

Game Narrative Review

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Overview

What better way to start a new adventure than by waking up under the stars? The smell of campfire and pine trees greeting you before your big day, with a four-eyed friend roasting marshmallows close by. A sensation that never gets old, no matter how many times you'll do it, or have done it already, after yet another failed journey. Another dreadful discovery. Another question without answers. Another horrible, painful death.

"There's our pilot! Back from your pre-launch campout under the stars, I see."

"Pre-launch", if only they knew.

"You're lucky I'm in a time loop, because otherwise I'd be super dead."

That only resulted in the risk of being grounded for medical reasons. Though, in this particular loop, your mind is left with too many questions and not enough answers. Maybe a grounded stroll could clear your head a bit. So, you pass by old friends blissfully living their lives in the cozy crater of Timber Hearth. Wine tasters, troublemakers, and music players. You've come to learn that there will always be a Hearthian playing music somewhere in the universe, right to the end.

You pass by a radio tower full of photos taken by a deep space satellite. You admire the sights of planets you've become far too familiar with shown at angles you'd never seen before. In doing so you're reminded of all the unfinished mysteries you have left to uncover within them. Overall, it was a nice detour, but it's time to get back to...

Wait a second... something's off. One of these prints has a shadow of something blocking the sun. Something... unaccounted for. Could it have been a malfunction? "40°" is written on the bottom of the suspicious print. Using your Signal Scope, you manage to spot the location of the satellite floating in space. Maybe if you flew—

BOOM

For a brief moment, everything went dark, and was just as quickly illuminated by the blue glow of your sun going supernova. Ah, had it been 22 minutes already?

FOOSH

You burn up with the rest of the solar system, seeing visions of ancient Nomai tech as the memories of the 22 minutes prior flash before your eyes. Then suddenly – you’re waking up underneath the stars to the smell of campfire and pine trees.

But there was no time to chat. In a sequence far too familiar, you’re buckling up and taking off in your ship. You find and lock on to the signal of the deep space satellite and engage autopilot, putting on your suit as your ship sails next to the drifting satellite.

You exit into the endless void beneath you. You haven’t quite gotten used to this part, but you push onward anyways. There’s a small screen on the satellite displaying its current trajectory. “34°”, then “35°”. There’s a tape recorder floating nearby, you play it. “36°”. “37°”. The tape is a message from another Hearthian who checked up on the satellite and confirmed everything was working properly. So, it’s not broken? “38°”. “39°”. But if it’s not broken, then...

Slowly you begin to see it - a large shadow creeping in front of the sun. And somehow, from beyond the great mass, you can still see stars shining through it. It was as if a hole was growing in the sun. You race to your ship and blast off in the direction of this stranger. Faster and faster in the frictionless space as the shadow gets so close that sun looks as if it’s disappeared completely.

Suddenly everything goes black – until you find yourself face to face with a giant, metal structure barely visible in the darkness. You hover, unable to move until spotting what looks to be a hangar casting a bit of light into the void around you.

It’s the only place to land, and so you do. Stepping out into the massive area full of empty ships you do not recognize. You spot some glowing text written on a wall in a language you can’t read. But you’re used to this, you tell yourself. You’ve translated

weird text all the time thanks to your Nomai Translator, the latest and greatest tech available to Outer Wilds Venturers. But by now you should know better than to ignore gut feelings, as your trusted machine scans the alien writing and reads back, in all red:

“ERROR: Unknown Language”

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This is the beginning of the first, and only DLC for Outer Wilds: Echoes of the Eye, though many will likely experience it in very different ways.

For those who have completed the base game, there is a bittersweetness that comes from never being able to truly experience it again. With every secret you unlock as Outer Wilds Venture’s newest pilot, you become that much closer to finishing the story. There are no upgrades, no tools to earn, nothing required that isn’t available to you from the start. You are restricted only by the limits of your knowledge and the extent of your curiosity. Once all has been learned, no amount of restarts will ever be able to reset the knowledge you carry, preventing one from ever truly experiencing Outer Wilds again.

