

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** To The Moon  
**Platform:** Microsoft Windows, Linux, MacOS, Nintendo Switch, Android, iOS  
**Genre:** Adventure, Puzzle  
**Release Date:** November 1, 2011  
**Developer:** Freebird Games  
**Publisher:** Freebird Games  
**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Kan Gao

## Overview

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A bright full moon glows upon the night sky, accompanied by thousands of stars twinkling across a broad horizon that seems to stretch on forever. Ocean waves crash along the rocky shoreline. Above stands two looming buildings; an abandoned lighthouse and a large house are settled nearby. Inside, the sound of a melodic piano is heard, its soft melody is sung throughout the house, inciting a peaceful atmosphere when...

*SCREEECH! C R A S H!*

A car sits at the bottom of the hill, its front end smoking from internal damage, a piece of roadkill lies on the road. A man and woman exit the vehicle, bickering amongst themselves over the crash. They're arguing about the damaged company car, swerving away just to dodge a squirrel, an act gone in vain as its limp body lies by the roadside. The woman, Dr. Eva Rosalene, orders the man, Dr. Neil Watts to take their equipment and head up the hill to the client's residence on foot. Upon arriving, the pair await for an answer by the front door, they assess their surroundings and ponder of what's to come.

"...It's probably gonna be another all-nighter, y'know." says Watts, placing the equipment case down, relaxing his arms.

"I know," Rosalene replies.

"And I doubt they'd have any coffee..." Watts starts.

"Shut up."

“...And the ocean waves will sing lullabies...”

“Not through your blabbering they won’t,” Rosalene retorts

“...And your eye-lids wil--” Watts is interrupted by the opening of the front door.

Rosalene enters with Watts in tow, until she halts him from entering.

“Don’t forget the equipment, moron.”

Turning around, he grabs the heavy utility case before hauling it inside the house.

“...I don’t get paid enough for this,” He huffs.

The door closes shut.

The start of *To The Moon* sets the tone for the game; a long night is waiting ahead for the main characters as their job isn’t going to be as simple as it seems. The game follows the story of Dr. Rosalene and Dr. Watts on their way to fulfill the wish of Johnny Wyles, an elderly man on his deathbed with one last wish: to go to the moon. Luckily, his wish can be fulfilled thanks to the technology at the Sigmund Agency of Life Generation (Sigmund Corp. for short), where Rosalene and Watts can enter Johnny’s memories and implement his desire into his earliest memories. This allows his younger self to pursue that wish in a simulation which will emulate those decisions, thus altering his memories into ones where Johnny was able to visit the moon. Using simple mechanics, players traverse the world of memories to collect items of significance called “Mementos” and solve simple puzzles in order to advance the plot. Over the course of the game, Rosalene and Watts discover that their client’s wish is much more than just simply going to the moon.

*To The Moon* delivers its narrative through players experiencing a series of events that occur throughout one's life without having any context of what led up to that point. Witnessing these events causes players to see the different factors in someone’s life that shape them into who they are, as told through the events of Johnny’s memories. Players can learn that characters can be much more than what's on the surface without having to interact with NPCs at any point in the game in order to care about who they are as people.

## Characters

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- **Dr. Eva Rosalene** - A Doctor (official title: Senior Memory Traversal Agent) employed by special agency Sigmund Corp. and one of the playable characters within the game, is sent to fulfill the dying wish of client Johnny Wyles. Rosalene is a mature, practical woman with no room for childish antics (specifically from her work partner Dr. Neil Watts), with a side knack for witty commentary. Throughout the game, Rosalene is shown to be very analytical of her surroundings, deducing clues throughout the world in order to conclude any information about her client. With her keen sense of judgement, Rosalene is able

to quickly find a solution that will best accomplish the task at hand, even willing to take risks if it means completing the job.

