

Looping Across Genres: How Time Loops, Roguelikes, and Cyclical Levels Shape Narrative Structure

Brent Van Mol

Independent scholar

Antwerp, Belgium

vanmolbrent@gmail.com

Keywords

narrative time, interactive storytelling, time loops, roguelikes, game text analysis

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In recent years, video game studios have increasingly turned toward forms of cyclical play, ranging from time loops and roguelike/roguelite structures to levels designed for deliberate repetition (Cartlidge 2025). These cycles have also become a prominent method of video game storytelling, characterised by players repeatedly experiencing variations of the same events and adapting their strategies to survive, progress, or solve a mystery to break the loop. As Evans (2023) notes, “time loops have been particularly prevalent in the last five years” (14), while Bailes (2021) describes 2021 as “the year of the time loop story”. This growing popularity has created new opportunities for video game storytelling through cyclical narrative design, yet little scholarly work has examined these shared narrative structures across genres.

Although time loop games are not entirely new – with earlier examples such as *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask* (Nintendo 2000) and *Outer Wilds* (Mobius Digital 2019) – 2021 marked a major surge in releases from both independent studios and higher-budget publishers. That year, Sony published *Returnal* (Housemarque 2021), Bethesda Softworks published *Deathloop* (Arkane Studios 2021), and indie studios released *The Forgotten City* (Modern Storyteller 2021) and *Twelve Minutes* (Luis Antonio 2021). These games span different settings and gameplay modes: *Deathloop* and *Returnal* take place in science-fiction worlds oriented around combat, while *The Forgotten City* and *Twelve Minutes* centre on unravelling mysteries. Each title enables gradual story discovery through repeated interactions with the same environments and characters across multiple loops. Since this surge in 2021, time loop games have remained popular, primarily within the indie scene, with examples such as *Ultros* (Hadoque 2024), *The Rogue Prince of Persia* (Evil Empire 2025), and *Rue Valley* (Emotion Spark Studio 2025). In the higher-budget space, releases such as *Saros* (Housemarque 2026) and the upcoming *Judas* (Ghost Story Games forthcoming) (see Valentine 2025) further indicate that this trend continues.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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While time loop games like *Returnal* and *Outer Wilds* use a strict time cycle as their narrative framing, roguelikes such as *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020), *Hades II* (Supergiant Games 2025) and *The Rogue Prince of Persia* utilise a similar loop structure. However, these games justify their repetition through cycles of escape, death, and restart until eventual success (Cartlidge 2024), rather than through an enforced time limit. Interestingly, cyclical structures can also appear as isolated looping levels within an otherwise linear game. For instance, *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* (Treyarch; Raven Software 2020) and *Alan Wake 2* (Remedy Entertainment 2023) each include a level in which story developments unfold through repeated traversal of the same game space. Because of these structural similarities, I introduced the term “loop-based games” in previous work (Van Mol forthcoming) to describe video games that share a specific cyclical structure and narrative framework. In that earlier project, I applied the term in a comparative study of *Hades* and *The Forgotten City*. For this presentation, I broaden its scope toward a more encompassing examination of loop-based games as a whole. These examples also demonstrate that cyclical narrative design appears across genres, ranging from science fiction and historical fiction to murder mystery, and that each genre adapts looping structures to different thematic and narrative goals.

Previous studies have explored time loops (Barkman 2022; Schniedermaun 2023) or roguelike repetition (Cartlidge 2024) separately. However, little attention has been paid to how these structures (e.g., strict time loops, roguelike runs, or looping levels) share overlapping forms of cyclical narrative design despite their structural differences. This presentation addresses that gap by examining loop-based games as a comparative category of cyclical narrative structures. This includes comparing the type of loop (strict time loop, no time limit, or single looping level), the world structure (open world, hub worlds, linear levels, or randomly generated levels) and how these structural differences shape narrative progression and a player’s influence over story developments.

The continued emergence of these games across indie and commercial spaces underscores their relevance and provides compelling case studies for analysing narrative structure in loop-based games. Key concepts for analysing these games include narrative time (Genette 1980; Juul 2004; Wei et al. 2010; Zagal & Mateas 2010; Anyó 2015), video game temporality (Hanson 2018), and the narrative puzzle (Fernández-Vara 2014; Wei & Durango 2019). While narrative time is essential for discussing time-centric stories, the narrative puzzle describes how players piece together the story through gameplay interactions, information gathering and problem-solving across repeated attempts. This concept is particularly important to assess how cyclical structures allow players to uncover narrative information, accumulate knowledge, and address challenges inherent to cyclical design.

I argue that the interplay of loops and narrative is central to how loop-based games construct their video game storyworlds (Thon 2016). Accordingly, this presentation examines how cyclical narrative structures function across different forms of loop-based games, specifically time loops, roguelikes, and looping levels. Rather than treating these structures as identical, it explores how they employ distinct temporal frameworks while sharing comparable forms of repetition, player discovery, and iterative progression. In doing so, this presentation considers how different genres utilise cyclical structures to support specific narrative goals, how these games frame repetition as both a narrative and gameplay structure, and how variations in loop

design shape narrative time and story progression, for instance between strict time loops and death-based looping structures.

This analysis draws on a literature review and game text analysis of recently released loop-based games. Through this approach, this presentation contributes to research on cyclical narrative structures in video games and offers insights into the evolving landscape of these loop-based games.

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