-screen when looking for him nearby. When the animal finds him, it starts jumping around happily. When Trico is badly hurt and unable to continue further, the boy puts his life at risk looking for barrels to feed it, climbing chains and scouring dangerous places to help Trico heal.

The two of them, however, part ways in the end. They are forced to leave each other because people of the boy's village fear the man-eating beast and do not see or understand their bond. The player's final interaction with Trico is, as the boy weakened after a fight saving the beast earlier, to send the animal away.

There is a scene after the credits that takes place several years after the game's time. It shows the green mirror half-buried in the dirt. The boy, who is now all grown up, picks it up and points it to the sky and it shines out a light. The cutscene's view follows the light and shows it travelling far away through the sky, all the way back to the *Nest*. It passes through many familiar areas the player had travelled through before and the camera stops in the cave where the game began. Suddenly there is a sound of a happy purr and a pair of glowing eyes appears in the dark. It is Trico, the boy's friend. It can sense the distant greeting, their bond is unbroken despite all the time apart.

6. About Uncharted 4: A Thief's End

a) General Information

Uncharted 4: A Thief's End is the fourth instalment in the PlayStation-exclusive action-adventure *Uncharted* games series developed by Naughty Dog and published by Sony Computer Entertainment. The game, just like the previous entries, follows the adventures of Nathan Drake (played by Nolan North), now a retired treasure hunter who seems to have settled down and is trying to lead a normal life alongside his wife Elena (Emily Rose). That changes when he is reunited with his long-lost brother Samuel Drake (Troy Baker) who seeks help finding the fabled treasure of Captain Henry Avery that he had promised to a fellow prisoner for helping Sam escape. Together with Sam and Nathan's old friend and mentor Victor Sullivan (Richard McGonagle) they travel around the globe one last time, looking for clues and hoping to find the pirate's legendary treasure, but they are not the only ones who are after it.

In addition to the action-adventure genre, the game features also puzzle, platforming, shooter, melee combat and stealth elements. Through most of the game, the characters pass through the areas on foot. They can blend in with crowds of people in cities, climb buildings, sneak around guards or fight them with large variety of different weapons, or swing to distant places or avoid enemies using the newly introduced grappling hook. But as they travel around the world and see different countries, some parts of the larger levels need to be traversed in vehicles; cars (jeep) and motor boats in particular.

The game begins on the sea with Nathan and his brother Sam driving a motor boat towards an island during a storm. They are escaping gunfire, being chased by armed thugs in other boats with one of which they collide not long after the game's opening. The story is then presented in retrospect up until the player reaches that moment again.

There are several moments like that when the story shifts either years back or forward. These time jumps are used to unite the story as a whole, provide context,

teach the player about the characters' origins and their motivations as well as explain the reason behind their surname "Drake".

Throughout the game, Nathan, Sam and Sully track the treasure to Italy, Scotland and then to Madagascar where they discover that Avery and other pirates pooled their loot. Nathan finds a map to a place called Libertalia, a fabled pirate utopia and sets that as their next destination. However, cunning Rafe Adler (Warren Kole), their former partner, and Shoreline (a private mercenary group) with Nadine (Laura Bailey) in the lead have been following in their footsteps as they are also after the treasure.

Their quest culminates in an intense sword duel between Nathan and Rafe in a closed-off room full of blinding gold on a burning ship that was hidden away in a cave with Nathan coming out victorious, using the environment to his advantage.

Nathan and Elena become new owners of the salvage company that Nate was working at and take up a job in Malaysia as they come to the conclusion that their life can never really be completely void of adventure if they want to be happy, while Sam and Sully become partners because they feel like their lives as treasure hunters are not over just yet.

The game's epilogue brings the player several years into the future and follows Cassie, Nate and Elena's daughter, waiting for her parents at their beach house with their dog. As she is exploring around, she stumbles upon artefacts from her parents' adventures (and previous games) and gets curious. When they finally come home and she starts asking about the objects, they are reluctant to tell her at first, but soon eagerly start telling her all about them, pleasantly wrapping up the *Uncharted* series.

b) The Companions

Uncharted 4: A Thief's End features multiple companions who tag along with the player-controlled Nathan Drake. They do not all follow him at once, the party changes throughout the game depending on what the story requires. Just like in the previous games of the series, they provide assistance, amusement, information, hints and company in general to help the player feel less alone during their adventures.

