

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Untitled Goose Game*

Platform: Nintendo Switch, PC

Genre: Slapstick-stealth-sandbox

Release Date: September 20, 2019

Developer: House House

Publisher: Panic Inc.

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: No narrative roles/creative director specified in the credits. Created by House House (Michael McMaster, Nico Disseldorp, Stuart Gillespie-Cook, Jacob Strasser) and friends.

Overview

"It's a lovely day in the village, and you are a horrible goose."

The statement above (found on the game's Epic page and Nintendo eShop page) perfectly encapsulates *Untitled Goose Game's* narrative premise. You are a goose causing mischief in an otherwise idyllic village. Within the village, ordinary people go about their mundane routines: a farmer tends to his gardens, a child plays with his toy airplane, a courier delivers goods to a pub. The Goose, however, has their own plans for this peaceful day. With a to-do list in tow and no given motivation other than personal satisfaction, the Goose (intentionally or otherwise) antagonizes each villager; such interactions include manipulating someone into breaking an ornamental vase, stealing laundry off a clothesline, or

dropping a bucket on someone's head. In each section, the Goose terrorizes the villagers until they are satisfied enough to proceed to a new area (with a newly expanded itinerary of mischief at their side, of course!).

Characters

- **The Goose:** The game's protagonist and the only non-human character within the story. A non-speaking character, the only insight into the Goose's mind is through the game's to-do list; the Goose's personality can be defined and interpreted through these goals, their interactions with the NPCs, and the afforded verbs/actions provided to the player. Through these aspects, the Goose can be characterized as mischievous, egocentric, and tenacious. The lack of given motivation within the game points towards the Goose's intrinsic enjoyment of causing trouble for others (which may, in fact, be shared by the player).

The Villagers

Both the Goose's antagonists and their targets. Each villager is defined by the space they occupy, their dress, routines and interactions to the Goose.

- **The Groundskeeper:** The Goose's first antagonist. The Groundskeeper's routine consists of tending to his gardens. Most of the Goose's interactions with this character comprise of stealing his possession and crops (which he will annoyedly replant after finding them misplaced).
- **The Shopkeeper:** An antagonist in the second area. The Shopkeeper is more aggressive than most villagers, chasing the Goose with a broom should they wander too close. In turn, the Shopkeeper is observed to be quite stubborn, forcing other characters to buy back any of their stolen possessions (which were, of course, planted by the Goose).
- **The Wimp:** The only child in the game. He can be found playing alone in the second area, amusing himself with a toy plane or soccer ball. The Wimp is the sole villager defined with only a singular adjective, defining his timidity. Unlike the other NPCs, the Wimp is fearful of the Goose and runs in fright should the Goose honk repeatedly. The Goose's to-dos

relating to the Wimp are notably antagonistic compared to other characters.

- **The TV Shop Owner:** Owner of a small TV shop. The Wimp will call the TV Shop Owner should the Goose trap him in the telephone booth. Otherwise, the Owner has little observable routines or interactions with others.
- **The Tidy Neighbor:** An antagonist in the third area. Through his yard, its inferred he plays cricket and grows competition-grade roses. He's quite proper compared to his next-door neighbor, attempting to enjoy the day by smoking his pipe, drinking tea and reading the newspaper.
- **The Messy Neighbor:** A foil to the Tidy Neighbor. Her backyard is filled with quirky, eclectic statues. Through the vase, cavasses, and statues in her yard, its hinted she's an artist. When not doing her laundry or painting, she has a habit of spying on the Tidy Neighbor, with whom she has an unfriendly relationship.
- **The Publican:** The owner of the Pub. Her routine comprises of cleaning the dining space and replacing any misplaced items in her workspace. Should she see the Goose on the terrace, she will shoo them away.
- **The Publican's Husband:** Unlike his spouse, the Husband simply sits towards the Pub's entrance doing little else, guarding the entrance from any naughty waterfowl seeking entrance.
- **Deliveryperson:** A courier working for the Publican; can be seen taking frequent breaks by their van. The Goose can access the Pub using the boxes they carry.
- **Pub Patrons (in Yellow and Blue):** Unlike other villagers, the Pub Patrons do not see the Goose as a nuisance, instead finding the bird amusing. A flower on the table sits between them and, should the Goose properly entertain them, the Pub Patron in Blue will award them a flower. Otherwise, they spend their time chatting with one and other.
- **The Old Man:** The old man spends his time alone at the Pub. He will amuse himself by playing darts or playing with his harmonica.