The game hosts a small-scale solar system of unique planets full of history and remnants of what came before. Players start the game waking up on Timber Hearth while the sky above will show the array of other locations available to them, playing out like clockwork. There is no order in which players must act, only discoveries that lead to questions, and questions that lead to clues. The many hazards of space travel, including an inevitable supernova, will likely cause players to die quite frequently only to wake up yet again as part of a mysterious, endless time loop.

For new players, Echoes of the Eye may be discovered early, late, or never at all before they finish the game. For returning players, this DLC acts as a prequel disguised as an epilogue that manages to recontextualize and rejuvenate the narrative that the base game had to offer. And to top it off, the moments of existential dread prominent in the original story pale in comparison to the horrors that lie within this enormous, new tale.

Characters

- ⚙ **Hearthians** – A bipedal race of no gender, with blue skin, long ears and four eyes native to Timber Hearth. After evolving from aquatic species and settling down in their comfortable crater villages, some Hearthians continued their pursuit of curiosity while others preferred to stay far away from the explosions and flammable launch pads. Those determined enough to seek out discoveries far beyond their reach founded a space program known as the Outer Wilds Ventures.
 - **Outer Wilds Venturers** – Travelers from the Outer Wilds Ventures program can each be found on different planets, typically next to a campfire while whistling or playing a common tune on a personal instrument. They've all been exploring the solar system long before you and will have plenty to say about the planet they're on, things they've discovered, and some recommendations for you to explore.
 - ⊙ **Esker, Chert** and **Riebeck** remain as they always have been, monitoring The Attlerock, Ember Twin and Brittle Hollow respectively with much to share.
 - ⊙ **Feldspar** has been missing in action for some time, currently camping out inside Dark Bramble unknown to anyone else.
 - ⊙ **Gabbro** can be found relaxing on Giants Deep and appears to be the only one experiencing the same time loop that you are.
 - 🕒 **You** – The newest recruit to the Outer Wilds Ventures space program, and the first pilot equipped with a Nomai Translator. This small addition makes you the first ever Hearthian capable of learning about the ancient Nomai's history. In a twist of circumstances, you find yourself trapped within an endless time loop that resets when you perish, or when the sun explodes in 22 minutes. As such, only you are capable of uncovering truths, mysteries and kept secrets that no one else could ever live to tell.

▲ **The Nomai** – An advanced, digitigrade species with fur, antlers and three eyes with slit-type pupils, often adorned with a life support suit for oxygen. While Hearthians were still aquatic creatures, a distant Nomai clan picked up a signal from a cosmic entity they would call “the Eye of the universe”. With potential unlike anything they’d ever seen, the clan warped immediately to its approximate destination without first communicating their voyage to others. That destination led them crashing inside Dark Bramble, trapped in its labyrinth of warped space. Out of the three escape pods, only two made it out. Stranded within a foreign solar system, those who escaped struggled to survive until they could once again pursue the Eye of the universe, which had since stopped broadcasting its signal. Across generations the Nomai made countless attempts at relocating the Eye. Their greatest and final solution involved firing a probe out in a random direction then sending its results back in time before it ever launched. Yet to power such a device would require the energy from a supernova – a feat that they were unable to perform. In time, the Interloper would pass through the solar system, blanketing it with a lethal substance that would kill the entire, unsuspecting clan in an instant.

❖ **Solanum** – Part of a Nomai generation born after the crash within your solar system. Despite being raised with the Eye as a great symbol to her clan, she regards it from a practical perspective. Her blind faith grew to accept that the Eye might have no wishes or intentions at all. With a belief controversial to her elders that came in search of the Eye; Solanum is at peace with the notion that her clan arrived here entirely by happenstance, and nothing more. Her pursuit of the Eye led Solanum to partake in a pilgrimage onto an elusive Quantum Moon that exists in multiple locations until it is observed, just as the Interloper was entering the solar system. Due to its mysterious properties, Solanum continues to exist on the Quantum Moon in a state that is both dead and alive. Should you find her, Solanum will teach you all that her clan has learned through a series of hieroglyphics and translations, including a theory that the Quantum Moon could in fact be the Eye’s moon. Additionally, for your curiosity and capabilities in finding her, Solanum asks to regard you as a friend.

