# The Last Guardian

Narrating through Mechanics and Empathy

*Beat Suter*

> In my dream I was flying.
> Flying through the darkness …
> I awoke to find myself in a strange cave.
> I noticed with a start that I was not alone.
> Beside me lay a great man-eating beast.
> (*The Last Guardian* 2016)

Thus an older man begins with a deep voice from offstage and tells in retrospect his story, which he experienced as a boy. The poetic beginning is quickly replaced by the presence of the boy and the beast that have to get familiar with each other and find their way in a foreign environment. Together they learn the mechanics of interaction and progress.

The narrative mechanics of the game *The Last Guardian* couldn't be easier at first. A boy and an animal find themselves in a chasm, which looks like a dungeon. The large beast is chained and injured. The boy wakes up from unconsciousness and does not know where he is. It quickly becomes clear that the boy and the animal are in mutual dependence to each other. One cannot move forward without the other.

## EMPATHY AND SMALL NARRATIVE INTERPERSONAL INTERACTIONS

It takes time for them to get to know each other and develop mutual support and cooperation. It is a slow approach. The boy tries to win the trust of the animal,

which is much more powerful than him. This is the only way he can free the animal from the chain and pull the spears from its wounds. And the boy can get the animal to help him reach the openings in the rocky ruins that hold both creatures captive. But the beast does not always do what the boy wants. It is an idiosyncratic and independent creature. The boy has to listen to it, watch its behavior and be patient. Certain interactions change the beast's behavior, and often the beast indicates where to go. The narrative mechanics of the small interactions between man and beast are the core of the game. This empathetic beginning is formative because the boy embodies the avatar role of the player and every approach and setback is experienced directly by the player.

The critic Mark Brown calls this "design by subtraction" (Brown 2015) – reduced design. This applies not only to the mechanics and the environment, but also to the narrative. The story begins, with as little baggage as possible, in a closed area: a prison. This is what game designer Fumito Ueda had in mind when he did his first sketch for the game with the beast behind prison bars (Ueda 2018). The two characters have to feel their way through this environment and get to know each other and bond. And the player has to learn the mechanics with which the two characters can advance through caves and ruins. The boy brings the animal food in the form of glowing barrels. The animal lets the boy climb on its back and ride, and lifts him up to ledges, which highlights the unusual vertical orientation of the game.

Due to the slow build-up of empathy, the player in the role of the boy is later able to trust and always count on the big beast, Trico. The player knows they can rely on Trico to catch them at the right moment after a jump into the void or to come to the rescue in time when the guards attack and threaten to kill them.

## SPATIAL PROGRESS STORY

This empathetic, interactive relationship of mutual dependency, which seems so simple at the beginning, is embedded in a more complex framework of a spatial progress story as well as a very complex backstory that is hinted at by the narrator's persona from offstage, but is only slowly revealed as the game progresses.

The game world and its sequences of rooms are constructed in such a way that closed claustrophobic rooms are replaced by taller ones, until finally an outdoor area is reached that allows you to breathe and marvel. You start in the Cave, a very small-enclosed area that feels like a prison. Then you go forward through the mountain, across slightly larger rooms towards a first small outdoor area. From there you can already see the big tower for the first time, which is the

setting for the final events of the game. Next, the game world reverts back into the mountain, across the fallen-statue bridge, through partly cathedral-like rooms in the mountain and out into the second outdoor area, from where you can see up into the sky, but also encounter some fog that limits your view. The journey continues in a spiral movement through the strange world of ruins and rocks called the Nest, which leads upward, becoming higher and higher. The further up you are, the greater the outdoor distances become between the levels you have to cover. And during this part, you will temporarily lose height by falling down or rescuing Trico.

The locomotion takes place as a spiral from bottom to top, through a labyrinthine world with strange ancient equipment. One room after another must be mastered. The boy must climb beneath a high ceiling, balance himself over wooden beams, climb up on ropes and chains, squeeze himself through ledges, and call out to the big animal, Trico. Trico usually finds another way and can jump up onto unreachable walls. Sometimes the boy has to climb on the animal's back or head and hold on while it jumps over spiky rocks or runs over rickety wooden scaffolding to reach the next play area.