Breakdown

Storytelling System & Gameplay Structure as Narrative Beats

At first glance, *Untitled Goose Game* is not narrative heavy piece. However, I argue that this assertion does not diminish the importance of narrative within the game, and how it enhances the play experience. The game functions as a storytelling system and utilizes prominent narrative structures. The Goose's personality and their antagonistic interactions with the villagers create story and incite amusement. Interrupting normalcy and examining the reactions of the NPCs is the game's core loop. Instances of mayhem, and moments of comedy, are rewards for a job well done. Characters (both the Goose and the villagers) function as props for a comedic set-up while the resulting slapstick functions as the comedic punchline. In turn, the mechanics, puzzle design, and AI operate to *transition* these two narrative points (set-up to punchline), creating a personalized narrative experience. The game systems function as a storytelling system as the Goose's verbs and the system feedback progress the story arc.

In turn, the game can be separated into six different areas: the Goose's domain, The Groundskeeper's Garden, High Street, The Backyards, The Pub, and The Diorama Village. The game's main structure can be divided as follows: tutorial (The Goose's Domain), level one (The Groundskeeper's Garden), level two (High Street), level three (The Backyards), level four (The Pub), and level five (the journey back from The Diorama Village to The Goose's Domain). Each section of the game represents a distinct chapter in the Goose's narrative journey and each completed objective is a storytelling beat within the given chapter. With each unlocked section, the Goose is exposed to more problems to be solved (through people to antagonize). These chapters cultivate a history between the Goose and the villagers, which is used to support the emotional stakes of the last level. While the player is not privy to any concrete history between the Goose and the villagers throughout the game, this changes in the final act.

The game's final level functions as the narrative climax, its level of engagement strengthened by previous narrative beats and player memory. After progressing through each area of the village, the Goose encounters a diorama of the villagers' otherwise peaceful home. There, the Goose demolishes its model clocktower and steals its replica golden bell. Once the Goose has procured the

bell, they backtrack through each section of the village, intending to return home. With the loudly clanging bell in tow, the Goose dodges any attempt by the villagers to steal their prize. As the player re-encounters villagers they have previously harassed, they are simultaneously relieving the comedic moments and character interactions within their Goose's generated history. In this manner, the importance of story structure and memory play a crucial part in enhancing gameplay. This is the final hurrah of the Goose and player; both are, once more, gleefully asserting their superiority over the villagers; such emotional impact could not be achieved without the buildup of previous narrative beats.

The Goose eventually returns home and drops the golden bell into a small pit found at the beginning of the game. There, dozens of stolen bells have been stashed away, revealing the Goose's history of theft. Not yet satisfied, the Goose adds more mischievous "to-dos" to their list thus continuing their cycle of chaos. In this manner, the *Untitled Goose Game* parodies the idea of the monomyth through its level system. The Goose's hero's journey may be comprised of causing mayhem upon peaceful denizens, yet the game's structure contains the necessary departure, initiation, and return to qualify within this tradition. The Goose leaves their den to complete their to-do list (the departure), encounters a series of trials as they harass the villagers, eventually procures the Golden Bell or the "Ultimate Boon" (the initiation), and returns home (the return). In short, the player's actions within *Untitled Goose Game* are structured through narrative and enhanced through a narratively driven framework.

Implicit Storytelling: Silence, Sound and Environment

Buster Keaton. Charlie Chaplin. The Goose. *Untitled Goose Game* is comparable to a silent-era film, where the conjunction of pantomime and foley music play a crucial part in storytelling. Characters do not speak in any instance of the story. At most, villagers will grunt or mumble to themselves softly, subtly exclaiming any annoyance or feelings they have towards the Goose. In turn, player is not privy to the inner workings of the Goose's mind. Instead, the player is afforded mechanics, a to-do list, and puzzles. Without the ability to speak, characters are defined by their allowed actions, the accompanying film score, and their surroundings; through these aspects, the player is given enough context to play the game and participate in generating narrative moments.

