

Retellings as a New Player Discourse: A case study of Let's Play Videos

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Game retelling is narrative or anecdote a player crafts about their experience of playing video games (Sych, 2020: 203). Eladhari (2018) coined this term based on the phenomenon of players telling stories about their game experiences. Various creative practices around video games, such as writing (Eladhari, 2018), art (Greting et al., 2022), animation (Larsen et al., 2023), and videos (Sezen & Sezen, 2021), are considered retellings and provide different affordances for game critique.

Along this line of enquiry, several studies take an interest in the process of rendering a gameplay experience into a narrative. Larsen et al. (2019) prompt the pre-existing state of retelling, afterstory, as the specific, static story that happens as a result of a play experience, before any narrativisation. Kreminski et al. (2019) discover that retellers/players tend to extrapolate from coincidental details to include additional story elements that are not directly modelled within the game's systems, or invent details about the nature of the fictional world in which gameplay takes place. Murnane (2018), examining player stories in Skyrim, finds that players are inclined to create a story of a play experience in which surprising events ignored by the system break their immersion in the game world. Greting et al. (2022) focus on fanfic and suggest that narrative gaps in character design and worldbuilding inspire artistic retellings.

Notably, these studies address some form of "gap" between the instantiated game content and the player story—gaps which are filled because of a lack of detail in the game. This could easily be seen as an actualisation of Wolfgang Iser's (1972) "gaps in the text". However, never has a literary text been able to produce a retelling whose relationship with its source text is so unique, like *Alice and Kev* in relation to *the Sims 3* (one example that could probably be compared is *S/Z* in relation to *Sarrasine*).

This also reveals a weakness of the current theory around retellings: it examines only the narrative aspects of an interactive system and the retellings, but is less concerned with the intention of the players. The playing of a game is an agential, attitudinal, sometimes transgressive and subversive traversal function compared with the reading of a literary text (Aarseth, 2007; Sicart, 2014; Nguyen, 2020; Bartel, 2024). By de-focusing on players' agency, the theory of retelling is not able to provide a self-sufficient rationale within its scope.

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This research takes a semiotic and hermeneutic approach, drawing on Umberto Eco's hermeneutic framework (Eco, 1979) as well as game hermeneutics/ludo-hermeneutics developed by contemporary game scholars (Leino, 2010; Karhulahti, 2015; Aarseth & Möring, 2020; Arjoranta, 2022) to build a theory that explains features of the "narrative gaps" in videogame retellings and explores how a player's narrativisation of their game experience forms a player discourse which in return shapes the meaning of the game.

Considering that there are a plethora of retellings of different forms and shapes (e.g. walkthrough, speed run, machinima, mod, to name just a few), I propose that each of them forms a player discourse which could potentially serve as a method tool for a particular purpose, this paper will not try to extensively discuss what discourse each occupies, nor will it try to argue that the discourse one type of retelling creates could be generalised to the whole concept. What this paper aims to do is to exemplify one possibility of retelling analysis, and by answering the rationale question concerning retelling itself, help to pave the way for a more well-rounded game research methodology.

The retelling this paper chooses to address is Let's Play (LP) videos. An LP players' (BeccaBytes) blind walkthrough of *Outer Wilds* is selected for a multimodal discourse analysis. The game is played for the first time, from the very beginning until a closure is reached.

The use of LP videos in game research is not rare (Roth et al., 2018), there has been discussion about its performative nature (Fägersten, 2017), its usage as archives or for preservation purposes (Menotti, 2014; Glas, 2015; Nylund, 2015). LP players position themselves as common game players with their own play style, and almost always aim to provide their audience with a complete experience, which makes them the perfect material for this research. *Outer Wilds* is chosen because it is an open-world game with no randomised elements. Therefore, each player's experience is solely dependent on their own choices.

Looking at the meaning-making in videogame, retellings captures where the intention of the player intersects with the intention of the game, this paper explores how the experience and interpretation of a player build new meanings on top of the source text of video games.

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