When the Fourth Layer Meets the Fourth Wall: The Case for Critical Game Retellings

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Abstract. Game retellings are when a player tells of the significant moments arising from their experiences of a game. It has been suggested that retellings are a marker of a game's success, insofar as they are evidence that the game has produced something worth telling to others. This paper argues that a subset of retellings take a critical stance towards their 'own' game, surfacing failures and breakdowns and rendering them the objects of shared public scrutiny. These are self-reflexively critical retellings, and they present an underutilized tool for scholars and designers of interactive narrative.

Keywords: Retellings · Interactive narrative · Emergent narrative · Self-reflexivity

1   Introduction

Game retellings are when a player crafts a narrative or anecdote about their experiences of playing a video game. Such retellings can take a variety of shapes: from describing a moment from a game in a passing conversation, to sharing a humorous anecdote on Reddit [1, 2], to inventing details of quotidian life within your galactic empire [3]; players might even create news-style reports on a game's events [4], or end up crafting a narrative so compelling that it solicits critical commentary on the retelling itself [5, 6].

It is clear that, for both designers and academics, retellings present a unique opportunity. Retellings offer a glimpse into the experiences of the audience of games. Moreover, retellings provide this opportunity "in the wild," [3] thereby allowing theorists to approach what makes a good interactive narrative without preemptively importing theory and nonnative assumptions about the phenomenon.

Increasingly, the importance of retellings is being recognized. Mirjam Eladhari describes the retelling as a fourth textual layer [6], bringing it inside the framework of story construction itself. In a different vein but with a similar result, James Ryan's curatorial approach implies that anything that truly qualifies as emergent narrative is also a kind of retelling, since it is a result of an interactor's (or a system's own) act of

curation [8]; for Ryan, all emergent narratives have therefore been 'retold' even if only on the level of a digital event log or to the authors themselves.[1]

Given their similar stance towards the importance of retellings, we should not be surprised to see that a similar claim is made by both Ryan and Eladhari regarding the relationship between retellings and the interactive narrative system's[2] *quality*. In Eladhari's words, the very existence of retellings implies that a game "has provided an experience that is significant or meaningful enough that it is worth telling someone else about" [6]. The system provides a meaningful experience, and the evidence is in the telling.

Eladhari goes further than Ryan on this point, arguing that—since retellings track narrative system quality— they could be useful as instruments of *critique*. By 'critique' here Eladhari means that retellings present a tool for assessing the depth, artistic quality, and originality of a narrative system. 'Critique' here implies analysis as well as assessment, and Eladhari calls for both a "blunt" [6] quantitative approach to retellings ('more retellings' being equated with 'better narrative system'), as well as a closer, detail-oriented analysis; while she does not expand much on what she means with the latter, similar work has since been started by Kreminski et al. [3].

I agree with Eladhari that retellings are a valuable resource for critique, but here—and as a way of following through with her call for a deeper analysis—I want to drive a wedge between narrative system *success* and the bare existence of retellings. In this paper, I make the case that a significant subset of retellings are themselves already critical of the narrative systems out of which they arise. These critical retellings focus on bizarre and uncanny outcomes of a narrative system; they mock, satirize, and ironically approach the machinations of their 'own' system. Sometimes, critical retellings actually lay bare the failures of their narrative system, taking its more bizarre outcomes as the object for satire and lifting these up for public display and shared scrutiny. My argument here will proceed stepwise through two sections:

1. In the first section, I present an account of critical retellings, describing them as anecdote-style game retellings that both refer to their own narrative systems reflexively and do so with a critical, ironic edge. Using two anecdotes from the game *Rimworld*, I argue that these examples work to ironically satirize and critique the results and mechanics of the game itself.
2. In the second section, I present a plausible alternative reading to my notion of critical retellings. Namely, I present the idea that the raw, uncanny, glitchy, *art brut*-like qualities of the outcomes of narrative systems are simply part of what it means for

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[1] James Ryan identifies a failing of previous accounts of emergent narrative: previous thinking about the form assumed that the raw outputs of systems were themselves already narratives, with curation being relegated to an incidental term or ignored entirely. For Ryan, emergent narratives do not arise from systems alone, but rather in the meeting between systems and curators— be they AI or human, player or non-participating. For this reason, it seems fair to say that a retelling is a subset of what he means by curationist emergent narrative: retelling is curation with an additional, public-facing narrative layer.

[2] Here I borrow Eladhari's term (interactive narrative system) [6]. My main concern and body of evidence will however focus on games in particular. Games are 'popularized' communal objects that create the communities within which critical retellings circulate.

them to be 'well-made,' and that we cannot describe the retellings of these outcomes as properly critical. Against this idea, I argue that such retellings arise from the contribution of reteller reflexivity, which is all but anathema to the aesthetics of *art brut*.

