

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Outer Wilds
Platform: PC
Genre: Exploration, Adventure, Mystery
Release Date: June 18, 2020
Developer: Mobius Digital
Publisher: Annapurna Interactive
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Alex Beachum, Kelsey Beachum

Overview

Outer Wilds is a game centered on space exploration and discovery. The player is tasked with journeying out into the galaxy and uncovering the many mysteries found there. Exactly 22 minutes into exploring, however, the sun goes supernova and explodes. You and all other life in the galaxy is ended abruptly and without warning. All is dark, until- You wake up on your home planet 22 minutes in the past, and the hook of the game is revealed: The player avatar is stuck in a time-loop. The rest of the game is played in these 22 minute increments, wherein you must find answers about what is happening and learn how to prevent the destruction of everything and everyone you know.

Characters

While there are many characters in *Outer Wilds*, those with narrative relevance are presumed to be long dead. They are characterized through the text they left behind in journals and transcripts which you discover on your travels. The game does not focus on any character's individual story, and is rather more concerned with a broad understanding of the societies and cultures the characters exist in, which are described below.

- **The Hearthians** – An alien civilization living on the planet Timber Hearth. They value curiosity and exploration above all else, seeking to understand the universe around them and their place in it. The player avatar is an unnamed Hearthian astronaut about to blast off and explore the galaxy for the first time. They are a member of Outer Wilds Ventures, a space exploration program founded by past Hearthians.

- **The Nomai** - A seemingly extinct alien civilization who lived in the same galaxy as the Hearthians long ago. Their technologically advanced culture valued understanding and knowledge above all else. The player learns about the Nomai by reading long-forgotten text they left behind and exploring the ruins of Nomai structures. It is later understood that the Nomai were a nomadic people who travelled through space on an endless, all-consuming search for “The Eye of the Universe.”

Breakdown

A common sentiment among the ever-growing cult following of the game *Outer Wilds* is the overwhelming desire players have to experience the game for the very first time all over again. What started as a student project eventually grew into a masterpiece of the medium so impactful thousands upon thousands of players herald it as one of the greatest games ever made. Having recently completed it myself, I am in total agreement with these reviews. *Outer Wilds* moved me. To briefly introduce it beyond just the acclaim it has received (and my own emotional attachment), *Outer Wilds* is, directly from its Steam store page, an “open world mystery about a solar system trapped in an endless time loop.” *Outer Wilds* is a game where everything, even its core conceit, is a surprise meant to be discovered through gameplay, so I will do my best to refrain from spoiling too much of the story. What I will discuss in this analysis, rather, is how unique the narrative of the game is in how it develops a desire within the player to chart their own path and explore the world however they choose. The emergent gameplay that results from this and nonlinear narrative structure of the game blend in order to tell a story that has both never been told before and could be told no other way, which is why the experience resonates so strongly with so many people, myself included. There is no one to fight, there are no worlds to conquer, there is only a vast solar system waiting to reward an adventurer willing enough to spend the time to learn its secrets.

Your player-character is a nameless, faceless alien astronaut, and while they may be the latest recruit of “Outer Wilds Ventures,” it is quickly understood that the story isn’t about them. As you explore alien architecture, meet fellow astronauts on foreign planets, and uncover ancient script, the player soon comes to the realization that *this* is the story: the world that exists around the player-character. By designing the game with exploration and discovery as its primary driving force and motivation for the player, *Outer Wilds* is able to act as a key example of a game that plays to the strengths of the medium, providing players with a narrative that would be impossible to experience without the interactivity and agency unique to games.

Strongest Element

The developers of *Outer Wilds* talk a lot about the idea of “truth in simulation,” which creative lead Alex Beachum explains as “having a world that feels like things are happening even when you are not there.” The world doesn’t revolve around the central character, as it does in so many stories. You are, rather, just an observant of it. This makes the time loop conceit of the game narratively compelling. As you explore the same simulated solar system over and over again, you try new things each time. Every 22 minutes the loop resets and you wake up ready to blast off again filled with a new sense

of purpose. A clue found on the ocean planet Giant's Deep may give you insight into how to explore a closed-off tower on neighboring planet Brittle Hollow where you learn more about the Nomai and the experiments they had been conducting around the solar system. Everything the player finds throughout their adventure builds upon everything else, resulting in an interconnected narrative web spanning the entire solar system. This complete interconnectedness stands out as the game's strongest element.

