2.1.4 The Wind and Where It Decided to Go

Digital Wayfaring - Storytelling in Oxenfree and the Question of Player Agency

Moving from page to screen, we now consider ergodic navigation in the context of storytelling, focussing on the critically acclaimed narrative game *Oxenfree*. *Oxenfree* (Night School Studio, 2016 is a dialogue-driven adventure game about a group of teenagers who unwittingly open a supernatural rift during an overnight island party. The player controls Alex, a teenager, guiding her through the island, interacting with friends, and turning a radio that picks up eerie signals. What makes *Oxenfree* a compelling study is how it integrates narrative choices and navigation seamlessly; conversation is continuous and player-driven, and exploration of the 2D environment directly ties into how the story unfolds. Unlike many games where dialogue choices pause the game, *Oxenfree* implements a free-flowing dialogue system - the player selects Alex's responses on the fly, interrupting or talking over characters if desired, or staying silent. This creates the illusion (and partial reality) of an ongoing conversation shaped by the player. From a narrative perspective, the player is performing Alex's character through these choices.

Janet Murray, in Hamlet on the Holodeck, envisioned precisely this kind of narrative interactivity: where navigation through the story world is a form of enacting or performing the story. In digital media, Murray suggests, the interaction can 'write' the story by the paths they take and the actions they choose - essentially playing a role inside the narrative[1]. With *Oxenfree,* navigation has two dimensions: moving Alex around the island (physical navigation of space) and navigating conversation trees (narrative navigation in dialogue. Murray would likely view each dialogue choice as amount of agency, the pleasurable power to make meaningful actions in the story world. The design goal of *Oxenfree's* Developers, as they stated, was to have dialogue

[1] One might argue that this mirrors life a little too precisely. Some critics might roll their eyes at the suggestion that ergodic literature could offer a useful lens for understanding lived experience. After all, once we encode something, especially through performance or text, it inevitably transforms. 'Representation always flattens' says August Barrington. But the point here isn't to trap life within the confines of an ergodic system. It's to suggest a symmetry. That maybe, just maybe, our strange little modern existence, with its performative labour rituals, algorithmic dating, and ritual sacrifices to the god of Microsoft Teams, might actually be more truthfully mapped by an ergodic structure than a linear one. Linear narratives don't quite account for the man in a suit who used to believe in dragons but now believes in quarterly projections. Or Jeff from Accounts, who hasn't felt real since 2007 and only expresses joy through ironic mug slogans and the occasional colourful sock gifted to him by his child who only sees him looking exhausted and shouting at football on a 50 inch TV screen at weekends.

that ‘shapes the direction of the story’ while feeling natural. In practice, as you hike through a forest or along a beach, other characters chat with Alex and you choose her replies, which can alter relationships and eventually determine who trusts whom or which ending you get. The story is navigated by talking. This aligns with Murray’s idea of the player as a performer: the player’s input isn’t limited to solving puzzles or combat (as in many games) but deeply entwined with narrative decisions, effectively performing the script.

Henry Jenkins provides another lens, emphasising spatial storytelling. He argues that game environments can function as narrative architecture - spaces ‘ripe with narrative possibility’ that players explore to uncover story. In *Oxenfree* the island is carefully designed to tell bits of the story through the scenery (notes left in old forts, radio signals at specific landmarks, the ambiance of an old abandoned military base). Exploration is not just a backdrop to story but an active narrative device. Jenkins notes that in games, story is often less about a preset plot and more about the player’s movement through space, creating an enacted narrative.[2] In this game, if the player chooses to take Alex to a particular area early, they might trigger a ghostly time-loop scene that reveals backstory; if they go elsewhere first, they learn different information in a different order. Thus navigation alters pacing and tone. One play through might feel like a slow-burn mystery if the player wanders listening to radio clues before hitting any major supernatural events; another might become a tense thriller if the player heads straight into a confrontation in the old communications tower. Jenkins would call *Oxenfree* an example of environmental storytelling where players write by moving. As he put it, players are especially engaged in genres ‘invested in world-making and spatial storytelling. *Oxenfree* fits this bill, with its richly realised island world that invites curiosity. The game even rewards backtracking: after the story ‘ends’ a new game mode allows players to navigate the island again with slight differences, implying that the narrative is not linear but cyclical (a clever tie-in to its time-loop plot.) This design literally encourages players to navigate the