In the end, I describe the critical retelling as a kind of immanent critique that is both compelling as a retelling and (simultaneously) self-reflexive analysis of a computational narrative system. These texts show how the less-than-desirable outcomes of a narrative system can be meaningfully and pleasurably redeemed through retellings themselves. I suggest further that scholars seeking to use retellings as an instrument of critique would do well to attend to the self-reflexive critiques and assessments already made public through retellings themselves, rather than taking those retellings to be merely a product of narrative systems.

2   An Account of the Critical in Retellings: Two Examples from *Rimworld*

Eladhari claims that retellings can act as an "instrument of critique" for interactive narrative systems [6]. By this she means both that the existence and quantity of retellings allow scholars and designers to assess whether a narrative system is 'well-made' or 'good,' and that retellings provide us with a dataset for deeper analyses. While Eladhari admits that there is a great deal of room for nuance here, the general claim is that retellings correlate with narrative system success. Against this, I want to contend here that there exists a subset of retellings that do not directly track the success of a narrative system insofar as they themselves are already engaged in the assessment and analysis of the narrative system out of which they arise. I call these *critical retellings*, and they are both retellings and a means of rendering a narrative system the object of shared public scrutiny. To explain what I have in mind here, I want to first look at two retellings from the colony building game *Rimworld*.

The first retelling I have in mind is told from the perspective of a prisoner of the player's colony [1]. With embellished dialogue, the reteller writes about how the prisoner is accosted by the player's "heavily-armoured interrogator":

> "You came into our town. Our peaceful fucking town. You—I had a wife. A wife and a kid. I had to watch them get turned into fucking mince-meat right infront [sic] of my eyes. I had to listen to their screams"

Despite this diatribe and the horrible events that preceded them, it is eventually revealed that the interrogator—the one who lost their entire family in the raid—is actually trying to recruit this prisoner to join their colony. The tone of the text is humorous, ironic, and in the end exhibits a degree of bathos. It laconically states, "Another failed recruitment attempt."

The second *Rimworld* retelling is told from the player's perspective and relates an anecdote involving a couple who visits the player's frigid polar colony [2]. While these guests arrive seeking rest and relaxation, both quickly succumb to hypothermia. A week later, the daughter of the two initial visitors as well as her husband arrive ("for some Rest & Relaxation," the reteller clarifies), and their stay results in a similar series of events.

The daughter of the initial pair is named Fanya, and the author writes that, after her own husband has died of hypothermia,

> "Fanya was in a similar situation to that of her mother. She was nearly dead from hypothermia and over 10 of her body parts had fallen off due to hypothermia, including her jaw and one ear. When she warmed up, I told her to leave. When she reached the edge of the map, I got a reputation bonus because Fanya exited healthy. '… Healthy'"

Again, we have a setup followed by humorous, ironic, and bathos-inflected ending. The title reads, "Honey. For this year's holiday, I want to go to that Ice Sheet colony where mum and dad died of hypothermia last week."

Both stories here are self-reflexively dealing with the mechanics of *Rimworld's* systems. The first story explicitly points to the prisoner recruitment mechanic in *Rimworld*, and anyone familiar with the game would know what the story is referring to; the second anecdote is related to *Rimworld's* system for having visitors and—more broadly—the storyteller system [9] in the game that tries to meaningfully set up events. One of the ways the storyteller operates is to introduce characters who have existing relationships. *Rimworld's* creator, Tynan Sylvester, has stated in an interview that,

> "We supply these labels, like say this is a person's sister, and suddenly everything has this new meaning […] It's pretty darn simple, just a matrix of numbers and labels, but they're so close to what we spend all our time thinking and telling stories about. A tonne of neuro-circuitry is just about finding connections in human relationships, and if you can spark that in the game, then people's brains just take over. There's this giant computer sitting there, trying to find connections and causal relationships and emotional inferences. You just have to get that motor running and all you need are a few simple labels, no more complicated than a children's book." [10]

While *Rimworld's* planets are large, the world ends up feeling rather intimate: it is full of family members, friends, lovers and enemies. The second retelling's reference to the game's (as it were) intimate labeling system, much like the reference to the prisoner recruitment system, would be quite familiar to players of *Rimworld*.

Both of these retellings, in other words, deal explicitly and self-reflexively with the game's systems, and both of them wink to a knowing audience. But they don't stop there: I contend that these retellings analyze and assess the outcomes of the narrative system in which they take place. They provide commentary on the game and its systems.

