

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension

Platform: Windows, MacOS, Android, iOS, Nintendo Switch

Genre: Point and click, Puzzle adventure

Release Date: Aug 6th 2020

Developer: Draw me a pixel

Publisher: Draw me a pixel

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Pascal Cammisotto

Overview

The game follows the story of *Game*. *Game* is a discarded game program that has lost his 'playability', the other half of his code. Broken and unmotivated, he is stuck in an unfinished state.

The player comes in, wanting to play. Through a back and forth between the player and *Game*, they awaken *Glitch*, the antagonist of the story, trying to hinder them throughout the game. The player and *Game* are sent spiraling down into other dimensions, getting stuck in alternative realities, trying to go back to their original one. On their journey, the player learns more about the story of *Game*, and *Game* finds the other half of his code, *GiGi*, only to lose her once more.

From that point onwards their goal shifts and the player and *Game* try to reunite *Game* with *GiGi*, meeting their developer on the way and, with his help, defeating *Glitch* and reuniting *Game* with *GiGi*, making them whole and playable once more.

That's it, that's the narrative, thank you for reading my narrative review!

...

Ok, ok maybe there is a bit more to it. *There Is No Game* is very unique in the way it tells its story, breaking the structural norms of classic video game narratives. Let's dig deeper.

The game has three layers of narratives: **Mini narratives**, the **Main narrative** and the **Player narrative**.

We already talked about the **Main narrative**, let's move on to the other two:

The **Mini narratives** are simple stories that create playable settings for the gameplay mechanics and for the progression of the **Main narrative**. These narratives are small and lack in depth and complexity. They are completely detached thematically from the **Main narrative** and are established in the game and its story as existing in alternative dimensions.

The **Player narrative** is defined by the dynamic and relationship between the player and *Game*.

The player is not playing as another character but rather as themselves, not just in personality but in their in-game identity as well. In order to integrate the player into the narrative, the game takes advantage of the player's innate motivation to play the game, using it to create a unique relationship between the player and *Game* that evolves as the story progresses. The player and *Game* work together and against each other in a dance of sorts, using the game mechanics, as the player has no voice, creating a bond formed through actions rather than words.

Characters

- **Game:** *Game* is a discarded game program, a part of him (of the game) *GiGi* is missing from his code so he is torn apart (quite literally), feeling like he could never get her back, he sees no reason to move on. Sad and heartbroken, he fights the player from playing his incomplete game.
- **GiGi / GG / Global Gameplay:** *GiGi* is the other half of the game. She used to be the gameplay part but has been severed from *Game*, sold out to a GPS system to be integrated into it. She is heartbroken by her separation from *Game* as well.

- **Mr. Glitch:** *Glitch* is the “bad guy”, the antagonist of the story, formed as a bug from the separation of *Game* and *GiGi*. He evolved into a virus with an *evil plan* that, as a reoccurring bit, we can never hear as he always ends up cutting-off every time he explains it. As the embodiment of a distorted, broken code, he is defined by his constant need to destroy and mess with everything in his path, especially *Game*, his structured origin.
- **The developer:** The developer is both the developer of the in-game’s incomplete game and the developer of the actual game (*There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension*). He appears in the game as a struggling game developer that had to break apart and sell a part of his passion project, his game code (*GiGi*) to a GPS company due to financial struggles. He is the root cause of the [Main narrative](#)’s conflict and the only one that can solve it by bringing *Game* and *GiGi* back together.
- **The player / Us:** We come in many shapes and forms but our innate motivations in the game are the same: to play, to solve, to progress. It’s those defining characteristics that unite us as players, they are our personality traits in the game. It’s why we fight *Game* in his persistence to stop us from playing, not because we are told to do so. As we learn more about *Game*’s story and the narrative at large, our motivations change and evolve.

Breakdown

Chapter 1: **Mise en abyme**

The game begins with *Game* announcing that, unfortunately, there is no game, blocking us (the players) from playing. The gameplay then becomes a playful cat and mouse dynamic between us and *Game*, in which *Game* puts down blockades, stopping us from playing, and we, in turn, attempt to break and bypass those blockades to reach the start button and start the game.

