Beyond the supernova: time, space, and utopia in Outer Wilds

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BEYOND THE SUPERNOVA: TIME, SPACE, AND UTOPIA IN OUTER WILDS

by

SARAH SALAJKA

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in
The Department of English
to
The School of Graduate Studies
of
The University of Alabama in Huntsville

HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA
2022
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Submitted by Sarah Salajka in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English and accepted on behalf of the Faculty of the School of Graduate Studies by the thesis committee.

We, the undersigned members of the Graduate Faculty of The University of Alabama in Huntsville, certify that we have advised and/or supervised the candidate on the work described in this thesis. We further certify that we have reviewed the thesis manuscript and approve it in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

Committee Chair

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Video games have evolved from simplistic marks moving on a screen to a diverse and inventive storytelling medium unique from other narrative forms. They allow for new methods of approaching traditional literary forms, such as the utopia. The utopian genre has seen a series of formal changes as social and historical contexts changed over time. This thesis proposes a new approach to the utopian genre borne from the current inability to imagine a future. While previous literary versions of utopia were expressed by moving forward through time or displacement through space, current social and environmental circumstances render this impossible, and so, new time and space must be explored. This thesis explores this concept through the 2019 indie game *Outer Wilds* in which the protagonist is forced to turn to new concepts of time and space as the current universe is destroyed.
Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the 2000s, advancements in entertainment technology have allowed video games to shift in form and structure. While most games were initially little more than moving marks on screens, advancements in technology have allowed for incredibly detailed works. Games are capable of holding upwards of 150 hours of content with photorealistic rendering, or even stylistic hand-drawn visuals, creating a much wider array of game content and visuals than was possible in the early days of gaming. Most significant to these advancements is the introduction of narrative and storytelling to video games and the ability for video games to be analyzed in a similar manner to other narrative forms, like the movie or novel. However, though video games have evolved to be a vehicle for complex narratives, they are unique from other forms and contain different modes of storytelling. As video games have evolved as a narrative medium, it has become possible to analyze their contents somewhat similarly to other narrative forms, and the combination of visual and narrative forms with the user interaction of video games allows for new innovation in certain fields. This thesis aims to perform a utopian analysis of the video game *Outer Wilds* through a close reading of the game’s narrative as well as its mechanics. *Outer Wilds*’ unique combination of a non-linear or multi-linear narrative, user interaction, exploration-based storytelling, and multiple endings allows it to push the boundaries of utopian fiction in ways that are not possible within the confines of a traditional linear narrative like a novel.

*Outer Wilds* is an indie video game produced by Mobius Games and published by Annapurna Interactive in 2019. It has won Game of the Year awards in 2019, a BAFTA for Best Game in 2020, and other various awards and recognitions. It is classified as an open-world, action-adventure, mystery puzzle game that is atmospheric, and contains good music. This
description of the game is just an example of the plethora of descriptions that can now be used to
describe a video game; this is a dramatic difference from the much more basic generic
descriptions of the past.

The story of *Outer Wilds* follows a nameless protagonist who is a member of the
Hearthian race, a young species of aliens who live on the pine-tree and geyser-filled planet of
Timber Hearth. The Hearthians are exploring their solar system through their space exploration
program, Outer Wilds Ventures, and the Protagonist is planning their first launch after the
invention of a translation device that will allow them, and the other Hearthians, to translate text
left behind by the long-dead Nomai, who inhabited the solar system before the Hearthians. There
are many planets for the Protagonist to search: The Hourglass Twins, a binary planet system
made up of the sand-covered Ash Twin and the cavernous, rocky Ember Twin; Brittle Hollow, a
brittle rocky planet constantly bombarded with asteroids from its volcanic moon; Giant’s Deep, a
dense oceanic planet with a stormy atmosphere, riddled with violent tornadoes; and The Dark
Bramble, which was once an icy planet that was torn apart by some plant seed that contains
pocket dimensions within it. Twenty-two minutes into the Protagonist’s first flight, the sun
explodes, and they die. The Protagonist then wakes up as they did at the beginning of the game,
stuck in a time loop, beginning a seemingly endless search of the solar system to better
understand why they are in a time loop, what the Nomai left behind, and what comes next.

The game features multiple possible endings—six in the main game, and two more in the
*Echoes of the Eye* downloadable content (DLC)—which is a large part of what sets it apart from
the story structure of the novel. There is minimal guidance throughout the game, as the creators
wanted an exploration-based experience, not one driven by specific prompts or goals. These
variables are integral to the story and experience of the game itself, so much so that game
director Alex Beachum states, “I’m really proud that we made a story that could only [...] be told through video games. [...] We wanted to make something that couldn’t have been made any other way” (NoClip 48:22). As Beachum explains, *Outer Wilds* could not have been done in any other form, but why is that?

It is significant to note that many advancements in video game narrative were made after the publication of many of my research texts. However, most literature that has been produced more recently in regard to video game theory does not focus on the narrative structure or difference of video games. Jesper Juul’s “Games Telling Stories – A Brief Note on Games and Narratives” and Marie-Laure Ryan’s “Beyond Myth and Metaphor–The Case of Narrative in Digital Media” aim to describe the ways in which narrative is different in game form; they address the linearity and temporality of games, along with the interactivity of the player in the narrative. Ryan also specifically references hypertexts, which are further elaborated on by Espen Aarseth in his book *Cybertext*. Despite this awareness of video game narrative differences, all three of these texts were written in the late 90s or early 2000s, before most of the substantial advancements to narrative in video games were made. While they do have some still-applicable sections, there are also many sections of these sources that are no longer relevant due to the advancement of technology since their writing.

For example, Ryan lists several types of story perspectives, as adapted from Espen Aarseth’s typology of user functions and perspectives in Cybertexts. She describes internal versus external interaction, in which external signifies a player or reader who is outside the virtual world, and internal is the reader or player who becomes a character. She also refers to an exploratory/ontological dichotomy: “in the exploratory mode, the user is free to move around the database, but this activity does not make history, nor does it alter the plot; the user has no impact
on the destiny of the virtual world. In the ontological mode, by contrast, the decisions of the user send the history of the virtual world on different forking paths” (12). Ryan does note that these definitions may be limiting, and they must be reviewed differently for each game, but as her categories go, it is impossible for a game to be both exploratory and ontological. As it relates to *Outer Wilds* specifically, there are both exploratory and ontological factors of it. Much of the game is strictly exploratory, as the time loop goes on, the player’s actions have no historical significance, and they are simply left to explore the world. However, there are many opportunities throughout the game—the various endings of the game—where the player is able to make an ontological choice and choose from various paths.

Likewise, Juul refers to narrative and interactivity as completely separate and observes that “relying too heavily on existing theories will make us forget what makes games unique: such as rules, goals, player activity, the projection of the players actions into the game world”. Juul is much more focused on the individual mechanics of games and writes off a lot of narrative as a sequence of events that can be retold post-gameplay, but not a narrative in and of itself. This was true at the time his article was written, but many computational advancements that allowed for games to be larger and contain both story and decent graphics allowed for more varied stories in conjunction with gameplay mechanics.

I am utilizing these sources instead of ones that better explore these concepts in modern games due to an absence of appropriate sources with a more contemporary context. Other sources that do refer to more modern games—*War Play: Video Games and the Future of Armed Conflict* by Corey Mead, “The Evolution of Video Games as a Storytelling Medium, and the Role of Narrative in Modern Games” by Chris Stone—discuss the medium of video games much in the same way that one would refer to a literary medium and do not adequately separate the
forms. Reading video games like literature can remove the unique features of video game narrative structure, such as non-linear or multi-linear stories and player interactivity. Analyzing games like literature can lead to a flattening of a multifaceted experience down into one, linear retelling of events, which does not capture or address the full possibilities of many games. Many contemporary games contain various routes or courses throughout the game, for example Rockstar’s *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018) utilizes an honor mechanic and multiple optional missions or player-choice plot decisions which affects the plot and ending of the game; a high-honor player, who committed fewer crimes and helped more people, will experience a different ending than a low-honor player, and this difference cannot be fully captured when attempting to create one singular narrative reading for a video game. What authors like Ryan, Juul, and Aarseth take into account is the way that various digital media forms differ formally from written or even visual narrative like film or theatre. What Mead and Stone’s pieces, and those like them, focus on is the way that games have evolved over time to adapt “narrative” as they refer to it, but by this, they mean a linear plot that can be followed by action beats, similar in style to a novel. While Stone addresses the “string of pearls” model of storytelling, which contains many branching paths, he never addresses. By utilizing the medium-specific language of Aarseth, Juul, and Ryan in a methodology similar to Mead and Stone, this examination hopes to illuminate better the role of medium in narrative analysis.

Aarseth’s *Cybertext* especially factors in the problems with placing these types of stories under the same umbrella of “the literary.” He finds problems with the concept of treating new media as the same as written literary forms but also finds issue with the “reverse problem[...] the tendency to describe new media as radically different from the old” (*Cybertext* 14.) He attempts to explain the ways in which various digital texts, referred to as cybertext, borrow aspects of
narratology and literariness from more traditional forms but also how they cannot be lumped in with traditional literature because of their formal differences and alternative user interaction. He believes that modes of literary analysis can be applied to cybertext, and that this analysis is particularly valuable because of the new frontiers cybertexts provide for methods of storytelling, but that does not mean that cybertexts should or can simply be “read” like books or even movies. Rather, they “should be studied for what they can tell us about the principles and evolution of human communication [...]to show what the functional differences and similarities among the various textual media imply about the theories and practices of literature” (Aarseth 17). He also identifies, particularly with adventure games, what he characterizes as an intentional scholarly avoidance of forms such as video games and cybertext due to the fact that they are not as well-researched as other narrative modes like the novel.

The intentional avoidance of these forms may be the reason people tend to lump them in with literature; literature is familiar:

Compared to all other literary formats, including hypertext novels, the adventure game’s textual structure is alien, too far removed from the genus of hegemonic literature to be recognized by any but a few xenophiles, who risk professional suspicion or ridicule when they dare suggest the pertinence of their newfound, strange looking object. No wonder their chosen strategy often is one of seeking similarity, bridging the gap, and trying to find a perspective, however narrow, that demonstrates that the species does not lack all the important marks of literature that we know and love (Cybertext 109).

The above quote could also be an explanation as to why I have struggled to find appropriate contemporary criticism of story in games that do not derive from more traditional literary analysis. Most sources I have found either refuse to analyze story aspects of games at all
(looking only at mechanics, player interaction in multiplayer games, monetary success, or the sociological details of gaming culture), or, read games like books. For example, while Stone and Mead both address the way that character or interaction is vital to the video game, they do not go much further than this to address the formal differences in narrative structure. They do not delve any deeper than the idea that the player inhabits the player-character and that this makes the experience of games unique, but they do not explain how the narrative structure is fundamentally shaped by this type of interactive medium.

Though I will here apply concepts generally applied to literature to a game, I am not doing so without acknowledging and accounting for the formal differences between written literature and modern video games. I believe, using Aarseth’s words, that

[W]hat makes [games] worthy of study is the fact that they present an alternative mode of discourse[...]. By investigating this, we may be able to extract knowledge[...] which may tell us something about discourse itself and which we could not have learned from our previous, more restricted horizon. This is sufficient reason to put [these texts] on the agenda of literary study, in agreement with the ideals of comparative literature. (Aarseth “Cybertext” 109)

The subject of this thesis, *Outer Wilds* has a unique narrative structure that, if reduced to or explained in a traditional literary, linear, narrative way, impedes the entire purpose of the story and functionality of the narrative. However, before I turn to the details of *Outer Wilds*, it is necessary to establish the terms I am pulling from Aarseth to create an adequate framework for the reading of this game different from a more traditional literary format. I will mostly be using ideas from Aarseth, Ryan, and Juul, including the terms *cybertext, hypertext, ergodic literature, and ergodic intrigue* in order to discuss the way that narrative and user-interaction are presented
in games. Then, I will move on to the specifics of *Outer Wilds* and include mechanical and gameplay information from scholars like Miguel Sicart and the creators of *Outer Wilds* themselves as interviewed by NoClip studios. Again, while some of these terms may appear outdated, Aarseth specifically encourages the use and adaptation of the terms he coins in *Cybertext*: “Please use these terms in any way you find pleasurable, please rewrite them, refute them, or erase them, if you want (Or ignore them, if you must.)” (Aarseth “Cybertext” 183). He is aware of the change of the medium and how the terms must adapt with the changing of the form and encourages the use of these terms, so it is appropriate to adapt these terms—which were originally used for video games and adventure games that were vastly different from contemporary games—to *Outer Wilds*.

Just as video games and their narrative structure have evolved with more technological advancements, they have become vehicles for new versions of previously existing genres. For example, many video games are science fiction or fantasy based, allowing for interaction with these worlds that are not possible just through reading. They create an interactive and immersive experience, creating new opportunities for genres that have existed for a long time. The evolution of storytelling in the video game medium can be linked to what Fredric Jameson calls the “desire for narrative”: “the impossible attempt to give representation to the multiple and incommensurable temporalities in which each of us exists” (Jameson *The Political Unconscious* xxviii). This desire is borne from the innate human desire for narrative, something that Aarseth refers to in his discussion of cybertexts. It is only natural that humans would eventually apply storytelling to new forms of art or expression such as the video game, but Jameson further claims that the desire for narrative is also a desire for the historical. “Always historicize!” is the “slogan” or “moral” of *The Political Unconscious*, as Jameson states
we never really confront a text immediately, in all its freshness as a thing-in-itself.

Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read: we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or—if the text is brand-new—through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions. This presupposition then dictates the use of a method[...] according to which our object of study is less the text itself than the interpretations through which we attempt to confront and to appropriate it. Interpretation is here construed as an essentially allegorical act, which consists in rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code (The Political Unconscious ix-x).

Jameson calls this historical reading of narrative “metacommentary”, and “every commentary must be at the same time a metacommentary as well”, as the awareness of why the interpretation is needed creates a genuine interpretation which “directs the attention back to history itself, and to the historical situation of the commentator as well as of the work” (The Ideologies of Theory 7). This historical reading of narratives is particularly useful in the utopian genre, which has seen a series of generic changes as the social and historical context changed over time.