◆ **The Stranger's Inhabitants** – Long before the Nomai knew about the Eye of the universe, its signal was first picked up by an advanced species of a very mystical science native to a neighbouring solar system. This species lived on the moon of a ringed gas giant, and resembled tall, bipedal owls with the legs and antlers of an elk. Overwhelmed by its potential, the Inhabitants sacrificed their entire moon's resources in order to create a structure that would take them to the Eye. The structure was built as a ring world full of trees, wooden homes and rushing rivers fit for long term survival, even equipped with a cloaking device. It is a structure that only you will ever discover and refer to as "The Stranger". When they arrived in the Stranger however, further inspection of the Eye revealed its catastrophic capabilities that would lead to the end of the universe. Out of rage, the Inhabitants destroyed all places of worship to the Eye. Out of fear, they built a device to block the Eye's signal. Out of despair, they fabricated the home they lost on their old moon as a dream world in which they could reside forever in an eternal sleep. In the meantime, the Stranger would remain cloaked and hidden in orbit around the Eye's nearest solar system. By the time you arrive, the long-abandoned Stranger will be on the brink of deteriorating, with nothing but the corpses that died in their sleep still inhabiting it. Should you manage to enter their dream world, the Inhabitants will not take kindly to the sudden appearance of a small alien and will perform any measure, as violent as necessary, to get you out.

☞ **The Prisoner** – One Inhabitant rebelled against the others, waking up from their fabricated reality to switch off the Eye's signal blocker, only to be exiled for their insubordination. After imprisoning them deep within the dream world, the Inhabitants turned the Eye's signal blocker back on before returning to their slumber, never to wake again. If you manage to find the Prisoner, they will not wish to harm you. Instead, the two of you will be able to share visions of your stories. The story you share with them will reflect all that you've learned thus far and result in freeing the Prisoner from their dream cell. Yet with their body long deteriorated, the Prisoner will wake themselves up only to be put to rest, leaving behind one last vision of the two of you sailing off into the horizon together.

- **The Solar System** – While not living creatures, the celestial bodies within Outer Wilds’ solar system each play unique roles to the overall narrative and have been designed with characteristics that make each one a very different experience.
 - **The Sun Station** – Created by the Nomai to blow up the **Sun** in order to use the energy of a supernova. The attempt was a failure, leaving the sun to survive far longer than the Nomai until the end of its natural lifespan.
 - **The Hourglass Twins** – The two planets **Ash Twin** and **Ember Twin** orbiting and passing columns of sand between each other. Escape Pod 2 landed on Ember Twin, while Ash Twin would later host warp towers and the Ash Twin Project that could send information back in time.
 - **Timber Hearth** – The coziest planet in the solar system, with the barren **Atterlock** as its moon. Designed after Yellowstone, Sequoia and Mount Rainier National Parks, home to the Outer Wilds Ventures space program.
 - **Brittle Hollow** – Resembling the basalt rock of Greenland and Iceland made fragile by the rain of volcanic rock sent from its moon, **Hollow’s Lantern**, causing pieces to fall into its black hole core. Escape Pod 1 landed here, and it would later be used to host the Black Hole Forge.
 - **Giants Deep** – An ocean planet loosely inspired by Santa Cruz beach cliffs full cyclones and a dense liquid core. The Nomai used its size to put a Probe Cannon that would search for the Eye’s location in its orbit.
 - **Dark Bramble** – Fragments of an ice planet ripped apart in place of a massive bramble seed that warps the space around it, home to large anglerfish. The Nomai Vessel and Escape Pod 3 are trapped inside it.
 - **The Interloper** – A stray comet full of a lethal, hydrophobic substance known as Ghost Matter that entered the sun’s orbit, killing all but aquatic lifeforms in an instant when its core ruptured, including the Nomai.
 - **The Quantum Moon** – Believed to be the Eye’s moon, it exists in multiple states until it is observed, reflecting the planet that it currently orbits. Solanum exists at its south pole as a corpse in every state but its “sixth location” – the hypothesized location of the Eye of the universe.