As the world is gradually explored, the game gains speed and becomes faster and faster, so that in the end the player is under permanent pressure and therefore has to act a lot quicker.

## FLASHBACKS AND BACKSTORY

The backstory is hinted at in the third cutscene, "The First Antenna", with some pictures that remain mysterious for the time being. Seven or more hours of playing will pass before it is explained in the longer cutscene, "Capturing the Boy". Up to this point the player is left in the dark. Only after the boy has fainted again and lies in a delirium in the next antenna room, is his story revealed. But until then. it is the relationship between the two characters and the carefully increasing gameplay that enables immersion and a narrative path. After that the backstory becomes important for the further progression of the game.

Almost at the top of the tower, the player begins to realize that they are in a funnel of ruins or a crater which serves as a nest for big animals. You realize how the crater world (The Valley) is laid out, structured and limited – and that there is probably a world outside. And finally, in the fourth cutscene, it is revealed how the boy and Trico ended up in the cave prison ruin in the first place!

The game has classic, but inconspicuous and cleverly embedded cutscenes – seven in total (Glaser 2017: 254ff.). Two short cutscenes at the beginning (Set-

ting the Scene, Awakening), a disordered delirium cutscene (The First Antenna), and the story of the encounter of the boy and the beast in the Memory Dream (Capturing the Boy). The fifth and longest cutscene in three parts is the live fight scene in the tower (Atop the Tower). In the following sixth cutscene (Saving the Boy) the boy has destroyed the master core of the tower, which now explodes live, whereupon he is rescued by Trico and brought to his village unconscious. The backstory is hinted at in the first and third cutscenes and told in the fourth cutscene. The second, fifth and sixth cutscenes are embedded in the live game-play. And the seventh and last cutscene (Many Years Later) brings the story to a conclusion with the boy as the grown-up older man – the one that tells the story.

## MYSTICAL AND MECHANICAL PREMISES

The backstory is the tribal history of the boy, as well as the story of the enslaved animals, of which Trico is one. Thus, an extraordinary or even alien power or energy is fought in the last third of the game. The two types of creatures became enemies through the action of a technical apparatus or unit located in the tower. This could already be perceived from far below as something apart and clearly different in its technological construction from the rest of the ruins of buildings in this crater world.

## CHANGE OF PERSPECTIVE

Anyone who has played the game will inevitably ask the question: which is the main character, the boy or the animal Trico? The answer takes some getting used to: the player only plays the sidekick as the avatar of the boy. The main character is played by an amazing AI – Trico! This change of perspective is deliberately employed by Fumito Ueda, the designer of the game. The boy may partly lead the beast Trico, but at many moments it is Trico who leads and drives the game. Trico probably means "the third Ico" (Brown 2017). The first two were played in Ueda's games, *Ico* and *The Shadow of the Colossus*. So the boy takes the role of the companion, which in the first game, *Ico* (2001), was played by the girl Jorda who was not able to carry out any actions herself. The boy is able to act and give orders but cannot progress alone and does not show signs of character change. By contrast, Trico undergoes a character development, overcomes the fear of the colored glass eyes and in the end is able to fly again. Finally, he saves the boy and brings him back to his village. Trico then takes off alone and flies away into

a liberated world. Years later, the children of the village find the light shield again. The boy, now grown into an older man, begins to tell his experiences retrospectively. And the narrative circle is completed – formally and fictively – with Trico who has established his home in the Cave.

*The Last Guardian* is one of the best examples of a game in which the narrative is told through mechanics. The story is conveyed through gameplay and gradual (spatial) progress in the game. The most important prerequisite, however, is the empathetic relationship between the boy and the beast Trico, including the noticeable character development of the beast into a very reliable companion and friend.

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