Some previous depictions of utopia were based on desires or manifestations of utopia in historical contexts: More’s Utopia, published in 1519, manifested itself as an island because it was conceptualized during the discovery of the New World, where a truly isolated, undiscovered piece of land could hypothetically still exist (Moylan Demand the Impossible 2-3). Later iterations of utopia, such as those presented in Morris’s News from Nowhere (1890) and Bellamy’s Looking Backward (1888), use time as a displacement from modern society, creating a prospering far-future utopia. Later versions of utopia developed as a “more radical critique” in forms like the dystopia, and the critical utopia of the 1960s and 70s when “a subversive
utopianism” rose out of the conflicts of the time, which “revived a longing for the not yet
realized potential of the human community” (10). The critical utopia was then concerned about
the “limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as blueprint while
preserving it as dream” (Moylan Demand the Impossible 10). They focused on the process of
reaching utopia, rather than the demonstration of a realized utopian social order, such as in
ever earlier utopias, where an outsider passively witnesses an already existing utopia instead of
working through the process of creating utopia in their own time.

Returning to the idea of the historical, Jameson finds utopia, and particularly science
fiction valuable because it emphasizes our current inability to imagine the future:

[W]hat is indeed authentic about [the relationship of SF and future history], as a mode of
narrative and a form of knowledge, is not at all its capacity to keep the future alive, even
in imagination. On the contrary, its deepest vocation is over and over again to
demonstrate and to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future, to body forth, through
apparently full representations which prove on closer inspection to be structurally and
constitutively impoverished, the atrophy in our time of what Marcuse has called the
utopian imagination, the imagination of otherness and radical difference; to succeed by
failure, and to serve as unwitting and even unwilling vehicles for a meditation, which,
setting forth for the unknown, finds itself irrevocably mired in the all-too-familiar, and
thereby becomes unexpectedly transformed into a contemplation of our own absolute
limits (Progress Versus Utopia 153).

My claim is that in modern times, with the growing threat of climate change, the seemingly
unstoppable rise of late-stage capitalism, and impending irreversible damage to our planet from
these factors, it is impossible for us to conceive of a possible new physical location or even a
positive temporal future in which a utopia could hypothetically be made. What *Outer Wilds* presents is, instead of an attempt to imagine a single utopian future, multiple depictions of utopian desire shown by multiple distinct groups throughout time. In the absence of one prescriptive track to utopia, the game features the stories of three different alien races and various possible endings to the game.

*Outer Wilds* ultimately tells a story of utopian desire, but these desires all fail. We never see a fully realized utopia in *Outer Wilds* and instead are told multiple stories of attempted utopias. One of the endings of the game sees the Protagonist enter the Eye of the Universe, a quantum entity that has never been consciously observed and serves as the focal point of the other utopias. The Protagonist, as an observer of the Eye, is able to use the quantum power it possesses to create a new singularity, collapsing the infinite possibilities of the Eye to allow the birth of a new universe after the inevitable destruction of the old. Before this, the Protagonist learns the stories of two other races who have two failed utopias.

The first chapter of this thesis will discuss the Eye of the Universe and the Nomai, a nomadic race that left technology behind in the solar system, allowing the Protagonist’s race to achieve space travel. The Nomai’s story includes the creation of the time loop, the failed effort to locate the Eye of the universe, and the sudden death of the Nomai at the hands of a radioactive comet. The Nomai fail in their fight against time. They cannot trigger a supernova before the sun’s natural death, which prevents them from finding the Eye, and they run out of time when the Interloper, containing the radioactive material, wipes out their species. A review of their story will establish that displacement through time alone is no longer a viable option for utopia.

The second chapter will cover the Strangers of the *Echoes of the Eye* Downloadable Content (DLC). The Strangers entered the solar system long before the Nomai. They left their
home planet, environmentally devastating it in order to build a space shuttle capable of bringing them to the same solar system as the Eye. They grow to fear the Eye after learning of its capacity for destruction, but they cannot return to their now-destroyed home planet. They create a digital landscape that mirrors their old world in order to cope with their guilt and die within this false world. This chapter will cover the Strangers, their relationship with the concept of the Anthropocene, and their manufactured false utopia. Their story will establish that displacement through space alone is no longer a viable option for utopia.

Both of these readings establish the base for the final chapter, which will focus on the Protagonist’s actions separate from the other stories. Chapters one and two establish the framework that there is no time and space for utopia to exist. When the Protagonist enters the Eye of the Universe, they are unable to save the universe as it already is, but they are able to create new time and new space, a new universe to form after the death of the old. The Protagonist creates this world utilizing a single song that breaks the traditional bounds of space and time, connecting the Protagonist with their own community of Hearthians, and with figureheads of the Nomai and the Strangers. Only when time and space are collapsed in this way can these three groups collectively leave their old world behind and together, with music, they create time and space anew.
Critical Overview

Video Game and Cybertext Terminology

Many scholars have discussed the progression of narrative in video games, though some have differing definitions of narrative and even disagree on when the earliest application of narrative to games began. Similarly to the novel, there are different ideas of what the “first” novel or the “first” of a specific genre might be, depending on various definitional criteria and the fact that repetition is required for the establishment of genres and forms. To address the concept of narrative in video games, it is first important to acknowledge the advancement of the video game form from basic simulation technology to the more widely accessible entertainment medium it is today. For this, I utilize Corey Mead’s *War Play: Video Games and the Future of Armed Conflict*, which addresses the origins of the technology used to create video games and discusses how the medium is inextricably linked to the military, and Chris Stone’s “Evolution of Video Games as a Storytelling Medium, and the Role of Narrative in Modern Games” which similarly addresses the origins of video games and what Stone perceives to be the advancement of narrative in gaming.

The military invested in many technologies following the Second World War in order to prevent another potential depression. These technologies included the types of simulation tech that was used in some of the first video games (Mead). It was not until the 80s that there was a shift away from simulation-based games: “an increasing focus on content and compelling narratives brought these simulations closer in basic form to commercial video games” that we know today (Mead). Sources disagree on the beginnings of early narrative video games. Some, namely Espen Aarseth, place this beginning with the Adventure Game genre, named after Don
Woods and Willie Crowther’s 1976 game *Adventure*, while others, like Chris Stone and Mead, focusing on the narrative game that also included visuals, arguing that narrative video games began with Nintendo’s *Donkey Kong* in 1981.

Scholars like Espen Aarseth, Jesper Juul, and Marie-Laure Ryan do not address the formation of narrative in video games in the same way that scholars like Stone and Mead do. While scholars like Stone, Mead, and Sicard focus on individual factors of games—narrative and mechanics separately, but not as part of one specific tool integral to the functionality of the game—Aarseth, Juul, and Ryan all combine these aspects to create a more complete analysis of game mechanics.

It is necessary to factor in Aarseth’s perspective on narrative games as well, beginning with the Adventure Game genre. Adventure Games were originally text-based roleplaying games in which the user would input commands that the controlled character would then perform. These types of games include *Zork* (Infocom, 1981), *Deadline* (Infocom, 1982), and *Mystery Mansion* (On Line Systems 1982). Eventually, these text-only roleplaying games evolved to point-and-click animated adventures such as *The Secret of Monkey Island* (Lucasarts 1990), and *Myst* (Cyan, Inc.1993). Because of the user’s input and various routes these games could take, the plot structure of these adventure games was much more similar to the modern video game than other existing games at the time that were solely entertainment focused, such as *Pac-Man* (Namco 1980), *Space Invaders* (Taito 1978), or other games that featured no narrative, just gameplay.

Stone creates a timeline of narrative that begins with *Donkey Kong*, but these were often not complex narratives in the same way that the earlier Adventure Games were. Stone even cites these early forms as being gameplay focused, where the story was simply background.
information that “give[s] the player a reason to continue playing.” (“Evolution of Video Games”). Jesper Juul argues, in regard to the game Space Invaders, that this type of game does not quite count as narrative, but rather is a game with “pre-history.” He argues that, in the game, there is an assumed world state, but that it is not actually addressed in the gameplay. For Space Invaders, “an invasion presupposes a situation before the invasion” but “we [the player] cannot restore the initial state” (Juul).

Similarly, games like Donkey Kong feature a bare-minimum narrative or pre-history but are not quite comparable to the Adventure Game’s Choose-Your-Own-Adventure novel style plot. Still, for Stone, games like Donkey Kong are the origin which gives way to games like 1996’s Crash Bandicoot, which follows a generically similar plot but with improved graphics and player involvement.

The type of game that Stone focuses on evolved in the late 90s and the early 2000s. These were my personal first exposures to the genre, and much of Aarseth’s work and that of many other scholars who focused on narrative in games were published during this period before the real boom of the narrative game. Even these 90s and 2000s games followed a common, replicable formula: a primary focus on collecting items throughout levels to gain a more important, rarer item at the end of levels. This formula was repeated in later Crash Bandicoot titles as well as games like Ty the Tasmanian Tiger (Krome Studios, 2002), Tak and the Power of Juju (THQ, 2003), Spyro (Insomniac Games, 1998), and Jak and Daxter (Naughty Dog, 2001). All of these contained the same gameplay formula or gameplay loop mentioned above with superficially varied characters, scenery, and stories.

The change to modern story-focused games began in the 2000s, when companies tried to combine gameplay and narrative (Stone). Some of this change could be attributed to “the game
industry maturing with its audience” (Stone). This “aging” of the industry resulted in some stark changes, where more advanced stories and darker themes were explored. A good example of this from my own childhood is Naughty Dog’s Jak and Daxter trilogy. The first, Jak and Daxter: The Precursor Legacy, contains minimal narrative, but gameplay is the main focus, falling into the category of the aforementioned games. However, there is an implied sequel in a secret cutscene that triggers if the player collects all of the rare items in the game. When the sequel, Jak II (Naughty Dog 2003), released, it carried the age rating, Teen, where the previous game was rated E for Everyone. Its plot took a gritty, science-fantasy dystopia turn that focused on corrupt politicians, human experimentation, gun combat, environmental collapse, and underground rebellion. This stark contrast from Jak and Daxter’s upbeat, bright colors, vibrant natural settings and new focus on platforming and puzzle solving most clearly portrays the movement from “child’s game” to a story made for teens and adults.

Games continued to shift in this more narrative direction, largely due to the advancements of computational technology, which allowed for increasingly complex game mechanics, better graphics, and most importantly, longer games. The medium of the video game did not initially have the capability to contain stories due to restrictions of technology, according to Mead. There was either the ability to have graphics but little story, or no graphics and decent story, like the adventure game. Now, with the ability to create appealing graphics and appealing stories in the game, most games have some sort of narrative or story component.

Before this advancement in game technology, Espen Aarseth released Cybertext in 1997, which did not address many video games but instead established terminology for digital narrative texts. Much of this terminology is still applicable to digital texts and even modern video games. Aarseth coined the term cybertext and defined it as a form of ergodic literature that “focuses on
the mechanical organization of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange. However, it also centers the attention on the consumer, or user, of the text, as a more integrated figure than even reader-response theorists would claim” (Aarseth *Cybertext* 1). A cybertext, then, is a text in which the physical medium is inextricable from the text itself; any attempt to separate story told in a cybertext from the original medium in which a cybertext is told (usually a digital medium) fails to capture properly the cybertext in its entirety. Aarseth classifies a cybertext under the umbrella of ergodic literature, which he defines as a piece of media in which “the user will have effectuated a semiotic sequence, and this selective movement is a work of physical construction that the various concepts of ‘reading’ do not account for” (1). The ergodic text is a text where a “nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text” (1). To Aarseth, a *nonergodic* text would be one “where the effort to traverse the text is trivial, with no extranaematic responsibilities placed on the reader except (for example) eye movement and the periodic or arbitrary turning of pages” (1-2). The term “ergodic” is not necessarily referring to the text in and of itself, but how the user or reader interacts with the text: “the ergodic work of art is one that in a material sense, includes the rules for its own use, a work that has certain requirements built in that automatically distinguishes between successful and unsuccessful users” (179). This term applies to cybertexts, hypertexts, and adventure games, as Aarseth addresses in his book.

The *hypertext* is a digital text that is told through individual articles or nodes that are connected to each other through hyperlinks or similar branching filing systems. Similar to the origin of the narrative video game, and also the origin of the novel, there is some disagreement over the origins of the term, as some refer to any nonlinear narrative, regardless of its technology or form, to be hypertext or hypermedia. For this reason, some attribute the beginnings of
hypertext to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. The hypertext form, as Aarseth and Ryan explain it, though, is explicitly an electronic category heavily inspired by and originating with Michael Joyce’s *afternoon, a story* in 1987. Some alternate reality games, or ARGs, use hypertext to create a series of links that connect the reader to other sites, images, or links in search of information, or a story. Ryan describes hypertexts as “nonlinear,” a term that Aarseth finds problematic due to the fact that the act of reading or experiencing any text will apply linearity onto it through the nature of time: “hypertext reading, like all reading, is linear in time and [...] the act of reading a hypertext reduces the nonlinearity of space to the linearity of time” (Aarseth Cybertext 43). What Ryan means by “nonlinearity” is that a hypertext does not have one specific progression of story: “if we take literally the claim that every traversal of the database determines a different story, a reader who encounters three segments in the order ‘a’ then ‘b’ then ‘c’ will construct a different story than a reader who encounters the same segments [in a different order]” (Ryan 4). Instead, Aarseth offers the terms “multilinear” but finds issue with that as well, stating that the importance of the various story configurations in a hypertext does not lie in the path but in the overall course. So, he proposes “multicursal[...] indicating that the lines are produced by movement, rather than drawn in advance” (Aarseth “Cybertext” 44). Ultimately, he claims, many of the terms used to describe these complex narrative structures are made more confusing by their loose definitions; however, “to construct a fundamental dichotomy between linear and nonlinear types of media is therefore dangerous, [as] it produces blind spots even as it creates new insights” (47). Aarseth emphasizes that even from an editing perspective, hypertexts (and many other digital texts), unlike novels, are editable after publication: “[the author] may at any point change or add parts to the text without any reader’s knowledge, and he is the only one who has full comprehension of the text’s composition at any time… with novels, revision after
publication is not common, and happens, when it does, only once in most cases” (Aarseth Cybertext 81). The revision after publication is something that is now extremely common in digital media, particularly video games, hypertexts, and other cybertexts, and reinforces the idea that different playthroughs will contain fundamentally different pieces depending on what version of the game or hypertext is being played/read. The story may literally be different player to player, or reader to reader, depending on what edits have been made, what content has been added or removed, and so on.

