

Minding Gaps in Video Game Narrative

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Video games are, in Marie-Laure Ryan's phrase, an "art of compromise" between narrative and gameplay. How does this compromise affect the significance of gaps and prompt a reconsideration of theories of narrative gaps (such as those developed by Wolfgang Iser, Lubomír Doležal, and others) geared towards non-interactive narrative? How do areas of opacity and incompleteness in digital narrative interact with the gaps that give rise to suspense, curiosity, and surprise? My first step towards addressing these questions will be introducing the way in which narrative cues are spatially distributed in video games, and particularly in genres such as open world or action games. Players piece together the story by paying close attention to objects and locations across the game world, or by interacting with non-player characters who are also distributed in digital space. This type of "environmental storytelling," as it is known in game studies, foregrounds gaps and discontinuities but also gives the player considerable agency in reconstructing (or ignoring) the narrative. This strategy also has the effect of shifting the burden of narrative explanation from the game itself to internet-based practices through which players share or discuss their interpretation of games that are particularly "gappy" and challenging from a narrative perspective, such as those developed by famed Japanese studio FromSoftware (e.g., the Dark Souls series). However, the player's agency in making sense of these gaps also complicates developers' attempt to design experiences of suspense, curiosity, and surprise, because the nonlinear nature of gameplay makes it difficult to predict when (and if) players will realize what is going on in the story. My paper will discuss some of the solutions developers have found for this problem, particularly in indie games such as *Return of the Obra Dinn* (Lucas Pope) or *Her Story* (Sam Barlow) where the player's experience is carefully constructed and thus affords suspense and surprise despite the seeming openness of the gameplay experience.