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While Jenkins focuses on the structural implications of spatial storytelling, it is worth acknowledging the affective and subjective layers players bring to these spaces. For instance, in *Fable*, I tend to play as a female character, often good, though not always. I do not just move her through the world; I become her. I project aspects of myself into the character, and in turn, the character reflects parts of me I may not have previously recognised. In that sense, I am not merely enacting a story. I am co-authoring it, with the designers, yes, but also with myself. The lines blur. This kind of identification or self-insertion is not uniform across all players. Some may focus on mechanics, others on roleplay. But it sits on a meaningful spectrum. While novels occasionally permit this kind of merging, particularly with hollow or archetypal protagonists, games actively invite it through customisation, moral choice, and interaction. In this light, the narrative of a game is not only spatial and enacted, but personal. It is woven from the player's own imaginative impulses as much as from the game's designed scaffolding.

story multiple times to uncover the full truth, reinforcing how traversal equals storytelling.

From Aarseth's perspective, *Oxenfree* certainly hs ergodic elements: the player's choices (efforts) lead to different outcomes (consequences). For instance, depending on your navigation and dialogue decisions, Alex's best friend Ben might end up dating or drifting apart from another character, or Alex might save her brother Michael from his fate in a time paradox - outcomes only accessible through specific paths of play. The game thus includes 'certain requirements' - you must tune into certain frequencies on your radio at key spots, you must choose some dialogue - that distinguish between successful and unsuccessful navigation of the story. A passive player who doesn't engage will miss critical pieces. In essence, *Oxenfree's* narrative branching and multiple possible endings fulfil the ergodic criterion that the user's input significantly shapes the narrative course. Yet what is remarkable is how naturalistic it feels. The effort is camouflaged in the ordinary acts of walking and talking. As one reviewer put it, the conversation system is so seamless that it feels like real dialogue - not obvious 'choices'[3]. The implication for narrative theory is that interactivity need not break immersion; here, interactivity *heightens* immersion by making you Alex's voice. The player navigates not a menu of options but a social situation, guided by emotional intuition. You might choose a gentle reply to comfort a friend, or a sarcastic joke to lighten the tension - these are narrative decisions driven by tone and relationship[4], arguably a sophisticated form of navigation through the story's emotional landscape. It's as if *Oxenfree* asks the player to navigate by listening and responding, not just by moving an avatar from point A to B. The result is a highly engaging narrative performance aligning with Murray's and Jenkins' ideals.

However, *Oxenfree* also brings to light debates about the limits of interactivity. Jesper Juul, a prominent game theorist, has been skeptical about viewing games as stories in the traditional sense. He might argue (as he often did in

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[3] This illustrates a key aspiration within some strands of ergodic ludo-narrative design: to weave interaction so tightly into the fabric of play that it mimics the feel of reality. In *Oxenfree*, choices are not signposted with fanfare. They emerge mid-conversation, mid-step, as part of a rhythm that mirrors real-life dialogue. The mechanics are concealed within naturalistic motion and speech. This reflects a deeper symmetry between ergodic functionality and lived experience. In life, we do not always recognise a moment as a choice until it is behind us. *Oxenfree* captures this by embedding decision-making within the flow, not separating it from it. The result is not only immersion, but an illusion of inevitability — a sense that the narrative is shaped as much by how we *are* as by what we *do*.

[4] And one might argue, the mental schema you bring with you into the experience.

other contexts) that while games can have narratives, they operate differently - gameplay and story often tug in different directions. Juul famously stated that ‘computer games are not narratives’ in the strict sense, meaning that imposing a narrative framework might overlook the unique qualities of gameplay. In *Oxenfree*, for example, if one treats it purely as a story, one might judge it by the coherence of its plot or character development. But from a gameplay viewpoint, one might instead focus on the mechanics (walking, tuning the radio, dialogue timing) and how enjoyable or challenging those are. Juul and fellow ‘ludologists’ would remind us that *Oxenfree* as a game must be engaging to play, not just narratively interesting. Interestingly, *Oxenfree* received praise for how its narrative and mechanics meshed, but some players noted that despite many dialogue options, the overarching plot hits the same major beats until the very end. This touches on Juul’s point: the story constrains player freedom to ensure a satisfying plot. You cannot, for instance, avoid opening the ghostly rift; that inciting incident will occur no matter what, because without it there’s no game.