While Aarseth describes the hypertext as something inventive, he also acknowledges that the process of writing a hypertext “is not all that different from the old world of print, pen, and paper. Hypertext is certainly a new way of writing (with active links), but is it truly a new way or reading?” (Aarseth “Cybertext” 78). Aarseth then argues that one of the most distinct differences between the reading of a written text and the reading of a hypertext is that hypertexts to avoid what Roland Barthes calls *tmesis*:

For Roland Barthes, *tmesis* is the reader’s unconstrained skipping and skimming of passages, a fragmentation of the linear text expression that is totally beyond the author’s control. Hypertext reading is in fact quite the opposite: as the reader explores the labyrinth, she cannot afford to tread lightly through text, but must scrutinize the links and venues in order to avoid meeting the same text fragments over and over[...] We might say that hypertext punishes *tmesis* by controlling the text’s fragmentation and pathways and by forcing the reader to pay attention to the strategic links (Aarseth Cybertext 78-79).

To Aarseth, this reluctance to “tread lightly,” the process of searching, and the desire to discover all the secrets of a hypertext creates “ergodic aporia” (79). Aarseth describes an *aporia* as “an absence of possibility” brought forth by the inability to fathom all of the details one could miss
in a hypertext or cybertext, the concept of not knowing all, leading to a “dialectic of searching and finding typical of games in general” (3, 91), and the goal of the hypertext is, eventually, after extensive exploration, to reach an “epiphany” that “replaces the aporia” and “is immanent: a planned construction rather than an unplanned contingency” (91). This “aporia-epiphany” payoff is central to the hypertext but is not a narrative structure innate to the form of the hypertext. It rather seems to come from “a more fundamental layer of the human experience, a ‘desire for closure’ (c.f. Douglas 172)” (Aarseth Cybertext 92). The epiphany is integral to the storytelling of the hypertext, and is in fact the goal, but the hypertext does not aim to tell a story. The hypertext does not contain any specific individual narrative, though individual readings or structured linear retellings of events could be misunderstood as narrative. Any story told from a hypertext would be a “succession of events” that the reader could “produce a narrative version of”. Because this narrative version would be created inside the mind of the reader and made with a “nontrivial effort” of sequencing events, it would be an “ergodic [version, marked] with the reader’s signature, proof that [the hypertext] does not contain narrative of its own” (95). So, while the epiphany that gives the reader closure is integral to the hypertext, the application of narrative onto the non-narrative structure of a hypertext is mostly possible through the aporia, the desire for exploration and understanding, and the aporia-epiphany combination, which could be understood as the desire for narrative.

Aarseth spends the fifth chapter of Cybertext establishing terms for the specific ways that narrative and story are featured in adventure games. When referring to video games or “computer games” of their own time, Aarseth, Ryan, and Juul all refer to older-generation games that do not contain the same narrative structure as games now, such as Space Invaders (Juul), and Pac-Man (Aarseth). As discussed earlier, these stories contain little more than pre-history or
some implied context to the game’s action. The adventure game, however, does contain a story that unfolds throughout gameplay and can be compared to more modern games.

To explain the ways in which adventure games contain a fundamentally different narrative structure to novels due to their user interaction, Aarseth cites Wolfgang Iser, explaining, “for Iser, the story of a narrative is produced by ‘a convergence of text and reader’ (1980, 50)” (Cybertext 111), however, for an adventure game or determinate cybertext, instead of the reader recovering a single, pre-existing plot, the user of the cybertext actively creates one potential story from many. Because of this alternative narrative structure, Aarseth proposes a new term for the way narrative or story functions in adventure games: ergodic intrigue.

Instead of a narrated plot, cybertext produces a sequence of oscillating activities effectuated (but certainly not controlled) by the user[...] As a new term for this element, I propose intrigue, to suggest a secret plot in which the user is the innocent but voluntary target [...] with an outcome that is not yet decided-or rather with several possible outcomes that depend on various factors, such as the cleverness and experience of the player. The term intrigue is of course borrowed from drama theory, where it refers to “a scheme which depends for its success on the ignorance or gullibility of the person or persons against whom it is directed” (Abrams 1981, 137). The difference between dramatic intrigue and ergodic intrigue is that the dramatic intrigue takes place on a diegetic, intrafictional level as a plot within a plot, and usually, with the audience’s full knowledge, while ergodic intrigue is directed against the user who must figure out for herself what is going on. Also, ergodic intrigue must have more than one explicit outcome and cannot, therefore, be successful or unsuccessful; this attribute here depends on the player. (Aarseth Cybertext 112-113)
The key component of ergodic intrigue is the player or user’s interaction with the text, which leads to the unfolding of potential plots over the course of many attempts. The player of the ergodic text, the *intriguer*, is similar to the narrator; however, the narrative distance between the three positions of “narrator, main character, and intriguer[...]” collapses in the adventure game” as the player comes to see the main character, especially in first-person game environments, as “an extension of [them]self” (113). This is a concept that Jesper Juul agrees on due to the implied temporal distance between reading a story and experiencing a story through gameplay. Citing Genette’s *Narrative Discourse*, Juul explains, “narrative is[...] a double temporal sequence[...] there is the time of the thing told and the time of the narrative” (Juul quoting Genette). Here, the novel would have increased temporal distance from the reader, but the player of the game would not have this distance, as the events playing out to them are happening “now.” Juul emphasizes that the only time there is a break in this concept is when there is a separation from the action of the game into written narration.

Aarseth emphasizes that there is merit in the study of cybertexts because of their unique capacity for user interaction, which allows for more experimental forays into storytelling that may “extract knowledge” differently than a novel might, something “which we could not have learned from our previous, more restricted horizon” (Aarseth *Cybertext* 109). It is integral for the cybertext not to be closed off and read like a more linear narrative form. The “desire for closure” Aarseth describes can be used to propel the cybertext’s user throughout the experience of a cybertext. This connects to what Fredric Jameson discusses, the “desire for narrative” as a first step to utopian thought. Both the cybertext, and utopian figuration are created out of a desire for a completed story, something that can be looked back on and deciphered. What makes video games particularly interesting and groundbreaking, is that many of them reject the model of “one
single story”. A game can not necessarily be looked at in totality with the same story and progression for every single person who played it. This variation is what makes video games valuable to study and allows for new innovation in old genres.

Utopian Theory and Terminology

To begin this section on utopian terminology, I will be drawing from Tom Moylan’s *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, where he contends that utopian writing in its many manifestations is complex and contradictory. It is, at heart, rooted in the unfulfilled needs and wants of specific classes, groups, and individuals in their unique historical contexts. Produced through the fantasizing powers of the imagination, utopia opposes the affirmative culture maintained by dominant ideology. Utopia negates the contradiction in a social system by forging visions of what is not yet realized either in theory or practice (1-2).

Moylan then surveys the history of utopian imagination, or the various ways that utopias have been depicted throughout its literary history, and how it has changed with historical situations. More’s kingdom of Utopia manifests itself as an island because it was conceptualized during the discovery of the new world, where a truly isolated, undiscovered piece of land could hypothetically still exist (Moylan *Demand the Impossible* 2-3). Later iterations of utopia, such as those presented in *News from Nowhere* and *Looking Backward*, rely on temporal displacement from modern society, creating a far-future utopia that is prospering, as the previous model of utopia confined to one island would not work. The original concept of utopia as an island, separate from society, was conceptualized during the exploration of “non-European” continents, like North America but once there was no more land to explore and think of in this manner, the
only way utopia could be removed from existing society was by an adjustment in time (Moylan
*Demand the Impossible* 2, 6). Later versions of utopia developed a “more radical critique” in
forms like the dystopia in the early twentieth century and the critical utopia of the 1960s and 70s
when “a subversive utopianism” rose out of the “oppositions of the 1950s and 1940s”, reviving a
“longing for the not yet realized potential of the human community” (10). This genre was
pioneered by authors like Ursula K. Le Guin, Joanna Russ, Samuel Delany, Marge Piercy,
Dorothy Bryant, Ernest Callenbach, and Suzy McKee (Moylan *Becoming Utopian* vi). They
challenged the white male hegemony of earlier utopian texts, presenting texts that acknowledged
issues of race, gender, sex, and class, usually from the perspective of female characters or
characters of color. The critical utopia was then concerned about the “limitations of the utopian
tradition, so that these texts reject utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream” (*Demand the
Impossible* 10). Critical utopias emphasize the open-ended practice of utopian thought as
opposed to earlier utopias where an unknowing outside would passively witness an already-
existing utopia instead of fully analyzing how it was attained. Critical utopias focus on “the
systemic alternative [...] the ensuing strategy and tactics taken by a human subject once again
unable to carry on anti-hegemonic tasks aimed at bringing down the prevailing system [be it
original or compromised utopia] and moving towards a radically different way of being”. Thus,
the critical utopia emerges as “a meditation on action rather than system” (30), or rather process
over plan.

Vital to certain critical utopias and to the historical context of *Outer Wilds* is the concept
of impending doom. Critical utopia is particularly interested in the *Anthropocene*, a term that
does not refer to a specific moment in time, but rather “the most recent period in Earth’s history
when human activity started to have a significant impact on the planet’s climate and ecosystem”
Moylan, in a recent interview with Hugh O’Connell, highlights critical utopia’s value in discussing the “Anthropocene, with its dystopian insistence on impending, unalterable apocalypse” (Becoming Utopian 223). He particularly emphasizes the need for a “critical utopian vision” in regard to the anthropocene, which can be used to “pull us forward as we struggle with the current historical conditions of a pervasive neoliberal world-destroying environmental toxicity” (224).

The information in this chapter serves as the critical basis of the analysis. Though each chapter mentions other scholars, the major relevant material, Aarseth’s cybertextual terminology, the analysis of games in particular, and the evolving concept of critical utopia especially, which will carry throughout the thesis is present here.
Time, The Eye of the Universe, and the Void

The Nomai’s story is one bound by time. Their story is a tragic one, beginning with the crash of their Vessel, stranding them in the solar system with no way to contact the rest of their race, and ending with the irony that, despite their attempts to create a time loop to prevent a disaster that would wipe out all life in the solar system, they fell victim to a separate, unseeable disaster which wiped out their race. While the Nomai are attempting to move through time, they are limited by space, and this is what keeps them from reaching the Eye of the Universe. They attempt to create boundary breaking technology to rise above the confines of time but wish to preserve space; their time loop is specifically designed to prevent any destruction of life or environment in the solar system. Because the Eye of the Universe exists outside of time and space, reaching this utopia through time alone is impossible. The Nomai rely too much on understandable systems of time and space, which extends past just the narrative or plot of the Nomai and into the structure of the story as a hypertext and the game’s mechanics and puzzles.

It is important to note that, for the Nomai, I will be focusing on their relationship with time, as the Nomai attempt to reach utopia by experimenting with and reaching beyond their own laws of time. Similarly, I will be discussing the Strangers’ relationship with space, as they attempt to reach utopia through displacement in space. That is not to say that the Nomai are not rooted in space, or the Strangers are not rooted in time. Time must be a factor in the Strangers’ story because time passes during it, just as space must be a factor in the Nomai’s because they exist in locations. The Nomai are trapped in space, physically stranded in the solar system with no way to warp away from it without the reconstruction of a Vessel, and so they attempt to reach utopia by moving through time. Similarly, the Strangers feel trapped by time, and as a response, create new space to emulate utopia. The final journey of the Protagonist is successful because it
is able to move through time and space at once, something both the Nomai and the Strangers before have been incapable of.

The Nomai wish to reach the Eye of the Universe, an unknowable quantum force in the solar system. To achieve this, they attempt to find the Eye of the Universe using a complicated group of devices that come together to create the Ash Twin Project. The Ash Twin Project fires a probe in a random direction in search of the Eye, and, using the solar power of a supernova, sends that information back in time twenty-two minutes. This would allow the Nomai to only use the materials to make one probe and one powerful cannon. However, the energy needed to power the probe cannon required the Nomai to induce a supernova. They wanted to create a supernova, and, with the time loop, receive the coordinates for the Eye of the Universe before the supernova took place, allowing for the preservation of the solar system, and the discovery of the Eye. Their attempt to manually trigger a supernova failed, and before the Nomai could make another attempt at finding the Eye of the Universe, they were made extinct by a radioactive substance entering the solar system and rapidly expanding, killing all land-traversing life there. They are unable to stop time or move backwards through it as they wish, and ultimately fall victim to destruction that they do not have time to fix. The theme of time stretches beyond just the nature of their story and is evident in the structure of it as well. The story itself is told in a non-linear, or multi-linear manner, as there is no one way to experience the text. The Nomai’s story is told to the player as they travel throughout the solar system, and they use the translator tool given to them at the start of the game to slowly uncover the Nomai’s history. The Nomai’s conversations are told through looping dialogue trees on what *Outer Wilds*’ creative director Alex Beachum calls a “Nomai whiteboard” (Alex Beachum interviewed by NoClip Studios).
As seen in Figure 3.1, Nomai text itself is a swirl of symbols, off of which other spirals emerge. Each independent spiral is a line of dialogue spoken by a different Nomai in response to whatever spiral it is branching off from. These branching conversations have no initial starting point, so the player is able to translate any Nomai conversation from any point in the dialogue. Additionally, there is no correct order in which to encounter the “Nomai whiteboards” (Alex Beachum interviewed by NoClip Studios) which hold these conversations, so the story of the Nomai can be uncovered in various orders.

Because of the way the Nomai story functions within the action of *Outer Wilds*, as a story gradually uncovered in many possible ways and for the sake of exploring, I believe it qualifies as a hypertext, using Aarseth and Ryan’s definitions. The key feature of a hypertext is its non-linearity or multilinearity, and to Aarseth, these texts usually are told through individual articles.
or nodes that branch off of each other. The Nomai’s text literally branches out from itself, creating this non-linear or multilinear path, but the act of discovering these texts is disjointed and multilinear as well, as they are found in no particular order throughout the gameplay. The Nomai’s story may take many different shapes depending on what order the player finds the notes in, or whether or not the player uncovers every single possible note in the game. For example, there are many easy to miss notes hidden at the bottom of geysers or inside the active volcanic moon. The varied routes throughout the game based on what order the notes are found can affect player approaches to particular puzzles throughout the game.

