

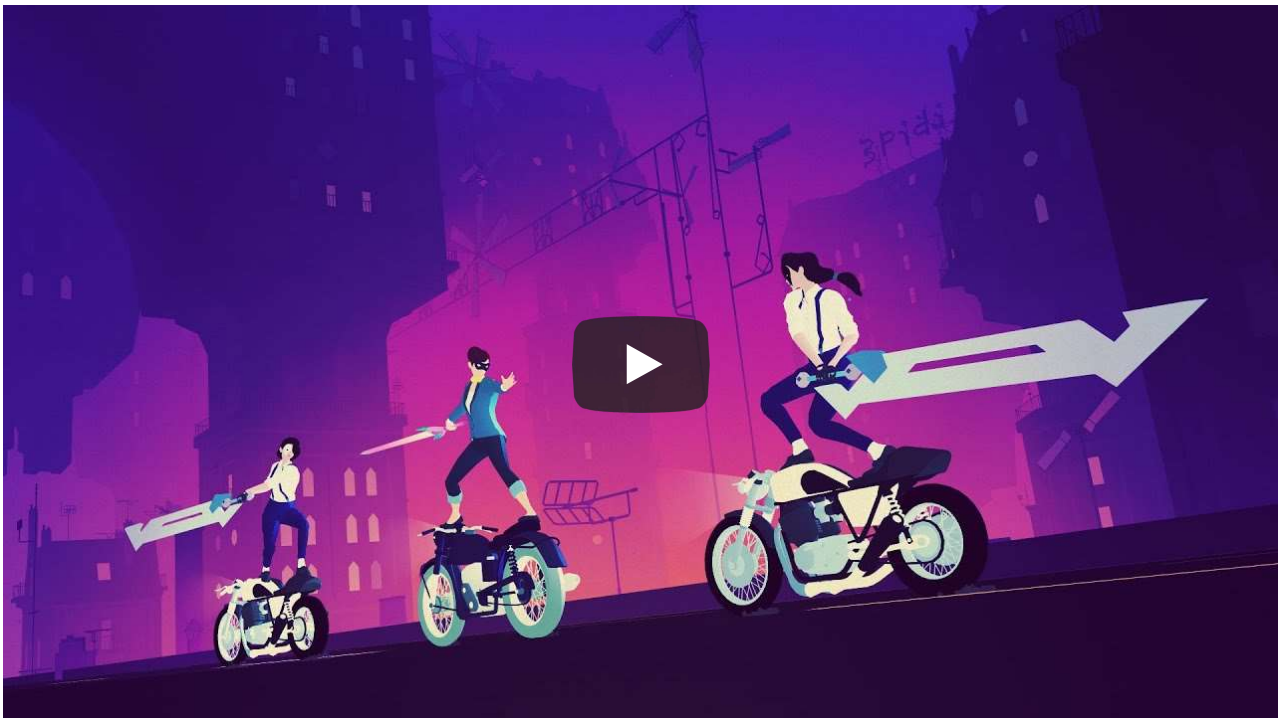
Screen, Screen Features

Ludonarrative Discussion: Best of 2019

Online Screen Editor Jacob Heayes runs through some of the highlights of 2019 in video game storytelling.

5 mins read

Written by [Jacob Heayes](#) | Jan 21, 2020



Last year was a strange one for video games. It's hardly a secret that the next-generation of consoles (the PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X) were heading our way in 2020, resulting in plenty of developers staving off their high-profile releases until this anticipated new wave of systems hit.

The result was a year defined by experimentation and esoteric independent titles; rule-breakers and rule-makers alike. For the purposes of Ludonarrative Discussion, it was a graciously fruitful one too, crammed with enrapturing interactive narratives that once again toyed with the potential of non-linear or player-defined storytelling. As such, this following list isn't necessarily a ranked order of my favourites from 2019 (although plenty of them are). This is a list devoted to the narratives and the experiences that particularly stuck with me, or attempted to take a step outside the norm. Without further ado...