Unsuccessful Element

While the freedom to experience the narrative in such a nonlinear way works great for immersion, it also leads to quite a bit of repetition in returning to areas already explored and opens the player to the potential to miss incredibly important information, which could be quite frustrating. It is difficult to label this an objectively "weak" aspect of the game, because the frustration that may come as a result of playing only adds to the feeling of success when the player begins to piece things together. I will concede that not all players will particularly enjoy this aspect of the game, but if their sensibilities are the same as mine they should come to appreciate it eventually.

Highlight

The game starts with you waking up on your home planet Timber Hearth, the morning of your first launch day. As you explore your village on the way to the observatory you are given the option to talk with your fellow Hearthians, who all express varying levels of excitement and worry about your coming voyage. It is discovered through these conversations that your species thrives on exploration and discovery, and that there have been quite a few astronauts that have left Timber Hearth before you in search of adventure. Later on you make your way into the Hearthian's museum, where you are given hints regarding what lies beyond Timber Hearth, including the existence of a strange, extinct alien race called the Nomai, who you will eventually uncover the larger history of. The most compelling moment of the tutorial section comes right after this, as you talk to museum curator Hornfels. They ask you what you intend to do once you blast off, and you are given a list of responses to choose, including meeting up with the other travelers, learning more about the Nomai, or "just winging it" among a few other options. Giving the player this choice and agency in the conversation is an incredible way to engage and excite them without explicitly telling them what to do. This is the moment it dawned on me that the entirety of *Outer Wilds* was going to be *my* experience and mine alone. Every player will play the game in a different order, allowing for carefully constructed yet totally emergent narrative experiences to exist as the very foundation of the game.

Critical Reception

While there are many who view *Outer Wilds* as a near-flawless masterpiece, some players are just not able to get into it. *Outer Wilds* is not a game that appeals to everyone, but what game *is* made for everyone? Games, like all art, have an audience in mind. Fortunately, critical reception has been quite positive, with *Outer Wilds* receiving many awards nominations, near-perfect scores, and "Game of the Year" markers from outlets like Polygon, Eurogamer, Giant Bomb, and The Guardian. Colin Campbell of Polygon

gave the game a strong recommendation, writing that “*Outer Wilds* is a game of intense originality, charm and beauty. It’s an escape pod to strange new experiences, where great stories are to be found, deep in the bellies of ancient worlds.” Phil Savage of PC Gamer gave the game an 89 out of 100, citing some issues with a few puzzles being too obtuse (specifically with no system in place to tell you when you’re on the right track), but overall declaring that “untangling [the mystery] is a delight.”

Lessons

- Narrative should be designed to work in tandem with gameplay, not around it.
- Well-crafted writing can be enough to engage a player on its own.
- Freedom and nonlinearity in story are tools that designers can make effective use of.

Summation

Outer Wilds is a story that could only conceivably be told through the interactive medium of video games. It affects players so profoundly because it cannot exist anywhere else, and has never existed anywhere else before. By the end of the journey *Outer Wilds* becomes so much bigger than the sum of its parts. The game explores what it means to be a conscious observer in the universe and asks fundamental questions about self and our place in the world, presenting these ideas in a way that relies completely on experience and interactivity, marrying the narrative and gameplay together and binding them so tightly players are left in awe of what they were given the opportunity to be a part of. The player is forced to come to grips with the limited amount of time they are given each cycle to explore, and therefore must pay specific attention to their surroundings, making decisions every precious moment they are alive. Death, however, is never too punishing a setback, as the player will always have learned something new each time they wake up next to that warm fire burning on their home planet. It is no mere coincidence the game has you open your eyes looking up at a sky full of stars in the beginning of each loop, always sure to remind you of the solar system of opportunity that awaits if only you are willing to step inside your ship and explore.