Traps, Silence, and Sunlight: How Bill's Town Constructs Narrative and Mood in The Last of Us

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Abstract

Bills town stands out as a unique environment setting and emotional focal point in *Last of us*. It is distinguished because of it lighting, overgrown environment, logically place traps and its narrative integration. This study explores hows Bill's town is different from other major location like Boston Quarantine zone, Jackson and Pittsburg in terms of environment, narrative storytelling and emotional tone or setting.

Extracting concepts from game studies such as environment setting and its story telling, narrative position, narrative architecture and emotional setting. This analysis focus on key concept elements like, lighting, sound, level setting and interactivity. Insights from developers interview and research tells that the Bill's town is more like Bill's isolated personality, Joel's sense of paranoia and themes like survival verse purpose.

By comparing Bill's to other location such as Boston Quarantine Zone (QZ) which highlights restriction and control whereas Pittsburgh represents disorder and the violence of humans and Jackson is the symbol of rebuilding of community and safety.

However, Bill's town is different from these environments setting because of its isolation. Its lush, environment setting where nature reclaims abandoned structure and created a temporary sense of clam which also carries tension and threat.

This balance not allows the environment to act as a narrative and emotional tool but, it also reveals Bill's backstory, Joel's internal mindset. The design encourages players to uncover story elements through exploration and subtle details rather than directly revelling elements.

In conclusion, the unique design of the Bill's Town makes strong bond between both emotional engagement and narrative understanding.

1. Introduction

The Last of Us developed by Naughty Dog studio is post-apocalyptic, action-adventure and survival game where society exposed has collapsed due to fungal infection that turns human into zombies. The game story follows the journey of Joel and Ellie across a collapsed society of United States. One of the most important chapters in their journey takes place in the Bill's Town, which is an isolated settlement in Massachusetts, where they meet the Bill. The Bills' town standout sharp from other location in the game, for instance the Boston Quarantine Zone is shaped by strict surveillance and control with the confined spaces, whereas the Pittsburgh presents a violent urban landscape dominated by hostile human groups.

In contrast the Bill's Town setting is characterized by warm sunlight, Overgrown and carefully placed traps creating a space that feels both calm and dangerous at the same time. The unique setting of Bills' Town raises an important research question which is "What makes Bill's Town emotionally and environmentally distinct from the Boston QZ, Pittsburgh, and Jackson, and how does its design reinforce the story?".

The art team intentionally let nature reclaim the area because it expresses about how nature is dominant, resulting in a vibrant landscape that still hold danger. This combination creates a space that feels both peaceful as well as tense at the same time. Beyond the gameplay, Bill's Town plays an important narrative role. It reflects the personality and survival philosophy of Bill, while also marking a turning point in the development of Joel. To fully understand its important, it is necessary to compare it with other major location setting in the game.

This study explores the concept from game such as environmental story-telling, narrative structure and emotional design to examine how the Bill's Town is different from other key location of the game. The comparison or analysis is drawn on developer interviews and particular attrition given to elements like lighting, sound and layout setting etc, because together these components make Bill's town unique (blending sense of calm with tension). The study then compares the elements to other major location which is Boston, Pittsburgh and Jackson highlight how each location is different.

Ultimately, the study argues about the environment setting and emotional narrative of Bill's Town does more than providing gameplay. it talks about as loneliness versus connection and survival versus purpose, while also reflecting states of the key character.

2. Review of Literature

Game scholars and designer have explored long ago how narrative meaning is communicate through space and environment. Janet Murray (1997) identifies "spatiality" as a key feature of digital storytelling. Arguing that game worlds allow players to move through environments, because that will clearly and intentionally communicate an idea, message, or emotion. Henry Jenkins (2004) introduces the concept of "narrative architecture", he also describes video game environments as carefully designed spaces where story elements are embedded within the world itself.

According to Jenkins, the designers construct virtual worlds in which information is distributed narratively across elements such as environments, objects, and spatial arrangements. In the design context of Bill's Town, it can be understood as a planned narrative system. Its layout includes abandoned houses, blocked

paths, and hidden crawlspaces etc, are structured in a way to guide player movement while gradually revealing story details.

The concept of environmental storytelling discussed by Don Carson (2000) and Henry Jenkins (2004) suggests that game's narrative is communicated through environmental elements rather than direct dialogue or cutscenes. Narrative clues like such as burned bodies, personal belongings and graffiti help players understand past events. In The Last of Us players go through implicit exploration which uncovers narrative meaning through observation and interaction. If this process can be compared with archaeology where notes, object placement, and environmental details reveal some fragments about the past events.

