

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Outer Wilds*
Platform: PC, Xbox One, PlayStation 4, Nintendo Switch
Genre: Adventure
Release Date: May 28, 2019 (PC)
Developer: Mobius Digital
Publisher: Annapurna Interactive
Creative Director: Alex Beachum

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Overview

Outer Wilds is the story of two alien races, 281,042 years apart, united by their insatiable curiosity and undying love for space exploration. More importantly, it's a story about the joy of learning, told by none other than the players themselves.

Mobius Digital's cosmic escapade is a 3-D adventure game bold enough to put its trust in the player to shape their own narratives — ones more meaningful than anything it could've done with more traditional storytelling structures. It's a dense network of mysteries and opportunities spread all throughout a clockwork solar system; a blank slate just waiting for someone to colour it with their own experiences and emotions. The game reminds you that this medium's experiences don't take place on the screen, they live in our minds, and that nurturing a curious mind is the key to an engaging, intimate narrative. Ultimately, *Outer Wilds* is a celebration of interactivity's potential, and a call to rediscover that childlike sense of wonder lying dormant inside us all.

You wake up by your campfire, just in time to witness an unknown structure tear itself apart over a distant planet — you'll have all the time in the universe to worry about it after. But today, you're joining your fellow explorers in space as *Outer Wilds* Ventures newest astronaut. In your makeshift spacecraft, you escape your planet's gravity for the very first time, now free to let your curiosity pull you in a million possible directions. You make a few stops, and make plans for countless more. Then, the sun explodes, and the blast swallows your system whole. You wake up by your campfire, just in time to witness that Nomai structure tear itself apart over Giant's Deep, again. And you'll wake up the same way a few dozen more times, every twenty-two minutes, each time a little more knowledgeable than the last.

Characters

THE NOMAI: A race of knowledge-seeking nomads exploring the universe aboard advanced spacecrafts known as Vessels. It was the curiosity of one clan that brought its Vessel to the Solar System, in pursuit of an entity dubbed "The Eye of the Universe." Their empty settlements and stations are found all throughout the system, housing valuable knowledge for any future explorers.

ESCALL: The leader of the Nomai clan. It was his rash decision to warp jump to the Eye's presumed location that doomed himself and a third of his clan after their Vessel mysteriously crashed into Dark Bramble. Though his escape pod fell prey to the planet's labyrinthine interior, the remaining pods made their way to safety. The survivors settled in the system and continued their search for the elusive Eye.

POKE: The apprentice of Annona, the original creator of the Vessel's now-defunct advanced warp core. In her attempts to recreate warp travel, she and her sister, Clary, discovered a negative time phenomenon that eventually led to the Ash Twin Project's 22-minute time loop.

PYE: One of the scientists responsible for recreating the negative time phenomenon at the behest of Poke and Clary. She was vocal about the need for the Sun Station, which she hoped would power the Ash Twin Project. Following its unexpected failure, she, Poke, and Clary paid a visit to the Interloper, a comet that had recently entered the system. Inside, they discovered its Ghost Matter core, which promptly ruptured and killed the trio, along with every Nomai in the system.

SOLANUM: A young explorer at the end of her pilgrimage to the Quantum Moon's sixth location. Solanum arrived just in time to meet her end alongside her clan. She is the only "living" Nomai that you can encounter, much to your surprise.

THE HEARTHIAN: Around the time of the Nomai clan's unfortunate demise, the primitive ancestors of the Hearthians swam unperturbed in their underground pools. Fast-forward hundreds of thousands of years and the Hearthians are beginning their early forays into space exploration, at a rather unfortunate time in the universe's history.

HORNFELS: The curator of the Timber Hearth Observatory, which acts as ground control for all astronauts. Gives you the launch codes to kick off your adventure.

ESKER: A lonely Hearthian who's made their home on the Attlerock. Ever since Hearthian ships stopped needing repairs, they've been out of a job. A serial whistler.

