Until this morning, ‘The Last of Us’ was the best video game I had played when it came to storytelling. Compelling story, deep and real characters, and a heart-wrenching ending made the game an instant success and the recipient of numerous accolades. ‘The Last of Us’ certainly deserved its success, but this morning I played through ‘That Dragon, Cancer’, and when it comes to story-telling, nothing comes close.

I know I’m a bit late on this one, talking about a game that was released approaching 3 years ago, but today I saw it in my steam library – a game I had a vague memory of hearing about and had evidently bought at one time – and decided to start it up. Two hours later I was left utterly emotionally and spiritually drained, with tears still running down my face. ‘That Dragon, Cancer’ is unapologetic in being upfront and honest with the emotional torture which accompanies the death of a child.

For those who don’t know, TDC is an autobiographical video game that tells the story of the Green family and their son, Joel, who was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive cancer at the age of one. The game retells Joel’s 4-year fight against cancer through about two hours of poetic, imaginative gameplay, switching between surreal narrative in hospital rooms, doctor’s consultations, and children’s parks; and sequences picturing the emotional turmoil of Joel parents.

Even to call a TDC a video game feels like an misnomer, as the player is led through the narrative with very little control, the primary interaction being clicking the next action, and looking around. The helplessness, lack of control, and feeling of confusion that this engenders lingers throughout is a powerful tool in communicating some of the Green’s struggles. Perhaps ‘The Last of Us’ can keep its title as best storytelling in a video game, because ‘That Dragon, Cancer’ belongs to a genre of media of its own.

A key theme of TDC is faith in God. Over the course of the story Joel’s parents’ Christian faith comes to the forefront as a source of both great comfort and struggle. Amy Green, Joel’s mother, clings tightly to the hope of a miraculous healing, while his father, Ryan, is full of questions as to whether God cares, or even notices, their struggles. Their journey of faith is pictured in the primary dream-like sequence as a journey on a boat. Joel and his mother travel safely in the boat, yet have no oars and no direction. Ryan is in the water, drowning, until resurfacing as he recalls the story of Jesus calming the storm. The picture is powerful, provoking, and penetrating, offering a real challenge to believers and non-believers alike.

Examples of Faith

The struggling faith of Ryan and Amy Green provides a humbling and poignant challenge to believers. Amy’s journey presents a picture of pressing on and on into God, demonstrating a deep conviction of God’s love and compassion, and a faith that God does work miracles in people’s lives today. Yet this is never presented as a health and wealth gospel, as Amy recognises her own insufficiency and doubts. Instead she throws herself entirely into God’s hands, writing “I would rather feel disappointed and let God heal my heart, than to feel like I did not push myself as far as I possible could in faith for my son”. The simple principle demonstrated here presents a strong challenge for every Christian to apply to themselves. Are you willing to trust God and let him take care of whatever may come, rather than protecting guarding yourself against troubles?

Ryan provides a distinct contrast to Amy. While Amy presses on to God, Ryan is pictured as drowning, questioning God’s compassion, whether his struggles can matter to the God of the universe. Following in the footsteps of biblical characters like Job and Habakkuk, Ryan questions God. Yet he questions from a place of faith, and when he eventually surfaces, is strengthened in his faith and able to comfort his grieving wife. Ryan’s struggles are deeply relatable to many Christians who face trials, yet he is able to focus on Jesus, on His power and leading, and come through with his faith strengthened.

Hope in the face of death

‘That Dragon, Cancer’ does not shy away from the real prospect of death that faces each of us. For believers and non-believers alike, the game is a challenge to consider what hope we have for eternity. Perhaps this is where the game could be criticised, as Joel’s parent’s faith may be interpreted as an ‘emotional crutch’ to cope with the horror through which they are living. There is no description of sin and saving faith, and the one reference to judgement holds back from naming ‘hell’. Yet we have to remember the context and intention with which the game was made. This is a picture of faith at work in the lives of believers as they face struggles here in the world. This is a picture of a living and active faith which provides confidence in what is hoped for and assurance in what is not seen. This is the benefits of the Christian life, offered to all who believe. No, a non-believer will not come away with a well-rounded understanding of the gospel. But they will be deeply moved, and perhaps led to consider what hope they have in the face of death. Perhaps it will be the beginnings of an investigation into the fullness of the gospel. For believers it is a reminder of the joy available to each and every believer, as the words of Christ are shown to be true for Amy and Ryan: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

‘Christian’ Media

In recent years books like “Popologetics” by Ted Turnau and “You are what you Love” by James K A Smith have brought some much needed teaching to Christians, considering how we engage with our culture at large. ‘That Dragon, Cancer’ presents a prime example of Christians not just engaging well with culture, but contributing well in a manner which is powerfully engaging. The game uses storytelling to preach in a way which is convicting yet subtle. Upfront but nuanced. TDC demonstrates the role of faith in the lives of the protagonists simply and honestly, yet leaves the player to make a decision on its goodness. The game is unlike any other games or films made by Christians out there, something recognised in the numerous awards won by the game. Film, television, music, video games, and all forms of media provide a powerful tool for Christians to shape their culture. Perhaps TDC can be the first of many culture-shaping artworks (yes, artworks) produced by Christians.