There are both returning and completely new characters who enrich Nathan's journey around the globe.

The familiar faces include Nathan's wife Elena Fisher, a journalist, who has been by his side since the first game as well as Victor Sullivan, a fellow treasure hunter, father figure and an elder, life-long friend.

Despite being related, Nathan's brother, Samuel Drake, is a completely new character who makes his debut very early on in the fourth game of the franchise. We learn that the reason he has never been mentioned before is that he was presumed dead. The childhood version of this character is performed by Chase Austin.

The other new companions who briefly join the party are a wealthy businessman and treasure hunter Rafe Adler who is also after the riches of Captain Henry Avery and is the game's main antagonist, and Hector Alcázar (Robin Atkin Downes), a famous drug lord Sam mentions in his break out story we get to witness through a playable flashback.

All the companions are controlled by an AI (artificial intelligence). They act as independent characters with their own unique animations, personalities and dialogue at times scripted to happen at a certain time, and at times optional. They also help during combat either by shooting, aiding Nathan while the player is struggling in a one-on-one fight or by pointing out and tagging the enemies during stealth sections. They follow the player's lead, or they show the way. While many times the characters are only there to keep the player company, there are also moments when their help is necessary for being able to continue further. When there is a ledge that is a little too high up, the player can boost their partner up there and they will help them follow by either pulling them up, dropping a ladder or finding something to use. Other times it can be something more subtle like hearing them buying you time by stalling an auction while you are trying to sabotage it in the maintenance room. All the companions no matter their age or gender can do all of those actions. One example of such moment where the companion's assistance is needed can be seen in a player-uploaded YouTube video (LordMatrim 2016, 8:55-10:10) which is directly followed by an optional dialogue (10:22).

If the player fails and dies (either in combat, during a shoot-out or by falling from a high place), the last thing we can hear is the companion calling out Nathan's name in a very distressed way.

The previously mentioned dialogue has always been a very important aspect of the *Uncharted* series. The discussions and chats feel genuine and natural with occasional jokes, bickering, reoccurring quotes and catchphrases and the use of swear words that add to the trustworthiness of the characters. The conversations happen not only during cutscenes but also during gameplay and if interrupted, they pick up from where they left off with the other allies asking about it, suggesting they wanted to hear the rest of the story or continue the conversation once the player comes back. They also comment on the scenery and objects in the environment, and if the player is stuck not knowing where to go, they show the way after a while, sometimes picking on Nathan (or the player for that matter) for being slow. For example, the brothers catch up on each other's past while they are making their way through the Italian scenery (mgarrard1128 2016).

There are moments when extra, optional dialogue can be triggered. It is often unimportant to the main story as it can be missed but it adds to the computer-controlled characters' development and background, providing us with some insight to the companions' thoughts, or allowing them to crack some extra jokes. One of these moments is on the way to the Rossi Estate where an auction is being held in Italy when Sam and Nate are trying to sneak in. Sam mentions he had missed "the little things" while he was in prison when they are walking through an orchard of lemon trees and a little speech bubble icon pops up above him, indicating that the player can continue the conversation if they choose to. Choosing to continue makes Nathan ask what Sam missed, to which he replies: *"The smell of fresh citrus, uhh, riding the motorcycle… It's little things but they add up."* There are roughly thirty minutes of optional dialogue throughout the entirety of the game, all of which can be seen in a guide video on YouTube (HarryNinetyFour 2016).

The first companion of the game is Sam, Nathan's elder brother. Nathan escapes the orphanage following a flickering light that he knows is coming from his brother who is calling him over that way. When they meet, Sam tells Nathan that he has something to show him but it is outside the orphanage area. He leads the way, and

the player. He shows the player the path to follow, what leaps to make, where to climb and helps Nathan reach places he otherwise could not, serving essentially as a tutorial. As it is a much younger Nathan, his climbing abilities are slightly worse (not being able to reach as high ledges) and slower than in the rest of the game but Sam is there to help him.

As an adult later in the game, Sam often teases his little brother verbally, to which siblings can probably relate. He also always makes sure that Nathan is okay and checks up on the player even during intense chases. Despite lying to him about his prison break out and the revelation of the truth on a cliff on one of the islands, he is the one who stands in front of Nathan to take the bullet when Rafe tries to shoot his younger brother.