What is the content of this commentary? In the first story, players of *Rimworld* will recognize the ability to recruit prisoners as colonists— even when the prisoners have attacked, raided, and murdered members of the colony quite recently. In fact, dragging incapacitated raiders to prison and ordering colonists to chat endlessly with them is one of the best ways of getting recruits. But this first retelling analyzes this recruitment system's blind spots, exploring how it quite often leads to strange and immersion-breaking results—as when a colony member that has been significantly, personally harmed will obediently work to recruit those who harmed them. Similarly, in the second story, we again see a bizarre outcome of the game's systems (visitation and the intimate labelling

of the storyteller). Again, this second retelling analyses how this system can lead to immersion-breaking results, as when a visitor ignores the grisly personal history of a given locale.

Both retellings lack emotional consistency or verisimilitude, and (crucially) the sardonic humour of the retelling comes to trade on precisely this. These retellings amplify the flaws in these systems for the sake of a pleasurable, *tellable* retelling: they lay out moments where these systems have produced bizarre, emotionally unbelievable, uncanny, and immersion-breaking situations. But instead of merely becoming frustrated with the systems, the players have taken to retelling as a way of publicly critiquing the narrative system through irony[3] and satire, winking at their audience who would have similar experiences with *Rimworld*: they have become critical retellers.

I read critical retellings as a kind of immanent critique, a way for authors to both present to their communities a compelling retelling and (simultaneously) publicly analyze, scrutinize—and even explicitly criticize the failings of—the narrative system that gave rise to it. Furthermore, at least in their most extreme cases (such as the two I describe above), critical retellings do not track narrative system quality. Instead, the stance of these retellings towards their respective narrative system is critical of that system, and this means that they can be compelling despite—even because of—their less than 'well-made' or 'good' story material.

Two caveats here before I move on: first, I am admittedly, dealing with *anecdotes* in these examples, and there are likely to be differences between these and story-length, narrative-focused or character-focused retellings. This should come as no surprise, since by their very definition critical retellings would tend to arise when a game has produced an output that would be more difficult to narrativize in a lengthy manner. Second, I am assuming that the readers of these retellings will have some direct experience with the game *Rimworld*, since both retellings are taking these common game mechanics (recruitment, visitation) explicitly as an object of reference.

These two limits are a site for further study. For now, suffice it to say that even a brief glance at the communities around *Rimworld* and other narrative-oriented colony-building games such as *Dwarf Fortress* [12] will make it clear that such humorous, ironic, and self-reflexive anecdotes are far from rare.[4] The question is how we read them, and the subsequent importance that is placed upon them.

3 Alternative Readings: Ryan's Computational *Art Brut*

Having a taciturn colonist obediently work to recruit a prisoner who just murdered their entire family, or having someone arrive for 'holiday' in the same unforgiving

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[3] Part of why I see these retellings as explicitly critical is their use of irony. Irony, according to Linda Hutcheon, always has an 'edge' [11]: it's critical of something, and quite often the straight discourse that forms one half of its double-speak. Here the 'straight' discourse just is the narrative system.

[4] To list just two examples: the *Dwarf Fortress* retelling 'One Stands Alone' involves a character referencing the game's plummeting frame-rate [16], and the famous retelling 'Oilfurnace' ends with a bizarre, fourth wall breaking moment that references the *Dwarf Fortress* community mantra— *losing is fun* [14].

biome in which their parents have just died due to environmental conditions—these outcomes are on the verge of incoherence. But instead of simply being disappointed or frustrated with the system, the authors transform a narrative system limitation into an ironic, satirical success at the level of the retelling: the humour of these retellings trades on the bizarreness, the uncanny qualities, and the immersion-breaking character of the content which comes to be retold.

Nevertheless, there is an alternate reading of the above *Rimworld* anecdotes. More in line with Eladhari and Ryan's point that a retelling shows that a narrative system is well-made or has produced a 'good' outcome, one might argue that the two above anecdotes from Rimworld also fit this bill: one could claim that—as bizarre as these outcomes are—the very oddness might actually constitute part of what it means for such a narrative system to be successful.

James Ryan makes a similar point about the aesthetics of emergent narrative. He claims that, due to the computational genesis of emergent narratives, there are similarities between them and *art brut* ('outsider art') [8]. Jean Dubuffet, the 20th century painter who coined the French term, saw *art brut* as works arising from the raw expression of an artist's subjectivity rather than from the undermining adornments of training and convention. He writes,

> "By [art brut] we mean works executed by people free from artistic culture, in which mimicry, unlike what happens with intellectuals, has little or no part, so that these artists derive everything (subjects, materials, means of transposition, rhythms, ways of writing, etc.) from their own depths and not from the clichés of classical or fashionable art"[13, translation by author]

Similarly, for Ryan, *art brut* computational emergent narratives are those with "a sense of the crude, uncanny, alien, eccentric, deranged, marginalized, pure" [8]; they are works that that would not have been penned by a 'normal' human author working within the confines of institutional art and literature [8]. This gives them a bizarre, jarring, uncanny quality. And yet, though the works are bizarre, Ryan argues that this does not indicate the failings of a narrative system so much as it reveals the unique potential for pleasure afforded by the form. The raw and uncanny qualities of computational emergent narratives just *are* part of their appeal.