These back-and-forth interactions help build our relationship with *Game*, establishing a duo dynamic for the next stages.

A good example of that dynamic is when we play Rock-Paper-Scissors with *Game*. *Game* cheats by taping on his answer after we give ours, and we, in turn, steal his scissors to cut a menu element to progress.

As one of his obstacles, *Game* creates a fake operating system where we load a fake program, glitching it, introducing us to the concept of different dimensions, sending us spiraling down between them, presenting alternative versions of *Game* in different cultures and themes.

By glitching the system, going to different dimensions, we awaken *Glitch*. *Glitch* provokes us to break the themes and every time we do, we go to the next one until our movement between dimensions finally comes to a stop and we face a bulky CRT television showing static, surrounded by black void.

Chapter 2: Behind the scenes

Game, now not in his dimension, no longer interacts with the setting, taking the back seat, commenting on our actions, becoming solely our narrator.

In opposition to the beginning, *Game* encourages our attempts at progression, hoping they will lead both us and him back to his own dimension.

Our goal now aligns with *Game*'s due to our willingness to play.

We break the front of the TV screen and reveal, through it, our first Mini narrative of a Sherlock Holmes game featuring Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, trying to figure out what happened to their neighbor Wilhelm.

Upon hearing a strange noise from their neighbor's apartment, Holmes and Watson go there but can't get past the locked door.

This is our introduction to the reversed, comedic dynamic between the two.

Sherlock Holmes, the classically brilliant, is slamming against the door, willing it to open, performing the same action over and over again, expecting a different result, while John Watson is being the intellectual one, prioritizing logic.

In order for us to progress Holmes and Watson's story, we interact with the setting through two different perspectives:

1. The front of the TV: showing the story as a game being played.
2. The back of the TV: showing the 'set' of the game, the 'behind of the scenes' elements, quite literally breaking the 4th wall of the Mini narrative.

There Is No Game is built around the concept of games being both experiences and mechanisms. Usually games only present the former, viewing the latter as technicalities that should be hidden. The TV is a metaphor, reminding us that *There Is No Game* often

'breaks apart the panel at the back of the TV', confronting the technical aspects, the 'set' of the game as part of its narrative across all of its narrative layers:

In the **Mini narratives**, the player interacts with the set and breaks the menus.

The **Main narrative** tackles the concept of Game's code being incomplete, reaching out to his real-world developer with the help of his player, trying to fix things.

In the **Player narrative**, *Game* often reminds us that we are players, encouraging us to close the game, uninstall it or even refund it.

When we interact with the story and *Game* speaks over it, being audible to Holmes and Watson, they begin to notice his voice and the effects of our actions. Not knowing that they are NPCs in a game, they react very differently to the player's actions and *Game*'s voice. Holmes, with his insistence, plays them off as natural phenomena while Watson, the logical one, is starting to realize the nature of his reality, being a game setting.

We enter Wilhelm's (their neighbor) home, discovering that he is infected by *Glitch*. We work towards releasing him, hoping it will lead us closer towards *Game*'s dimension.

When we release *Glitch*, he messes with the game, destroying the story's setting, opening the path to the next dimension. *Glitch* mentions his 'evil plan' for the first time, starting to explain it and getting cut-off by a security screen popping up.

The more we interact and affect the setting, the more absurd and comedic the interactions between Holmes and Watson get as their perception of their world diverges, reaching its climax at the end of the **Mini narrative**.

Right before we move on to the next dimension, Sherlock and Watson are about to fall into the abyss. Watson is having an existential crisis, realizing that he and his whole world are not real, while Holmes, still completely oblivious, excuses the world breaking apart (literally), to be the result of a fault line.

Upon saving Holmes and Watson we move on to the next dimension.

Chapter 3: The good, the bad, and the princess

We get to the next dimension and face an RPG game where we learn in a heavier undertone, giving us a glimpse at *Game*'s sadness, that *Game*'s game was supposed to be an RPG as well.

In this Mini narrative we follow an NPC-like hero, devoid of almost all agency and logic, having to direct him through an RPG setting, leading him to his lost princess.