RIEBECK: A fellow astronaut and enthusiastic archaeologist. Unfortunately for them, their fear of space has kept them on Brittle Hollow for some time. A banjo enthusiast.

CHERT: An astronomer who's found the perfect stargazing spot on Ember Twin. Has growing concerns about the recent uptick in supernovas. An avid drummer.

GABBRO: The only other member of Outer Wilds Ventures stuck in the time loop after pairing with a memory statue on Giant's Deep. A flute player.

FELDSPAR: A veteran astronaut, and the best Hearthian pilot to come from Outer Wilds Ventures. They've been missing for some time after crash landing inside Dark

Bramble. A fearless explorer that a certain newbie should consider aspiring to be like. Now alone with their harmonica.

YOU: The newest member of Outer Wilds Ventures who happens to pair with a Nomai memory statue just before their first flight. It's up to you to build upon the foundation that the Nomai laid down eons ago, in order to find the Eye of the Universe and secure a future for existence itself.

Breakdown

Storytelling in the Solar System

The Hearthians, like the Nomai before them, are motivated by an implicit hunger for knowledge. For a Hearthian, there's no ambitious end goal that inspires their learning. Rather, it's the act of exploring, observing, and interpreting what was previously unknown that fulfills them. Unsurprisingly, the core aesthetic of play that drives *Outer Wilds* is discovery. The game stresses the importance of being present, of bearing witness to the happenings of the universe, and being an active participant in those events. Its narrative structure draws out this implicit desire to learn and make sense of the world around you.

Outer Wilds isn't fixated on any particular master plots. It stands in stark contrast to the rigid story structures found in so many adjacent adventure games. The game rejects both traditional linear and nonlinear structures; every piece of every puzzle is available to you at any time. There's no "following" or "skipping" plot points because you're responsible for creating your own. It makes an effort to confront your expectations and asks you to look beyond them, to instead focus on what truly matters — your personal narrative. With no direct guidance and no golden path to the finish line, the spotlight falls on emergent storytelling. The questions you ask yourself, the order you ask them in, and how you go about testing your theories become the beats that make up your story. The game systems and carefully arranged Solar System help to facilitate your own narrative.

The Solar System is home to an immeasurable number of possibilities, and every single one demands your attention. There's almost too much for you to juggle at any given moment. The 22-minute time loop provides structure to your story and tames the chaotic decision-making process — especially important considering the time-sensitive events introduced alongside it. This format divides the journey into recognizable segments, each with its own story arc surrounding your discoveries. Having time as a resource forces you to internalize the rules and layouts of the Solar System. The time constraint encourages you to plan treks and experiments,

making for well-paced emergent narratives. Without it, managing your cognitive load would be a near-impossible task.

Floating at the center of the game's many mysteries are three core components: the Ash Twin Project, the Vessel, and the Probe Tracking Module. Orbiting them is a dense web of overlapping puzzles and secrets scattered all throughout the Solar System, where progress is limited by nothing but your own knowledge base. Embedded storytelling blankets the game world with nuggets of narratives-to-be, waiting to be interpreted and strung together by you. Everything you learn relates back to a number of comprehensive, consistent, and flexible game systems that govern the Solar System. Your journey towards mastering each and every one of them comprises your central narrative.

In this way, *Outer Wilds* becomes an immersive experience on the level of systems. Their consistency contributes to a smooth flow state where no unpredictable components ever threaten your growing understanding of the systems. And, as you exercise lateral thinking and uncover new facets of each system, you continue to feed your implicit curiosity. The sheer variety of what you can learn — across systems, environments, lore, et cetera — also builds spatial immersion. Meticulous attention to detail culminates in a Solar System that feels lived-in; you can't help but form a strong bond with every celestial body, giving their roles in your narrative a distinct emotional flavour.