- **Dr. Neil Watts** - Another Doctor (official title: Technician Specialist) employed at Sigmund Corp. Watts is the second playable character within the game and is Rosalene's working partner. Watts is a childish and humorous man, usually seen dropping various pop-cultural references and jokes throughout the game. Watts also has a tendency to make thoughtless comments towards his clients, being seen as rude and insensitive, as he only accepts jobs with the motivation of getting paid. Despite his careless and comedic persona, Watts can also become serious when the situation calls, and become sentimental towards clients, as later in the game he becomes attached towards Johnny and River. He sympathizes with the hardships they faced, doing his best to ensure they've died happy rather than die with regret, even if it goes against company protocol.
- **John 'Johnny' Wyles** - A dying elderly man with one last wish to go to the moon, for reasons unknown. Serving as a main character within the plot, the game follows the memories of Johnny's life, with players slowly learning about various life events from present day to his earliest childhood memories. First seen as an innocent old man who cared about the well-being of his deceased wife, players soon learn that Johnny isn't as simple of a character as he seems.
- **River Elisabeth Wyles** - River is the fourth main character in the game and Johnny's deceased wife, after being diagnosed with a terminal illness in its late stages. Players never interact with River at any point in the game, only watching her through Johnny's memories. River is shown as a quiet and reserved woman diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome.
- **Joey Wyles** - Johnny's deceased twin brother who died in a car accident after getting run over by his own mother. Before his death, Joey was a bright and kind boy, aspiring to become an author one day in hopes of bringing joy to his child readers and earning enough money to financially support his family. The aftermath of Joey's death resulted in their mother projecting Joey's likeliness onto Johnny by forcing him to enjoy the same things as Joey, such as pickled olives and children's novel series *Animorphs*.
- **Nicolas** - Johnny's close childhood friend since Middle School, a caring guy who is always looking out for his friend which is evident through his multiple appearances throughout Johnny's life.
- **Isabelle** - A friend of River and Johnny, Isabelle, like River, has Asperger's Syndrome, but was diagnosed at a younger age than River. As a result from her early diagnosis, Isabelle learned how to hide it and be deemed "normal". Like Nicolas, cares about her friends, usually acting as a voice of reason and helping Johnny understand her and River's condition.

- **Lily** - Johnny's caretaker for the past 2 years, who is a single mother of 2 children. Lily lost her husband in a war, and answered a job ad to become Johnny's caretaker. Lily is grateful for Johnny's kindness as he let her family stay in his house while caring for him in his final years.
- **Anya** - The abandoned lighthouse by the coastline. Anya is not a person but rather an object of great importance that River was strongly fond of (due to her great interest in lighthouses) wishing Johnny to care for Anya after her passing.

## Breakdown

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### Storytelling Structure and Character Attachment

Rather than telling a story from beginning to end, *To The Moon* presents its narrative from the end to the beginning, with players travelling back in time to watch a series of events in the form of cutscenes unfold before them. Players start the game having no clue who their client, Johnny, is, with no proper introduction from the man himself. Only through anecdotal retellings from Lily do players have a vague sense of who he is. Aside from the very few interactions Rosalene and Watts have with Johnny, players only really see him as a widowed old man who wants nothing more than to visit the moon. After being asked about his motivation for his wish, Johnny fails to explain his motives, not understanding why he does, only that he truly wishes to do so.

After the first couple of memory jumps, players hear the name of another character, River, Johnny's deceased wife whose grave lies next to the abandoned lighthouse. In one memory, Johnny is seen visiting his wife's grave, stating he'll never understand her reasoning on why she chose the things she did. Here the player is prompted with an internal question "What exactly did River do?", "How did she die?" Besides being a beloved spouse, River had tasked Johnny with a job, players are unsure of and will never know the answer unless they go back in time to find out. Like any typical storytelling structure, the story beats induce feelings of curiosity as players are unsure of what will happen next. *To The Moon* lets players witness the aftermath of said events but with no context for what led up to that moment or why things happened the way they did. This creates a more interesting method of portraying the plot compared to traditional methods, making it more engaging to the player. This is exemplified in the memory right after where players see River for the first time, right before her passing, as players watch how Johnny interacts with his wife. River explains she'll refuse medical treatment, as they lack the finances and tells Johnny that what will make her truly happy is for him to finish building their house and watch over Anya. The scene answers one question, but raises another "Who is Anya?" This type of structure continues throughout the rest of the game, working just as effectively as traditional narrative structures. The