In the game's second level, the Shopkeeper tends to her wares. As noted in the character summary, the Shopkeeper is more aggressive than other villagers. While other characters will shoo the Goose with a wave of their arms before returning to their routine, the Shopkeeper will grab a broom and use that to chase the Goose away. This deviation from the standard AI characterization makes the character distinctive; the use of the broom as would-be-weapon is more intimidating to the player than an NPC simply flapping their arms. However, *Untitled Goose Game* remains a light comedy. While the villagers may express anger of frustration through pantomime, any interpretation of real hostility is mitigated by the accompanying soundscape.

Untitled Goose Game uses adaptive music to underscore the Goose's shenanigans. The soundscape is usually kept to a minimum throughout the game. As the Goose traverses the village, the ambient sounds of the wind or water create a sense of quiet monotony or even isolation. However, any negative connotations to this ambiance serve only to heighten the game's absurd premise. The pitter-patter of the Goose's flappy feet against the quiet soundscape creates *contrast*. Silence serves to emphasize the Goose's presence, their silliness; running faster compounds this sentiment as the rapid pitter patter of their feet illustrates encroaching mayhem. In parallel, the game's adaptive musical score undermines any real hostility resulting from the Goose's antagonistic actions within the game. As the Goose approaches the Shopkeeper, for example, a few piano notes will ring out to demarcate the start of a gag. Once the Shopkeeper sees the Goose and begins to chase them away, more piano notes will begin to play, faster. The score becomes louder and more playful as the two interact.

The crescendo of sound which accompanies each naughty act, each comedic interaction, fills the emptiness of the game world with *joy*. The sound incites positive emotions amongst players, despite any visual conflict. Through the visuals and the pantomime of the characters, the game acknowledges the Goose doing something awful. However, ensuing soundscape states this conflict should be interpreted as *fun*. The soundscape allows the player to empathize with the Goose, and to clearly state the player's part in the mayhem is both amusing and low-stakes; whatever happens within this space is not *serious*, says the music. For the villagers, this interaction is a small disruption in their day-to-day lives. As the music begins to fade and the villagers resume the pantomime of their usual

activities, everything returns to normalcy; the Goose's actions are a disturbance, yes, but like the notes of a ringing piano, they are not *lasting*.

The evidence of the Goose's history with the villagers is interspersed throughout each game level. Upon completing a game level (by sufficiently harassing the target villagers), a character will put up a sign with iconography distinctly claiming, "No Geese Allowed". While the Shopkeeper will write this out on a chalkboard, the Groundskeeper, Neighbors, and Publican have ready-made signs in their respective areas. While these signs are seemingly a comedic endnote for each level, the final sequence reveals that these characters have these signs for a *reason*; that is, as compounded by the imagery of the stolen bells in the Goose's hideaway, the Goose has a *history* of wreaking havoc upon this village. Suddenly, the player's earlier actions can be reevaluated, earlier interactions recontextualized. How often has the Goose antagonized the Shopkeeper? Or the Publican's Husband? With the implication of a defined history of conflict, perhaps the villagers have justified motivation for their hostility. Either way, the hinted history between the Goose and the village is a subtle narrative thread woven throughout the game. The stash of stolen bells further enhance the player's triumph as they complete the final level; the narrative context, that the Goose has done this before, is the final punchline – a reward for having completed the game and proving that you, the Goose, are more clever than any village inhabitants.

Roleplay

As stated in the game's tag line, "[i]t's a lovely day in the village, and you are a horrible goose." The "**you**" in this statement is crucial to the game's function. *Untitled Goose Game* is about play and the embodiment of a character. Taking control of the titular Goose is, in short, pre-defined roleplay and the game's systems and interactions are calibrated to support this role. *Untitled Goose Game* is, in fact, a relatively linear experience. Levels are small and constrained, puzzles have strict completion requirements, and the Goose's personality is similarly limited. You are an asshole Goose, and there's no escaping that. Through the game's verbs, you may **only cause havoc**. There is no option to be universally kind. As such, the Goose's characterization is built into the code, affecting player interaction within the surrounding systems. For example, "pick-

up” is seemingly harmless verb. However, through the eyes of the villagers and the surrounding game system, this action suddenly becomes “steal”. Despite being an agent of chaos, the Goose is subtly restricted in terms of movement and interaction.