Sayonara Wild Hearts (Simogo / PS4, Switch, PC, iOS)

Wild hearts never die! The empowering rallying call that echoes throughout *Sayonara Wild Hearts*' dreampop narrative doubled as a personal motto of mine for the remainder of the year, an essential reminder that the strongest love one can express is for themselves. It is no exaggeration that ever since its release in September, I have played (or at least watched) through the entirety of *Sayonara Wild Hearts*' campaign over ten times, and its capacity for delight never dwindles on each subsequent playthrough. Running at only an hour, its story is one designed for replayability and precise appreciation, a refreshing break from the 100+ hour gargantuan open worlds that have otherwise run rampant throughout contemporary video game libraries. A self-titled 'pop album video game', each level in *Sayonara Wild Hearts* consists of a playable music video for a track from the game's original soundtrack, a blissfully vibrant collection of vocal and electro-pop that happily wears its influences on its sleeve. The levels themselves are thankfully just as delightful and eclectic. *Parallel Universes* involves navigating alternate dimensions at the click of a finger, *Night Drive* is a dream come true for any vaporwave wallpaper fiend (that's me) and *Forest Ghost* is an eye-popping woodland trek via luminous deer. Whilst each segment follows a basic framework of collecting hearts, they all similarly twist the formula as much as follow it, constantly finding new and exciting ways to increase the challenge or visual punch. This isn't an overtly narrative game, yet it's one of the few video games that has made me weep in its credits, ending on an unspeakably beautiful note that repeats that aforementioned sentiment of self-love. There's absolutely nothing like *Sayonara*, and it is an utterly essential play.

Once you're hooked, *Telling Lies* is near impossible to put down.

Telling Lies (Furious Bee / PC, iOS):

It's no secret that I was an enormous fan of Sam Barlow's prior detective title *Her Story* and was similarly anticipating this spiritual follow-up (**cough** I even interviewed him about both of them [here](#) **cough**). It's safe to say the wait paid off. *Telling Lies* is a fiendishly intricate web of deceit, duplicity and deception; it might be the most overwhelming detective game I've ever played in regards to the sheer volume of evidence and narrative threads in your possession. Whereas *Her Story* followed two days of police interview tapes, *Telling Lies* is far more ambitious, centering on two years in the lives of four characters whose conflicts and goals predictably intersect and clash. Told through live-action footage (much like *Her Story*) 'stolen' from an NSA database, the experience is far more intimate and even voyeuristic than its predecessor as you begin to learn the daily routines and tiny personality quirks of these individuals. You see them flirt with their lovers, you see them tell bedtime stories to their children, you see private Skype conversations that feel distinctly *wrong* to watch. Yet, Barlow once again tantalises the player with an immensely compelling mystery that encourages speculation but never outright defies careful and logical investigation. Whereas *Her Story* took me around two hours to 'finish', I spent roughly ten on *Telling Lies*, frantically typing up notes and keywords like a madman and keenly following multiple leads at a time. Once you're hooked, *Telling Lies* is near impossible to put down. It's a sharp response to the current information control crisis and truly leaves the responsibility of constructing the narrative to the player; it is in that sense one of the greatest interactive stories of recent times.

Disco Elysium (ZA/UM / PC / PS4 and Xbox One in 2020):

Speaking of detectives, us wannabe sleuths really were treated last year as *Disco Elysium* also snuck out and instantly made a lasting impression. The first title from Estonian studio ZA/UM, *Disco Elysium* is deceptively well-crafted as if from the hands of those with decades of experience. Inspired by a custom *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign created and played by the developers over several years, *Disco Elysium* transports players into the unsettled, disgraced capital of Revachol. Wrought with a brutal murder, disenfranchised truckers and a workers' union tipping towards chaotic violence, it's hardly the most pleasant space to inhabit for 30 hours but it's absolutely an enthralling one. *Disco Elysium* stands apart from its contemporaries with exceptional writing that draws upon philosophy, politics, literature and existentialism with remarkable nuance

and confidence, to an extent I have rarely ever seen in this medium. What's even more gleeful is that so much of the dialogue and character rests in the player's hands; this is a true role-playing game that allows the player to construct the interior workings and thoughts of its alcoholic, restless detective protagonist. Through its original thought chamber mechanic, *Disco Elysium* gives you control to implant ideas ranging from communism to reconciling long-lost memories or anarchy into the protagonist's head. It's refreshing, witty and has a genuinely crafty mystery to boot. If you're pining for a video game that harkens back to the roots of tabletop role-play, this one is absolutely unmissable.