Emotional design is the key element of shaping players engagement and that what game designer emphasize. Don Norman (2004) proposes three level of emotional experiences which are visceral, behavioural, and reflective and these 3 were widely applied to game designs. Also, by building on this Baharom et al. (2014) suggest the perception of the player in game is strongly influenced by immediate emotional responses at the visceral level. In the context of The Last of Us this means that the players initially respond to environments on an instinctive level. Developer insights also support this statement for example, the use of warm, golden sunset lighting in Bill's Town was intentionally designed to create a sense of comfort and contrast with the cold atmosphere of the Quarantine Zone. This produces a temporary feeling of relief for the player which is then disrupted by hidden threats.

Industry retrospectives highlight how the Boston Quarantine Zone (QZ) uses bluish, overcast lighting and rigid impersonal architecture to communicate a sense of the control and oppression. In contrast the Pittsburgh is characterised by overgrown vegetation and lighting was dynamic which make the ruined city feel both realistic and unsettling.

More broadly, game is often known for benchmark in the environmental storytelling where objects, empty spaces, and subtle details contribute as much to the narrative as traditional cutscenes. Overall, this body of literature suggests that the game carefully aligns level design with narrative purpose.

3. Objective

This study aims to understand by comparing Bill's Town systematically to other key location setting in *The Last of Us* and to understand how its design is uniquely different from other location and how its unique design serves the narrative. The specific objectives are:

- **Exploring environmental differences**: Exploring how Bill's Town's environment setting (architecture, lighting, sound, objects) are contrasts with the Boston Quarantine Zone, Pittsburgh, and Jackson in terms of visual style and what makes unique about Bill's Town.

- **Analysing emotional tone**: To explore the emotional atmosphere of Bill's Town which includes feelings like isolation, beauty and suspense and then comparing all these with the setting of other major location setting in the game such as Boston QZ, Pittsburgh and Jackson etc.

- **Narrative Integration** To analyse how Bill's Town design elements such as traps, landmarks and collectibles strengthen the overall game story and its themes. While also allowing and enabling players to discover story elements through their own exploration rather than direct revealing of information.

- **Apply theoretical frameworks**: To use concepts from environmental storytelling and narrative structure in order to interpret and understand how Bill's Town actually functions as a narrative space in the game..

Use developer insights: Commentary from designers and writers to validate how design decisions were intended to serve narrative and emotion.

4. Methodology

The research is a qualitative comparative case-study approach. The analysis is based on

1. Direct examination of in-game environments through gameplay experience and cutscene observation.
2. Review of developer commentary and interviews.
3. Relevant academic and industry literature on game environment design.

I played Last of Us developed by Naughty Dog, I explored the entire game, replayed the sequence covering the Boston QZ, Bill's Town, Pittsburgh, and the introduction of Jackson, taking notes on environmental setting, audio, narrative structure, lighting condition and pacing of game etc.

Second, developer and level designer interview were analysed article and post from the Naughty Dog studio. Other source provides a glimpse about colour, environment setting and story design. Citations like Pangilinan's commentary on flora life removal in the Boston (QZ) and Bill's Town's warm aesthetic directly inform the analysis of environmental differences.

Third, the study applies the concepts from game study to guide the analysis. The idea of storytelling told by Henry Jenkins is used to identify how narrative elements are merged within the environment setting and its elements. The findings are cross-referenced with player and critic responses to ensure validity, for example, the interpretation of Bill's Town as representing "clam with underlying danger" aligns with common audience perceptions. The comparative analysis focuses on broader narrative structure and environment setting.

5. Discussion

Bill's Town vs. Boston Quarantine Zone: The Boston Quarantine Zone (QZ) is presented like a human controlled environment setting it defined by restriction and sterility. By minimizing vegetation and natural light the developer intentionally tries to emphasize oppression and loss of freedom. Elements such as high security fences, armed patrols, and bluish overcast lighting contribute to a prison like atmosphere. This design creates a strong emotion of tension and hopelessness. For instance, civilians were waiting in lines for inspection which reflect fear and uncertainty. This aligns with Jenkins idea of narrative structure where level setting communicates systems of control and societal oppression. Looking at Boston (QZ) which represent a dystopian space in which both nature and individual autonomy are suppressed.

In Contrast the Bill's Town is established by warm natural lighting and dense overgrowth. According to developer this environment setting was intentionally designed to evoke a sense of freedom while also maintaining underlying sense of danger. Abandoned houses are surrounded by trees, vines, and sunlight and ambient sounds such as wind chimes and distant birds replaced the mechanical noise of military

control which were found in the Boston Quarantine Zone. This shift in atmosphere creates a sense of relief allowing the player to escape from the oppressive environment of the Boston Quarantine Zone.