Untitled Goose Game's strength, however, is masking this restriction. Honking may be just the result of pushing a button, but this form of communication has different meanings within a narrative context. Some villagers, notably the Wimp, interpret honking as a sign of hostility, subsequently fleeing should the Goose be too close. For most villagers, honking is a disturbance. Villagers will stare at the direction of Goose, until player stops, or the Goose leaves the area (either of their own volition or after being chased away). For the player, however, there may be intrinsic enjoyment when using the action; the sound itself is a stark contrast to the usually quiet landscape and may be used as a musical accompaniment to the chaos of the horizontally integrated soundtrack. As such, honking may also be used as a method to roleplay despite the game’s restrictions.

Exploring combinations of the Goose’s provided actions allows freedom to play despite being constrained within a defined character. The player can, for example, pluck all the Groundskeepers crops while he is not looking and honk to turn his attention back to his ruined field; this action may not accomplish any extrinsic goal, but the player may find intrinsic pleasure in the resulting chase or feedback from the AI. As such, the Goose will always be mischievous, egocentric and unkind by virtue of the system. In turn, the Goose will always be interpreted by the system with an amount of hostility. However, the player can personally define *how* this hostility is warranted and *to what extent*. Even within the context of a pre-defined character, *Untitled Goose Game* allows freedom to play through verbs flexible in the use of roleplay.

Strongest Element

The strength of *Untitled Goose Game's* narrative is its **refusal to explicitly define its characters**. The game utilizes pantomime, sound design, mechanics and AI reactions to *hint* certain ideas and relationships between characters. Character are, in fact, never explicitly or absolutely defined by dialogue, backstory, lore, etc. As such, the resulting interactions between characters, and

the characters themselves, are objects for player interpretation. This aspect is crucial to creating play in *Untitled Goose Game*. The game is founded on the idea of *meanness as fun*. As such, this foundation can break down if the player reflects upon their actions too deeply. Should the players empathize too strongly with the villagers, antagonizing the NPCs suddenly becomes uncomfortable. The ability of the player to customize a personal narrative regarding the Goose's motivations and relationships, based upon the game's hints and undefined characters, is pertinent to their play and story experience.

Unsuccessful Element

The game's most unsuccessful moment was the Goose's interactions with the Wimp. The Wimp is the only child in the game and is the object of the Goose's most relentless "pranks". As stated in "Strongest Element", if that player empathizes with an NPC, their play experience becomes compromised. Schadenfreude, or "enjoyment obtained from the troubles of others" ([Merriam Webster](#)) acts as the player's motivator and reward. The player feels *empowered to create disarray* and chase schadenfreude through the game's puzzle design and through the system's verbs. There is no option to, for example, give the Groundskeeper a flower. You may only pluck/steal the flower. Committing bad deeds is the sole interaction afforded to the player. By consequence, being mean should feel like naturally fulfilling the game's assigned roleplay; as the Goose, being bad should be *fun*.

However, **the ability for the player to experience guilt-free schadenfreude ruptures during morally ambiguous moments**. This problem is most prominent during the Goose's interactions with the Wimp. The majority of the Goose's objectives are those of *low-stakes chaos*. Manipulating the Messy Neighbor into accidentally cutting the Tidy Neighbor's prize rose, for example, is low-stakes; the Goose's actions may be mean, but they are not *cruel*. By contrast, the Goose's interactions with the Wimp edge towards cruelty. Such objectives include forcing the child to buy back their own toy and stealing his prescription glasses. Most notably, the Goose must terrify the child and trap him in a phonebooth; a post-game objective even asks you to trip him into a puddle. As the Goose's "To-do" list locks progression, the player must commit to these actions.