Even in its obnoxiously obvious writing, Death Stranding remains a captivating experiment in breaking gaming tradition and trusting players to engage in its social elements and unusually slow pace.

Outer Wilds (Mobius Digital / PC, PS4 and Xbox One):

When Hello Games released *No Man's Sky* in 2016 to violent disappointment from players, it was yet another blow to the dream of an open space exploration masterpiece manifesting into reality. Whilst *No Man's Sky* is currently a far improved title to the hollow shell it once was, 2019 bestowed upon science-fiction lovers another antidote to their longing. *Outer Wilds* on first glance is the antithesis to what *NMS* attempted – a sci-fi exploration game that deliberately *scales back* its world to a single solar system rather than near-infinite procedurally generated planets. The smaller hand-crafted toybox is a gamble that thankfully pays off. Each world at first appears surprisingly tiny, an orb that could fit in the palm of your hand even. Yet, look closer, and every planet has a treasure trove of secrets and history to unearth in an immensely satisfying exercise of discovery. Rather than base its gameplay loop on collecting materials and crafting tools (a la *NMS* or *Minecraft*), *Outer Wilds* has no levelling or skills to obtain. Every tool you need to explore the unknown depths of space is handed to you in its introduction; instead, one progresses solely through finding narrative pieces on alien artifacts or following clues and solving a multi-planet puzzle. Through a database on your trusty ship, the mysteries of the solar system and an ancient civilisation gradually appear and interlink. The planet design too is ingenious: an ocean world ravaged by tornadoes, a ruined city built on the outskirts of a black hole and two planets stuck in each other's gravity are a few of the highlights. To everyone who's felt the desire to explore

every nook and cranny of an environment, to find a secret hidden in plain sight or solve a mystery that appears impossible, *Outer Wilds* is nothing short of a miracle.

Death Stranding (Kojima Productions / PS4 / PC in 2020):

Of all the rabid speculation that preceded the release of Kojima's magnificent enigma *Death Stranding*, his first release post-breakup with *Metal Gear Solid* publisher Konami, few still could have predicted what finally ended up in our hands. *Death Stranding* is both overpoweringly baffling and brilliantly simple. At its core, it's a game that returns to one of the fundamental pillars of video games – space and how players traverse it. Sam Porter Bridges (played by a somewhat subdued Norman Reedus) makes deliveries across a post-apocalyptic American landscape; one ravaged by a vengeful nature, ripping mountains through cities and canyons across desolate plains. Contacted by Bridget – the final President – he is enlisted to reconnect a disparate America via the 'chiral network' (an ethereal evolution of the Internet that draws upon energy released from a purgatory dimension – I know, stick with it). The metaphors are proudly on show, even for Kojima's standards. Of course his family name is Bridges, he's bridging America together! Of course Deadman works with corpses, and of course the President's surname is the titular Strand. Even in its obnoxiously obvious writing, *Death Stranding* remains a captivating experiment in breaking gaming tradition and trusting players to engage in its social elements and unusually slow pace. Through building structures for others, Sam can receive 'likes' from other players who use them, and of course he can use their ones too. Every moment of connection, no matter how brief, feels meaningful in a way I've never experience so potently. Yoji Shinkawa's art direction is also breathtaking – beautiful landscapes, spectacular vistas and horrifying spectral entities ('BTs') that rupture the realm of the living. It's a totally beguiling experience, a commitment that demands your complete attention and if it hooks you, is undeniably consuming. It's divisive by nature, but rewarding in its unapologetic unorthodoxy. *Death Stranding* isn't the best game of the year, but it is almost certainly the one that's made the strongest lasting impression.

Sayonara Wild Hearts trailer courtesy of Annapurna Interactive

DEATH STRANDING

DISCO ELYSIUM

GAMES

LIST

LUDONARRATIVE DISCUSSION

METAL GEAR SOLID

NO MAN'S SKY