While Rafe is the main antagonist for most of the game, he is Nathan and Sam's ally for a short while near the beginning of the story. Rafe is cold-blooded and willing to do anything to get what he wants. When Sam is shot and has to be left behind, Rafe is the one who convinces grieving Nathan to leave, telling him impassively that "his brother is dead". He was also the one who paid for Sam's release out of the prison years later so he would help him look for Avery's treasure. Gameplay-wise he acts just like any other companion in the game – he helps in fist fights, provides cover and kicks down a ladder for the player to climb.

Rafe never stops looking for the treasure and becomes partners with Nadine Ross, the leader of a private mercenary group Shoreline. Their and the Drake brothers' paths cross several times but it is always in a negative sense as they are both after the same reward. The last time Rafe and Nathan interact is at the end of the game when they engage in a swords duel that ends in Rafe's death by a pile of gold. The player has to focus and counter his former companion's swings by pressing the corresponding buttons as their icons pop up when Rafe attacks, and follow up with their own attack if they are successful.

Hector Alcázar could be first presumed the main antagonist but it turns out to be wrong. Sam makes up a break out story featuring Hector, allegedly his cellmate for a year, as his main helper during the escape and justifies his call for help by inventing a false threat. Together with other Alcázar's men they shoot their way out of the prison for themselves and for the player. Hector then insists that in return for his help

he wants half of Avery's treasure and gives Sam three months to find it – the player's character's main drive is to help his brother out of that situation.

Victor "Sully" Sullivan, *"possessed of a silver tongue and a seemingly limitless supply of cigars"* (as his official Uncharted 4 multiplayer profile description states) is Nathan's go-to adventure partner and his father figure. He is a kind man who raised Nathan as his own son and cares for him deeply despite the fact they are constantly mocking each another in a good spirit. Victor likes making jokes no matter the situation but knows when to get serious.

Sully not only works as a regular companion who helps in combat, gunfights and chats with Nathan, but he also is the one who flies them all over the world in his plane or provides a getaway ride when things get intense. He also has contacts that come in handy in their search. Sully and Elena later pair up behind the scenes as he helps her find her husband when Nathan gets hurt after falling off a cliff. He also saves Nate near the end of the game when he shoots down a heavily armoured vehicle that is chasing the player.

Elena Fisher has been by Nathan's side in all the *Uncharted* games. As her creator Amy Hennig describes her, she is "the female version of Nathan Drake". She is able to fight, climb and act on her own just as much as the other companions. She is optimistic and always willing to help Nathan even though she may not always agree with his decisions.

First she serves mostly as company to Nathan and the player during a "normal" day at home after work. They fight over washing the dishes and so she challenges him to beat her high score in *Crash Bandicoot* that the player controls as Nathan who is playing the game for the first time in his life. She explains how to control the character and what the goal is and the rest is up to the player's skill. During that, Elena also comments on Nathan's performance in the PlayStation 1 game but she is essentially commenting on the player's efforts.

While she is somewhat pushed aside for the first half of the game, she and her relationship with Nathan are important for Nathan's wellbeing. After storming out of their motel room when she found out he had been lying to her about the reason for his absence, she does not appear again until Nathan is badly hurt and unconscious

after falling off a cliff, separated from Sam. Elena forgives him but admits that she is still upset about the fact that he lied to her despite being married and having many adventures together behind them. Together they set off to find Nate's brother and discuss their relationship on the way when there are calmer moments, filling the silence while traversing the area.

Those moments are supposed to make Nathan (and the player) feel guilty. Nathan wants to talk about the issue and brings it up several times but keeps getting cut off because then is "not the time" or it can be talked about "later" and it leaves him feeling miserable every time, talking to himself and self-pitying while Elena walks ahead. They finally reconcile with a kiss when they are traversing New Devon and Elena sees his need for adventure, as she very much understands that herself. She and Sully then accompany Nate looking for Sam up until the moment when they are forced to get separated.

Worth mentioning is the very last companion of the game who appears in the epilogue. We play as Cassie, Nate and Elena's daughter years after the treasure haul. She is home alone and the only other character around is their dog called Vicky (likely named after Victor as he and Nathan joked about it in chapter 11). Vicky mostly just keeps Cassie (the player) company as she roams around the house and begs for treats which is an optional action the player can do. Once outside, Vicky runs and lies down on the pier next to a boat. When the player comes near, she sits up and the option to pet her pops up. After she is petted, another optional action for the player is triggered. It is to make Cassie tell Vicky to "go find mom and dad", but they are not around so the dog just looks around in a confused manner.