While the Wimp's character and backstory are undefined, their prominent character design may incite sympathy in the player. Due nature of roleplay in *Untitled Goose Game*, the player is suddenly forced into repeatedly bullying a child to progress the game. Consequently, the reward of guilt-free schadenfreude may be compromised. While the objectives regarding the Wimp may not be an issue for some player, moments where players feel guilty for their actions rupture roleplay and destabilizes the game's core. Due to the narrative implications (bullying a child) and system design (bully child to proceed with game), being mean may no longer be *fun*. In such moments, the game's strength and primary motivator for advancing the game shifts. Instead of chasing something of *intrinsic value* (glee from play and experimentation, schadenfreude as emotional reward and motivator), the player simply seeks something of *extrinsic* worth (task completion).

Highlight

The highlight of *Untitled Goose Game* is, in my opinion, encountering the Diorama Village. This moment is the calm before the storm and a reprieve before the ensuing chaos of the final level. *Untitled Goose Game* is about *contrast*: routine versus disruption, silence versus noise, peace versus conflict, human versus goose. The Diorama Village operates as foreshadowing and symbolism. Each level in the game (the Groundskeeper's garden, High Street, the Backyards, the Pub) is filled with people serving as gatekeepers. Prior to the Diorama Village, the Goose juggled several conflicts in a single area. By contrast, the Diorama Village is completely empty. From a level design standpoint, this allows the player to relax before progressing to a lengthier level. On a narrative level, it's symbolic. No one stands in the Goose's way.

The Diorama Village represents peace. The Goose's arrival demarcates the destabilization of this peace, while visually representing the upcoming level as interpreted by the Goose (and, to some extent, the player). Described in the breakdown, the Goose destroys the Diorama Village's Clocktower before stealing the golden bell. The image of the Goose, large and comically imposing against the dainty village, prize in tow, perfectly represents the sentiment stirred by the game. It's absurd and silly. Through this imagery, this fact is dialed up to eleven. This section seems to say, "You may just be a Goose. The final level may be long

and arduous. But here, in the Diorama Village it is clear: you are the harbinger of chaos and nothing can stop you from completing your to-dos". As such, this moment is an incredibly clever storytelling moment.

Critical Reception

Untitled Goose Game has earned generally positive reviews. Depending on the console, the game has received an overall Metacritic score of 79% - 81%. Games which utilize numerical reviews praise the comedy and game premise but focus mainly on its puzzle elements. For the purposes and relevancy to this narrative review, I will be summarizing critical reviews without numerical scores.

In "*Untitled Goose Game: The Kotaku Review*", Nathan Grayson positively remarks upon the player's ability to embody the characterization of the Goose.

"Every time I pulled off some maniacal goose prank [...] I'd get the person to stare at me, wait a beat, and then emit a single, faux-quizzical HONK, as though unable to comprehend why they were staring at me. "You expect me to feel guilty?" it was as though I was saying (in honks). "I'm a dang goose." Then I'd waddle away like I hadn't definitely just spent 20 minutes meticulously orchestrating the demise of that person's good day."

The statement above positively remarks upon the creation of character afforded by both the narrative framework and the game's mechanic design; the player (Grayson) imposes their interpretation of the Goose's actions and thoughts through the ambiguity of its character; the creation of the Goose's personality is personal to the player.

"There's an insidious joy in drawing out increasingly infuriated reactions from the small town's people—all of whom are, in their own way, kinda douchey. They had it coming, I think. Or maybe I've come to so thoroughly inhabit the goose's headspace that now that I have an implicit bias."

Without strict backstory on the Goose or the surrounding characters, the player has the freedom to justify their actions within the play space. Grayson points positively to the schadenfreude afforded to the player. Through personal interpretation of the Goose's inner mindset, the Goose's actions are justified.

Writing for the Los Angeles Times, Todd Martens similarly remarks

positively on the player's ability to create character. The lack of explicit characterization, regarding both the Goose and the villagers, allow for an engaging play experience.

"Press a button, and "spread your wings" we're told in the opening moments of "Untitled Goose Game. A brief moment of inspiration before the terror starts. Or, depending on your point of view, the justified revenge."