The contrast between two locations is both visual and thematic. The Quarantine Zone is mostly devoid of vegetation and natural light, its space is dominated by concrete, metal fences and enclosed spaces which gives very suffocating feel to the player. In comparison, Bill's Town presents a more open environment where nature has slowly reclaimed the human structures, and this is also enhanced by warm, golden lighting that creates depth and certain kind of atmosphere which feels different. This shift reflects a broader change in spatial narrative, basically moving from confinement to a relative openness.

Bill's Town vs. Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh's chapter basically throws Joel and Ellie straight into an urban warzone which is populated by the Hunters, a group of armed cannibals who are extremely dangerous. The city streets and sewers in Pittsburgh are dark and gritty, and they are filled with bloodstains, burnt bodies and crude signs of violence everywhere. Environmental storytelling in Pittsburgh mostly emphasizes human cruelty where graffiti, notes and tombs of lynched victims tell the story of a society that completely fell apart. For example, as Joel and Ellie first enter Pittsburgh, they find burned corpses and a note tallying stolen goods which reveals the Hunters atrocities and what kind of people they are. The lighting is generally much dimmer, with harsh artificial lights coming from exploded vehicles around the area. Overall the emotional design here leans very hard into fear, desperation and vigilance of the player.

Bill's Town by contrast is almost calm in its own chaos which is quite different. Though Bill has armed himself to the teeth, the empty town carries an eerie quiet feeling except for occasional alarms and wildlife sounds in background. Pittsburgh is mostly about surviving active human threats whereas Bill's Town danger is more environmental in nature like traps and zombies etc. The player tasks are also different in both locations, in Pittsburgh the main objective is to fight through a city to reach safety, whereas in Bill's Town it is more about scavenging peacefully for a car without really facing any direct gunfire from enemies. This pacing difference shapes the emotion of the player quite differently, Pittsburgh is high tension and full of adrenaline, while Bill's Town feels more methodical and mysterious in its own way. The environment of Bill's Town which includes cobblestone paths, a large wooden bridge, carnival ring toss and barnyard areas feels almost quaint and simple when compared to Pittsburgh's rubble and flooded highways. Yet it is precisely this blend of the charming elements for example punching bag game, toy shops and a treehouse with the more macabre elements like a booby trapped church and a pile of dead bodies triggered by a door that makes Bill's Town narratively rich and interesting. The contrast here highlights how Pittsburgh's environment tells the story of violent communal collapse, whereas Bill's Town tells the story of one man's isolation and eventual loss.

Bill's Town vs. Jackson: Jackson serves as a kind of narrative bookend in the game, which is seen briefly at the start of Part I and then more fully explored in Part II. It is portrayed as a flourishing mountain town that is powered by a hydroelectric dam and sustained by farms around the area. Its design features tidy suburban houses, playing fields and smiling neighbors which gives a very different feel compared to other locations. In terms of emotional design, Jackson mostly conveys safety, community and a sense of normalcy for the player. Nature in Jackson is more cultivated through farms and gardens rather than overtaking the structures like it does in Bill's Town. The overall mood is peaceful and hopeful, and this aligns with Joel and Ellie's temporary respite with their loved ones.

By comparison, Bill's Town is not really a community at all but more like Bill's solitary fortress which he built and maintained alone. There are no other friendly survivors to greet Joel and Ellie in this location, only the potential companionship of this one odd man which is Bill himself. The lighting in Bill's Town for example the sunset glow and its overgrown foliage does superficially resemble Jackson's outdoors in some ways, but the emotion it creates is quite different from each other. In Jackson, the player feels welcome and part of something bigger, whereas in Bill's Town one feels both welcome by Bill and yet wary at the same time, because he is essentially a loner who does not trust anyone easily. The design choices also reinforce this difference, Bill's Town has numerous private and barricaded spaces for example Bill's fortified house and caged windows which strongly contrast with Jackson's open parks and schoolyard areas. Thematically, Jackson's safe haven feeling contrasts quite clearly with Bill's Town tension between safety and threat which coexist together. Ironically, Bill and Frank did create a small garden and farm together which is seen in the expanded narrative of the TV series, but in the actual game we only see the remaining relics of Bill's architecture and what he built. So overall Bill's Town sits emotionally somewhere between the oppression of the QZ and the security of Jackson, it is freer than the QZ yet far more anxious and uncertain than Jackson.

Spatial and Narrative Design of Bill's Town Spatial and Narrative Design of Bill's Town: Bill's Town is basically built like a multi area maze where the player can freely explore around. Key landmarks in this area include a windmill water tower which you can see as Joel first approaches, a wooden dam, a high school and Bill's house and workshop etc. The chapter also mixes gameplay and conversation with Bill together which feels quite natural. Spatially the town is divided by a river which is basically the dam, and it also offers loops, side alleys and hidden shortcuts here and there. All this complexity pushes the player toward exploration naturally. Environmental storytelling is strong in this area, for example an open door or a flashing arcade machine like the Turning game works as a kind of narrative lure that pulls the player into a scene where background clues slowly come out. Like if a player just follows an open door into a room, they dont just find loot but also stumble upon an Easter egg which is Bill and Frank's arcade and this adds more to the story. This way of using environmental cues to move the story forward is something Jenkins calls narrative architecture and it works very well here.