Breakdown

Outer Wilds crafts an emotional narrative that follows the theme of curiosity-driven exploration prevalent within the core gameplay. The Echoes of the Eye DLC works to recontextualize that base story while adding a new story of its own that approaches this theme from a different angle. Before delving into the plot however, it is important to first understand the ways in which it is presented. From a gameplay perspective, the how, when and where players will go about finding pieces of the plot make the storytelling in Outer Wilds one of the boldest elements within the game.

Time

The conventional way of storytelling – i.e., experiencing the story as it happens – is almost entirely thrown out the cockpit. Players will instead act primarily as an observer to the majority of Outer Wilds' story that had already taken place long before the game began. Even with the added element of a time-based mechanic, the player never actually witnesses the majority of these story beats unfold in person. Players are never sent back in time far enough to be part of the bigger narrative or make changes to any previous decisions. Instead, time is used as a safeguard to ensure players that no matter what they do, the game will reset without consequence. Once this safety net is familiarized, players can begin to take greater risks that may even cause inevitable death in the process in order to find more relevant story details.

That said, due to its non-linearity, there is very little restraint in place to mitigate the order in which players discover the story. On paper this can seem incredibly confusing, especially considering that the game is rooted heavily in mystery and puzzle elements. In reality, the writing manages to make chronological order the least hindering aspect to a player's understanding. Story beats are typically separated by plotlines, then further broken down into mostly self-contained bits of information to provide players with enough context to make the info worthwhile, regardless of when it was discovered. This allows players to worry less about re-organizing key moments and more about filling in the blanks.

Curiosity

Outer Wilds is built around an incredibly active playstyle with the level of agency it requires of its players. Despite this, the few story-relevant experiences that occur early in the game act entirely devoid of player input – this includes the supernova, the cutscene that unfolds as time rewinds, and the orbital probe canon that launches in your view every time you wake up. It would be very difficult for a passive player to learn more about the story by strictly following what they're told to do, but not as impossible as it would be to avoid these passive elements all together. The supernova, time loop and probe canon are each unavoidable in their own way, and yet none of them can be explained without leaving the starting area.

In order to help those who prefer the comfort of guidance, Timber Hearth's starting area is home to a variety of optional tutorials to gameplay mechanics, all played off to work naturally within the small Hearthian community. Tutorials range from learning how to repair your spaceship by fixing a broken satellite in the Zero-G Cave – located literally within the center of the planet – to using your Signal Scope to win at a game of hide-and-seek. On top of learning the game's mechanics, many villagers at Timber Hearth can either recommend places to visit or mention curious things they've heard about that can provide a starting point that may entice players to further investigate.

In order to guide those who fully embrace the free-roaming playstyle, Outer Wilds relies on its art style and the careful placement of any structure or sound that may draw a player's attention. Any object or location that may peak a player's interest is typically designed to fit the story beat it relates to without breaking the narrative. All Nomai structures, for example, are made with a similar, unique material no matter what planet they're built on. Meanwhile the planets themselves are all designed to be entirely different from one another in their style of gameplay, visuals, and sound design. On top of quality, the quantity has also been considered to ensure that players don't often find themselves in areas devoid of anything worthwhile to investigate. On the other hand, too much information in a single location may overwhelm a player or discourage further investigation. This attention to detail regarding how similar or different certain elements must feel to one another allows them to be easily recognized as something familiar, or something yet to be explored.

Discovery

Pieces of the Outer Wilds story have been primarily presented in the form of Nomai translations combined with in-game visuals and set pieces to add further context. With the DLC's inclusion of a new species, players are presented with a few opportunities to try and fail to translate their new language. Instead, slide reels can be found throughout the Stranger that showcase specific moments in the Inhabitants' history visually rather than textually. Getting an insight into how the Nomai communicate without ever actually seeing them provides a very different emotional connection than only being able to see the Inhabitants without ever getting a glimpse into their thoughts.

There are far more Nomai translations than there are slide reels to account for being primarily made up of conversations and dialogue as opposed to general summaries of specific events. That being said, the majority of both formats contain important clues to greater puzzles in addition to their story beats. This format encourages, if not demands its story elements to be considered while overcoming gameplay obstacles and mysteries, rather than detracting from them. This cohesion allows for the Outer Wilds gameplay and narrative to remain consistently relevant to the player, especially during segments where they may find themselves directly following the footsteps of those they're learning about.