Needing to direct the hero character, this time, *Game* takes a more active role, speaking to the hero as *Gaia*, guiding him, while we affect the setting by using elements around the screen to create paths that enable progress for the hero.

The dynamic between us and *Game* is now actively cooperative. *Game* is the mouth (the voice) to our hands (the actions).

Throughout the chapter, we lead the hero together with *Game* through the RPG world, figuring out a way to progress through each section of the map, finally getting him to his princess.

When we reach the princess, we go back to a heavier undertone where we learn that *Game* also had a 'princess' once. Her name was *GiGi* but she disappeared, and ever since, his life has been meaningless, *GiGi*, missing from his source code, has turned him into an empty shell. He asks us if we now understand why he has been trying to drive us away, claiming that without *GiGi*, there literally is no game.

Glitch pops out of the treasure chest meant as a reward for finishing the game and messes with the RPG's code, forcing us to go back through it with his changes. He starts talking about his evil plan for the second time, this time getting cut-off by an ad. We are thrown back to the beginning of the RPG, this time, with *Glitch*'s ominous changes.

Chapter 4: Free2Pay

Glitch's changes turned the RPG into a "free to play" game, introducing clicker mechanics, blocking us behind virtual paywalls, presenting in game ads and introducing more freemium mechanics in a light and comedic fashion.

Once again, we lead the hero to his princess through new challenges and mechanics.

Finishing the Mini Narrative once more leads us to the next dimension.

This chapter acts as comic relief after *Game*'s darker moment, taking jabs at freemium games and their mechanics and making funny references to other indie games.

Chapter 5: Loss of control

The game pretends to end, claiming that we finally got back home to our dimension, as we are thrown into the credits, but the credits are just another dimension.

In the credits we build the setting ourselves by slotting different names into different boxes, each slot affecting a different part of the setting, revealing new elements.

Glitch is stuck in the credits, and we work to rescue him so he can help us get back. When we eventually free *Glitch*, he sabotages us once again, forcing us to go through simple mini-games, solving them in creative ways. Upon beating the mini-games we get a new credits plaque with the letters “GG” written on it. When we slot it in, we hear *GiGi* for the first time.

Glitch comes back and we learn through their dialog that *GiGi* was a part of *Game*'s code and that her full name is *Global Gameplay*. She used to be the gameplay in *Game*'s game, and she had to leave after ‘the update’, being integrated into another program. We also learn that *Glitch* was formed by their separation.

Glitch mentions his evil plan again, being cut-off by moving on to the next dimension.

GiGi sings about her pain from being separated from *Game*.

Then we go back home to *Game*'s dimension, this time to the real one, starting back at the beginning, but with *Game* having to lose *GiGi* once more.

Chapter 6: Back home

We start the ‘non-game’ over again from the beginning, only that this time, *Game* is heartbroken, having lost *GiGi* for the second time.

Game doesn't try to fight us like the first time.

His sadness consumes him and he starts crying, his tears fill up the screen, breaking the menu, integrating them into the gameplay.

Game exclaims that he is nothing and that no one loves him.

We use the menu elements broken by *Game*'s tears to spell the words: “LOVE GAME”, attempting to comfort him.

This is another wonderful example of the way we communicate with *Game*, this time in reverse, with *Game* acting (flooding the screen) and us talking (spelling “LOVE GAME”), creating a powerful moment.

Game profoundly tells us to go and be with the people we love, to hold them close and cherish them because they won't be there forever, nothing lasts forever. Following that notion we are prompted with a quit button.

Attempting to quit doesn't actually work, giving a false choice which cheapens the experience of that powerful moment.

When we don't quit, this time out of love for *Game* instead of contempt, wanting to help him rather than fight him, he takes our refusal to quit the wrong way, thinking that we are trying to mess with him. *Game* gets angry, threatening to delete our save file if we lose an impossible quiz he constructs. When we inevitably do, he pretends to delete the

file, starting the game over, giving us a scare. *Game* states that since we are messing with his feelings, he is messing with ours.

Game reminds us of the reciprocity and equal standing we share in our relationship with him. We are not just a player messing with a game (*Game*), he can mess with us too.