If Ryan is right about this, we might re-read what I have called critical retellings as narrative system successes, and then attempt to understand them along the same lines as we would understand any other retelling. The two *Rimworld* stories could then be read as the sharing of unique, if bizarre, details of interactions with a well-made narrative system. Indeed, the richer and more complex a narrative system is, the more significant this detail-comparing is likely to become; if the details are not only unique but uniquely odd, this might only increase the desire to publicly surface and compare such idiosyncrasies.

This alternative reading is plausible, but I do not believe it does justice to the *Rimworld* anecdotes cited above. First, I think it is at least reasonable to say that the narrative systems in these two *Rimworld* retellings have produced less than desirable outcomes. Such outcomes present a degree of incoherence within the game's own world, within its own history, or in relation to some basic laws of our own; through this incoherence,

the very seams of the simulation itself are laid bare for all to see. Accordingly, both *Rimworld* stories present us with instances where, as a player, one might reasonably expect to become disappointed or frustrated with the system's results; likewise, both stories present us with outcomes where, as a designer, one can imagine looking at the narrative system's output as something in need of a fix. We can reasonably imagine a patch for *Rimworld* stating something like, 'Visitors will no longer attempt to take restful holidays where their immediate family members have recently died horrific deaths due to environmental conditions.'

Admittedly, this point is in no way conclusive. As stated earlier, part of the use of retellings is that they allow us to approach computational emergent narratives in a way that does not rely on the importation of theory. One cannot base an argument on what it is for a narrative system's outcome to be 'good' (coherent, immersive, representing our world, etc.) since this is to presuppose precisely what is at stake.

But beyond the outcomes of the narrative system appearing (internally or externally) incoherent or unsatisfying, I think we have another reason to read these examples as critical retellings as opposed to just 'successful' *art brut*. It boils down to the character of the retellings themselves, and in particular the clear self-reflexivity performed by the retellers. Given that a primary quality of *art brut* is its very lack of self-reflexivity—it is the art of prisoners, loners, the mentally ill, and other marginalized peoples, and by its very definition it lacks the self-reflexivity involved in imitation or reference or the palette of a shared history—then it is difficult to understand how such deeply self-reflexive *Rimworld* retellings could themselves be described in these terms. Put succinctly: the unique aesthetic of *art brut* arises from its somewhat naive relation to the act of creation, which is almost the precise opposite of what is at work in the *Rimworld* and *Dwarf Fortress* examples cited above.

A close look at the retellings themselves renders clear that these *Rimworld* anecdotes are profoundly self-reflexive—a quality of retellings that has remained under-theorized by scholars working in this area. This is why the concept of *art brut* or even glitch art [8] does not do justice to this aspect of these examples of retellings *as retellings*. To be fair to James Ryan, he is describing the aesthetics of the narrative system's output (and perhaps muddying the waters by relying on a retelling[5] in order to do so), while I am following Eladhari and taking retellings as a dataset to approach narrative systems and re-interpret that aesthetic understanding. Perhaps then we can simply say that the naive, '*art brut*' outputs of a narrative system may—in some cases and if they are '*brut*' enough—be taken up in a critical, self-reflexive, and ironic manner by retellers.

4 Conclusion: A Friction-Filled Partnership

Many of the above issues come down to a question of ontology, and an argument about the interplay of complex elements and forces that come to make a retelling what it is. Is a retelling primarily the product of a reteller, or primarily the product of a narrative system? It should be clear that this question poses a false dichotomy. The answer in any real instance is 'both.' In the words of Kreminski et al., we have a storytelling partnership

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[5] Ryan's lengthy exploration of the aesthetics of emergent narrative as such relies on a specific retelling of the game *Dwarf Fortress* called 'Oilfurnace' [8, 14].

[15]. This text has made the case that sometimes this storytelling partnership can involve conflict—that friction *between* a system and a reteller is part of what allows these systems to support creativity—and that one manifestation of this friction is the critical retelling. Critical retellings as described above are game retellings that:

1. tend to be shorter and more anecdotal than 'narrative';
2. explicitly reference and reflect on the mechanics of the narrative system, or the nature of the narrative system itself;
3. speak directly to a knowing audience that would understand these same mechanics and their importance within the system;
4. retell with a critical edge that is performed through irony and satire;

For scholars following Eladhari and looking to use retellings to assess the depth, artistic quality, and originality of a narrative system, the assessments *already shared* by players in the form of critical retellings present an excellent starting point. I would implore scholars to attend to these moments of irony, self-reflexivity, and friction between retellers and the systems with which they partner.

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