Once a player has made a new discovery relevant to the plot, their ship log is updated with their findings and visually organized in a way that links them to other found clues of relevance. On top of saving players from having to remember all that they've learned, areas that have yet to be fully explored will be marked with an icon and a message stating, "There's more to explore here". It's important to note that this is only displayed when the undiscovered info is within the realm of what a player can be reasonably expected to encounter considering everything else they've learned.

Plot

According to the Nomai, the Eye of the universe is believed to be older than the universe itself. It lured the Stranger's Inhabitants into destroying their home in search of it, only to end up blocking its signal in fear of what they learned; its potential to end the universe. One inhabitant briefly released the Eye's signal before being imprisoned for treason, allowing it to be picked up by a Nomai shuttle.

The brevity of the signal left the Nomai stranded on the Eye's nearest solar system, as the survivors devised countless failed methods to try to find it again, including a probe powered by a supernova that could send information back in time 22 minutes before its launch. But they could not cause the sun to explode before a stray comet blanketed the system with a hazardous substance, killing them instantly.

In time, Hearthians would evolve and organize the Outer Wilds Ventures. As you find yourself in a 22-minute time loop that ends with your sun's natural supernova, you use this time to learn about your solar system's history, discover and bond with the Venturers, Solanum, and the Prisoner while learning that the universe is slowly dying.

You will not be able to save the universe, but you can make use of the late Nomai's probe, now successful with your sun's natural demise, and enter the Eye of the Universe for yourself. Inside you're joined by those you met along the way, all sitting around a campfire as they play a final song together before a new universe is born.

Characters

In order to tell a story second-hand from the perspective of alien species worth a player's attention – the struggles, desires, and achievements experienced in Outer Wilds' history and theme are deeply rooted in humanism.

☼ **Hearthians** are the only species you're able to have interactive conversations with, which coincides with the fact that they play a bigger role to the gameplay rather than the story, but continue to each have their own varying personalities and sense of humour. Hearthians thrive on an admirable level of determination in the face of limited resources and the common explosive results. Some prefer the comfort of staying within safe, familiar territory. But those with the shared passion of discovery can resonate with players eager to explore the game, especially within Outer Wilds Ventures' veteran pilots. Esker often sits in the dark on the Attlerock, conveying a not-so-subtle loneliness to players who interact with them. Tiny little Chert has set up camp on Ember Twin's incredibly hot orbit around the sun. Riebeck, who was already terrified of space travel to begin with, has managed to fall dangerously close to Brittle Hollow's black hole. Gabbro relaxes on Giant's Deep, surprisingly unphased by the time loop you two are experiencing. And Feldspar's daredevil antics has resulted in him chilling out with his

busted ship by the skeleton of a giant anglerfish within Dark Bramble. Each of these venturers are all placed under rather unfortunate circumstances, yet not one of them regret the decision to be where they are now; out observing their wild solar system.

▲ The way in which every **Nomai** conversation is told maintain these elements of relatable dialogue and emotions. You'll read exchanges between Nomai that are filled with wit, cleverness, and ambition, but also ones filled with flirting, sarcasm, struggle, and a heavy weight of despair. Ever since their crash into your solar system, the Nomai clan have had to face the loss of companions, the desperate struggle to stay alive on foreign land, and the painful realization that the very entity that brought them here was somehow even further out of reach. Reading Nomai text that had been made shortly after their initial crash is some of the most heartbreaking pieces of writing present in the game. Some text is made out in the open regarding their desire to keep moving forward while more private emotions of grief and worry over loved ones are made separate from the rest. Writings such as, "the pain of your absence is sharp and haunting, and I would give anything not to know it; anything but never knowing you at all (which would be worse)". It's as relieving to learn how the Nomai would rebuild as it is painful to uncover their inevitable failure. To imagine their excitement detailed in their feverish writings as they got closer to once again finding the Eye, all within the solar system that would act as their eventual grave. The remnants of what they left behind, particularly the placement of their bodies, further conveys how sudden their lives were cut short along their thematic struggle of getting so close, yet remaining so far. Nomai corpses can be found embracing each other while suspended in space around a bramble seed, or impaled by shards of ghost matter mid-crawl out of the Interloper, or collapsed in the remains of what used to be a children's classroom.