game is able to pace these events in a way that feeds players information without them feeling lost on what is happening, while keeping them engaged with every plot development. The narrative delivery also allows gameplay to feel cohesive with narrative context as players travel through memories in order to advance the story.

With each new memory, players are presented with new information, learning about the life of Johnny and his relationship with River, seeing different remembrances that led up to the events in the future. Rosalene and Watts comment on this during one memory, where they watch a tender moment between the couple.

“You remember what happens, don’t you? It’s like watching a train wreck.”

“The ending isn’t any more important than any of the moments leading to it.”

This commentary can begin to establish a form of relationship between player and character, creating an empathy link through dramatic irony. As players gradually see different events while knowing how everything turns out, watching characters live out their lives in ignorance of what the future holds. Rosalene’s comment regarding every moment is just as important as the ending expresses the game’s ability to showcase the various moments in our lives that make living so special, both the good and the bad. Furthermore, the scene also enhances the game experience as it teaches that although players may interact very little with an NPC or none at all, you can still grow to care for said character the longer you watch them. With every cutscene we watch, we continue to learn their backstories and motivations, with little to no interaction necessary. The game’s characterization portrays its cast to shine in a light that compels players to learn more about them, thus enhancing character investment.

With this relationship in mind, the game’s story structure works effectively as players can begin to understand what kind of people Johnny and River are the further they progress in the game. Traveling to his younger years, Johnny exposes himself as a man who had only asked out River with the goal of wanting to be different from the rest. Her being casted as different from others, is what drew him towards her back in High School, at what is believed to be their first meeting. This motivation, players learn about, comes from Johnny’s childhood trauma after witnessing the death of his twin brother Joey, resulting in Johnny taking beta blockers, repressing many of his childhood memories. The aftermath not only greatly affected him but also his mother, who projected his brother’s likeliness onto him, thus forcing him to take on the same interests as he did. Her projection to make Johnny want to be known as someone different is enhanced because of this.

River on the other hand, is portrayed in the game as being more than just a wife to Johnny but someone who impacted his life, appearing in almost every memory players go

through, never leaving his side. This stands true, as what is believed to be the couple's first meeting in High School is revealed to actually have occurred prior to the day Joey died. On the night of a carnival, the two coincidentally meet in a secluded area away from the crowd, bonding over their interest in stargazing together, presenting the blossom of a new friendship. Their time is cut short when Johnny's mother calls for him, signalling for him to take his leave. Upon leaving, the pair promise to meet on the moon if one were to ever forget or get lost. This moment of revelation greatly strikes at the player's emotions, when the events of the future begin to make sense. Players find themselves engrossed in the first interaction between the two, child innocence charming players into feeling emotions of empathy and sadness.

Not only does this scene greatly affect player relationships but in-game relationships as well, with Rosalene and Watts understanding the meaning behind Johnny's wish. They now feel empathy for their client, when in comparison to the beginning of the game, where they had the intent of finishing their job quickly and promptly before going to more trouble than what is needed. Establishing these heartfelt reactions from characters helps portray them in a realistic light. Although players may not relate to these characters on a personal level, their dialogue speaks emotions that resonate throughout the game, allowing for meaningful player experience. With *To The Moon's* reverse storytelling, players are able to grasp the narrative of the game in a way that never over or underwhelms players with information, which would ruin player immersion. This structure also carefully frames its story by following its main characters down a journey where players can bond with the cast without needing to interact with them in order to develop an emotional attachment.