Another thing worth mentioning is the water tower which stays visible even later. Armon Walker points out that from the sewer section in the next chapter, Bill's Town water tower can still be seen by the player. This kind of landmark helps keep a sense of continuity and realness in the game world. It also kind of reassures the player that even though chapters are changing, the world is still connected and same. And it also reminds the player of Bill even after leaving his town which is a small but meaningful detail. In terms of how the game makes you feel, the warm lighting and open sky in Bill's Town makes the player drop their guard a little, and then the sudden scares like clickers you cant hear coming or traps going off hit much harder because of that. Walker also notes that designers actually broke some game rules here, for example clickers that Joel normally should hear but cant in Bill's Town, just to catch the player off guard. These moments show how the whole area is kind of designed to make you feel safe first and then scared, which keeps you emotionally hooked throughout.

Environmental Storytelling in Bill's Town: The collectibles and notes which are scattered around Bill's Town help fill in the backstory of the place and its characters. Players slowly get to know about Bill and his partner Frank through written clues and how certain items are placed around the environment. For example there is an audible note which reveals Frank's suicide and what he personally felt toward Bill

which is quite an emotional moment. Objects like pictures of Bill and Frank, fresh bread left in the oven and planted eggs give a rough idea of how they used to live together in this place. These details build up what researchers call a diachronic narrative which basically means the story of events that happened over time in Bill's Town, and all this happens without the game directly explaining anything to the player. Environmental storytelling theory says this works because players themselves piece together the story from these material clues they find around.

By putting narrative information into the environment like this, the design turns story discovery into something the player actively does rather than just watches. Jenkins describes this by saying the environment works as a form of narrative architecture which fits very well here. For instance when you enter Bill's workshop there are notes on a whiteboard about car parts and this connects directly to what Joel and Ellie are actually trying to do in the game which is find a working car. A punch card audio log or the old radio sitting in the shack also shows Bill's lonely sense of humor and his paranoia in a subtle way. The level designers basically created a whole character biography just through the space and objects around it which is quite interesting approach. This also connects to Fernandez-Vara's idea of indexical storytelling where every toy left in a basket or every rusted tool lying around becomes a kind of clue or index to Bill and Frank's life together. When you compare this to QZ or Pittsburgh, those environments dont really have this kind of personal domestic detail, they mostly focus on the shared suffering and despair of many people at once. Bill's Town is different because it is just one man's space and because of that it is full of personal and private artifacts. This smaller and more personal scale makes the player feel more empathy and slowly understand Bill's loneliness and his eventual despair in a much more genuine way.

6. Conclusion

Bill's Town in The Last of Us is honestly a good example of how level design can strengthen both narrative and emotion in a game. By carefully crafting an environment that is both beautiful and dangerous at the same time, the designers managed to give this one chapter a unique emotional feeling that other chapters dont really have. Compared to the rigid and suffocating order of the Boston QZ and the more visceral violence of Pittsburgh, Bill's Town feels like a strange kind of sanctuary which temporarily frees the player from despair but at the same time keeps reminding them of loss. The player's visual and emotional experience is mostly guided by environmental storytelling throughout, things like sunlight coming through windows, handwritten notes and cleverly placed traps all help reveal character and theme in a subtle way. Developer commentary also confirms that every aesthetic choice from color palette to how nature was placed was meant to reflect Joel's mindset and Bill's personality. So in this way Bill's Town design strengthens the narrative by basically making the space itself into an active character in the story.

Overall this chapter leaves a lasting impact because it connects spatial form with story content in a very natural way. It shows that Joel can actually let his guard down and trust someone even if only for a brief moment, and it also foreshadows his later decisions about family which becomes more clear later in the game. The warm hues and open vistas of the area encourage empathy and hope in the player, while the mechanical dangers and personal memorabilia found around remind the player of themes like love, isolation and survival etc. As players piece together Bill's story through the environment they are doing exactly the kind of narrative archaeology that Jenkins and other researchers describe in their work. The result of all this is that Bill's Town stays emotionally distinct and memorable, not just because of its puzzles or combat sections, but because of how its geography itself tells a story. Through its careful spatial and

emotional design, Bill's Town becomes a powerful narrative space that clearly stands apart from the rest of Joel and Ellie's journey and adds a lot to the game's overall themes.

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