❖ If you manage to solve the inner workings behind the elusive Quantum Moon, you'll have the chance to communicate face to face with **Solanum** – a living Nomai. It would be a very one-sided conversation, involving the combination of various symbols to form a question that Solanum will answer with Nomai writing to the best of her abilities. Symbols that she explains represent "the two tenets of Nomai philosophy; to seek out and to understand is our way of living". Solanum correctly assumes that she may already be dead, referring to the Quantum Moon's other locations that would have been within the

solar system during the expulsion of ghost matter. Through your efforts, Solanum wishes to regard you as a friend, but will remain on the Quantum Moon until the end of time.

◆ Outer Wilds' original tale of fear and grief pale in comparison to the events that took place among the **Stranger's Inhabitants**. The somber optimism within the base narrative is jarringly succumbed to anger and deceit, further stressed by the unsettling actions and facial expressions witnessed in the Inhabitants' slide reels. The species is shrouded in its attempts to stay hidden, a secrecy that began with the horrible inclination that the Eye they had worshipped had betrayed them. Although their plights begin in a similar fashion, the Inhabitant's corpses tell a story that ended very different than the Nomai's, yet just as haunting. Even without context, the repeated patterns and organization in which their bodies can all be found imply that the Inhabitants had willingly chosen this path. Now, there exists a species tormented by the Eye. So truly terrified of it that they built a machine to hide it from anyone else. So ashamed of their history that slide reels were burned in an attempt to erase it. So wrought with loss that they would build and reside in an artificial recreation of their old home forever. And when one of their own kind rebelled against their decisions, the lengths at which they went through in order to keep their Prisoner hopelessly confined and hidden away goes beyond reason. The only way to free the Prisoner is to sneak past the Inhabitants living within the dark, dream-world version of their old home and learn secrets on how to break the simulation. Should they find you, they'll pursue you. Should they catch you, they'll force you out by any means necessary, going so far as to snap your neck without hesitation. For the first time in Outer Wilds, players aren't limited to intelligent creatures or violent creatures. Now they must face against a combination of both.

☞ And yet, these creatures aren't monsters. Throughout the slide reels you'll watch as their bold sacrifice for nothing drives them into grief and paranoia over all that they'd lost and all that they'd fear to lose again. It was a fear that shamed the **Prisoner** and motivated their act of rebellion, briefly releasing the Eye's signal into the universe once more. If the player manages to find the Prisoner after learning the base game's major plot points, they'll be able to share the results of the Prisoner's actions, and how they single-handedly created the Outer Wilds story by bringing the Nomai to your solar system.

Conclusion

Once a player has found the answers to Outer Wilds' biggest questions, they can take their first active steps to finally make a change within the endless time loop. In your final journey, the efforts made by the Nomai will not have been made in vein as you use the results of their technology to reach the Eye of the universe for yourself.

It's unclear what exactly is happening once you enter the Eye, though that almost seems fitting for an entity that has bewildered other generations of alien races before you. Inside you will be subject to darkness and silence, with the exception of occasional low ambient along with a visual reflection of all that you've accomplished, and all that is ending. You'll find the reflections of friends you've made along the way, each one "collected" in a way that's symbolic of their history as they gather around a campfire in a dark, empty void. Finding the Prisoner demonstrates the macabre reality of everyone dying along with the universe. Afterwards, they can be found standing isolated from the rest of the group, sharing their regret on behalf of their species' fear and actions. They will accept your decision to send them away, but if you choose to include them, they will be able to join the others around the campfire in playing the last song in the universe as it slowly comes to an end. Then, in a grand explosion of light, a new universe is born.