In the epilogue, the player can also find several items to interact with lying around the house, one of them being a letter from Sam and Sully who talk about their retirement. They learn that Sully stopped smoking which is a big deal considering it has been his characteristic habit the entire series and that he and Sam will be coming for a visit in near future. While the companions are not physically there anymore, this letter gives the player information on what happened to them after the story. In other words, gives them closure on their adventure partners they might miss.

7. Comparison of the Elements of Companionship of *The Last Guardian* and *Uncharted 4*

The Last Guardian and *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* are video games with single-player story mode that feature computer-controlled characters who are actively by the player's side. They are greatly different when it comes to the companions themselves; one game uses a single animal and the other multiple humans as the player's partners.

Considering the contrast of those companions, both games succeed at providing a helpful, cooperating partner who reacts to the player's actions essential to reach the end of the journey and to make the player feel like they have somebody else to rely on. Among other things, they accompany the player on their quest, aid in combat and help them reach otherwise inaccessible areas, making them a capable and indispensable part of the team.

While the stories and characters of these two games are significantly different and unique in their own ways, the sense of companionship is present in both of them. It is therefore likely that their characters have certain traits in common that contribute to the illusion of a real partner despite being single-player video games.

a) The Companions in General

Both games contain completely different kinds of characters that accompany the player. The player's companion in *The Last Guardian* is a large, mythical animal, while in *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* there is more than one partner, and they are all humans (except for a dog in the Epilogue). In both games, the player controls a human character.

Trico, the player's only companion in *The Last Guardian*, is introduced early in the opening credits. When a new game is started, there is a slideshow of animals and mythical creatures such as the unicorn or the griffin, which ends in a look at a drawing of Trico, implying that they are a mythical species of that world.

The game never mentions what gender or age the boy's Trico is directly. However, the subtitles that translate the narrator's spoken language refer to Trico as "he" multiple times throughout the story.

Figure 1: First in-game look at Trico in the opening credits

By contrast, *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* features multiple computer-controlled companions. There are both men and a woman of various ages and different personalities with their own backstories from previous games in the franchise. They "take turns" in providing company to the player as the story requires; sometimes there is only one, and other times they create a party of three or four.

b) Companion's Relationship to the Player's Character and Their Purpose

Trico of *The Last Guardian* is practically a stranger, a wild animal that, as the player learns far into the game, kidnapped the player-controlled boy before the start of the game's main story. It is hostile towards him at first but becomes friendly when it learns that the boy does not mean any harm and starts protecting him and watching over him from the moment the boy frees Trico from its chains in the starting cave area.

While it is an animal, it cannot be considered the boy's pet. It acts like its own being with its own mind who follows and looks after the human because it wants to, it does so of its own free will. They are not related in any way other than that they

develop a powerful bond that deepens over time thanks to which they are able to overcome their fears and other obstacles in their way.

In this sense, their relationship may be reminiscent of the bond between the little prince and "his" fox in the well-known novella by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1943). On their own, they are nothing extraordinary or different from the other humans or tricos (or foxes in the book's case), but it is their connection and, as explained in the novella, becoming "tame" that makes them special in each other's eyes. The fox in the novella explains the concept of being tame in chapter 21 like this:

"To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world…" (Saint-Exupéry 1943, 46).

Figure 2: Trico keeping an eye on the boy

The boy does not consider Trico a new long-term friend at first as he casually bids it goodbye fairly early in the story, telling the beast that he needs to go back home to his village, not knowing where exactly he is. However, Trico decides to ignore the boy's decision and continues following him or even leading the way at times. Later on, there is a mutual trust between the two characters that translates into the gameplay itself. The player can rely on it during platforming as well as in combat.

They are partners in a world that they need to traverse together because they need each other: Trico's wings and horns are broken at first and the Nest can only be escaped by flying out of it. Trico's original purpose was to serve the "Master of the Valley" like the other tricos did. That is who makes them seek out, kidnap and bring children to the Nest (for a reason that is not explained). When Trico's horns got broken after a fall from the sky on its way back from the boy's village, Master of the Valley became unable to control it and ordered the armoured spirits to chain it to the ground until the horns grow back.