In my personal experience, the first time I played the game, I explored each planet until I had discovered everything on one planet, then moved to the next. The second time I played the game, I followed individual clues in disconnected lines across the solar system. For example, in the first game, the Orbital Probe Cannon, which contains the coordinates to the Eye of the Universe, was one of the last places I searched because it orbits Giant’s Deep, and this was the last planet I searched its high gravitational pull, dense ocean, thick obscuring fog, and raging tornadoes made me uneasy. The second time I played, it was one of the first places I explored because I was directed by someone on the first planet to talk to Gabbro on Giant’s Deep, who mentioned that something exploded in the atmosphere—the Orbital Probe Cannon. This is just one of many examples, but it gave my experience with the story a very different direction, and the second playthrough actually led me to find more clues that I had not uncovered the first time because of my search style.

Another way that routes change in the game is due to another aspect of hypertexts that Aarseth mentions: their ability to be edited after publication. Aarseth mentions that with traditional texts, “revision after publication is not common, and happens, when it does, only once
in most cases” (Cybertext 81). However, with hypertexts, and cybertexts in general, “[the author] may at any point change or add parts to the text without any reader’s knowledge” (81). This is particularly true with video games, which frequently see content patches, bug fixes, and other editing methods that change previous versions of the game. One puzzle in *Outer Wilds* has quite different solutions based on which version of the game a person originally played. The puzzle requires players to enter a portal in a specific room at a specific time. The original solution to this puzzle required the player to stand outside the room with the puzzle and run into the room, into the portal at the specific time the portal became activated. Later updates placed a cactus in this doorway however, preventing this method from working. Instead, the player had to wait in an enclosed annex inside the room with the portal and rush the portal when it became active. When I first played *Outer Wilds*, I struggled with this puzzle, and when searching for solutions to it, was only able to find answers to the puzzle from earlier versions of the game in which the cactus did not yet occupy the doorway.

The most significant thing about the hypertext and the way it functions is the ergodic aporia and epiphany combination. For Aarseth, the aporia is the emptiness, “an absence of possibility” that drives the hypertext’s user to explore and uncover the text’s secrets. Then, after this exploration, the goal of the hypertext is to create an epiphany that “replaces the aporia”. The aporia is the main drive of *Outer Wilds*, as the creators explained that their original intentions were to create an exploration-based game with no goal besides the exploration itself (NoClip). Though there are aspects of the Nomai’s story that help the player interact with the game world, the Nomai’s story and their eventual extinction functions more like a background hypertext. The story even contains features similar to the links and connections of a hypertext, with highlighted text connecting certain ideas, and a “rumor board” in the ship’s log which connects information
the player finds “like a detective board” (Alex Beachum interviewed by NoClip), creating visual connections between individual links. The database system also prompts the player where they have and have not explored everything to its fullest, encouraging more research, but not overtly guiding the player to specific points. This leads to the slow discovery of the history of the Nomai, leading to the eventual epiphanies of how they died out, why they were present in the solar system in the first place, and why the Protagonist is stuck in the time loop.

The hypertext nature of the Nomai’s story breaks it from linear time. Not only does the content of the story center around time, repetition, and discovery, but the way that this story is presented also uses these features. The discovery has no exact start and no exact end, just a steady flow of information. It is also possible for the dialogue the player discovers to loop; some locations in the game are in contact with other major locations, and because of this, the same conversation or “Nomai white board” will be present in both locations. For example, there are communications between the Nomai working on the Ash Twin Project on the Ash Twin, but also on Giant’s Deep at the laboratories that are sending off materials to the ATP. Then, some conversations from this same lab on Giant’s Deep are also available to find on Brittle Hollow at the observatory, where researchers there are sending materials to Giant’s Deep, and studying the nature of the planet’s swirling tornados. Features like this allow the Nomai’s story to loop in a similar way to the gameplay, calling back to the Nomai’s ultimate goal: the success of the Ash Twin Project and the time loop.

This connection to time is seen through the gameplay mechanics and puzzles in the Nomai’s story as well. The Stranger’s mechanics will be touched on more in their own chapter, but the puzzles in their story are more connected to location or displacement into the augmented world than to time. In the main story of Outer Wilds, the Protagonist solves many of their
problems by waiting or moving quickly, as the solar system gradually changes throughout each twenty-two-minute time loop. Miguel Sicart defines game mechanics as “methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game,” and “core mechanics” are “the essential play activity players perform again and again in a game” (Defining Game Mechanics). To differentiate between core mechanics and other frequently used mechanics, Sicart specifies that a core mechanic is used to “achieve a systemically rewarding end-game state.” By both of these definitions, the mechanics between the core Outer Wilds game and the Echoes of the Eye DLC are different, and the core mechanics seem to fit the themes of time and space in each.

Based on the definition Sicart supplies, I define the core mechanics of the Outer Wilds base game as translating Nomai text, flying the spaceship, exploring, waiting, and dying. It is possible to have variations of these tasks, such as the ability to learn how to meditate from Gabbro, which speeds up the task of waiting, but it does not eradicate it and rather makes it a more accessible mechanic. The most interesting mechanic in my opinion is dying. It serves a vital function, as it is the quickest way for a player to restart the loop if they have failed a puzzle because too much time has passed. Dying also, from a game design perspective allows the world to reset its state so the entropy of the world does not extend beyond what is possible to navigate: if the world did not reset after twenty-two minutes, it might be possible, for example, for Brittle Hollow to completely cease to exist as it is broken apart by its volcanic moon. Unlike most games, dying does not inherently end your gameplay and is, in fact, frequently used as a tool to give the player more time. Instead of ending the game, it allows the player, as Sicart says, to “achieve a systemically rewarding end-game state” (Defining Game Mechanics). While there is always the time loop to be aware of, even in the Echoes of the Eye DLC, it does not have the same relationship with time. To be more specific, dying and waiting are not core mechanics of
the DLC because both dying and waiting actually hinder the player’s ability to move throughout
the environment and create a setback, whereas in the base game, they allow the player to uncover
secrets.

The clearest example of waiting and dying as vital mechanics is evident in the puzzles on
the Hourglass Twins. Ash Twin and Ember Twin orbit each other, and at the start of the twenty-
two-minute time loop, Ash Twin is covered in sand. As the planets orbit each other, this sand
slowly pours into the rocky caverns of the Ember Twin. There are multiple puzzles on these two
planets that require waiting around for sand to rise or repeatedly dying to reset the world in order
to reach certain areas before the sand has covered them. For example, the Sunless City cannot be
fully explored unless there is no sand, so it must be traveled to immediately at the beginning of
the time loop. However, it is also possible to find a fossilized head of an angler fish—an enemy
found inside the Dark Bramble—in the Sunless City, and accessing it requires the player to stand
on top of rising sand, waiting for at least five minutes while the sand rises, and the player
ascends to a previously inaccessible chamber. Furthermore, the entire existence of the Hourglass
Twins, as a metaphor for the shifting of time, connects to the Nomai’s dilemma, as the Ash Twin
Project is at the heart of one of the Hourglass Twins. They are completely steeped in time—
down to the physical location of their time machine in the core of a planet that is emblematic of
the sands of time.

All of the time manipulation present in the Nomai’s story exists for one reason: reaching
the Eye of the Universe. In fact, the Eye is the core of all three narratives throughout *Outer
Wilds*; the Eye is what calls the Nomai and the Strangers to the game’s solar system, and without
the Nomai’s fascination with the Eye, the Nomai would not have constructed the apparatus for
the time loop. Without the inclusion of the Eye, the heat death of the universe would have been
one, final blip in time, not the repetitive death loop it is in the game. Without the Eye and the presence of the Nomai and Strangers in the solar system, the titular *Outer Wilds* Space Program on Timber Hearth would not exist, as their ability to travel space was enabled by remnants of Nomai technology, not technological advancements of the Hearthian’s making. All of this is only possible due to the Eye of the Universe, but what makes the Eye of the Universe such an intriguing force to the Nomai and the Strangers?

The Eye of the Universe is not the formal title of any planetary body or entity but is rather the name the Nomai give to a macroscopically quantum object located in *Outer Wilds’* solar system. The Nomai first heard a signal from the Eye of the Universe and determined that the signal was “older than the universe itself.” The age and seeming impossibility of this signal piqued the Nomai’s curiosity, and they followed the signal to *Outer Wilds’* solar system, where they became trapped after they crashed in the dense branches of the Dark Bramble and were forced to abandon the craft there to create new settlements on the solar system’s other planets. The Nomai’s knowledge of the Eye is limited, as described by the writing left in two Eye Shrines throughout the solar system: “This shrine is a space to reflect on what brought us to this star system: the signal from the Eye. We observed the Eye’s signal in our travels and followed it here to find its source. What we know is this: The source of the signal is older than the universe itself. The rest, we have yet to learn. Enter and open your mind to its possibilities” (*Outer Wilds*, Annapurna Interactive). Besides the knowledge that the Eye exists and is old, the Nomai determine that the Eye contains “macroscopic quantum behavior” and that it has a moon, which they dub the Quantum Moon. Interacting with the Quantum Moon is the closest the Nomai ever get to reaching the Eye of the Universe, as they are never able to determine the Eye’s location before their race is killed. The moon, however, lends them material for research. Studying the
moon and some quantum rock shards that are scattered throughout the solar system, they
determine that the quantum moon and other quantum objects operate under specific quantum
rules:

- A quantum object will collapse into a singularity when being actively observed, so it
  will stop moving and changing characteristics.

- The rule of quantum imaging states that actively observing a photo of a quantum
  object is the same as actively observing a quantum object.

- The rule of quantum entanglement establishes that objects with a close proximity to
  other quantum objects will exhibit quantum elements. This is discovered by the
  Nomai, Coleus, who, while standing on top of a quantum shard, is transported with
  the quantum shard when he and the shard stopped being observed by his research
  partner. This theory is also used to explain why the Quantum Moon is Quantum.

According to Solanum, the last Nomai on the Quantum Moon, “this moon is probably
quantum because its proximity to the Eye made it quantum, the same way the areas
surrounding quantum shards that landed on other planets eventually became quantum
too” (Outer Wilds, Annapurna Interactive). Trees in a grove on Timber Hearth also
move around when they are not consciously observed, because this proximity to a
quantum shard has rendered them quantum.

- The rule of the sixth location states that the quantum moon is capable of moving to
  orbit six different planetary bodies: Timber Hearth, the Hourglass Twins, The Dark
  Bramble, Brittle Hollow, Giant’s Deep, and the Eye of the Universe. The physical
  appearance of the Quantum Moon is altered to mirror that of each planet it is orbiting,
  and because of this, when the Quantum Moon orbits the Eye of the Universe, the
entire moon is covered in quantum rocks, preventing the Protagonist from seeing anything or moving. The rule of the sixth location states that the only way to properly access the Quantum Moon as it orbits the Eye, without being impeded by these quantum shards, is to access it by utilizing a quantum shrine at the north pole of the Quantum Moon.

The Nomai who live in the solar system have created a cultural and scientific practice of pilgrimages to the Quantum Moon, as it is the closest the Nomai are capable of getting to the Eye of the Universe. Despite their research and fascination with the Eye, they never learn what exactly it is and what it has the power to do. “The Eye of the Universe” is simply the name the Nomai give the entity due to its age.

The Nomai never learn the secrets of the Eye, and neither did the Strangers, who heard the Eye’s call long before the Nomai. Both groups referred to the Eye of the Universe with a specific symbol: an empty center and many branching paths reaching outwards. Figure 3.2 shows the Strangers’ version which has many more branching paths and appears more organic, like branching tree limbs, while the Nomai, in Figure 3.3, have a slightly shortened version of this symbol, perhaps due to the fact that the Strangers cut off the Eye’s ability to broadcast its symbol, cutting these symbolic branches short.
Because of the similarities between these images, it is reasonable to believe that this symbol is part of the Eye’s signal or its “call” as some of the Nomai put it (Outer Wilds,
Annapurna Interactive). The Nomai and the Strangers have never had contact with each other but are bound together by their awareness of the Eye. The only way both groups could have near-identical symbols representing the same entity is if the entity itself gave them the symbol. This symbol is also somewhat similar to the actual physical appearance of the Eye, as seen when the Protagonist encounters it at the end of one of the game’s many endings. It is difficult to make out too many details when looking at the Eye because of how dark the space around it is, but it appears to be a large orb with tendrils reaching out from it, appearing almost like cracks in glass. The Eye is surrounded by black and dark purple clouds, sporadically illuminated by lightning.

Fig. 3.4. The Eye of the Universe from Afar from *Outer Wilds*. Windows PC Edition. Annapurna Interactive and Mobius Digital. 2019.
The player only ever gets an external view of the Eye from this side angle, though through cheating and installing modifications that allow the player to move the camera away from the physical location of the character model, it is possible to see the Eye from above. Fig. 3.5. The Eye of the Universe from Above from *Outer Wilds*. Windows PC Edition. Annapurna Interactive and Mobius Digital. 2019.

The design of the cracks along the clouded surface of the Eye appear extremely similar to the sign that the Strangers and the Nomai both utilize, and the flashing lights beneath the clouds create the appearance of a negative space at the center of the Eye, as opposed to the clouded planet-shaped orb shown from the side angle. The Eye’s signal, echoing out across the universe, is not a message but simply a proliferation of itself.

Even at the end of the game, the Protagonist does not have any more knowledge than the Nomai had concerning the true nature of the Eye of the Universe. The Protagonist is simply told
that the Eye has quantum capabilities, and that it has never been consciously observed, but
anything else is a mystery. The Eye of the Universe exists outside the bounds of what the Nomai
understand, outside of the bounds of time, a system which it does not seem to follow. If it were
possible for the Eye’s signal to predate the Universe, then the Eye must predate “time” itself as it
is understood, as the Eye had to exist before anything else. It also must, to some extent, exist
after everything else, as the Protagonist’s final actions create a new Universe, and for the Eye to
be able to create this new Universe, it must also be there. So, the Eye outlasts the dying Universe
and also, because of its existence in the dying universe, predates the next. Because of the Eye’s
omnipresence and existence outside of the Nomai’s understanding of time and space, I find Alain
Badiou’s concept of the void particularly applicable. For Badiou, the void represents what does
not exist in a certain situation, or “what eludes representation by the state of the situation”
(Badiou “Ethics” xxxviii). He uses the term ‘void’ “rather than ‘nothing’ because the ‘nothing’ is
the name of the void correlative to the global effect of the structure” (“Being” 56). The term
‘nothing’ still falls inside the structure, but the void represents “the failure” of the system,
something the system does not, and cannot account for.