The Universe & You

You wake up, an excited Hearthian, ready to launch their career as an Outer Wilds Ventures astronaut. *Outer Wilds* is experienced entirely in the first-person perspective, but that alone isn't enough to create engagement. The jarring dissonance between player and character personalities, voices, and actions often overpowers any narrative benefits of the graphical perspective. Your Hearthian is a cipher character: an empty canvas that doesn't speak outside of your selected dialogue decisions, and never responds to anything you see or do. Their only identifiable trait is one that the two of you share, being an implicit drive to discover. It's more accurate to say that you experience the narrative with yourself as the protagonist in *Outer Wilds*.

The game continues to close the divide between itself and you through primarily diegetic user interfaces. As a work of science fiction, *Outer Wilds* is able to contextualize what would typically be a non-diegetic HUD, and brings it into the game world as a futuristic helmet's interface. In a universe dictated by physics, your helmet, your ship, and your gadgets are fitted with all the information you'll need. Unfortunately, it doesn't stray away from all non-diegetic elements, the Hearthian dialogue being the prime example. However, as you continue making discoveries and fostering a relationship with the game world, it becomes harder for these non-diegetic elements to shake your suspension of disbelief.

The emphasis on curiosity-driven narratives demands healthy, but less aggressive communication on the part of the game. Therefore, diegetic elements are supported by strong visual and auditory cues. The shape and colour language of *Outer Wilds* conveys just as much information, if not more than any GUI elements. The marriage of these techniques contributes to compelling environmental storytelling. From dilapidated structures to the messy scribbles of Nomai children, the Solar System never stops providing new material to interpret. Every planet has its own identity, and with that, unique opportunities for narrative arcs.

Despite highlighting game systems and obstacles that largely center on physics, *Outer Wilds* remains extremely accessible even to those (read: me) missing this all-important interest in the subjects it explores. You can thank the rustic qualities of Hearthian life, and a focus on exploration that's more reminiscent of childhood treks through the park trail than the formula-laden struggles of actual space exploration. This evoked storytelling, drawing from familiar sensations and experiences, gives you a more concrete idea of exploration to attach yourself to. The campfire-y tunes and improvised technology, among other things, interspersed throughout tap into a sort of nostalgia that grounds the experience.

Your personal, makeshift spacecraft is a hodgepodge of wood, scrap, and other miscellaneous doodads. It's more reminiscent of a childhood tree fort than a spacefaring vessel, in the best way possible. Everything about the nature-centric Hearthian culture calls you to channel the childlike wonder that you thought you'd lost. At the same time, the game recognizes the average player's interest in space and sci-fi, making space exploration the perfect vehicle to explore the value of knowledge. It combines the spirit of childhood discovery with an interest in space exploration to prime you for the journey to come.

Learning from the Nomai

Outer Wilds Ventures outfits each of its spacefaring members with a standard array of tools to communicate with the Solar System and the Nomai. Although the Nomai are no more, everything they've left behind is infused with stories, knowledge, and mysteries. Your spacesuit and spacecraft, for example, are both influenced by knowledge passed down by the Nomai, echoing *Outer Wilds'* sentiments about compounding knowledge. The remainder of your kit aids you in furthering your education, extracting whatever it is you can from the ruins of the fallen clan.

The Translation Tool is the only gadget in your arsenal that's unique to you. The device allows you to, as the name implies, translate the Nomai language. Nomai text adorns surfaces and computers all over the game world; Nomai scrolls and projection stones can also paint text passages on surfaces once inserted into a reader. Their writing consists of branching spirals

patterns that capture conversations between multiple Nomai. *Outer Wilds* offers an extra touch of player input by allowing them to explore certain facets of a conversation in the order of their choosing. These texts become your primary source of information, providing insight into the inner workings of the Solar System and Nomai technology, as well as complementary Nomai lore. Through reading, you're able to contextualize your discoveries and draw more meaning out of your experiences thus far. Alternatively, experiencing an event prior to learning about it enriches the text when you eventually stumble upon it.

The history of the Nomai, rich as it is, shouldn't be conflated with the central narrative. Their exploits serve as supplementary stories that add to your narrative and make information more approachable. The idea of more approachable lore is explored further through *Outer Wilds*' Nomai characters. Just as channeling childhood nostalgia makes space exploration less intimidating, relatable characters make science and history more palatable. Nomai history can be divided into subplots, each one with its own cast of characters with human wants and needs. You can't relate to the Nomai clan, but you can connect with its individual members, not only because you've followed in their footsteps, but because their experiences also speak to the human condition.