### **Subtle Storytelling Through Symbolism**

Symbolism plays a key role in telling the narrative of *To The Moon*, with core gameplay involving players collecting items of significance, called "Mementos" within Johnny's memories in order to advance the plot. Many objects within levels hint to the player what role they play in the story. In the beginning of the game, players are asked to find more information about Johnny and investigate the estate alongside Lily's children, who tell the player of a "funny" room in the basement. Upon entering the funny room, players discover that it is filled with origami paper rabbits, and the top of the lighthouse stores even more. Here the players can begin to wonder where these paper rabbits came from, and if Johnny was responsible for crafting them all. This question leads into the importance of the paper rabbits, as they continue to reoccur in numerous levels, hinting to the player the impact they had on Johnny's life. Investigating the room further lets players stumble upon a stuffed toy platypus. The obscurity of the animal immediately sticks out to the player, making them curious about the significance this particular toy holds in the story. Already, players come across mementos of great importance, but their

value is not known during this time. As the game progresses, the value behind them becomes more evident with every new layer to the story revealed.

Another object that proves to be of significance is the abandoned lighthouse named Anya by Johnny's house. Anya symbolizes the stars River had longed to befriend since childhood, having a strong belief that stars were just far away lighthouses. After River entrusted Johnny with watching over Anya to ensure she wouldn't be alone, Anya's purpose was also a symbol of River's love, as the purpose of a lighthouse is guiding ships to shore which in context to the narrative serves as Anya will guide Johnny home, ensuring he'll always have someone to watch over him even after River's gone. This further presents to players that the lighthouse acts as a motif throughout the game, its placement on scene is always present throughout the game.

With the game's core gameplay revolving around collecting mementos, repeatedly seeing the same object can signal to the player its hidden meaning in the story. The paper rabbits, for example, resemble the stars Johnny and River looked at during their first meeting, explaining the large quantity of rabbits crafted. With each new plot development, the story hints that River had been crafting them to remind Johnny, since he had forgotten. This is illustrated in a segment where Johnny reveals what he believes was their first meeting, confessing his motives for approaching her back in high school. River's reaction to the confession is also a subtle hint towards the meaning behind the rabbits. After a long pause between the two, River pulls a small hacky sack (a gift Johnny gave her during their first meeting) from her pocket. She asks Johnny to throw it as far as he can towards Anya, he instantly obliges, which confirms to River that Johnny truly did forget their meeting as he threw it away without any hesitation. This leads her to craft paper rabbits as a way for him to remember that night. Seen as strange at first glance, the reason behind River never telling Johnny is because of her Asperger's which is never explicitly stated in the game, but heavily referred to within the first half.

Players never confirm her diagnosis until they watch a certain memory of River visiting the doctor's office with Johnny. The doctor recommends a medical book discussing her condition by real-world medical author Tony Attwood, a psychologist who specializes in studying Asperger's Syndrome. As a result of this, she left hints for Johnny to remember that night, but due to her condition, expressing her thoughts proved to be difficult, thus giving a larger meaning to the rabbits. Connecting story beats through this method helps drive plot points into having a deeper meaning than simply being what is shown on scene.

The subtlety of *To The Moon's* narrative is shown through its symbolism, which provides an outlet that gives players more information without explicitly stating it while telling its story in a way that doesn't feel shallow. The paper rabbits' significance proves

to be a big example of subtle storytelling within the game. The toy platypus' significance symbolizes River and Johnny's friendship, being a token of friendship he had gifted to her during their first meeting, that River has cherished throughout her life, appearing in multiple levels. With location motifs present within the game, on multiple occasions do players come across Anya, the lighthouse's presence always watching over Johnny and River throughout the game's plot. This type of storytelling helps enhance gameplay, when players realize the true significance behind the game's mementos and their connections to the characters, resulting in an intrigue that creates impactful narrative beats and game delivery.