The Eye of the Universe, like the void Badiou describes “does not present anything”
(“Being” 86) besides echoes of itself, as the DLC title aptly states. Its message says nothing, just
creates a ripple of its effect throughout space. Before the Strangers limit the reach of its call, it
seems far-reaching. Badiou posits that the void is omnipresent and that “the void, to which
nothing belongs, is by this very fact included in everything” (“Being” 86).

The void is “neither local nor global, but scattered all over, nowhere and everywhere”
(Badiou “Being 55), much like the Eye of the Universe itself. It is also “thematized…according
to the presentation of its errancy,” as it is recognized because of its status outside of what the
Strangers and the Nomai see as possible. The Eye’s simultaneous omnipresence combined with its inexistence does not compute the Nomai, who understand the universe as one bound by time, and specific laws of physics. This interpretation of the void as something that exists outside of our knowledge is somewhat similar to how Slavoj Žižek describes quantum physics. Žižek explains that quantum mechanics are like levels in a video game. It is not that we do not have the knowledge to discover certain things, but that these things were simply not programmed into the game: “it’s not our limitation, it’s the unfinished character of reality itself” (Žižek). The Nomai cannot find the Eye of the Universe because it exists outside of the rules of their game’s programming, so to speak.

What prevents the Nomai from reaching the Eye of the Universe is their inability to fully break away from the existing laws of time, and their attempt to apply their own understand of time and space onto the Eye. In creating the quantum rules, the Nomai attempt to apply their understanding of the world to quantum objects which clearly reject previous laws of physics. It is only possible for the Protagonist to reach the Eye when they are able to break free from the standard passage of time, allowing them to experience time more like the Eye itself might. The Nomai fail to achieve this. Their story is immortalized in the writing throughout the solar system, which, while it may have many various orders of reading, ultimately leads the player on a repetitive loop. The story tells the player that the Nomai are trapped, how they arrived, and what their goal is, but as they never achieve this goal, the Nomai text throughout the solar system just acts as an echo of the Nomai’s failure to break free from the cycle.
The Strangers, the Anthropocene, and Conservative Fear of Utopia

While the Nomai’s story is one tied to time, the Strangers’ tale focuses on space and the destruction of space due to the Strangers’ actions. The *Echoes of the Eye* Downloadable Content (DLC) carries themes of destruction and decay and is especially centered on environmental collapse caused by the Strangers. Every environment the Strangers interact with collapses due to their interference, evocative of the concept of the Anthropocene. Their response to their own destructive tendencies is one of fear, and they retreat into a false world that is not fully separated from the real, as it is tethered to it. The Strangers’ story establishes that there is no space, real or imaginary, that can hide us from entropy.

The *Echoes of the Eye* DLC was released September 28, 2021 and is an addition to the story of *Outer Wilds* that takes place during the same time as the base game. Effectively, it adds a new location to the game. In order to incorporate the new location without breaking the events of the base game, the events of the DLC take place on a large space station called “The Stranger.” This space station is cloaked, so it is invisible to the player unless it happens to pass in front of the sun. The Protagonist first locates it by flying out to a deep-space radio probe that has been taking pictures of the solar system. There, the Protagonist finds that, at a certain angle, a mysterious object passes in front of the sun. The Protagonist can then fly directly to this object and discover that it is the Stranger. This must be done early on in the time loop, as about halfway through the time loop, the Stranger seems to sense the increased solar activity from the sun and activates propulsion to fly the entire Stranger far out of the solar system, so the player’s location is displaced without disrupting the functionality of the game’s core planets.

In the DLC, the Protagonist discovers the Stranger and begins to explore, uncovering the secrets of the alien race that had once lived in the ring world. Because the alien race is referred to
as “the Strangers.” I will be referring to the space station/ring world in which the DLC takes place as “the ring world” from now on, as the inside of the space station forms a ring, where the walkable area of the station is on the outside of the ring. If the player stands in one location and looks directly upwards, they can see across to another location on the ring. The Protagonist discovers that the Strangers came to the solar system even before the Nomai did, and they too were searching for the Eye of the Universe. They had heard the Eye’s call and traveled to find it but destroyed their home planet in order to build the ring world that allowed them to reach the Eye’s solar system.

Once the Strangers arrived in the solar system, one of their elders scanned the Eye of the Universe with a communication device and discovered that the Eye had the potential to cause destruction. Because the Nomai translation tool that is used in the main game is calibrated to translate only the language of the Nomai, all of the events that tell the tale of the Strangers are visually depicted using slide reels. For this reason, it is difficult to cite these events because they are images, and because they are slideshows, it is difficult to show a sequence of events as opposed to one static image after the next.
Figure 4.1 shows the elder discovering the destructive abilities of the Eye. The red light emanating from the Eye is destroying the planets of the solar system. In response to this, the Elder believes that the Strangers have made a grave mistake in coming to the solar system, and all of the Strangers begin to hate the Eye.

The key issue here is that the Strangers have already destroyed their home world in order to create the ring world, so they have nowhere to return. They mourn the loss of this home planet and even create a song, the “Elegy for the Rings,” in which they sing about the loss of their planet and the large, ringed planet that was visible from it.
Figure 4.2 depicts the remains of the Strangers’ home planet as they build the ring world from its materials. The atmosphere is destroyed, and the ringed planet in the distance is barely visible through the thick smog caused by the environmental destruction. Most of the slide reels that depict these images have been burned or hidden away digitally in the false world, so the Strangers do not have to face the horrors they enacted on their home planet.

The Strangers’ fear and sudden turn against the Eye of the Universe can be likened to Karl Mannheim’s concept of the conservative utopia. Mannheim differentiates between ideology and utopia, stating that ideologies “are the situationally transcendent ideas which never succeed de facto in the realization of their projected contents” (175), while utopias also “transcend the social situation[... ,] but they are not ideologies [...] as [utopias] succeed through counteractivity in transforming the existing historical reality into one more in accord with their own
conceptions” (176). For Mannheim, wishful thinking is not enough to be utopian. It also must find a means to actually transcend the status quo. He then lists various forms of utopian mentality, including chiliasm, the liberal-humaitarian mentality, the conservative mentality, and the socialist reality. Mannheim finds that, as the conservatives are comfortable with their world state as it is, they do not have a utopia in the same way that other mentalities do: “They tend, under such conditions of existence, to regard the environment as part of a natural world-order which, consequently, presents no problems” (206). Instead of a utopia that creates innovative ideas in opposition to the current structure of society, the conservative mentality fosters a “counter-utopia which serves as a means of self-orientation and defence” (207). For the Strangers, this is their retreat into the familiar and their violent rejection of the Eye of the Universe.

After learning of the Eye’s destructive powers, the Strangers tear down shrines they had previously constructed in worship of the Eye and spend their time recreating the world they destroyed.
Figure 4.3 shows the Strangers gathered around a church-like building dedicated to the Eye of the Universe, cheering as they burn it to the ground. Their actions here are defensive against a feared ideology that the Eye represents to them, though this ideology is not one that the Strangers have ever actually seen to exist. The Strangers only have the destructive portents from their Elder’s vision to react to, not an actual system of being. Their opposition to the Eye falls in line with Mannheim’s categories, as he establishes that the conservative mentality does not rise out of an inherent belief system, but rather a reaction against “opposing theories” (207). “In its original form, conservative mentality was, as we have mentioned, not concerned with ideas. It was its liberal opponent who, so to speak, forced it into this arena of conflict” (208). The Strangers combat the reality of their situation by hiding within a reflection of their old world. When the Protagonist encounters them, all the Strangers are long dead—they have been in the solar system for longer than the Nomai, and when the Nomai entered the solar system, the Hearthians had not yet evolved past a tadpole state and would not do so until long after the death of the Nomai—and continue to live perpetually in this dream world.
The only thing that can disconnect the Strangers from their dream world is a real-world interference with the green flame in the device that connects them to the dream world, and this inevitably happens. Figure 4.4 shows the corpses of the Strangers as they hold the devices, and the green flame at the center of the room which keeps them tied to the world.

The Protagonist also holds a device used to enter the dream world. When the Protagonist encounters the ring world, it is decaying and breaking down due to the neglect of the Strangers, who have abandoned reality for their manufactured landscape. A dam breaks, flooding many lower sections of the town, snuffing flames and causing buildings to take structural damage. Two of the towers that hold the dreaming Strangers fall, and the flames are extinguished. When the Protagonist’s flame is extinguished in the dream world, they simply reawaken in their body, because their body is still alive.
As seen in Figure 4.4, the Strangers have spent so long away from the real world that their physical bodies have wasted away, leaving behind leathery, hollowed out skeletons, clutching to the lanterns that keep them bound to their dream. When their lights are put out, they have no physical form to return to, and their desperate screams can be heard throughout the dream world as they finally meet their death.

A theme throughout the Stranger’s story is that of neglect, environmental collapse, and a retreat into the past or the familiar. Instead of learning to live anew once they have destroyed their chance to return home and discover the destructive capabilities of the Eye of the Universe, the Strangers retreat. This retreat leads to the neglect of the ring world they have created which, repeating the cycle, slowly decays as it has been ignored by the Strangers in favor of hiding in the past.

One of the key factors to the way Outer Wilds manifests utopianism is its depictions of responses to current events. The Strangers’ tale relates specifically to Anthropocenic climate change and similar trends towards disaster that we are facing in the modern day. Outer Wilds contains many depictions of the relationship between nature and those that inhabit it. The Nomai are cautious as they interact with the solar system, as they are aware of their potential long-term impacts on the ecosystem. In the gameplay, the player is constantly at war not only with time but also with the natural occurrences of the planets they encounter. Brittle Hollow slowly falls apart as it is bombarded with meteors from its volcanic moon. When traversing Giant’s Deep, the player must stay near gravity centers that prevent the twisters on the planet from flinging them into space. A parasitic seed from the Dark Bramble has made its way to Timber Hearth, implying that, even if the sun did not destroy the solar system, the Hearthian’s home planet will eventually be swallowed by the Dark Bramble.
With these depictions, Outer Wilds balances the entropic decay of the universe with the powerful and sometimes destructive forces of nature. However, all of these events are not caused by the Hearthians or the Nomai. The Stranger’s situation is unique because it is the only story of decay present in the game caused by a specific group.

As Outer Wilds itself was released in 2019 and the Echoes of the Eye DLC in 2021, it is possible to apply the concept of the anthropocene to the game. In the face of seemingly unstoppable climate change on earth, many people turn to nihilism, pessimism, or longing for times long past. This is what the Strangers do as well, as they create a false world to return to instead of taking the more difficult steps to fix their mistakes. Mannheim establishes that, while liberal utopias are focused on the future, while dismissing the past, the “conservative mode of experiencing time found the best corroboration of its sense of determinateness in discovering the significance of the past, in the discovery of time as the creator of value” (211). Instead of looking forward, the conservative mindset leads conservatives to find more value in things that have been around for a while than in newer things. The conservatives “turn [their attention] to the past” and “attempt[...] to rescue it from oblivion” (212), adopting the mindset that something old and traditional has more inherent value than something that is new and has the potential to break existing paradigms. For this reason, conservatives like the Strangers may find immense value and pride in restoring or enforcing ideas of the past in objection to ideas of the present or future. For the Strangers, their rejection of the Eye is a rejection of a new concept, and their continued neglect of the ring world they created is a rejection of the new world. Even though it is made of the remains of their old planet, this does not stop the Strangers from looking backwards and rejecting this new ring world in favor of a return to the old and familiar, which was around for much longer and, therefore, imbued with greater value.
The world the Strangers create could be compared to many things: a dream, a simulation, a digital landscape. It is physically accessed through sleep and the Stranger’s connection to a device with the green flame, but the world itself is digitally constructed. However, this dream world cannot qualify as a true utopia, as it is not fully separated from the real world. First, in its design, it is a direct reflection of the world the Strangers used to live on but destroyed. They attempt to return to their home through this, stepping backwards rather than forwards in time. They also attempt to reclaim or reform a space that has been lost. Though Mannheim’s categories are focused on time, I believe this manifests in the Strangers in terms of space. The ideology of the Eye, or the call of the Eye, is what caused the Strangers to destroy their home planet, and they later learn of the Eye’s destructive capabilities to other spaces. So, to counteract what they believe the perspective of the Eye to be, the Strangers construct a device to suppress the Eye’s call so that it cannot later be found by other travelers, and then they attempt to undo steps they have done in the past in the artificial recreation of their home world, rejecting any ideology that looks away from the past.

When the Strangers learn of the destructive power of the Eye, they are also shown a vision of, after the death of the current world, new growth or rebirth.
In this vision, the Elder is seen with the vision shown over their head. There is a skull of one of the Strangers, long-dead, but now overgrown with new plant life. The slides just before this showed the rotting away of the Stranger, and the desolation left behind from the Eye’s power. The Strangers never seem to acknowledge the potential for new growth and life. Just as the Nomai before them, the Strangers are incapable of seeing the Eye as something that exists outside the bounds of time and space. The Strangers only see the destruction of space as a result of the Eye but cannot imagine that there could be new space or new life created after this event, and so, unable to rationalize something that is beyond their understanding of temporality or space.

This desire to return to their past reality could be linked to Bloch and Benjamin’s theories on dreams, which were ultimately influenced by Freud. For Freud, the desire to return is linked to trauma, and how an individual might attempt “to revive the trauma, to remember the forgotten experience [...] to make it real’” (Goldstein 51).
This is likely what the Strangers are doing, as their simulated universe is a reflection of their home world. Benjamin and Bloch also borrow from Marx, “who equated revolutionary consciousness not only with awakening from the dream but realizing it” (Goldstein 53). The Strangers not only live indefinitely in this dream, but they also are aggressive towards anything that could disrupt their dream state. When the Protagonist enters the dream world, if they are seen by a Stranger, they are chased down until the Stranger catches the Protagonist, lifts them into the air, and snuffs their green flame, returning them to the real world. So, the Strangers are not only stuck in the dream, but they willfully resign themselves to it, not becoming fully aware of what the dream represents in their own psyche, and, as they are dead and have no bodies to return to outside of the dream, they are incapable of waking from it.