This is where Alexander Galloway’s insights become relevant. Galloway, in Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture, discusses how algorithms structure player experiences and often subtly control what appears to be free interactivity. The appearance of choice in games can indeed be algorithmic trickery’ in the sense that code pre-determines how the story can branch. In *Oxenfree* the algorithm (the game’s code) ensures that certain events happen by certain points; you cannot simply decide to leave the island early or ignore the ghosts[5]. So while you have conversational freedom, you are still playing within a scripted framework.

However, the need to differentiate between narrative and gameplay and view them as a binary seems arbitrary at best; Insisting on viewing media like Oxenfree purely as narrative or purely as gameplay overlooks their capacity for meaningful overlap[6]. Meanwhile, Galloway’s concern with the illusion of choice and restriction of choice is hardly an argument for ludology - a field founded on rules. Both narratology and ludology function on a wide variety of different rules. In combing the two, we are simply finding the sets of rules that complement the other. Choice in ludo-narrative settings is necessarily shaped

[5] I mean - you can always turn the game off and go play Minecraft in creative mode.

[6] It is akin to drinking a Tequila sunrise and scoring it purely on the merits of the orange juice.

by constraints — but then again, so is every choice we make. You can't exactly opt out of gravity either.

We see here a tension that is fundamental to interactive narrative design: in order to tell a coherent story, designers often have to guide or limit the player's actions; yet to offer meaningful agency, they must leave space for player influence. *Oxenfree* strikes a balance. It gives players control over tone and relationships, even as the central plot machinery remains fixed. You cannot avoid the supernatural rift. You cannot simply walk off the island. But you can shape how you respond. Emotionally, ethically, socially, and this influences how the story *feels* as it unfolds.

This leads to what we might call tone-led wayfinding - a form of navigation governed not by strategic logic but emotional resonance. Many players report making dialogue choices by instinct, responding as they imagine Alex might, rather than mapping outcomes. They navigated not toward endings, but through moods - following the tone of the movement, not the plot line. This represents a subtle evolution in interactive narrative design, where emotional intuition becomes a primary mechanic.

It is my hope that this idea extends into *Wayfinder.* That performers in polygodic process will engage with the environment or artefact based in their intuition and emotion, and not just logic. I hope that they pick up an item that *speaks to them*.

Scholars like Juul and Galloway will continue to pose sharp questions. Are we expanding the possibilities of narrative? Or are we simply dressing up pre-written plots with decorative interactivity? Galloway might add that there are no surprises for the code, only for the player. In that sense, the player is a discoverer, not a co-author.

This critiques are valuable, particularly for a project like *Wayfinder*, the framework for which relies on participation. I say that co-creation must be genuine, but some would say not at the cost of coherence. I'd argue that depends on the aims of your creation. *Oxenfree* offers a model: a lucid, accessible form of ergodic storytelling where walking and talking are not diversions from the plot, but the method of experiencing it. The player does not step outside the story to make choices - they remain inside it, responding in real time. The game demonstrates that the best navigational narratives dance between structure and freedom.

Having explored navigation in textual, physical, and digital narrative spaces, we finally turn to the idea of space itself as a story. The symmetry between navigational storytelling and Polynesian wayfinding has lingered in the background - navigation by stars, sea, wind - all inherently spatial. As part of my theoretical proposal, space (a room, or a box of objects; the rehearsal environment) plays a crucial role. The next chapter will examine a case where physical space is overtly the narrative medium - Talliston House & Gardens. One might call it an art installation of many rooms each with its own story. By looking at Talliston and theories of spatial storytelling, we will address how environment can function as an ergodic text that one walks through to experience a narrative. We will also grapple with classic critiques (from Aristotle to Peter Brook) on whether space and design can substitute for plot and drama, thereby bringing our exploration full circle to the foundational question: can a path (through a house, or a performance space) be a story?