## **Strongest Element**

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Strength in *To The Moon* lies in its characterization, the emotional depth of the main cast that players experience over the course of the game. Seeing a life of ups and downs expresses the hidden depths of the game's characters, and their reactions express emotions that feel very sincere. Never once do the characters feel superficial to the point that watching plot points can take a player out of immersion because of how forced a character may sound to a player. Especially with characters like River, who players may not particularly relate to, but learn to care for, due to how human she comes across in the narrative. This leads to an outcome of characters that feel much deeper than what they may first appear to be on the surface, since as players observe their actions, they learn to empathize with them. The game's strong characterization reaches its players emotionally, which forms a bond between player to game, thus creating strong elements of narrative delivery.

## **Unsuccessful Element**

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The downfall in *To The Moon* is the realization that Johnny's happy ending isn't real despite the player fulfilling his dream of becoming an astronaut and going to the moon by the end of the game. After taking in the plot, players can realize that the narrative of Johnny's life leading up to the moment he achieves his goal is nothing more than a fantasy that was lived out through a simulation. Johnny was able to relive a happy life with his brother and still achieve his dreams while reuniting with his future wife at NASA. River, on the other hand, still died knowing that her husband was never able to remember their first meeting, no matter how hard she tried. It is painful to see her cherished moment that affected her greatly, to be forgotten by someone she loves due to Johnny's traumatic past. This hinders the player experience by showing the unfairness of reality, as the game repeatedly touches on the theme of life's hardships in its narrative.

Players will find that River was never able to remind Johnny of their treasured memory together, reminding them that life is not only hard but unfair. This unfairness is effective on character attachment, as it hits players with the sad reality of knowing that not all characters can receive a happy ending.

Looking upon this narrative delivery and its negative impact on player relationship, we can see that letting players grow heavily attached to a character and having its narrative brush off their chances of a happy ending can ruin the game's impression. How this feeling can be reworked for future reference, is by giving players hope that despite the struggles characters face, there's still chances for characters to achieve their goals and happy endings, whether this be explicitly told in game or up to player interpretation. This style of delivery allows for player intrigue even after the game is over and maintains the same relationship players have always felt, without negatively impacting player experience.

## **Highlight**

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A highlight within the game's narrative that stood out is the climax which occurs after the huge revelation players experience after realizing the meaning behind Johnny's wish. It begins with Rosalene and Watts, arguing over how they should go forward completing their job knowing Johnny's true motives, while returning to Johnny's high school. Rosalene, a character who wants to complete the initial job at hand at any cost, deems it beneficial to remove River from Johnny's memories (or so the player thinks). Watts argues, saying that removing River would defeat the purpose of why Johnny wants to visit the moon in the first place.

"But if that means removing River, then what's the point?!" Watts yells.

"The reason why he even wants to go to the moon in the first place is because she died!"

"I know. But we are legally bound by the contract to specifically--"

"#@%& the contract!"

"I didn't take this job to make him miserable, Eva."

This argument delivers a tense moment and reveals relationships between characters, specifically for Watts who has developed an attachment towards Johnny, demonstrated in the argument. Rosalene wants to remove River from Johnny's line of memories to complete the mission, while Watts believes that removing River will only make him miserable. Realizing what little time they have, she runs off and uses the simulation to create booby traps in order to stop Watts from catching her. The game changes from its usual calm demeanor into a suspenseful plot point as players run down an endless hallway, dodging spikes and other traps. After catching up to Rosalene in a

cutscene, players are shown River being dragged away off scene by a group of unknown individuals, soon Johnny appears, looking for River in the same spot she was seen in from the original memory only to be confused of her whereabouts. The scene shifts as a new character runs into the scene, calling to his friends to hurry after him. Johnny follows behind, alongside Nicolas and it is revealed that the new character is none other than Joey. Rosalene appears, revealing that she chose to save Joey in exchange for moving River elsewhere in Johnny's memories.