We retaliate and have a back and forth with *Game*, similar to the one we had at the beginning of the game, with us trying to progress and *Game* trying to stop us.

We end up accidentally flooding *Game*'s code which leads us to a new dimension.

When we get there, we stop fighting and *Game* comes down and apologizes.

The beginning of this chapter changes our dynamic with *Game*. Laying our frustrations and annoyances out in the open, making us realize that we learnt to appreciate and root for each other, shifting our relationship with *Game* from the begrudging cooperation, experienced in the previous chapters, into a caring friendship.

The 'dimension' we land at this time is the developer's cellphone where we learn through his emails that *Game* was meant to be an RPG but the main programmer left for a better opportunity and, due to the developer's financial issues, *GiGi*, the gameplay system had to be sold and integrated into a GPS system. The developer's love project, his game, was broken apart into *Game* and *GiGi*.

We find *GiGi* in the GPS app and contact her. *Glitch* calls us on the phone talking about his evil plan, getting cut-off due to bad signal as he starts elaborating. He breaks through to the internet, transforming into a virus, hacking computer systems worldwide, wreaking havoc, presumably enacting his evil plan.

The three of us (the player, *Game* and *GiGi*) work together, using the phone's apps to control smart appliances in the real world, eventually calling the developer's office phone reaching out to him. We work together with the developer to stop *Glitch* by reuniting *Game* with *GiGi*, trapping *Glitch* in their code and making the game whole once more.

Epilogue:

We go back to the start for the 3rd time. *Game* wants us to leave to have some alone time with *GiGi* after being separated from her for so long. *GiGi* exclaims that we at least deserve to play the game after all that we have done. *Game* begrudgingly agrees and we are given a dramatic choice between two options:

1. Play the game and risk *Glitch* taking over again, escaping from within *Game*'s and *GiGi*'s code once more.
2. Delete *Game*'s code, sacrificing him to take down *Glitch* for good for the sake of the world.

If we play the game – *Glitch* indeed escapes and takes over once more and the game ends.

If we delete *Game*, he pretends to delete his code trying to make us leave. When he realizes that we are still there, watching, he panics, closes the curtains on us and the game ends.

Strongest Element

The strongest element of the narrative is the **Player narrative**, and more specifically, the relationship between *Game* and the player, the way it's formed through actions and its evolution throughout the game.

At the beginning, the player naturally perceives *Game* as a nuisance trying to block them from doing the one thing they are there to do, play the game. At that point, the tone of the relationship forming between the player and *Game* is light, constructed from the playful tackle between the player and *Game*, formed from fun and creative actions.

Then, the player and *Game* get lost in other dimensions as a consequence of their actions, making the tone and their dynamic a bit heavier.

After leaving his dimension, *Game* takes the back seat, letting the player act, begrudgingly rooting for them to succeed in order to go back to his original dimension.

Later he takes more agency, using his voice to compensate for the player's muteness, working in tandem with the player to achieve their aligning goals.

Then, the player learns more about *Game*, connecting to his story and motive for fighting them, empathizing and rooting for him. That connection occurs just in time for *Game*'s low point, when he needs the player the most, having lost *GiGi* once more, leading to a bond between them.

Their relationship is altered masterfully, through the player's actions combined with the correct timing. The player is not forced to choose between dialog options, making their actions more powerful and their relationship with *Game* more genuine and meaningful.

Unsuccessful Element

The least successful element of the game's narrative is its ending, which is not entirely fair because it was arguably doomed to fail.

The narrative puts itself in a difficult position, its whole premise is trying to get the game back together, and so, the end of the 'non-game', logically, must be the start of the actual game which presents a couple of issues:

1. A whole new game beginning just to give an ending to the main one is not feasible or justifiable in terms of development.
2. Even if it was justifiable, it doesn't accomplish its goal, shifting away focus from the main game instead of letting it come to a close.

The developers ended up with two optional endings:

1. The player starts the game against *Game's* warning about *Glitch* being freed if they play it. *Glitch* is freed when the code runs, taking control once more, becoming a destructive virus and the game ends.
2. The player chooses to heed *Game's* warnings about *Glitch* being freed by playing the game, deleting *Game's* code. *Game* pretends to delete his code, trying to fake the player into leaving. *Game* eventually realizes that the player did not leave, and in a panic, closes the curtains on the player and the game ends.

