

### Outer Wilds

Jennifer Baker



*Outer Wilds*. Annapurna Interactive, 2019. Video game.

*OUTER Wilds* is a space exploration game developed by Mobius Digital and published by Annapurna Interactive in 2019. The player character is a newly-minted astronaut who ventures from their home planet of Timber Hearth to explore the surrounding solar system. The worlds of *Outer Wilds* recall the rich environments of the *Metroid* series in their compelling combination of dynamic, physics-driven planetary activity with the environmental storytelling of the Nomai ruins, remnants of an ancient alien civilization that disappeared long before the time of the Hearthians. Players can explore black holes, translate Nomai writing to uncover bits of history, and chase down quantum singularities-- until the solar system's sun goes supernova, destroying the solar system and killing everyone in it, including the player.

This apocalyptic event reveals the central conflict of the game: the player is trapped in a 22-minute time loop that spans from the moment the player character wakes up beside a campfire on Timber Hearth to the destruction of the known universe. The beginning of each loop sets in motion a sequence of events that occur across all planets of the solar system: one planet pulls the sand off of the other in the manner of a vast hourglass, another planet falls piece by piece into a black hole, and the sun expands to consume a small space station circling its outer reaches. The player's task is to observe and make sense of these events while searching for clues to discover how to escape the time loop, solve the mystery of the Nomai, and perhaps even prevent the end of the universe. However, even as the player is allowed to explore freely without much direction from the game, it becomes painfully clear that *Outer Wilds* is a cosmic on-rails narrative that the player merely moves through, an existential horror that the player can never truly prevent, but only make peace with.

*Outer Wilds* began as creator Alex Beachum's Master's Thesis at the University of Southern California. He had developed a number of planetary tech demos, small projects that model a particular game mechanic or physics simulation, but struggled to find a thread to bind them together into a coherent game. He then designed an

“emotional prototype”, a project similar to a tech demo that would establish the game’s mood. Beachum set the player on a planet next to a roaring fire, where the player character would peacefully roast marshmallows until they were consumed by the nearby sun going supernova. This set the tone for the rest of the project (Cameron). According to Beachum, there were three pillars that guided the game’s design: curiosity-driven exploration, a world that changed outside of the player’s control, and a deliberate centering of the “feeling of space ... a camping in space aesthetic where you still felt vulnerable” (Wallace). Beachum has since stated that the intent was to “tell a story that only a video game could tell” through elements such as environmental storytelling and limiting the player’s agency (O’Dwyer). As a video game that so self-consciously utilizes all elements of the medium to tell a speculative narrative, *Outer Wilds* is ideal for any number of theoretical interventions.

As a science fiction narrative told through a game medium, *Outer Wilds* grapples with a number of science fictional concerns that are both conveyed through and complicated by game mechanics. A reading of genre conventions, for example, suggests that *Outer Wilds* is a sort of space western with its banjo-heavy soundtrack, ramshackle spacecraft, and aliens in cowboy hats, but the game cleverly undercuts the self-aggrandizing and colonial positioning immanent in the genre through the player’s relative lack of agency. In a similar vein, *Outer Wilds* engages science fiction’s propensity for literalizing its metaphors by embodying Janet Murray’s definition of a video game, “a kind of abstract storytelling that resembles the world of common experience but compresses it in order to heighten interest” (176). In *Outer Wilds*, this compression is realized in planets that are small enough to be thoroughly explored by the player within the 22-minute timeframe. Another potential research intervention is Aki Järvinen’s framework for analyzing video games through emotional processes, which reveals the connection between the emotional effects of narrative and the paradox of player agency. The Rumor Mode system in *Outer Wilds* displays points of interest that the player has found as an interconnected web of “rumors”. This interface “embodies the unknown,” establishing curiosity as the game’s driving force and primary source of pleasure (Järvinen 103). As players sate their curiosity, however, they also must come to terms with their complete lack of agency in the universe. The more points of interest the player uncovers, the more it becomes obvious that the player is not the center of the story, but one small, insignificant piece of it. Observation is a paradox that effaces agency each time agency is exercised.

*Outer Wilds* is ultimately an existential project that suggests modes of meaning-making in the face of a vast and uncaring cosmos. True to the creators' intent to create a story that could only be told through a video game, it is an exceptional example of a text that demands analysis in all aspects of video game modality, from level design to player agency and immersion, to narrative design, to visual elements. *Outer Wilds* is a model text for the necessity of interdisciplinarity in science fiction studies as it engages with video games as a new frontier of speculation.

### Works Cited

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