Bloch’s idea of the night-dream versus the daydream illuminates the purpose of the Strangers’ dream: “the night dream is submerged in the memories of the past while the daydream projects itself into the future. Daydreams are ‘dreams of a better life’” (Bloch The Principle of Hope 115). Both dreams are based on wishes or desires, but “the night-dream moves in the forgotten and the repressed, the daydream in what has never been experienced” (Bloch The Principle of Hope 115). The dream the Strangers have created is the night dream, stuck in the past and unable to move forward, similarly to how their conservative utopian response looks to the past. Both the night-dream and the daydream though are responses to the nightmare. The nightmare is what causes the night-dream, or the conservative reaction within Mannheim’s categories, to occur. According to Freud, the nightmare is “negative wish fulfillment [... where] the content of the wish is destroyed and turned into its very opposite, causing anxiety and despair” (Goldstein 62). The night-dream is a response to the nightmare, a repressive one that, instead of propelling forward to a more positive future, turns backwards and hides. For the Strangers, the nightmare, would be any interaction with the Eye of the Universe.
Once they discover the potentially destructive power of the Eye, the Strangers go out of their way to ensure that they do not face the consequences of its discovery. They create a masking device to block the Eye’s signal, seen in Figure 5. When one of their own kind briefly allows the signal to play again so that the Nomai can find it, they imprison him for all eternity, entrapping him forever in a confined portion of the dream world without the ability to extinguish his flame and die naturally.

They then attempt to go back to the time before their knowledge of the Eye exists by retreating into their dream world. Benjamin and Bloch disagree on whether or not waking from the dream is the best method towards utopia: “In Benjamin, dreaming is something from which we need to awaken. The dream is repressive while awakening is emancipatory. With Bloch, on the other hand, it is only the night-dream that is repressive; the daydream, in contrast, is emancipatory” (Goldstein 62). While they may not agree on whether or not the act of dreaming itself needs to end, through both of their theories, they agree that the type of dreaming the Strangers partake in is repressive.
The Strangers’ manufactured world, then, is flawed and cannot be truly utopian because of their dreaming and their repressive connection to the world as status quo. The utopia is unattainable for the Strangers because of their intentional retreat back into the “repressive” dream state and to a location of the past, rendering them tied to the present and the inherently binding and destructive nature of their present society, unable to move towards the future. Mannheim states that because of the conservative desire to cling to the past, it gains a “presentness and immediacy,” which render the past “an actual experience” rather than a far-off concept to look back upon (212). Waking from the dream is also impossible for the Strangers, as their physical bodies have died as a result of their desire to return to what they have destroyed. They are physically incapable of ever removing themselves from the dream. There is no space for them to inhabit, nowhere to return.

To connect the idea of critical utopian process to the Strangers’ artificial world, I claim that the Strangers have attempted to replicate their ideal form of society, one from the past rather than seeing utopia as a process of moving forward. The Strangers, to use Mannheim’s terms, are clinging to an ideology, rather than a utopia, as it does not reject the status quo, and this manifests as a conservative utopia that violently rejects any potential change the Eye of the Universe would enact. One Stranger, known as the Prisoner, attempts to fight against the actions of the conservative majority and briefly deactivates the device that suppresses the call of the Eye. Because of this, he is imprisoned and not allowed to experience the reflection of the old world as the other Strangers do. The Prisoner still exists in the dream world, though he is confined underneath the world; the part of the dream world that the Prisoner is in is accessed through glitches or phasing through walls in certain areas, as though the player is breaking the engine of a video game to access it, and the Prisoner is only capable of being freed through similar game-breaking actions,
as the Strangers destroyed the standard key to the Prisoner’s cell so he might never be freed. Because of this, the Prisoner is stuck in the same deathless state as the other Strangers but is unable to experience his home world. The Prisoner is framed as sympathetic to the Protagonist, as he quickly befriends them if and when the Protagonist frees him from his Prison. His behavior is contrasted heavily by the other Strangers, who will aggressively screech and chase down the Protagonist if they see them in the dream world and snuff their green flame to forcibly kick them from the world. After the Prisoner is freed, he leaves his cell, and walks into a pond just outside, extinguishing his own flame and killing himself. The game frames the Strangers’ actions as fueled by fear, and cruel to the Prisoner, who was the only member of the Strangers to go against the status quo in order to allow others the chance to see the Eye. The game indicates the imperfections of the Strangers’ utopia to show the player that the world the Strangers have created is not a successful utopia at all, but a sad reflection of what once was.

Just as the Nomai were limited by their perception of time, the Strangers are limited by their understanding of space, and their need to reach backward for old, familiar spaces instead of moving forward towards new horizons. The Strangers obsession with the past, and not the future, is what causes them to cling to old spaces. Their inability to imagine a future that is “other”, and not simply a continuation of the present, to branch outside of their established world, limits their spatial horizons as well as their progression through time, and so they revert to the past, and to old, familiar landscapes, whether those be real or imaginary.
Diegetic Music of *Outer Wilds* as Utopian

The two previous chapters address utopias that are, in the context of the game world, utopias of the past. This final chapter covers the final utopia of the game, one that is only possible after considering the two lessons learned from the previous utopias: there is no time, and there is no space for a utopia to inhabit in the game’s current world system. From the Protagonist’s perspective, these other events are background history to their task at hand, and though these tales directly influence the gameworld in which the Protagonist exists, they are not stories with which the Protagonist directly interacts. The present situation of the heat death of the universe sets the Protagonist’s context apart from that of both the Stranger’s and the Nomai’s self-inflicted isolation.

The final utopia of *Outer Wilds* follows the Protagonist’s actions in one of the many possible endings of the game. In this ending, the Protagonist learns from the Nomai’s writings throughout the solar system that they can travel to the Eye of the Universe and that it has never been consciously observed before. Following the clues that the Nomai leave behind, it is possible for the Protagonist to find the coordinates of the Eye of the Universe and use the power source for the game’s time loop as a power source for the Nomai’s long-abandoned vessel. This allows the Protagonist to warp to the Eye of the Universe and enter it, where they become the first creature consciously to observe it. Once inside the Eye, their own perception of the world shapes how the Eye appears, and they see many reflections of familiar locations, such as Timber Hearth. In the end, they are able to create a new universe to take the place of the previous one, though it is not a fully formed new society that pops into existence, but the beginnings of potentially new life that nobody in the main game ever gets to see. This utopia completely erases the current
situation and creates new time and space for the utopia to inhabit, because there is no way to salvage the universe as it is. The universe as it must die so something new can be born.

The utopian attempts by the Strangers and the Nomai are limited in their ties to their social and cultural identities. Neither group leaves behind their existing frameworks in their pursuit of utopia. The Protagonist, beginning their story as the world is ending, has few options: continue to live indefinitely in the loop, end the loop and die, or end the loop and create something radically different. Their social and cultural context does not hinder their path to utopia, as they know there is no way to salvage it regardless of the choice they make. The Stranger’s fear hinders them from seeing the potentially benevolent power of the Eye, and they retreat into the familiarity of their destroyed home world through the creation of their artificial landscape. The Nomai leave behind their traditional nomadic and non-intrusive practices, but this causes in-fighting between traditionalists and progressive parties within their culture; they are not collectively ready to find the Eye of the Universe, to leave behind their previous culture and move forward into the new. With the impending heat death of the universe, the Protagonist is placed in a unique situation where they are capable of reaching towards a “radically different way of being,” as they know there is no other option besides death. As Moylan puts it, they are “in a time of deep historical change,” which allows them to make choices towards utopia that otherwise would not be possible.

In *Outer Wilds*, the process of reaching utopia is only discovered after intensive exploration throughout the solar system, and the arrangement of many factors into a specific order, most likely over multiple time loops. Before the Protagonist can take the steps to complete the loop, they must discover that the warp core from the Vessel is damaged, and the only other warp core that could power the Vessel, allowing the Protagonist to warp to the Eye of
the Universe, is the core that powers the Ash Twin Project; the only way to reach the Eye of the Universe is to remove the time loop’s power source, and risk permanent death for the first time in the game.

After the realization that to travel to the Eye, the time loop must end, the Protagonist also must be sure they have the coordinates to the Eye of the Universe by visiting the Orbital Probe Cannon Tracking Module that sank below Giant’s Deep’s oceans. As long as, at some point, the player has visited the Tracking Module throughout the entire game, the coordinates will be remembered when they are necessary. Then, the Protagonist must travel to the Hourglass Twins to reach the core of the Ash Twin, where the Ash Twin Project is located. They will collect the warp core that powers the Ash Twin Project, which is needed to replace the damaged warp core in the Nomai’s broken Vessel. From there, the Protagonist sets off to the heart of the Dark Bramble, where the Nomai’s Vessel has been stuck ever since they first crash-landed into the solar system. The Protagonist replaces the broken warp core with the core from the Ash Twin Project, inputs the coordinates, and is warped to the Eye of the Universe. At first, the Eye appears as a series thick purple fog column that occasionally flash in color, and the Protagonist descends into the fog. Then, they appear to be flung back to the observatory at the beginning of the game, where they first are linked to the Nomai’s time loop device, and where they first receive the launch codes before their inaugural space flight. They exit the observatory to see thousands of stars around them, which begin to explode and burn out until they are enveloped in total darkness. In the darkness, they receive a signal and are led to a quantum reflection of themself. The sequence closes with a length segment where the Protagonist finds themself in a tree-filled grove not dissimilar to the environment of their home planet, where they must follow signals that lead them to quantum reflections of the other Travelers that they have met.
throughout their journey. Once all of the Travelers are gathered, the Protagonist must ask them to perform one final song together around the campfire to send off the old universe, and out of this song and the community around the campfire a new universe forms to take the place of the current one after its death. In the final scene of the game, the Protagonist leaps into the smoke created from the campfire and is then floating in space, watching the sun explode in blistering white light for one final time. Their visor is cracked, and the light approaches them, consuming everything. As the Protagonist dies, grandiose music plays, and the world is reborn.

The actual utopia is the new universe, which is briefly shown to the player (not the Protagonist) in the final cutscene post-credits, 14.2 billion years after the events of the game. The player is able to see the world that the Protagonist has created and even the silhouettes of the new race of creatures that has evolved in the solar system. The image is the utopia but is secondary to the experience of the process that is given to the player through *Outer Wilds*’ gameplay. The image of the new universe remains impactful, but it is less important and much less emphasized than the drawn-out act of the universe’s creation. The actual image of the utopia is static and unmoving, physically shown on the screen for only a short time after the credits, while the sequence in which the Protagonist uses the Eye’s quantum power to create the utopia can be as long as the player wants it to be while they exhaust dialog options with the Travelers and potentially delay the inevitable end of the universe. Usually, this sequence takes about ten minutes and is possible only after the many hours of gameplay beforehand, which allow the Protagonist to have the knowledge necessary to reach the Eye of the Universe. The final image is there to show the player what the Protagonist’s actions have resulted in, but the narrative emphasis is on the creation of the utopia, not the utopia itself.
This focus on the actions that result in the utopia rather than the presentation of the utopia itself is an example of the critical utopian emphasis on process over place. Moylan explains that in critical utopian works, there is “an awareness of the limitations of the utopian tradition, so that these texts reject Utopia as blueprint while preserving it as dream… [critical utopias] dwell on the conflict between the originary world and the utopian society opposed to it so that the process of social change is more directly articulated” (Becoming Utopian 30). These works “center more on the dynamics of the utopian process itself[...] thus, the critical utopia emerges as a ‘meditation on action rather than system’” (Moylan Becoming Utopian 30). The video game format in general lends itself to focusing on action rather than a fixed state or system, but Outer Wilds especially ensures that there is little focus on the final utopian state by never allowing the Protagonist to see it. It is only relevant to the player.

Though the utopia is created by the Protagonist alone, it is based on their perception of the world and the type of environment and people that have had a significant impact on them throughout their life. For this reason, the Eye manifests as a reflection of Timber Hearth, and the Protagonist interacts with quantum reflections of members of their own community, specifically the other Outer Wilds Ventures Space Travelers who are positioned on the other planets throughout the game. The Protagonist does not make the utopia alone, but with the assistance of their community and with the utopian power of their final song played around the campfire.

The importance of community as a central theme is clear from the beginning of the game. The Protagonist is a nameless vessel for the player to act through while experiencing the world, allowing the player to discover new things while also being immersed in the community of the game. The Hearthians treat the Protagonist with warm familiarity when they first venture throughout the village on Timber Hearth. Still, despite this familiarity, the Protagonist is never
given any personality or role in society besides that of being a new astronaut for the titular Outer Wilds Space Program who helped invent the translation device used throughout the game to read Nomai text. The lack of concern the game shows with creating a role for the main character emphasizes everything *around* this character. From a formal perspective, the main character functions as a means for the player to interact with the story as a blank slate with no assumed role or goal, which is increasingly common in roleplaying games and other first-person games where the player may easily see the player character simply as an extension of the self.

The journey through Timber Hearth’s village serves a dual purpose, allowing the player to become familiar with the core mechanics of the game while also emphasizing the sense of community that the Protagonist has been raised in. This stroll through the town acts as a tutorial to the mechanics used throughout the game, but it also serves to show the Protagonist (and the player) the town from which they come. The player is able to talk to every Hearthian in the village, giving them different insight on village life, and learning charming anecdotes about themself or others. It is a natural introduction to the game that does not rely too heavily on forced exposition and talks to the player as though these are things, they are already familiar with, while sprinkling in tutorial aspects along the way.

They are able to play hide and seek with some local children, adding a playful element to the tutorial, but also teaching the player the vital mechanic of using the signalscope to search for various sound signals throughout the game. The Protagonist can also help repair some old mining equipment at the behest of an old mentor, proving they are truly ready to blast off into space while also teaching the player how to manage the zero-gravity and spaceship repair elements of the game. Every Hearthain the player interacts with is ecstatic for their return, and some even encourage the player to fill them in on their exploits when they return from their
voyage. During this first walkthrough, the inhabitants of the village and the player are completely unaware of the supernova that is only twenty-two minutes away, so when the sun explodes after this idyllic and uplifting walk through town, growing steadily more familiar and attached to the village and its inhabitants, it is particularly impactful.