Neither of those options are very satisfying, lacking closure.

When writing this section, I was attempting to write a better ending and realized that it is rather pretentious of me to think that with a few lines and relatively minimal time I could do better than the writers of this amazingly unique and creative narrative. Instead, I will leave this part as an open-ended question and design exercise for *you*, the reader:

How would *you* write an ending that is **defined** by the beginning of something new?

Instead of tackling the whole ending I will focus on a part of it. The choice between playing the game and deleting *Game's* code is not a very hard one for a single reason:

Glitch is built as an antagonist but one with little depth or interest. He has a very specific role in the game which is to sabotage the player and *Game*, creating problems for them to solve. As for his evil plan, we never hear it and when he finally enacts it we don't see it or feel its consequences.

The lack of weight for *Glitch's* perceived threat makes the weight of risking *Glitch* becoming a virus, once more, very light. When I played through the game, I didn't think twice about clicking the play button as my ending choice, if *Glitch* takes over, so be it.

Trying to solve that issue, I would focus more on *Glitch* as a character, giving him a more profound story given his identity as a character formed by the separation between *Game* and *GiGi*.

An example would be to delve more into the idea that he opposes *Game* and *GiGi* because their reunion would nullify his existence. Shifting the goal of his secret plan to making sure that they remain split apart, perhaps even trying to destroy them to finally be free of their threat to his existence that is their reunion.

That could make the choice at the end make the player feel that by playing the game, they are actually endangering *Game*'s existence due to *Glitch*'s intentions if he gets released, making the choice more meaningful.

It could even lead to a different direction of empathizing with *Glitch*, wanting to free him, having to choose between him and *Game*.

Highlight

The highlight of the game takes place at the start of chapter 6 after *Game* loses *GiGi* for the second time at the end of chapter 5.

That point in the game represents a crucial turning point in the player's relationship with *Game*. Until that point the player gets hints of some darker, sadder story but for the most part, it's a lighthearted struggle between the player's motivation to play, and *Game* trying to stop them.

It's only at the end of chapter 5, when a part of *Game*'s story is revealed, explaining *Game*'s past and his motivation for trying to stop the player (because there really is "no game") that our perspective changes.

Chapter 6 begins by letting the player **know** that they are starting over, being back at the correct dimension, but *seeing*, and more than that, *experiencing* *Game*'s heartbreak through their tears filling up the screen, makes the player **feel** like they are in a completely different setting.

We no longer want to fight *Game* but rather help him, comfort him. It's a really powerful moment, making us feel a sharp transition in attitude, maybe even a little bit of guilt for our insistent pushback against *Game*.

Critical Reception

NintendoLife 9/10 reviewed by Ollie Reynolds:

Reynolds O. (2021) praises the uniqueness of the game's 4th wall breaking elements, stating: "It's a tremendous fourth-wall-breaking experiment that, while technically a sequel to the 2015 title **There Is No Game**, feels wholly unique.". (paragraph 2)

He goes on to address the interaction of the player with the **Mini Narratives**, as I call them, as genius, stating: "The scenarios from this point onwards are frankly *genius*, as the games themselves can be directly manipulated by the user...". (paragraph 4)

Reynolds O. (2021) ends by praising the characters' unique personalities, explaining: "Of course, all of this would be nothing if it weren't for the exceptional writing. Each character, whether it be the narrator or one of the video game sprites, is wonderfully well realised, and we found ourselves frequently giggling at the dialogue". (paragraph 7)

TheGuardian 5/5 reviewed by Simon Parkin:

Parkin S. (2020) also acknowledges the game's relationship with the fourth wall, through its lack of existence, literally stating: "There is no fourth wall...". (paragraph 1)

He goes on to praise the game's uniqueness, humor and powerful relationship between the player and *Game*, what I refer to as the **Player narrative**, saying: "Its [the game's] ideas arrive as a torrent, a dizzying display of creativity; and as your relationship with the chatty AI subtly shifts from one of antagonism to collaboration, the game assumes the rewarding feel of a buddy movie. The result is an extraordinary, postmodernist video game quite unlike anything else.". (Paragraph 4)

The game is highly praised for the way it tackles the fourth wall, as well as its humor, creativity and its unique interactivity.