Strongest Element

With a combination of powerful visuals, context, atmosphere, and overall tone – the music and sound design within Outer Wilds cannot be understated. Sound is used to communicate hazards, equipment status, or how much time a player has left. The main theme is always being played by Outer Wilds pilots using their own instruments, making the final harmony between them, Solanum and the Prisoner carry impactful emotional context. Despite its non-linearity, the game will take advantage of assuming the emotions players will be experiencing during certain segments. Timber Hearth's theme carries a sense of comfort and ambition while locations filled with Nomai corpses are paired with music suitable for heartache. The soundtracks for Outer Wilds and its DLC both act as beautiful representations for the content and emotions that each portion uniquely offers with incredible accuracy, doing absolute wonders to an already incredible experience.

Unsuccessful Element

The player-driven agency within *Outer Wilds* requires players to use a certain level of critical thinking based entirely around clues that they are not guaranteed to have discovered or considered. Should this impact or halt gameplay progression, it would also interrupt story. Players who find themselves more interested in the game's narrative than its puzzle solving will have a hard time dealing with the frustrations of hitting a dead end. Alternatively, those clever or lucky enough to solve later mysteries without encountering previous clues may end up missing important story beats or emotional character moments, hindering the intended impact of the game's later segments.

This remains true within its DLC segment, however with the bigger difficulty curve found primarily in getting past its scarier segments rather than puzzle related ones. To help combat this, the developers included a "Reduced Frights Mode" option that could be toggled on and off at any time to make the scarier sections easier without damaging the narrative. It is an incredibly welcome feature, but one that won't solve the issue for everyone, particularly those who would only enable it after they feel they've reached their limit. This could easily result in a lesser appreciation for the rest of the DLC's story, especially considering its rather anticlimactic ending. This style of ending was likely done to leave players feeling intentionally unsatisfied while having a greater impact on base game's finale. However, this again will be based on player assumption, and it is an assumption that is as reasonable to ask of the players as it is for the players to have already played as the developers intended. It may not be so reasonable for those who stumble across the DLC before the main game, found their way to its ending through coincidence or luck, or have already gotten frustrated with its more difficult segments.

Outer Wilds is designed to limit these lesser experiences to an admirable degree, but because of the very nature that the game is based around, it is not impossible to avoid.

Highlight

The ending to Outer Wilds has always stood out as a beautiful demonstration of the narrative's themes that have been made even stronger with its DLC. However, Echoes of the Eye manages to create an entirely new moment that overshadows even this.

When you finally figure out how to break into the Prisoner's confinement, there's a chance this will be the last great encounter you experience before the great end sequence. In this moment, you come face to face with a species that has proven itself to be incredibly smart, dangerous, and overall terrifying. It's hard to ignore their feats and losses yet all they've tried to do is kill you – until finally you've found one that would rather communicate peacefully. As the Prisoner shows you their story, that familiar second-hand emotion prevalent to Outer Wilds' stronger narrative beats hit once more, just as effectively as the rest, creating deep sympathy for the ambitious, exiled creature.

However, in the following moments when you're given the chance to share your story with them, you'll be subjected to a feeling that nothing else in the game has prepared you for – sharing the burden of your knowledge with someone else.

A reinvigorated theme song plays as you add your story into their history, sharing with the Prisoner all that you've learned combined with the new understanding of what their actions meant for the rest of the story. You will have only just learned of the Prisoner's act to release the Eye's signal. If the realization hadn't set in yet, the rising music paired with the visuals of watching the Eye's signal reach the Nomai Vessel is an incredibly powerful confirmation. Finally, you're able to see the events of your discoveries unfold before you. The Nomai crashed inside Dark Bramble, the survivors rebuilding until being wiped out by the Interloper, even Feldspar finding the first Nomai ruins. Ruins that fascinated you as a tiny young Hearthian in a museum, and how that very fascination is what made you into the Outer Wilds pilot you came to be.

After sharing your story, the Prisoner responds with a great howl, grants you a deep bow, and leaves the confines of their cell. You may chase after them only to find a vision they left behind of the two of you sailing into the horizon together.

