I've often wondered what place cinematics have in video games. Games are intended to be interactive experiences, so it doesn't really make since why you would want to remove control from the player to show them a cut scene or movie. However, I think cinematics can serve a couple of interesting purposes in video games.

One, they help frame content in otherwise open world games. Open world games are very tricky to pull off and often overshoot their mark and are too open. When I started to play Morrowind I was really excited at the possibilities. However I never got more than 4 or 5 hours in before I lost interest. I started this game 3 different times with the same outcome. Likewise with Minecraft I played a bit, enjoyed building neat stuff, then lost interest. I feel one way to handle this problem would be for cinematics to help frame the content. When a player enters an area a cut scene could highlight areas of interest to give the player a starting point. This could even be taken further by having the cinematics dynamically pick what to show in a particular area based on what the player has or has not already accomplished.

Second, I liken cut scenes to rests in music. My band director in high school taught us that many times it's not the notes that are important so much as the rests in between them.

Let me touch on the first purpose a little more. Open world games are quite popular because they allow the play to do whatever they want. So me examples are The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind, Minecraft, and Grand Theft Auto. One problem with these is that it is very hard to present content. If the player goes into them intending to spend quite a bit of time looking for the content then it’s fine. However, many times (including my own experiences) the player gets lost in the large open world presented. When I started to play Morrowind I was really excited at the possibilities. However I never got more than 4 or 5 hours in before I lost interest.
I feel this is a fairly graceful way to present content, without having to linearize it. The goal, after all, is to have an unconstrained open world experience.

I recently played the demo for Mass Effect 3. One particular point in the single player game really stood out in my mind. Don’t worry; there are no real spoilers here. This event took place about 2 to 3 minutes into the game. Still I am talking about the single player experience so if you want to keep that completely a surprise skip this section.

At this point in the game you, as Commander Sheppard, are running along a rooftop. The game suddenly wrenches control away from you as the rooftop begins to collapse and Sheppard starts tumbling down.

This stood out to me because it created a feeling of complete helplessness. Not to mention after the awesome roll my character did at the bottom I felt more determined to finish unscathed.

The feeling of helplessness was what really stood out to me though. The game took control away from me, thus ending the interactive part of the experience. But it was more than that. I actually experienced a lack of control over the game.

Games are meant to be played, so an event in one where you completely lose the ability to play the game stands out. It’s like a rest in music. Often the music is meaningful because of where it has no sound. Now I don’t think an entire game could be modeled around this phenomenon, but cinematics can be used here to add this loss of control feeling to an otherwise interactive experience. Again, being able to dynamically create these cinematics given the current situation the player has gotten into would only increase the power of this technique.

In studying cinematics and games I’ve often wondered where my work would fit. Games are supposed to be interactive, so why have movies in them? But I think there are important roles cinematics can play in game experiences. These are just a couple interesting uses I have thought of for them.