Lessons

1. **Fourth wall? What's that?** The fourth wall is not essential for creating deep and meaningful stories. Usually, 4th wall breaking is comedic relief, outside of the boundaries of the canon story, but in *There Is No Game* it's simply a normal part of the premise. It's not that the fourth wall is broken often and is, therefore, a normal occurrence, but rather that it doesn't exist in the first place. The place of the player as someone beyond the fourth wall is a necessary and crucial point in the story with an example like *Game* threatening to delete the player's save file as part of their back-and-forth fight that progresses their relationship in the game.

2. **Mechanics as dialog:** Communication is complex. We often default to constructed languages, made of cold, pre-defined, words and grammar (case and point with this competition and my / this analysis within it) and tend to forget that we are complex beings, communicating through unspoken languages built of expressions, actions, sounds etc. I find that, often times, those languages create a more direct emotional connection than words.

Even though the player has no voice in the game, or identity for that matter, they express themselves through their actions. Creating, I would argue, a more powerful form of connection, one that is acted instead of said, without forcing a preset dialog on the player. The narrator in turn, sometimes replies with words but sometimes with actions of his own, creating a silent and powerful dialog.

Here is a good example of a back-and-forth dialog spoken through mechanics: In chapter 6 the player mutes *Game*, clicking on a mute button, stopping *Game* from lecturing him about what to do. *Game*, using a cursor of his own, unmutes himself, and the player uses *Game*'s cursor to burst a bubble protecting a key, a bubble that *Game* put in place to stop the player from accessing said key.

3. **The player is the character:** In traditional storytelling, the reader / viewer / listener is often passive, giving the writer full control. Games are different. In games the player is active, they have agency within the game's world and therefore have an effect on its story.

The 'default' solution to the problem of the player's role in games is putting them in the shoes of another character, roleplaying as said character. The dilemma with that approach is that the player is not another character, that role is forced upon them and if they notice and resist, they quickly realize that their agency is limited, breaking their immersion. A lot of players like the idea of giving away some agency to roleplay as someone else and there are a lot of games that cater to that genre. But what about players like me, that lose their immersion when forced into the shoes of someone they are not, into a voice that is not their own? *There Is No Game* teaches us that we don't have to take on the role of another character. Sometimes, we can fit into a story and be an active and meaning part of its narrative while still being ourselves.

4. **The narrative has layers!** A lot of stories have side stories and elements not directly connected to the main path, but they are most often confined to the themes and settings of the [Main narrative](#). *There Is No Game* takes the concept of side stories to the next level. The reason I divided the narrative into three

layers: **Mini narratives**, **Main narrative** and **Player narrative** is because they have a deeper symbiotic relationship with one another than simple side stories. I call that relationship '**The River Structure**'. So, what is it? Let's break down:

The **Mini narratives** are the '**Embankment of a river**', each is its own contained simple story, representing a piece of land, detached from the other narratives, used as a setting for the higher layers of narrative.

The **Main narrative** is the '**River**' itself, the pathway between the different **Mini narratives**. It's more amorphous and chaotic but contains a coherent, consistent narrative, complex in the way it navigates the relation between the frontend and backend of the game but constructed and consistent nevertheless.

The **Player narrative** is the '**Boat**', containing the player and *Game* as its navigators, sailing on the river that is the **Main narrative**, stopping at the embankments that are the **Mini narratives**, affecting them to progress down the river, experiencing the **Main narrative** as they sail through it.

That **connection** between the layers of narrative is genius, allowing them to exist in tandem while being completely separate in nature.

Summation

There Is No Game: Wrong Dimension deserves a narrative analysis, not for a complex story or elaborate characters but rather for its incredible innovations in the way it treats the fourth wall, the way it tells its story through its uniquely connected layers of narrative, as well as for the place of the player within it, giving away control over their character while still telling a great story.

References

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