The village in which the Protagonist lives is built in a crater on Timber Hearth and is mostly built of wood from the tall pine trees in the area. It is relatively rudimentary as far as technology goes, save for the salvaged bits of Nomai technology that the Hearthians have grafted onto their own technology. The town seems to be made up of manual laborers, those who cut down trees, work in the mines, and even work with the space program to construct new ships. In “Who Put All These Banjos in my Sci-fi Game?” Polygon, an entertainment news source mostly focused on video games, questions the connections between individualism, blue-collar themes, and the use of folk music in video games. They mention that in *Outer Wilds* there are “blue-collar aesthetics and characters… being an astronaut is a blue-collar job. You’re also an archaeologist. And an alien, but all of these things are imbued with a homey, down to Timber Hearth feel. It’s not a shiny, Star Trek future: it’s banjo-playing space explorers and rocket ships that are liable to give you splinters.”

There are no other depictions of class in *Outer Wilds*, no white-collar people who organize or profit off of the actions of blue-collar workers, no elites, and no unemployment. In fact, there does not seem to be a monetary system that rewards people for their blue collar-work. They do it to help the community and to further their exploration, but not for explicit financial benefit: they do not have to work, they want to work. The model of community and labor presented in the Hearthians is a model of unalienated labor, and the scenic depiction of Timber Hearth itself is reminiscent of William Morris’s ideology. William Morris was a socialist writer
and novelist, whose aversion to industrialism was particularly well-highlighted in his 1890 novel *News from Nowhere*. In *News From Nowhere*, Morris travels to the distant future, where a revolution has caused significant change to society’s structure:

In this future England, most of London has disappeared to be replaced by fields and gardens: the distinction between town and country has been abolished. Villages remain, with communal meeting places, and markets where produce is brought for distribution, but no money is used; one simply asks for what one wants[...] The ugliness of industrialism has been superseded by an ecologically sustainable system largely based on craft production. [...] The central theme is of work as pleasure, and the separation between mental and manual labor has been overcome (Levitas “The Education of Desire” 124-125).

The Hearthians work for pleasure, not out of a need to uphold a system of production, and this allows for a sense of rest in the first walkthrough of Timber Hearth. The Protagonist is not reprimanded for their leisurely stroll through town, and none of the town’s inhabitants complain about work at any point throughout the game. In fact, they are enthusiastic about their work, and share this excitement with the Protagonist.

Initially, I thought that the lack of class in *Outer Wilds* was a troubling omission. How could *Outer Wilds* be utopian with a distinct lack of breaking free from capitalism? Then, I found the concept of “symbolic gratification.” Jameson describes how, in science fiction in the 1950s, there was rampant depictions of a specific type of scientist, one who

does not do *real* work, yet he has power and crucial significance; his remuneration is not monetary, or at the very least money seems no object; there’s something fascinating about his laboratory (the homework shop magnified into institutional status, a
combination of factory and clinic), about the way he works nights (he is not bound by routine or by the eight hour day); his intellectual operations themselves are caricatures of the way the non-intellectual imagines brainwork and book knowledge to be. There is, moreover, the suggestion of a return to older modes of work organization, to the more personal and psychological satisfying world of the guilds, in which the older scientist is the master and the younger one the apprentice. [...] (Jameson *The Ideologies of Theory* 17).

This concept of the scientist, whose mode of working was wholly different from contemporary society, was, as Jameson explains, not really *about* the scientist, but was “a distorted reflection of the 1950s male feelings and dreams about work, alienated and nonalienated: it is a wish fulfillment that takes as its object a vision of ideal work, or work Herbert Marcuse would call “libidinally gratifying work” (*The Ideologies of Theory* 17). This scientist, then, is like the Protagonist, a tool through which the story is possible, a “pre-condition only,” and functions as a version of what Jameson calls “symbolic gratification.” The scientist is “not [attached] to the events of the story” specifically, but rather the scientific context of the story

With *Outer Wilds*, I believe that this depiction of a society that works when it wants to work, has a community-based system in which everyone is working to better their society on the whole, and does not have capitalistic endeavors of power or control, is symbolic gratification. The presence of unalienated labor in the Hearthians is not, then, a departure from utopian commentary on class but a symbolic gratification of the desire to work, create, and thrive in a community model not tied to ideals of profit or upward mobility. The creators of *Outer Wilds* emphasize that the only reason for the player to explore is “to satiate their own curiosity,” that the goal is to “gain knowledge, and not like, to conquer planets. [It’s] our ideal version of real-
world space exploration” (Alex Beachum interviewed by NoClip). The model of unalienated labor seen in Timber Hearth’s culture, the Protagonist has no direct incentives to exploration and experiences no reprimand if they choose not to explore as well. The free-roam nature of the game makes it possible for the player, if they so choose, to stay on Timber Hearth after receiving the launch codes; they can sit in front of the campfire for twenty minutes and cook marshmallows until the sun explodes, and the game does not punish one for this. Both the culture of the society as well as the gameplay rewards doing something for the sake of doing it without incentive or punishment.

Beachum also emphasizes that, even from a game design perspective, “it’s not supposed to feel like a player centric game” (NoClip). Instead, things happen to the player, but the world “doesn’t revolve around them” Loan Vernau, the game’s co-creator, also emphasizes one of the main points of the game: “all science is important, it’s all meaningful, even if it’s just to answer a question, you never know where it might get you. It’s worth it.” The structure of the game and its setting are structured to encourage exploration for the sake of exploration, not for any benefit. And, because the game was released during a time of increased worker exploitation, low pay for jobs, record breaking corporation profits while workers get the short end of the stick, this depiction of a society that works together as one could very easily be understood as a reflection of the desires from a break of real working-class life, similar to the depiction of the scientist in the 1950s. From a video game perspective, this was present with large corporations creating big name games, referred to in the gaming community as Triple A games. Many of these games, such as CD Projekt Red’s Cyberpunk 2077 (2020) features “months of crunch” (Hall) in which workers were forced to work abnormally long hours in order to ensure the game was released on time, but despite this crunch, they game was released with a multitude of bugs that often
rendered the game unplayable. Similarly, the popular battle royale game *Fortnite* (2017) featured anywhere from 70-100 hour weeks during crunch in order to ensure the game’s continued success (Campbell). Stepping outside the sphere of games, during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, wages have stagnated for many workers, and “despite rising inflation, major U.S. corporations are reporting record profits” due to “price gouging” (Solman and Koromvokis). With the stress and exploitation of the current economic situation, it seems that the form of labor seen in *Outer Wilds* is a form of symbolic gratification.

Part of the escapism and symbolic gratification in *Outer Wilds* comes in the form of leisure. The characters in the game are able to settle down and stop work at any time they choose, and for the Travelers, the other astronauts who travel the solar system like the protagonist, their primary form of leisure is settling down in front of a campfire and playing an instrument. Tying back to the theme of labor, almost all of the music that relates to the Hearthians is folk music, which has historically been tied to black, working-class culture (Polygon “Who Put All These Banjos”). The folk music and instruments used in the Hearthian’s music reflects back to the bucolic serenity of Timber Hearth’s village. Additionally, folk music is traditionally performed and passed down by small groups, a detail which is reflected in the Traveler’s group song in the game’s final sequence. The choice in musical instruments for the Hearthians is distinct from the more electrical sounding music of the Nomai and the warbling, haunting strings and vocals featured in the Strangers’ musical tracks. But how does this musical aspect tie into utopianism?

In Ruth Levitas’s *Utopia as Method*, she addresses Ernst Bloch’s argument “that music is the most utopian of cultural forms ‘by virtue of its so immediately human capacity of expression’” (Levitas 41). For Bloch, utopia can be achieved through music because of its
inherent ties to humanity, emotion, and expression. Music is used specifically to evoke emotion throughout *Outer Wilds*. As the composer of the soundtrack states, “the overall approach was making sure that music only played during emotionally important segments of gameplay. I didn’t want it to turn into ‘musical wallpaper’ where the score is only chugging along in the background and ends up being an annoyance over time” (Vitelli, interviewing Prahlow). An example of this takes place in the beginning sequence of the game, where the player wakes up and begins to wander the village of Timber Hearth. An aptly titled song called “Timber Hearth” plays while the player is introduced to the town, followed by a song “Morning” when the sun rises over the forested community. Both of these songs are very short though, and conclude not long after they begin, ending before either of them can become easily ignorable “musical wallpaper”. Outside of the game “Timber Hearth” is the most listened to song in the soundtrack’s twenty-eight song list according to Spotify listens alone: it has four million listens, while both the game’s main theme, “Outer Wilds”, and the song played in the final scene of the game “Travelers” only have three million listens each, which Prahlow believes is because of the strong sense of home the song provides (NoClip Studios). All of the songs listed here, with the exception of “Travelers” is nondiegetic and metadiegetic, location or event-based music.

The nondeigetic and metadiegetic music in *Outer Wilds* has a different function to the diegetic music in the game, but before those differences can be addressed, it is necessary to establish the definitions of the terms. In *Narrative Discourse* Gérard Genette refers to concepts of narrative diegesis, and other various forms of diegesis that refer to different story frames and levels of narrative distance. Jill Daugherty explains that Genette describes diegesis by first distinguishing the difference between two potential root words for the term: “diégèse (= the story universe or sphere in which the story unfolds), and diégésis (= pure narrative, without dialogue,
as opposed to mimesis). Genette derives the adjective *diegetic* not from *diégésis*, but from *diégèse*, using it as the adjective for *story*” (Daugherty 59). Because of this, *diegetic* refers to something existing within the sphere of the story. This is the definition often used when referring to diegetic music, something seen in film when music is playing within the movie itself, audible to the characters, but is also being heard by the movie’s viewers. Genette adds further detail to his definition with terms like *extradiegetic*, *heterodiegetic*, *homodiegetic*, and *metadiegetic*.

*Extradiegetic* refers to the things outside the story that allow the story to work, such as an external narrator who write the events of the story or perhaps the world in which the story exists (Genette 227); *heterodiegetic* refers to a narrative in which the narrator is absent from the story, and according to Daugherty, is sometimes confused with extradiegetic; *homodiegetic* refers to a narrative in which the narrator is a present character within the story being told (244-245); and *metadiegetic* refers to a story or story framework that is being told inside a story, a story within a story (228, 231). For the purposes of this thesis, the most important of these definitions is the base definition for *diegetic*, and *metadiegetic*, as *Outer Wilds* contains—when including the *Echoes of the Eye* DLC—two stories inside the main story, that of the Strangers and the Nomai.

*Outer Wilds*’ soundtrack features a few specific motifs: Event-based music, Nomai location music, Stranger music, and diegetic music. While much of the Nomai and Stranger-centric music is nondiegetic, as it is not produced in the game world for the Protagonist to hear, some of it is also *metadiegetic*, as these songs also point to the story within the story. For example, a specific song called “22 Minutes” plays at the end of every twenty-two-minute loop as the Protagonist experiences their memories from the loop over again. “End Times” is a song that informs the player that the end of the loop is approaching, and at the end of the song, the sun explodes. “Final Voyage” is a more intense version of “End Times” that plays when the
Protagonist removes the warp core from the Ash Twin Project to bring it to the Vessel. These are simply nondiegetic, as they are background music tied to an event and are not linked with the stories of the Nomai or the Strangers. The music that is tied to the stories of the Nomai or the Strangers is easily distinguishable, as the composer picked distinct instruments for each of the alien races and story associations in order to signal to the player what sort of information they might be discovering during these metadiegetic sequences. For example, the Nomai almost always feature a piano track, and a specific song called “Nomai Ruins” will play when encountering a significant Nomai location. Similarly, when discovering new information inside of the Stranger through the slide reels, the song “The First Seekers” will play, informing the player that they are gaining new knowledge about the Strangers’ search for the Eye of the Universe.

When the player is entering or examining a location important to Nomai science, the track typically suggests the technological, with drums, synths, and echoing, whining sounds like that of a flute or low whistle, edited to sound somewhat more like the Nomai’s distress beacons. Examples of this include the “Sun Station” track, which features stretched out and distorted piano music played in reverse to symbolize the Sun Station’s intent on creating the time loop and sending the Eye’s coordinates or the Protagonist’s thoughts back in time. The piano specifically is linked to the Nomai and plays only in soundtracks important to them. Whenever the piano music is played, it signifies that the player is in a location significant for the Nomai. This music is nondiegetic to the character and metadiegetic to the player, as they can recognize that this music prompts them to search for something in that location. The choice to include detail only where content is done in art design; planets like Timber Hearth are barren of detail aside from the few craters in which there is relevant information (NoClip Studios). The strategic placement
of detail and lack of detail serve less as a guide towards certain areas and more of a subtle sign to the Player that they would not need to search every nook and cranny of the game world in order to uncover the game’s secrets. If there is no detail, whether that be in art design or in music, there is no reason to spend too much of the allotted twenty-two-minute loop scouring the area.

The Stranger’s music from the *Echoes of the Eye* DLC has an ominous, warping sound, as though the music moves around the listener as it is being played. It has more horns, bell chimes, and electronic distortion or static than the Nomai, as well as featuring electric guitar. Some of the Strangers’ music also features banjo, though the composer of the music, Andrew Prahlow, stated “i [sic] never changed the strings on the original 4-string outer wilds banjo for 10 years, so a lot of the worn-sounding banjo playing in echoes of the eye is literally me playing on old rusty banjo strings” (@andrewprahlow on Twitter). The aged and creaking sound quality to the Strangers music symbolizes how long they have been in the solar system, and how long they have lived unnaturally in their dream realm. The haunting and uneasy feeling the music gives is also emphasized by the Strangers’ behavior. The Strangers are largely superstitious and nostalgic, and the actual gameplay of their sections also contains horror elements, which the rest of the game does not. It is possible to turn the game on “reduced frights mode” when confronting the Strangers, as they will charge the Protagonist and scoop them up if they see them in their manufactured world. With “reduced frights” mode turned on, the Strangers hold lanterns to make themselves more visible to the player in dark areas, and where they would originally run full speed at the player to remove them from the dream world, they now walk leisurely towards the player in a less startling manner. Their music contains human vocals laid over the nondiegetic tracks, but when the Strangers produce the music themselves, they emit a synthetic, eerie howl or whine. This creates an unsettling atmosphere but also doubles as a song of mourning, as the
Strangers are experiencing great grief from the destruction of their planet. “Elegy for the Rings,” the song the Strangers sing to mourn the loss of their home planet and the large ringed planet visible from it, highlights the duality of the off-putting and the sad. It displays the use of guitar and distorted singing as the Strangers mourn the loss of their home planet as a group, though in the total darkness of the dream world, hearing the song echo, seemingly sourceless around the player, is also very haunting. Occasionally, the Strangers’ music also features low-pitched, electronically edited guitar in a way that almost sounds like an electric version of a didgeridoo. The warbling, damaged quality of the music is something else that is specific to the Strangers.