Each plotline can span multiple planets, but others find a home in a single location. Areas accented with Nomai technology and structures are guaranteed to house new knowledge to shape your story. The placement of each planet's Nomai-touched landmarks identifies key areas worth exploring, preventing you from taking fruitless detours. Nomai projection pools also give glimpses into structures where significant discoveries can be made. The responsibility for locating the remaining nooks and crannies falls onto your other two gadgets: the Signalscope and the Scout Launcher.

The Signalscope is your personal guide. It highlights hot spots all over the Solar System, but leaves it up to you to make the executive decisions. Tuning to the Quantum Fluctuations frequency, for example, helps you hone in on quantum shards around the Solar System. Meanwhile, the Scout Launcher is easily the most versatile of the bunch, and the most useful for exploring Nomai structures. Most of its functions, beyond its photo mode, stay relatively hidden, however, and are slowly revealed through further exploration and experimentation. Your understanding of the Solar System is reflected in your mastery over these gadgets' myriad applications. The ease at which you can traverse the game world is a testament to your growing pool of knowledge.

Strongest Element

Outer Wilds' unwavering focus on crafting a systemic world that allows emergent narratives to flourish is its strongest element. Each design decision was made to encourage exploration and promote curiosity. No action taken by the player is ever at the behest of the game; it makes subtle suggestions, it doesn't give directions — if even that. Every piece of information received is filtered through a lens constructed out of all the player's individual experiences. The result is a narrative that's entirely player-driven, where no two players will ever have the exact same stories to tell. The order of key story events, or even what even constitutes as one, is largely reliant on the player and how they choose to interpret and respond to the Solar System. Playing *Outer Wilds* is a perfect showcase of how video games live entirely in the mind of their players.

Unsuccessful Element

The more intricate the mysteries, the more pressure a game faces to communicate the steps required to make progress. In *Outer Wilds*, where unobtrusive guidance is king, all environmental cues and other signifiers have to be in top form to ensure a steady stream of discoveries. Unfortunately, there's just too much to account for, and the quick solution of having overt directions goes against the game's philosophy. This combination of complex mysteries and passivity gives rise to countless potential stumbling blocks. More question marks mean more opportunities to hurt the narrative flow, while looser hand-holding makes getting back on track more challenging.

For example, reaching the Ash Twin Project sits at the end of a long string of discoveries, yet the final step is ill-communicated. Normally, your curiosity would pull you towards another mystery in the interim, but by the final stretch, the endless paths before you collapse into an unavoidable few. Mobius Digital was quick to adjust bits of Nomai text over several patches to help nudge you in the right direction. However, that aspect of *Outer Wilds*' design guarantees that there will always be other miscommunications.

Highlight

The emotional highs that come with knowing you're on the cusp of a great discovery are some of *Outer Wilds*' greatest gifts to its players. Watershed moments like these punctuate your entire journey, but only one dramatically alters its course: the Sun Station report. After exercising your mastery of either piloting or warp technology, and braving the deadly gap separating the two station modules, you're rewarded with the secret to stopping the supernova —

or so you think. You're excited, but that excitement quickly dissipates the moment you translate a crestfallen Pye's project update.

“The Sun Station is useless. It will never and could never, cause the sun to explode.”

The Ash Twin Project failed. Stopping the supernova was never an option. 281,042 years later, your system's sun is at the end of its natural life cycle, and there's nothing you can do about it. You think about Chert's vindicated concerns regarding the heat death of the universe, the distant supernovas you've witnessed from the cockpit of your ship, and the folly behind your self-appointed duty to save your system from its star.