In his review of *Untitled Goose Game*, Martens details the backstory he outlined for several characters within the game. His characterizations are more outlandish than most interpretations, yet positively remark upon the ambiguity of the narrative. The game does not explicitly state the Goose's history with the villagers (they only hint that this conflict is continuous and ongoing through the "No Goose Allowed" signs and the Goose's collection of bells). As such, Martens notes the narrative allows space for the player to justify the actions of the Goose.

"You deserve to be terrorized by a goose. All of you. Every. Single. One. Of. You. Spread your wings, little goose, and restore karmic balance to the universe."

In both reviews, roleplay and character creation was an integral part of the reviewers' experience. The interaction between mechanical design, the premise, and the lack of explicit backstory or motivation allow the player to internalize the game to best suit their desired play experience. The game's comedy relies upon the freedom to roleplay and instigate conflict without guilt.

Lessons

Several lessons can be learned by examining *Untitled Goose Game* through the lens of storytelling. Firstly, **do not underestimate the effect of storytelling on the gameplay experience**. As explicated in the "Breakdown", *Untitled Goose Game* benefits from the story structure of the hero's journey. The strength of the final level is built through structured storytelling and the creation of personalized moments. Each chapter includes the Goose attempting to complete their to-do as the user instigates several emotional beats by personally interacting with the villagers. As players pass through each area, they revisit their personal narrative. The antagonists become notable through the player's

memories of these interactions as they *share history*. The gameplay experience of final level is heightened when the player has personal emotional connections to the narrative context.

The next lesson of *Untitled Goose Game* is the **benefit of allowing roleplay within a pre-defined protagonist**. *Untitled Goose Game* is strict with its characterization of the Goose. The Goose's role is to be a disturbance. There is no way for the Goose to create harmony within the village. The point of the game is to be horrible. While players *must* enact this aspect of the Goose's personality to progress, it's also important to allow players the feeling of choice. As earlier stated, all verbs within the narrative support the Goose as an agent of chaos. However, the *degree* and *method* of the Goose's mayhem is determined by the player. Despite the game's linear storyline, the player chooses their interactions within the game space. The combination of verbs at the player's disposal allow them to impact the surrounding environment in an intrinsically pleasing way. The guise of freedom afforded by roleplay makes strict objectives less oppressive. Games with defined protagonists may benefit from this idea.

Finally, sometimes **leaving characters undefined may support storytelling**. In choice-based games, players desire both motivation and permission when enacting change. When it comes to issues of moral ambiguity, players must feel these actions are, to some extent, "acceptable" or "justified". *Untitled Goose Game* formulates this acceptance by leaving characters undefined. The Goose's motivation, their history with the villagers, and the villager's personalities are left to the player's imagination; nothing is explicit. As such, the player fills this ambiguity with their own narrative reasoning. The Goose's backstory may be complex, or their motivation may boil down to the intrinsic glee of creating chaos. Similarly, the villagers may be innocent denizens going about their routines, or they may have a reason to incite the Goose's spite. Nevertheless, leaving the Goose and villagers undefined creates an emotional barrier between the players and their questionable actions; players configure the story to justify their needs. Stories with more narrative complexity might learn from this dynamic, should the narrative designer desire to incite similar dynamics.

Summation

Most people do not see *Untitled Goose Game* as a narrative game, but its success relies on the use of narrative frameworks and instigating narrative beats. The comedy of *Untitled Goose Game*, which is so often positively remarked upon, is *storytelling*. Though the game contains no dialogue, no explicit backstory or motivation for its characters, the world, soundscapes, mechanics and interactions create character. In turn, the player's engagement is defined by their ability to roleplay the Goose and interact with the NPCs. Mechanics and the surrounding systems allow the player to interpret the Goose's character and personalize their narrative experience. Sparse storytelling and the roleplaying quality of each game mechanic contribute to the personal feel and narrative of *Untitled Goose Game*. In this respect, *Untitled Goose Game* is deserving of analysis within a narrative context. House House, whether purposefully or inadvertently, has created both an effective story, and a unique story-making system.