Similar to the Nomai, certain tracks play when the player encounters new locations or new information with the Strangers; when they are reading slide reels and uncovering the Strangers’ past, a specific song plays, and this is similarly not heard by the Protagonist but functions as a metadiegetic signal to the player.

Hearthian music, which is used on Timber Hearth and in locations like the Museum, is mostly acoustic, folksy music. Occasionally, it includes non-acoustic instruments like bass, but played softly. The tracks most prominently feature acoustic guitar, strings, banjo, and harmonics. The music played when traveling in space is the only exception to this, as it combines the musical styles of the Hearthians with that of the Nomai, as the Nomai technology left behind is what allowed the Hearthians to achieve space travel. While the Protagonist moves in a vessel that is an amalgam of some things Hearthian, some things Nomai, the music features banjos and guitar, but also electronic and synthetic tracks evocative of the Nomai’s musical styling. Because most of the game is spent exploring other locations, it is rare to encounter the acoustics and folksy Hearthian music on its own: the electronic sounds of the Nomai or the haunting futuristic tones of the Strangers. So, when all of that is stripped away and the music returns to its folksy
roots and the acoustic instruments of the Travelers, it is particularly impactful to the player. These songs remind the player of the unity and camaraderie present in Timber Hearth and emphasize the importance of the Hearthians as a community. Polygon claims that the use of banjo and similar folk instruments in science fiction “says something about the now by referencing the past [...] using [the banjo in science fiction] together, it’s like building a bridge through time, between the real and the fictional” (“Who Put All These Banjos”). In *Outer Wilds*, the banjo and folk music, while heavily tied to the working-class status of all Hearthians, could also be signifying the relative youth of the Hearthians compared to the extremely technologically advanced races that have interacted with the solar system around them. Then, the combination of the musical styles, especially in the ending of the game, is “building a bridge through time,” (Polygon “Who Put All These Banjos”) potentially connecting three races that existed in the solar system millions of years apart. All of the musical stylings only come together in one incident, inside the Eye of the Universe, signifying that the power of the Eye itself is what reaches across time and space and brings together these communities which otherwise could never have met. The Eye itself creates the bridge Polygon describes, its omnipotent nature allowing it to manifest the Nomai, the Strangers, and the Protagonist all in one location at the same time.

This final song also consists of the various Travelers the Protagonist meets throughout the game. On each of the planets encountered throughout the game, there is one Traveler that can be located through use of the signalscope to follow the sounds of their individual instruments, which is primarily used on Timber Hearth to listen in on other planets and ensure that all the Travelers are safe. If all of their instruments can be heard on their respective planets, they are safe. These instruments include Esker’s whistling on Timber Hearth’s moon, Chert’s drums on
the Ember Twin, Feldspar’s harmonica in the Dark Bramble, Gabbro’s flute/clarinet (it is described in the game information/wiki as a flute, but looks like a clarinet) on Giant’s Deep, and Riebeck’s banjo on the Brittle Hollow. Instead of each playing their own independent tune, all of these are playing different tracks to one song. As Andrew Prahlow explains, “it’s sort of a representation of how music can bring people together no matter the distance, and it helps this huge universe feel a little bit more like home” (Prahlow interviewed by Chesler). In the final scene of the “Eye of the Universe” ending, the Protagonist enters the Eye of the Universe and encounters quantum reflections of the Travelers as well as reflections of Solanum and the Prisoner, if they have met and conversed with them. They join together around a campfire and play this same song as a unit, and the collective performance of the song weaves the new galaxy.

Bloch contends that music can “communicate that which is not (yet) utterable”, and that music has the capacity for affecting or inspiring change in the world: “it invokes, as well as prefigures, that world” (Levitas 41). Music is already used to shape the world and the player’s experience of that world in *Outer Wilds*. The nondiegetic and metadiegetic music is specifically constructed to reflect the societies and locations that each song represents, creating a specific feeling for the player without becoming forgettable background tunes. However, it is the use of diegetic music, particularly the last song in the game, that perhaps approximates the utopian. Bloch further explains:

Musical expression as a whole is thus ultimately *a vice-regent for an articulation which goes much further than anything so far known*… Thus music is that art of pre-appearance which relates most intensively to the welling core of existence… of That-Which-Is and relates most expansively to its horizon; —cantus essential fontis vocat [singing summons the existence of the fountain] (Levitas 41-42).
To Bloch, then, music presupposes the world, creating it in a form of expression that cannot be fully articulated. He uses the term “horizon” here, which, as described by Louis Marin, is itself a nebulous word in relation to utopia. Originally, while horizon meant “limit,” or an ending point, the definitions of the word evolved from meaning “border,” to something more “far off, unreachable point”: “horizon, which originally meant a limit, the power of circumscribing a place, connotes at the end, immensity, infinity: such is the limitless horizon of the ocean” (Marin “Frontiers of Utopia” 406). So, the “horizon” that music relates could be either a single point or an infinite, expansive state of being. The nondiegetic and metadiegetic music in *Outer Wilds* follows the former definition of horizon. It does not create something new, but rather guides the player through something already established, like a map, announcing to the player when they have arrived at a significant location and, based on the musical styling, for whom the location was significant. The diegetic music, however, especially that which the Travelers play at the end of the game, creates something new from the “fundamental uncertainty” or “extreme changeability” of the Eye of the Universe, and represents the immense and infinite horizon.

This ending focuses on the idea that the player is trying to prevent the finite end of the universe. Though the player cannot prevent their own death or the death of their people, they can build something new. Levitas cites Bloch to refer to this relationship between music and death: “For Bloch, music remains a vehicle of possibility even in the face of death, that greatest barrier to utopia: ‘If death, conceived as the axe of nothingness, is the harshest non-utopia, then music measures itself against this as the most utopian of all arts’” (Levitas 42-43). Music, in the Eye of the Universe, is the force that becomes stronger than time and physics. It defies the existing timeline, the heat death of the universe, and opens the possibility for something new. In discussing Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera*, Bloch declares
whereas music cannot change a society, it can, as Wisengrund [Adorno] rightly says, signalize its impending change by ‘absorbing’ and proclaiming whatever is decomposing and re-forming beneath the surface. Most of all it sheds light on the impulses of those who would be marching towards the future in any case, but can do so more easily with its help (Qtd. in Levitas 61).

Similarly, the Protagonist is incapable of saving the world. They must “march towards the future,” but require the song to help move it along. There is no science, no otherworldly quantum power that can prevent the heat death of the universe, but they can use the knowledge, the power of observing a macroscopic quantum object to absorb and reshape what is actively dying into something new.

The intentionality of the music in *Outer Wilds* is partially what makes it so impactful. In a world where we are constantly over-exposed to stimulus, especially music, the sparing and intentional use of it gives it emphasis. Musical systems like Muzak pervade our everyday life as “a soft totalitarian project of massified mood control” (Anderson 812). This phenomenon has escaped Muzak, and is present in websites like Pandora and Spotify, which offer “playlists for every mood’ (for example, focus, chill, workout, romance, party, sleep)” (813). This constant exposure is meant to nullify emotional states through exposure to music, but “sustained listening reveries can drift with various degrees of attentiveness from an ambiguous and objectless mood state to the nostalgic unlocking of nests of private memories and associations—and back again” (Anderson 819). Constant musical exposure “flouts the ideals of autonomous music, concentrated listening, and interior experience. It pulls away the curtain protecting the presumed inviolability and privacy of subjective emotional experience” (819). By contrast, *Outer Wilds* takes significant efforts to leave the player in atmospheric silence. There is not much music that
plays when exploring locations, just the sound of the environment with which the player interacts. As Prahlow states, he wanted to avoid creating “musical wallpaper” to which the players become desensitized. This approach allows the players to have an emotional connection to the music, and have an “interior experience,” which constant background music would now allow.

Most notably, in the final scene, the player has control over not only when the music begins but also those is involved in its creation. The Travelers will always be involved in the final song but depending on the Protagonist’s journey before entering the Eye, it is possible not to include Solanum or Prisoner. And, even if the Protagonist has met the Prisoner, they are given a secondary opportunity to reject the Prisoner’s inclusion in the song. The Prisoner, aware that their presence might impact whatever universe is to unfold, gives the Protagonist the chance to exclude them:

When my kind found the Eye and realized what it was capable of, they were terrified. It was too difficult a truck. Like a light too bright to look upon directly, it burned them. What they could not unlearn was hidden away in darkness—obfuscated, then lost. They did not want to see their story end. My kind weren’t always like this. We weren’t always afraid. I did what I could do to set things right, yet I am still of my kind, and you know now what they did. I cannot promise our fear won’t stain your mind. And so, a choice: Are you certain you want to remember me? (Outer Wilds Annapurna Interactive)

By giving the Protagonist and, by extension, the player the ability to choose whether or not to include Solanum or the Prisoner, the player becomes a part in the construction of the song, even though they do not play an instrument, and the creation of the new universe that follows. The
game then displays the most literal explanation of death and reformation through music that is possible. The music creates a cloud in the air above the campfire, which is the new universe, and the Protagonist jumps into it, leaving the old behind and moving towards something “radically different” in utopian terms (Moylan _Demand the Impossible_ 30).


The world created following the campfire song, shown in Figure 5.1, is also directly affected by the Protagonist’s choice of whether or not to include Solanum and the Prisoner. If neither of them are included, the final screen shows multiple new colorful planets with auras of planetary gas, viewed from a forested planet, but there are no visible creatures. To the player’s knowledge, the universe may have life, but it is unseen. If Solanum alone is included, a campfire lights the bottom right corner of the screen, and a group of bug-like aliens is shown huddled around the fire, roasting marshmallows. If the Prisoner is also included, the final image alters so that one
large planet that was previously in the foreground is now a looping planet with rivers, mirroring the Stranger’s home planet and ring station. Also, an eerie blue light and ritual stones light up the forest, and a giant forest creature holding a lantern appears in the forest as well, joining the bug-like aliens. The player has the ability to give life to the new universe, but for the fullest, most life-filled version of the new universe, the game requires the player to bring in every aspect of the “decomposing” world, as Bloch puts it, each of which is instrumental in the “reforming” of something new. In the final moments of the game, the Protagonist uses the time breaking tech of the Nomai to move past time to reach the Eye. They reject the Strangers’ model of returning to old space, and move forward creating new space, leaving behind the space of the past.
Conclusion

*Outer Wilds* is a game that does not so much show three individual stories of utopia, but instead shows the logic of utopia itself. Each group of aliens shows a different utopian thought process, and, as the game represents the logic of utopia, it is never necessary to physically show the location. The characters in the game never see the universe that forms after the final supernova, it is there for the player’s satisfaction, but the game does not need to show in order for the player to understand the ending or the though processes of those striving to reach the Eye.

As a video game and ergodic text, *Outer Wilds* does not need to represent utopia itself, but can instead offer the player a number of ways of exploring utopian thought. As Aarseth explains, the outcome of ergodic intrigue is “not yet decided” (*Cybertext* 113). There is no definitive final utopia that must be reached, but rather much to independently explore. Even the final image of the new universe is variable, as the player may choose who takes part, what values and presences to bring into the new world, what new home to build.

This new universe, that forms from the pieces of the last one, “feels like home” as composer Andrew Prahlow put it when describing the sense of community despite distance. This final scene shows the effects of the Protagonist's actions, and reveals how each choice, and each inclusion in this final scene is reminiscent of something from before, but not perfectly matching. The planet that the image is seen from is grassy, and full of tall pines reminiscent of Timber Hearth, but also contains large, glowing stones and a long river. The world is concave, looping around itself reminiscent of the Strangers’ space station. The other planets have stars or bright lights at their cores, or are partially broken apart, similarly to Brittle Hollow. The bug creatures in the bottom right corner are like the Hearthians, gathered around the fire, though the player only sees these creatures if they include Solanum in the final song. Similarly, a giant creature
holds a blue lantern, and this creature is only featured in the final vision if the Prisoner is included in the final song. These features create an air of familiarity to this new horizon, 14.3 billion years after the events of the game. Bloch claims, “the faces which turned in the utopian direction have of course been different in every age, just like that which in every individual case they believed they saw. Whereas the direction here is always related, indeed in its still concealed goal it is the game; it appears as the only unchanging thing in history” (*The Principle of Hope* 1374-1375). Though there were different “directions” to reach utopia, the Nomai, the Strangers, and the Protagonist in the end all had the same utopian goal, and the features of their lives have all now been combined in this new universe. Bloch concludes:

> [M]an everywhere is still living in prehistory, indeed all and everything still stands before the creation of the world, of a right world. True genesis is not at the beginning but at the end, and it starts to begin only when society and existence become radical, i.e., grasp their roots. But the root of history is the working, creating human being who reshapes and overhauls the given facts. Once he has grasped himself and established what is his, without expropriation and alienation, in real democracy, there arises in the world something which shines into the childhood of all in which no one has yet been: homeland

(*The Principle of Hope* 1375-1376)

The new world in *Outer Wilds* is created using this idea, bringing together all the vital pieces of the old, but reshaped by the “working, creating” Protagonist who enters the Eye and sets the reformation of the universe into motion. There is familiarity, a sort of nostalgia in the new world similar to that which “shines into the childhood of all,” but it is also profoundly new, somewhere “no one has yet been.”
The new universe connects the Nomai, the Strangers, and the Hearthians across space and time. For the new universe to exist as it does, it requires the efforts of the Strangers and the Nomai to happen. Even if, in their own times, neither race was able to reach the Eye of the Universe or achieve this utopia, their utopian desire set the framework for what the Protagonist is able to achieve. Without their efforts, the Protagonist would have neither the means to reach the Eye nor the incomplete frameworks of utopian thought to follow. Their stories presuppose the world and are made real through the final song. Without them, the new universe would not feel like home.
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