From a gameplay perspective, this moment can feel underwhelming. Narratively however, it's easy to be overwhelmed by the emotions of everything that transpired

within the past 5 minutes or so. The freeing of the Prisoner creates an incredibly intimate exchange that allows you to finally share the heavy weight of all that you've learned onto the shoulders of someone else – someone who had been confined for ages upon ages for having the same determination in the face of fear as you did. Coming to the realization that you'll never see them again without resetting the loop, it can leave you with a very empty feeling in the DLC's final area that you worked so hard to get to. When all that is left for you is to restart the loop once again, you may find yourself with a greater sense than ever before to put an end to this cycle, even if just for the chance to see your new friend one last time.

Critical Reception

GameSpot's Alessandro Barbosa gives Echoes of the Eye DLC an 8/10, despite commenting that the stealth sections are “the only time, across the main game and this expansion, that Outer Wilds' loop feels frustrating, and it's consistently disappointing to brush up against (...) The conclusion is thankfully strong enough to soften the blow the final third that precedes it, and it's made even better by the changes it makes to the conclusion of the main game, should you choose to see it through once more after the expansion.”

Edwin Evans-Thirlwell of Eurogamer states “if you didn't like Outer Wilds, I'm not sure Echoes will do much for you. All the 2019 game's slight frustrations are back, though you at least won't spend as much time crash-landing on planets or being eaten by fish (...) The worst thing about Outer Wilds's [*sic*] first expansion, from my perspective, is that there won't be another one. Which is also, of course, the expansion's best quality”.

IGN's Tom Marks gives the DLC a rating of 8/10, freely admitting that they are “not generally into horror games overall, and those who are will almost certainly enjoy these sections more than [they] did, but that's sort of the problem; (...) those scary sections also just aren't quite as interesting as the creative clockwork puzzles that make Outer Wilds so special elsewhere.”

Lessons

Emotion can be conveyed through context and imagination - Majority of Outer Wilds' greater emotional moments are experienced second-hand as an observer. And yet despite being separated from these events in many ways, Outer Wilds manages to build emotional attachment while never showing clear visualization of what had transpired, leaving only context clues for the player to imagine themselves. This can lead players to assume the worst or the best of situations, but never have any proper confirmation of the exact sounds and visuals that took place. In doing so, this not only maintains a barrier of separation between players and the events of ancient history, but allows for these events and the context they carry to stay active within players minds.

Relatable flaw invites sympathy - The pursuit of curiosity against improbable odds is a prominent theme within the three major races featured in Outer Wilds, with each one demonstrating different approaches to that drive. Admiration is found in a Hearthian's achievements with their limited resources and in the Nomai's struggle to move forward at any cost. Alternatively, the Stranger's Inhabitants show a darker, more candid outcome in the face of ultimate failure that can relate to human guilt and regret. Despite being alien both narratively and in how little you interact with them, the species you encounter are written with very un-alien aspirations, failures and flaws that make it easier for players to understand and sympathize with their emotions.

Instruction is to protect as curiosity is to motivate - Outer Wilds demonstrates how effective curiosity can be in crafting an adventure. The emphasis to recommend players to new things, remind players of old things, while never the other way around gives a sense of exploration that is free from hand holding or shame in failure. The limits of how far players can be encouraged to pursue their curiosities in the face of clear, intentional danger has been further stretched by the DLC's more terrifying moments. In doing so, the game has also demonstrated the importance in providing the right amount of guidance within self-driven exploration in order to draw the line between ambitious verses cruel player expectations.

Summation

The complete journey of *Outer Wilds: Echoes of the Eye* rewards player curiosity and initiative with a powerful, yet bittersweet narrative to match the gameplay experience. Its themes around death have been enhanced to face players with the fear that can be associated with it, and resolve in a way that is both heartbreaking and optimistic. Players will feel isolated in their journey to single-handedly learn the dark secrets of those who lived before them in an experience that can be frustrating at times, when not otherwise gratifying. Its bitter, macabre story speaks volumes in relation to the gameplay experience, with an underlying message that can help console players as they confront its inevitable end. *Outer Wilds: Echoes of the Eye* offers one chance to experience an adventure of pursuit in the face of improbable odds that lasts until the player has overcome its greatest mysteries.

Citations

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