Trico was since then able to think for itself and decided on a new purpose: to guard the boy and help him get back home when he fed the beast and removed the chains and spears from its body. The player-controlled boy becomes the beast's main and only interest.

Contrarily to *The Last Guardian*, the multiple companions in *Uncharted 4* are very diverse and feature all friends, family members and antagonists, both men and women, and young and old people. They all treat Nathan Drake (the player's character) as it would be fitting according to their relationship.

All the characters, including the player's, are after the same goal – they search for Henry Avery's treasure, and while they are all there to help the player reach that goal and aid them along the way, they do so for their own, different reasons.

Samuel Drake (born Samuel Morgan) is Nathan's elder brother. The player gets to witness him both as a teenager and as an adult. Despite that he had been presumed dead for many years, they remain close and trust each other greatly. They mostly bond over their common interest in history, historical figures and treasure hunting and often banter with each other. Sam is eager to catch up on his younger brother's adventures that he had missed because of the years in prison and is very protective of him, yet he does not hesitate to hold onto his dream and follow his own desires even when the others tell him not to because it is dangerous and not worth the risk anymore.

Sam is the reason the story is set in motion as he drags Nathan back into the life of adventure to "save himself", when in reality he only wants to find the treasure before Rafe does as it has been something he had been after his entire life but never got the

chance to truly pursue. He sets the goal for Nathan (and the player) and is what keeps pushing Nathan forward, reigniting his passion for lost cities and fabled artefacts.

Figure 3: Sullivan, Elena (and Nathan off-screen) trying to convince Sam to quit chasing the treasure

Elena Fisher, originally an investigator of historical mysteries, is Nathan's wife. They met in the first game of the franchise and got married sometime between *Uncharted 2* and *Uncharted 3.* However, Nathan's fear of commitment and longing for adventure was damaging to their marriage and they broke up. Despite that, Elena kept wearing her wedding ring. Partially thanks to Victor Sullivan who had been looking after Nathan's wedding ring without his knowledge, they got together again and live together by the time of the fourth game. Elena remains supportive of him and comes to save him even after she'd been lied to and was truly upset because of it. They reconcile thanks to their mutual passion for adventure and mysteries.

The game shows her as a very supportive and understanding character both at home and in the terrain. She tries to influence Nathan in the sense of keeping him grounded and reminding him of important values such as honesty, and is an example of how romantic relationships can be affected in such scenarios.

Figure 4: Upset Elena confronting lying Nathan

Victor "Sully" Sullivan, who often calls Nate "kid", met teenage Nathan in Colombia when they both had plans to steal Sir Francis Drake's ring and astrolabe. Victor saved him from other thugs and offered to look after him, beginning their lifelong friendship and a father-son-like relationship despite being unrelated. They became very protective of each other and stuck together in good and bad times in all four games. It is obvious that Victor truly cares for him as he also tries to put him on the right path by offering advice when it comes to personal problems between Nathan and Elena. He has a history of double-crossing people he had worked with in the past but Nathan trusts him fully and never doubts him in that way unlike his brother Sam.

Victor's purpose as a fellow treasure hunter in all their adventures together has always been to help and support Nathan. He serves as a father figure and even as the voice of reason at certain times in the game, such as when he suggests there must be a safer way to save Samuel than going after the treasure.

Figure 5: Victor tries to persuade Nathan to tell Elena the truth about their trip

One of the antagonists who accompany the player for a short time is Rafe Adler. At first, he helped the Drake brothers look for Avery's treasure but later on he competed with them over it instead. He is selfish and determined to get what he wants focusing mainly on the goal therefore he does not treat the brothers like friends but more like business partners. Even though he uses them to find the treasure's location, he only sees them as an obstacle in his way after he loses trust and patience with them and attempts to get rid of them for good, trying to kill both of them when he gets the chance.

Hector Alcázar, the false main villain and allegedly Sam's cellmate for a year, becomes the player's companion for a brief section of the game where they control Sam in his flashback story. Hector shows interest in Sam's tales about Henry Avery's treasure and his knowledge about its location which becomes the reason why he brings Sam along when his men arrive to break him out of prison. The criminal he is, he does not genuinely care about Sam and his dreams, he only wants the money and threatens Sam's life if he does not bring it to him within three months.

Both antagonists help the player's character escape out of prison for their own benefit. They only accompany the player in one chapter each and use their assistance for their own goal in the long run.