But, rather than drowning yourself in nihilism, you're oddly content. In fact, this knowledge does nothing but spur you on. You want to know more, and now you know the universe has more to show you. This single beat encapsulates everything *Outer Wilds* is about: discovery for its own sake — the quest for understanding, and the joy of that journey. The Sun Station presents an opportunity to do away with all your preconceived notions of “the goal” and embrace learning itself as the true goal of the game. Its impact owes a lot to *Outer Wilds*' efforts to nurture personal narratives. How every player interprets this beat is wholly dependent on their unique journeys thus far. Even in the face of what might be the worst possible news, you're still willing to press onward. You can't help it, and being able to draw that out of players is a testament to *Outer Wilds*' curiosity-driven narrative design.

Critical Reception

IGN – Mike Epstein – 8.4/10

Mike argues that behind the veil of seemingly abstract progression, there's a defined structure in *Outer Wilds* that governs its narrative. That structure is present in the myriad tidbits of information — textual, visual, and aural — that rely on a player's own interpretations to advance the narrative. He notes that “your understanding of the world and its stories is your progress, and each step forward feels like a genuine eureka moment.” [1] Mike appreciates the curiosity-driven gameplay that contributes to these meaningful narrative beats that keep him enthralled.

TheSixthAxis – Thomas Hughes – 9/10

Thomas is pleasantly surprised that a narrative supposedly centered on astrophysics is as relatable as it managed to be. He's impressed at how authentic the Nomai text is, saying that it has “a surprisingly human feel,” [2] despite its purpose being to educate the player on Nomai history and science. By allowing fully realized Nomai personalities to colour the expository text, the narrative becomes more approachable in his eyes.

Twinfinite – Chris Jecks – 4/5

The strong lineup of planets and plotlines brings the Solar System to life and makes exploration worthwhile for Chris. To him, each individual planet is its own character: “Every planet has its own story to tell, its own mechanics and secrets you’ll need to uncover, and its own narrative threads that all tie together into the larger, overarching plot.” [3] He lauds *Outer Wilds* for its strong environmental storytelling and ability to communicate its story through gameplay, as exhibited by the planets.

Lessons

The most satisfying questions are the ones that players ask and answer themselves.

Offering guidance and spotlighting potential courses of action are always welcome, but not if it means robbing players of the opportunities to be curious. Opting for more subtle cues leaves the door open for players to set their own goals and trial different approaches. The product is an environment where emergent narrative outcomes can thrive outside of rigid narrative structures. *Outer Wilds* actively avoids intruding on the player’s decision-making process. During the initial conversation with Hornfels, they only ever ask the player what they plan to do first, never providing direct objectives.

Only communicate information relevant to the player’s experience.

There’s value in text that helps to contextualize the player’s experiences. Spending time with lore that has no bearing on the player’s adventure has an adverse effect on the overall experience. The dissonance between what they observe and read forces them to question the relevance of every bit of information they stumble across. *Outer Wilds* earns the player’s trust and interest with text that complements their discoveries, and vice versa. Nomai lore as a whole seems so distant, yet the bygone clan’s journey becomes inextricably tied to the player’s.

Players relate to characters, not constructs.

Similarly, worldbuilding through text is futile if players have nothing to sympathize with. In a game like *Outer Wilds*, where unpacking the scientific breakthroughs of an entire alien race is crucial to cracking the mysteries of the Solar System, otherwise dry information should be neatly packaged into bite-sized pieces and delivered by well-rounded, relatable characters. On Ember Twin, the player learns to avoid Dark Bramble’s anglerfish through text left behind by Nomai children playing a game inspired by anglerfish behavior. By giving players something to latch on to — in this instance, playground games — information can be made more palatable.

Summation

Outer Wilds is an adventure that starts and ends in the mind of its players. It's a seminal game that detaches itself entirely from the structures that govern more established storytelling mediums. Mobius Digital invites you, the player, to tap into your childlike wonder in order to build a novel narrative unique to you. The Solar System comes to life only because you make the conscious effort to turn a few planets' worth of discoveries into something more. It's a game with an intense passion for learning that leverages its interactive nature to nurture your adventurer's spirit.

Citations

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