The game then proceeds to show the player the drastic changes in Johnny's life, presented through a cinematic cutscene where players view the original memories Johnny had spent with River to be replaced by his brother. This scene also shows the implementation of Johnny's wish as within the altered memories, he chases his dream of becoming an astronaut. This plot point serves as the most pinnacle moment in the game where players can look back at a character's hardships, knowing their struggles until they see the new altered memories and the positive outcome it has. Capturing the emotional bond players have with Johnny when they see him achieving his dream by his brother's side, proves to be emotionally engaging. Furthermore, the delivery of this plot point is enhanced with the return of River, giving Johnny not only his brother, but meeting his lover again in his altered memories. Once more, the emotional chords in players are struck as this reunion shows us the happy ending the two deserve, delivering this moment through a cutscene that leaves a deep impression on the player.

## Critical Reception

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IGN: Anthony Gallegos - Praising the game for its bravery on exploring themes of life and death and multidimensional cast. Gallegos comments on the game's limited gameplay that causes a lack of engagement, mostly due to simple nature of the mechanics, noting that the game's narrative is what carries the game as a whole, stating "Some games are utterly mindless and carried by the action or gameplay, but *To The Moon*'s gameplay moments are reliant on the excellent plot" Gallegos gives the game a score of 7.5 out of 10.

EuroGamer: Lewis Denby - Examining how *To The Moon* frames its story by telling it in reverse. Denby notes the difficulty of framing the game's narrative that way, saying it requires careful planning and praises its execution by saying, "Johnny's story is told in reverse - a task that requires tremendous courage on the part of the writer. Holding it together demands careful planning and structuring." Like Gallegos, Denby takes note of the game's shallow gameplay, stating that the game's narrative makes playing the game more worthwhile. Denby gives the game a score of 9 out of 10.

## Lessons

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- **Character interaction isn't always necessary for player bonding** - Players don't always need to interact with characters in order to get to know them better. Showing how a character acts through on scene interactions not directed at the player can tell a lot more about someone than with dialogue. Observing how characters behave and interact with others is enough for players to understand who they are, and give enough reasons to care about them. *To The Moon* exemplifies this through players taking on the role as observers throughout the game, since they never engage with River at any point but learn so much about her through actions alone.
- **Breaking traditional structure** - Not following typical storytelling structures allows for more engaging plot development. Framing a game's narrative should carefully reflect on the game's context, whether it be for character development or for the greater overarching theme. *To The Moon* utilizes this framework with the context of giving Johnny's younger self his last ambition. Witnessing the many highs and lows of Johnny's life, the game can effectively deliver an impactful experience to players through keeping them wanting to learn more, and is based on showing the results but never providing context or reasoning unless the player advances forward. This drives for a captivating way of telling a story by asking "Why/how did this happen?" as opposed to traditional structures that ask "What will happen next?" seen in a more basic structural format.
- **Using symbolism to tell a story can create a more meaningful experience** - Items of great significance in one's life can have a lot of value and meaning to an individual. In *To The Moon*, collecting items of importance play a key role in expressing the story behind its central characters. The recurrence of items can signal to players that there is some significance to the role these objects play in context to the story. The paper rabbits are a symbol of Johnny and River's first meeting as children, the abundance of them representing the thousands of stars they bonded over. Once players are able to figure out the symbolism behind these items, it ignites a feeling of revelation that connects the narrative's plot points making them much more impactful to the game's narrative delivery.

## Summation

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*To The Moon* beautifully captures the meaning of life and its positives and negatives into a light where players can feel as though they've known the main characters their whole lives, by telling a compelling story through a framework that breaks traditional norms and executes its storytelling in a way that players are able to understand and engage with how the events in people's lives influence their life choices. Each character of the game's main cast expresses their emotions in a way that feels very real and honest, grabbing the attention of players. These elements curate an experience that players will emotionally invest their time into, giving the game a chance to tell a story that resonates with players.

## Citations

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