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Videogame Time Loops

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INTRODUCTION
This paper will offer a close analysis of time loops as a narrative device in two recent videogames, *Outer Wilds* (Mobius Digital 2019) and *Deathloop* (Arkane Studios 2021). While far from a new phenomenon in videogames, nor other media (David Bordwell 2002; Jan Simons 2008), recent years have seen the release of various titles like *Outer Wilds, Deathloop, Twelve Minutes* (Luis António 2021), *The Sexy Brutale* (Cavalier Game Studios 2017), *Loop Hero* (Four Quarters 2021), *Returnal* (Housemarque 2021) and more that place time loops as central to their experiences. I argue that time loops narrativize something that is already implicit across most videogames – repetition. As Brendan Keogh (2018, p. 145) argues, "through character deaths, saved files, checkpoints, action replays, Let's Play videos, walkthroughs, skippable cutscenes, lag, fluctuating framerates and countless other phenomena, time travel is a banal feature of videogame play". Every game with a save/load feature already contains time loops. Acknowledging them within the gameworld essentially narrativizes elements like repetition and failure that are frequently part of play but outside of a game's storyworld. This paper therefore intends to offer a close analyse of their inclusion in *Outer Wilds* and *Deathloop* and determine what impact narrativizing repetition has on how videogame time loop's function.

Outer Wilds is an open world adventure game in which players take control of an unnamed novice astronaut in a solar system trapped in a time loop. Venturing forth from your homeworld at the beginning of each loop, the player has twenty-two minutes segments in which to explore various nearby planets and uncover the mystery behind the time loop hidden in the remains of an ancient alien species known as the Nomai before the system's sun goes supernova and the loop resets. *Outer Wilds'* time loop centres on a preoccupation with space, particularly with how space is navigated (Michael Nistche 2008, p. 161; Mark J. P. Wolf, p. 19) and how it changes. From its main menu onwards, the game places the player in the position of an explorer, venturing out on expeditions to steadily improve their cognitive map of the solar system one loop at a time. The creation of this cognitive map is challenged by the way the space itself is designed, both in how it takes advantage of how space is framed (Mike Jones 2005, p. 5) and how space itself loops much like the time loop. This looping experience of space is also expanded into the game's narrative via how it charts the cyclical rising and falling of various alien civilizations, each building on the exploits of the last in much the same way the player as explorer does from one loop to the next. *Outer Wilds'* time loop is thus emblematic of its world – both the

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spatial looping and exploration of its many planets, and the way its story perpetuates a cyclical historical logic.

By contrast, *Deathloop's* time loop is predominantly about pleasure. *Deathloop* is a first-person shooter developed by Arkane Studios that follows the player as Colt Vahn, a soldier trapped in a time loop on an island called Blackreef, who is tasked with breaking the loop by killing eight targets in a single day. Blackreef as a setting is both narratively, and for the player, established as a hedonistic playground that allows its inhabitants to pursue pleasure and violence free of consequences thanks to the safety of the time loop. Within this safety net, the player's goal becomes to perform the 'perfect loop', by learning the way the inhabitants of the loop operate and exploiting this to kill all eight targets at once. In this way, *Deathloop* foregrounds the operational aesthetic as part of its goal – taking pleasure in learning how something works (Neil Harris 1981; Jason Mittell 2006; 2015). Learning how *Deathloop's* loop functions becomes akin to learning how a rudimentary Rube Goldberg machine works - the character's 'perfect loop' goal exemplifies the moment when the player's operational awareness finally slots into place, allowing them to take pleasure in their knowledge of the game's systems, and by extension beating the game. Despite the game's goal being to break the loop, the time loop is thus inevitably valorised, both by the player and their exploits and by Colt himself over the course of the narrative. *Outer Wilds* and *Deathloop* therefore are useful case studies through which to focus on how time loops, and by extension, repetition, can function in videogames – as both centred on space and a site for pleasure and mastery.

BIO

Cassandra Barkman is a PhD candidate at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia under Prof. Angela Ndalianis and Dr. Dan Golding. Cassandra's research regards the investigation of complex and puzzling narrativity within the affordances of videogames.

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