Figure 6: Rafe reveals the truth about Samuel's bail-out plan

c) Amount of Interactivity and Independence

The AI partners of both *Uncharted 4* and *The Last Guardian* are endowed with high level of interactivity and independence in relation to the player. As Laird mentioned: "Human-level AI partners must also adapt to the environment, respond in a human-like way and adapt to the player and other support characters" (23).

The in-game companions in *Uncharted 4* are portrayed as realistic humans and therefore act that way when working with the player. They give the them items when needed (Sam gives Nathan a grappling hook, throws him a gun), chat with the player-controlled character or between themselves, provide cover during gunfight sections, comment on the scenery, weather and the player's actions (such as knocking over a cairn), take cover if the player throws a grenade too close to them, squint if the player shines a flashlight directly in their face, and more. They interact with the player and adapt to their behaviour as needed, like pointing out an important object they had missed, telling them to watch their step while platforming or warning them about nearby enemies, even tagging them for the player at times.

Figure 7: Sullivan shows concern for Nathan (the player) when he is climbing a tower in Madagascar

They are very independent in combat and during gunfight sections. They are able to take down enemies on their own, hide from them and remain stealthy until the player makes the decision to open fire or gets in trouble.

When idle and with the optional dialogues and scripted actions depleted, they do not actively engage with the player any more on their own other than follow them, get out of their way when pushed or get startled when the player shoots or causes an explosion near them.

Figure 8: Sam squinting when the player shines a light in his face

Whereas the player and the non-playable characters in *Uncharted* 4 may eventually exhaust their mutual actions, the "idle mode" is different in *The Last*

Guardian. Trico's behaviour is based mainly on real-time reactions to the player's actions and adapting to the world around them as they progress, most of its actions are not scripted. While it "thinks for itself", when it is done walking around and being distracted by the environment, Trico comes over to the player, sits near them and focuses its attention solely on them, occasionally looking at a bird flying nearby. If the player moves around, Trico keeps an eye on them and their actions. The player can also call Trico's name at any time, point where Trico should go, tell it to attack or to jump, scold it or praise it, to all of which Trico reacts. The player can also climb or pet Trico at any moment. Petting different parts of its body invokes different reactions from the beast and, if the surroundings are tranquil enough, petting it on the head can make the animal fall asleep. Sometimes it can be difficult to wake Trico up after that, the aspects that affect the duration of its sleep are uncertain. Petting is also used to calm Trico down after a fight.
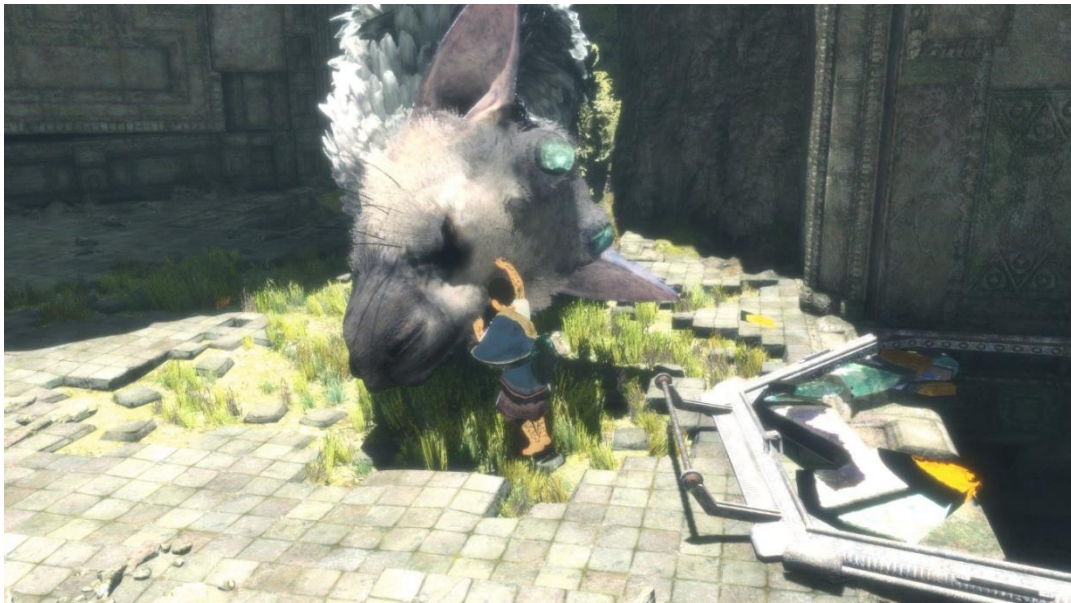

Figure 9: Boy petting Trico

The beast is very helpful in combat because the swings of its claws can defeat the enemies in one or two blows. It is possible yet very difficult for the boy to defeat the enemies (especially when outnumbered) on his own. The player can wait it out on the animal's back where they are safe or help by leading the enemies away, making them drop the stained glass eye panels the animal is afraid of or by pulling their helmets off. After a fight, there is the option to remove spears from Trico's body (if there are any). It is not required as they will break off on their own eventually, but it is an extra, interactive mechanic the player can enjoy and Trico will audibly appreciate.

Figure 10: Boy riding on Trico's back

There are times when Trico's help is essential, such as when there is a ledge too high or a gap too wide for the boy to jump on his own. Sometimes Trico will give the boy a ride on its back and other times it will get ready to catch the boy when he jumps towards it. In the latter option, Trico lets the boy know it is ready for it by making sounds directed at him.

Figure 11: Trico ready and waiting to catch the boy when he jumps towards it

The companions' help is needed to progress in certain areas in *Uncharted 4* as well. Sometimes the partner's help will be necessary to open a large door, hold a mechanism in place (for example a bridge) or boost the player (or vice versa) up on a high ledge and then drop them a ladder or a box to climb on so they can follow.

Figure 12: Boosting the companion up on a high ledge the player cannot reach alone

d) Time Without the Companion

There are sections in both games where the player ends up on their own without any partner by their side. They have to rely on their own skills and abilities to find a way to reunite again as neither of the games' heroes is on their journey alone and they aim to reach the end together. In both *The Last Guardian* and *Uncharted 4*, sections with companions predominate over those without them.

In *Uncharted 4*, the parts when the player is alone are very similar to those with them by their side gameplay-wise. The player still gets to take down enemies like before, climb buildings or rocks and do everything they normally can with the difference that there is nobody to help them with it and make it easier for them by providing hints or getting rid of some of the enemies. Nathan only talks to himself by saying what he thinks out loud or makes funny remarks towards whatever is happening at the time without getting a reaction from somebody else.

Figure 13: Nathan talking to himself commenting on the hanging skeleton

By contrast, *The Last Guardian*'s main character relies heavily on Trico while getting from one place to another and therefore the list of things they can do with Trico by his side narrows down when it is not around. The boy, a child, himself can only climb to places that he can reach but the Nest is not very suited for that kind of travelling as there are very tall towers and areas where bridges have collapsed. On the other hand, there are places only the boy can reach that the animal is too big for, but in those cases the beast is always waiting nearby for the boy to return or to open a path for it.

Figure 14: Trico unable to fit through the small hole and continue

The biggest difference comes when there are enemies around. Without Trico to defend the boy, the enemies are nearly impossible for him to defeat and it is best to

outrun them even if there is only one of them. When the boy is alone and attacked by other tricos, the player has to try their best to avoid and outsmart them when possible as there is no way for the boy to win such fight.

Figure 15: The yoroi soldier (on the left) chasing the boy when he is alone

Figure 16: The boy being attacked by an enemy trico

8. Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to find out whether there are any common features in single-player game companions who create the illusion of a real partner despite being controlled by artificial intelligence by comparing *The Last Guardian* and *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End* that each provide completely different kinds of such characters by the player's side. While one game uses a single animal as the player's partner throughout the entire story, the other uses multiple human ones and the group around the player changes.

In both *The Last Guardian* and *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*, the companions play an important role in relation to the story and the player's character. They are necessary to progress further and to reach the end of the game. Both games also feature sections where the companion is not present. The immediate goal of those parts is to get back together with said partners before being able to return to the original goal. While *The Last Guardian* becomes significantly harder without the companion by the player's side, it does not make a great difference in *Uncharted 4* from the gameplay's point of view. The characters interact with the player in their own, various ways a lot and respond to their behaviour and actions and are able to act independently, help the player both in and outside of combat and even guide them at times. At certain times, the partner's help is necessary in both games to progress to the following areas.

In conclusion, even though the types of companionship of both games are vastly different compared to each other, they share certain features like necessity, high interactivity, independence or active support and are able to offer a similar kind of experience and sense of company that make the player feel less alone in a single-player video game.

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